The Hare of The Fox

by Scaramedn

Summary

Three years after solving the Nighthowler case, Nick and Judy have fallen into a routine that leaves both content. However, a new arrival makes ripples in their lives that neither were prepared for. New revelations and a powerful enemy with a grudge will force them to face their inner demons and rethink their priorities if they hope to have a future.

Notes

This was (and is) my first fic. Hardly my best work, but worthy of inclusion for the fact that I put a year into it and it shows where I started as a writer in the fandom. Also, I think it's a story worth telling. Enjoy!
Chapter 1

It was morning. Another one. He wasn't sure, but he thought it was a Tuesday. The date had a 2 in it somewhere. He was pretty sure it did, anyway. Bah! Details and unimportant ones at that, until coffee happened. The important details of the morning were that it was a work day, he had first shift, it was his turn to get coffee and there was a special guest arriving at the precinct, so he had to be on time. On time meant 15 minutes early and he was well ahead of that. He was nothing if not punctual.

There were many things that Nick Wilde was not. Tolerant of mornings, was one. 20 years dancing on the razor’s edge of the law and making his own hours, coupled with his very nocturnal vulpine nature made for slow waking, especially in cold weather. That said, he was still up and moving, if grudgingly, at 5:15am every day.

Nick Wilde was not unused to stares. For his entire life, mammals had peered, gawked or glared. As a kit, the looks were heavy with pity, or disgust. They became distrustful and calculating as he grew older, eventually turning fearful, as he grew into his adulthood and the confidence that came with it. Now, the stares were largely the same, but there were smatterings of respect and occasionally good will sprinkled through the gazes of the onlookers. He even caught a little awe in the eyes of kits and cubs, once in a while. The Nighthowler case, his uniform and his excellent service record had earned him that. To be frank, he cared little for the opinion of the common mammal. There had only ever been four mammals whose opinions held any weight with him: his deceased mother, the Chief (out of necessity), Mr. Big, (because he wanted to avoid a career as a fox-cicle), and his partner’s. Her opinion was worth worlds to him.

She had changed him from a petty criminal to an upstanding citizen and part-savior of the city, or so their collective friends, coworkers, the media, and her parents, thought. It wasn’t a change and both he and she (and his mother, as she had embarrassed him with) knew it. All she had done was bring out what had been there and buried for so many years. That truth apparently made a lousy news story, though. Nick shuddered at the mere memory of the press after the Bellweather arrest. The reporters had been like hyena cubs with squeaky teething ring.

Nick Wilde was certainly not stupid. He was a fox. He had to be smart. Ignoring the stereotypes associated with his species, his species dictated that he was smart. He had to be. Nick was intelligent, well read, diversely skilled, good with his hands, quick witted (as anyone who'd spoken with him could attest) and observant. Even before his life on the dubious side of the law began, he'd had these skills well honed. He'd needed them just to survive being a fox.

Another thing Nick Wilde was not: ignorant of himself. "Never let them see they get to you"; his motto. Easy to say, hard to pull off. It required self-awareness, life experience, and the ability to not lie to yourself. He'd heard what he was so many times since that heartbreaking night when he was nine. He'd had 23 years of losses, gains, triumphs, failings, moments of brilliance and more instances of mind-jarring idiocy than he was comfortable admitting. He'd been through enough to know who he was. Nick knew what he was and how other mammals saw him. He knew they weren't the same thing. He knew his conscience and capabilities very clearly: what he could and couldn't do, what he would and wouldn't do. He had his personal code and followed it. That didn't mean he was the most “moral” or “ethical”, or even the most “honest” of mammals; by common standards, but he made his way and took care of his own.

Nick Wilde was not a fool. Foolish at times, yes, but never a fool. “Seriously”, he mused to himself. “Who isn’t?” He knew he wasn’t immune to irrational moments. He kept a firm hand on
himself (in several ways, he chuckled) and tried to avoid situations that could only end badly for him.

What it boiled down to was one very simple thing. He was experienced. He was a 34 year old todd, born and raised in the biggest city in Mammalia. After a youth largely on the streets and twenty-odd years skirting the law, the mob and the public, he'd danced around them all, managing to come out in one piece and financially ahead. His private holdings attested to that. Holdings neatly hidden and (after his contributions to the Nighthowler case) entirely his tax free, courtesy of a very grateful mayor who signed the papers granting him clemency.

Nick Wilde was intelligent, self-aware, capable, and confident. All very attractive characteristics in a male, which leads to another area of experience: females.

Nick mused on that thought for a moment, as he waited for his rather massive order at the local coffee shop. He’d managed his morning jog, shower and self-assembly for the day (a Monday, he’d finally figured out) in good time and meandered his way to his local hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, The Bark & Bite Beanery. It was a tiny place that he’d gone to for years and loved dearly. The delicious aromas that he brought into the precinct each day got enough attention that Bark & Bite, or The B&B, quickly became a favorite of Precinct 1. It was friendly to all species, close to just about everything and run by Miranda, a large female hyena and her significantly-smaller partner, a wombat named Jerry. Nick was curious about the specifics of their “partnership”, purely as a former entrepreneurial business-mammal. Knowing how a good partnership functioned was part of daily life for him. Especially, interspecies partnerships. Those were of particular interest to him.

Shaking his mind out of that distracting rut, he turned his attention out of his own head, where Judy claimed he spent too much time as it was.

Looking at the order sheet he grimaced slightly. His turn to bring the coffee meant 9 cups of varying sizes, on a normal day. Today it was ten because he lost a bet with Delgato. The furry prick had won on a technicality, but it was still a win. Plus he was accumulating brownie points with a certain cheetah, so a bribe for everyone’s favorite gossip and information broker was due at the front desk. Therefore he needed three large lattes for Higgins, Fangmeyer and McHorn, an extra-large light and sweet for Francine, Bogo’s breakfast-abomination bucket of iced wheatgrass, lemongrass, and mint, two medium cappuccinos (one with a second shot and cinnamon for the other) for the Lupine contingent, The Clawhauser Special as it’d come to be known (a vat of hummingbird food with a caffeine chaser), Judy’s small raspberry-melon spice latte, his own medium coffee with three shots and Delgato’s catmint double espresso. He was glad everyone had texted their orders to him last night, because he’d never have remembered it otherwise, not this early.

He watched as the coyote on the register helped her obviously new coworker, a sweet little elk doe, with the order. He was the only mammal in the shop this early, but he knew the morning rush was coming. They knew it too, as they scampered around, pulling shots, frothing milk and loading the ZPD cart they kept especially for the morning order. Whoever’s turn it was to bring in the coffee order the next day had to drop it off the evening before, at shift end and Nick was oh so grateful he had it today. Coffees for three pachyderms, two big cats, the wolves, a water buffalo, a cheetah who could eat like a pachyderm, an itty bitty bunny drink and his own was too much for him to manage without it. He’d have a second cardio workout for the day by the time he made it to the station.

As the baristas plied their trade, Nick enjoyed the show. They were both younger than him, friendly, obviously morning mammals and cute enough catch the eye. The fact that the newbie needed some help and the coyote was an old hand at the job made for a charming display of
camaraderie and added visual appeal to his morning. They’d conscientiously made his coffee first, so his brain now was beginning to function at near-normal speeds. He sipped while they worked and by the time the order was ready, he was mostly-done his cup, well-warmed from the hot liquid and flirting a little bit with the young ladies. They laughed at his jokes and he left them a nice tip. As he pulled out the door with cart on tow, the elk doe trotted up with a refill for him, on the house. He gratefully accepted and sent her a wink in thanks. Her blush was nice little lift to his morning.

Females…

Nick appreciated females and they appreciated him, but he was a fox. That comes with some issues. More on his end than theirs, but that’s what it was. Contrary to popular opinion, foxes were rather picky when it came to dating.

Back in the quadrupedal days, vulpines mated for life. That particular trait of the species had diminished. It was far from a biological imperative, but it did remain as a cultural characteristic. In their younger years, foxes were free and often eager to date, play the field and explore their preferences, like any other species.

However, that tended to die out fairly quickly. By their mid-20’s most vulpines were either looking for a long-term committed relationship that ended at an altar (or the courthouse), in one already, or very comfortable in their single lifestyle and unlikely to change it. That isn’t to say that breakups, divorces, and later-life commitments weren’t possible. They were, but were fairly uncommon. The vulpine reputation for home wrecking, man-whoring and general promiscuity was largely undeserved. The already poor reputation of the species was only made worse by a few outstanding exceptions to the rule. Statically, they were no worse than any other species. Of course, that stereotype had been useful in his days street-side, both in his professional capacity and for pleasure. He’d enjoyed the challenge of talking his way into a lady’s bedroom, whether he used the bed or not.

Nick had reveled in his days in the dating pool, but he hadn’t spent much time in it. In his line of work he had a small catch twenty two. He could date nice vixens, but either they didn’t want to date a criminal and ran when they found out, or he didn’t want to drag them into his life. He could date a vixen from his side of town, but trust was a major issue there. The few times he’d attempted it, he’d ended up poorer and dumped, or ended it himself because he got too paranoid to do anything else. The only other option was what he called “single-use relationships”. They had their appeal initially, but he quickly decided they weren’t for him. There was no satisfaction in something so devoid of emotional connection. Finnick thought that was hilarious when Nick explained it to him.

So, dating hadn’t been a part of his life for a long time. He’d had the art of the hustle to practice and perfect, people to meet, money to make and plenty to keep him occupied without involving any romantic complications. He enjoyed females, aesthetically. He was, however, a fan of the “look but don’t touch” rule. He found vixens a delight to gaze upon. They were pretty pieces of art that he could admire, perhaps chat up, but they stayed on the gallery wall. He had hoped for a time to find the masterpiece that he’d want to take home, but that had become a fantasy, bordering on a pipe dream many years ago. For a long time he’d been content to just enjoy the view and occasionally do a little sport flirting.

Then, some years ago, a surprising thing happened. Surprising to him, anyway. He’d been loafing around at a little bistro in the Rainforest District, enjoying a sandwich and coffee after a particularly satisfying hustle, when a young tigress walked in. She was fit, healthy and well dressed in a blouse and skirt combo that screamed office worker. Normally, Nick would have just
dismissed her as another would-be mark and left it at that. He’d never cared about females other than vixens as anything else, but this time something struck him. Much to his surprise, he found her very appealing. Before he knew it, he was actually checking her out.

The pattern on her skirt complimented her stripes. Her blouse was plain, but fit her fur tones and was very flattering. Her watch and earrings were tasteful and fetching. The ensemble fit her build, brought out her femininity and made her eyes stand out. She was lovely and she frankly looked damn good. Attractive, even. Nick was momentarily stunned as he admitted that he’d thought a female outside his own species attractive. She wasn’t even in his family of species. He’d seen a few canids that had been worth a second look, but never a feline. While he processed this minor mental bombshell, the object of his attention caught sight of him staring. He was mortified that he’d been caught and awaited the torrent of abuse that could only come his way for being a fox and blatantly ogling.

Only it didn’t come. When their eyes locked, he saw her understand what was happening. Obviously, he was staring like a kit at the pretty girl at school. How could she miss it? She looked away, collected her order from the cashier, winked at Nick with a smile and slipped out the door, umbrella in hand. It took his several minutes to get what was left of his brain working, again. When it did, what had just happened registered and his body reacted. His cheeks turned red, his heart rate tripled and he’d dashed out of the bistro under the sternly disapproving gaze of the owner, trying very hard to keep his lower body out of sight. He’d sprinted the opposite direction to where the tigress had gone and ran until he found Finnick, who laughed until he was physically unable to move.

When the diminutive menace had finally regained the ability to draw breath without convulsing with laughter, all he said was, “Your go out for lunch and come back with cat scratch fever!”, And then collapsed into hysteric again. When he managed to calm down he was slightly more helpful. “Man, you like what you like. I don’t care. That’s your business. Just figure it out quick, huh? If I gotta play wingman at a Milk ‘n’ Nip Bar, I need to know so I can get my game right.”

Despite the urge to douse the little grief-monger with cold water, Nick appreciated his friend’s perspective. He was supportive, even if he’d found the realization hilarious, and he was helping in his own brusque way. Nick took his advice. Several afternoons were spent mammal-watching, which wasn’t unusual, really. The big difference was the intent behind it. He wasn’t just looking for marks and honing his mammal reading skills, he was looking at what was there and (to his brief shock) he liked what he saw. He found that the art metaphor he’d held for so long regarding vixens, applied to females in general. He saw a lot that he liked in a lot of places he didn’t expect. Felid, canid, mustelid, even ursine females had a lot of appeal to him. Broadening his field of appreciation was massively eye opening for the little red fox. Suddenly, there was a lot more to enjoy in the city he’d thought he’d known so well.

That was when two other bombshells hit. Within moments of each other, he caught himself appreciating a Muntjack doe in a pencil skirt and what he thought was a nice pair of lupine buns in a pair of really figure hugging jeans, until said attractive wolf turned around looking for his girlfriend. His. Girlfriend.

Finnick had howled for hours. Nick regretted mentioning it at all.

Shaking off that equal-parts embarrassing and amusing memory, Nick guided his cart and its precious cargo into the lobby of ZPD Precinct One and to his first stop on the morning coffee run. He was tired from the cart pushing workout, but he the end was in sight and the reason he was reminiscing was on the horizon. His smile only grew at the thought.
While Nick muscled the cart of caffeinated life juice across the lobby, Clawhauser was inhaling a bowl of Lucky Chomps and wiggling his way through an impromptu dance routine to one of Gazelle’s albums. Nick found Clawhauser to be very mysterious at times. He danced like that with a bowl of cereal and never spilled a drop. He danced like that all the time and never lost weight. He ate more sugar than the rest of the precinct combined daily and hadn’t died. It was baffling. He’d asked a couple of the veteran officers about it, but they just shook him off. Apparently, they just took it at face value. Either they were used to it, or didn’t want to think too hard about it.

“Hey, Claws! Claws? BEN! Oh, for…”

Clawhauser was so deep in his Gazelle trance that he’d tuned out everything around him. Nick grabbed a sheet from the note pad on the desk, crumpled it into a ball and lobbed it up to bop the distracted cheetah on the nose.

“Hard to do with your eyes closed, buddy. I’ve got your usual, here.” As Nick lifted the near-vat of super sugary coffee up to the desktop. Clawhauser quirked an eyebrow and smirked at the little jab.

“Ooh! Thank you! It smells like heaven!”

“Neither do I, but I love it and I make it work.” Clawhauser took a long sip and sighed in obvious pleasure. “To what do I owe this delightful treat? Need a little intel on everyone’s favorite bunny? The mighty Clawhauser knows all.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but no. It’s just coffee for a friend, but if it has to be something, call it building credit,” Nick sighed.

It was no secret that the lovable receptionist was desperately in love with three things: Gazelle, sugary treats and playing matchmaker, in that order. His duties as desk sergeant put him in the perfect position to collect gossip on everyone and everything. He used that information to nudge burgeoning romances where he could and he oh so desperately wanted Nick and Judy to be together. He tried to get under Nick’s skin at least once a week about it. Nick had no idea if he bothered Judy about it too, but she never mentioned it and he left it alone. Clawhauser could also be bribed into parting with some of his vast store of gossip for a price measured in donuts or concert tickets. He did a brisk trade around romantic holidays.

“Hrmmm… You sure? I’m sure I could help you get your hands on some honey bunny buns.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ll pass. You know we don’t have that kind of relationship. And don’t let her ever hear you say “honey bunny buns”. She’d skin us both. See ya, Buddy!” They both chuckled as Nick struggled off with the cart, Clawhauser, slurping down a distressingly large measure of super sugary liquid.

Nick was almost to the elevators, when he heard Clawhauser shout, “Oh! Nick!”

“Yeah?”

“Francine is up in her cubicle, but everyone else should be in the bullpen. The delegation from the ZPA will be here in an hour and Bogo wanted a word beforehand.”

“Perfect. Thanks, Bud!”
This simplified things significantly. Francine was indeed at her cubicle and was very happy to get her morning libation. From there, Nick piloted the now-lighter cart back to the elevators and, hence, to the door of the bullpen. Wolford had the door open and waiting for him when he arrived and greedily collected his drink, as Nick rolled past. The walk up the aisle got easier with every officer passed, until he passed Higgins at the front. The Chief’s stayed on the cart until he personally came to collect it, so there it stayed, in the corner. All the coffees delivered, he parked the cart in the corner, collected his own and Carrots’ drinks, checked the time and headed out to the lobby to wait for Judy. She was already in the precinct, of course, but she was in her morning paperwork frenzy. He’d learned to stay out of her way when she got like that very early on.

Instead, he sat and sipped his drink. A glance at his phone told him he had almost 40 minutes before Bogo wanted to meet. On time meant 15 minutes early and Judy always added 15, which meant she would be wrapping up and headed his way for her morning hug and ten minutes of morning banter in, oh…

9…
8…
7…

Cups down…
5…

Turn towards the frantic pattering of bunny feet…
3…

Arms out and brace…
1…

“Nick!” This was the best part of his morning.

Impact. A beautiful ball of grey fur, energy, and enthusiasm slammed into his chest and clung there.

Beaming up at him, Judy chirped, “Morning, Partner! Ready for another day?”, as he returned the hug.

“Sure am, Carrots.” He replied, as she slid back to her feet and he tousled her ears.

This was all part of their morning routine. He brought coffee. She brought pastries, but left them at the reception desk until after their morning hug. She would swat his paw, scolding him for touching her ears. He would laugh and she’d punch him. Then, both of them would roll their eyes and smirk as Clawhauser’s morning squeal would reach their ears. Judy’s was often less exasperated than Nick’s, but they knew he meant no harm. Then, she would collect their breakfast and they would take a few minutes to nibble baked goods and banter.

It was a simple pleasure and small, but it meant more to him than he’d ever admit out loud.

While she chattered about trouble with paperwork, office gossip and her parents’ MuzzleTime from last night (apparently, there were more family weddings coming up), Nick leaned back and just basked in her gloriously sunny presence, like a lizard on a rock.
Nick had many secrets, but only two big ones. One he had to work especially hard to conceal was
how much he liked affection. By nature, he was extremely affectionate. As a kit, he’d never gotten
enough. Apparently, it was a family trait from his mother’s side. However, many years of
estrangement from his family and keeping bad company had deadened his inherent need for
affection and physical contact. Criminals weren’t big on hugs and it did nothing for a criminal
reputation.

That had changed quite a bit, once the little grey ball of glee had exploded into his life. She was his
polar opposite in so many ways, a perfect counterbalance and compliment as a partner and
naturally affectionate in a way he was no longer comfortable with, but found he wanted badly. She
had worn down his resistance slowly. Now, he found himself hugging back without hesitation,
looking forward to it daily and seeking it out when he needed it. Casual touches, leans and half-
hugs were now part of their daily lives together. He loved every moment, but he had to keep it
controlled.

Nick’s attention slipped fully back to Judy as her enthusiasm reached critical mass about
something. He knew that tone and pitch of her voice was reserved for especially good news. “I
can’t believe that Jacob and Ian are finally out of the closet and getting hitched! We’ve all known
for ages, but it such a thrill to see them…..” So, one of her brothers who was in the closet, wasn’t
anymore. “It’s about time, Carrots. I’ve met the buck once and it was as obvious as your little
cotton tail that he was gay.”

Judy immediately shifted her tail out of his line of sight with a scowl that didn’t hide her smile. Her
punch was not so half-hearted as it impacted his bicep. “Eyes front, Wilde.”

“No promises.”, he as he sipped his coffee, earning him another light punch.

Then, she was off about the wedding delays for her sister Felicity Nick could only smile.

The reason for that was his second secret. As he sat and chattered with his partner, his calm, cool
relaxed expression was in place, as ever. His outside was a picture of serene contentment and saucy
attitude. It was a finely crafted mask to conceal what was inside. Clawhauser would be thrilled if
Nick’s mask ever slipped, because all he’d find is validation.

Nick Wilde was many things. He was observant, self-aware and experienced. He was also not a
fool. All of these character traits led him to an inevitable conclusion. Nick Wilde was in love with
his partner. Hopelessly. Had been for a good long while. He knew it and he wasn’t fool enough to
deny it to himself either. It was as plain as the red in his fur.

He also knew it was not a possibility. Most of the reasons Clawhauser would dismiss with a wave
of a paw and a breezy laugh, but Nick was not so easily mollified. He knew from hard experience
that relationships were not like they were in children’s’ movies and love does not simply conquer
all. Any relationship he’d have with Judy would be uphill all the way. Interspecies, pred-prey,
coworkers, partners, public servants, public figures…. So many issues…. And worth every drop of
sweat, but all of it predicated on a single assumption: that she was interested. That was an
assumption he was unprepared to make.

He knew she’d dated before. They’d had a night just before he left for the academy where they’d
made it a competition who could tell the worse dating horror story from their pasts. He’d won with
his Finnick-Tequila-raccoon ex-girlfriend story, but it barely beat out her ex-girlfriend-serving-her-
at-the-restaurant-on-a-date story. As fun as that had been, it made clear that Judy had only dated
lagomorphs in Bunnyburrow, and that pattern hadn’t changed. She’d had a few dates since he’d
known her. Some were meetings by chance. Others were arranged by her always-interested-in-her-
daughter’s-love-life mother. Either way, all were rabbits of some variety. Perhaps, not enough to be
definitive, but a hell of trend.

Judy’s voice revved back into that particular vocal range that meant they were late, meaning they were 29.8 minutes early, instead of 30 minutes. This was a perfect moment to ruffle her fur.

She was hopping in place and dragging on his arm, so he allowed her to drag him onto his feet and towards the door. Her enthusiasm was extra high today because there was special training and a VIM coming in today from the Academy. Of course she’d be thrilled.

He put on his favorite mope-face and complained, “But, Carrots, it’s still early. What’s the rush?”

Judy pipped straight back, “It’s professional courtesy to be 15 minutes early.”

“And the other 14 minutes and 38 seconds? Are what? Bonus?”

“Oh, stop being difficult and get in here,” she grumped, as she held the door open.

“That’s not possible, sweetheart, and you know it. Look! There’s hardly anyone in there!”

“Damn it, Nick! Just. Get. In…. Blast!” he’d completely stopped just in the door frame. The few officers in the bullpen had turned to watch the morning floor show. Nick smiled and saluted Grizzoli with his coffee cup, while Judy struggled to move him and maintain her professional dignity. It was a losing battle. Grizzoli saluted back and rolled his eyes, but didn’t stop watching. Every one of them knew this was part of their dynamic and all in good fun. Unfortunately, no one knew how excited Judy was that day, so what happened next was totally unexpected.

Judy was incensed at his intentional unhelpfulness and finally gave in to his obstinacy.

“Why are you being such a pain in the tail?”

He turned and bent down just to her eye level. “It’s part of my charm.”

Pinching the bridge of her muzzle, all she could do was sigh. “Could you and your charm, please, get out of the doorway and to our seat?”

“Sure thing, Fluff! All you had to do was ask nicely.”

“Just move!” And that was when it happened. Her eyes were still closed and she swatted, hard, at where she thought his shoulder was. Unfortunately, he had straightened up and turned around to jauntily make his way to their chair. That put the path of her palm strike in line with, not his shoulder, but his posterior. The resultant smack and yelp caused the populace of the room, the officers waiting outside the bullpen, Clawhauser, Judy and Nick himself to all stop dead.

Nick’s mind went into overdrive. He had to play it off and draw attention away from the blush that flooded his ears. He couldn’t be given away like this, so when in doubt, deflect. “My, my, Officer Hopps…. If you like it rough; I don’t mind, but ask a lady, first.”

At that line, Clawhauser’s third bowl of cereal hit the lobby floor and there was pandemonium in the bullpen. The cheering, hooting and catcalls were deafening. Judy’s ears were scarlet. They flopped behind her head in embarrassment and she buried her face in her paws. Nick internally cringed. He loathed embarrassing her like this and he knew he would pay for this later. He’d make it up to her and already had a few reserve ideas for just such a situation. That didn’t make seeing her wilt any less painful.

Nick reached out to her, hoping to guide her to their chair, when her eyes slipped over her paws and
he knew fear. There was mirth in her eyes, so he knew he wasn’t about to die, but there was fury there too. Bunny fury he knew all too well. The kind that left bruises.

Turning tail, he sprinted through the bullpen, wide eyed and grinning in maniacal anticipation. “Feet up! Coming through! Gangway!” Some of the larger officers obliged and moved their feet. Others just laughed as they watched a furious bunny run down her prey. A five minute chase through the legs of tables, chairs and laughing colleagues found Nick captured and laughing as he fended off a hail of rabbit punches. The ones that he managed to block would leave bruises on his arms. The ones that he didn’t would leave bruises too. He deserved it and she struggled to restrain her giggles as she pummeled him.

The bludgeoning continued until Nick managed to nudge her off balance with a foot sweep and she overbalanced into his arms. He flipped her around and pinned her arms, before grunting out, “Ok, Carrots, enough. I’m sorry. Dinner’s on me Wednesday at Full Moon Cafe, and I get your coffee the rest of the week.” She struggled again, trying to get leeway to hit him again. “They’re doing a Very Berry Special this week. A different flavored berry latte every day, all week.” She settled a little and he relaxed his grip, fractionally. “And if you stop the beatings, I’ll take you to B&B for a Carrot Honey Milt Blitz after work, today.”

“You think that’s enough to make me stop? Just really tasty treats I can’t resist?”

She obviously was sold, but needed one last little push to give in. He breathed, “I’ll throw in a foot rub after our next foot patrol…” into her ear, so only they could hear it.

And she was sold. He could tell by her shuddering in his arms. Her feet always hurt after a full day. Be it a regular patrol, piloting the joke-mobile, or any other duty, legwork was the mainstay. By days end, everyone’s favorite rabbit officer was always foot sore and a foot rub was often the difference between ache-y crabby bun and cuddly flirty bun. It was one of her favorite things and a well-kept secret between the two.

“Tonight, Bottle Brush Butt. That’s happening tonight.” She whispered back.

“First you smack it, now you’re talking about it. Do you have a butt fixation today, or something?”, he muttered.

“One more joke and its fists of doom, round 2.”

“Understood, Officer Cottontail.”, He smirked.

Wolford leaned down with an urgent, “If you two are done whispering sweet nothings, Chief’s on his way.”

Never ones to argue with a Wolf’s sense of smell, the two jumped apart and hastened to their places for the morning briefing. Nick gave his petite partner a paw up into their shared chair and took her hand up in turn. This was the quickest way for the two to get seated and served as a small treat for Nick. He got a lovely view of her honey buns on her way up, followed by (as childish as it sounds) a chance to hold her paw and she returned the favor. Occasionally, he let his thumb roll across the back of her paw as he let go. He couldn’t help himself. It was the most he was ever going to get and while he was fine with that (he kept trying to convince himself) he wasn’t going to pass on the little things.

All this happened under the amused and exasperated gazes of their coworkers, who shook their heads and turned back to the conversations and phone-surfing that The Nick & Judy Show had interrupted.
Nick sat and thought, while Judy did her usual fist-bump routine with McHorn. Another little quirk that she had made a part of her daily routine and, in turn had made her part of the team. She was so adorable, even when she was hamming it up to get a grumpy rhino to crack a smile. Nick couldn’t help but admire her. She’d gone from a naive sucker in a bowler hat to someone he couldn’t imagine life without.

She was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Nick smiled as he thought about how good he had it. A good friend, the perfect partner, actual coworkers, a career, steady income and self-respect were all his. All because of her. Judy gave him a reason to be the scout he’d always wanted to be. He was turning into such a rom-com cliché, it was farcical. The soft-boiled criminal turned cop was going gooey over the sweet, bubbly little bunny that he’d unwillingly befriended and elected to follow. All it took was her big, lovely eyes, looking up at him, for him to crack like a plumber’s ass.

He was a hot mess over her and only getting worse with every thought that passed through his fuzzy mind.

That was why he refused to let himself entertain the idea of her interest. He was slipping already and he couldn’t afford to slip any further. Life was good. Damn good. The best it had ever been and she was the cornerstone of it all. He was not about to rock the boat and risk ruining what he had just because he couldn’t get his emotions back in the damn box.

The social fallout awaiting them if they did get involved was a concern, and he doubted severely that she felt anything but platonic love at most. She was so sweet to everyone. Even the damn criminals liked her. The only thing he got that no one else did was time with her at work and a little of her personal time, when he could squeeze into her schedule. He had to hold on to that. He had to anchor himself to the fact that he was her friend and partner and nothing else. As long as that was a fact, he had a chance to keep it together. Once he was friend-zoned he was in familiar territory. He’d been there before. He just had to put himself there without her noticing him putting himself there.

He blinked as he realized how utterly insane he sounded. He was making excuses for things that didn’t even exist and planning on friend-zoning himself when he wasn’t even in the running. He needed professional help.

Fortunately, his self-stressing delusional reverie was interrupted by the Chief lumbering into the bullpen, to the usual cacophony.

“All right, quiet. Enough!” Bogo’s trademark bellow silenced the room and he began his usual drone through announcements he didn’t care about.

Nick was about to make his usual crack about Chief Buffalo Butt’s lack of enthusiasm, when he heard Judy gasp. Thinking he’d missed something important, Nick looked to her to see what was going on, but she wasn’t looking at the Chief. She was looking at the chief’s thigh level and off to his side. Following her line of sight, Nick found the obvious focus of his partner’s rapt attention.

It was a rabbit. It was an obvious he, with light grey fur, unmistakable black stripes across his ears and face and a reputation that every mammal alive knew. It was a reputation that, coupled with his partner’s imminent fangirling, made a lead weight fall into his stomach. Standing next to his boss was Jack Savage; government agent, celebrated veteran law enforcement officer, decorated hero, paragon of rabbit-hood, idol to all members of the Lapidae family, and threat to female virtue everywhere.

“As you are all aware, our precinct has the honor of being the focal point for a special training
enterprise over the next 18 months. The express focus of this training is curbing the recent increase in smuggling activity in the city and, eventually, stamping it out entirely. We have with us today; an agent that needs no introduction; as his record speaks for itself. Special Agent Jack Savage has been seconded to the ZPA for the term of the training in order to bring us up to speed, precinct by precinct, and will be leading our training for the next month. His expertise and experience in unearthing and ending smuggling operations will be an invaluable asset in combating these criminal cells. I trust you will show him the warm welcome and respect that a mammal of his caliber deserves. Agent Savage, if you would like to say a few words?”

The black striped buck moved to the podium with a composure that bespoke great prowess and long experience. His brief address to the universally ram-rod straight and riveted audience was delivered with an aplomb and gravitas that was impossible to deny, let alone ignore. He had the room eating out of his hand within a few syllables. His charisma was awe inspiring. Nick was pole-axed. He heard not a single word the rabbit spoke. The last he heard was the gentle intake of breath Judy had taken and the look of adoration on her face when she saw Jack standing by Chief Bogo’s hip.

Dread settled into Nick’s bones as he felt more than saw Judy leave their seat at high speed. Jack had finished his speech and officers were coming forward to welcome him. As her form receded in the direction of the only other rabbit in the room, a sick nauseous feeling filled him. He slid off his seat, as if on autopilot, and followed.
In an apartment that could have been a broom closet, a small grey paw slapped an alarm clock off after a single ring. It was exactly 5:00AM and Judy Hopps was ready for another day. Her morning routine was simple and her enthusiasm boundless. Growing up on a farm would ingrain early rising, hard work and dedication into anyone. In her, however, these traits had become not habits of a lifetime, but the cornerstone of an extraordinary mammal. After a two mile run and a quick shower, to start her day, she was in her uniform and off to the patisserie, a homemade smoothie in paw. With her baked goods ready to go, she’d walk to the ZPD, dig into her paperwork backlog, power through it, and be at the bullpen with 30 minutes to spare for morning briefing. At least, that was the plan under normal circumstances. Today was a tiny bit different. They had a special visitor joining them today at the briefing.

Judy was many, many things, as anyone who knew her could verify; many things to many mammals. To her coworkers, she was energetic, motivated and dedicated. To her boss, she was an efficient paperwork machine, a superb officer and a menace to his peace and quiet. To her family, she was a source of endless pride and constant worry, bordering on panic. To her friends, she was a willing ear to listen, a shoulder cry on, and a lot of fun to be around. To the criminal contingents of the city, she was an adorable, grey-furred demon in a blue uniform. Judy knew her reputation and cultivated all aspects of it. She loved being a good friend, coworker, subordinate and daughter. She also loved that her fame, as unwanted as it was, had its uses in bettering interspecies relations and improving the city.

She was an open book and knew exactly where she stood with everyone around her. All except her infuriatingly enigmatic partner. Every time she thought she had a decent handle on that fox, he'd say or do something that took the rug right out from under her. Sometimes it was a story from his past he'd let slip through the mask. Sometimes it was finding that he had a skill that was completely unexpected. She remembered one instance perfectly.

Judy had called him that morning, looking to meet for lunch, and gotten an address that made absolutely no sense. It was a shop front, tucked behind an old hotel-turned-apartment building in an old style arcade on the gentrifying side of Sahara Central. She'd stood around waiting for him for almost 20 minutes, before calling him. It rang twice when suddenly she'd heard his personal ringtone for her coming from what she had assumed was an abandoned car near the shop front awning. This was followed by a weirdly delayed surround sound of him answering the phone.

"Hey, Carrots. What's up?"

"I'm at the address you gave me. Remember? We were supposed to get lunch?"

"Sorry. I got stuck in a project and lost track of the time."

"What project? Where are you? I can hear you, but I can't see you. Where are you hiding?"

Judy eased her way over to the car as they chattered, equally amused and annoyed by the impromptu game of hide-and-seek with her camouflaged friend. She was just peeking into the driver's seat when his head popped out from under the running board and, incidentally, under her skirt. He took the phone away from his ear and smirked as she leapt back, slapping her skirt to her thighs and blushing furiously. All he'd said before vanishing under the vehicle had been, "Black suits you. Silk or cotton?"

She'd been embarrassed and nearly apoplectic until he strolled out from behind the car, wearing
coveralls that looked like they came out of a prohibition era film, wiping dirt and grease off his paws with a rag. Judy had been too jarred by his unexpected appearance to do anything but mentally stumble to a halt as her anger fizzled out, turning to confusion. She stammered as her brain struggled with the sudden gear change. This got his amused attention.

"You ok, Carrots? Gnat got your tongue?" He drawled as he smirked. She just loathed that smirk, especially when it grew as he looked at her. It meant she was being mocked or he found her funny. Usually both. It was an expression that she hated to see on his face. It fit perfectly, tailored and oh so perfectly him. He wore it well and it made her heart flutter. She couldn’t stand it.

"It's, 'cat got your tongue'!" His penchant for mangling common sayings to annoy her didn't help. That smirk grew, again.

"If you say so. Isn't that species-ist against felines that way?"

"Yes, it is! Which is why you shouldn’t say it!" Judy was fuming by this point.

"I didn’t say it, sweetheart, you did. Mind if I clean up?" Nick snarked.

"What? No! I-" Judy was tongue-tied. Again.

"M'lady wishes me to stay in my filthy state for our luncheon? Why Officer Hopps, I simply do not know what to say. What would the neighbors think?"

She'd sputtered indignantly and fought a losing battle against the ruby red blush that suffused her face and ears. His ridiculous upper-class accent and over the top word choice, coupled with the innuendo were just too much for her. It was him in a nutshell: silly, witty and suggestive all in one. All he did was chuckle as he walk to a slop sink and lathered up to his elbows.

"Deep breath, fluff. I'm just ruffling your fur. I'll be done in a minute and we'll head out after I change."

"Oh, you'll be done in a minute, Slick."

"More like 40 seconds, now."

She hated it when he was like this; all wit and one-liners and casual charm, turning her threats and righteous indignity into humor, smiles and burning cheeks. She could keep up with him, usually, but some days (like today) Judy couldn't get her feet under her around him. What she hated most was how much she liked it. As angry as she was, she was fighting a grin and her ears were pink with amusement as much as irritation.

"Alright, Mr. Pedantic, explain."

"Explain what, Darlin'?"

"You. Car. Coveralls? Covered in grease?"

"Just a little maintenance on a friend's car. He needed an oil change and was worried about the rotors. Looked fine to me. Needs a pad change soon, though."

"You're a mechanic, now?"

"Just now? Nope! Have been for years."

"Nick!"
"Alright, alright. I know enough to do basic maintenance, but nothing in depth. I can keep a running car in good form, but rebuilding an engine or whatever is a bit beyond me."

"When did this happen?"

"Earlier today. He dropped it off about an hour ago."

"Not that! When did you learn to do all this?"

"You pick stuff up."

"Do you."

"I certainly do."

"Uhhuh."

"Useful skills, valuable knowledge, pretty girls… I'd pick you up, but I'm a bit filthy."

"Don't you even think it."

"Too late for that, but you look too nice to get you covered in grease, just for a sight gag."

Judy's breath hitched at his comment. She was already flustered, and- He thought she looked nice? A smile spread over her face and she couldn't make herself look up for a moment. When she did finally look up, she was glad she had, but wished she hadn't. Nick had rolled his shoulders out of his now unzipped coveralls and all she saw was the mix of red and cream fur across his chest and stomach.

"Nick! What are you doing?!"

"What, fluff? I said I needed to get changed. I'm not getting lunch dressed like this."

"Here? Now? You're in public!"

"I have pants on, Carrots. I'm not flashing the goods for the world to see."

"Pants, but no shirt? Why on ea- those are not pants! Those are boxers!" She shrieked as she covered her eyes in mortification.

"These are not underwear. They are running shorts, and to answer your question, no shirt because this getup is plenty hot on its own, especially when you're elbow deep in a car."

"Then why wear it, and not proper clothes?!"

"Because I don't want my "proper clothes" covered in vehicular detritus, dumb bunny. Although, I do like the idea of improper clothes. We should try it some time."

"Ok. Ok, fine! I get it. Just get dressed!"

"Wow, Carrots. I didn't think I was that ugly to you."

Judy felt the bottom drop out of her stomach at that and her ears started drooping. She didn't want him to think that. She was momentarily riddled with guilt and moments from apologizing, when she felt his breath on her ears. She froze to the spot and struggled not to react as he whispered, "Or do you just like what you see and don't want to admit it?"
She turned to swat him, but he danced out of range of her paws. Now, out of his mechanic's frock, his russet coat was free and dancing in the late morning sun. Her clumsy swing and shock at the view caused her to stumble. Catching herself in time to see him slip inside the store front, she heard the lock click and the implications of that act on the heels of his last jab at her made her blood boil. Judy made it to the door and was hammering on it in moments.

"Nicolas Piberius Wilde, open this door!"

"Just a second, fluff! Buttoning my shirt," he sing-songed back. She could hear him chortling, as she banged on the door with her fist.

It just made her angrier. She hated it when he didn't take her seriously. It was rude and condescending and the thought stopped there as Judy found the door she had been pressing her shoulder into gone. She fell face-first into nothing for a terrifying heartbeat, her arms scrabbling for something, anything to halt her forward motion. Then her muzzle planted itself into something soft, which smelled like violets. Her arms reflexively grappled on to stabilize herself, while she got her balance back. She looked up and directly into Nick's emerald eyes.

"You missed me that much, Carrots? I'm touched."

She pushed herself off of him and was about to give him a high velocity "touch" to the stomach when she saw what he was wearing. A light grey dress shirt, coal slacks and a tie that was just a shade and change darker than her eyes. He looked good. She still punched him.

"Ow. I take it you approve?"

"It's alright. No bad tie and horrible Pawlynesian shirt today?"

"You said you wanted to eat someplace nice, so I figured I'd dress appropriately."

"You clean up pretty well, for an ex hustler who moonlights as a mechanic and a cop on the side," Judy sassed, trying to cover up her obvious staring.

"You clean up nicely yourself, sweetheart. For a cute little country bunny," he crooned as he tousled her ears. She smacked his paw.

Laughing and ribbing each other, they wandered off to find a place for lunch. Judy adored her time with him, but the workout her heart got these days was not doing good things for her mindset. She told herself it was just from him embarrassing her and playing off her relative innocence, but part of her knew it was a lie.

She pondered this as they walked into a tasteful little bistro in Sahara Central, near the park. They were seated at a table by the window by a middle aged beaver and left to review the menu. They sat in silence until she heard Nick calmly say, "So you never answered my question, Carrots."

Judy was confused. Abruptly pulling herself from her musings left her worrying that she'd missed something. "I'm sorry. I zoned out for a second. What question?"

"Cotton or silk?"

It'd been almost two years since that day and she still remembered it as clear as crystal.

That was them. That was the problem. He flirted as much as he breathed, while she increasingly
couldn’t stop the smiles as time passed. He was incorrigible and ridiculous and deliciously cheeky in all the ways she hated to love. And she did love it. She loved the jokes and misdirection that made her laugh, the double entendre and innuendo that made her blush, and the many moments that were uniquely theirs to describe. They made her days rich and colorful and her nights full of laughter and sweet dreams; but at the end of the day, or the night, or the shift, or the show, he would leave.

He would see her to her cab, or station, sometimes to her door. He would hug her and wink as he said good night, sometimes ruffle her ears, and then slip out into the night and, usually, into her dreams.

The few times he had stayed at her place for after a long shift, or a night out, he’d been a complete gentlemammal. He’d seen to her needs before his own, made sure she was comfortable, insisted on taking the floor to sleep. Even the one night he’d had too much to drink and she managed to wrangle him up to her apartment, so he could sleep it off, she’d gotten him settled in her bed and flopped down next to his snoring form, completely exhausted. She was out cold in seconds. Judy woke alone in the bed, covered with her blanket, with water and painkillers on her bedside table and there he was, on the floor. He’d even apologized for getting that drunk and making her take care of him.

Minutes plodded steadily by as Judy allowed herself to slip into another fond memory. That particular day had been a good one. Two wonderful things had happened, despite having to drag a mildly inebriated fox, twice her size and over twice her weight, home. She’d like think more would have, if she’d had the day free, but…

She’d woken up before him and tiptoed around his sleeping form, to the door to the hall. He was a totally different mammal when he was asleep. No smirk, no mask, no deflection; nothing to hide who he was. She hoped that one day he’d drop the mask when he was awake so that she could meet the mammal she’d only glimpsed once or twice. He’d been without his mask only once before, the day he received his shield from her. Granted, it hadn’t been as solid since then. She’d seen through it more and more as he’d grown comfortable with her and willing to show more of himself.

Smiling to herself, she slipped out the door and padded quietly down the hall to the floor’s communal bathroom. She tended to her morning needs and when she returned to her room, Nick was awake and quite obviously out of sorts.

She was intrigued by the idea that he was awake and off form, so she decided to take a leaf from Bogo’s book. She let him sweat. She barely made it to the refrigerator and got it open before she heard his voice a rare, uncertain tone drift her way.

“I’m sorry, Carrots. It’s been a rough week and I needed to unwind. You shouldn’t have had to babysit me.” Her expression was nonplused, when she looked at him from the open fridge, but her mind was reeling. She was used to his independent nature, but he was so open and obviously felt guilty. There was something eating him. She had to push. Maybe he’d open a little more.

“I didn’t babysit you. I dragged your fluffy butt up here all on my own because I wasn’t about to let you sleep it off under a bridge.” Her tone was carefully neutral and non-confrontational. The Academy had taught her to let the suspect talk themselves where she wanted them. She knew it was mean, but this was important. It was also a little payback for all the fun he had at her expense.

He’d cringed at the bridge comment and visibly wilted. “Just tell me I didn’t puke all over you, or start singing or… do anything inappropriate.”
Her eye brow was the only thing that moved, other than her heart, which irritatingly sped up. Did he seriously think he’d done something to her? “What do you think?”

“No?” he squeaked, obviously bracing.

She knew he always expected the worst and was used to abuse from mammals for no reason, but knowing it and seeing it like this… she caved.

“No, dummy, you didn’t. All I did was get you home after you had a little too much to drink. All you did was be unhelpful and then fall asleep as soon as your head hit my pillow.” She was smiling now and letting the tension bleed out of the room. “Like you said, it’s been a rough week. You needed it. I won’t blame you for destressing. Just next time, after a couple at the bar, we’re going to one of our apartments for any more. You’re kinda heavy.”

His relief was palpable and his humor retuned enough for him to half-whine, “Hey, this is all muscle, Fluff. I don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

“All muscle, with just a light sprinkling of chub?” She joked, knowing it was a bald-faced lie. She closed the refrigerator and walked over to him with a pitcher of her favorite smoothie.

Muscle weighs more than fat and while Nick was no body builder, he was certainly fit. All lean vulpine muscle. A point of pride for him; pride which she’d very neatly pricked.

“I’ll have you know I have exactly one ounce of fat on my body.” Nick retorted, indignantly.

“Is it between your fluffy red ears?” Judy shot back, setting the pitcher on her bedside table, next to their glasses.

“Ouch, Carrots. Gloves up.” He said somewhat bashfully. “But seriously, I’m sorry I had so much and you had to drag me all the way up here.”

“Nick, come on. It was just a couple beers too many and I’m a tough little bun. I can handle getting a wobbly fox into bed,” she joked, paws on her hips and a smirk on her lips. It was one of the only times she’d ever managed to get him to obviously blush. She joined him moments later, when she realized just how forward she’d sounded.

The laughter immediately followed as the absurdity of what had just happened hit them both. They were panting and wiping tears from their eyes, as the laughing fit subsided when it happened. He reached out the way he always did, but instead of the ear ruffling she was expecting, she felt his paw gently cup her cheek, his thumb gliding across her cheekbone.

“Oh, Carrots… I’d be lost without you.”

It was a moment. Just a pawful of heartbeats. The warmth of those heartbeats had lasted through their slightly awkward breakfast smoothie afterwards, through her apologies that she had meetings with activist groups all day, through their casual parting and all the way to the end of all her obligations of the day, not that she paid much attention to any of them. The warmth of his touch stayed with her until she was nestled in her bed, at the end of the long day. Judy fell asleep that night touching the same spot and woke from dreams of what she had hoped would have followed.

That had been months ago. Maybe a year? No. Not even close. Was it? She could always remember events, but rarely the exact dates. Not a weakness a cop should have. One she combated with a variety of semi-effective countermeasures, including carrot pen and paper.

She brushed her memory concerns aside and tried to focus on her morning routine. She scampered to the bathrooms on her floor and returned with equal alacrity. She still had to get herself together
and to the bakery before work and she had exhausted the padding she always built into her plans.

As she let herself back into her apartment and changed into her running clothes, her thoughts returned to her vexing vulpine.

She knew affection was a little hard for him and he didn’t open up quickly. Since that morning he’d grown steadily more tender and open towards her. She knew he cared for her and she hoped he wanted more out of what they had. He gave her maddeningly mixed signals and drove her batty with the flirting, but he didn’t ever quite take a step past it.

Shortly after that incident, she had considered being more aggressive. Fru Fru had been a major proponent of that option. To hear the shrew talk, all Judy needed was herself, a nighty, her service handcuffs and the backbone to apply them to her foxy source of frustration. Not that she was against the idea, but that tactic was likely to panic him, more than win him over.

As she shook herself out of her reverie, she realized how much time had passed. Her schedule was salvageable, but she had to get moving. Plus, she was flustered and full of conflicting emotions right before work. Again. She knew her morning run would help clear her mind.

As she left her apartment and got her running playlist playing on her Ipawd, she couldn’t help but think about her life. Running had always been like meditation for her. It cleared the mind, relieved stress, helped her think.

Thinking.

Judy had always thought more than most mammals expected. Granted, she didn’t always think everything through as much as she should. The Nighthowler press conference was just one instance. There was her last boyfriend, the girlfriend before him, the wasabi incident in 11th grade, taking on Gideon Grey when she was nine, the noodle wager with nick last week… ugh… How one fox managed to eat that much ramen in 15 minutes and not pop (or die from the salt) was beyond her.

She sighed and upped her speed to her fastest traveling pace. She had to make up some time.

Judy wasn’t a dumb bunny. She’d proven that dozens of times over. She wasn’t dumb, or completely inexperienced and her naivété was long gone. Perhaps not all her innocence, but that was neither here nor there.

She’d fallen in and out of love and knew the emotions well enough, so she knew that what she felt wasn’t temporary. A simple crush would have died off ages ago. It had happened before. This was something else and she wasn’t positive what it was, but she wanted to find out. She had to. No one had ever made her feel like this and she was positive that wasn’t a fluke. She was positive that whatever they had, it was worth exploring and she was well past ready to get started.

The sticking point was him.

Maybe he was scared, or had some hang up. She didn’t know what his issues might be, but she did know two things that made a world of difference. One, you’re guaranteed to fail if you never try and she was nothing if not a try-er. Two, they were growing closer every day and she knew it wasn’t just her that felt it. Too many times she’d seen through his bluster to believe he felt nothing for her. She wouldn’t give up. She just had to wait for him to finally open up to her and admit it. It was just a matter of time.

Patience, Judy.
She was not a patient mammal. Waiting had never gotten her anything. Everything she had gotten, she had earned with hard work, dedication, or sheer audacity. Head first and all-in was the only way she knew how to work, but she also knew that this wasn’t a prize or a goal. It was a mammal. It was Nick. He was too precious to her to risk losing him by being overeager. She got enough of him every day to keep her happy enough and she’d get more, in time. Eventually, she hoped, the whole package.

She giggled at that. Hehe! Package. She was 12.

As she rounded her last corner and bounded up to her apartment building, she tried very hard to steer her mind away from thoughts of Nick and his package with distressingly limited success.

What was with her today? She never got like this. Not this badly anyway.

Her reminiscing gave way to nebulous concern as she let herself into her tiny apartment and collected her toiletries. A cold start and a warm finish on her shower helped her shake off her unpleasant mental state a bit. By that point, she was in her usual rhythm and running on autopilot.

She was dressed, badged and on her way to see Tanya and Li at Buck & Doenuts, before she checked her phone for the time, again. Then she was sprinting. It was 6:22am! She’d never get her paperwork done before she was due in the bullpen. Tanya was on the register and the bobcat had her usual order ready. She always did. Judy’s atypical lateness was enough for Tanya to shoot a questioning eye Judy’s way as she sped up to the register.

“Everything ok, Bun? You’re running awful late, for you.” The motherly concern was welcome, if ironic. Tanya was a year younger than Judy and almost as petite. As Tanya spoke, her digits flew over the register buttons.

“Really weird morning,” Judy replied, breathing slightly heavier than usual. “Totally off my groove.”

“What’s got you so rattled? That partner of yours, again?”

“Again?” Judy asked, as her ears drooped. She’d frozen in the midst of pulling her billfold from her pocket and Tanya smirked at Judy’s obvious tell.

“Don’t give me the bunny eyes. He’s the only mammal in the city that can get your goat,” Tanya shot back.

“Hey!” they both heard from the back.

“Get over it, Li! It’s Judy!”

“Oh! She can get me any time!”

Both females facepawed and Judy shouted back, “In your dreams, Curly!”

“Every damn night!”

“He’s unbelievable.” Tanya muttered as Judy counted out her due.

“I’ll arrest him later.”

“Ooh! Please?”

“Shut up, or I’ll shut you up, you dirty old goat!”
“Are you open to suggestions on how?”

“Listen, I’ll catch up with you later. Let me know if I need to bring a taser. I gotta run!” Judy called as she backpedaled out the door and bolted down the sidewalk, leaving Tanya to thrash her baker. He’d probably enjoy it.

Judy would normally have had a few minutes to spare for Li’s antics, but she was so late. She was also keen to flee the conversation that Tanya was unquestionably about to start. “I barely even know what has me rattled. How could I possibly explain it to her? Ugh…”

Off kilter when she woke up, disjointed all morning and she was now in total disarray. Why was nothing going in any way she could work with today?

At least, she had their morning together to look forward to. Every day, they treated each other to breakfast. Her pastries and his coffees, after her morning hug. That hug on the horizon every day was what got her through her morning paperwork. Not the promise of coffee, not her morning run, but that one moment when she could throw herself (literally) and the whole build-up of her emotions at her fox and not have to worry. That was what got her through.

Unfortunately, it was also the one thing that had tipped her hand to Clawhauser. He’d called her on the blatant look of joy that preceded it one day and she’d promptly given it away in every way. She’d been so lousy at lying back then. Not enough of Nick had rubbed off on her, yet. Not that he had ever. Maybe he had because of her? Now, that’s a… Oh, no… Focus, Judy!

The point was that the overzealous feline knew about her interest in Nick and had been disgustingly thrilled when he put it together. It was the reason her “usual” from Tanya was three pastries. It varied a bit, depending on availability and what Li decided to make each week, but it was fairly consistent. Nick had his blueberry muffin, or Danish. Judy had a carrot donut with a berry glaze, or a strawberry tart. Clawhauser’s bribe was whatever was intensely sugary. Recently it had involved maple syrup in the batter, or melted maple sugar. Judy thought they smelled delightful, but she didn’t want the diabetic coma it would take to finish one. She could split it with Nick, but that would only make the rumors worse.

She just needed to clock in, dive into her paperwork and make it to 7:20. That was hug O’clock. Now, it was 6:38am and she was through the doors! Clawhauser’s concerned look was ignored as she launched herself across the lobby, up the stairwell and into the office she shared with Nick. 6:39am found her booting up her computer and reaching for the first file she needed to complete. Out of an empty In-Box. She’d finished it all yesterday just to make sure this morning would go smoothly. With the training and visitors, she’d wanted a clean slate.

As the lightbulb between her ears clicked on, she dragged her paws down her face and flopped back into her chair. This was just not her day. 41 minutes until hug time and no work to do. Glancing at Nick’s Inbox, she saw a single file. She leapt over to it, grateful for once that her partner was less diligent than she. She flipped the folder open, eager to see what was left to do, only to find it was empty. That is, empty, save for a sticky note. On it was a drawing of a little fox face, with its tongue sticking out and “Gotcha!” written below.

In that moment, she was so conflicted… The cheeky bastard had stayed late, or come in yesterday to wrap up his work so she wouldn’t panic today. He’d also set her up and she had waltzed right into it. He knew her way too well.

She flopped back into her chair. Again. She was doing a lot of panicking and flopping today. If this kept up she’d end up having a breakdown.
She checked her phone.

38 minutes to go.

Nothing to do.

Torn between staring into space and draining her phone’s battery, she chose to stare. She regretted her decision moments later, as her traitorous mind latched right back on to the one thing she was trying to avoid thinking about, Nick. She had a problem.

Everything reminded her of him. Even the damn paperwork!

Nick's dislike of paperwork was well known and thoroughly documented, much to Judy's despair. Also, to her confusion. Most officers hated the tedium and neither she, nor her partner, were immune to it. The forms and reports were an inescapable and intensely drab aspect to their vocation. The confusing aspect to Nick's dislike wasn't in that he did dislike paperwork. It's how he was so good at it.

One afternoon, about 8 months into their partnership, Nick and Judy had found themselves badly behind in their paperwork. What had started as a routine traffic stop near Little Rodentia had escalated into a drug bust and pulled them into a week of near insanity, working a massive related case that involved Vice, Homicide and the Mafia task force (much to their discomfort). The stack of paperwork once their part in the case was done, bordered on the alpine.

Bogo gave them 36 hours to complete and either turn in for review, or file appropriately, all of it. After that, either they'd have 2 days leave (if they succeeded) or 2 weeks of "light duty" issuing citations in the meter maid vest and joke mobile when they did finish up. As far as the chief, Judy and the rest of the ZPD was concerned, parking duty for two was the only possible outcome. 14 hours until the deadline, Judy's expectation was all but confirmed. She was exhausted, miserable and had more than half of her stack to go. She hadn't stopped for a break in almost 9 hours and had cramped paws, sore fingers and pins and needles in both legs to show for it. She was all but despairing of getting done at all, let alone by the deadline.

Despondently, she slid off her chair and dragged herself over to her partner's desk, hoping for a few minutes of commiseration and a coffee break, before diving back in. She hadn't heard so much as a quip from her partner in almost 4 hours and not even a key stroke, or the sound of pen on paper in over 2. She expected to find him asleep at his desk and even less done than she had managed.

To her horror and consternation she found him entirely absent.

She hopped onto his desk top looking for his stack of unfinished papers, only to find it was empty. There wasn't a single sheet there. Panic gripped her as her mind played out all the ways this could have happened. Where were his files? What happened? How? How were they gone? Did he shred them to avoid doing them? Were they burning in the parking lot? Was he making them into a collage? A Papier Mache model of Finnick's van? What the hell happened to it? And where in the name of celery sticks was he?

Just as she was getting ready to tear out the door to track his fuzzy tail down for the throttling he doubtlessly deserved, he sauntered back into their office, leaving her torn. She was so glad to see him, because now she wouldn't have to waste time looking for him, but she also had been so eager for the break in the monotony that a foot chase would grant her.

Her internal conflict bought Nick enough time to strike a confounding blow against her already stymied train of thought, by slapping a cup of her favorite coffee into her hands. As she was
shocked out of her mental morass and her lips parted to say something (she had no idea what, even now. It never had a chance to form) Nick slipped a roasted, sweet and sour carrot medallion between them, still warm from the cart. Once her brain registered her favorite street food treat in her mouth and the scent of her coffee of choice in her nose, she realized that she was starving. She turned to see the rest of the large pouch of tasty treats sitting by her keyboard, with a bottle of water and Nick reaching for the top of her pile of unfinished paperwork.

“Nick!”

“What?”

“Don’t you ‘what’ me! Where were you? Where is your paperwork? You know we have a deadline and you’re wandering off to get food and didn’t say anything? I can’t believe you! What in the name of celery sticks are you trying to pull?” Judy ranted at the increasingly wide eyed fox. At least until the end, there.

“Celery sticks? Really, Carrots?”

“Don’t you dare try to joke your way out of this, Wilde. I am not in the mood for it. You have ten seconds to explain. Choose your words carefully.” If she had hoped to convey the imminent and barely restrained consequences for his bad behavior, it was very short lived. Her angry tirade was met with a nonplussed expression and a single raised eyebrow.

“I’ll answer in the order you asked. I was at Bark & Bite Beanery and then the grilled veggie stand across the street, getting us some refreshment. My paperwork is done and turned in.” At this moment Judy opened her mouth to voice her incredulity, but Nick’s paw padded digit sealed her bunny lips, and he continued, while her ears drooped and cheeks heated up, “You can check with Clawhauser when I’m done. I did say something. Twice. You were in a fugue state I call “the paperwork doldrums” and only grunted at me. I have a video of it as proof. It’s in your email. I also left a post-it note on your computer screen.” Judy’s eyes darted to the screen and did see his personal blueberry colored sticky note there, with his chicken scratch handwriting in her carrot-orange ink stuck to it. Her eyes darted back to the fox, as he continued. “And what I’m trying to pull is our fat out of the fire. I have no interest in being first mate on the ZSS Joke-Mobile for two weeks.

“Now...”, He said, with a sigh as he lifted his pad from her lips and leaned back, “By my estimation, we have enough time to get your remaining files done with about 2 hours to spare, after you verify my claim about my paperwork with Clawhauser, eat your treat, drink your coffee and watch the video in your inbox of you ignoring me.”

All Judy could manage was a pitiful squeak of “We?”

Nick’s expression was equal parts fondness and exasperation. “Yes, Fluffbutt. We. I’ll get started on the next section, while you do your part.”

“My part?”

“Go see Clawhauser and take a break. You’re hungry and we both know it. Actually, the whole station knows with how loud your stomach was a moment ago. Come back in ten minutes and we’ll get this done.”

All Judy could do was stare. After she hadn’t moved for two minutes, Nick sighed and stood up. He shuffled her out the door with the carrot sack and coffee in paw, saying, “If you’re back here in less than ten minutes, it means you want a nose-boop every five minutes for our next three shifts.
Now, go.” With the door to their shared office shut firmly behind her, she did the only thing that made sense. She wandered over to the reception desk and the invariably dancing Cheetah who worked there.

Fifteen minutes later, Judy re-entered her office, Nick was scribbling away and had obviously made progress on her stack. It wasn’t phenomenal, but the fact that she could tell there was a difference was impressive enough.

“Before I jump back in, I have to ask.”

“Ask what?”

“How did you get done so fast?”


Judy was horrified. “That thing? It's a pain! It never works! Not even the creators liked it.”

“And yet, I still use it. To devastating effect, I might add.” Nick replied, entirely unruffled by her outburst. “Yes, it’s a beast and you have to do all the setup yourself, which takes literally hours per form. However, once it's set up, all my forms are easy. 2 hours on a case file for you? 10 minutes for me.”

“You still have to write out the events as they occurred.”, Judy fumed at the smarmy red fuzzball.

“This is true! Specifically, write or type. That's the other thing. The app allows me to transfer notes, so I write as I go. I take notes on my phone when we’re on a case, or patrol, or whatever. You know all those times you pull me out of Furbook? I’m actually writing my reports for the day. I jot it all down as we go. Then, I transfer to the form, print, sign, date. Done! Why do you think I let you drive all the time? You drive, I write.”

“Also! Compartmentalization. Almost every file has the same basic forms to start with. Create a template and they are all but instant. Just change the date and specifics. Saves tons of time.”

Judy was appalled. “Then, why do I have to work so hard to get you to actually do your reports every week?”

“Because it’s still boring and tedious and you’re adorable when you’re grumpy?”

They’d managed to get everything done and logged with over three hours to spare, much to Bogo’s surprise. Everything being in order, their two day leave was signed off on. Once she had taken his advice on compartmentalization they both made good time. They’d left the station with contented smiles and ruffled fur, with the unsettled gazes of their coworkers following them every step of the way. None of the officers of ZPD Precinct One had ever seen a laughing fox chased around the lobby by a furious rabbit, before, but since then… weekly occurrence.

That had been a good day. Expectations exceeded and well-deserved down time earned. Just the way she liked it.

She wanted her hug. 8 more minutes down and she wanted her hug.

Hug.

Damn it! She needed something. Anything. Anything!
She gave up and set an alarm. A few taps later she was struggling for biscuit supremacy in her latest game, Jamba Jam. It was that or work on beating the pen-on-nose balancing record, currently held by Trunkaby. 4 minutes, 11 seconds.

She was down 4 lives and a good fifty words deep into a blue streak because of that island cricket thing and its cracker obsession when her alarm blared out of her phone. She was so startled she dropped it and watched as the small rectangle tumbled across her lap to hit the floor.

Scrambling to grab it, she left a trail of fire out the door, towards the stairs. She was back at her desk six seconds later to collect her paper sack of pastries and back out in seven. She launched herself down the stairs and crossed the lobby to the reception desk with all suitable speed and silence. She stopped by Clawhauser and dropped the bag under his nose. He’d collect his while Nick was distracted, leaving the other two untouched. That was the deal for his silence.

Judy looked for Nick and, seeing him, could no longer restrain herself. She sped towards him with every ounce of enthusiasm she’d been repressing since dawn.

She was moving.

Airborne!

Impact! She clung to him like a baby koala for a heartbeat or fifty before chirping, “Morning, Partner! Ready for another day?”, as he returned the hug.

“Sure am, Carrots.” He replied with the usual ruffling of her ears which she hated. She’d “hated” it for ages. It was one of the newer forms of affection he showed her and he was completely unaware that his pawpads were rolling right over one of her erogenous zones every time a finger pad slid over the base of her ears. She swatted his paw away, before she melted into a puddle of grey goo.

She bolted back to the desk to collect their breakfast, giving Clawhauser a pointed look. His morning squeal at their antics had been more intense than usual. He unrepentantly shrugged and smirked as she trotted back to her fox and launched into a stream of consciousness about anything mundane that came to mind. It wasn’t what she wanted to do, but it was that, or she’d say what she was thinking, or worse, act on it.

Nick was listening, obviously. He was aware enough to spare the mental energy to work in a comment about her tail, after all. That threw her a bit.

Focus, Judy. Paws to yourself.

That thought didn’t help. She was starting to stammer and needed an escape, when she looked at her phone. 7:30:12am! Perfect! Time to move! Moving was great cover.

Up! Get up and moving. Distract him!

She grabbed his arm and started dragging him out of his seat.

He whined, “But, Carrots, it’s still early. What’s the rush?”

Judy shot back, “It’s professional courtesy to be 15 minutes early.” Didn’t he know that?

“And the other 14 minutes and 38 seconds? Are what? Bonus?”

He was impossible. “Oh, stop being difficult and get in here.” She stood in the doorway, pulling on his arm with all her weight, willing him to move at more than a glacial pace. Damn…slippery…
floors… not enough traction!

“That’s not possible, sweetheart, and you know it. Look! There’s hardly anyone in there!”

“Damn it, Nick! Just. Get. In…. Blast!” He was stopped dead and she was shoving on his back. In front of everyone. His habit of playing to the audience, while in the office was so unprofessional. She had to work so hard not to smile at it. He was in his element as a showman and it was painfully distracting to her.

Judy finally gave up on pushing. “Why are you being such a pain in the tail?”

He turned and bent down just to her eye level. “It’s part of my charm.”

She pinched the bridge of her muzzle, and took a deep, calming breath. Why did he have to do that? The urge to do something highly inappropriate was nigh overwhelming. “Could you and your charm, please, get out of the doorway and to our seat?”

“Sure thing, Fluff! All you had to do was ask nicely.”

“Just move!” And her paw smacked his shoulder. Only, it wasn’t his shoulder. The yip that she heard made her eyes snap up and open, seeing exactly what she’d done. She’d just slapped his ass. In the bullpen. A full house.

Dread filled her and she heard the words. “My, my Officer Hopps…. If you like it rough, I don’t mind, but ask a lady, first.”

Cacophony reigned. Judy’s heart was hammering. She hid behind her paws and desperately tried to calm herself. She was so angry with him, but so grateful he’d broken the tension. She was giddy. She finally got her paws on his fluffy butt. Only one, but still… Now, she had to get him back. Just droop the ears, curl in a bit and… She felt him come closer. Her eyes popped over her paws and she saw him flinch. His face held anxiety and giggling and the knowledge that he was about to get thrashed.

“Gangway!” And she was off!

She ignored the laughter and focused on actually doing what she dreamed of most nights, chasing her fox. If she was lucky, he’d offer her a decent bribe to assuage her anger. She’d have to milk it for all it was worth. The thought made her grin and spurred her on.

Once she tackled him, she rained punches upon him, knowing what was about to happen. He’d do something to escape and get enough space to start negotiating. She expected nothing less.

She didn’t expect to end up wrapped in his arms. Her end of the negotiations were made over the thunderous hammering of her heart. In a brief moment of hysteria she wondered why being in love made you short of breath while your heart raced. What was that about? Did Mother Nature think fainting was the perfect way to indicate attraction, or did she think it was just funny as hell?

Her mental lapse didn’t seem to impact her negotiating at all. When she finally resurfaced from her minor panic, she found that her reflexive struggling had won her dinner at her favorite cafe, a week of amazing coffee and a dose of her favorite minty addiction after work.

She had to fight a little. “You think that’s enough to make me stop? Just really tasty treats I can’t resist?” She was fooling no one.

His breath tickled her ears and she fought off a swoon, “I’ll throw in a foot rub after our next foot
patrol.” He just offered her heaven. Like fun was she waiting until a foot patrol.

“Tonight, Bottle-brush-butt. That’s happening tonight.” She growled back.

“First you smack it, now you’re talking about it. Do you have a butt fixation today, or something?” he muttered. If only he knew…

“One more joke and its fists of doom, round 2.”

“Understood, Officer Cottontail,” he smirked. She loved his smirk.

Wolford’s warning caused them to leap apart and sprint to their chair. A few seconds later they were seated and she was back in her groove. For the first time all bloody day… All was right with the world. She had treats coming her way, and a foot rub!

Nick had an uncanny talent for unwittingly finding her erogenous zones. Every time he worked the sore out of her little bunny toes, she invariably had more than a few inappropriate dreams. Ok, daydreams. Day-porn-dreams. In the shower. She needed more musk mask before the training. If she didn’t the whole damn station would know how badly she was turned on and Clawhauser was bad enough.

Thankfully, she was spared further self-embarrassment by the chief striding into the room. She had her notepad and pen ready to go.

“All right, quiet. Enough!” Bogo usual voice of command silenced the room and she couldn’t help but look up in admiration. That was when she saw him. For the first time ever, she ignored everything Bogo said. Standing at the water buffalo’s side was a rabbit. Not just any rabbit. He had grey fur and black stripes on his face and ears. Black suit. Air of supreme confidence. Small notches and scars easily visible on his ears. It was Jack Savage. Her role model. Part of her inspiration to come to Zootopia and become an officer of the law!

She had to meet him! She dragged enough attention back to Bogo to hear, “…I trust you will show him the warm welcome and respect that a mammal of his caliber deserves. Agent Savage, if you would like to say a few words?”

Judy sat enraptured. Everything she aspired to be was in front of her with everything she wanted right by her side. She knew it wasn’t a dream! It wasn’t a dream!

Agent Savage’s address was short, sweet and… surprisingly boring. She was a little surprised, but not horribly so. She supposed she shouldn’t be too shocked. He had to do this a lot. She couldn’t expect him to deliver every welcoming speech with her level of energy. Practice did make perfect, however. He was an excellent speaker and the pinnacle of professional comportment.

At the conclusion of Agent Savage’s speech, Bogo dismissed them until the first session of the planned training schedule at 9:30, sharp, lecture hall. Until then, they were free to wrap up any last minute paperwork, or other tasks, as they were expected to devote themselves fully to this exceptional opportunity. A few pointed looks were aimed at certain officers in the room.

Judy wasted no time in leaving her seat and walking over to their guest of honor.

“Agent Savage? Judy Hopps. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m looking forward to working with you.”
Dawn’s light crept through the window of a very nice hotel room in Savannah Central’s Palm Hotel & Casino. It crawled gently across the walls, illuminating a desk that had been polished to a mirror finish, a flat screen TV large enough for a medium sized pachyderm, and a luxurious bed, entirely unused and immaculate. As it crept along, seeping through the excessively large and opulent rentable domicile, it illuminated nothing that was not where it should be. The sheets were straight and so tight you could bounce a quarter off them. The curtains were as straight and spotless as the walls. The stone floors and counter spaces, tile and glass were polished to almost mirror quality. There was not a scuff, speck of dust or paw print in the entirety of the room. That is, until the sunlight graced the space before the wardrobe.

The sunlight that suffused the room was not a surprise to him. He had marked the hours through the night from gloaming to now without pause, or sleep. He seldom slept in places he was uncomfortable. In this distinctly posh room, he was certainly uncomfortable. It was pleasing that the ZPD thought so highly of him, to warrant this, but it was not a place he enjoyed.

It wasn’t bad. It was quite lovely, if he was honest, but there was something clinical about it that he found unsettling. It suited his station, though, so he would tolerate it. He discarded that line of thought as he turned his mind towards something less frivolous: his dress for the day.

His daily enrobing was not much of a challenge. He no longer had the limitations imposed on the lower ranks, regarding his dress. In the lower echelons of the family of institutions he served, dress was practically uniform. Utility, understatement and commonality were the hallmarks of the neophyte with a mind towards upward-mobility. Once one managed to ascend to an appropriate level of authority, one was permitted the indulgence of adding a touch of personality to one’s garments. Females tended to be a bit more overt and flamboyant, adding variations in style, color and texture, where appropriate. It simply wouldn’t do for a field agent to have to wrestle with an evening gown during a foot chase on city streets. That hadn’t stopped one unfortunately willful zebra from attempting a miniskirt suit in the field, some years ago when they had been popular. It was unfortunate, but her embarrassment had served as an empirical warning to the rest of the team. Some of his fellow males who had managed to climb the ranks decided to indulge more in ornaments than textiles. Rings, tie clips and sunglasses were common marks of higher rank. Others preferred to embrace their freedom and make themselves visually famous.

Jack did not.

Jack’s dress was now as it had been since his days as a probationary officer. Dark suit, dark tie, white shirt. They were of finer cloth and cleaner cut than the old days, but otherwise three was little difference. He purchased for quality and was willing to pay for it. However, he needed nothing to make himself stand out. His stature was plenty. No one could possibly mistake him for anyone but himself. There was, after all, only one rabbit agent.

In the wardrobe, the rabbit perused his selection of dressing options. It was a mock irony he occasionally amused himself with. Many years ago, Jack had found himself inadvertently studying psychology and some of the quirks that occasionally manifested in those gifted with a fantastic mental capacity. Albert Sweinstein was a singularly gifted mammal and possessed a surfeit of personality that complimented his brilliance. A peculiarity which Sweinstein had adopted was a full closet of the same suits. He wore nothing else. It was his considered opinion that he shouldn’t have to waste valuable mental energy or time on anything so petty as his clothes. He had higher priorities. Jack had cared little about the porcine genius at the time, but that attitude of practicality
resonated with Jack’s sensibilities. That stint of self-education had resulted in many amusing anecdotes, including the aardvark that had four PhDs but couldn’t escape the library. It had also provided some humor to his and his partner’s lives in the field. Once Jack had adopted this idea of a personal uniform, they’d occasionally done the valley-goat scene from Clawless. The goofy falsetto of many years ago floated through jack’s mind, “I mean, come on, it looks like they just fell out of bed and put on some baggy pants and take their greasy hair - ew - and cover it up with a backwards cap and like, we're expected to swoon? I don't think so.”

Memories from the past were not something Jack appreciated at the best of times; after a night of no sleep in a strange place, all the more so. His chuckle died in his throat. He never thought about those days, if he could help it. If he couldn’t help it… That was cause for serious concern.

A firm mental slap later, Jack found his mind in a more pleasing avenue. Running a paw across the selection of garments, he briefly debated his Cerville Row or that red-hued black suit he’d gotten in Purris. They were both acceptable, but in the right light the Purrisian made him look like a modern day Bunnicula. Another crushed smile was followed by another mental slap. If he was unable to maintain discipline, he didn’t deserve the indulgence of either. He settled on his standard black suit, white shirt and black tie; just like his juniors.

He’d found that keeping his own dress standards to the standard of the mammals who served under him created a sense of familiarity and speedy camaraderie, which was very useful in pulling a team together, especially from scratch. They saw him as “one of us” and to be respected for his willingness to not flaunt his status. That said, Jack had to admit that occasionally a "splash of color" was a pleasant change and he allowed himself the extravagance on rare occasions.

His old partner had been quite the opposite in opinion. He’d worn the dark suit, yes, but only as a backdrop for some of the most tragically heinous neckties that had ever seen daylight. John's ties had been horrors. He’d called them "the flaw that makes the masterpiece”; usually, to mass cringing from their colleagues.

Jack shook off the reminiscence before it could go further. It accomplished nothing to dwell on the past or the dead. So, why was he doing so much of it today? He’d need more coffee than usual to survive this day; perhaps, chamomile tonight, as well.

Orders for both quickly placed with the front desk, he turned back to his wardrobe and collected his selection. That done, he set what he needed on the foot of the bed. He then hopped up onto the mattress, yanked the bedsheets back and crawled under them. He vigorously rubbed his scent and fur into the sheets, making it look as though he’d spent the night in the colossal expanse of linen. He then departed to the shower and the preparation for another day, his usual morning misdirection accomplished. Hopefully, the water would wash away the mental uselessness that was plaguing him. As the water fell, Jack reflected. He refused to give the mirror or his memory the satisfaction.

Jack was one thing and he was it very well. He was a professional. A career as a government operative, required him to embrace the religion of pragmatism. He was calm, charming, sophisticated, intelligent, cultured. Everything he was expected to be. He was a consummate professional. His work spaces were always clean. His reports were always on time and accurate, verified and cross referenced. His experience was vast and career, spotless. Without fail, he kept his professional life and his personal life strictly separate. This was easy, as he had no personal life. He had the illusion he maintained to keep his superiors for irritating him about "work-life balance" and other such nonsense. Jack had no friends or living family. No lover. No confidant. No personal connections. He had no need. A web of colleagues, subordinates, contacts, superiors, informants, brokers, suppliers and security personnel were what he had. He knew his role in this web of relationships and responsibilities. He had worked the web to his advantage for over 2 decades. It
was functional.

He was never one for introspection. He didn't need emotional support. He kept up appearances. Took occasional does to bed, just to keep the rumors and well-meaning therapists away. He never bedded them, but they left sated, and no exceptions. It's amazing what a bottle of strong wine and a silver tongue can accomplish. He had learned early that the same skills that could get a doe into his bed could convince them they had the greatest night of their life, despite having no memory of it. In truth, he had as much interest in does, or females of any kind, as he did in 8th century Etuskian sculpture, avian grooming tools and dancing the polka, none. He did, however, have an interest in maintaining his reputation. It did wonderful things for getting him what he wanted.

Or it used to. Jack bemoaned his infuriatingly altered circumstances as he concluded his grooming, dressed and made his way to the lobby and hence, the car; perfectly on schedule and according to expectations, etuskian espresso in paw.

He was no longer the field agent par excellence. Despite every favor he'd been owed, he had been retired from the field, promoted to a deputy directorship and sent out to "teach". He wasn't surprised after almost 24 years that he'd been sidelined, but it still rankled. He still led his "team" with suitable aplomb and professional grace despite his suspicions they were present more to babysit him than provide assistance.

He knew this posting was his last one. He'd never be allowed to return to the field but his experience and insight was simply too valuable for him to be fully put out to pasture, just yet.

"Pasture" was fittingly the name of the retirement village where he was likely to end up. It was named to be innocuous, located next to a private medical facility and a small, equally private cemetery. It's where relics like him were sent to finish rotting and quietly end their days. It was also called the Wrinkle Farm. It was where the crop was planted in the ground after the harvesting.

He had nothing left after his tour in the classroom ran its course. He was only 43 years old, but he had no future. There were no horizons any more. He'd be planted at the farm and left with nothing but his memories. He'd be dead in a month. He wouldn't even live long enough for his health to turn, or one of his enemies to find him. He'd sink into his own mind and remember himself into a broken heart, or look in the mirror and see what he really was: a lonely, bitter, beat up rabbit in early middle age that couldn't stop grieving, or lying to himself. He'd find his end at the bottom of a bottle.

He shook himself and slammed the door on that maudlin line of thought, as the car door opened, indicating his arrival at the city center. This was neither the time nor the place. His discipline was slipping. Another sign he wasn't fit for the field. He had two years left in the classroom. More, if he was seen as effective. He'd best at least appear effective.

Quite some time after his arrival, Jack found himself struggling to maintain his impassive demeanor. He was waiting to be escorted to the "bullpen". An honor the chief had claimed for himself. Jack had spent the morning this far suffering through a personal meeting with the massive mammal, going over the anticipated schedule of instructional events over the next six weeks, when some cacophony had erupted from the floors below. Bogo had grimaced and sighed, before excusing himself. Obviously this was common enough an occurrence to no longer be a surprise. That did not bode well. Jack had ignored the booming voice that penetrated the walls after "Clawhauser!" The chief of Precinct One had returned with an obviously forced smile before apologizing for his imminently extended absence. Jack had been nonplused, but was as ever emollient. He'd sent Bogo on his way with a patient smile. A short lived smile, but serviceable. Giving up momentarily, Jack allowed his irritation to surface and, muttering to himself, he moved
away from the window and back to the small chair left for him in the conference room by the chief’s office.

He was grateful for the momentary peace and wanted a few more minutes of same before having to start his performance, again. Jack did like the buffalo, but he was of the breed of mammals that took their work so seriously, they had to pretend to not care, just to maintain their sanity. It was ultimately futile. They cared too much and nothing would change that. It was an act jack knew well. He’d seen it many times and it was similar to his own.

He arranged himself and smoothed his face and clothes into his well-practiced mask of competent self-satisfaction that everyone knew instinctively and expected without exception. He had a reputation to uphold. It was easier to hold when he was only acting for his own benefit.

A moment of self-directed vexation at another stint of self-indulgent nonsense flitted through his visage.

This was unacceptable.

He was Jack Savage; government spook, pred-hater, silver tongued philanderer, the only mammal to take down an alligator in aquatic combat, breaker of the Reptilian mafia global smuggling ring, only mammal to successfully infiltrate Herpetalia and sabotage the Serpentine naval station at the end of the Cold War; an object of lust for any doe and the envy every buck. He was a scarred and black striped legend.

He couldn't help the memory returning. Just a snippet of a conversation with his old mentor.
"Legends are hollow. A legend is a story wrapped in convenience and hyperbole. They aren't alive. They don't breathe. They aren't real. Worst of all, so little is true. They're convenient lies wrapped around a tiny nugget of fact." Jack laughed bitterly to himself at how true that was in his case.

Bogo returned and led Jack out of the room with an unsettling mixture of forced servility and feigned good humor, barely draped in professional comportment. As he followed Bogo downstairs he mused at how many lies and how little substance made up his legend. He followed the chief to a room that would be just like so many others; boring and filled with mammals he had no interest in. They didn't matter.

He would simply do his job, put on the act and teach. They would thank him, hero worship a little and then fade out of his increasingly little world. It wasn't worth the effort to do anything but pretend. He was good at that. He'd been pretending, acting, lying and keeping his secrets buried for so long, it was a reflex. Even from himself.

He forced his attention back to the present as his escort preceded him through the doorway, the lummoxes in the chairs that filled the room naturally started behaving like jocks at a rally, stomping and cheering. He was so tired of working with adolescents.

Jack took his place at Bogo’s side and tried to distract himself as the chief droned through the morning announcements. It was just so utterly depressing. Grown mammals behaving at what was best described as juvenile level. So disappointing.

His own teams had always run like military clockwork. A tight ship sailed well. He'd run every team he had led and every operation he'd conducted by the strictest of rules. By the book, hells, Jack wrote half the damn thing. Jack had always understood that humor and a "locker room atmosphere" was good for morale and camaraderie. He didn't mind its necessity. He minded its childishness. Inappropriate during operations, he had always discouraged such behavior until after the job was done. Then his people had been given leave to unwind. They'd been all the more
grateful for its rarity and motivated to be granted it. Being denied leave after a mission was a rare and severe punishment that he had doled out only four times in his tenure. All four times, thoroughly deserved.

He did enjoy seeing his people relaxing, though he seldom joined them. It was good to see the masks drop a bit and the mammals inside the agents come out to play.

This though.... This was embarrassing. It may be the enduring stress of the daily life in city law enforcement that made it advisable to have such rituals, but Jack was less than impressed. Not that it showed of course.

He was the consummate agent. Perfectly confident in all things. Especially in a room of subordinates.

Regardless of species, or background, a subordinate was a subordinate. Treated with the respect they earned, handled with appropriate firmness and guided properly, any mammal could be found useful on a team. It was his job to find the niche for each, guide them into it and coax them into giving it enough to be proud of. Once their pride was hooked, they'd do anything to keep it.

While Jack mused over this tried and true mechanism, he kept one ear on Bogo's droning, waiting for that tone he knew would indicate he was on. He let his mind drift over what he knew of the precinct. Supposedly, there were a few anomalies in this place. That Mammal Inclusion gubbins had spawned a few unusual officers. If that globular cheetah on the front desk was any indication, this place was full of oddities.

There was something he'd heard about a rabbit and fox team. He'd paid it little mind, but in the unlikely event it was true, well... This stint at precinct one would be a trial for him. Another buck would be nice enough to speak to. It had been some time since he spent time with one of his own species. Whatever rabbit had managed to earn a place as an officer would be worth significant attention. The fox though... Jack had issues with vulpine species. For one thing, a fox had been responsible for his partner's death. That death had resulted in so very many terrible memories.

He'd been allowed to head up the investigation, as he had found the only lead linked to the murder, despite his closeness to the case. He had acquitted himself with admirable restraint, despite a concerning start, and that one incident had led him into the second most celebrated career in mammalian history.

One lead led to another, then a shipping company, an underboss, a crime ring... which led to Amphibia and a network of clandestine criminal organizations. Organizations that had provided Jack ample target for his wrath.

They killed his partner to keep their operations quiet. They had no idea that one little death would bring the heavens down on them. He'd spent a decade and a half raining misery upon them from every angle. Cargoes confiscated, operatives taken, prominent figures arrested and convicted; Jack had delighted in disassembling their interconnected ventures, joint by screaming joint. He'd finally managed to hunt down and corner the last of the major players and thus end his revenge for his partner's death.

Unfortunately, that also ended his life in the field. With that massive case and all associated cases concluded satisfactorily, his superiors had decided enough was enough. They'd indulged him and he'd gotten extraordinary results. However, he was too old to begin a new set of assignments and too valuable to risk losing, in the field. He was to teach until his tour was over. Then he would be allowed to "consult" where deemed appropriate.
It was clear he was done, but he was still in the game. A bad hand could still be played well and he knew this game.

He just had to figure out what to leverage so he could get back in the game for real. Perhaps, he could end his days in service, instead of planted at the Farm.

Bogo’s droning came to an end and it was Jack’s turn at the podium.

He was a good two thirds of his way through the usual meandering platitudes and verbal glad-handing when he spotted her. The ears had been a giveaway but he’d held off looking at the rabbit until the end. Best not to get the “all bunnies together” jokes started any sooner than necessary. As he turned towards the pair of obviously lapin ears, he found himself intensely grateful he’d done so. It wasn’t a buck. It was a doe! A doe rabbit officer… This could hardly get worse.

Her eyes were bright and staring at him, rapturously absorbing every word. Suddenly the lapin solidarity comments were a non-issue. He was a buck. She was a doe. Two rabbits. The “multiplying” jokes would be starting within minutes. They probably already had formed and were just awaiting release. As irritating as that would be, it would be the doe herself that would be intolerable. Jack’s definition for the females of his species was not particularly kind and reinforced by both his work and what passed for his personal life.

To him, female member of the Lapidae family of species were hormone driven floozies, marriage focused opportunists, or the reason “dumb bunny” was a commonly used term to describe his species. They were useful and passable props for undercover operations and maintaining the illusion that he had a private life. That was about it. Granted, maintaining his reputation created the very problem it solved, but that was neither here nor there.

What was here, unfortunately, was the end of his speech.

Tramp incoming in

3…

2…

1…

“Agent Savage? Officer Judy Hopps. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“The feeling is mutual. It’s a pleasure to see another rabbit on law enforcement.” Taking the proffered paw, he presented his Irresistible Persona. The one females seemed to like so much. Only she didn’t. No pupil dilation, no scent change, no giddiness… not a trace… interesting. She spoke clearly, simply, directly and with professional bearing. She had actual self-control, for a doe. Maybe, this could be useful, or at least less taxing to keep her at bay.

“I have a couple years under my belt, but still a lot to learn. I’m looking forward to learning from you, sir. Oh! Allow me to introduce my partner. Agent Savage, this is…”

Jack turned to face as she directed and the world came to a shrieking, soul ripping halt. There was no air. The floor was gone. He couldn’t blink. He felt sucker-punched, like it had that horrible night, like it had at the funeral.

It was a red fox. A mirror image. An after image. It was a ghost.
“Officer Nicolas Wilde. Pleasure.” Came a hollow croak that could only be describes as sepulchral, along with a paw.

It was him.
Chapter 4

It was early. Very. The sun wasn't even up yet, but Nick was. He was up and dressed and on his way to work, with a small tote of drinks. He had a very long day ahead of him, but first Nick needed to clear his head. After checking in, he headed to the gun range in the ZPD basement. He often went there to unwind a little. There was little love of the act of firing a weapon in him. It was a useful skill and an unfortunate necessity of his vocation. He found the idea of intentionally causing harm repellant, but he found it nonetheless cathartic to practice.

There was much to set the mind to in practicing the art of the marksmammmal. Proper form, posture, breath control, the fine tuning of the grip, balanced tension in the hands. It all served to ease the mind and eventually clear it. The many hours Nick had spent in the range had earned him the respect of the weapons master and the meerkat who worked the maintenance booth. It had also earned him several unofficial competition wins and a file full of official certifications. Accolades he kept neatly filed away in a box. Best not to advertise, he thought.

Today, he needed his catharsis badly. It had been a very taxing three weeks. Agent Savage had been a continuous thorn in his side for two reasons. The bizarre and often confusing comments he directed at Nick and the oddly hesitant almost-flirting that he did with Judy. It was not what Nick had expected in any way.

His coworkers saw nothing odd at all. As far as they were concerned, two rabbits equated to imminent mathematics of the reproductive kind, but Nick was less convinced. He knew acting when he saw it and there was definitely a world class performance running daily at Precinct One. Only, the performance was... Mixed? Mingled? Mangled? It was just...

Why couldn't he find the word?

It was as though there were multiple performances being presented for different audiences, at the same time, by the same cast. It all fit the stereotypes and expectations enough to fool the common eye, but Nick's eye was not common. It was very refined and extremely sharp. It could pick out the inconsistencies and in this case they made no sense. He was missing something. Maybe several somethings. He was sure he would know by now if he could just keep his damn emotions in check when Savage got near Carrots.

There was something off about their interactions and Jack's oddly disjointed behavior made it clear something was less than as it seemed. Something about those two together just didn’t fit. He’d tried to puzzle it out to no avail. All of his attempts had accomplished nothing but the erosion his emotional cohesion. As soon as a thought of those two entered Nick's mind, his green eyes were no longer just literal. A rush of jealousy and ill temper would flow through him from ears to tail and his focus would be shot. It was a lovely catch 22.

The worst of it was that while the puzzle would remain untouched and his equipoise would be ruined, he wouldn't be able to help self-deprecating route his thoughts would flow into from there.

Why would she want me?

He'd been over it in his head plenty of times before that smug lagomorph had been around, but until now it had just been theoretical. Nick’s own history of failed romances and generally mixed self-image was a shaky thing in the face of the exceptional female that was his partner. It was seldom up to snuff, even on good days. With that flop-eared lothario present, why even pretend?
Adding to the sense of helplessness Nick was battling, time itself seemed to be conspiring against him. He’d barely seen Judy at all. Between the scheduled shifts, cross-training with other partners and the various class schedules that were part of the training regimen, contact at work was minimal. Plus, Judy had a major increase in activity from her activist commitments. There was just no free time they had at the same time. They hadn’t even had their morning hug in 19 days. Yes, he was counting.

Today being day twenty with no bunny fix. Nick needed a substitute to tide him over. In the absence of his personal addiction, he had options. His selected option for today would be seeing Finnick and Honey after work. That would keep his mind busy enough to survive another day, but to get there he needed to get his head on straight and survive his shift and classes.

Nick increased his haste through the range foyer and over to the quartermaster, a rather cranky snow leopardess.

"Officer Snowflake! Good to see you!"

"It's Officer Snowfleece, Wilde. When will you get it right?"

"Hmmm… Never. Never works for me. Does that work for you?"

"It's too early for this. What do you want?"

"You're no fun in the morning."

"Not out of bed, anyway."

"Oh, the possibilities…"

"None that you’ll ever explore, now what do you want, Wilde?"

"1000 rounds of tranq, 1000 rounds of non-lethal ballistic and to give you this."

"Why am I getting coffee from you?"

"Because I bought it for you and since you aren’t in bed…"

"Fine. Here. Don't think this gets you any brownie points."

"Just a courtesy for the early hour, Snowflake. Don't get your tail in a knot." He said as he collected his ammo and slipped over to sign into the pistol range. "Hey, Sam."

"Wilde. Early today." The barely polysyllabic response came from an enormous Kodiak bear who acted as the weapons master. He was a mammal of few words, but many thoughts.

"Need to clear my head before my shift." Sam nodded and waved him through. "Chamomile and honey. Thanks."

Nick passed through to the range proper, leaving the crabby feline and stoic bear to enjoy their morning libations.

The place was deserted. It was early. Nick had no idea how early, but he knew he'd be a while. In a moment of clarity, he popped out his phone and texted Bogo that he was in the range, asking if he could meet the others there, instead of the bullpen. As he was already in his blues, it wasn't an inconvenience.
Message sent, Nick got himself set up for firing practice. He was half way through loading his third magazine when his phone chirped. Bogo gave him the go ahead to stay there until after muster. Nick fired off an FYI to Clawhauser as a courtesy and clicked the device off before tucking it away.

Now, he had peace and quiet and gunfire to look forward to. Just the peace of practicing the art and the monotony of refilling his magazines to keep his paws busy. The hardest part was holding the button to retract or replace his target 2000 rounds was a lot for a morning, but he needed the mental break. It might even stop the self-flagellation.

He shook off the depressive cloud before it could settle fully and set himself up in his favorite booth. Once settled and arranged as he preferred, he checked his sidearm and set about chewing through the boxes of ammunition. In the middle of his third round of reloading, he finally slipped into his groove. Then, he had thunder in his hands and a target in his sights and that was all he needed.

Some time later the last box was empty and the last of the brass had fallen. Nick was leaning against the wall of his booth, letting the automatic system sweep his brass into the gutters conveniently placed at regular intervals across the floor.

He finally felt like himself, a little. He collected himself, cleaned his area and waited for the others to arrive. He didn't wait long.

A few minutes later, in tromped the usual suspects from the bullpen, with a very concerned looking rabbit at the head of the pack. Another rabbit followed, at the end.

They could be bookends, Nick chuckled to himself. Maybe then he'd keep away from her. His good humor dissipated as easily as it had come, as did his now short lived calm of mind. That nagging, niggling irritation was back. Jealousy, Nick had been prepared for. He'd not been prepared for the possessiveness. She was not his. Not like that. Not now. Likely not ever. You have no claim on her. Not her heart, or head or even her attention. You don't even have a claim on her cute fluffy little tail. No matter how badly he wanted it.

Her tail was very distracting. Yes, he did love fluffy things, more for their novelty than anything else, but her little white tail was attached to, well, another anatomical structure he had an interest in. He had for a good long while. Her hip-checks had been a common occurrence, basically since they met, so he'd known she had a solid pair. It wasn’t until about three months after that concert way back that he’d really gotten an appreciation going.

One night she’d convinced him to come out with her and Clawhauser to some new club. Not his thing, but he’d heard rumors about the bartender being something special, through the grapevine. Worth a try. A worthwhile risk, he’d discovered, as out it had turned out to be a friend of his. Nikki was a maned wolf and as sweet as she was sassy (which was very) and a miracle worker in the intoxicating arts. The two had shot the breeze between her rushes and Nick enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Judy had taken the dance floor by storm the moment they arrived, dancing herself silly with Ben and, eventually, Fru, when she materialized later in the evening, avec Koslov, of course. Her fierce energy and outright glee turned a lot of heads, as did the unusually form-fitting outfit she wore. Nick had to admit she looked good. He’d always thought she was somewhere between adorable and pretty on the looks scale.

That was, of course, until that "Sexy Minx" song by David Guerilla came on. Rumor had it that the large primate had a soft spot for the diminutive mustelids. Or a hard spot, if you preferred your
innuendo crude. Nick had never cared for the song or the artist, but that night his opinion changed.

As the bass hit and the whooping treble that characterized the song rolled out of the speakers, her normal, ebullient hopping dance was replaced with a near-serpentine undulation of her hips that rolled with the beat and was more effective than a hypnotist's pendulum.

He heard Nikki’s low whistle at his shoulder, and he glanced over. She had an expression that was equal parts appreciation for the view and unspoken question to him. “Sorry, Nix, she doesn’t share your interest in females.”

“Pity.” She pouted, and then smirked at his obvious interest.

“What? Bunny got back.”

“Say it plain, Nicky. You’d hit it till it howled.”

Nick had no chance to reply, for the song changed, Judy appeared and his seat at the bar was vacated in favor of cutting a little rug. Judy’s laughter had been the highlight of the night. Nikki’s had echoed it.

That was when his appreciation for posterior appendages of the bunny kind had bloomed. Before he could pull his mind fully into reality (and leave the gutter, so he wasn’t blocking any snorkels) his mind flashed “Close Encounters of the Furred Kind” through his mind. In relation to his recent thoughts about Judy, that did not help. Stupid associative memory.

He was already thinking about her tail; the tail which he could see because Grizzoli just bothered her about something and what it’s attached to. What a view. He needed more coffee and anything to distract him.

Anything but the other rabbit. The one headed his way.

Not my day, is it? Suck it up, Wilde.

Jack eyeballed him all the way from the doorway to the instructor’s post. Nick had no idea what was going through the furry little shmuck’s mind, but that smile looked far too like a mirror of his own for comfort.

“This morning, we will be assessing your rapid fire accuracy. Two clips. Ten rounds apiece. One target. We will be using marksmammal rounds. They are not standard bullets, in that they will cut a clean hole upon impact. We will be able to see exactly where your shots fall. No frayed paper to conceal poor shots.” That last line had been delivered, with a clear stare at Nick.

Jack demonstrated the proper stance again, directing his words clearly at his vulpine victim. “You are to fire the full clip, eject the magazine, reload and fire again, as quickly as possible. You will have three tries to make a passable result. Perhaps there will be some improvement over the last few results.” That time, it included a raised eyebrow and a smirk. “Remember to treat this like life or death. It may be the case all too soon.”

Nothing surprising.

“And as our resident vulpine decided it was unnecessary for him to attend muster, he can go first. Perhaps the time he spent this morning will have shown results.”

This was certainly off-pattern. Nick was usually assigned to go last. No other mammal had to go last in any single training event, or class. Always him. His only comfort was that Judy was
routinely just before him. That was as much a curse as a blessing. As officer after officer would make their attempts, be it paw to paw, marksmanship, or disarming techniques, they would receive criticism or praise as warranted and be sent off to drill. Then it was Judy’s turn.

Nick had forced himself to become used to fuming quietly as Agent Savage, or “Please, call me Jack” spent a good 10 extra minutes working with Judy, every single time “just to make sure she got it perfectly”. Today, he would have had to touch her arms and shoulders to tweak her tension, shift her feet and hips, her grip, modify her shoulders and weight balance. All just to try to cop a feel. Every day, Nick struggled to reign in his possessiveness and jealous anger, while his coworkers had made nothing but “rabbits multiplying” jokes, just out of earshot for the two rabbits at the firing line. Not out of his.

It did nothing for his peace of mind and less for his self-esteem.

That rabbit was really pushing it. Nick had gotten permission and been cleared through Bogo. Savage had to know that. He was using public humiliation as a teaching tool. There was low and then there was this. Judging from the look on Bogo’s face it didn’t sit any better with him than it did Nick.

At least there was that. So far, nothing Jack had done was so overt. Just little things. Applying extra pressure, “adjusting” the scale he was scored against, comments on his aptitudes. That one comment from last week’s paw to paw still bothered him. As if it wasn’t bad enough dealing with him daily, the little fuzzball had decided Nick was a good subject for him to demonstrate a take down and the escape technique for the same hold. After the initial demo, the officers in attendance had been paired off for drilling, including Judy. She got to knock the stuffing out of Officer Sandpaw for the following hour, while Nick had other delights to endure.

Savage had spent the same time drilling Nick headfirst into the mat. Rather than taking the time to wander the room and correct the other officers, as was his usual habit, he had stayed with Nick and with increasing severity, put the fox through his paces.

At the dismissal, Nick had done the expected thing at the end of a sparring match and offered his paw. “Good round, Savage.”

All he got in return was “Not like you used to be.” And Savage was gone.

Nick collected himself and moved to the firing line. He was all set to go when two things happened. One, he saw Jack wink at Judy. Two, Lupesson opened his trap. “Hey, Wilde. You still using standard issue? Why don’t you use a real gun? Can’t handle the firepower?”, while flaunting his Smite & Woolson Magnum.

“I don’t need to compensate, Loopy. I got plenty.” The wolf’s face fell, as the rest of the room sharply inhaled. Judy’s eyes were so large she could serve dinner on them. “You want to whip them out and measure? Yours is bigger. I promise.” Sarcasm so thick his meaning couldn’t be missed.


Nick raised an eyebrow. “A wager in front of the chief and instructor? You serious?”

“No money. No regs. You scared?” The wolf spat.

Nick turned his gaze to the buffalo, who appeared to be admiring a crack in the wall. Then to the rabbit, who just smirked back and waved him on. “Deal.”
“You just go ahead, Wilde. I wouldn’t want to discourage you.”

“Suit yourself.” Ear covers and eye shields went on across the room.

Nick turned, with the go-ahead and his pistol roared. Ten times, a magazine fell, another slammed in, the slide fell and ten more thunderclaps rolled through the air. It was no more than 5 seconds, total, from the sighting to the final shot.

Nick holstered as the target rolled in.

Not a mammal said a word, until Nick commented, “Like I said, I got plenty. I also know how to use it. Just tell the ladies at B&B I’ll have my usual. Thanks, Loopy.”

All the wolf could do was numbly tilt his head in a facsimile of a nod. It was then that Bogo made himself known. “Wilde, my office in 10 minutes. Savage, a word. Now.”

Nick’s expression must have displayed some concern and it was not missed by the enormous bovine. Ordinarily, a quiet word was worse than a dressing down, but in this case Nick’s expression was met with a subtle, but clear, shaking of the head. Making his officers sweat was a small perk of his job; one the painfully few, but when it came to the abuse of his officers, he had no patience.

Nick shot a look at Judy, who shrugged and smiled weakly. Nick shrugged and padded off to grab some coffee in the breakroom, to kill time.

Ten minutes and one cup later, Nick was refilled and was at the office door.

Ten minutes later the chief still hadn’t appeared. That was very odd. Punctuality was one thing that Bogo never skimped on. It was practically his middle name. Assuming he had one.

When he finally did show up, he looked shell-shocked.

“Chief?”

His usual stomp and movement like he was cresting the waves of an ocean of lesser mammals was gone. Instead, he drifted. The air currents carried him past Nick, who was significantly freaked out.

“Sir?”

Bogo finally snapped out of his stupefaction as his flaccid hoof nudged the door open. His usually intense gaze, now barely focused enough keep him from bumping into the walls, managed to focus on Nick. For a moment Nick was convinced the sight of him made Bogo want to run. “Wilde. Come in. Wait. Don’t. No. Take the day.”

Taken aback at the aghast look on Bogo’s face, all Nick could manage was “What? Sir, are you alright?”

“Offic—… No. Wilde, I am not OK. Come in.” Bogo’s scraped-together bluster deserted him. He moved to his desk and sat heavily behind it, while Nick scrambled into his usual spot in the chair opposite. The minutes stretched and Nick watched his boss rub his temples. Not wishing to tempt fate, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Eventually, Bogo scraped his hooves over his face and fixed his unusually drained glower on the only other mammal in the room. He took a deep breath and Nick swore afterwards that he saw his boss wilt a little. Just a little at the edges.

”Wilde, this… Before I can deal with anything else, including you, I need to wrap my brain around
what just happened. Before you say anything, you are not in hot water with me. I’ve dealt with Savage’s behavior towards you. For the moment, that’s all I can say.” Seeing the confused and frightened look on the fox’s face, Bogo relented. “I promise you’ll be brought up to speed shortly, just take the day off and relax a bit. I’ll authorize it. Tomorrow, report to muster, as usual. We’ll proceed from there.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

“Don’t thank me, Wilde. It makes me very uncomfortable.”

Nick just managed to keep his smirk contained until he was on the outside of the closed office door. Then, he couldn’t help it. That was an interesting piece of knowledge to hold onto for later humor value, and a big fat red flag.

His grin faded to a smaller, pensive one. He was confused, yes, unsettled too. Something was definitely up. If the chief was that wrecked after a conversation with the tiger-bunny something big was in the works. Also, if there was any danger to him, Bogo would have him under lockdown in a safe house in a rabbit’s heartbeat. So big, but safe. Maybe to do with him, maybe not, but he was definitely involved somehow. Odds were it was some new development on the operation they had planned at end of training. Concerning, but down the road, still. It wasn’t imminent. Good.

Now, he had a day to himself and things he could do. He wasn’t getting anything until tomorrow, so he headed for the stairs. He shot Finnick a text on the way, telling him he’d be early.

What he needed was downtime.

So, off to work with the angriest little fenneck fox that ever was and the craziest badger within 1000 miles, then a little R&R. He’d even be home early, for a change. Things were looking up. Maybe they were even going his way. Sure they were. And he was the heir to the throne of Amphibia.

Nick left the precinct and headed home to change. He had a tram to catch.
Judy was less than impressed. After the myriad disappointments of the day, dealing with a likely drunk member of her own species was not a task she wanted to be dealing with. The fact that it was not in her professional capacity, and on her own time, rankled. The fact that it was a task she was handling solo, without her partner whom she had finally gotten the time to see socially... Well, irked was a kind word. She was not happy; the particular kind of not happy that led to a short temper and a lower than usual tolerance for everything, especially anything unhelpful. The evasiveness of a mammal trained in subterfuge was right at the top of the list.

The reason for her irate state was a long series of events entirely outside her control. She had missed Nick so badly over the last three weeks. They’d been separated at work, her events had nothing but planning issues and she’d barely been getting any sleep between the two. The most contact she’d had with Nick were sporadic conversations by text message and a little banter if they passed in the halls. She had never regretted her commitments outside of work, nor had she ever felt as though her job had been a burden in any way. After this, though, some paring back of responsibilities was imminent in Judy’s life.

Judy had never believed in fate or the superstitions that other mammals indulged in, but she was sorely tempted to make an offering at temple if it would break her current streak of rotten luck. The day Agent Savage had arrived, things had gone generally poorly, and it seemed as though nothing had gone her way since. The most obvious manifestation was the change in Nick. It was obvious from the very first moment that Nick was not thrilled to meet Agent Savage and she suspected that a little of that had to do with her. The idea had thrilled her for all of a heartbeat, but that was all that the fates allowed her.

The instant Nick’s paw met Jack’s, it was clear there was something wrong. For a fractured breath, Jack’s expression was somewhere between disbelief and horror, followed immediately by deepest disdain and condescension. Judy knew of Savage’s reputation as anti-predator and his particular dislike for red foxes, as one such mammal had killed his partner. Practically everyone knew the story. However, Jack’s clear dismissal of her partner was a bit extreme, especially considering his reputation for professionalism.

In the days that followed, Jack’s attitude towards her partner improved in no way whatsoever. In fact, it only seemed to redouble in its negativity. He seemed to delight in harping on Nick. Adding caveats and extra challenges to his tasks, judging him on a more severe scale than the other officers, even commenting on Nick being a disappointment, were all common, bordering on daily occurrences. It was bizarre.

Judy had also noticed that she got far more attention than any other officer in the training, except maybe Nick himself. That was also odd, but in a different, more indecipherable way. Whenever Jack tried to work with her, it felt extremely professional. Not inappropriate, or cold, just strictly straight forward, if more intense than he was with the others. If she were to try to put her paw on it, it was like Jack was trying to teach her with the same fervor he was teaching Nick, but without the extra dose of nastiness. However, he’d follow it up with some borderline coy comment, which she found bewildering. It was just tacked on at the end, almost as if he’d forgotten until then and only just added it on as an afterthought. It left her confused.

It also infuriated Nick. His mask was good, but she’d spent long enough around him to know some of his tells, subtle and camouflaged as they were. Judy suspected that Nick’s dismay was part of why Jack did it, but she had no idea how serious the intent behind the flirting was. There was
something feigned about it. It was almost doing it for the crowd. That or he was so sure of his appeal that he didn’t feel the need to really try. That idea she found both insulting and repugnant. And inaccurate. The idea that Jack was putting it on sounded silly when she first had it, but the more she thought about it the more it fit. Nick did it all the time.

Granted, everyone did that to a point. Depending on where you are and who you’re with, your behaviors change. It was almost instinctive, but not always. Sometimes in was by intent. She’d paid attention around Nick for so long that she saw it was all intentional with him; the crafting of the persona to the situation, target, and goal. Often times it was after the fact that she put it together, but it was always there. In the bullpen, his pedantic silliness and obvious stage whispering were designed to get a laugh and lighten the mood. When they were dining out at a nice place, he had the manners of a king. A king with a dirty mind, of course, but certain allowances were made for royalty. With suspects, he was the smuggest shmuck imaginable and in interrogation it worked miracles. What Jack was doing felt the same, but not quite right.

She hated to compare the two, but she couldn’t help drawing the parallels. They were too plentiful to avoid it. They were both charming in their own ways. They were each worldly and knowledgeable, had unusual talents and sharp tongues. They valued their appearances, were extremely private and kept their secrets safe. However, for all that, they were very different.

Jack was restrained, stodgy, rigid almost. She found it intriguing and off-putting at the same time. She’d probably like him if he ever broke down that shell of his, but Judy didn’t have the necessary icepick, license for explosives, or interest. She had one male to figure out and he covered her bucket list item of “possess one endless enigma.” Nick, on the other hand, was standoffish, but not cold. It felt like hesitation. The distance he created was all for the preservation of his soft, squishy center. Judy didn’t need to break him out of his shell. She just had to be patient and let the Wilde animal come to her.

She giggled a little. Nick would be so proud of that terrible pun. She may even have earned a groan. She missed him. She missed her morning hugs so much. So she was furious when she found him gone after his talk with Bogo.

Judy had been crawling out of her fur wanting a hug from her favorite fox for over a week. She hated to miss a day, but she’d put up with three bloody weeks! After a fortnight she felt so deprived, she’d gone to his locker and stolen one of his T-shirts. She’d worn it while she slept and pretended she was getting the cuddles she needed that way, but it was a feeble stopgap measure at best. His scent was comforting, but it was missing the rest him. The warmth, the feeling of safety, the comfort, the big floofy tail she wanted to cuddle, his scent. The smell of violets had been cloying to her all her life, but after the last few years it had become one of her favorite scents. One she was going to finally get a little of this morning, but then it all went wrong again!

She had intended to find him and tell him that her evening was free for once. It was a Tuesday and Nick never ever had anything to do on Tuesday nights. In anticipation of an evening with her partner she’d rented a terrible movie. They could grab Mongolian BBQ, watch a movie that was eminently ignorable and joke around at her place for the evening. Maybe he’d spend the night. In either case, they would finally get a little time together to enjoy the simple things. The simple things were the best. Bad movies, delicious roasted veggies with noodles and cuddling with her fox; if she was lucky, maybe a little progress. She was ecstatic!

As she jogged into the lobby, her attention was immediately drawn to Chief Bogo at the front desk, talking to Clawhauser. Her look of interest became one of concern as her favorite cheetah pointed her way, dragging that intense bovine gaze her way with a discomfiting alacrity.
“Hopps, walk with me.” The chief seemed unusually contemplative.

"Yes, Sir. What can I do for you?" she replied. As she walked away from the desk, she shot a quick look at Ben, who shrugged with a worried look on his face. Evidently, he knew nothing. Not good.

“You can tell me what you think of Agent Savage.”

Oh, boy. “I’m not sure what you mean, sir.”

The chief sighed, as he led her into the elevator. “Just get in here.”

Judy trotted onto the elevator with a hesitation that she was sure no one could miss. From Bogo’s tired expression, she could tell he hadn’t. He punched the button for the third floor and waited until the elevator was moving. Judy was just getting anxious enough to speak, when he reached out and hit the emergency stop switch, rendering the elevator inert between floors.

“Sir?”

“Hopps, I’m going to ask you again. What do you think of Agent Savage? This is as private as we can get, so speak frankly.”

“Shouldn’t we be having this conversation in your office, sir?” Judy asked uncomfortably.

“My office is an official space where minutes must be kept and conversations reported.”

“I see, sir.”

“You have excellent vision, Hopps, so I’d hope so. Now, talk.”

“Sir, I’m not comfortable with him.”

“Has he behaved inappropriately towards you?”

“Not to me, no.”, she replied. “To Ni-, I mean, Officer Wilde. To me he’s just been… Well, odd, sir.”

“Yes,” the massive bovine grunted as he leaned against the wall. It was as casual as Judy had ever seen the chief and, aside from the listing of the elevator itself, worried her. ”So I’ve been hearing. Go on.”

“Well, sir,” Judy struggled to find the words. “I don’t appreciate how he’s treating my partner. The rules seem totally different for him than the rest of us. Harsher. Also, he spends almost as much time working with me as he does Wilde, but he’s much more pleasant.”

“Does he flirt with you?”

Judy couldn’t hide the blush at the frank question. “Yes, sir. And no, sir.” Bogo’s raised eyebrow spurred her on. “I mean, he does say things that seem friendly, maybe suggestive even, but only in the loosest possible definition.”

“Go on.”

“- Ugh. Fine. It feels like he’s doing it absentmindedly, out of habit. It’s like… he’s distracted, or his mind wanders and suddenly he remembers ‘this is where the flirting is supposed to go.’ It
comes across as slapdash and disconnected.”

“Does his instruction suffer for it?” Bogo inquired.

“Not at all. Sir. Um, I’m learning plenty, especially with the extra time I get.” Judy mostly mumbled.

“Yes, I’ve heard about that. The only mammal who gets more time with him is…”

“Nick.”


Bogo sighed. “One last question, Hopps.”

“Sir?” she squeaked, praying for this distressing conversation to end quickly.

“When Savage finishes with you, who does he usually work with afterwards?”

Judy didn’t like where this was going, but there was only one answer. She’d seen it on day one and the pattern hadn’t varied a bit. “Wilde, sir. He has worked with me first and Officer Wilde afterwards, without exception.”

“I see.” Bogo’s countenance betrayed no surprise at this revelation. “Alright, Hopps, I will be attending this morning’s lesson, discretely, to see for myself. I have seen and heard enough for me to be concerned and with the confirmations you’ve provided, I need to get involved. Thank you for your honesty.”

“Sir…” Judy began, but Bogo beat her to it.

“Officer Wilde has made no complaint himself and is in no way out of line, so far as I’ve heard. As such he has nothing to worry about, nor do you. However, if he is being poorly treated, I need to address it as both his commander and his fellow officer.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you sir.”

Rather than answer, the chief had simply hit the emergency stop switch again and let her off the elevator at the second floor. She checked her phone. Barely any time until she had to report, but she might just be able to see Nick and get a quick hug on the way in to rollcall. The delay created by Bogo disrupted her timing, but she still had a little hope for the morning. A small hug was better than no hug and tonight was wide open and rife with possibilities for mutual cuddling satisfaction. She smiled as she thought about Nick’s potential reaction to that turn of phrase.

She sprinted down the stairs and zoomed past the front desk, only for Clawhauser call her to a stop. To her horror, he informed her that Nick was in the firing range and had been since his check in more than two hours earlier. There was no time left to get to the range and the bullpen for rollcall. No hug. Again. And Nick would be late!

Seeing her panic, Clawhauser stopped her before she hared off after him and told her that Nick had checked with the chief and gotten cleared to meet them in the range, for class. Judy wilted. Bogo hadn’t mentioned anything. She knew he had a reason, probably a good one, but it bothered her. Nick hadn’t even told her. She thanked Clawhauser and headed into the bullpen. She sat alone on her chair and waited. She knew her coworkers were gossiping about her bad mood and his absence, but she didn’t care.
She managed to keep a little of her routine by fist-bumping McHorn, but her heart wasn’t in it. Her smile was a ghost of its usual self and she knew it was obvious, as the rhino was apparently aware of her plight. His usually minimal level of enthusiasm was bordering on the awkwardly saccharine, this morning. The reversal of their usual roles unsettled her deeply and likely creeped out everyone around them. She tried to shake off her gloom as Savage and Bogo entered the room to the usual din from her coworkers. After roll, they headed to the range and another chance to talk to Nick.

Another chance shot to hell.

The mass of blue-clad mammals drifted out of the bullpen and meandered, as only a group of mammals consisting mostly of felines and herd animals could, towards the range. To Judy, it was moving at slightly less speed than molasses in Tundratown. How anyone baked in that place was beyond her.

She kept pace and plodded along with the rest, as best she could. She couldn't rush ahead and add grist to the rumor mill, but she was aching to just get there, already!

She needed to talk to Nick for longer than a dozen heartbeats, which, for a rabbit, was a distressingly brief time.

Her parade of disappointments resumed as soon as she entered the range. No sooner had she sighted the object of her pursuit, than Savage had cut between them, efficiently drawing their attention, before taking command of the room. She hadn't even had a chance to say hello. There was nothing she or Nick could do as the class began, especially with Bogo present. The hulking mass of bovine authority tolerated a degree of familiarity and ease amongst his officers, so long as the behavior was appropriate to the situation and not detrimental to performance. In no way whatsoever would he allow disrespect to a guest, especially an honored one. Anything but the fullest attention and sharpest focus could result in a dirty look at best and a quiet word afterwards. No one wanted a quiet word with the chief.

Instead, Judy rested on her heels and watched with increasing incredulity as that obnoxious stripy disgrace to ethical behavior in the workplace slammed her partner. As if that wasn't enough, “Loopy” Lupesson just had to throw in his two cents. That wolf was as proud (and more obnoxious) than any lion Judy had ever met. She was ready to tear into the shaggy twit until she heard Nick's voice. It felt like it had been years. A divine chorus of the snarky, irreverent, God of the verbal sucker punch.

Judy giggled at the exchange between Nick and Lupesson. That wolf never learned and always ended up regretting it when he baited Nick. This was no exception. She hadn’t expected quite the turn it took, though. Wagers were not uncommon in the office, but they were kept very much on the discrete side. Bogo was well known for severely disciplining anyone involved in wagers. Though, apparently, only for monetary stakes. That was a small technicality she hadn’t been aware of and not a comforting one. Her apprehension mounted as she watched Nick move to the line and have the last exchange with Loopy. She knew Nick was a decent shot, but putting it to the test against a veteran in a high pressure situation was not a bet she would have taken. She regretted her doubt 20 shots and 30 seconds later.

She was gobsmacked the moment she saw the target. She’d expected a decent clustering in the kill zone and a few outlying impacts. She was not expecting two neat rows of ten rounds in a zipper pattern. All 20 shots were in the center of body mass, roughly evenly spaced and the two lines paralleled each other clearly and cleanly. Mechanical perfection, it was not, but it was far better than anything she had expected. She barely managed to shake herself into coherence to manage a
feeble smile at Nick as he passed and it wasn’t until after he was gone that she realized what had happened.

She was equal parts annoyed with herself for letting him escape and failing to grasp what she was seeing. She was obviously not alone in her confusion. None of her comrades saw this coming. Lupesson kept shaking his head and looking up like he was expecting the target to be a mirage, even going so far as to pass his paw behind to confirm the holes were real. At length he flopped down and groaned, muttering something about a fortune in coffee. While the others were distracted with ribbing Loopy, Judy hopped up and collected the target sheet. It’d make a great present with a decent frame and it was too good not to keep as a memento.

The minutes ticked by and the room was filled with the low buzz of casual conversation. With Bogo and Savage occupied and Nick waiting on Bogo, there was nothing else to do. Judy hoped Nick wouldn’t get in too much trouble. She couldn’t honestly see him getting in any. He’d behaved professionally, unlike Savage and Lupesson. Judy had just started to consider that fact when Savage re-entered the range and in high dudgeon. He wasted no time in making his presence and displeasure known.

“Alright! Your task for the day. You will score five target sheets at a 90% or better and you will keep trying until you get all five. When they’re done, sign off, bundle them and leave them on my desk for review. When you finish, you’re done for the day. Get to it!” And he marched out the door with the same alacrity. Lieutenant Stoneclaw entered as he left and took up supervising the fire testing. The enormous, silent presence of the weapons-master efficiently curtailed any conversation about the bizarre happenings of the morning.

Judy wasted no time. She collected her supplies and pumped out 5 acceptable target sheets in 7 tries, including a new personal best at 94%, in just under 20 minutes. With any luck Nick would just be wrapping up with the chief and on his way to the lockers, or showers. She grabbed her signed, clipped and certified proofs of completion for her morning task and sprinted off to drop them at Savage’s desk. She immediately headed down the hall towards Bogo’s office.

Being an area than most officers avoided unless necessary (and one she was unsettlingly familiar with), there was little foot traffic in the area; and no sign of Nick at all. She was about to turn around and make tracks to the stairs when the door swung open. For a split second, Judy’s expression of surprise was a mirror reflection of the chief’s, as the two mammals regarded each other. His recovered first.

“I take it you’re looking for your partner.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Um, yes, sir. I finished my task for the morning and according to Savage we’re free for the day once we complete it.” Judy replied uncertainly.

The look of resigned irritation on her boss’s face gave her great cause for concern, as did the muttered comment obviously not intended for her ears. Being a rabbit had its advantages. “If that’s how he’s going to play it, fine. We’ll play.”

“Sir?” She would have missed it if she wasn’t a rabbit. Thank gods for lapin hearing.

Bogo’s expression betrayed absolute knowledge that she had heard him. “Hopps, if you are looking for Agent Savage, he’s gone back to his hotel.”

“I’m not looking for him, sir. I’m looking for Wilde. Is he here?” She replied, very confused.

“You just missed him. I sent him home after this morning’s incident. He needs his rest.”
“His rest? He looked fine earlier, sir.”

“He needs his rest, Hopps. I suggest you let him get it while he can.” Bogo’s gaze seemed to intensify with every syllable as did Judy’s discomfort.

“Sir, what is going on?”

“An excellent question, Hopps. You’d have to ask Agent Savage. This is his Op.”

Judy’s brow wrinkled as she stared up at the bovine. “Op? Is something going on, chief?”

“I am unable to comment, Officer Hopps. However, I’m sure Agent Savage has invited you out to drinks after work once or twice. You might want to take him up on his offer.” And the water buffalo was gone; vanished behind his office door.

Stunned, off kilter and upset, Judy could only blink indignantly at the closed door for a few moments after it shut. Her ears flopped down on to her back in dejection as the rest of her flopped against the wall. Taking several long, deep breaths, she forced herself to calm down.

Another bust. Nick was gone. He hadn’t even waited! No text, no message, nothing. Not that she could really blame him. After that kind of morning, she’d have likely done the same, but it still hurt. This day was becoming a complete washout. Now, she had a completely wide open day, not just an evening. A. Day. A whole day and no Nick to share it with! What she did have was Bogo’s cryptic suggestion that she talk to Savage about what was going on. The last thing she wanted to do was deal with him, or his absurdly erratic flirting, but, well, it was all she had. It was a lead.

A lead.

Bogo wouldn’t have pushed her like that unless it was important and it had something to do with the farce she was mired in. He’d said he couldn’t talk about it, but she knew where to go for the information she needed. This was not how she wanted to spend her day.

Roughly an hour and a half later, Judy stalked into the Palm Hotel and Casino lobby. She’d taken the time to go home and change into something formal enough for the hotel dress code, but comfortable enough for her mood, which had darkened considerably as the morning had worn on. Decent blue slacks, a white button-up blouse with carrot print, and a grey jacket were about as good as she was willing to do given the circumstances.

A quick stop at the concierge desk got unexpectedly frantic results. Jack was expecting someone and if it got her in to see the flop-eared prick, she’d be it. The mink in charge of the desk scurried out, leaving her post in the charge of a very pompous lion. He would have looked quite imposing and impressive, if he hadn’t gotten a small piece of tape stuck to his ear. The flicking of his ear was a sure sign to her that he’d end up rolling around like a kitten within 10 minutes and all semblance of dignity would be lost. Judy smirked at the thought and headed off after the Desk Manager.

The mink led her to the hotel bar, wringing her paws the whole way and ushered Judy through the doors before hastily vanishing again. The poor mustelid was obviously nervous for her colleague and for the same reason Judy had noted earlier. Her frantic shout of “Francis! Don’t! I’ll be right there, just leave your ears alone!” penetrated the door just after it closed. It was followed by the sounds of very feline commotion and office furniture hitting walls. Big cats were silly at times.

As she turned from the door and scanned the room for her lapidae quarry, she noticed that there
was no one else in the whole of the room. There was Savage at the bar, a very pensive looking badger in a pressed shirt and waistcoat tending the bar and her.

She padded over, not bothering to hide her approach. Not that either mammal reacted to her in any way, even when she pulled back the barstool and claimed her seat next to Jack. After a solid two minutes of being ignored, she’d had enough waiting. Aside from Jack sipping on his lowball and the bartender wiping an immaculate mug with a spotless bar towel, nothing had happened.

Judy rapped firmly on the bar top and the badger looked up. Such an act hadn’t happened in the whole of his life, if the look on his muzzle was any indication.

“Hi. I’ll have a club soda with lime and two orders of the aburaage with a side of braised eggplant, on his tab.” Then, turning to Jack, “Someone decided to make my day a misery, so lunch is a fair starting point for compensation.”

“Making sure I buy you dinner first, Hopps? How pragmatic of you.”

“I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Jack, but I don't want to sleep with you.”

“Really?” came the somewhat incredulous reply.

“Yep! I know what I like and you do nothing for me,” she stated with no hesitation.

“Wow.”

For a moment, Judy was concerned, but irritation won out. “That much of a shock to your male ego?” she said as she clicked on her carrot pen recorder. If I’m going to deal with this prick, I may as well get something tangible for Nick. Or blackmail.

“No. It's a relief.”

It was evidently her turn to be confused. “A... Relief...”

“Yes. You're the first female in ages who's been willing to talk to me without trying to talk her way into my bed. It feels... Cathartic.”

“You really don't have many mammals to talk to do you?” Judy replied, her aggressiveness bleeding off for the moment.

“None. Not like this anyway. It's nice to have a confidant; someone who is willing to listen without a vested interest in the outcome,” Jack replied, mostly to his lowball.

“I do have a vested interest. I want to know why you're beating on Officer Wilde so badly. Besides, don't you have plenty of females that could do that for you?” she replied, noticing that her food had arrived and the bartender disappeared, again. Evidently, discretion was a service Jack had paid for with the reservation of the bar.

“Females do nothing for me.”

“Of course they don’t,” she said, dripping sarcasm with every syllable. “That’s why you have so many notches on your belt. Shouldn’t you be trying to add me as one more?”
"No, Officer Hopps. This will surprise you, I’m sure, but you are simply not my type."

"Smart?" she said, not hiding her offence.

"Female."

"What?"

"Ms. Hopps, I'll be blunt, so we don't risk misunderstanding each other. I am drunk and for the first time in ages I feel I can trust who I am speaking with. I. Am. Gay. Very. And I always have been."

"But... Your reputation...!" Judy sputtered.

"Is a thorough lie." She must have been doing a poor job of hiding her incredulity, because Savage continued after glancing her way. "I work in espionage, Hopps! I know how to make a good cover."

"So you..." She still couldn’t believe it.

"... Prefer dicks to does, yes. Every time." OK. That was crude enough. She believed. “You have no reason to worry for your virtue, with me. Now, you have the evidence you need to convince Wilde to talk to me. You can turn off that carrot pen of yours.” The audible click pulled a chuckle from the quickly inebriating rabbit. “Before you ask, I have experience spotting wires and you’ve used that trick before.”

“So what else of the ‘great legend’ that is Jack Savage is a lie?” she asked, somewhat miffed at being seen through so easily.

“Oh, enough.”

“You’re giving me more than that.”

“In a different circumstance, that’d be suggestive,” Jack snarked back.

“I know you’re gay, now, and I’ve spent enough time with Nick to know deflection and verbal evasion like the back of my hand. Now, spill. You said it’s all a lie. How much?” Judy’s irritation was back in full force. The skewers for the aburaage were looking very convenient for her as interrogation aides.

“Of the more commonly known aspects of my reputation... Well, I am a government employee. I did contribute to the fall of the smuggling ring, but that was a massive effort by hundreds of mammals. I merely led a portion of them. I am not the only mammal to successfully infiltrate Herpetalia or take down a gator in the water. I am merely the only living mammal to do so. Both of those were accomplished prior to my own achievements, by my mentor. As to the sabotaging of the Serpentine naval station... On that one, I merely assisted. The “object of lust for any doe and the envy every buck” is pure hyperbole, though. I’ve been turned down plenty and no one in their right mind would want to be me;” he added with a snort, followed by a large mouthful of amber liquid.

“As for pred-hater... an out-right lie. Just an act held for many years. And my status as a “silver tongued philanderer”... Well, I do have a way with words, thanks to my mentor. He taught me well. Philandering though... Not so much. Another total fabrication.” Judy was thrown by this mass of confessions, but nothing prepared her for the diatribe that followed.

“When I take a doe to my room, usually she drinks herself out cold before even laying a paw on me. Then, it’s off to the bed for her, while I sleep on the couch. Who in their right mind would ever
claim that they had a bad night with me in bed, especially, with little to no memory of it? With my reputation, if they can’t remember it, it must have been magical. If they can remember, they have to save face. They can’t say “I wanted to bone him, but got so sloshed he just poured me into bed.” They’d die of mortification.” Jack’s frankness was frankly disturbing, but Judy couldn’t find it in herself to stop him. Obviously, these were things that he’d not told any mammal in a long time, maybe even a lifetime.

“On the rare occasion it’s neither of those, and the doe manages to stay sober, I can play the ‘gentlemammal’ card and behave like a saint. All “romance”, no action and they still leave contented. “An evening of pure romance with Jack Savage”; a perfect story to brag about and I can avoid sullying myself any further.” The sing-song voice that accompanied the female portion of his rant betrayed disgust and bitterness plentifully.

Food forgotten, Judy took her chance at the break in his ranting. “Why, though? Why the lies? Who was your mentor? Why did you take the credit for so much?” All the questions came pouring out.

"I didn’t take it. I was handed it. Against my protests, if you can believe it. My mentor was one John H. Wilde.” Judy’s eyes narrowed as the name snagged on her thoughts, then widened as realization occurred. Jack nodded, pausing to take another sip of his drink. “I can see you've made the connection and to confirm it. Yes, he was related to your partner. His father in fact. However, as much as he deserved the credit, all of it, society didn’t want to hear the truth and it was his own idea to deflect some of his accomplishments on to me. I understand why he did it, but...” Jack trailed off, rubbing his head while Judy floundered.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you know about the end of the cold war and foxes?” Tension and focus seemed to flood through the striped rabbit in a way that Judy found highly disconcerting.

“Only what school taught me and nowhere near what I want to, respectively.”

Her answer seemed to amuse Jack, as he responded with a very vulpine smirk on his face. It was both alien and very well suited. “I’ll give you the short version. During the war, the government recruited foxes. There were a lot of bad reasons this was done, but that's not the point here and now. The reason they were so desirable was that they could be kept off the books, no one wanted to admit employing one and, more importantly, they were self-trained.”

“What do you mean?”

“At that time, Vulpines were... Hell, most medium-sized predators were treated terribly. Raccoons, weasels, badgers and many others were often discriminated against. The stereotypes of today are a mild echo by comparison. Foxes, however, were treated as vermin. Many that were recruited leapt at the opportunity to get away from that.”

“So what's the deal with ‘self-trained’”? Judy prompted, turning sideways on her stool to face him. He had her full attention.

“Because they were so despised they had to take care of their own. Most foxes from that time knew a lot more than they were ever credited for.”

“Can't you be clear?” Judy wasn’t following and it annoyed her.

“They were carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, electricians, medically trained...”
“By profession?”

“Well, yes, that too. Also collectively.”

“What?” Why were all the males she knew so bloody cryptic?

“Most basic education for foxes used to include all those things. No service mammals or technicians would ever deal with them, so they had to do it themselves. All of it. They often offered their services to other medium preds, too.”

“So you’re telling me they were what? Renaissance mammals?” The idea was so absurd it might just be true.

“Exactly.” Judy struggled to keep her jaw from hitting the floor.

"Vulpines of that time were... Extraordinary. Along with general education, or home schooling, lots received lessons in those urban skills and often much more. Music, dance, family trades, languages, self-defense -for obvious reasons- the culture and history of their species and sirelands. Most foxes could build their own homes, called ‘den architecture’,” Jack chuckled. “That's why the ‘fox’ neighborhoods always stand out. Distinctive architecture. Quite lovely in its own way...” A faraway look filled his eyes, a smile curving his lips.

“Ok, but you're getting off topic. Stop drinking and talk!” Jack had been sipping with greater frequency, the longer he spoke. At this point he was practically mumbling around his glass. She was fed up with the mangled speech and decided to take drastic action. Reaching out she used a favored trick of her mother’s for wrangling recalcitrant kits.

“Ok... Ok! Off the ears, doe! Ow! How does Wilde put up with you?” Jack all but whined.

“He learned when not to push me. Now, explain!” Judy shot back, brandishing a skewer with tofu still attached.

“They were perfect! Don't you see that? Mechanical savvy, adaptation, scavenging, engineering! Bloody emergency triage! They knew it all! By 16, most foxes were better trained than agents are after a decade in service! They came with many of the skills they needed, so training costs were minimal, and a third the standard pay was plenty. They'd be thrilled to get it! Just to sweeten the deal, they were bloody disposable! Who would care if some mangy foxes disappeared? No one who mattered! That's what it was.” Now that she'd gotten him talking, Jack couldn't seem to hold back. The longer he talked to louder he became. Judy could practically feel the wealth of memories and emotions welling up from the depths of his psyche; the alcohol loosening more than his tongue.

“That's... sick.” She couldn’t suppress the horror in her tone.

“It was the times. And sick is an understatement.” Jack’s volume had diminished, but his intensity had not. “Almost none made it back. By the time I joined up as a probationary agent, there was one. Only bloody one. They assigned me to him for training for my probie year as a joke. The new joke with the old joke. We were a laughingstock.” This time when he took a swallow of scotch, emptying the vessel, Judy felt like joining him. She sipped her club soda and wished she had ordered something with a bite to it.

"Only we weren't," muttered Jack, as he refilled his lowball. The bottle made a loud clunk as it came to rest on the bartop. Its wobble, before she reached out to steady it, enough to let Judy know that the ever poised, self-possessed Agent Jack Savage, was well and truly drunk.
"We weren't. I was. He. Well... He was something different. Not respected. Not liked. More like feared. Awed. Revered? He was terrifying."

"Like deranged?"

"Try overwhelming. Judy, how hard did you have to work to be accepted at the ZPD?"

"Extremely. It took everything I had every single day", she said with no hyperbole or overstatement, while she nibbled her tofu.

"So you had to do ten times the work or out think everything that would require strength, just to make the basic grade. You had to be smarter, cleverer, and more resourceful to survive and you did it so well you made top of your class, or thereabouts?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with it?"

"Stop menacing me with tofu and I'll tell you."

"Menacing you seems to be the only way you tell me anything." Despite her words, she finished her skewer and returned it to the plate. Reluctantly.

"It was grossly difficult for you, yes? Not just for your physical limitations in form of stature, weight, size, etc., but because you were a bunny. You were too little and fluffy to be anything but a mascot, correct?" he said, more statement than question.

"Yes."

"Now imagine all of that, while being actively despised, hated. Denigrated at every single opportunity. Personal effects destroyed or stolen. Test scores altered. Food tampered with. Open violence. Singled out for abuse or punishment for no reason. No support from superiors. Some actively encouraging such treatment," he spat rapid fire into her increasingly wide eyes; the fire in his own burning brighter.

"That's what they had to deal with. All that and more, with the knowledge that if their superiors had their way they'd be sent on a suicide mission at the first opportunity, and if they managed to survive, they might be shot as a suspected double agent. Think you'd be a cop if you were up against that?"

"...No..." Judy couldn't lie. In the face of all that, she knew she’d have crumbled.

"Well that was what your partner would have faced 30-odd years ago, it's what my partner prevailed against and survived long enough to earn a subordinate, me. He had to endure all of that and more."

"That's..."

"Awe inspiring?" Jack retorted with overt, bordering on sadistic, relish.

"Yeah... No. That isn't enough."

"This'll make it worse. He didn't just survive. He thrived." His eyes bored into hers so intensely she could barely breathe. "He took all that abuse and made it training. He was unofficially the best, most effective, most disciplined and most devastatingly proficient field operative they had ever had. It was as though they were trying to kill him and failing. Every assignment carried greater risk and lower odds of survival, and it only served to make him stronger, more skilled. He returned
every time. Alive, defiant and radiant in the face of their incredulity.”

“You cared for him,” Judy choked out, when Jack paused to breathe.

“Oh, Officer Hopps... That. Is an understatement. He was my closest and only friend for all the time we worked together. The only one I ever trusted. In our line of work, that is rare and precious. We were very similar, and starkly different, but we worked as a team and I thought the world of him. He was an extraordinary mammal. There was an intensity to him. It was like your rampant enthusiasm, but while yours is a bright glow that suffuses your world, his was focused to a razor’s edge that could cut straight to the soul. Unfortunately, that is part of the problem I have now with your partner.”

The sudden gear change left her reeling. “I’m sorry. I don’t follow,” she confessed with a shake of her head.

“He has the same smile. The same attitude. But, with green eyes that John never had.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What part?”

“Why are you so hard on him if he's John's kit?”

“A good question, Hopps. The simple answer is Echo.”

Judy’s ears flickered in consternation. Instead of the answers she’d come here for she was being bombarded with a tangle of half-truths, startling revelations and bizarre turns in the conversation. All of which left her reeling. “An echo? Wha...?”

“Not an echo. Echo. The spy.”

“The...” The enormity of what Jack was implying killed any thought past that.

“John Wilde was Echo. It was his code name. The greatest saboteur and agent of espionage in mammalian history was Nicolas P. Wilde's father.”

Judy was completely speechless.

“Exactly,” Jack continued, as though her shock was only to be expected. “By the end of the war Echo had made a gargantuan list of enemies. Many of whom are still alive. Echo may be dead, but his son... Well... Revenge on the son would still be sweet, no?”

Judy’s ears momentarily sank to brush against her shoulder blades as the true scope of the situation began to sink in. “You're trying to prepare him,” she uttered, her voice rife with emotion.

“Yes. I spent most of my life avenging John’s death and now, I thought I was at the end of my career. I was retired from the field because of my value as a resource of experience, but now I have this to deal with and frankly, Officer Hopps, I’m struggling.”

“Ok, so I get that he was important to you and you worked hard to take down the people who hurt him, but why are you beating on Nick?”

"The reason for that is part of the reason I'm here in Zootopia, at all. No! Put the tofu down! Tofu down! Now!” Judy popped it into her mouth with a smirk.
Jack's sigh was rich with weariness "I can't believe that I'm saying any of this. Only in this place could I feel endangered by a suspiciously opaque gelatinous food product."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Now if you don't mind...?", Judy shot back, finally feeling a little more grip on the situation. All she wanted was an explanation. Why were males so difficult?

"Yes. I am in Zootopia, not just to teach, but because my psych review after my last arrest indicated certain “instabilities in my emotional state”. Don't look at me like that, Hopps. If I was dangerous, I'd be contained and we both know it. I'm no threat to anyone, just deemed unfit for field work."

"What does "emotional instabilities" mean in a language that mammals speak?"

“As far as the shrinks go, it means that the stress of the job has finally gotten to me and I need to take a desk job for my mental health.”

“And for the rest of us it means...?"

“Well spotted.” The compliment came with the same half-smirk-half-pride smile she saw on Nick’s face from time to time. It made her feel accomplished; and a little uncomfortable. “The rest of it is that I buried my hurt at John's death and buried myself in work. Now that the last of the parties involved in his death have been handled, I have nothing left to keep myself from remembering. No distractions. I'd resigned myself to an early and very short retirement, until I got here and found Nick. Then, everything changed.”

“So... You're trying to prepare him....”she promoted. His maudlin ramblings were becoming problematic.

“Now, I have a purpose; to prepare Nick for what's coming. I am not succeeding.”

“What are you talking about? His shooting alone is proof he's getting better.”

“No, Judy. It isn't. John had a saying and I'm sure Nick knows it. ‘Never let them see your full potential.’"

“Close. Nick has one that's similar. ‘Never let them see that they get to you.’"

“Another of John's axioms. It's close enough in either case. John always liked having an ace in the hole. What Nick showed us today was that he was tired of hiding and being stepped on. He hasn't improved. He was just that good to begin with.” Judy swore she heard a hint of admiration in his tone.

"I still don't understand. I'm missing something."

Jack lifted his lowball to let the light shine through the golden-amber liquid before taking another mouthful. "What you're missing," he began, after setting the glass down. “Is that while I'm trying to help him prepare, I'm fighting my own memories. He's so like John that most days I can't tell them apart. One moment, I'm leading the class. Then, I'm back with him at the range, or on the mat, or our desks and talking like we always did, giving each other headaches and bantering. Then suddenly John's eyes are green, his voice is different and he looks confused or offended by a running joke we've had going for years. Then it hits me and reality comes back. That skews my expectations, my comments, everything."

“Is that why your flirting always seems so insipid?”

Jack laughed at that. "Yes, to a point. It's true, I'm used to not having to work hard to flirt, but my
disconnection is evidently affecting me more than I had anticipated and manifesting more openly."

"If it makes you feel better, it took until now for us to put it together."

"Us? So Bogo did, too. Which is why you're here, I presume." At least he was still somewhat sharp, if sloshed.

"He confronted me about what was going on this morning. He put it together from multiple sources, but not what specifically, or the scope of it."

"I filled him in on enough to help him grasp the part that concerns him."

"Meaning, the part where Nick is in trouble?"

"No. Just the part that his father is Echo and the possibility of media interest. If I told the chief that Wilde was in danger, he'd insist on a lockdown and a full read in. We do that and we tip our hand. Don't worry, he'll know. Just not quite yet."

"Judy’s expression must have betrayed her fear at the turn of the conversation, because Jack was hasty to continue. “Don’t look so panicked, Hopps. Do you really think I’m doing nothing on my end, but teach classes? My team is leading surveillance and protection details and I’ve leveraged other resources. Your precious fox is being protected from the shadows. Don’t you worry.”"

There was nothing else to ask. “How can I help?”

“Keep training and support your partner. After tonight, a lot of things are going to change, but for tonight? If you want to help, you can send Wilde to talk to me. I'm not going anywhere and we may as well get this over with.”

“He may not want to talk to you and I won't force him.”

“You have your carrot pen recording and I am quite sure of your persuasive capabilities. Besides, he’ll be willing to listen to you.” Jack’s half-disparaging compliment was unhelpful in the extreme.

“Will you stay sober?” Her sarcasm was back in force…

“As I am not sober now, I will make no promises, Officer Hopps. I will, however, stay sober enough to speak to him and remain articulate, but please don't tell him anything yourself.”

“Excuse me?” …as was her irritation.

“I'm asking you to allow me to do this myself. Wilde deserves to know this and it's something he deserves to hear from me directly, along with an apology.”

“How imminent is this threat?”

“Honestly? We don't know. We do know it was public knowledge that Echo's file was due for release and the hold I placed on it has been noticed. The hold is in place and will remain for another ten weeks. That's how long I have to get my head on straight and him - and you, incidentally- up to scratch. By then, everything else will be ready.”

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Judy departed the bar with reasonable, if cautious haste, her mind buzzing. There was too much happening in her head and she couldn't keep up. She needed a moment to regain her footing. Unfortunately, she didn’t have moments. She had to find her errant partner.
The air was warm when Judy's paws hit the pavement. She felt drained from the emotional lunacy she’d been enduring. She needed to find Nick. It was barely after noon. No responses to her earlier texts. She sent another and headed to a bistro across the square for a bite. She was stress eating and she knew it. Thank the gods for Lapidae metabolism and her exercise regimen.

However, food was a necessity if she was going to get any further. For only being half-done, this day felt four years long. Judy was annoyed and antsy, so she took her root-veggie and avocado salad wrap and large orange-carrot juice to go.

She hated to do it, but there was only one sure way to track that infuriating vulpine down. A jog to the subway, a 25 minute ride and the connecting bus saw her to Nick's apartment building in south western Savannah Central. It was close enough to the Rainforest District and the Marshlands to be damp, but not oppressive. Judy had been there only once to meet Nick for a night out and never been inside. It looked lived in and in need of a little love, but not in disrepair. In the early afternoon light it looked almost... Stately.

She felt rather anxious, now that she was here. Nick was very private and she didn't want to intrude, but she didn't have a choice. She had to find him and this was the only sure-fire way to do it. He had to come home sometime. Didn’t he?

Steeling herself, she stepped through the doors and was perplexed yet again. Old world beauty in the form of dark woods, calming colors, polished brass and lush carpeting... The lobby was the very picture of relaxed refinement and stress free comfort, furnished for all shapes and sizes. The air was scented with lavender and lemon. Everything seemed to be crafted specifically to soothe, calm, invigorate and comfort. It was obviously old and restored, but well maintained since. It was delightful. She felt more relaxed and clearheaded than she had in days, just walking in here. That feeling was followed by confusion. How did Nick live here, of all places? It must cost a fortune!

She meandered up to the concierge desk and was neatly informed by Danielle, the red squirrel that occupied it, of her worst fear. Nick wasn’t in. "Mr. Wilde informed me he'd be returning around 4:00, miss.” That was almost three hours from now. Hosenfeffer!

"I can't let you into his residence, but if you like, you can have a seat and wait for him. Perhaps, some tea?” she offered with a warm smile and a wave of her hand towards the seating area.

Defeated, Judy replied, "That would be lovely. Thank you."

She walked over to an overstuffed, squishy chair for smaller mammals and sat. A few minutes later Danielle appeared with a rather brawny, and evidently shy, young stoat in tow. They were dressed in what appeared to be a uniform that suited the décor. Between them, they carried a large tray laden with a teapot, cup, saucer, plate of various nibbles and a glass of water with lemon.

"Chamomile and cinnamon blend with honey, miss. May I offer you a magazine, or...?"

"No, thank you. I'm... I'm good, I think”, she replied hastily, thoroughly perplexed at the further oddness of her day. The stoat swiftly departed.

"Very good, miss.” She turned to leave, but hesitated. Judy looked up from her cup as she continued. "Not to pry, but you said you were Judy Hopps. You're THE Judy Hopps, yes? Mister Wilde's partner?"

She nodded apprehensively, but her concern was short lived. It gave way to panic as the tiny female launched herself into Judy’s chest. As she clung there, much as Judy did to Nick, she said "Thank you, miss,” before seemingly remembering herself and climbing down to ground level. She
was beaming and fidgeting with very obvious restraint.

"Um…" Apprehension to panic to bewilderment in 0.08 seconds.

"I’m sorry, Miss Hopps. I couldn’t restrain myself. You're Mister Wilde's partner! The one he talks about so much!"

"He does? And Judy is fine."

"Um, Dani, please." She pipped up, shyly. “And oh, yes, miss! He has so many stories." Seeing Judy’s eyes bulge, she hastily continued, "Don't worry! All good and perfectly tasteful."

"Are we talking about the same fox? The Nick Wilde I know is anything but tasteful."

Dani tittered. "Yes, his preferences in clothing are appalling, but that isn't pertinent. I wanted to say thank you for sticking with him."

"You're welcome? I'm sorry but I don't understand."

"I don't expect he's told you." Dani was barely able to sit still. "Mister Wilde's helped us a lot, Joey and me. He's the one what got us these jobs. We're grateful and he can only help us 'cause you helped him. He's fond of you, miss, and no mistake. He's a better mammal for knowing you."

Of the roiling emotions and questions in her, confusion must have been the strongest one she showed.

Dani sighed. "It's not my story to tell, but this is my part in it, so I can. Mister Wilde hired us to tend the building for him. He's a good employer and fair. He's helped a lot of us."

"Us?" Judy managed to squeak.

"Yes, miss. Us. Joey and me was pickpockets once upon a time. We knew Mister Wilde from before he met you. When he bought the building he offered us honest work. We get a home, good pay, safety. A new start. He's done more too."

"He's helped other mammals?"

"Oh yes, miss." Her enthusiastic nodding nearly made Judy motion sick. “Quite a few, but that's not my tale to tell. He'll tell you if you ask, I'm sure."

"I doubt that very much."

"If I'm not too forward, Judy, I'm positive you can."

"What makes you say that?"

A knowing smile spread across the arboreal rodent's muzzle. "When a male talks about a female the way he talks about you, he'd do anything she asks. You could get him to shave his tail and dance a striptease in Tundratown Square, if you wanted."

The remainder of Judy's afternoon was spent chatting with Dani and occasionally Joey when he dared to emerge. He was sweet and nervous and much happier back in the kitchens, helping the cook. Between all the conversation, Judy had quite a list of questions for Nick when he finally showed up, which he did. Not that Judy noticed at first.

The first she noted of Nick’s presence was a dark looming presence behind them as Dani regaled
her with some escapade she’d gotten into as a kit. Judy’s eyes popped up to see him leaning over her chair. That was certainly one way to get her heart pumping. She leapt up with Dani, the squirrel stammering rapid-fire apologies and fidgeting with an energy Judy found frightening. Nick continued his repose until Dani had to inhale or black out.

Nick lifted his paw to pause the onslaught. “How many times have I said it, Dani? As long as there’s no one to take care of, you can mingle as you please.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll just be off, then. Talk to you soon, Judy!”

“Absolutely!” Judy replied, with her eyes glued to Nick. "Nick! You..." Only to have her words die as she saw him move around the chair and sit in her place. He was wearing a dark, striped suit with a trench coat he’d draped over the arm and a leather case set next to it. He looked like a fashion plate straight out of a 1950's film.

"I..." he prompted.

"...Look like a mob lawyer." His raised eyebrow was all the reply she needed. "I mean, you look amazing, but why are you dressed like that?" she back peddled.

"Amazing, huh, Fluff? You like what you see?"

Yes. Hands on her hips she wrinkled her nose at him. "I'm confused by what I see. You disappeared from the station, didn't say a word to me all day and now you show up looking like you're..."

"Representing Mr. Big in court?" he supplied.

"Yes."

"Heh. Don't worry your adorable little self about that, Carrots. I don't do that anymore."

"Don't... What?"

He chuckled and stood, collecting his things. "Other than stopping by to comment on my fashion sense, was there another reason you stopped by?"

"I... Yes, but first, why are you dressed like that?"

"Back to that again?"

"I figure if I'm going to get any answers they're going to be in order, so I don't forget, now talk."

"That's my clever Bunbun." Judy struggled not to grin and ignore the butterflies at his unconsciously possessive compliment. "I'm dressed like this because I was in the Nocturnal District until about 20 minutes ago. That also answers why I didn't respond to your texts and calls."

He headed past the desk and towards the elevators, Judy hot on his heels.

"The reception is spotty at best and the signal repeaters seldom work." That was common knowledge to anyone who’d lived in Zootopia for long enough, and a mandatory piece of knowledge for public servants.

"Correct! Give the lady a cigar! Next?"

"Why were you down there?"
"Visiting a friend or two." He hit the down button. “Finnick says hello, by the way.” His phone erupted with alerts. “Twenty three texts and four phone calls in a 3 hour spread? Wow, Carrots. You miss me?”

Unbearably. "Hah! No he doesn't."

"More like 'you tell the rabbit I say hey, when you get back topside, you hear?'" The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. “Are you coming or what, fluff?”

“Um…”

Placing his bag across the opening to hold the door, he turned to reveal an all too familiar smirk. “You’re here already and been talking to the most enthusiastic chatterbox in the city, so there’s no point in you waiting here, anymore. Wanna see my place, Carrots?”

“Yes!” She bolted past him and had to struggle not to grab his arm as she passed.

A few moments of silence had her excited beyond restraint. She was going to see his place! He looked amazing! Everything was good again. She had to say something, or she’d do something. Something like test if that suit fit as well as it appeared to.

"The rabbit? Still?"

"Take the compliment, Carrots. You're the only one he calls that."

"Just "rabbit", though? Nothing complimentary, there, Bottlebrush Butt." The old rhythm was back and it felt so good. Judy felt warm and fluttery and it’d been maybe 3 minutes.

"It's not "rabbit". It's "the rabbit". Capitalize the "T" and the "R". You are ‘The Rabbit’." Then to her blank look, "You've earned the definite article, sweetheart. That's about as high as you can get in his books."

"Oh..." she said, stunned. "So why don't you call me something like that?"

"What, all the nicknames I have for you aren't enough?" he replied, feigning hurt. The elevator stopped and they stepped out into an obvious basement apartment foyer. Nick preceded her to the only door on the hall and unlocked it.

"You know what I mean. One that carries weight, or shows esteem, or something that isn't mildly condescending but we both like it," she said distractedly, trying to get a look around him.

"Oh, I have nicknames like that for you. Quite a few, in fact."

"Uhhuh, so why don't I ever hear them?"

"Do you really want me calling you Honey Bunny in public?" Beets could take lessons on red from her, after that. "How about Carrot Cake? I could never say at it around Clawhauser, but otherwise it'd be fine. Maybe Cuddle Bunny? Or..."

“No! No no. That's fine. “Carrots” is good.” Waving her paws back and forth in the universal sign of ‘no, really it’s okay’, Judy swallowed down the desire to answer with an affirmative and definitive “yes” to his query.

“So I'll just leave those for my inner monologue, then?” He was obviously pleased at his victory.
The door creaked open and he entered.

His inner monologue? So he thought of her in those terms? “Or when it's just the two of us...” The words were out before she could stop them. Where was the filter between her mouth and brain?

“Why, Carrots...! You say things like that and mammals will talk.”

Whelp… Go big or die of blushing anyway. “And if I don't care?”

“Ok, then, Honey Bunny. You can explain to Clawhauser and Fru how we aren't a couple, despite the nickname, when they inevitably overhear it. Now, get in here.” Still chuckling, Nick set down his case and hung the jacket on a hook near the door.

“Assuming I can cut through the squealing,” she quipped as she stepped over the threshold. And then she was in his… den.

It was sizable, even by wolf standards. Plenty of space and most of it empty. Despite that, it felt lived in and cozy. Not cramped. His furniture was... Eclectic. None of the pieces matched in any way she could fathom, but it was all very him.

“I live basically on the floor, so other than the cushions and few chairs, I don’t need much for sitting.”

“Explains the open space.” She was barely listening. The place she was in fascinated her. Bookcases, dressers and blanket boxes were everywhere. Some looked like decrepit farmhouse antiques, while others were flea market finds or... his couch was a giant fuzzy beanbag. It was big enough for two Clawhausers to sit comfortably and covered in blankets. The snuggle urge Judy felt was so intense she could taste it.

“Resist, Bunbun. Once you’re in there, there’s no escaping.”

“It’s only a matter of time.”

“Hah! True. Bathroom is at the end of the hall. My room is on the left. The right is the kitchen and the spare room.” He sat on the only easy chair in the room, while she looked around. “So to what do I owe the pleasure of your company tonight, Honey Bunny? Not that I'm complaining, but I wasn't expecting to see you until tomorrow, at best.”

"If you'd stuck around, you'd have found out that I had all evening free. My meetings tonight canceled. Plus, Jack gave us a throw away assignment and I was done in 20 minutes. We could have hung out all day, but you had to pull a David Copperphur and poof on me!" She regretted her bad grace as soon as she said it. His expression was a saddening mix of disappointment and regret.

"Whoa! Sorry, Carrots. I made plans for today, figuring you'd be busy again. I did wrap up early, though, and it’s only 4:30. We can salvage something of the evening."

"Ugh... I can't say I blame you and I didn’t know until this morning, myself. I'm still frustrated with you, though. Very."
"Wow, fluff. I didn't think my absence left such a hole in your life."

"You wish." You have no idea.

"So, what did you do, today? Something to make up for your negligent partner, I hope." His self-deprecation made what she said next a trial, because she knew what was coming.

"Other than high tea with the sweetest squirrel I’ve ever met in your apartment lobby?"

Nick smiled. “She’s a good sort.”

“She is. I also have many questions for you, Mister Wilde, apartment owner and philanthropist.”

“Can they wait until I don’t feel so cornered?”

She laughed. “They can wait a bit, but don’t think you’re getting out of it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Fluff.”

She sighed. "You need to talk to Jack."

Nick's mood instantly soured. "And here I was enjoying myself." Judy saw the tension settling back into his frame and she hated to be the one to ruin his high spirits.

"I went to Bogo after you left."

He seemed resigned to the uncomfortable turn in conversation. "Was he as unhelpful to you as he was to me?"

“He wasn’t unhelpful. He was cryptic.”

"That's odd."

"What's odder is that when I asked him what was going on he told me to Jack because it was his "op"."

"His op?" Nick leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees. She certainly had his attention, now. “So Agent Savage was working an angle. I'm glad I wasn't too far off. So what happened?”

"You know Jack asked me to get a drink with him."

Resignation turned to open resentment on his face. "Oh, yes. I am very aware of that."

"Well, I went to his hotel and found him at the bar."

"You had a drink with that..."

"I had a sip of club soda with lime. He was drinking enough for three."

Nick’s incredulous response was in no way a surprise. “Agent ‘always-in-control’ Savage was drinking?"

"Heavily. I got him to talk and he told me a lot more than I was expecting."

"Like what?"

"Like he's gay."
Nick was silent as he processed this. In retrospect Judy should have known it was coming, but Nick’s laughter surprised her. He laughed himself to tears.

Several minutes and a few tissues later, Nick was curled in the chair holding his stomach. He managed to gasp, "Oh, Carrots... That was the best punchline I've ever heard. Amazing set up. You got me," through the tears.

"Only I'm not joking," she deadpanned.

The click of the carrot pen perked his ears. "Officer Hopps, you are simply not my type."

"Smart?"

"Female."

"What?"

"Ms. Hopps, I'll be blunt, so We don't risk misunderstanding each other. I. Am. Gay. Very. And I always have been."

"But... Your reputation...!"

"Is a thorough lie. I work in espionage, Hopps! I know how to make a good cover."

"So you..."

"... Prefer dicks to does, yes. Every time. You have no reason to worry for your virtue, with me. Now, you have the evidence you need to convince Wilde to talk to me. You can turn off that carrot pen of yours."

"Believe me now?" She loved that stunned look on his face.

"I have a choice?" he deadpanned. “Ok. Fine. Obviously he wants to talk to me. What about?"

"It's his story to tell, Nick."

His expression slid from shocked to stubborn. "I'm 50/50 on going at all, Carrots. I could just pretend I haven't heard anything and go back to business as usual. If you want me to go, as the imminent flood of persuasive adorability I see building behind your eyes indicates, you're going to give me something to tip the scales."

"It's about your father." The silence was so thick Judy could have drawn on it with chalk. She watched for a second time that day as powerful memories and emotions spilled over into a mammal’s eyes. “You never talk about him, Nick.”

“That's because there isn't much to tell. No, that's a lie. It's because I'm... Conflicted when it comes to him.” Tension bled off him in waves she could almost see.

“What do you mean?”

“I had so many good memories of him as a kid, but he ended up drowned in the CD after a bender, a month after walking out on us.”

She cringed. "'Conflicted'. Got it."

“Yeah.” He was up and pacing. “I despised him for years. We struggled and I blamed him for all of
it. And now, this... I...” He flopped back onto his chair. “He was a great dad, then a deadbeat, then something I put in my past and left there, because I had bigger things to worry about. If Savage wants to talk about him, that can only mean there's more to the story than I thought.” A sigh, heavy with do-not-want rattled out of him. “I don't really have a choice though, do I? I better go see what Agent Fluffer-Nutjob has to say.”

"Do you mind if I stay here?” she asked, full of apprehension.

His eyebrow rose. “You just want to get lost in the giant beanbag, don’t you?”

“Sorta, yeah,” came her sheepish reply. “Also, I want to be here for you when you get back.”

Nick’s face was unreadable. “Thanks, fluff. Help yourself to what’s in the fridge. Carrot water is on the bottom shelf.”

“Anticipating my arrival?”

“It was inevitable, Honey Bunny. I was just prepared for it. Just get your drink before you hop onto the bag. Trust me. Back soon.” He said as he rose from his chair and pulled his suit coat back on.

“When I get back, movie?”

“Sure! We can go to my place and pick up food on the way.”

“Seriously? Movie night at the breadbox?”

“The breadbox. Where did you get that from?” She snorted at the nickname for her apartment. He was obviously feeling better as his wit was making a triumphant return.

“It’s tiny and where the buns live,” he continued with a shrug.

“I live alone. Only one bun.”

“We're talking about different buns.” His smile was back and her knees were weak.

“Behave.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” Judy was loving his aggressive flirting and everything it implied. “We could use my place, considering that we're already here. More space. Bigger screen.”

“And that's just the problem, Nicky.” Hard to get. Fight him. She had to at least pretend. This was how they played, her and her fox.

“When I get back, movie?”

“Your couch is big and you'll insist on sitting on the opposite end from me and I don't want to walk.” He wasn’t fighting it.
“You mean crawl.” He knew what she was doing.

All in, rabbit. Just go for it. She walked over to him and took his tie gently in her paws. She applied a little firm pressure and he bent to her eye level, soft smirk and all.

“Ok. Listen, fuzzbutt. Here’s how it’s going to work. I'm tired and crabby and I’ve missed you for the last three weeks. We have a lot of missed hugs to make up for and we both need the support, so tonight I'm taking my cuddle claim and you're going to give it to me. Now foxtrot over and deal with Savage. The sooner that’s done, the sooner your affection debt can be addressed.”

“Understood, Officer Fluff.” He said as he straightened, his tie threading through her paws. “What I don’t understand is why you wanted to relocate in the first place.”

“There's less room for you to run at my place. Bathroom. End of the hall, you said?” She headed to the hallway.

“Straight back and hang on there, Carrots,” he scoffed as he walked to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water. “Are we forgetting who the predator is here?”

“Oh! So you'll chase me for a change?” she said as she half turned to look at him.

“Let's shake it up. Why not?” he said as he lifted the bottle to his lips.


The sound of fox choking on water followed her. She reveled silently at his response. It was the first time she had rendered him truly speechless. She turned back to the hallway as he reached to put his drink on the counter. Just for kicks, she wiggled her hips and tail and was rewarded with the sound of a bottle hitting the floor.

This will be a good night, she thought to herself as she opened the bathroom door. “Oh, and Nick?”

“Yeah, Fluff?” he responded, paw on the handle of the front door.

"What was that about not being a lawyer for Mr. Big, anymore?"

"Ask me no questions, Carrots, and I'll tell you no plausible fabrications."

And he was gone.

It was about two hours later that she saw him again. He'd slipped out the door with a smile on his face that was equal parts long-suffering and amused. He'd returned inscrutable.

In the meantime, Judy had done as suggested. She'd gotten herself a carrot water and found a baggie of beet chips in a lower cabinet. He'd gotten it for her, obviously, as he never touched them himself. After finding two such considerations, she had a root through the rest of the kitchen. No fresh veggies, but plenty of things that would keep well and be healthy for an herbivore. The implications that he had them and had for a while, but never asked her to visit made her giddy.

With supplies in paw, she skipped to the enormous mound of fuzz that was his "couch" and with a mighty leap plopped directly into the center of it. She was instantly filled with regrets. Nick had been absolutely correct. She could never leave. It was too perfectly comfy. She should have grabbed a juice, too.

Foregoing the complication of figuring out his entertainment setup, she opted for her earbuds and
the old classic, Bemewled. Somehow, her phone automatically synced with the Wi-Fi in his apartment. He could only have done that if he'd gotten into her phone and set it up that way. She was warm and fuzzy and her fox was doing all kinds of things that made her warmer. She nestled in, pulled a blanket over herself and set about putting dents in her drink, snack and high score.

She'd stayed that way, only breaking out of her voluntary prison long enough to make a run to the bathroom and grab more snacks, before returning to snuggle nirvana. She was there when Nick returned, his arms full and his mouth closed.

She was initially concerned, but also puzzled. The Mongolian BBQ was thoughtful of him and welcome, as the snacking hadn't sated her hunger any more than it'd soothed her nerves. The four bottles he was carrying were the concerning part.

She disentangled herself from her nest and dropped to the floor, with her empties, which went into the bin by the counter. She padded over, while he put everything on the counter.

The two bottles of Glennquidditch, were frankly frightening both for the price tag and their size. Her father had gotten a rabbit sized bottle of the 14 year as a Founder's Day gift when she was 12. He'd had less than half in the years since then. Said it was too precious to waste on anything small, not that he drank often, anyway. The two Nick was lugging around were cheetah sized and the 25 year, to boot. The third bottle was a large Gerbilsteiner mineral water.

He also had a bottle of the vilest drink known to mammal kind, asparagus schnapps.

“I have to ask, Nick. Why all the alcohol? And why that?” She said, indicating the small green bottle of evil.

“They’re on Jack.” She knew that tone. It was his hustler persona.


“That stuff isn’t for us, Carrots. It’s a treat for a friend of mine. The rest will keep for a good occasion.”

“A treat? It’s compost in a bottle. Who would want that for a treat?”

“Someone with no taste, obviously.” The smirk was there, but it was all mask and no mirth.

“Nick…”

“I talked to him, Carrots. What he told me… I’m gonna need a little time to get my head around it all.” As he spoke, bottles of scotch moved into a cabinet, the Gerbilsteiner went into the fridge and the schnapps went to a back corner of the counter, ‘so he’d remember it for his visit.’

Eventually, he turned to her. His expression softened, his paw ruffled her ears and she smacked at it. She knew he wasn’t ok, but he was better than she had expected.

“Come on, Carrots. Let’s eat.”

Dinner passed in light ribbing and fussing at each other. Nothing serious passed either of their lips. He warmed up slowly and by halfway through the meal he was much his usual self. He was sweet and snarky and she loved every moment.

Once they’d eaten their fill, the leftovers went in the fridge and the rest into the bin. While Judy
sipped another carrot water, Nick broke out a small bottle of rye whiskey and the Gerbilsteiner. Judy declined, but she knew Nick needed it. He downed one quickly and poured a second as he moved towards the couch. It went the way of the first almost as quickly, as Nick flicked on his television and pulled up Nutflix.

“The Mare Witch Project 1999, Serpentity, The Princess Pride, Catsablanka, Fleas and Loafing in Las Vegas…?”

“Ooh! Princess Pride.”

“Not a horror fan, Honey Bunny?”

“Not when a classic romance is on offer.”

“Ahh. I like it for the humor and sword fighting.”

“Sure you do. I bet there’s a little romantic in you.”

To Judy’s amusement Nick didn’t answer. He poured a third drink for himself and put everything but his glass away. His silence was answer enough for her and she was about to start in on him when her breath hitched. Leaving his glass on the coffee table, he walked over to her and knelt down.

“Judy, I need a favor.” Her good humor withered in the face of his sincerity. All she could do was nod. “Don’t kick me.” She was airborne.

She squeaked as Nick scooped her into his arms. At this point in time her brain seized and kicking was the last thing on her mind, as was moving, or breathing. She clung to his shirt as she felt him move to the table and collect his glass, before expertly climbing the giant beanbag and settling into it, with her nestled in his lap. He set the movie to play, leaned back and sipped.

“Nick?” was all she could manage.

“You said you wanted cuddles, Honey Bunny.” Nick replied, shooting a wink down at her. In a softer voice he continued, “I’m sorry, Judy. I… I really need this right now. I know it’s a lot to ask, but please just give me this while I’m tipsy enough to think I can get away with it.”

Working around the hammering in her chest, she managed, “I’m not going anywhere,” and meant every syllable. The city could collapse before she’d give up her seat.

At that, he rolled back and to the side, cradling her into his chest. She reveled in the feeling of being in his arms. Even if it was only one night, and thanks largely to emotional upheaval and alcoholic assistance, it meant that he wanted her there. She was happier than she’d been in ages.

The movie played and they sat, nestled into each other, lazily watching. Eventually, Nick’s drink was finished and the credits were rolling. Nick was dozing, slipping in and out of awareness.

Judy rested a paw on his cheek and he smiled. “I have a good partner.”

“I do too.” She did not expect a reply from her semi-conscious partner, let alone what slipped from his muzzle next. He shifted a little and sighed. “Jack loved my dad.”

Shocked, Judy responded. “He did?” She knew he was fading and would be asleep in seconds.

“Thing for rabbits… family trait,” he chuckled weakly.
Judy’s heart felt like it was about to split her ribcage. It was a good thing for her that his eyes were closed and he couldn’t see her face glowing in the dim lighting.

Nick’s next words were so soft she almost missed them over the pounding of her heart. “I’m the second Wilde he’s kissed.”
Chapter 6

Jack's sigh was short and sharp, more an expulsion of air than an expression of emotion. Or so he told himself.

He was still drunk, which wasn’t a surprise, considering the bottle and a half of scotch he’d consumed. When he did sober up, he’d be hungover. Badly. And not in the way that’d make for a good punchline. He felt as though he’d been keelhauled for mutiny on the ZSS Bad Decisions. He’d managed to get to his room and into bed without assistance, but that was the only good thing to happen in the entirety of the previous day. Quite the accomplishment.

He knew he'd crossed a line with Wilde in the class. It was sloppy, stupid and entirely his own fault. The rest of the day was consequences. One slip up had resulted in excruciating pain. Karma was owed a debt and the canine goddess was collecting. Jack hoped she was through, but he knew better than to do more than hope. She was ruthless and thorough and he had so much to pay for.

After the incident at the ZPD, his conversation with Bogo had gone poorly. He knew he deserved the dressing down for his behavior, but he would have avoided the explanations if he could have. Unfortunately, he couldn't. Not with Bogo as incensed as he was. Jack had reasoned that it was as good an opportunity as he was going to get, so he read Bogo in. A little. It had gone about as well as expected.

Jack handed Bogo back the file on Wilde. “What do you know about Echo?”

Bogo had deadpanned, “It's a sonic effect that occurs when sound waves bounce off a hard surface.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed to avoid rolling them up at the bovine. “You've spent too long around Wilde.”

“There's no need to be insulting.”

Banter. Fox-grade sarcastic deadpan banter. Bogo had always possessed wit, but never the execution. That vulpine's influence was everywhere. The rest of their conversation was intense and unpleasant, despite its brevity. It left Bogo stunned and Jack in a truly foul mood. So foul, in fact, that he broke another of his rules and failed to fulfill his duties. Whatever his responsibilities, be it in any capacity from field agent to coffee boy, he'd fulfilled the duties associated with the posting. In this case, however, instead of behaving as an instructor to a corps of law enforcement officers should, he comported himself with all the aplomb of a petulant brat by storming off to pout.

Then, he had to... He just bloody had to go out and seek refuge in alcohol. He’d indulged in liqueurs, liquors and spirits for missions, or socially, just as anyone else did. However, to elevation or excess was not acceptable. Only twice in his life had he drank so heavily.

The first was the disastrous celebration after the Bearlin Wall fell. He and John had celebrated with their team and the population of the city until the wee hours of the morning. No one remarked on the fact that they slept in each other’s arms, or that they reeked of each other. No one could have noticed with the weapons-grade hangover they’d all had. Everyone smelled of sex and either embarrassment, shame or exultation after that night. The world was changed and they’d made it happen, so what was a little indiscretion after such a feat? Nothing. Nothing at all. Not with the Minister smelling of scotch, male badger and shame, the director reeking of his secretary and her sister and half the staff covered in pheromones of every variety. The collective, non-verbal,
agreement was that everyone would just forget the night. For many, it wasn’t an act. For others, an impossibility.

The second was last night and it was likely to carry more consequences than the first, both personal and professional.

Jack was miserable.

Furious and miserable.

He buried his head in his pillows, hoping to smother the memories, but to no avail. Sitting up only made the dizziness and nausea intensify, effectively crippling him. He sat, until the pain was too much. He had the strength to fight either his mind or his body and Karma took advantage of both. He toppled back onto his pillows as the memories flooded through what currently passed for his mind while he desperately suppressed the rebellion going on in his middle and mole with a hammer in his skull.

He had no choice. He let the memories come and the horror of the previous evening rolled over him. He’d been bare-bones with Bogo and he’d managed to keep to the technical side with Hopps. She’d gotten the practical side of the story; the facts as they pertained and the likely consequences; the safest portions of the truth.

The conversation with Nicolas, though. That little exchange had fondled the technical in passing, before plowing through the emotional and straight into crippling confessions over the course of about 25 minutes. All it had taken for him to unravel was a single glance at the source of his ever growing dissolution. As Nick had entered the room and padded towards him, Jack had known he was finished.

Jack sat quiet and barely composed. Nick sat next to him and an awkward silence coagulated around them. It’d hung so thick in the air that Jack had been tempted to test it with one of Judy’s abandoned skewers just to see if he could somehow pierce it. The bartender discreetly slipped away, after setting an extra glass on the bar, leaving the two their privacy.

Jack knew he had to be the one to break the ice, but it was a task he knew would have consequences. He was already emotionally unsteady and the alcohol wasn’t helping him maintain his poise. He sighed and pushed his glass back to rest beside the nearly empty bottle. His internal struggle to turn and face Officer Wilde was pathetically brief and he settled for sitting up straighter and squaring himself mentally.

“I owe you an apology, Wilde,” he had stated with all the calm he could muster.

“An explanation wouldn’t go amiss either.” And his composure, cobbled together as it was, vaporized. That was just like John.

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Eyes closed, he peeled himself out of his bed despite every fiber of his being begging him not to. He still felt the effects of the alcohol, but not the ones that could blunt pain.

No matter how badly he wanted to forget the previous day he couldn’t, just like he couldn’t forget the day the Wall fell. That was the one day that he had been totally free with his emotion. His joy. His passion. He’d been free to show John the depth of his feelings and in the morning he’d gotten the supreme carte blanche. No public outcry, no internal censure, no consequences at all. He was not likely to get the same latitude in this case.
Jack growled as he finally shifted his feet to the floor and shambled unsteadily to the shower.

***

"Yes. An explanation, as well." As the words left his lips, his face came to rest in his palms and his elbows braced up on the bar top. "Though I can't promise you'll like what you hear, I hope you'll allow me to finish before anything else. It's not a short explanation and there are several things that will be hard for you to hear. I'm not asking for forgiveness. Just... Let me have my say. Afterwards... That will be your decision to make." At least he'd managed that with a shred of dignity.

Jack presumed that the silence he received in turn was a good sign. Jack knew all he moves were his to make. As he opened his mouth to speak, Nick sniped in, "You prefer dicks to does, huh?"

All Jack could do was laugh. The fox joined him moments later and the tension flowed out of the room. Some minutes passed before the rabbit managed to wipe the tears from his eyes and his companion to settle his snickering to a manageable level.

The fox followed it up with, "Sorry. Couldn't take the suspense."

"Oh, my. I needed that," Jack managed while massaging his aching ribs.

"It looked that way," the fox said with a smirk.

From the look his next words got, he knew he had no mask left. "You are so like him." Jack paused, gathering himself. He had the momentum. He just had to keep it going.

"What you just did was exactly what your father did whenever things were too tense. He always knew exactly what to say. He could cut the tension from a room or an egotistical twat down to size with a few words and never raise his voice to do it. You are very much your father's son."

***

A batch of fresh, hot tears spilled down his cheeks, mixing with the shower water. Now that the floodgates had been opened, Jack was having a devil of a time controlling them. Sealing them up was a pipe dream, but the hope had been present that he'd have a little control. Some hope.

The worst of it was that he wasn't sure if it was his grief, his embarrassment, or the fact that he'd behaved so ridiculously in front of Wilde. If it was the last one, gods help him. He didn't want to know why. Too many land mines.

A sopping grey paw found the temperature controls and shifted them towards cold.

Jack was not a love struck kit. He never had been. Nick wasn't who Jack wanted him to be. It had taken a month of selfish fantasy and the massacring of his self-respect, but he'd finally grasped that. What he had to do now was stop being a stupid rabbit, and deal with the mess he'd made.

***

"So you knew him. I can only assume through your work." Wilde responded with obvious reserve.

"Yes, I did."

"Was he an informant?"

"What?" The question made absolutely no sense.
"My father. Was he an informant?" What Wilde was asking finally dawned. He thought John was a 
criminal informant. The idea was so absurd, that Jack couldn't hold it in. For the second time in as 
many minutes, Jack's ribs ached, but this time he laughed alone. The coolly displeased voice of the 
fox on the stool next to him cut through Jack's haze of mirth and helped bring the laughing down.

"If this is your idea of an explanation, or an apology, it needs work."

"You're right." Jack forced himself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Only a small burst of 
giggling managed to escape before calm fully returned. "You're right of course, Officer Wilde, of 
course. I apologize for my outburst and my appalling treatment of you so far. I have been severely 
out of line. I hope you will accept my apology in time, even if you can't, now."

Before he could continue, Nick cut in, "That depends. Before anything else, I’ll need an 
explanation and answers. From there, we'll see. I'm willing to forgive a lot, Savage, but only if it's 
warranted."

"Fair enough. The first answer is, yes, I did know your father. He was not a CI. He was a coworker; 
my partner, in fact, and my mentor. He was my assigned senior agent for my debut year and 
remained my partner for 8 more or so, until his death. I'll give you a minute to digest that." Jack 
poured himself another measure, emptying the bottle. A raised paw brought another to replace it. Jack 
took a sip, as Nick finally regained the ability to blink.

"Proof." Was apparently all Wilde could manage to croak out.

Reaching into his jacket pocket the rabbit pulled forth a photograph that had, obviously, been 
carried for a long time given the creases and dings around the edges. "Here. The same photo I 
showed to Bogo. That was John and I on assignment in some nameless snakehole. The only 
mammals to set eyes on that picture in the last 15 years are you, Bogo and I. Evidently, today is 
show and tell." Jack realized he was being sarcastic and desperately slammed down on it. He 
couldn't afford to get pulled into the old patterns.

"So this is why the chief looked pole-axed. He believed you."

"As did Hopps. If you don't, yet, consider that they both do. They need lots of convincing. If you 
can accept that, we can save time and get to what really matters."

"Ok. Let's say for argument’s sake that I believe you, because I know them. It'll take a while for 
me to..."

"I understand." Jack’s impatience was getting the better of him. If this was coming out, it was all 
coming out and gods help him. “Then, let's move onto the next bombshell. Your father was Echo. 
The agent, to clarify. I'll pause again, here, for you to work on that one." This offered him the 
chance to open the new bottle and refill his glass. After a moment’s thought he also poured a 
measure into the second glass for Nick. He was likely to need it soon.

"My dad was... Hang on. John H. Wilde, my father, the mammal who raised me with my mother, 
was Echo?" Nick stammered, then shook his head and leaned on the bar as if he couldn’t quite hold 
himself up. "Convince me."

Jack smiled and pushed the glass closer to Wilde. They were making progress. "Your father was a 
fox and an agent. It was kept a secret both for his cover and the public backlash. Do you 
understand that?"

Nick’s snort was an echo from the past. "Any fox would. It was a bad time for our species.
Prejudice was worse and nastier." Nick replied with obvious distaste as he pulled the glass closer, cupping it in his paws.

"Exactly." Gods, he was like his father. Just as sharp, just as quick, just as intense. Just as beautiful. "For that reason many of his accomplishments were credited to other agents, including me, but that didn't hold up under a ministerial review. Too much vague information for the vaunted tastes of the political elite." Jack let his disgust have free reign.

“So, the agency took John's accolades and bundled them up under a code name that was so secret no one was allowed to know anything. It was a conspiracy of willing ignorance and convenient silence. A false name and real accomplishments. Nothing else in the files. It grew its own mystique and became a legend. To his allies, it was an aspiration; to his enemies, it was a terror. Like the boogeymammal."Jack chuckled. "The funny part is that none of it is made up. The file for Echo is huge, larger than a Pandani phone book, and it isn't even complete. So much was done off the books."

"A simple and elegant solution." Wilde's genuine admiration made the next words more satisfying to say than Jack wanted to admit.

"It was John's idea."

"What?"

"Your father was the most intelligent, wisest and most deviously clever mammal I have ever had the honor of knowing. He taught me everything I know. Quite literally, when it came to the job; very close to it when it came to life. I would not have had the career I have without him." Jack's mood faltered.

"Or the reputation," Nick added.

The morose feeling couldn't be stopped and for once, Jack didn't want it to. "Or the reputation", he confirmed. “Or anything else." A mouthful of scotch helped disguise the cracking of his voice.

"Go on." The simple words, spoken in kindness broke him.

"Your father was a miracle worker. He came up from the worst places, endured the worst abuse and thrived. He became a legend and all before I met him. He made me the mammal I am. His death made me the agent I am."

"How did he die? I know you avenged his death, Echo’s death, and went on to do great things, but according to my mother he died a drunk, face down in a canal. I thought he was a deadbeat, but that couldn't be the full truth."

"It was anything but." Jack fought, but he couldn't stop the tears any more than the lump in his throat. The emotion in Nick’s eyes was hard to witness; a child’s desperate need to believe in his parent. "He died because he was a fox. That's all. No great enemy. Just horrible luck."

"Take a breath. Tell me when you're ready."

***

Shaking from the cold and finally back in control of his weeping, Jack shut off the water and stepped out of the shower.

The situation was not unsalvageable. Steps could be taken to bandage the... personal aspects... of
this mess and hopefully keep the effects on the rest of the operation to a minimum. For a start, he owed an apology to Wilde. Privately. Very. Humble pie was bad enough. With an audience... Well, he'd had enough damage to what was left of his ego. Best not.

***

Jack's bitterness couldn't be held in check any more than his tears. "There is no ready and this has been too long coming. I'll try to at least stay coherent."

Jack looked to Nick and, receiving a nod, took a long, deep pull of scotch then began.

"John caused his own death, but not directly. In the Cold War his work caused the reptiles and their allies to hate and fear foxes above all other mammals. The cold blooded bastards held onto that fear after the war ended. When those damn frogs set up in Zootopia, all they saw was a fox living too close to their base of operations for comfort. They panicked and the result was a bounty."

"A bounty as in a price on his head?" Nick prompted.

"Yes. Not a lot of money either. Just enough to tempt a ten-a-penny thug into stepping into the big leagues. Clarence Xavier Voss shot your father with a special cocktail of venoms and chemical stimulants called Lullaby. It was a relic from the war, provided to Voss as part of the contract.

"I don't understand."

"What part?"

"If my dad was so good, how did Voss get him?"

"He could have handled a dozen enemy operatives in the field, but Voss was an amateur and at home. He wasn't a groomed agent after the legendary Echo. He was just thug fox going after another fox for a payday. John was in his immaculate cover and there was no chatter to suggest a risk. It was all under the radar. John was dead before we could even react." Jack managed to choke out his next confession, "I was the one who found him."

Nick poured another generous measure into Jack’s lowball. Half of the volume slid down the lapin’s throat before he tried to continue, only he couldn’t.

Nick’s voice was somewhere between alarmed and understanding, but it was a balm to Jack’s senses when he said, "You don't have to remember it right now."

"That's the trouble, Wilde. I can't stop remembering it. That night was burned into my mind. I went straight from John's side to my contacts in the underworld and found Voss the same night. He's still alive. Sort of."

“Sort of?” Nick’s obvious disquiet at the caveat pulled Jack’s, somewhat bleary, focus away from his reverie and back to the here and now.

“After I caught him, I made him talk. He talked. He sang. He begged. I broke him, and I got what I needed. When I left him with the TUSK medical team I had a lead on who issued the bounty and enough documentation to go to my superiors.” Nick was unsettled at his intensity, but it didn’t matter. Maybe he should regret what he had done to Voss, but he never would. “They green lighted my mission. They were hesitant to allow me to handle it because my partner was the victim, but I had enough clout that I pulled it off, owing a few favors. Over the following four months or so I paid those favors back in Intel, reptilian agent captures, and double agent corpses.”
“John had been killed because they thought he was a risk; a fox living that close to their distribution facility. Their fear of Vulpines in general led them to unintentionally murder the greatest fox agent in history. It also brought me down on them.

“All my hunting unearthed enough leads and information to put together what was actually happening. The war was over, but business never ends. The black market was hungry for everything under the sun and, while the forked tongued cowards couldn't provide it, they could smuggle it for those who could. With a little help from criminal syndicates in the Ursine Socialist Snow Republics and Yak-Uza, they were involved in mammal trafficking, poisons, weapons, drugs, medical supplies. Anything. They were the go-to critters for covert transportation. Materials, personnel, gear…”

At an apparently complete loss and desperate for something to say, Nick blurted out, "Didn't you get a replacement partner?" The cringing that followed was positively spectacular. And captivating. Oh gods…

Thankfully, the alcohol helped Jack as he launched into another diatribe. Anything was better than giving in to where his mind was going.

“My superiors tried to pair me up with a variety of "better halves" as they put it. Initially, I expressed concerns that no one would want to partner with a rabbit now, any more than they had when I started. I was proven wrong by a long list of volunteers. However, none of them could keep up with me. The closest ones were a squirrel by the name of Nathan Sciuridae, a kodkod named Bethany Ivypaw and a snow leopardess named Charity Sturm. They ended up in tech, cold case and the aviation units, respectively. There was also that ridiculous llama. Went by ‘C’. Ended up in Vegas doing a comedy routine with a very chubby bear. Too much personality for covert work.” He was obviously babbling. As long as he kept talking, he could keep control.

That was, naturally, when it all went wrong.

***

He dried himself and passed on the fur blower. The cold had beaten the emotional nonsense into something close to remission, so it would be allowed to linger. Perhaps it'd last long enough to get him through his morning reports.

He attempted to hasten through the rest of his morning toilete on autopilot. His success was mixed and the end result was passable, but nowhere near his usual standards. He looked rough and there was no mistaking it. The one fortunate point in being an emotional demilitarized zone and hungover was that it was very easy to disguise the one with the other. Red eyes, droopy ears, lethargy, looking like a plague victim... If he couldn’t manage to look normal, he could at least disguise his overt humiliation with a mild embarrassment.

With that depressing thought fresh in his mind, he headed towards his closet, after making a stop at the room phone. A cup of coffee, water and painkillers materialized while he considered his clothing choices. Minutes after he placed his call, a 20-something springbok doe delivered the cart of morning necessities and departed without a word on the order, or the occupant’s state of dress. The efficiency (and discretion) of the hotel staff was a point of pride and a major selling point. Jack was used to such treatment, but was especially grateful this morning. To a point.

The painkillers helped his headache a bit, but not his dexterity, as evidenced when his coffee ended up sprayed across most of his wardrobe selections, as well as the wood and stone of the floor. A pot of espresso and more water were delivered with a complimentary bowl of fruit and Alka-Seltzer while Jack endured another very cold shower. In the same visit, the house staff collected his soiled
clothes and quickly cleaned the floor. Before Jack stepped back into the room, it was returned to its previous immaculate state.

Upon departing the shower this time, he wasted no time in meandering. The Alka-Seltzer and most of the coffee vanished uncomfortably quickly. The large carafe of water followed suit moments later.

Feeling slightly more capable of handling dangerous things like gravity, Jack returned to perusing his gutted wardrobe. All that was left was the “Bunnicula” suit and a white linen monstrosity he’d received as a gift. The fact that his choice was, “which villain will I be playing today, a vampire or Dr. Moreau?” was not lost on him. Or comforting. Figuring that his red eyes would go best with the vampiric ensemble, he made his selection and dressed. If nothing else, the extra intimidation factor would help him keep inquiring minds on their own business.

He braced himself and made it out of his room only a few minutes later than was usual for him. This was a good sign. However, his mask was less than complete, as was his control.

***

After a few moments of silent contemplation, Wilde brought his full attention to bear and Jack felt the weight of his attention. It settled like lead weights across Jack’s shoulders. Their eyes met and the last reserves Jack had were simply gone.

“Savage.” Gods, he was just like him; soul searching stare, and all. “I know he was your partner.” Not good. “But that doesn’t explain everything.”

No. Gods, no…

“If my dad was your partner, you took revenge, yes. I can see that.” Oh, gods, no… “But your devotion of a decade and a half to your revenge is a lot more than I’d expect for a ‘partner.’”

He knew.

Despair bled off Jack in waves, as he resigned himself to the unavoidable. After so many years, he just couldn’t, anymore. “Just ask, Wilde.” The tears he’d held in check for years were breaking through.

“He wasn’t just your partner, was he?” A statement, not a question.

“No. He was so much more.” So much pain to say, but such a release… “I loved him.” It was such a catharsis to finally say it out loud. “He was the only mammal I ever loved and he died on my watch.” The tears never shed, but due, flowed without restraint and nothing, not even the gods, could stop it. “And here I am. At the end of it all and I find you.”

“What do I have to do with it?”

“Weren’t you listening?” So sharp, yet so dim. The grief and fury couldn’t be held back anymore.

"You’re just like him. You are so like him I can't tell the difference at times," Jack snarled through his tears, into Nick’s wide-eyed disbelief. “Yes. That's why I've treated you so oddly. I look at you and for a heartbeat, I see him. You speak and it's his voice. I know you aren't him, but those moments... I crave them. It's that little hope that he's still here... Then his eyes are emeralds, not sapphires and he looks confused or angry. Then, you aren't him anymore and my heart breaks again, because he’s gone.”
“You miss him that much?”

"I'd give everything I have just for one more moment with him. Just to say goodbye. Or just to feel alive again. Just for a moment." The glass in his hand groaned under the pressure of his grip. "I was ready to retire and let go at long bloody last, but here you are. It's something straight from every dream and all my nightmares."

Before the vessel actually caved, Jack felt warmth on his back. Nick's paw was resting on his shoulder. A weight he'd never thought he'd feel again. He looked up from the large paw pads resting on his collar at the fox it belonged to and couldn't make himself breathe any more than he could make the tears stop.

He was standing at Jack's shoulder, sympathy written across his face. "I'm not my father, but I'm not going to make his partner suffer alone."

A sob of broken laughter fluttered through his tears, now flowing freely. For the first time in too long he didn't feel alone. He felt light with relief and the need to feel lips pressed against his. His paws had unconsciously drifted up to cup the red furred face in front of him and pulled it down until their lips met. It had only taken a moment and he hadn't intended it to happen, but once it did the pent up emotion from years of solitude and loss flowed like a torrent and he didn't dare pretend otherwise, let alone try to stop it. The elation of the moment, the release; the kiss deepened and grew and for a moment the world fell away.

Jack broke the kiss. When their lips parted and he looked up at Nick's face, it took a moment for the fox's eyes to wobble open. He looked wonderstruck, or like the last thing imaginable just happened, which was quite close to the truth.

***

What had he been thinking? He hadn't been. He'd been feeling; wondrously, gloriously, ruinously feeling.

All that the previous day had accomplished was the ruination of whatever self-respect he'd had left. His professionalism, gone. Work ethic, gone. Ethics in general! Gone! He’d left his job undone and stormed off in a huff, like a kit. He then drank half the bar dry, half-arsedly read two mammals into a classified op while intoxicated, and then kissed his bloody subordinate after breaking down into emotional mush.

"We should continue this when we're both at full capacity." His singsong voice was rife with self-mockery as he made his way through the streets of Zootopia. What a way to end a conversation. Not that it wasn't already past-tense with that brilliantly bungled kiss.

Bloody hells, that was a spectacular way to shred whatever good graces he'd managed to garner with the fox. With all the bombshells he'd had dropped on him, Wilde was already mentally tenderized. He'd done nothing do to deserve that.

What had possessed him?

Never mind whether he was interested in males, even if he was obviously interested in rabbits, he was a decade Jack's junior, the son of his former partner and a coworker. Sort of. It was a grey area. An unhelpful, murky grey area that was draining his ability to be firm with himself. It'd been a while since he'd done anything like that.

Oh. Gods. Stop.
No innuendo.

That was almost as bad as that line to Wilde at the end of the night.

...Wait... Jack stopped in his tracks, forcing mammals to make their way around him on the sidewalk.

Why was it bad? Think, Jack.

Something about the words bothered him. The phrasing... He pushed through the haze of alcoholic aftermath and let the memory come.

A deferment was what he'd intended; a deferment to another time for the continuation of their discussion, when he was sober and hopefully sane. A professional request based on poor circumstances and personal awareness of his intoxication. Awareness that was off by about 10 hours.

He'd been practically giddy. Ears flopped behind him and anxiously looking up, trying to hide his embarrassment at what he'd just done by... looking through his eyelashes.

Dread settled in Jack's gut.

Red eared, red faced and... wringing his paws... he'd smiled awkwardly as he stammered out "We should continue this when we're both at full capacity."

What had happened was... everything he'd intended, delivered by a bashful, cutsey, blushing... Oh gods, it wasn't even flirting. That was a pass. He had made a pass at Wilde. It was a double entendre that he, in his state, had completely missed. Wilde couldn't have. From orbit. To his further horror he realized it had even included an allusion to whiskey dick on his end as the reason for the 'raincheck'. Ughhh...

At his staff meeting, the glasses over his eyes concealed their redness and his mildly unkempt fur was a subtle yet visible indicator that he was not fully himself that morning. One unfortunate caracal made the terrible mistake of making a small jest at his boss' expense. Something about "a wild night out." Nothing mean spirited, just a little ribbing at his expense. Jack might have let that slide with a firm warning, but the poor fool made an unintentional wild/Wilde pun and the second mistake of not having his reports ready. What little patience Jack had until then evaporated like water on the surface of the sun.

Two minutes later a terrified caracal scampered from the room, followed by four other members of the support staff with, "You're reports will be in my paws in 10 minutes come hell or high water, or I will personally introduce you to both!", ringing in their ears. They had never seen the rabbit anything but calm, so they surmised that the hangover was truly awful and that the stories they'd heard weren't exaggerations. He truly was a typhoon in a tea cozy.

The remainder of the morning went as smoothly as he could have hoped for. He didn't burst into tears as long as he kept himself between miffed and fuming. His subordinates were finally acting like a clockwork support crew, instead of babysitters. An utterly out-of-their-depth, terrified-of-their-boss support crew. Reports and instructions flew, work was efficient, follow up was immaculate and, eventually, Jack departed for his usual 9:30 meeting at Precinct One and the paw to paw class scheduled for the morning.

Thank whatever gods were watching over him that there was no firearms training today. Another bottle of water, followed by a small smoothie and more coffee had returned most of his faculties to
him, but nothing removed the furious pounding between his ears. Light hurt and his sunglasses remained in place all the way to the ZPD. Small arms fire would be the death of him.

Jack bypassed the front entrance, as there seemed to be a gathering at the front of the building. An inordinate number of the mammals present had cameras; the tell-tale sign of a press mob. Lovely. Naturally, the press was around for some story or other, probably to do with a case, or some celebrity, or something equally pointless. The last thing he needed during his hangover was camera flashes. The horrid hosts of sunlight, rampant throughout Sahara Central and the Square were quite enough, thank you.

The first sight to grace his eyes upon entering the building was too weird to be painful. Officer Nick Wilde was standing at the front desk, steaming. Literally steaming, with a vat-sized coffee cup on his head, while Hopps split her attention between trying to shake the liquid (which could only be coffee) off her arm and making sure Nick was ok.

The rotund cheetah behind the desk, Jack was fairly sure it was "Clawhauser", was gibbering apologies and flailing about, scrambling for napkins. The rest of the officers, rather than amusement, were looking on with a blend of concern and speculation. This did not bode well. Something was off.

Before Jack could continue his analysis, the booming voice of Chief Bogo hammered down from above. "Hoops! Wilde!" Then to Jack's bewilderment, "Savage!"

Jack looked up and finally understood the old saying ‘face like thunder’. If a storm could take mammal form, that was it. The expression on Bogo’s muzzle was crystallized fury and Jack suspected that if it was physically possible, lightning bolts would have rained down on them from his horns. Jack sagely opted to restrain his reflexive indignity as such treatment and bide his time until he knew what on earth was going on.

He cast a look towards the other objects of bovine ire. The combination of blithe amusement and resignation on Wilde's face was frankly inappropriate and the trio of concern, exasperation and fear on Hopps' made her look... constipated.

Evidently, things were not well, with any of them.

Jack made his way to the elevator with the other two. An awkward silence ensued. It lasted until the doors closed. Hopps was assiduously avoiding looking at either male and her foot was drumming a centipede's march on the floor, displaying the state of her nerves quite clearly. Wilde was apparently content to drip coffee and smile. It smelled so strongly of sugar it made Jack queasy.

"I know, Tiger-Bunny."

At a loss, Jack quirked an eyebrow.

"Total overkill, am I right? I'm sweet enough." At which point Hopps huffed in what Jack had to assume was frustration or disgust.

"You’re a mess, Wilde.” Minimal contact, Jack. Keep it minimal.

“No. You’re a mess, if the state of your fur is anything to go by and I’m sure you’re eyes are as red as Carrot’s ears, behind those shades. I, on the other hand, am drenched.” Jack’s angry retort died on his lips as Wilde continued, “I’m dripping with good looks, as it is,” followed by a wink. Jack’s ears had barely been up in the first place, now slapped down against his back. He was floored.
After everything last night and this morning the last thing he’d expected was flirting, serious or otherwise. Breathing was suddenly difficult and Jack busied himself with his coffee.

As the door opened, Wilde all but strutted out ahead of both rabbits, whistling. Jack was very confused. Nick was somewhat laconic by nature, but to be so at ease when faced with an angry Chief was unusual, let alone when still dripping coffee with every step. Jack, glanced at Hopps. Her expression was somewhere around irritated, but there was something else there too. Concern, obviously. Guilt? Why would she feel guilty?

Judy trotted to catch up to Wilde and whispered something too quietly to be heard. Whatever reply she got was apparently quite saucy, and not appreciated, as she scowled and hit him. Their dynamic was their business, but it sparked an odd feeling in Jack’s chest to see them interacting so. It had to be the effect of recovering his sobriety.

He was mentally shaking himself when he heard Nick say, “Am I ear-ittating you, Honey Bunny?” Jack’s eyes snapped up in time to see Wilde flick Hopps’ left ear to punctuate the pun.

That had been one of John’s favorite puns to bother him with and “Honey Bunny?” Jack did not like the feelings boiling in his chest. He didn’t want to identify them, or assess what they meant any more than he wanted to figure out why that daffy wolf, Lupesson just dropped the coffee he’d been offering to Wilde. What was the problem with mammals and coffee today?

Focus, Jack!

Getting side-tracked would benefit no one. His concern for the moment was Bogo, his obvious ill temper and the reason behind it. Jack paced up to the other rabbit and her partner as they reached Bogo’s office door. The vulpine knocked jauntily and they were admitted to the chief’s presence.

The water buffalo said nothing, but wore an expression that was somewhere between a fake smile and a horrible rictus. He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk and the two officers took what had to be their usual places, on one chair. Judy, with anxiety etched across her features and edging away from the puddle forming around Wilde, while her partner wore an easy smirk. What was wrong with that fox today? Jack winced internally. Well, what else was wrong...?

Jack followed suit and occupied the other chair present, but elected to stand as the chair, as usual, was designed for larger mammals. Bogo made no comment on this, but let out a long breath before turning his computer monitor to face the three opposite him.

It was a video capture of the bar at the Palm. Jack’s eyes snapped to Bogo’s and the bovine stared daggers as he tapped a key to play the video.

There was no sound, but the picture was clear enough to make out what was happening. Jack had the pleasure of enjoying a third-person perspective on a snippet of the events of last night. The main feature of the clip was very obviously a rabbit pulling a fox in for a very long, very passionate kiss. He felt his bile rising.

Stricken, and grateful for the concealment offered by his sunglasses, Jack watched until the buffalo ended the video show.

After a moment of silence, Bogo uttered a single word that had professional patience and the weight of the heavens behind it.

“Explain.”
Morning. Nick disliked mornings. While they were full of delightful things like the sweet ambrosial nectar that was coffee, the bliss of a nice, warm shower and the early morning woodworking sessions that were part of his morning routine since he was 12, there were also downsides like jogging, bed fur and the looming threat of grapefruit.

One of the many downsides he associated with mornings was the struggle of separating dreams from reality. It wasn't much of a struggle, really. The crushing disappointment that frequently accompanied it was the painful part and the desire to avoid it was a natural impulse. Dreams were filled with the good things in life - food, wine, comfort and females - but reality was where his job and Carrots were, so reality won hands down. That didn't make the transition any more pleasant.

Detaching himself from the pleasures of his dreamscape was usually the first hurdle he faced in his day, followed shortly by the life and death battle to separate himself from the delicious warmth and comfort of the bed, to face the horror of his morning run.

Unfortunately, Nick hadn't gotten as far as that, today. He was mired at that first hurdle. Thoroughly stymied, he was. It was the sticking point on this particular morning, due to another of those morning things. It was a particular morning thing that had been only dreamed about, but never achieved: morning cuddles.

He'd dreamed, daydreamed and fantasized about waking up wrapped around a beautiful vixen since his voice first cracked. It was something he'd come close to, even brushed in passing, but never actually had. The vixen had changed over time and been semi-amorphous until a certain doe rabbit had appeared on stage in his dream theater. Since then, she'd been the star.

That's what made this morning such a challenge. He'd woken up to cuddles. If he was awake. That remained to be seen. Cuddles were not at all what he expected, outside of a dream. They were even a particular variety that he'd given up on ever getting and with a female he'd similarly given up on attaining. And yet, on this morning he had awoken to cuddles with Carrots. Cuddles of a scarily intimate variety. Impossible cuddles!

He so desperately wanted to be awake, but he wasn't convinced. So many dreams had started this way... He was barely more than half dressed, as was she. Either buttons on his shirt had opened during the night and her blouse had ridden up, or his dreamscape was starting this one off on the lurid side, as usual. Fur on fur was a sensation he hadn't experienced in a very long time and his Carrots felt exquisite. Too good to be real.

Nothing felt this good.

He had to be dreaming.

He was fairly sure the incident with Savage and Bogo giving him the day off had been real, as was the trip to the Nox side of town. After that, he must have come home and had a couple, before
knocking out on the couch. That was what he had expected yesterday to be and here he was.

Naturally, his subconscious (which apparently had a twisted, sadomasochistic streak) would pull that as a starting point for the insane dreams he'd had. There was the whole thing with his dad being a spy, Savage crying, of all things, before kissing him and making a very obvious, very good pass at him. Now Judy lay sprawling across his chest semi-clothed. He knew he had a thing for rabbits, but the male rabbit side of things was new. Maybe he should invest in some therapy; get his subconscious to be less of a dick.

But, that did nothing for his present conundrum, so he shelved it for later. Now, he had to figure out this lucid dream thing and how to wake up, despite not wanting to.

Start at the beginning, Nicky.

The beginning… He had been drifting through the haze at the edge of consciousness for a while. Warmer and more comfortable than he'd been in a very long time. There were a few sensations he wasn't familiar with and a delightful, sweet, earthy-spice scent in the air.

He was very familiar with the feel and texture of his couch. As it was more comfortable than his bed, he'd slept there many times. He could indulge in creating a nest and burrowing into it to sleep in all his foxy glory. He had vast experience in sleeping thus, so the weight on his arm and shoulder was alien to him, as was whatever had pinned his forepaw. It was out-rightly odd and a sensation he couldn't quite place, despite its distant familiarity.

It felt... squishy. As an experiment, he'd flexed his paw ever so gently and was rewarded with a new puzzle. What on earth gasped when you squeezed it? He tried it again and wasn't a gasp. This time it was a soft moan.

Whatever it was, it felt and sounded heavenly, and seemed to ooze. It slid simultaneously into his palm, across his chest and waist, and up under his chin. Delectable warmth seeped in everywhere it touched, and the scent got stronger, practically drenching his olfactory senses. This was accompanied by an odd, soft trilling and what some primal part of his brain told him could only have been nuzzling.

His mind slipped into what passed for wakefulness in this dream just as Judy's hind paw slid into the perfect position for teasing or torture. It was morning and he was a healthy reynard, Nick supposed. It made sense that he'd be aroused, especially since he had a female, a beautiful female he was hopeless over, resting her head on his shoulder, somewhere between wrapped around and straddling him.

Still firmly in dream territory then, and a very detailed one, but what the hell. Let’s see what's next.

Nick settled in and enjoyed what his mind had supplied him. He savored the discomfortingly too-real feeling of her draped across him. Her weight, her warmth, even the nuzzling and the feel of her breath across his fur was better that he'd imagined it when he was conscious. The location of her foot was distracting, but Nick was determined not to miss the forest for what she was doing to his tree.

He languidly traced his paw pads down the curve of her side from her shoulder to her hip, tracing little lines with his claws. The dream-Judy seemed to enjoy this, as she arched into the touch and stretched again. Her body contoured to him as she nuzzled his neck and gripped gently at his chest with her paw. This was heaven. His heart was going to give out any second with how hard it was hammering at his ribs, but he'd die grinning from ear to ear. It was the sweetest dream he'd ever been lucid for.
The stretch rolled from her nuzzle down her body, until the hip resting in hip palm rolled. He reflexively gripped a little more firmly than he had previously and she gasped again. Such a delicious little sound.

In quick succession three things happened. Her hips rolled forward grinding against him, her leg continued her stretch and slid her foot along his length to the knot as she moaned into his chest.

Nick couldn't suppress the whimper that slipped between his teeth.

Then the dream took a turn he didn’t expect. Carrots' huge, beautiful eyes opened and looked at him with all the love in the world, right before her little bunny fist bumped his jaw with the force of a sledgehammer.

Not a dream. Crap. Ow!

Nick rubbed his jaw and wondered, briefly, why his luck had turned so bipolar while his partner crawled up his body to get a look at the damage.

“Nick! I’m so sorry! Are you ok?” Carrots was looking down at him, her soft paws rubbing along his jawline in a way he found quite pleasant. Any more pleasant and he’d start doing the leg twitch canids were so well known for. He was already embarrassed at the prospect and the position he was in did him no favors, at least in the self-restraint department. Soft grey fur, acres more of it than he had any right to see, were on full display while she ran her paws across his muzzle. It was delightful and had to stop before he did anything monumentally stupid.

“I’m fine, Honey Bunny, especially with such a beautiful view.” Judy blinked for a moment, before looking down at herself. Then, she was gone. The next thing Nick registered was the bathroom door slamming. So much for avoiding monumental stupidity…

Well done, genius. Next time, work in a leer. Maybe, lick your chops. Really capture the essence of “letch”. Ugh…

He sighed and dragged himself out of the nest that had been his little slice of perfection, only moments before. He really had to get his head checked, followed by his luck. Waking up to lapin affection, followed by a jaw bruising and a show so good he’d nearly lost his fuzzy mind, now this. An offering to Karma would be good for his peace of mind, next festival, assuming he lived that long. Right now it was time for damage control.

He padded over to the bathroom door and knocked.

“Carrots? You ok?”

“Does embarrassed to death count as ok?” came the muffled reply.

“You’re talking to me, so at least you aren’t catatonic.”

“Don’t rule it out, Slick. I could still get there.”

“You’re being sarcastic and sound angry. I think my ribs are in more danger than your sanity.” He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a sob from the other side of the door.

Make that sarcastic, angry and very upset.
A long silence followed. It accompanied a sick feeling in his gut that grew as the silence did.

He had to break the spell of the moment, before it got any worse. He had enough to apologize for, already and letting her stew in her upsetment would only make it worse. Taking advantage of his partner’s goodwill by pressuring her into cuddling with him, groping her in her sleep, taking advantage of her unintentional immodesty, compulsive smartassing… His behavior of late was reprehensible, extenuating circumstances or no. He knew he was in trouble now, and no amount of tasty treats were going to dig him out of this one.

He needed to think.

He headed to his bedroom to get ready for work. Maybe, she’d be willing to talk to him before they had to go in. They had plenty of time, even allowing for her needing to get home to change. As he was laying out his uniform he heard the bathroom door open, but before he could say anything Judy’s voice came from the hall.

“Um, Nick? I’m gonna head out, now. I need to get, um, ready for work. And stuff. Seeyouthere. Bye!” Her farewell address was accompanied by receding footsteps toward his apartment door and punctuated by the thump of the door meeting the frame. She was gone.

It was at that moment that his alarm clock went off. The cherry on top.

Nick disliked mornings.

He shut off his alarm and left his morning preparations in favor of collecting his bottle of water and downing it on the heels of a painkiller. Screw jogging, and the rest of it. If this day was going to be a rollercoaster, he was going to enjoy the ride and you could never enjoy a rollercoaster when you were holding on.

It was too much. His work, Jack, this morning with Judy, his father and all the madness that came with him… He wasn’t fully confident of where the dreams ended and reality started anymore. He’d been working his tail off with very little respite for ages. His last “vacation” had been a three-day weekend in Bunnyburrow as a plus one for Judy at yet another family wedding, months ago. He hadn’t had a real break in… Too long to figure out. Aside from the occasional mental health day, or long weekend to visit the burrows, he’d been working practically nonstop since he joined the ZPD. Too long.

It was time to let go and just roll with it. He was due.

Something clicked in his head and he felt himself take half a step back from the world. What he said, how he said it, what he did and how he did it; none of it mattered. He’d lived both dreams and nightmares, and he’d had enough.

He showered quickly, dressed in his blues and headed out to a place he hadn’t been to in ages, a tiny sandwich shop in the old neighborhood that was ancient when his parents had been young, called Cleopatra’s Ladle. It specialized in the best kind of breakfast food; the kind that clogged your arteries and made your taste buds sing. He’d been craving cricketroll, turkey bacon and poutine for weeks. It was time to indulge.

Two hours later, he was very full of greasy goodness and satisfied at the flirting he’d accomplished with the proprietress. The forty-something pygmy hippo hadn’t had the patience for him at first, but leaving her blushing and smiling left a good feeling in his stomach and elsewhere.
It'd been a little awkward when he'd been caught staring. By rights he should have left the place immediately, at speed, possibly with a broken muzzle, but that hadn't happened. Instead, he'd been recognized and gotten a side order of crispy crickets and some locust pepper poppers on the house, along with a little saucy (and confusing) innuendo. Forty minutes later, he was firing a wink at her as he slipped out the door, bill paid and a solid tip (enough to cover the extras and some) earning him a radiantly surprised smile. It felt good.

He'd gotten a little something extra and paid for it anyway. It was nice to get a freebie, but the look of fond exasperation that he'd gotten was worth more. Notoriety wasn't always a bad thing and goodwill was fostered through small acts of kindness. A free nibble or two wasn't much for him, but supporting a local business would help down the road. He'd have to stop in again soon.

The warm feeling, and the excessive amount of food he'd consumed, kept him in good spirits until he reached the plaza that hosted the ZPD. It was mobbed with reporters, photographers and newsmedia personalities. Not a welcome sight.

Nick kept a low profile and skirted the crowd. The last thing he needed was to get bombarded with questions. It wasn't that he disliked reporters. They were just doing their jobs, for the most part, but he'd had enough media attention for a life time and then some. Mostly thanks to Judy.

Mostly.

Thanks to that first, horrid press conference things had not gone well, and not just for their burgeoning friendship. Damning accusations of speciesism were hurled both at her personally and the ZPD. Questions about the nature of their interactions in front of the press were hurled at him; a fox menacing a rabbit officer. The months of civil unrest it sparked and the shame she must have felt resulted in her resignation and cowardly flight to Bunnyburrow with her tail between her legs. He’d never asked about that time, but he’d paid attention to the media coverage, out of morbid curiosity. It wasn’t like he had a choice. She was the first mammal in a very long time to see past his fur to the mammal beneath. That didn’t fade.

She was unforgettable.

It didn’t help that his face had been splashed across the airwaves, next to newscasters and printed in news articles all over the city. He was forced into an extended vacation (at bat point courtesy of his cantankerous midget of a partner) and had to take a pass on hustling for several weeks, until the attention died down. It’s hard to run cons when everyone knows your name on sight. It didn’t help matters that when he thought about his former activities he couldn’t help but think of a certain doe rabbit. Hard to play the game when you can’t focus.

Months later there was the Bellweather confession where she was injured in the pursuit of the truth and justice, side by side with him, no less; one of the very predators she supposedly found so distasteful. Just to top it off, she had been involved with predator rights groups, tolerance activists and the Interspecies Harmony Movement since her return. She even worked with Gazelle on part of the ‘Love Conquers’ rally at the end of her Burning Mammal concert. She was the darling of the City Hall public relations machine. They could not get enough of her.

Unfortunately, he was tangled up with her inescapably and they loved him just as much, if not more. He was the classic bad-boy-turned-good, to compliment her fallen-and-then-reformed hero. He was a con-artist with dubious but unconfirmed connections all over the city; a pure-blood big city lowlife, and a fox to boot. He was everything that the good mammals of the city loathed and feared.

Then, there he was in the news footage, carrying her out of the Museum of Natural History to the
paramedics, with her smiling up at him, arms around his neck. Within an hour, his involvement in the events of the day were out. Everymammal learned how he had helped her trick Bellweather into talking, coming up with the plan to do it, and using his wit and wiles for the good of the city. He had bandaged her injured leg and refused to leave her behind, despite her request that he do so.

After that came the news of his admission to the Academy, her specific request for him as her partner, his graduation as valedictorian and the cherry on the cake was the picture of her pinning his badge on his chest at the graduation ceremony. A photo he’d had framed.

That picture made the front page for weeks. The first day or two was the announcement of his graduation and some related background stories, but the tenor of the writing changed quickly from the success of the MII to the relationship of the two mammals depicted. The reports on their relationship ranged from the inappropriately speculative to blatantly fabricated. Somehow, they’d dug up something of their reconciliation during the Nighthowler case and that they had been in touch throughout his time at the academy. The rumors and speculation on a possible romantic aspect to their relationship had been a major nuisance for the first few months of their partnership. Eventually, Bogo had to intercede both with the press and City Hall to calm things down.

Since then, the attention had been less overt, but it wasn’t gone. He was under no illusions. It was only a matter of time before another media storm. He suspected that the mayor would be the one to cause it, too. Only an idiot would think otherwise and if there was one thing Nicolas P. Wilde was not, it was an idiot. He just hoped that this press mob wasn’t there on his account.

Nick slipped through a side door by the motor pool. No one was fussed at the breech of protocol. The door was only supposed to be used by the maintenance and motor pool staff, but if an officer or two used it to manage a discrete entrance (or escape from their boss) on occasion, no one remarked upon it. This was especially the case on days when the media was at the gate.

The badger, capybara and two deer that worked in that section of the building were tolerant of passersby. They often received waves in passing from the transient mammals. The ones that could free their hands from their work waved back. They were quiet mammals and good at their jobs. Despite the grease and dirt that never completely scrubbed out of their fur, they were very orderly, neat and tidy in their workspace. Nick enjoyed visiting them. They were always appreciative of company, and he usually brought treats or good humor to boot. Their workshop was usually a bastion of order and sanity, if not always quiet. For them, every day was just another day. Business as usual.

Except for today. As Nick trotted through the main maintenance bay, he waved per usual. In return, he received a smirk and a wink from the badger and one of the deer gave him a thumbs-up, while the other two chuckled and nudged each other like grade school cubs. It was still early-ish, so the fact that they were taking a load off wasn't too unusual. That didn't explain their atypical behavior. Unfortunately, time was against him, so Nick had to pass on solving that mystery, for now. Maybe later he'd do a little recreational interrogating.

He continued through the halls, turning heads with irritating regularity. Apparently, it was Stare-At-The-Fox Day and no one had told him. Ignoring the twits, he made his way to the atrium and the front desk, where he found another peculiar sight.

Benjamin Clawhauser was actually still. Still as in occupying a single location sans movement. Even when the feline was standing in one spot, some part of him was always in motion. He would dance around, pace in place, wiggle, fiddle with something... even when he was looking at his phone, filing paperwork, or typing. It was creepy, until you got used to it. The gregarious ball of fluff was never not moving. Nick suspected he even danced in his sleep. Possibly as a result of all
the sugar he regularly consumed.

Another thing that caught Nick's eye, or more significantly his nose, was that his coffee was untouched and had made it past the actively-steaming point. Clawhauser never let his coffee cool. He liked it hot and sweet and it was usually gone before it was cool enough to not infuse the area with the scent of sugar, chocolate and whipped diabeetus. All he could smell was the regular AC tainted air of the building and the cup was obviously full, as the pile of whipped cream poking out the top attested.

The cheetah was staring at his phone, mouth agape. The only movement he was managing to accomplish was a single tap to the smartphone screen every 30 seconds.

Nick watched the creepily metronomic action for a few minutes. He didn't want to break whatever spell was going on, but eventually his curiosity won out.

"Morning, Ben."

No reaction.

"Claws? Hey, Claws! Wake up!"

Nothing.

"I just saw Gazelle in the halls. She was naked and juggling goslings."

A blink. At least that was something.

Nick opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Judy's surprisingly ebullient voice, followed by an impact to his ribs.

"Morning, partner!"

There was a moment of confused joy and relief that Nick enjoyed, before the world was dark, wet and warmer than he was comfortable with. Everything was muffled.

"Nick! Are you ok?"

"I'm soaked. And I have a cup the size of a bucket on my head." He removed the offending, now empty, container and looked down at himself. Fortunately, the whipped cream had ended up on the floor. Unfortunately, the liquid candy that Clawhauser called his morning coffee had ended up on him. Once immaculate and professional, he was now soggy. Soaked to the skin, more accurately, in liquefied sugar.

Am I dreaming again?

"I feel like a cruller."

Before anyone could remark on his absurd response to the situation, the heavens spoke.

"Hopps! Wilde! Savage!"

Nick didn't even bother looking up. His arms flopped wetly to his sides and he chuckled. Everything else about the last twenty four hours was surreal. Why not have a meeting with his furious CO, the partner who woke him up with a haymaker then hugged him, and the VIP who tried to perform a bar room tonsillectomy on him? Indeed, why not?
A smile spread across his face. Nick took a moment to shake himself, as wet canines do, showering the area around him with sugary bean-juice, with just a hint of musk.

A delightful blend… wet canid, fox musk and saccharine coffee; demonic cologne at its finest. I sound like a commercial. This dream has way too many weird twists in it.

A smile spread across his face. "Hey, Ben? Give housekeeping a call for me, would ya? Oh! And put up a couple hazard cones? I’d clean up, but I don’t want to keep the boss waiting. Thanks, buddy.” Now slightly less sopping, but still gently dripping, he strode off to the elevators.

Every single mammal in the atrium was watching them; him and his little grey companions. He was used to it. The quiet tension in the air was something he wasn’t used to anymore. Since putting on the uniform, the looks hadn’t been rife with such… speculation. Once upon a time, the populace of a room would be wondering what he’d planned to steal, or what he’d stolen, considering it was a police station. Now, he wasn’t quite sure what they were staring for. There were so many possibilities, but none fit completely. Oh, well. He would know in a few minutes.

Flirting with Savage on the way up was fun and oddly satisfying, especially when Judy got all huffy. It was nice to tweak both their ears; his for the month of bad behavior and emotional bombardment, and hers for her punch and poof act and the super hug follow up this morning. Mixed signals, he could handle, but this was well beyond "mixed." More like maniacal.

He felt buoyant and cheeky as he strolled off the elevator. Judy scampered up to him, asking if he was ok. The “Honey Bunny, I’m amazing and if you’re a good little doe, you’ll find out how amazing first hand,” earned him a bop on the arm and made Loopy drop the first of his owed coffees.

“Sorry, big guy. It doesn’t count until it’s in my paw. Try again tomorrow!” Nick patted the wolf’s arm as he passed.

At the door to what was usually imminent doom, Nick tapped out a ditty with his knuckles and the door swung open. Bogo’s silence was not unusual, or unexpected, nor was the baring of teeth that he used in place of a smile when he was truly angry. Nick helped Judy up to their usual spots in what he lovingly called “The Hot Seat”. Judy was a bundle of nerves and Jack was struggling to remain inscrutable in the other chair. It was cute, really.

Bogo remained silent as he turned the monitor and hit play. A short eternity later, he spoke.

"Explain."

The silence was deafening. Judy had found her feet at some point and the two rabbits could have passed for statues. It all made sense; the media, the stares, the unusual greetings and well wishes. Maybe I could use them for bookends. Nick’s snickering broke the stalemate.

"You find this humorous, Officer Wilde?" Bogo said with a sickly sweet, deceptively light tone.

Dream or not… "Sir, after what I've been through, it's either laugh, or cry."

The water buffalo rocked back slightly with a considering expression. It was unusual for Wilde to be quite so impudent and what he said did carry a lot of truth. The fox had been through a lot of late, especially with the family connection and it was only to be expected that he was suffering for it. His attitude was still concerning. There was usually at least a little edge to the vulpine even on
his off days. Now, he felt... vague, bordering on disconnected. Not good. He hated to do it, but erring on the side of his officers’ mental health was the wise course of action. Today, Wilde was getting a free pass. But only for today.

"Yes, Wilde. I can understand that." Bogo shelved the many acerbic thoughts that came with his decision before blowing out a rumbling breath. The bovine’s hoof pinched the bridge of his snout for a moment, already regretting his choice. "This is a disaster."

"Chief? I think I’m a little out of the loop, here." Judy piped up, anxiety and tension etched in every syllable.

"Hopps, this clip was posted to EweTube early this morning by a, now former, security technician employed by The Palm Hotel. He posted it as a teaser in hopes of selling the rest of the video. He is now facing civil and criminal charges. The rest of the video is in our custody.” He paused to sigh and run his hoof across his features. “But, the damage was done. Roughly two hours ago it went viral and has been plastered across the airwaves since. It’s a media frenzy and it centers around you and your partner. I’ve had interview requests from a dozen sources including ZNN, ZBN, ABZ, Radio 2, Vixenswear Daily and Playbuck Magazine.”

“We have two ins with Playbuck.” Nick chimed in, receiving three glares in return. “Just saying.”

"Sir, I'm sorry, but I still don't understand," Judy continued. Her ears were down and her eyes were huge. She needed a hug.

Rein it in, Nicky.

"What's not to understand? The media has footage of you kissing Wilde. ‘The darlings of Zootopia are finally together’," Bogo responded in sarcastic saccharine falsetto.

"That isn't me, sir!"

"Oh, I know, Officer Hopps.” The sarcasm remained unabated. “The rabbit in that clip is none other than the Honorable J. Savage Esq., but the press don't know that. They don't want to know that.”

"But...?" Judy all but screeched in indignation.

"They see a grey rabbit with black tipped ears kissing a fox and the video quality does nothing to clarify that. The front desk mammals were interviewed before we could reach them. They confirmed that you were escorted to the bar and that you were wearing dark clothes. No one saw you leave. Nick went in later and "joined you." The rest is easy assumption."

"Then we just have to correct their assumption!" she almost barked.

"They'll never believe it." Jack's hollow voice cut through the air.

"Oh? And why not, Jack?" Judy’s impatience and anger at the other rabbit was crystal clear.

"Because I'm Jack Savage. Who would believe the truth, especially with such a desirable alternative explanation?" Jack's tone was resigned, bordering on the funerary. Nick and Bogo's surprise at his tone was not shared by Judy.

"Well isn't that just perfect?" Judy visibly forced herself to calm down. "So what do we do?"

"The media relations group is preparing a response that will hopefully address this in a way that
will mitigate the damage." Bogo’s unhappiness at delivering the news was palpable.

"Mitigate it how?" Judy practically growled.

"Something like you reacted to a potential threat under pressure, or attempting to evade surveillance while undercover, or something like that." Nick chimed in.

"So instead of him being outing, I'm publicly incompetent."

“Not incompetent, Hopps. No one is saying that. I will make sure that no one comes to such a conclusion.” Bogo assured.

“I just can’t believe this is happening.” The waiver in her voice was unmistakable.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles, Hopps. I'm not any happier about it." Jack said.

"You're not happy? Why? You're getting off scot-free and I'm taking the hit!"

"It was my indiscretion and it should be my problem, but it isn't." Jack’s tension and volume were rising. Not much, but enough to be noticed.

"Suddenly, you're concerned about professionalism?"

"Hopps!" Bogo cut in before the spat got out of hand. Judy forced herself to turn to Bogo and stand at attention, all the while quivering with emotion. "I realize this is not an ideal situation, but finger pointing will not help."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," she bit out.

"I know, Hopps. I want to deal with this less than I want to lie naked in a bathtub full of rusty razor blades and lemon juice.” The buck and doe both grimaced at that particular mental image.

“That is a whole new kind of kink, sir. I didn't know you had it in you,” quipped the reynard.

“I have a stapler and you have lips, Wilde. Consider that carefully,” Bogo ground out. “I will address this media situation and deal with City Hall. We need you three out of sight until the frenzy dies down.”

“The three of us, sir?” Nick asked, confused. “If they think Judy and I kissed on camera, shouldn’t she and I stay off the radar? Jack isn’t a part of it; not in that respect, anyway.”

“While I agree with you, I am electing to play it safe. I don’t want any media types seeing him around and getting the brilliant idea to suggest that he was the grey rabbit, not Hopps.”

“Even if it’s the truth?” Judy spat back, indignant.

“Especially, because it is,” Bogo replied through gritted teeth. “Hopps, I appreciate your position and I am trying to help. The truth right now will do anything but that.”

“May I ask how the truth will make things worse?”

“Oh, Honey Bunny, your naiveté is showing,” Nick crooned. Bogo and Judy turned to him, wide eyed with incredulity at his informality. It was now obvious he was not well. “The media is losing their minds at the thought of you and me kissing. What do you think they’d do if they found out it
was a different rabbit? A buck, no less?"

“It’d only get worse.” Judy’s realization would have been so cute under other circumstances.

“Bingo! They’d have a whole new angle to pursue. Can you make the next step on your own, Officer Hopps?” Nick chirped as he crossed his ankles and tossed his hands behind his head.

She was silent in horror at the possibilities.

“I’ll help you. Try adding the fact that it’s the world famous Jack Savage in the video and what happens?”

“City hall explodes,” Bogo muttered.

“The paparazzi go insane,” Jack chimed in, taking off his sunglasses. The other mammals in the room cringed upon seeing the state of his eyes. Even Judy, despite her righteous anger at the other rabbit felt a pang of sympathetic pain at how rough Jack must have felt.

“And that’s just the start.” The other three mammals looked at the fox again, this time with varying degrees of fear, anticipation and resignation across their features.

“How long do you think it will be before some tabloid reporter gets the idea that we’re in the great soap opera cliché, the love triangle, and runs with it?” His audience was stricken and pale-eared, so he continued. “Or perhaps a ménage-a-trois…?” Judy was steadying herself on the back of the chair and Jack had elected to sit before he fell over.

It took a few minutes, but Bogo managed to regain his voice. “That settles it. Out of sight, out of mind. You three need to disappear.”

Nick couldn’t resist, “Let me just whip out my magic wand.”

“We don’t have time for innuendo, Wilde,” Jack shot back.

“You’d love it if he did, though, wouldn’t you?” Judy sniped in.

“It’s like dealing with the Manx Brothers...” Bogo groused, mostly to himself.

Nick waggled an eyebrow in response and tugged at his still-wet lapel, “Let me get out of these wet clothes and into a dry nip-tini.”

“Thank you, Croucho.” Color had returned to the Chief’s face and force to his voice. “You three are going to make yourselves scarce for the next three days while I dig us out of this dung pile. Maybe longer. Not a word, Wilde! I’ve already checked with HR. You both have plenty of vacation time to burn.”

“Where will we go?” Judy asked. Life was returning to everyone slowly after their shock.

I’d best speed it along. Time to play the goad and punching bag.

“Carrots, if you say your place, I’ll make breadbox jokes until we’re all dead.”

Bogo cut in before Nick could continue. “Your apartments are a no go. I’ve received reports that reporters are staking out both of your residences.”

“The Palm is out, too. Too high profile,” Jack added. He was sounding livelier, too. Good. “And too many cameras.”
“I have a place we could go.” The looks Nick received were encouraging. “Don't look at me like that. It's entirely aboveboard, discreet and off the usual radar, complete with an appropriate price-tag.”

“Where?” The suspicion was obvious in the buffalo’s voice.

“Do you really want to know, sir?”

Bogo opened his mouth, but Nick cut in, "Plausible deniability?" His mouth snapped shut.

A moment’s thought later, Bogo relented. “Fine. The location is off-books. You will stay in touch at least twice daily. I'll keep you appraised. Savage, I presume that your people will assist with damage control and expenses?”

“Of course. Whatever the agency doesn't cover, I will personally.” The Tiger Bunny was getting more tiger in him by the second. Nick was pleased.

“Good.” Bogo looked from one mammal to the other, taking mental notes. “What else do we need?”

“I need clothes,” Judy chimed in. Nick could see the wheels finally turning for her.

Keep them thinking.

“We both do,” Jack replied. “Toiletries and personal effects, as well.”

“Wilde?” Bogo was looking to him for answers. Perfect. Now he had he become the answer mammal for this farcical salvage operation. Time to go to work.

Just keep their irritation focused on you. Not each other. Then, use their attention.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I don't have a closet of guest's nighties,” Judy blushed as her fist found her hip, Jack rolled his eyes and Bogo face palmed. “There is a clothes shop near the place I have in mind that accommodates medium and small-sized mammals. It isn’t cheap, but it’ll solve our nudity problem.”

“And the toiletries?” Judy prompted.

“Just make a list. I’ll have them delivered once we arrive. Dietary preference, as well.”

“I’ll cover expenses in the short term. The Chief and I can figure that out after we get this situation in the past-tense,” Jack supplied.

“Fine,” Bogo boomed. “Now, I don't care where you’re going or what you do. Just stay away from cameras and in contact with us here. No talking to anything that might want to interview you. Now. Get. Out.”

“Ooh! Poultrygeist, 1982!” That vein on Bogo’s forehead was beginning to throb.

“Savage, Hopps, please get the fox out of here,” Bogo ground out.

And there she blows! Just like clockwork.

“Hah! I see what you did there!” Judy grabbed his tie and almost bodily dragged him out of the chair. Nick felt a paw on his back, pushing him towards the door as soon as he regained his feet.
“Just a moment! Before I forget, make sure you get receipts for everything purchased during this little traipse off the radar. Oh, and Wilde?”

“Yes, oh mighty evil one?” The phone in Bogo’s hoof groaned under the pressure of his grip.

“I presume you have clothes to change into?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. Get cleaned up. You smell like a candy store belched.”

“Absolutely, sir!”

The lapin pressure reasserted itself on his neck and back and Nick was guided firmly towards, and out of, the office door.

“Hehe! I’m a foxwurst between two wry buns!” As the stress dissipated, he couldn’t keep the silly in.

The pressure on his tie and back increased, but despite their increased speed, Nick did not miss the pink tint in Judy’s ears, or the gripping of Jack’s paw, any more than he missed the Chief’s booming into the intercom, as they receded down the hall.

"Clawhauser!"

"The Red Panda death pepper special level 6, sir?” came the cheetah’s voice through the tinny speaker.

"Level 8. And some kimchi stew, heavy on the gochujang. And the Pepper Mandu Special! And the scallion pancakes!"

“Sir, your wife will kill you if you get the pancakes.”

“Only if she finds out, and she’d have to get in line. Oh, and get a housekeeping detail up here. Wilde’s leaving a trail.”

Nick managed to hold in his chuckling at the overheard conversation until they were away from the door, but once they were a safe distance down the hall, he had to stop. He leaned against the wall and laughed, while the two rabbits looked on.

After a few minutes, the laughter petered out.

Jack was the first to break the silence. “Are you ever serious, Wilde?”

“When it’s necessary,” Nick breathed through his smile.

“And unless humor serves a purpose,” Judy commented. “It’s what you were doing, wasn’t it?”

“That’s my Carrots,” Nick replied with a smile. “Jack, do you really think we’d have a plan like this so quickly, if I hadn’t managed the atmosphere in there? We didn’t have time for an in-depth analysis, so I kept everyone annoyed with me, so they’d pay attention when I spoke and I could keep the conversation moving. We didn’t have time for everyone to vent or spat, or grouse. I cut it to the bones before the momentum got going and now we have something we can work with.”
“Still, it was hardly professional…” the buck chided.

“You’re lecturing him on professionalism after how you’ve treated him since you got here?” Judy cut in.

“I realize I was out of line, but extenuating circumstances…”

“…aren’t an excuse!”

“I’ve apologized for my behavior,Hopps, and it isn’t your concern, but Wilde’s.”

“He’s my partner, so his treatment is my concern.”


“Wilde, I will end you,” Judy’s threat did little to hide the pink in her ears.

“You love me and you know it.”

“Some days, I wonder,” came the grumbled reply.

“Save some for me, would you?” Jack chimed in.

“Which of us are you asking?” Nick retorted with a saucy smirk.

Jack sputtered and Judy ignored him. “He was my partner first, Savage.”

“You want to be kits arguing over a toy? Fine. I kissed him first! So there!”

Nick was highly amused by this point and was about to comment, when he found himself on his knees. Judy had wrapped her left leg around his right, just behind the knee, and planted her foot. The joint buckled and it forced him to kneel. She grabbed his tie and used it to guide his muzzle into a collision course with hers. Their lips met and for a second time in less than a day, a rabbit kissed him. Hard.

This is definitely a dream. Oh, Karma help me… did I drink the schnapps?

He clawed his way back to what passed for coherence in time to catch the tail end of Jack sputtering, “What was that?”

"We're even!"

“Good grief, doe…”

While they were squabbling, Bogo stomped up to the trio. He elected to ignore the absurdly suggestive situation for the sake of what little sanity he retained.

“Hopps, I have a request,” Bogo rumbled, quietly.

“What do you want me to do?” Her trepidation was not missed by any of the three males.
“I just got off the phone with the PR team. You are free to refuse, but I’m asking for the sake of burying this a little more quickly.”

She considered it for a moment and nodded. “Go on.”

“The press are convinced that it was you in the video, so I would ask you to join me at the press conference. Your presence would add a lot of support to the story and cement it.” Seeing her expression, he hurried to add, “You won’t need to say anything. Just be present and look professional.”

“What about Officer Wilde?”

“In his state?” The three functional mammals took in Nick’s dazed, bordering on drunk visage. Given his earlier behavior, getting him to function decently, let alone professionally, was a long shot. After what just happened, however, gods only knew what he’d do.

“Point.” Judy conceded.

“That would help add authenticity in the eyes of the public,” Jack mused. “Just have her wear a dark suit and it'll look even more plausible.”

“Not a bad idea,” Nick said, as he regained his feet with all the grace of a dizzy giraffe and turned to the buck. “Got one in her size?”

“I’m not a wandering tailor, Wilde.” Jack snapped.

“No, but you are about her size, Agent Savage…” Bogo mused.

“I don’t have anything here to change into and I’m not going starkers.” The last half of his statement was followed by a hard side-eye at the fox who was quietly murmuring ‘starkers’ and sniggering to himself, before he waggled his eyebrows suggestively at the buck.

“Hopps, do you another set of clothing?” Bogo inquired.

“I have workout clothes?” Judy replied uncertainly.

“Absolutely not,” Jack was adamant… Until Nick spoke.

“You were in full support of this a moment ago, Savage. What happened? Afraid to put your wardrobe where your mouth is?”

Some minutes and lots of lagomorphic griping later, Nick found himself stepping out of the shower and toweling off in the males’ locker room. Shortly after Nick’s jeans found their proper place, Jack walked in. The chief had taken the opportunity Nick’s shower had presented to discuss the situation with Jack, and Jack’s boss. It evidently went well, as Jack appeared no worse for wear.

“So, Tiger Bunny, how’d it go?”

“Well enough. The Director doesn’t appear to care. The presumption of the press that Judy was me in that clip is apparently all the damage control he feels is necessary. As long as we reinforce it, it should stick and that’s that. He greenlighted the emergency funds necessary to handle the logistical portion of this op.”

“Can I get that in a language that mammals understand…?”
Jack’s annoyance was palpable as he replied to the fox’s flippancy, “I still have my job, my boss OK’d the money for transportation and accommodations for our little vacation and he’s left it in my paws to handle as I see fit.”

“He didn’t comment on your almost being outed?”

“He’s much like your chief,” Jack commented, as he started to disrobe. “His exact words were ‘My policy is ‘don’t ask, don’t care.’ Just deal with it.’”

“You want me to give you some privacy, Tiger Bunny?” Nick quipped, as he slid his T-shirt over his head and tucked it into his jeans.

“Stop being ridiculous, Wilde.” His jacket and tie were already draped over the canid’s bench.

“I’m not being ridiculous. I’m being considerate.”

“Unnecessary. We’re both males. There’s nothing to be uncomfortable with.” Jack’s paws fumbled with the buttons of his shirt.

“I’m perfectly comfortable, Tiger Bunny. You’re the one getting naked in front of the reynard you surprise tongue-wrestled last night.” Jack’s paws slowed on his shirt buttons as the words sank in.

A breath rattled out of Jack as his bravado wavered and the emotion was impossible to miss as he spoke. “On second thought, you’re right. Some privacy would be appropriate and appreciated.”

As Jack picked up a towel and headed for the shower stalls, Nick mentally berated himself. That was not what he’d intended to do. He’d struggled to keep everything as light as he could manage and that was a really effective downer. The emotional turbulence was evidently infectious and he was not immune. He pensively collected the already discarded articles of clothing and walked to the only occupied stall in the shower area.

“Hey, Savage. I’m sorry. That came out a lot worse than I intended.”

“Oddly enough, Wilde, I figured as much. I’m not upset.”

“For a secret agent, you’re lousy at lying.”

“For an ex-conmammal, you’re lousy at reading marks.”

“Wow. Tiger Bunny’s letting out the claws…” A weak chuckle drifted out from behind the curtain, in response. “So… If you aren’t upset at my tactlessness, what is it?” Nick had to keep him talking. Silence would only stymie action and they didn’t have time to wrangle an emotionally catatonic rabbit.

“If you must know, Wilde. I’m embarrassed.”

“Bloody hells, you’re impossible. I know you know better and don’t pretend otherwise.”

“I’d never.”

“Like hells you wouldn’t, Red. You’d do it for a laugh, in a heartbeat, just like you’re feigning ignorance now, to keep me talking.”

“Ok. You got me. You’re still answering my question. What are you embarrassed about?”
“Must I?”

“Oh, you must.” Nick started to sing along to the Lords of Catnip. “I must! I must! I must increase my MMMH!” Jack’s paw slapped down on Nick’s muzzle, vicelike, holding it closed.

Jack was standing there in his boxers, ears down and tension rolling through his frame. “I know what you’re doing, Wilde, and while it’s appreciated, it’s unnecessary.” As he spoke, his paw fell away and he refused to meet Nick’s eyes.

“Necessary or not, It’s happening. Now, why are you embarrassed?” Nick’s tone betrayed nothing.

“Do I really need to say it?”

“It’s that or you can stand there in your skivvies. Nice print, by the way. Maple leaves?”

The smile in Jack’s voice was small, but present. “Impossible fox.”

“Glad you’ve caught on. Now, you know you need to say it, just to get it off your chest.”

“I’m ashamed of my behavior and my treatment of you since we met, my frightful behavior last night, and the consequences we’re enduring because of my poor handling of the situation.” Jack finally looked up and faced the fox. “I owe you many apologies and… I’m sorry, but I don’t know where to begin.”

“Then, let’s just say your apologies are accepted and let’s deal with the mess.” To say that Jack’s expression was disbelieving would be an understatement.

Nick ran his paws through his head fur and over his ears. “Listen, Jack. I’m not going to pretend that this situation isn’t a pain in the tail, but nothing will be gained by me holding a grudge. We have enough to figure out and I don’t have the energy to spare on being angry at you. To be honest, you don’t deserve it. You’re hurting and I said it last night, I won’t let you suffer alone, but don’t think you’re off the hook. You have stories to tell and that ‘classified’ stuff won’t fly with me. Understood?”

“Understood.” Relief had replaced the apprehension in Jack’s face.

“Good. Now, give me your pants.” Nick smiled at Jack’s discomfiture, as he handed over the last garment he needed.

“Thank you.”

“Sit tight, Jack-jack. I’ll be back in a bit with your substitute clothes.” Nick strode from the room, leaving a rabbit unsure of how he was supposed to react. He wasn’t forgiven, but it was more than he had any right to hope for. As Nick walked down the hall, he missed Jack sinking to the floor, a smile on his muzzle as tears rolled down his cheeks and for once, he didn’t mind.

Nick rapped his knuckles on the door to the female’s locker room and called in, “Carrots? You in there?”

In response, Judy walked out the door and cocked an eyebrow at her partner.

“Yes, oh Carrots, my Carrots?”

“You took your time.”

“Jealous, Fluff?” Her glare intensified from displeased to deadly. She didn’t even dignify the
question with a response, electing instead to slap her clothes into his chest and pulling the suit from his paw.

Nick Looked over what Judy claimed were ‘workout clothes’ and a lascivious grin spread across his muzzle. Calling the bottoms shorts would be generous. “Wow, Carrots? Really? These barely count as clothes.”

Pouting and hiding her red ears was the only response he received, so he continued. “So, why haven't I seen you in these?”

“If your leer is anything to go by, I’m glad you haven’t.”

“Awww. I thought you liked my leer.”

"If you want a show, Jack'll be in them soon enough." She was being positively petulant.

“Oh it'll be a show alright, but not the one I'm interested in. Still, I could use the laugh.” Nick knew when to walk away, and given her crankiness it was time to make tracks.

Nick made his way back to the males’ locker room and found Jack already in the shower stall. He handed the clothes through the curtain and waited for the inevitable reaction.

"Oh bloody hells, no. She cannot be serious."

"It's all we've got, Tiger Bunny!" Nick replied, barely restraining his laughter. "Hop to it!"

"This isn't funny, Red."

"You're right. It's hilarious. And who are you calling “Red”? Are we doing nicknames, now?"

"Do you ever stop with them?"

"Oh, it’s constant for me, but it's usually only me."

"I suppose you'll just have to adapt."

"Speaking of adaptation, how's your camouflage coming?"

"I believe this is the most horrifying outfit I've ever worn and that includes when I was undercover as a monitor lizard bellhop."

That statement gave Nick pause. "Ok. One, you're telling that story later. Two, get out here, so we can get this over with."

"I'm not leaving this room."

"Oh, but you are."

"I'll sleep here."

"Not happening."

"I'll go nude."

"An indecent exposure arrest is a better option?"

"...no..."
"Then out you come!"

"Blast."

A minute or two passed and there was still no movement. “Come out Tiger Bunny.” Nick’s amusement was only growing.

“No.” …As was Jack’s desperation.

“If you don’t come out, I’ll have to come in.”

The threat made Jack panic and blurt out, “Couldn’t you just eat me?”

Nick was surprised, but didn’t miss a beat. “I don’t eat rabbit. Foxes haven’t for centuries.”

“Hopps wouldn’t mind.” Jack was nearing hysteria and flailing horribly.

Nick wasn’t buying it for a second. “Neither would you, now get out here.”

The curtain slid open and all Nick could manage for several minutes was to slip in an occasional inhalation between fits of laughter. As if the sequined, hot pink Gazelle tank top wasn’t enough, the bright orange terrycloth booty shorts with “Bunny-licious” across the rump stole the show. He had to admit Jack didn’t look bad, except for the massive grump all over his face. The death glare accompanying said grump did nothing to stop Nick’s levity.

“You aren’t making this any easier, Wilde.”

“Not in the job description, Agent Fuzz, but I do know what will help you feel better.”

Resignation dripped from Jack’s voice as he gave in to Nick’s comment. “Fine. Get it over with.”

“You look great in those shorts.”

Jack dope-slapped Nick in passing, as he made his way to the locker room door.

Nick laughed. “It’s a little early to be hitting on me, Tiger Bunny. At least wait until we get home.”

Jack’s progress stalled at the comment and Nick snickered. He made his way past the rabbit and out to the hallway, heading to where Judy and Bogo were supposed to meet them, in the bullpen.

On his way, Nick passed the main foyer area and saw several members of the housekeeping staff hard at work, trying to get his puddle off the floor and the spray off the walls and desk. It was something of a losing battle, as the more they mopped, the more it spread around. The sugar had quickly saturated the mop water and now, they were putting down as much as they were getting up. Clawhauser hovered around bemoaning his lost coffee and apologizing to the beleaguered mop-wielders.

As he passed, Nick couldn’t help but start singing “Pour Some Sugar On Me”, by Deaf Leopard, which alerted the fretting cheetah to his presence. He was promptly waylaid by Clawhauser, who began machine-gunning apologies the moment Nick was in vocal range. The effusive spiel and offers for compensation only sputtered to a halt when Jack passed where the two predators were talking.

Clawhauser’s jaw wobbled to a stop, only to hang open, as the diminutive lagomorph walked by. Nick didn’t miss Claw’s ogling any more than he missed the glances to see if Nick was seeing the same thing. Yeah. Jack looked good, especially from behind. Nick waggled his eyebrows at the
cheetah and left him standing there dumbfounded and red cheeked.

This just keeps getting better!

Upon entering the bullpen, it was Nick’s turn to stall out, as he saw his partner. While Jack looked good, if fabulously humorous, in Judy’s clothes, Judy looked intimidatingly hot in Jack’s suit. Where Jack was slightly taller and lean, her shorter, curvier build made up for the lost height in all kinds of ways that drew the eye. The red highlights in the cloth caught the light and shimmered over her contours and made her eyes seem darker and more intense.

When her eyes found his, a shiver danced down his spine all the way to the tip of his tail, which bristled slightly. She padded quickly over to him and grabbed his arm. “Officer Wilde, may I have a word with you, please?”

She dragged him out to the hallway, passing Jack in the process. Nick was barely aware enough to see Judy’s eyes grow at seeing Jack in her clothes. Laughter sparkled in her eyes for a moment, before being squelched. Possibly saved for later.

Judy dragged him down the hall for a few paces, before turning to him and pinning him with a stare that could melt steel.

"Ok, Nick. Spill."

"What are you talking about, Carrots?"

"Don't play coy. You've been acting weird all morning. You barely reacted to getting doused with coffee. You were flippant with the chief. You're flirting with Jack...!"

"I flirt with everyone!"

"And that's the problem!"

"That's how I behave normally, fluff. How is that me behaving weirdly?"

"It isn't!"

"You've lost me, Carrots."

"Rrrrrrrgh!"

"Whoa! Easy! You claim I'm acting oddly, fine! I am, but why are you so angry?"

"I... ugh... first things first. What is going on with you?"

"Fluff, this time yesterday Jack humiliated me in front of the whole day shift and the chief. I thought he was a douche and couldn't stand him."

"So what happened?"

"Since then? I know I visited Finn and Honey. After that, I'm not sure how much of it was a dream."

"I- You really think you're dreaming?"

"Let’s see... I was kissed by Jack Savage after he told me my dad was a super spy, not a deadbeat drunk, then I woke up with the famous Judy L. Hopps wrapped around me. She then punched me
before hightailing it, and yet I got my morning hug like nothing happened. Then the video and 
Bogo didn’t destroy me… It’s just… It’s all so fantastical. I think I’m having a bad reaction to the 
shellfish I had with Honey and this is a really intense fever dream while I’m dying in the hospital. 
That, or reality has sprung a leak. I’m having a little trouble, here, Carrots."

"I, uh… What a mess," she stammered in response.

"To say the least."

Fidgeting and blushing horribly, for reasons Nick couldn’t grasp, Judy asked, "So what are you 
going to do?"

"Save my psychotic breakdown for later?" The glare he received made him take a step back and 
holds his hands up to placate the nearly rabid rabbit. “I kid! I kid. Carrots, I'm joking. What am I 
going to do now? Get us to my safe house."

"Safe house?"

"Yes. Safe. House. A house that is safe," he snarked back.

“You need new material.”

“Shhh. After that …”

"Hold up there, slick. Where is this 'house that is safe’?"

“It's someplace you'll like.”

“Where. Is. It?”

“It’s in the Nox, Carrots.”

“And you own it, maybe…?”

“Karma, help me…” he sighed. “Yes, it's one of my properties.”

“So I'll meet a few more of your philanthropic beneficiaries...?”

“Wipe that rapacious smirk off your muzzle. You're a rabbit, not a fox.”

“I could have a little fox in me…”

There was so much he could say to that, but now was not the time. Nick just managed to swallow a 
groan, covering his interest with not so feigned shock. Widened eyes blinked rapidly at his partner. 
"And you say I'm acting unusually..." Judy giggled in response. “You do realize that isn’t helping 
convince me this isn’t a dream, right, Carrots?"

"So, after...?" she promoted.

"After we escape the Precinct, we go to the safe house and lie low for a while. That's plenty of time 
for me to collect on my debt."

“Debt...?”

“Jack's promised me information on my dad. “
“Oh. Of course.” Annoyed jealousy was undisguised in her voice, but Nick pretended not to hear it. “You're going to pump him for information...?” It was clear she had ideas on what kind of “pumping” was going to happen.

“Ouch, Carrots. Keep those gloves up, huh?”

“I'm sorry Nick, but after this morning I'm a little... out of sorts...”

“Me too, fluff. I owe you an apology too.”

“Come again?”

“I’d love to!” Nick chuckled at her wide eyed expression. “Sorry, Carrots, but you started it.” The confusion in her expression only grew, so Nick plowed on after a paw over his ears. "I owe you an apology for taking liberties last night and this morning. You wanted cuddles and I went too far with it, then I copped a feel this morning... I don't blame you for walloping me, or for glossing over it. Don't worry. It won't happen again."

Judy’s confusion only grew. "Glossing over... what? What are you talking about?"

"The hug this morning...? Back to our usual routine?"

"Now, you listen to me, you feather-brained git. I'm not glossing over anything. Until that coffee got dumped on us, I was having the best morning since Yule morning when I was 11."

"That was when you got that bicycle painted in the ZPD colors, right?"

"Yep! Best Yule ever!"

“Then, why did you punch me?”

"That...!" She started strong, but finished barely audibly. "Isn't something I'm ready to talk about, yet. Given the... circumstances..." Reddened ears were tucked tight against her shoulders and she refused to meet his gaze.

“Ok…? I heard you sob in my bathroom. Can you help me out with that one…?” Nick was grasping for anything that he could get an answer on.

Judy spoke, Nick had to assume, because her lips and jaw were moving, but no sound escaped.

"Ok…? Later on that one too, I guess?” Judy nodded vigorously. Nick would have been irritated if he hadn’t been so disturbed. “Um, can you tell me why you left so quickly?"

"Oh, for... I was embarrassed, Nick..."

"For showing so much fur?"

"The- I- Yes. ...and the punching thing..." She was so red he could feel the heat radiating off her face. She was reaching the point of immolation.

"Ok. Ok, Carrots! I won't ask. I'm confused as all hell, but I make it look good. Just don't combust on me... and enough of the doe eyes! You're killing me, here!"

That made the doe in question giggle. "Look, fox, I... I'll explain. I promise. Just not now. Maybe
when we get a quiet moment alone?"

"No audience, huh? That may be a while in coming, Hopps."

"Tell me about it..." Her statement was punctuated by Chief Bogo entering the room and shooting her a pointed look. “Ugh... Duty calls.”

"Well, I never! Judy Hopps unenthusiastic about performing her duty! Now I have seen it all!" The bop on the arm he got was deserved and indicated things were getting back to sort of ok. A small breath of relief blew between his teeth and Nick looked to his next task. Escaping the ZPD.

Talk about irony. When I was a hustler, I never set paw in this place. Now, I'm a cop and I need to escape!

It was time to fill Jack in on their destination.

While Judy suffered through the attentions of the press and Bogo’s attempt at whitewashing the incident, Nick sat in the blacked out sedan with Jack. Once Judy wrapped up with the tender attentions of the media, she’d join them, the decoy vehicle would depart and they’d slip out the high-security entrance on the north side of the building.

Nick sat on the plush seat and took in his surroundings. It was just a car, so there wasn’t anything too impressive, past the fact that it was built for wolves. Nick supposed that was part of the disguising factor of the vehicle choice, as was the driver; a pretty (and extremely nervous) caracal. Jack was back to taciturn and Nick was fairly certain that one of his mammals seeing him in such a ridiculous state was the cause.

Nick caught the cat’s eye in the rearview mirror and smiled. She returned it and seemed a little more at ease. Nick cast a sidelong look at Jack, before looking back at her and winking. The telltale ear flick told Nick all he needed to know. She was working very hard to avoid her boss’ wrath, but was having a terrible time of it, keeping her curiosity, and laughter, under wraps. “Hey, Sweetheart?”

The driver was confused and unsure of how to respond, while Jack just rolled his eyes. “Yes, you, the kitty behind the wheel.”

“Yes, sir?” She had no idea whether to be offended at the familiarity, or glad of the tension relief in the air. Poor kitty.

“What’s your name, kitten?”

“Special Agent Agnes Birchfang, sir.”

"Special agent? How special are we talking?" The other mammals rolled their eyes. "Special training? Special clearance? Special operations group? Special needs...?"

Before the feline could retort, Jack cut in. "Special agent is a term denoting an investigator or detective charged with investigative work."

"Tough job. So special training, clearance, operations group and experience."

"Summarized broadly, yes," droned Jack.

"And you work with him?"
"Yes, sir," the prim response drifted back from the front of the car.

"And you're a molly of what? 26? 28?"

"38, sir, and not a molly."

"So, a queen then." The feline acknowledged him with a sharp, single nod. "You work that job with this buck and raise a family? Please tell me you're mated."

"Excuse me?"

"Birchfang, if you aren't taken, it's a crime."

Her laugh was musical, if brief. "As it stands, fox, I’m not, but I'm not looking either."

"Fair enough. And it's not my business, but if you're looking for a male to get to know..."

"Don't you have enough entanglements, Wilde?" Jack cut in.

"Not me, fluffy bunny. The precinct. We've got a lot of single males of varying felid sizes. Or other species, if that's what you prefer. There's a nice caracal Tom up in planning."

"Are you seriously trying to turn the ZPD into a dating service?"

"Just presenting an option. If you're going to be in town for a while, you may as well. And where else are you going to find a male that understands the demands of the job? Or female, of course. No judging."

"And are they all as silver tongued, as you?" asked the queen, a hint of purr in her voice.

"That's for you to find out, Special Agent Birchfang."

"Angie, sir"

"So that's what mammals you don't arrest call you!" She giggled in response. "Call me Nick, or Officer Wilde if you need to be formal, only don't be formal." That earned him another small smile. "Thanks for driving, Angie. It's always nice when a pretty girl takes me for a ride."

She choked back a laugh and Jack huffed beside him.

Nick leaned over to his irate companion and whispered, "What's the matter, Jackie? Even if she talks, who would believe her?"

"Thankfully, no one, but I am looking forward to getting to the tram station. I have another agent bringing a set of clothes presently."

"I thought you wanted to make this trip low profile, Tiger Bunny," Nick chortled at near-normal volume.

Jack practically shouted, "You call this low profile, fox?" gesturing at his attire.

The snickering from the front seat was not missed by either passenger. The growl that Jack emitted had the giggles stifled very quickly.

"Wilde, you are doing nothing for my image."
"I’m doing plenty for your image, Tiger Bunny. Being seen with me will do nothing but improve it."

"Tarnishing is not improving."

"Aww… Is someone feeling cwanky?"

"Officer Wilde, why are you goading me?"

"Because you need to lighten up. I didn’t create this situation and you are going to give yourself an ulcer if you stay this tense. Do you want that, Agent Fluff?"

"What I want is to get through this ignominious departure with a shred of self-respect intact."

"You may have to give up on that one, but is there anything else you’re wanting, while we stare into each-others’ eyes?"

Jack’s eyes bugged at the realization of how close they were and what it looked like. He shoved Nick back into his seat and stared awkwardly out the window. Nick, on the other hand smirked and shot another look at the rearview mirror. The caracal driver’s eyes were the size of dinner plates and her mouth was hanging open.

Fortunately, the moment broke when the door popped open and Judy’s stressed and fidgety form scrambled into the vehicle.

"You ok, Carrots?"

Judy’s amaranthine orbs met his emerald pair for a split second, before she looked everywhere else and squeaked, “Yes. Let’s go.”

She scrambled into a seat on the opposite end of the car from the two males and buckled in as Jack waved a paw. The car pulled away from the secured entrance, through the underground parking garage and up, onto the street. The street was clear of anything but the most usual traffic and the sedan bearing the three runaways slid away.

About 35 minutes later, the car stopped by the Night Train tram station with service to the Nocturnal District and the Deeps. Judy and Nick stepped out as they had entered the vehicle, but Jack disembarked in a pair of navy slacks and a green polo. The handoff of the clothes at a stoplight had been almost disturbing in its subtlety. Jack had changed in full view of both mammals in the back, under the bewildered eyes of the driver.

His comment of “What modesty do I have left, anyway,” sparked a smirk, a raised eyebrow and an eye twitch from Nick, Judy and Angie respectively.

The three mammals moved quickly to the platform and directly onto the waiting tram. Jack had used his connections to reserve a full tram car at a remote platform. The time between the car parking and the tram leaving was perhaps ninety seconds and no one was the wiser. They hoped.

As the fox and rabbits settled in for the hour trip into the lower city, the tram slid along the overhanging tracks and glided towards the artificial mountain chain that was the cornerstone of the Alpine District.
Chapter 8

Judy sat and fiddled with the hem of her jacket as the single-car Night Train sped away from the platform and into the late morning sunlight. Nick had attempted to engage her in conversation a number of times during the car trip, but she couldn't find a way to give more than a monosyllabic response to anything he said and she never made eye contact. Thankfully, Jack remained mostly quiet.

She was a hot mess and no mistake; a hot, bothered, completely flustered mess. Her day had not been good for her heart. Or her libido. Kinda. Only it had. A lot. It had been amazing! Yet, horrible. Uncomfortable and aroused was not a pleasant combination, especially with her current company.

Sweet cheese and crackers, what have I gotten into...

Her day had made absolutely no sense until she spoke to Nick outside the bullpen. Then, it made perfect sense in retrospect, or at least his part of it had. It made perfect sense that he was really out of it, hence his peculiar behavior. She should have seen it sooner. A voice that sounded suspiciously like the Chief’s rattled through Judy's head, mocking. “Impressive investigative work, Hopps.” Clearly she had been spending too much time around her boss.

It was so obvious. She had just been too wrapped up in her own reactions to think of anything other than the immediate. Nick was right. Bunnies were emotional. She was struggling so much with most of what she learned and it was about Nick's family. Of course, he'd feel a little off kilter. If she had been thinking at all of him, instead of just herself, she would have seen it.

She’d gotten all wrapped up in helping him with the aftermath of his talk with Jack, and not pushing him, but the moment he picked her up, her brain fried. Then, their night together happened, and morning and the coffee thing and the video and…

Stop, Judy. This isn’t helping.

She owed him explanations. He owed her a couple, but she suspected they’d end up being Jack's. Like the kiss! When Nick said that he was the second Wilde Jack had kissed, she thought he was talking in his sleep, or dreaming, or… anything but telling the truth! She’d convinced herself that he was hearing his subconscious’ reaction to all the revelations, or a joke. Maybe both. If anyone could joke in his sleep, or troll a mammal using just his subconscious, it’d be Nick. Disregarding that little comment of his was the only way she had gotten to sleep. Otherwise, sitting still would have been a challenge, let alone resting. She would have…

She would have done nothing. She would have sat there in his arms and turned into a nervous wreck, enjoying nothing. Much as she would have liked to thrash Jack, and still sort of wanted to, she didn’t have the right. Nick was her partner and friend, despite the intimacies of the previous evening. Those titles did not grant her authority to bludgeon anyone who kissed him. When she got the one she wanted, however, all bets were off. Thrashings aplenty. Especially, for Jack if he ever tried that again!

Well… Maybe not “when”, anymore. It was probably an “if”, at best.

No! No. It’s not an “if”. You’ve come too far to give up. You’re closer than ever. You don’t know either way, so stop assuming it’ll go against you. Stay positive and keep working.
She had to be content with that, for now. So much had happened in maybe twelve hours. She could have left Nick resting and gone to run off the interloper, but it wouldn’t have been satisfying enough to make it worth giving up what she now considered “her spot.” Last night was heaven for her. She couldn’t have seen that coming in a million years and she didn’t care. Anything of the kind was months off as far as she was prepared for, and that was if she was lucky.

Then, Savage happened. Judy was disgruntled to admit that Jack’s appearance had catalyzed so much. Despite the upheaval and emotional distress, she’d gotten closer to her fox than ever and much more quickly than she could have hoped for. Things would be wonderful if it weren’t for the kiss.

She absentmindedly moved her fiddling from the hem of her borrowed jacket to her ears. For some reason, whenever she thought about Nick, she ended up lightly self-grooming. She knew it meant something, but had never bothered to figure out what. She had higher priorities. She knew her mother would know. And cheer, most likely, before filling her in…

That’s helping ever so much…

Her vexed focus shifted from the weirdly ornate casted bronzework of the tramcar roof to the window. The Nocturnal District, or the Nox as it was commonly called, was a place she’d never been. It was a place she’d trained for, obviously. However, most of her training was for the circumstantial hazards of the place in an emergency situation, such as falling debris, limited air quality and low light operations. Rabbits’ limited night vision led her to be passed over for cross training patrols in the Nox and she didn’t enjoy the idea of going to a place she couldn’t see well, despite the compensation of her excellent hearing, especially at present. Judy was already discombobulated, so the prospect of flailing around in the dark held little appeal.

So much wrong and so much right in so little a time. The kiss. The kisses...

Her ears burned just thinking about her fit of jealous pique at the station. If she hadn’t been so incensed at that EweTube clip and Savage being so apathetic, she never would have behaved so childishly. Her only regret was that her first kiss with Nick had been so one sided. Sort of. Nick had reacted and apparently well, considering he was dazed for most of her conversation with Bogo. That was good, right? Judy blushed a deeper red.

When her boss had materialized just after her kiss she knew that she had avoided official censure and possible Mammal Resources consequences by a fraction of a second. That was one of the reasons she had agreed to assist the chief with the press conference. She didn’t know much about Karma, but Lady Luck she knew. Her embarrassment at the conference was a small price to pay for such a fortuitous set of happenstance. Divine intervention or not, Judy wasn’t about to take chances.

Speaking of divine intervention, she had to do something about clarifying what had happened with her hug this morning to Nick and explain her pugilistic morning greeting. At least the "sobbing in the bathroom" part would be easy. "I wasn't crying, Nick, I was so happy to punch you first thing in the morning that I was giggling maniacally. That was all that you heard."

Yeah. Sounds totally sane.

She wanted to pull her ears in frustration, but she was now too busy fiddling with her paws to bother. Her head flopped back against her seat as her nervous fidgeting came to a momentary stop. Clearing her head with a few deep breaths would have been nice, but she knew Nick was about to ask...
"You ok over there, Honey Bunny?"

That.

Her ears re-inflated with blood at the nickname and the tender tone, despite the casual phrasing. Fidgeting recommencing in... Now. Just now. All the fiddling, now. The nervous energy and all the thoughts from the day that she’d managed to momentarily disperse reconvened for another session of “Freak Out The Bunny”.

It’s fiddler crab season!

She knew she needed to give him a real answer; something more than a single word, barely in hearing range. Unfortunately, she couldn't pull it off. In the moment it took for her mouth to open, her brain engaged and "I'm fine, Nick. The events of the day have me a bit out of sorts," became, "Yep!", delivered at a frequency of sound closer to that of a mouse in a leaky helium plant than an adult rabbit. At least they were headed to the Nox. Maybe she could find a bat who could act as an interpreter.

She giggled at the silliness. She was getting as bad as Nick was earlier.

The tram glided along the tracks, passing the western corner of the meadowlands; a picturesque, if dull, District that vaguely reminded her of Bunnyburrow. The rolling hills of the district were mostly populated by ruminants, bovines, smaller prey and the elderly. It was considered the country club of the city; quiet, peaceful, comfortable, well off and predictable. Like Rabbitton from the Lord of the Minks. (Not to be confused with Lord of Fleas, a horribly depressing “classic” she’d been made to read in school and had nightmares about.)

The most activity it saw was during the annual district-wide croquet tournament. Last year, it had gotten particularly vicious and ended with a handful of arrests for lawn ornament vandalism, illegal shearing -courtesy of some disgruntled senior sheep- and a few literal cases of dyed-in-the-wool, when a cheeky contestant dropped fur-coloring into the communal showers. Otherwise, it’s only notable trait was its proximity to the Alpine and Nocturnal Districts, as well as Outback Island.

The Alpine district was home to a variety of species that preferred thin air and cold wind, such as snow leopards, chinchillas and goats. It was also home to the Avian Consulate and some of the best winter weather sporting resorts the city had to offer. It was the epitome of modern sporting culture; a latticework of funicular railways, switchback roads, ski slopes, trails and tracks draped on the mountainsides. Its lovely vistas and clean air made it a popular tourist destination, even in the summer months.

On the other end of the spectrum, quite literally, was the Nocturnal District. Where the Meadowlands met the mountains, the Alpine went up, while the Nox went down. The district was nestled in a series of enormous subterranean caverns that spanned an area almost as large as the city proper. Only accessible via long, circuitous tram lines, or freight elevators, the nocturnal district was home to a very different set of mammals with a very different set of cultural and social norms. Kinkajus, coatimundi, ai-ai, and bats of all types congregated there, alongside moles, minks, stoats, vulpines and other mammals who found the lower light levels most comfortable.

Judy had heard stories of the Nox and its unique customs many times, but wasn’t sure how much to believe. She didn’t want to deal with culture shock in addition to everything else she had going on, but it looked like she wasn’t getting a choice. She had to trust Nick on the whole “off the radar” thing and let him guide her.

Obviously, she was not ok, or even close. It had all started so well, too. That was the part she
Judy couldn't get over.

How she woke up... She'd had dreams and fantasies start like that. If she were honest they tended to happen when she was not sleeping, too. She had them at her desk, in the shower, when she blinked... Yes, she was a rabbit. A titanic sex drive was part of the deal and she was losing her fluffy little mind with want. Specifically, of a certain todd.

Judy was frustrated. Exceedingly so. Her frustration was almost as severe as her embarrassment. Despite her discomfort during the press conference, she had her male of choice and she was so close. She was partly to blame for panicking and hiding in the bathroom, but she had hoped to recover after finding him at the station. Her hopes were succinctly dashed and it's been nothing but interference since.

I was this close. I touched it.

Yes, it was with her foot, but it still counted! Judging from his reaction (what little she had been fully conscious for) he had enjoyed himself. Now, if she could only work out if it was him awake, or if he thought he was dreaming, maybe she could calm the neurotic self-doubt, a bit. She knew he was “dreaming” of her, but with everything else... well... Insecurities weren’t just for males.

Nick’s little “thing for rabbits” comment had been everything she’d ever hoped to hear, just like everything else in that evening. The heavy flirting, the intimacy, his openness; It was so perfect! She’d managed to ignore the “second Wilde” comment as a joke and reveled in her fox all night. The morning was even sweeter, if more... pelvic in focus. If she’d kissed him instead of punched him, it would have made things a little easier, she supposed, but the punch meant so much more.

If things had gone her way, her hug would have been followed by dragging her male off for a little explanation, before rollcall. With a lot of blushing and a little honesty there was a good chance that she’d finally get her paws on him (and much more, besides) for real!

Then the video clip had happened and elation became panic at the speed of light. From what she had seen in the clip, Nick had been pretty floored by Jack’s kiss and not in a bad way. He’d even responded! Was that reflex? The alcohol? Had he drunk any? He hadn’t responded to her kiss the same way. Granted, it was only a few seconds compared to Jack’s 20 or so... Would he have responded? As enthusiastically? More? Less? Or, not at all...

What did he actually mean, “thing for rabbits”? What kind of “thing”? Did he like rabbits for company? Were they just “cute”? Was it a fetish? Was it a thing for doe rabbits? Bucks? Both? Did he have a fixation because he was a fox? Should she come with a side salad?

Screw rose petals on the bedspread. It’s lettuce, croutons and a vinaigrette! Oh, gods....

Why did she have to be this way? Ears over tail for a fox...

If she had any interest in lagomorphs this wouldn’t even be a concern, but rabbits didn’t do it for her anymore. If she was really honest, they never had. Since her last blind date, almost two years ago, that had been painfully apparent. That was the day she fully realized she liked sharp teeth, the smell of violets and males big enough and strong enough to pick her up and take her. Well, not so much realized. More like admitted to herself. It was easy once she clued in on the fact that all she did the whole date was miss one particular mammal that possessed all those character traits.

And so many more...

Judy suspected that if she had only been able to accomplish that a little sooner, she’d be much
closer to her goal instead of just crowing about touching it with her widdle bunny piddies.

At least that night had been clarifying. The milquetoast her mother had set her up with had only one thing going for him. He was an athletics instructor, so he had stamina. Or so he told her 11 times in under an hour.

Quite the catch. Thanks, Mom.

Since concluding that embarrassing, demeaning and very early evening with the overly enthusiastic (and rather dim-witted) buck by faking a crime in progress a few blocks over, Judy had axed any dating aides she'd had. The Matefinder.com account vanished, the Tailtracker hook-up app was deleted unused, even her Furbook account status changed from "single", to "not interested." Her mother's Muzzletime call ten minutes after the change was made had been unenjoyable to say the least. And very long.

Judy shuddered at the memory.

That day, she finally gave up on dodging the truth. Nick was what she wanted. She was aware that there would be certain... challenges to a physical relationship with him, but the press conference earlier had brought some of these challenges to a distressingly clear light. Light which was, thankfully, blunted by the mountains. The shade was nice. It helped her hide her blush.

The questions shouted at her were things Judy had no idea how to answer. She had no idea how the mammals asking them could do so in broad daylight, let alone in public. Even Bogo had been shocked for a heartbeat, before appalled and furious took over. His bellowing, politically correct and professional as it was, shamed and silenced most of the miscreants. The few remaining reporters that decided to pursue the story, instead of the smut, were treated to a dull explanation of events where "quick thinking" and "atypical circumstances" were to blame, not burgeoning romance.

If only they'd seen the third floor atrium 20 minutes earlier… Blood suffused her face at the memory of her momentary insanity. Again. She was going to need a transfusion, at this rate.

A fitting continuation to the start to the day, wasn’t it, Judy? If only it was an actual continuation, instead of a childish overreaction…

If she started talking to herself, she’d really need help. She needed to stop thinking so negatively. It wasn’t helping. It also wasn’t relevant. They were all ears-deep in trouble and the least Judy could do was pull her mind out of her misery and her pants, so she could stop being a liability.

What she needed to do was clear her mind and get a grip on herself. When the situation was stabilized, she could get back to getting a grip on her fox. All Judy needed to do was put the whole thing with Jack on a back burner. Once she did that, she could work on shelving the other distractions, like remembering how good Nick’s fur felt on hers, how his paws gripped her… Maybe once she stopped thinking about that, she’d be able to stop thinking about how good he smelled, how much she liked his paws on her fur, how he whined when she teased him with her hindpaw… How close she came to shredding his clothes and doing all the things she’d been dreaming about for… She was in trouble.

You’re supposed to be clearing your mind, dummy, not wallowing in a porno-daydream!

“Carrots, if you keep shaking like that, I’m giving you a martini shaker and putting you to work.”

“You are so not helping.”
“A full sentence! We are making progress. Excellent.” Nick’s statement was delivered with the classic psychiatrist’s accent and punctuated by a nose-boop that left her cross-eyed for a moment. She really was out of it, if she didn’t hear him walk over. Her eyes focused on what was in front of her, then on her partner with one eyebrow raised.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a newfangled thingy we city-folk call a note pad. It comes with this little thing here called a pen.” He dangled said object from his other paw. “You can use it to write stuff down. You know, like lists. Like what you want to eat for the next few days and what you need to keep yourself looking so scrumptious?”

“And not stinky…” Compliments like that weren’t helping.

“You smell good to me, Carrots.”

“I won’t after a couple days.”

Nick… For the sake of your virtue and my sanity, stop. Please!

She accepted the notebook and pen, barely able to look up at him. As Judy started writing her list, Nick sat down and waited. She was quickly distracted by him, not just because of his proximity, but because he was flexing, stretching and rubbing his jaw. She didn’t mind his teeth. In fact, they held a lot of appeal for her, but the activity on the edge of her vision was distracting, for a variety of reasons.

"Nick, what are you doing?"

An articulate, "Huh?” Was all she got in return. It was made all the sillier by the sight of a small bulge moving about inside of his cheek as he worried at his upper gums with his tongue; something else she had a serious interest in.

Around her giggling she said, "That. What are you doing?" while trying not to stare too eagerly.

"Oh, my jaw is sore. I got punched earlier today by somebunny that doesn't know her own strength."

I can’t take this.

Before Judy could stammer an apology around the ears she was hiding behind, Jack’s shortling ruined the moment. It saved her some embarrassment, but she wasn't pleased.

"Something you want to share, Agent Fuzz?"

"I'm just amused." Jack’s grin was bordering on the vulpine in its smugness. "Have you ever looked at mammals and thought how silly they are? Mother Nature has a truly wide-ranging sense of humor. I mean, take mammal mating habits, for example."

Judy had an inkling of where this was headed and she’d be screaming bloody murder and beating the stripy pissant within an inch of his life, if she wasn’t frozen in horror. It was a good thing she was, too, as her beating Jack would only confuse matters. And give her away. She was also secretly grateful that it was him saying it, not her. Unfortunately, as she was paralyzed and could only watch as Jack continued, she also couldn't throw herself off the tram to escape the teasing that was to come.
“Mammal mating habits are bizarre.”

“What do you mean?” Nick inquired.

“What else would you call the mating call of your own species, Wilde? I mean no disrespect, but from an outsider’s perspective it’s quite silly.” Nick’s ears shot back against his skull. His discomfort at the topic was plain to see, as was Judy’s interest. Jack continued. “It’s also a species characteristic and quite romantic in its own way…”

Judy’s patience ran out at his circumlocution. “Savage, what are you talking about?”

“Officer Hopps, call me Jack. At this point, I think you’re entitled to that informality.”

“Oh, fine. Whatever. First names. Good. Now, what’s this about a mating call?”

“It’s nothing, Carrots.” Nick seemed very tense.

Jack chortled. “You haven’t told her?”

“It never came up.”

Judy muttered, “It did this morning.” Nick coughed into his paw and Jack’s eyebrows rose along with the corners of his mouth. Judy cleared her throat. “So… Mating call?”

“Yes…” Jack’s grin turned sharp. He was enjoying this, the little sod! “When red foxes find the love of their life, they perform a mating call. It’s quite an event for the vulpines involved. They quite literally sing their devotion to each other.”

“Awwww!” Judy squealed, as Nick hid behind his paw.

“It sounds like a flooded engine yodeling.” Judy wanted to be insulted on Nick’s behalf, but she couldn’t stop the guffaw that escaped her mouth. The look Nick sent her was part embarrassment, part resignation.

“Et tu, Carrots?”

Judy couldn’t help but giggle, albeit contritely, with a shrug.

“Don’t feel too bad about it, Red. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Red?

“It isn’t limited to vulpines, either. Mother Nature’s sense of humor has touched us all,” Jack continued.

“Would you care to spread the embarrassment around a bit, then? Lessen the sting?” Nick pouted, over crossed forepaws.

Jack huffed a laugh and dove in. “Small felines in love sound like bovines in pain. Lupines do that face licking thing. Then there are the head butting competitions the ruminants do over females and don’t get me started on porcupines. If you want a diverting read, go to a porcupine fertility clinic and get a guide "for a friend." The suggestions and lateral thinking they have in that book rival the Buni Sutra for creativity and that’s just to get a hug. You’ll never look at cork board or rubber cement the same way, if you read further.” Judy was starting to feel relieved at the direction his lecturing was taking. It was going away from where she had feared. She experienced a moment of hope.
“And then, there’s rabbits.”

So much for that…

“Rabbit females sucker punch the male they want to mate with.” Jack’s grin was rapacious. “It’s much like your yodeling, Wilde. A species characteristic and a cultural indicator of desire.”

“So… that's why you punched me...”

“Um...”

“Is that what it meant every time you've punched me? Oh my... I'm seeing our relationship in a whole new light, now, Carrots. Does ...” Nick stopped himself, partly because it was not a polite topic for a public space. The rest of it was because he saw Judy's eyes peeking out from behind her ears, pleading for him to please stop talking before she immolated.

Jack chuckled again. "Don't feel bad, Hopps. There are weirder mating rituals than that."

“Such as...?” Nick’s tone dripped with irritation.

“The Avians, for a start. As odd as some of our Mammalian customs are, we may find solace in that the Avians are even more peculiar. Their courtship is particularly bizarre. They date and what not, like we do. However, when the “third date situation” arises, it’s very different. You want romance and seduction? The Avian response is “I will show the depth of my desire via interpretive dance!” I’ve been to Avia on several occasions. One of which was during the Spring Flock. I saw some of the most extravagant and enthusiastic performance art expressions of "I want to shag you" imaginable.”

“OK, I- What?” Judy stammered.

Nick laughed. “Aren’t they surrealists, or something?”

“The term you’re looking for is ‘cultural abstractionist’,” Jack replied.

“Seduction by abstract interpretive dance…” Judy felt ill at the thought.

“Uhhuh. The denizens of tropical climes are particularly… um… surreal,” Jack countered.

Nick snickered, “What about reptiles?”

“Male alligators have submarine bellowing contests to determine their desirability as mates and attract the attention of females.”

“They what?” Judy nearly squeaked.

“They yell under water. It’s their version of a pick-up line.”

“Yell...” Nick parroted.

“Under water.”

“What?”
Just let it go.

“...so... That really is why you punch me all the time, isn’t it?

Shut up.

“You're literally hitting on me.”

Oh gods, shut up!

“Does fists of doom mean you're in heat?”

“I'm glad I'm not in your shoes, Hopps,” Jack smirked.

“You wish you were in my shoes, Savage. I have a shot at getting him in the sack.”

Well done, Judy. Nothing awkward there, at all.

The pause after Judy's little comment was awkward, both for the recent topics discussed and the associated mental images (that tidbit about foxes yodeling to their one true love brought to mind images of Nick at karaoke night). The fact was that the conversation had died, dumping them back into a cloud of lingering emotional aftermath and unspoken questions. It was fitting that just then the tram finally reached the mountains.

The tram glided into the tunnel mouth without pausing. Judy was caught somewhat by surprise and latched onto Nick’s arm. She was reluctant to let go, even when the lights in the car came on. It was obvious he didn’t miss her reluctance. Fortunately, she was spared any awkwardness as the train exited the tunnel and she got her first look at the Nox. All she saw at first was a mass of black and white reflected against the glass. She got up and moved to the window to look down, squinting and still making out nothing.

Nick’s chuckle snapped her head around. “Maybe this’ll help.” He fiddled with a control on the tram wall and the lights shifted from a direct shine to an indirect glow. Another control dimmed them further, to a gentle twilight. “Now look, Carrots.”

She looked again and couldn’t contain her surprised gasp. The tram tracks were set into the wall of an immense cavern. They gently corkscrewed their way to the cave floor over a long, slow descent. It’d be a tedious trip if it weren’t for the unbelievable view. Judy’s mouth hung open at the impossibility of what she was seeing; multicolored lacework over ink.

“This never gets old...” Nick murmured from somewhere beside her and Judy could see why.

Lights shimmered and glistened not only from the mammal made structures, but the cavern walls, stalactites, stalagmites, and structural support columns in a dizzying array of subdued, gentle hues. From a distance there appeared to be no rhyme or reason to the placement or colors, but the farther into the cavern the tram moved, the easier it was for Judy to see that the lights made up specific areas of the underground.

It was like her first day in the city all over again, until Nick nudged her and pointed. She looked out, instead of just down and she couldn’t believe her eyes. Hanging from the ceiling of the cavern was a near-mirror image of the cityscape below. Structures that looked to be carved directly from the preexisting stone, or built and hanging down, were twinkling their lights back at the city below. In and around the crowns of mammoth pillars were irregular sprawls of more lights in little clusters, stretching all the way to the cavern walls and out into the murky distance. The city down here was at least as large and complex as the city above and mammals called it a district!
One stalactite was covered in softer, pastel colors of lavender, peach, and hues of blue, red and yellow that resembled the pale light of dawn. At its base it met with lights of a brighter nature, deeper shades of the same colors. In what appeared to be the center of business and entertainment given how it sparkled, there were flashing lights in every color imaginable against patches of darkness. Gaudy neon signs abutted gently twinkling pathways and dimly lit patches gave way to artfully arranged showpieces of light.

Rounding one particular support Judy could make out walkways strung here and there where the cavern would support them. Each one was lit in a different manner with its own set of colors and some sported other decorations by way of flags, beading, elaborately carved posts, or even bioluminescent plant life that twined around the ropes and wood, stone and metal in a panorama of light and shadow. In the distance Judy could see other caverns and light displays of every variety.

Nick was at her side and smiling as he said, “Welcome to the Nox.”

Jack joined them and the three stared in varying degrees of wonder as the tram slowly spiraled its way down the walls to the cavern floor.

When they pulled into the station Judy rushed out of the car and gawked like a proverbial tourist at everything around her. At a distance, the district had been like a dream; a starry night applied to the inside of a cavern. Up close, it was like a step through time. Nick guided her past architecture from the previous century and fashion from… Her ears were red again. Even Jack’s eyes betrayed genuine surprise. Nick was snickering.

Everything worn was done in subtle pastels and greys, favoring pattern variations, texture and cut over more flamboyant fashion characteristics. The clothing worn in the Nox was also apparently rather… flexible. In the space of two dozen meters, they passed a family of Coati-mundi in Edwardian era finery, a badger in a 1930’s style pinstripe suit, moles in something too steampunk-ish to be anything but a fashion statement and a group of stoats wearing lovely almost-nothings, done in latex, string and lace.

“It’s legal, Carrots. All the naughty bits are covered and you’re off duty.” Judy was floundering for a reply when Nick continued. “This is the Nox, Carrots. Here, there’s one rule that everyone takes seriously. “Keep your nose in your own.” A mammal’s business is their business and none of yours unless they bring you into it. The only exception is if there’s a threat to the community.”

“That’s why you brought us here,” Judy said, comprehension dawning.

“It’s not completely safe, but it’s should be good for a few days at least, especially if we keep to ourselves.”

“Clever fox. To evade the press, you bring us to a place where it’s considered a social taboo to gossip, especially to outsiders. You said you own land here. That means you’ll be protected by their code and we will by extension. A trim solution, Wilde.” The respect in Jack’s voice made Judy uncomfortable, even as Nick preened.

They made their way through the streets to another, smaller station-like structure that Judy vaguely recognized from another old movie. While they chattered and mammal-watched, a trolley rolled up to the structure on tastefully concealed tracks. The style was all San Flamingo and Judy was a little doe-kit hanging off the handles as the car pulled away. They passed a different neighborhood every few blocks and each was both architecturally distinct and clearly marked; Vulpin Downs, Minkburg, Molehaven, Upper Stoatsburrough.

Judy rode wide eyed and gaping at everything they passed, until Nick took her paw and guided her
off the trolley car. She was bewildered by everything she saw, but the structure he was directing her towards floored her, when she decided to pay attention. It was huge, even by Zootopian standards. It was a vast tower, apparently cobbled together; a mix of natural structure and mammalian construction. It looked painfully creepy and very much not of this world.

Judy dug her feet in and pulled Nick to a halt. “What is that?!?” She was not bothering to hide her discomfort.

“What’s the matter, Carrots? Scared of heights?”

“I’m scared of that! It looks like the Tower of Baradpurr!”

“I didn’t know you were a fan of Molkien, Hopps.” Jack chimed in.

“Nick got me into it a couple years ago. Now, what. Is. That?”

Nick smiled that smile she loved and loathed, “That is not Barad-anything. It’s support and transportation pylon A-113. It keeps a portion of Tundratown from dropping in for a visit. It also houses a set of elevators. Those are what we’re here for.”

“Elevators, Red? We’re going up, I presume?” Jack inquired, ambivalently.

“We could go down, Tiger Bunny, but the moles down here aren’t particularly good hosts. They prefer to keep to their own.”

Judy did not like the nickname thing going on any more than the prospect of going “up” anywhere, around here. “Where are you taking us, Nick? Spill. Now.”

“You know where we’re going, Honey Bunny. To one of my properties in the Nox. It just happens to be an apartment complex that caters to the Desmodontean and Pteropian communities.”

“The what communities?”

“Bats, Officer Hopps. He’s taking us to an apartment complex for bats.” Jack seemed a little amused and a lot annoyed, as he spoke. “You, uh, failed to mention that little detail, Officer Wilde.” Nick grinned.

Judy was not happy. “I’m uncomfortable with heights, Wilde. I have been since that little zip-line incident at the Marshlands training camp last year.”

“Me too, sweetheart, but trust me. The view is worth it. Just like this morning.” So saying, Nick winked and traipsed off towards the base of the tower and an ornate brass elevator door, facing them. “I’ll hold your paw on the way up if it’ll make you feel safer.”

Judy stared after him for a moment, before trading a look with Jack, who shrugged and followed the fox. Judy rolled her eyes and followed, grumbling dire consequences for the smirking, red-furred menace in front of her. She had to love him to put up with his teasing.

The elevator was a confection of metal filigree and glass that climbed up the outside of the pillar with the ease and speed of a squirrel ascending a birch tree. The sudden acceleration made both rabbits grab hold of the larger, more stable mammal by reflex. Nick’s paws being in his pockets, as usual, the two lagomorphs had easy handles to grab, in the form of his forearms. Judy maintained her hold on Nick’s wrist during the trip, but she noticed that Jack didn’t. He let go reluctantly, and while his paw lingered, but he did let go. Judy had no idea what to make of that aside from not liking it generally. Fortunately, the trip was quick and Judy had little time to dwell on yet another
The elevator doors opened on a comfortingly enclosed set of gantries and catwalks, in a similar style to the elevator. In consideration to those incapable of flight and unused to hanging from the ceiling, the gantries were neither open mesh, nor glass-floored. A consideration Judy fervently wished they had included in the elevator itself. As the rabbits shakily disembarked the vertical transport, Nick was whistling and enjoying himself. Clearly, Judy would have to add the lack of forewarning to his tab for later retribution.

Jack kept pace with her as Nick led them along the catwalks and pathways. Seeing a city upside down was both fascinating and disorienting and both rabbits gawked openly, though Judy more so. Eventually, they passed through a door that looked the same right side up as upside down and entered a very large structure that was part stalactite, part-mammal made and all confusing. It looked like a stone beehive, with doors and windows set irregularly across the face. The only opening that didn’t lead to open air was the door they were walking up to, on the gantry square.

The entryway was nothing atypical for an apartment structure; a carved wood door with brass and glass inlays, in a floral pattern. Inside, a reception desk stood next to the main doors. There were windows and hung paintings. Nothing unusual. However, to the left was an open archway to the main sitting area and that… That was confusing.

It was very spacious. Naturally, larger mammals wouldn’t be visiting such a difficult location to access and the architects could not be reasonably expected to accommodate pachyderms, so there weren’t accommodations to suit. However, there were tables and chairs for small to medium-sized mammals spaced across the floor, as one would expect. There were a number that were occupied by the aforementioned small to medium-sized mammals. It was all quite comfortable in an early 1900’s cocktail lounge decor. There was even a set of wall-mounted terraces to accommodate mammals more commonly found in Little Rodentia.

The confusing part came from the more ceiling-based accoutrements. A variety of bats occupied chairs on ground level, but several also elected to stand. On the ceiling. They hung from loops, rings, rails and lattices set into the ceiling. The brassworks were set to allow a variety of bats of different sizes to speak eye-to-eye with their companions, of equally varied sizes, complete with adjustable sections. Thus, the “seating area” was a three dimensional steampunk-ish puzzle of size and perspective that made Judy’s already taxed senses throb unpleasantly.

Fortunately for her, Nick ignored what had to be old news for him and proceeded to the desk where Judy hoped to find a small shred of sanity. She was to be disappointed. The mammal at the desk was a hunchbacked vampire bat, wearing a service uniform and a nametag displaying “Igor”.

Upon seeing Nick, the bat visibly perked up and Judy was ready for some kind of formulaic greeting for a visitor, or maybe for his boss. What she did not expect was, “Welcome home, Master.”

“Hello again, Igor.”

“It’s pronounced “Eye-gore”, Master.”

“Of course, and it’s “Mister Wilde”, or “Nick”, isn’t it?”

“As Master wishes.”
Nick chuckled at what was obviously an old… Judy wasn’t sure. Comedy routine? Argument?
“There aren’t any walkthroughs for apartment 8F today, right?”


“Good. Igor, give me the key. We’ll be staying there for a few days.”

“Very good, Master. Would you and your companions care for refreshment?”

“Yes, herbivore fare.” Nick pulled his notebook from a pocket and handed it over to the obsequious bat. “Send out for what’s on these lists. It should be a 3-4 day supply of comestibles and personal effects. If anything is missing, contact me before you adjust. Before, Igor. Also, have Mister Tepis visit at his earliest convenience, for two fittings.”

“Certainly, Master. I have a hunch he’ll be over shortly.”

“Thank you, Igor. Add the receipts to the book and send them to my desk at the precinct, along with the bill for the days occupied, with copies to Finnick.”

“Understood, Master. I’ll attend to that presently and send Inga straight up with a platter.”

As they headed down the hall to another elevator, Judy was struggling to process what had just happened. Jack was a touch quicker on recovering. “If you have a reanimated chimera that does a soft-shoe routine and a bunch of lab equipment in the basement, I’m shooting you and fleeing for Avia.”

“Even if he has an enormous schwanzstucker?”

“Don’t even start, Red.”

Nick was unfazed. “Hah! Don't mind him. He saw Young Frankenswine when he was young and fell in love with it. He enjoys playing the part.”

“Doesn't that unsettle the residents?”

“Not really. They think it’s campy, but charming. He can snap out of it if he needs to, but usually it's just a bit of silliness. It's rather endearing.”

Judy cut in, “Is Inga as eccentric?”

“Ahh, but that would be telling.” Nick’s smile did not reassure her.

An eight floor descent and a stroll down the hall to a door with a stylized brass “F” on the frame led them to what Judy assumed to be their accommodations. Her ambivalence at what was on the other side of the door was short lived, as all appeared relatively normal inside. The apartment was spacious with high ceilings. The brass ceiling fittings for bats were present, but not as pervasive as in the lobby sitting room. It was obviously decorated with foxes in mind, as everything was slightly large for her and Jack, but perfect for their “host”. Judy suspected that this was a second home for her partner, until she saw the twin of his beanbag couch in one corner. Then, she was certain.
Other than the huge beanbag, the apartment looked like it had been lifted directly from an Agatha Corgi Novel. Judy was half-convinced she’d see Hercule Parrot waddle through, on his way to solve a murder, if she stuck around for long enough. She was so distracted by yet another completely unexpected side to Nick that she missed his question four times, only vaguely registering his voice at all.

It was only when Jack walked up to her and tapped her shoulder, startling her, that she became aware of anything.

“Drink, distracted Bunny?” the fox queried with his patented smirk.

“Uh, no thank you.”

“And for you, oh stripy cranky one?”

“For the fifth time in as many minutes, NO! I still have a hangover and the headache is back.”

“Not to worry, Tiger Bunny. Inga will be here in a second. I’ll have her bring something up to help you with that.” As he spoke, much to both rabbits’ irritation, Nick poured a finger of some clear liquid that was obviously alcoholic, into each of three lowball glasses.

Refusing to dignify his contrariness with words, she settled on a stare and palms-up shrug-head shake combo, clearly asking “Didn’t you hear me?” without saying it.

In response, Nick smiled and said, "Just wait for it, Fluff..."

Moments later, the front door opened and in walked a quokka in her mid-20’s. She wore a conservative maid’s outfit, pushing a small trolley with a tea set on a tray and a large set of plates, piled high with steamed, grilled and raw veggies, several varieties of fruit and a bowl of mint and parsley, with a variety of dipping sauces, most of which she had never seen, or smelled before.

She set the plates of food and tea out on the center table and stood back, allowing Judy and Jack to serve themselves. Nick spoke to the smiling female, obviously making arrangements, but Judy noticed the quokka glancing her and Jack’s way very frequently. She had almost convinced herself that it was her being a professional servant, until she clasped her paws in front of her and started hopping in place, in a decidedly unprofessional manner.

Judy’s curiosity morphed into concern when the quokka, who could only be Inga, emitted a high-pitched squeal that got both her and Jack’s attention mid-bite, followed by, "Can I, Nick? Can I can I can I can I?"

"Jack, Judy, meet Inga.” With an apologetic shrug, he continued. “Sorry, Jack. Go ahead, Iggy.”

Taking that as permission, the petite marsupial charged Jack and grabbed him in a bone-crushing hug, squealing, “Ooooh! I love the tiny gay ones!”

“Who has no filter or concept of personal space,” added the fox without an ounce of remorse to be heard or seen.

Jack was obviously unsure of how to extrecate himself without hurting the overly friendly marsupial. “Unhand me, female! Paws off the tail! Oof... And how dare you imply that I'm gay!”

Judy could only watch in stupefaction as the buck continued to struggle.

“Oh, honey, I don't imply. I state. It's so obvious. You've got two world-class lookers with you and you look at Boss-Male, here, more than the bunny-babe, hands down. If you're straight, you'd be
glancing her way every few seconds, whether you knew it or not. You don't,” Inga concluded in a matter-of-fact voice and with nary a breath between words.

“What?!” Judy croaked.

And suddenly all that manic attention was on the doe. “There's a lot of hot to see, bun. You turn more heads than you think. Just not the one on the rabbit with racing stripes. The red-furred smartass who cuts my checks does that.”

“He does not!” Jack stopped in his effort to smooth his clothing to sputter in indignation.

“Oh, quit pretendin’, fluffball,” snorted Inga as she circled round the room in flurry of nosiness. Their lack of baggage seemed to interest her greatly. “You best get that stick out your ass, if you want him in there instead. No one's judging. No one cares. It's just funny as hell seeing you freak out!”

Jack continued to sputter, once more completely out of his depth.

“Listen, sugar-fluff, if you weren't so obvious before, your red ears now are all the giveaway you need. So give up the bluster and run with it. Who knows? Maybe if you give up the tough bunny act and act as sweet as you look, he'll knot you. I know he has a skeleton it two of the male type in his dating closet.”

“He has... what!?” Judy’s gaze shifts from Inga to Nick so quickly she nearly makes herself dizzy.

“Oh, yeah, honey bunch! That fun-sized fox with the sailboat ears is one, if I were to bet. Just sit him on your lap and spin 'im, right boss?” She said as she headed towards the door, slapping Nick's ass in passing. "Mm-mm! Boss, you got some fine buns. And here you went out for more. You gotta tell me the name of your baker.”

By this point both rabbits were scarlet and desperate to either end the conversation or flee. Their obvious discomfort did nothing to stop the quokka from chattering. She didn't even pause. "My my, you're really stuck between a rock and a hard place. I hope it's between a hard and a wet one and soon. It'd be good for you. Just remember, I ain't gettin' the bleach shipment till next week, so keep it inside, if you can. That goes for you too, bunny boy! And you, Cute ‘n’ Curvy.”

As she turned to leave, Nick called out, "Oh, Inga! Before you go, Dani will be arriving soon. She has a few things for us."

"I'll bring her right up, big guy. You know I'll do anything for tall, red and handsome."

The slamming of the door signalled a momentary vacuum of silence. Neither bun seemed able to move. A glass in each paw, Nick moved to stand between them. “And that's Inga. Now, here are your drinks.”

“Thank you,” J&J replied simultaneously while automatically reaching for the offered beverages. Anything to blunt the reality of what just happened.

“Heh. Stereo Purround Sound...”

After sipping her glass, Judy coughed a few times and choked out, "What-

"Did you just drink? Bunbay Sapphire Gin with lemon."

"No. What-"
"Did you meet? Inga. She's the housekeeper on this floor."

"Damn it, Wilde! Let me finish my question!"

"You mean you didn't want to know those two?"

"Yes! I- no. What?"

"Ask your question."

"What in the bloody hells is wrong with her? Is what I think she's trying to ask," supplied Jack, who had already shot back the majority of his drink.

Judy touched her nose and pointed at Jack, while she choked on another sip of gin.

"On the nose, it seems. Well?" He asked, turning to Nick.

The fox's smirk was soft and a little sad. "She was a street kid who got mixed up with a bad crowd; tried some designer drug that didn't treat her well. Now, she has a condition close to Tourette's Syndrome. Basically, she has no mental filter."

"That would explain the foul language..."

"Hah! No it doesn't! I said she has no filter. The rest is all her."

"What?"

"She was always a dirty-minded little marsupial, she just kept it on the inside. Now, she runs with it. She feels no shame. Calls it liberating."

At this point Judy was mentally stalled and could only stare, as Jack sat his empty glass down on the table. “Nicolas, I think I need to lie down for a while. Is there a place I can…”

“Down the hall, second door on the left. There’s a bathroom attached. I’ll keep the food covered until you’re ready.” Jack nodded and padded off to get some much needed rest. “What about you, Carrots? The first door on the right is all yours, if you want it. Same set up.”

Judy found herself nodding. She suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion roll over her and decided she needed a nap. It was early afternoon, but it felt like several weeks had passed in the last 6 or so hours. She wandered off and found the door Nick mentioned. She closed the door behind her, stripped down and opened the wardrobe, looking for a hanger. The desire to hang her borrowed suit up was put on pause as she looked at the clothes before her.

She was certain Nick lived here at least some of the time as it was full of his gaudy shirts, boring slacks and a selection of suits like the one he was wearing last night.

That was only last night…

She shook her head and pulled down a shirt that was horribly wrinkled and replaced it with Jack’s suit. She pulled the flower printed monstrosity over her head and was enveloped in Nick’s scent. Quickly wiggling under the covers on a slightly-too-large-for-her bed, she pulled the shirt up to her muzzle and inhaled.

Warm, overwhelmed and surrounded by a comforting scent, Judy drifted quickly off to sleep.
Special Agent Angie Birchclaw strode through the front doors of ZPD Precinct One with profoundly mixed feelings. When she had been pulled from her usual duties as a grade 2 investigative lead for the dubious honor of helping the soon-to-be-retired legendary agent Jack Savage, she knew it was just going to be a short-term assignment, babysitting an old field officer while they were on their way out of service. She had accepted the assignment, knowing that it would be a nice feather in her cap; an accolade to list on her roster of accomplishments when it came time from promotion reviews on the next rotation.

What she had not expected was the incredible series of events and revelations that had happened since the assignment began. Being a teaching aid for the ZPD in prep for another crackdown was one thing. Being the accidental right arm for a newly-minted Deputy Director, under the Taskmaster General herself, was something entirely different. Something she wouldn’t have expected in a month of Sundays. It was a near-instant promotion a couple-dozen times over and very much a trial by fire. Granted, none of that had been facts, until her new boss uncovered a threat to the only surviving descendant of the mythical Echo. Then, all manner of madness was unleashed.

She had gone from teaching a few classes and managing a small team with a few cursory duties centering mostly around keeping Agent savage out of the way to wrangling half the bloody government; security detail management, surveillance & intel analysis, team scheduling, personnel reviews, equipment requisitions, and logistic supervision of multiple assets overseas and locally... Angie was a little overwhelmed. Especially, after the morning she’d had yesterday.

Her boss was known, very well known, for his discipline and punctuality, his impeccable dress and manners, his even temper and exacting standards. He walked into the morning briefing yesterday morning late, unkempt, surly (by his standards). His even temper was entirely absent, as Special Agent Dimitri Felinowicz discovered. The tom was socially inept and a bit frat-tommy, so it didn’t surprise Angie, (or anyone else, honestly) when his smart mouth got him in deep trouble. The scale of Savage’s reaction to the semi-inappropriate quip, however, was flabbergasting.

Birchclaw had prided herself on being chosen for the assignment, “assisting” Savage and so had ignored the more outrageous stories that were told about him. After that morning, she was absolutely convinced that they were understatements, instead of hyperbole. She had never known terror quite so sharp as when Jack Savage had turned his bloodshot, burning eyes her way and boomed orders at her. The little lagomorph wasn’t an agent. He was a force of nature, like a really pissed off earthquake, compressed into a tiny, striped, grey fur coat.

Talk about camouflage… An avatar of Zeal himself that looks like a cuddly little plushie. He should have come with a warning label, or some hazard symbols, or something…

It was only after getting her boss to the Precinct for the day that she heard about the EweTube clip and saw for herself what the hubbub was all about. She couldn’t possibly believe that the rabbit in that ridiculous clip was Savage. It had to be Hopps. Her crush on her partner was practically legendary in its own right. The whole bloody Precinct and half the city knew about it. It seemed the only one who didn’t was the objet d’affection, himself. Though, how he wasn’t aware of it was well beyond Angie’s ability to reason. It was as obvious as Jack’s stripes, the fox’s red fur, or Hopps’ own huge… ears. She didn’t like to think ill of mammals without reason, but Angie was starting to lean towards Wilde being aware, but playing games. Or, at least she had been.

It was a natural assumption given the information she had of Wilde. He was painfully sharp and
disgustingly observant, even if he used those skills for chaos-mongering and cracking terrible jokes. The fact that his partner was so obvious in her interest should have been clear as day. However, Angie had noticed that there were other mammals who had their amorous eye on the red fox. He didn’t pick up on them either.

It confused her.

How could he had such a glaring blindspot? It’s absurd!

Unfortunately, “absurd” might as well have been Wilde’s middle name, as far as Angie could tell. The behavior she witnessed at the precinct that day was… Well, there was no other word for it; insane. You could swap in deranged, or demented, or possibly cartoonish. They worked well, too. She’d crossed paths with the fox several times and he’d always been a bit odd, but only where he could get away with it. A bit of silliness, or adolescent play-acting wasn’t a bad thing, necessarily and Wilde certainly could play the class clown when the mood was on him. Yesterday, though, it was bizarre. Singing in the halls, dancing around, flirting like he was in a bar with everything that crossed his path… It was, almost, inspiring for him to just be that out-there on the clock. How he’d managed to keep his job was beyond her.

Then she saw the EweTube clip and found out that he had spoken to Jack about his parentage. Then, so much made sense. Finding out about your father and being kissed by your partner in the same day was, well, a lot to handle. It was obvious that he was a little off center and emotional. She had hoped Bogo wouldn’t be too hard on an officer under potentially severe emotional duress. She’d heard the Water Buffalo was strict, but fair and not without a sense of understanding when it came to the wellbeing of his officers.

Her concerns were blown away, however, when she saw her boss climb into the sedan wearing quite possibly the most laughable outfit she could have conceived of. It looked so outlandish, she couldn’t believe her eyes. Then the fox had materialized and the show had really gotten strange. Angie knew Wilde loved to get under mammals’ skins, so she wasn’t surprised when he started needling Jack. What she did not expect was Jack’s blushing-schoolboy routine in response. That and the fact that Hopps was borrowing Savage’s clothes led Birchclaw’s investigative mind to a conclusion that made her ears burn.

The rumors were true. It wasn’t Hopps. It was Savage in that clip!

At that moment, she understood why Jack was leaving with them, why Judy was playing up that she was responsible, why Wilde was so off his rocker and why Hopps was so angry. She also knew that her boss was trusting her with this information and she had to keep it under wraps. Savage was trusting her with a huge amount of sensitive personal information. It was her responsibility to live up to his trust. There were no illusions that she’d pay dearly for it if she failed, but, oddly, that didn’t concern her.

She knew she wouldn’t talk. It wasn’t her style to gossip. Also, she couldn’t help but feel for the little guy. She had read his file (who hadn’t) and she knew he’d had it rough. Despite his impressive CV, he’d always seemed a little lonely. With this situation, insane as it was, Agent Jack Savage seemed more present in the moment and more alive than he had in the previous weeks. It wasn’t her place, but she couldn’t help hoping that it would do good things for the lonely little rabbit.

Unfortunately, that hope needed a little help and it was up to her to do her part. That meant running training classes and keeping things moving in Savage’s absence. She knew she could handle it. It was going to be a few days, maybe a week of running things. She had been charged with the duty and she’d do it. Her dossier would look amazing when she came up for review. She just had to bust
her tail and prove to Jack that he had done a good thing, leaving her in charge.

That being the case, she’d been up at 5:30am, gotten her kittens to their grandmother’s by 7:00 (which was a miracle in the first place), made it to the morning briefing 35 minutes early, powered through the morning reports, reviewed the rosters for the week and daily rotations, signed off on requisitions and spent the ride to the ZPD reading the threat analysis and raw intel reports. It was 9:45 and she was already exhausted. Next up was the advanced paw-to-paw class, then 30 minutes for lunch, followed by lecture, firing range, lecture and the field exercise for ‘applied surveillance and tailing techniques’, ending the day at 6:30pm. Fortunately, the kittens were staying with her mother for the night. She might survive the evening briefing in the car on her way home and stay awake long enough to microwave dinner before passing out on the couch. Again.

How that rabbit manages to do all this and the rest of his job is beyond me. He must be a cyborg or something.

She was shambling past the front desk when she heard “..and then they just disappeared! All three of them! Just like that…” She looked towards the source of the sound to find the desk sergeant, a rather corpulent cheetah, discussing something with a bored looking rhinoceros, a bemused wolf and a hippo that looked decidedly uncomfortable. The conversation was already written off in her mind and Angie was headed toward the bullpen for briefing when “EweTube” came wafting to her ears from the cheetah’s mouth. She immediately checked her watch and headed back to the desk, where she cleared her throat.

“Oh! Agent Birchclaw! I didn’t see you there.”

“Yes… That’s kind of why I’m here. You’re Officers McHorn, Higgins and Wolford, correct?”

The wolf and hippo replied, “Yes, Ma’am.” while the rhino simply nodded.

“Good. I’m heading up training while Agent Savage is off site. Briefing is due to start momentarily.” At that, all three mammals checked their phones or watches before mumbling a quick apology and hastening off, leaving Angie and the creepily cheerful cheetah alone.

“Officer Clawhauser.”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m sorry, ma’am! I didn’t meant to make them late, ma’am!”

“Calm down, Clawhauser. I’m not a drill instructor, just an agent and they aren’t late. I gave them a courtesy reminder because I was passing.”

“Yes, Ma’a- oh, uh… Sorry. I’m…”

“A little high strung?”

“Uh, kinda? Um….”

“Hmmm… Listen, Clawhauser, I’d like to hear what you think of this whole situation with your officers and my boss.”

“Okay, but didn’t you say you had morning briefing in a minute?”

Wow is he obtuse. “Not right now, big guy. After work? I hear this coffee shop, Bark and Bite, is it?” The cheetah nodded vigorously, jiggling a bit as he did so. “Yeah. I hear most of the mammals around here swear by it.”
“Yeah! It’s the shop of choice for the precinct. One of Wilde’s best ideas!”

The fox again? Seriously? “How about we get a cup after work? Meet here, 6:30?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure! My shift ends at 6, so no problem!”

Lucky furball. “Perfect. And, if you could, keep it under wraps until then. We don’t want to be accused of rumor mongering, do we?”

The paws slapping over his mouth with the melodramatic gasp let Angie know he wouldn’t be spreading any more rumors, or speculation that day. And, once she spoke to him after work, he’d be convinced he was out of his mind for even considering it. Now, to survive the day, without a lunch break. She’d have to work through it to make it to her coffee with the ridiculous boob.

Eight and a half hours later, Angie Birchclaw was finally done with her last class. She trudged her way through the ZPD hallways, finally making it to the atrium, when she saw it. A fat cheetah in jeans and a pink-ish polo. She was not in the mood for this. She wanted to go home, have a hot meal and a hotter bath, before curling up in a freshly made bed, draped in comforters and her secret collection of Squidable stuffed toys. She knew the best she’d get was a slog home for a quick shower, a microwaved ‘Crickets For One’ dinner and her disaster area of a bed, if the couch didn’t mug her first, and that was without wasting gods only know how long orbiting the smallish, spotted moon over coffee. She wanted to scream in frustration, but instead put on the best face she could manage and walked over to her companion for the evening.

“Clawhauser.”

“Oh! Agent Birchclaw. There you are. I was starting to worry.”

That earned a quizzical look. “Didn’t think I’d show?”

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t be the first time I was stood up and I know you’re really busy covering for Agent Savage and all. I wouldn’t blame you for forgetting”

Now, Angie felt a little guilt and had a little confusion to deal with. She didn’t like the idea that he’d been treated poorly. The fact that she’d been considering it moments earlier did nothing but gnaw at her. She was also confused that he was so considerate. Not what she expected at all.

“I wouldn’t forget. The least I’d do is reschedule.”

“Of course. What was I thinking? You work with Agent Savage. Of course you’d be better than that.” Now, the guilt was more a chew than a gnaw, as they headed towards the main doors.

Great. “Shall we go?”

“Yeah! It’s right this way!” So saying Angie followed Clawhauser as he guided her through the busy evening streets and to his favorite coffee shop. About ten minutes later, they crossed the threshold and were engulfed by some of the best coffee smells Angie had ever experienced. She loved good coffee and, with as beat as she was, she was looking forward to the caffeine to get her through the rest of her day.

She was pulled out of her personal aromatherapy fugue by her companion’s cheerful voice. “Hi, Astelle! Hey, Donna. How’s it going?”

“Hey, Ben. Your usual?”

“Ooh! Yes, please!”

“One Clawhauser Special coming up! Anything else?”

“What do you want, Birchclaw? It’s on me today.” This surprised Angie, but was nothing compared to the looks of delighted surprise on the barista’s faces.

“Um… I’ll take the House Special Blend Latte. Medium, please. Do you have honey?”

“Kiosk by pick up, hon. All the fixin’s,” replied the grinning coyote behind the register.

They meandered over to the pick-up counter and collected their drinks a few minutes later. The mischievously speculative looks Angie got from the deer who pulled the shots made her very wary. So much so that she chose a quiet table, out of eyeshot of the offending mammals. It was for the best considering they would be discussing what she considered well beyond private matters.

Once they were seated Angie commented, “That’s a relief.”

“I know, right? It’s been a busy day.”

Angie decided to pass on figuring out if he was being obtuse intentionally, or if he was just oblivious. It didn’t matter for her purposes. With a little prodding she got him talking, and good grief did he talk. Most of what he said was random tangents on Gazelle, or random office gossip. At least, at first it was. His chatter was a bit disjointed and very stream-of-consciousness, but Angie quickly found herself surprised at how much the Cheetah knew. He was a veritable fountain of in-house intel on his fellow officers and the cases they worked. He never shared anything inappropriate, but what he did was… stunning in its detail.

He was about 20 minutes into his rambling when Donna, the deer, came trotting over. She left two danishes on their table “on the house”, before scampering off to her station again.

“Thanks, Donna!”

“No problem, sweetie! You two just take your time and enjoy yourselves.”

Angie’s obvious discomfiture at their exchange sparked a small change in Clawhauser, which she in turn reacted to. “What was that about?”

“It’s the girls being nosey. I can’t really blame them, but still…”

“What? It’s that unusual for you to be out with someone? You don’t strike me as unsociable.”

“No, that’s true. I’m fine with socializing. It’s just you’re a…”

“I’m a what?

“A female.”

This confession made Angie choke a bit on her coffee. “That’s a surprise to them?”

“Yeah… They probably think this is a date.”

Angie’s ears perked in curiosity. “Is that such an oddity?”

“For me? Yeah.” He looked up for a moment, but couldn’t maintain eye contact. Before she could find a response, he continued. “This is the closest thing I’ve had to a date since the Academy. Not
that I think this is one! I don’t at all. It’s just they probably do. Sorry,” he half mumbled as he reached for one of the danish and began nibbling, with what Angie assumed was a nervous habit.

Angie was feeling somewhere between uncomfortable and disbelieving. “I don’t understand.”

Clawhauser swallowed and offered a self-deprecating smile. “It’s not that hard. I’ve been coming here for a couple years, so I guess I’m a regular. I got friendly with the baristas and it’s come up once or twice. Dating, I mean. They know I’m not exactly involved with that whole scene, so…”

“Why not? I’m just curious.”

“Well, I’m not getting the attention of any cheetahs with this figure, now am I? And no one else has ever been interested, so… I dunno… I gave up a long time ago.”

“Aren’t you like the matchmaker of the ZPD, or something?”

“I get a little rush from helping office romances happen where I can. It’s not the same, but it’s enough.”

That statement left a huge, awkward silence in its wake and Angie floundered for something to say. The best she managed was “So you’re a regular, here?”

“What? Oh, yeah! I’d have to be to get a drink named after me.”

“I saw that. What is it?”

“Most of the guys call it Beetus Juice.”

“I can believe it, but what’s in it?”

“It’s a medium pachyderm-sized java mocha latte with three shots of espresso, beet sugar, maple syrup, whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles! It’s divine!” The cheetah sighed and rolled his eyes in pleasure on the last sentence so dreamily Angie couldn’t help but chuckle.

“That’s a lot of sugar for one cheetah, Ben. You sure that’s healthy for you?”

“I brush my teeth after every meal and before bed. No problems there.”

“That’s good, but what about your weight? Isn’t that a concern?”

“I guess so, but I pass my physical every year. I’m a bit high on a few tests, but it’s nothing serious. The doc says I’m fine, but recommends I eat better and whatnot.”

“And you ignore them?”

“I take it under advisement, but I like sweets too much. I know I should cut back, but I don’t have any reason not to keep at it. Steady as she goes, you know?”

“So you’ll change when you get sick, when it may be too late?”

“I... Guess...?”

“You aren’t even fooling yourself, Ben.”

“I know. But why should I change? It makes me happy and that’s what I have right now.”
“Have you ever tried other things?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like other foods? Do you just like sweets?”

“Uh… Not really. I figure if I’m going to eat my feelings, it should be something I know I’ll like and aren’t sweets like the perfect feel-better food?”

“Obviously, you’ve never had soul food.”

“I’ve heard of that. What is it?”


“Wha-what? Where are we going?”


“Dust makes me sneeze.”

“Come on, Spots. I’m introducing you to Momma.” She traipsed around to the counter and got the attention of Stella. “Hi, can we get a bag for those danishes? We’ll take them to go.”

She ignored the flabbergasted looks from the baristas as she apparently made the impossible happen; Benjamin Clawhauser leave without finishing his pastry.

Two and a half hours later, a very full, very happy pair of felines waddled out of Momma Swampdigger’s Cajun Grill, stuffed fit to burst. The proprietress, a marshlands black bear whom everyone called “Momma”, ran the place with the help of a handful of fox squirrels and black squirrels, who worked as waitstaff. The hole in the dock eatery was a rickety old dump of weathered wood on the end of a pier, a few turns off the main river in the south-east section of the district. It boasted bluegrass and jazz bands playing most nights to accompany some of the best cajun gumbo and seafood in the city with several dishes from all over the world. As Momma always said, “As long as it has heat and flavor, it’s welcome.”

Angie had always loved the place and from Clawhauser’s blissed out expression, now he did too.

“So what do you think?”

“I think I’m gonna die.”

“Come on you big baby. It wasn’t that bad.”

“Spiciest food I’ve ever eaten.”

“Wuss. You still ate three bowls.”

“Too good not to. So did you.”

“Smaller bowls.”

“Bah.”

There was a comfortable pause in the conversation, where both felines just enjoyed each other’s company as they strolled along the docks and causeways towards the transit center. A ferry would
see them to the Rainforest District where they could catch a train to their respective homes.

Once they were on the ferry, Angie pulled out the bag of danishes and waggled it under Clawhauser’s nose. “Want some dessert, big guy?”

To which she got a surprising answer. “Ugh, no. I, uh… I think I’m good.”

“Benjamin Clawhauser declining sweets? What is the world coming to?”

“I’ll laugh when I’m sure I won’t pop.”

Birchclaw giggled in response before offering, “I had a good time tonight. Thank you.”

“You’ve got it backwards, Birchclaw. You took me to Momma’s, remember? I should be thanking you.”

“I guess. But you made this trainwreck of a day end on a good note, so thank you.”

“Oh, any time! This is the best evening I’ve had in ages.”

“Likewise.”

Before long the ferry made berth and the felines disembarked with the rest of the passengers. They meandered to the transportation hub, chatting and dodging the occasional flurry of rain. They said goodnight and headed off to their homes, still overfull and happy.

Special Agent Angie Birchclaw finally made it home at 10:15pm, with a belly full of spicy seafood gumbo, grilled mudbugs and cornbread, after an excellent evening out with a very unlikely companion. She smiled all the way from her front door to her bathroom, where she had a long, hot, soothing shower before worming her way into bed. She was content and relaxed, as only a well-fed feline can be, when she realized that in the entire evening she hadn’t even gotten around to talking Clawhauser about the EweTube clip.

Meanwhile, one Benjamin Clawhauser arrived at the home he shared with his mother and niece. As he entered, he heard his mother’s voice from the sitting room.

“Ben! Ben, is that you?”

“Yep! It’s me. Oof,” he replied, as he flopped heavily into his favorite armchair.

“Are you alright? Another late night at the precinct?”

“It wasn’t work, this time. I went for coffee after work with a friend and we ended up getting dinner. We went to a place in the Bayou, had something called… uh- gumbo, I think. I overate.”

“You tend to, but don’t you prefer sweets? Gumbo is spicy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s spicy, but I liked it.”

“Did you get dessert?”

“No. Ugh, if I have another bite, I’ll be sick.”

“That’s unusual. You sure you’re ok?” Ben could only nod as the activity of the day caught up with him. “Was it one of the usual crowd from the day shift? I need to thank them for helping you broaden your horizons.”
“No, mom. She’s one of the trainers on loan from the Academy.”

“She…?” Clawhauser somehow missed the note of shocked interest that accompanied that single pronoun.

“Yeah. She’s one of the ZPA instructors. She wanted to talk about something for work, but it got lost in the shuffle. I’ll talk to her tomorrow, or something. Anyway, I’m gonna hit the hay. See you in the morning? Or are you leaving early? Mom?”

“Oh! Um, yes. Tomorrow. You should see me before you leave. My book group doesn’t meet until 11:00.”

“Ok. See you, then. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, son.”

The last thing Angela Clawhauser did before she went to her bed was prepare everything she’d need for the next morning. She set up the coffee maker, put together her book club bag and placed it on the coffee table; the very last thing she did was pull out the ingredients for one of the simplest and quickest recipes she knew; beignets. Harry’s favorite. Once the dough was made, she left it in the refrigerator to rest and went to her bed. It would only take rolling, cutting and the fry to finish, which wouldn’t take long.

At the very least some fried dough balls would be a nice thank you to whomever this female was that took her son out. She did hope, however, that it’d give her kitten a chance to eat with her again. With that, who knows? Maybe they’d do it again.

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Just after 7:30pm, the front door on a large townhouse in the southern Meadowlands creaked open. It’s owner strode in and, with great purpose, made their way down the entryway hall, shedding the trappings of the day. A coat found its usual hook. The briefcase and lunch cooler that made the same commute every day with their owner landed in their respective spots on the runner table and the kitchen counter.

The mammal in question did not touch their work tie. The mammal who was the target of their interest didn’t like it when the tie was removed for them. That was hers. She didn’t care what else was removed on the way from the door to where she was, but the tie stayed. It was one of her requests that he considered sacred.

A svelte, yet muscular, aardwolf was standing at the counter. Before he could even brush her neck ruff with his muzzle, she preempted him.

“I can hear it in your step. Which one is it, this time, baby? Clawhauser, Lupesson, Savage, WildeHopps, Higgins, Wolford or Sandpaw?”

“The first four.” Bogo rumbled into his wife’s neck. “They’re impossible, the lot of them. And what is “WildeHopps”, exactly?”

“You know I talk to Clawhauser. It’s his word for those two.”

“Fitting enough. They are joined at the hip.”

“Only a matter of time on that one, baby.” She commented, letting loose a bray of laughter.
Bogo smiled despite himself. He loved her laugh. She wasn't a hyena, but her laugh got her mistaken for one constantly. “You too? Can’t I escape the madness that swirls around them in my own home?”

“Awww! It’s so cute seeing you keep your police chief persona at home,” she commented while wrapping her paw around her favorite garment. She pulled him down to rub noses before continuing. “You enjoy the gossip and drama as much as Clawhauser.”

“I would love to say yes, but after today…”

“Oh, no. It was a bad one…?”

“Very. You may hear Clawhauser add “Savage” to that before long.”

That made her pause as she worked to pull her husband’s tie free of its knot. “What, exactly, does that mean?”

“It could mean a dozen things. All of them are a PR nightmare and I’ve already have one of those to deal with.”

“I heard about the EweTube clip. Is it really as bad as the newsreaders say?”

“It’s worse. Take the juiciest bits of every rumor and roll them into one, then double it.”

“Ooh…” Her eyes practically lit up. Sometimes he worried that she and Clawhauser were talking too much.

“This isn’t going to be fun,” he admonished lightly.

“Come on. Sit down and have some kimchi chips, while I make you a ginger rum.”

“You spoil me.”

“I do. Far too often. Shall I stop?”

“Not on your life.” That earned him another bray of the laugh he treasured.

Before long, the bowl of kimchi chips was empty, the cocktail was mostly gone and dinner plates were used and piled in the sink, soaking. The muscles in Adrian Bogo’s neck were finally unknotting under the ministrations of his wife’s paws and life was less miserable.

He loved his work and he loved his wife. He had enjoyed both, for all their respective difficulties, nowhere near long enough. His work gave him purpose and fulfillment, while his home was his sanctuary. It helped that she was a superb massage therapist and physical trainer with the Meadowlands Therapy Center. His job allowed her to work part time, which made life for both of them much easier.

There was one little proclivity of hers that did frustrate him and it wasn’t her laugh. Bogo loved and cherished her laugh. The thing was, she was just a touch vindictive. She wasn’t cruel, or even very mean, except when it came to one specific thing. Him.

It came up every year. It’d be soon. Right around Migration Season, the annual Basho.

The Basho was a reimagining of the ancient spring and autumn sumo competitions that took place in the eastern Pandani archipelago. The system of competition had been adopted as a way to unify the various competitions that occurred around the mating seasons that coincided with seasonal
migration. The highly ritualized event had been adopted by the elders of the various herd species around the founding of the city, to replace the violent, sometimes bloody and occasionally scandalous battles that occurred around mating seasons. The various species competing for space to even compete among their own ended up causing more chaos than the competitions themselves, so the original competition grew and became somewhat diluted as society grew less tolerant of bloodsports. Now, it was closer to an Olympic style series of events.

In the decades since the founding of the event, the ritualized battle-centric format had fallen off and the competition had become a combination of different, more moderate, elements. Some combat remained, but they were more sideshows for the main event. Now, it was mostly for bragging rights. Instead of stylized trial by combat, there were various tests of strength, dexterity, appearance, intelligence and various other measures of desirability and, in some cases, combat. There was the official, ceremonial headbutt at the opening and closing ceremonies, but that was about it. For any combat-based events, a bow, or boxers’ handshake had become the norm. Other species had also gained the ability to use it as a backdrop for their own events, such as the Annual Lapidae Boxing Tournament and the Outback Survival Run.

The main event was voluntary and highly selective. In order to even qualify there were extensive application processes, including medical checks, financial prospects, intelligence and personality tests, all designed to measure the desirability of the competitors. While many things had changed over the years, one thing had not. While the Basho was a competition and had been tamed a bit as society had changed, the basic driving force behind it was the same: to prove the desirability of the males. The competition was open to any migratory herd species, where males competed for the title of Bull of the Year. Part beauty pageant, part strong mammal competition, with a hefty dose of pomp and circumstance, it was the height of ruminant and migratory society. The Bull of the Year was considered the most eligible bachelor in the city and was therefore in very high demand. This was supported by the fact that the final judging was done by the popular vote of the female populace.

The sticking point for Mrs. Jessica Bogo was that her husband had earned that title the year he had married her. He had subsequently been invited back to compete the following year; an honor accorded only to bachelor competitors. It was an intentional snub to their marriage and to her.

That first year, he had seen her well and truly angry for the first time. In her rage, she had stumbled upon an ingenious way to get revenge. She told him to compete. It took several days of “convincing”, but he had eventually given in and competed for a second year, winning neatly. Throughout the competition, the elders had attempted to “guide him” into choosing a more suitable bride and when he refused, they had condescendingly replied “next year you will.” They had played this game, the elders growing more impatient and Bogo growing increasingly satisfied with their displeasure for four years.

The fifth year, no invitation appeared, so Mrs. Bogo sent her husband off to demand his place as reigning Bull, which he did. The elders had no grounds to deny him, as they considered him unattached and both Bogos took great delight in rubbing their snouts in it, which they did that year and for another two after. To date, no other male had held the title for seven consecutive years. It was glorious fun and accomplished several things at once. First, and most satisfyingly to the Bogos, it snubbed the Elders right back for the nastiness they had been shown. Secondly, Jessica Bogo had gotten an extraordinary thrill from seeing her husband win year after year and come home to her. It had done wonders for their marriage. Thirdly, it had raised his level of visibility on the city’s social radar, which in turn opened doors. Seven victories in a row was far more than significant and the value in his accomplishments were seen by more than just the females in the Migratory community. Much to Jessica’s disappointment, when her husband had gained the rank
Captain in the ZPD, he had opted to step aside as reigning Bull to throw himself into getting his position of Chief.

That was eight years ago. I wonder if she’ll ask again, this year.

“Honey…”

He couldn’t restrain his smile. “I’m not competing, this year, Jess.”

“But why not?”

“Honestly, I don’t have the time. Now, what did we agree?”

“We let the bastards stew until you retire, then all bets are off.”

“Think I can win it again?”

“I think if you do, you’ll be mayor.”

“Gods, no.”

“You’re right. You’re too blunt for city politics. Commissioner?”

They cape buffalo gave a slow grin. “That’s more like it.”

“That’s two years, Love.”

“Only two?”

“Cheeky. You probably know it to the hour.”

“One year, ten months, eleven days, nineteen hours and… uh… thirty two minutes. Ahem… roughly.”

“Not that you’re counting, or anything.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“So, what are you going to do instead?”

“The same thing we’ve done every year, baby. Clean up in the office pool.” The expression on her face caused his ears to flick. “What?”

“Baby, we don’t need the money. You’re too good at it. If you play, no one will stay in. Why don’t you skip it this year.”

“I know that tone. You’re up to something.”

“Well…”

“Come on. No keeping secrets.”

“Well, I had a thought. Why don’t you coach someone to the win?”

“Coach them… You mean, hand it to them.”

“I suppose so, yes.”
“And which deserving mammal have you decided should receive this honor? Clawhauser. Of course. Ok. Why?”

“I need a reason?”

“You always have one.”

“Oh, fine. I want to do your other wife a solid.”

“Oh, gods… that “work wife” thing again? Ugh. Fine. But if he wins, you’re “guiding” him to do something other than spend it all on donuts.”

“Deal.”

He could tell something was still bothering her. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing, really. I wish he’d find himself a nice girl. Then, I wouldn’t have to guide anything. Or a guy. Either way…”

“Don’t say it like that. He’s still young. Give the kitten a chance.”

“Oh, so speaks the old bull.”

“You better run cub, before this old bull shows you how young he is!”

“Eep!”

And they were off, running!

Wildehopps, Clawhauser and the Basho could wait. That was insanity that lived outside his home. Here and now, only one thing mattered and that was best left to your imagination.
Chapter 10

Jack hated shopping. He absolutely despised it. On that note, he had a great appreciation for his species. Rabbits stopped growing in their late teens, so unless they let themselves go to fat, they could theoretically wear the same clothes for decades and it wouldn't matter. They could, but few did. Updating one’s wardrobe was something of a necessity. The point is that they could. This solved a huge number of problems in Jack’s mind.

He’d had a tailor. Just one. A master craftsman who had his little shop in the meadowlands and in his shop was a file with Jack's name on it. In it, his measurements were written in a precise script that any idiot could read. All Jack needed to do when he found he had a need for a wardrobe update was to contact Mr. Alastair Borden and place an order. In 3-6 weeks the desired garments would appear by courier, perfectly fitted and neat as you please.

Jack had operated in this manner for over a decade and been quite content. This kept him in his work uniform suit and occasionally a garment set that had a touch more personality, annually. It was all he had needed.

Now, he knew Nicolas P. (Bloody) Wilde, or as Jack had started thinking of him, "The Laughing Bastard, Jr.". Jack shook his head at the state of his wardrobe and muttered dire aspersions on his friend.

The term was still very new to Jack. He knew the terminology and definition of the word, but its practical use in relation to himself was a bit beyond his faculties most days, at least as far as it related to Nick. As Jack's friendships had been entirely non-existent for years, this didn't surprise him. However, the extent of the influence of a "friend" on one’s life surprised him greatly. Right at the top of the list for unexpected surprises his friendship with the fox provided him were three items. The first of these was the state of his poor, abused, overstuffed and totally disheveled wardrobe.

In the Nox, Jack had returned to the land of the living recovered from his hangover and quite hungry. In searching for the refreshments he'd abandoned after the disastrous meeting with Inga, he stumbled into the clutches of his friend, the fox. The fox had another friend, a North Saharan Fruit Bat by the name of Abraham Tepis. The subsequent fitting had resulted in one of the most exposing and intimately uncomfortable experiences of his life. For almost an hour, he had stood, arms up and practically nude, while Mr. Tepis took measurements that not even a forensic anthropologist could have a use for, and this while Nick had done a running commentary. Jack was sure he'd have red ear syndrome after that experience.

Much to Jack's further consternation, all that measuring had resulted in some of the finest clothes he'd ever seen, let alone worn, making the experience grudgingly worth it. Four full suits, three pairs of casual trousers, a variety of dress shirts, two poet shirts, foot wrappings, a fine wool-lined long coat and a fedora all appeared two days later, along with an equally impressive array of garments for Hopps in skirts, blouses, skirt suits and dresses. Apparently, Amanda Tepis was just as skilled as her father and less prone to embarrass their clientele to death. While Jack had been subject to Wilde's cheek, Hopps had received similar, if more welcome attention in private.

The clothes crafted by Tepis & Co. were bar-none the best clothes Jack owned. He had no idea what they cost, as Wilde refused to divulge said information, but whatever it was... worth every penny.

Unfortunately, this left Jack with three consequences which he was completely unprepared for.
Most irritatingly, he now owed Wilde for the clothes. Jack disliked owing favors, as they tended to compromise one’s integrity. Jack firmly felt that he was already compromised enough when it came to Wilde, for an increasingly long list of reasons.

On a related, though somewhat less significant note, Jack would have to switch over from his old tailor, just on principle. His sensibilities screamed for both continuity and for practicality. In this case they conflicted because he wanted his routine, but the new clothes were just too good a quality not to continue with. Such a change in Jack's life, despite appearing petty, was rather significant for the lagomorph. It felt like the ending of an era.

The second problem concerning Jack was that Jack Savage now had more personal goods than could reasonably be maintained in a hotel. It was a daunting possibility, but he was being forced to consider buying a flat.

Jack had needed to mentally shake himself out of the stupor that the very idea caused in him. The idea of him, Jack Savage, putting down roots? Absurd!

Just like the rest of my life since coming to this city. Everything else has changed, so why not this?

Beneath his feigned sanguinity, Jack was genuinely anxious at the possibility. He'd been on the move almost his whole life, but now... He'd heard the term "nesting" many years ago in Avia. It was distressing how close his own behavior was becoming to that avian characteristic. He was starting to look at furniture, not as materials occupying space or handy cover in a firefight, but as something he might want for himself. His fears were further amplified when he quietly asked Hopps about it.

Or, “Judy”, I should say.

The casual addressing that had been adopted between himself and his fellow rabbit law enforcement officer was something rather new to him still and also a challenge. It was comforting to have a fellow bunny to associate with. If Jack was really honest, it was good to have an actual confidant. He’d made the comment in the bar at the Palm about how nice it was to have a confidant, but he was drunk and jumping the gun severely at the time. Now, less so. Judy Hopps was proving to be exactly what Jack needed: a support.

Even when it was heinously embarrassing.

She confirmed that some mammals nest too, usually around the time they decide to settle in an area and begin seeking a mate, or starting a family. Among said mammals, rabbits featured prominently. That confirmation had nearly given Jack a heart attack. All his window shopping and quiet daydreaming came into stark relief after that conversation. Fortunately, Jack had relatively little time for such things and the behavior had been intermittent at best. He had limited time for it. There was his job, after all.

And that was where he had to stop, because anything else he could name only dug him deeper.

Yes, he had his job, but not only that anymore. He had a private life. One that only added fuel to his nesting anxieties, especially on the heels of Judy’s “one of the girls” comment, the other day. Once upon a time, when Jack clocked out he knew he had several more hours of work maintaining his various covers ahead of him. On assignment there was equipment that needed maintenance, escape routes to keep clear, perimeters to check. At home, paperwork had been his greatest ally. Hours and hours could be consumed filling in forms, writing painfully detailed reports and cross referencing everything.
Now, he had a team that did that all for him. He had several. Almost all his responsibilities were delegated to some extent or other. Equipment was a whole department. Escape routes and perimeters were for the field teams to handle along with security details and surveillance. He didn't write any more than a dozen report sheets or forms in total on any given day. Instead, he read reports, which was infinitely quicker than writing them.

Even so, it still takes more bloody hours than there ever are...

Hyperbolic griping aside, he was always done his reading well before clock out and that included and up-to two hour lunch, some days. This left hours and hours and hours empty, waiting to be filled. To Jack's dismay and delight, they were all too often filled by a smug, cheeky, irresistibly charming, painfully handsome vulpine and his partner, the energetic, sweetly caring, empathetic, optimistic rabbit.

They were such good friends and far better than he could have hoped for. The guilt was murder on his peace of mind. He could strangle them both...

As if I didn't have enough I worry about. Sweet cheese and crackers... Great, now I sound like her. And inside my own head, no less!

It was bad enough that he was picking up her mannerisms, not to mention Wilde’s.

Wilde.

Jack was sorely tempted to pour himself a drink, or just flee for somewhere. Anywhere. That bloody fox was wrecking him.

In the Nox, Nick hadn’t demanded, or pushed, or even pulled. Those, Jack could have handled. He had vast experience with those. Counter-interrogation was a skill set he had possessed for many years. It was always a challenge keeping a secret or out maneuvering an interrogator, but with the experience Jack had, a novice officer of the ZPD should have been no trouble.

And yet...

Jack had no idea how the fox managed to get under his fur so quickly. And he hated to admit the possibility that he wanted to, despite all he said in protest. He also hated to admit that it did him good. The whole “getting it out will help the healing process” gubbins that the psycho-babblers had spouted at him for so many years was true. He’d never forgive the fox for proving them right. Just like how he would never understand how Nick managed to make him tell everything so easily and laugh as he did it.

Somehow, that fox got him to want to talk. He had many things he had to talk about and wanted to. Jack was many things and among them was “a mammal of his word.” Promises were made from his mouth to Wilde’s ears of stories, details and frank honesty about his father. He’d told secrets he’d held close to his heart for years; the day he fell for John, the day they began their relationship, their trials, travels, tribulations, disagreements and celebrations. All difficult stories to tell to an audience that deserved to hear it. He spoke through both tears and smiles of good days and bad and felt better for it.

Much to his surprise, and eventual stupefied horror, he quickly found that he couldn’t stop. His tales shifted from those of his beloved partner and friend to include a bit from his own career. Then more, and more, until he was rambling about everything. His own past, his life with John, his lost family; near misses, terrible assignments and moments of glory were all spread before the fox and his lapin accomplice. All the stories that hurt to tell came tumbling out of his mouth with the
slightest opportunity, as long as it was that blasted fox who was listening. At first, anyway. Any
hesitance he felt about speaking to Judy vanished, as the days and nights wore on. Before long,
Jack was baring his soul to her as much as to her predatory partner.

They were extraordinarily patient listeners. They asked questions where they were needed, but
usually just let Jack meander through wherever the story took him. In one week he’d told volumes,
and not just about John. He’d told his own tales. Things that he hadn’t even told his former lover
until they’d known each other for close to two years.

In return Jack received tales of growing up as a street brat and running cons in the city from Nick,
while Judy provided farm-doe tales of a pastoral youth and her struggles with having dreams too
big for her community’s understanding.

I endured eleven days of tender loving care at the hands of a world-class sadist during my captivity
in Amphibia and gave them nothing. I spend ten minutes with that smug furball and I’m laughing
while I tell my life story. Bloody hells…

Jack kept replaying conversations in his head, hoping to figure out how Nick did it. All he’d
managed to figure out is that irritation, innuendo, terrible puns and blind turns in the conversation
somehow worked. Worked on him, at least. That was not an admission Jack liked to make, for a
whole list of reasons.

Most of the conversations they’d had sounded more like a comedy routine than a series of
confessions. Nick would start out irritating him about something. He’d stall. There’d be some
terrible jokes and suggestive comments and suddenly Jack was a fountain of words.

“So, Jack, who do you actually work for?”

“Classified.”

“You know I won’t accept that line. Who do you work for?”

“Can't talk about it.”

“You mean "won't." Who do you work for?”

“That's not a simple question, Wilde.”

“Yes, it is. Who do you work for?”

Jack's eyes rolled. "The government."


“I'm paid by the Pay & Rations division of the Treasury, if that's any help.”

“Not really, but if that's the best you can do…”

The buck sighed. “Wilde, when I say "the agency", that's exactly what I mean. I work for a
government agency.”

“You make it sound like a temp agency.”

“More or less.”

“What, so you know how to lay out a letter?”
There came a knowing chuckle from a certain grey furred agent of… someone. Everyone? “Well, yes... That's a pretty basic skill. Ok, ok. I relent. The agency I work for is just that: The Agency. We provide support for investigations, logistics, intervention, extraction & insertion, operations... Basically anything and everything. We're sent where we can be useful, based on our skills and experience.”

“So, you…”

“We work with whoever needs help domestically, or with our allies. To me, all those agencies and bureaus or whatever; ZIA, ZBI, UIS… They’re just all part of the same alphabet soup. I answer to my director in the Office of the Intelligence Services Taskmaster General. Past that, it's whoever can't get their job done this week.”

“Are you serious?”

"My agency was originally created as a counterespionage task force to combat the Reptilian External Security Initiative, in the war. When the war ended, our reason for being vanished. The RESI became the Reptilia Bureau of Internal Safety and their mandate changed -officially- to internal matters. My agency was deemed too useful to be disbanded and too specialized to be easily absorbed into another service."

"There wasn't a place for you, anymore?"

"In conventional terms, no. The ZIA handles external security and intelligence gathering, the MI divisions handle larger scale security and military concerns, while the MSA provide specialized surveillance support and handle electronic crime. The ZBI covers inter-provincial investigations and larger scale internal crime and the ZPD handles local policing. Any overlaps are covered by specially formed task forces. Counterespionage is a bit passé."

“So, you’re like handymammals?”

“That, or hatchetmammals. Officially, we’re liaison officers and agents of the Taskmaster General’s office. “Ringers” is a term I’ve heard used before, but that makes us sound like a carnival game.”

“Oh, the places I could take that line of thought.”

“Don’t even think it, Red.”

“Too late! So, do you actually have a mandate at all? A Charter or something?”

“Yes, and no. Officially, we render assistance where needed and support the Taskmaster General. The only cases we handle ourselves are ones related to past cases the Agency handled in its previous, wartime incarnation. Of course the individual ministries and secretariats have their own enforcement and investigative divisions... inland revenue, treasury, employment, diplomatic corps, burlesque... It’s mostly ethics and anti-corruption stuff on our end.”

The foxes ears perked suddenly as he leaned forwards. “What do the ministry of burlesque investigative officers do? Look up skirts?”

“Hang on a second, Jack,” Judy chimed in. “With all these law enforcement organizations, who oversees them?”

“Who polices the police? That's easy. The Taskmaster General. He or she has the official final word, after the overseeing directorate.”
“And you're an agent of his office.”

“Correct.”

“So you're like internal affairs?”

“Somewhat. We do handle in-house investigations, but only at the highest levels. It sounds pretentious, but the fact is that we aren't an enormous organization. The ZPD has IA and most of the alphabet soup is self-policing, for face-saving if nothing else. My agency only gets involved when it's really hit the fan. We don't often get called in as official investigators of the Taskmaster General, but when we do…”

Nick’s chuckle made Jack pause and turn his head. “Something funny, Red?”

“The Taskmaster General.”

“What’s funny?”

“You said “he or she.” Isn’t the word taskmaster consider masculine? Little odd when a female holds the office.”

“Like the current one? Yes, we did consider calling her the Taskmistress, but that led to some very awkward misunderstandings. Some mammals got inappropriately excited, so we had to change it back.”

“Wow! Jokes from the Tiger Bunny.”

“Didn’t think I was capable of it?”

“What can I say, Jack? You’re full of surprises.” Jack was about to respond, when Nick continued. “Like that pass you made at me at the Palm.”

Jack fumed at the memory. It’d taken five minutes to get his ability to speak back and by then, there was no convincing Wilde that it hadn’t been intentional. What Jack found most frustrating about it was that Nick didn’t seem to mind at all, unlike Judy, who pouted. Jack was also frustrated with himself for being pleased because of it.

He’d had a long conversation with Judy that first night in the Nox. Nick being the only mammal who hadn’t had a nap that day, he retired early, leaving the two rabbits in an extremely awkward silence.

Their eventual conversation was stilted at first, but eventually it got moving. It was quite wide ranging and was extremely uncomfortable at points, but by the end they had hammered out an understanding, of sorts. Jack’s apologies and Judy’s explanations had done a lot to get the two lagomorphs on the same page.

“It's called projecting, Hopps. I’ve been projecting my preferred reality and my desires onto Nick. It wasn't real attachment; just an emotional indulgence. One that's cost us all, and you especially. I know you have feelings for Wilde. The events of the day notwithstanding, I don't know if he's caught on or not, or if he can even take it seriously given the state he’s been in all day. He may still be "dreaming". In either case, it's entirely my fault that you're in this situation and your relationship with him has been jeopardized. It was not my intention. Just... a selfish delusion; one with too high a price for mammals that don't deserve it. You shouldn't be suffering for my idiocy, but you are and I can only apologize.”
"You're doing that a lot lately."

"I have a lot to apologize for."

"That's true, but not what I was talking about. You keep talking about indulging yourself and delusions. I don't get it."

"Well, what would you call it?"

"I didn't say you were using the wrong terms, just the wrong tone. Jack, you've made mistakes and you've stepped on my toes. No, I'm not happy. I'm also not going to judge you just yet."

“You’ll give me a chance to condemn myself properly?”

“I’ll give you a chance to show us you’re different than what you’ve shown us so far.”

“So, you’ll give me enough rope to hang myself with.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. No one is condemning you, so stop beating on yourself. Self-hate won’t help the situation. I’m not happy with you, but the madness of the last day or so aside, I’ve had no complaints.”

“Other than how I’ve treated your partner.”

“Yes, Jack. Now, stop being nit-picky and just accept what I’m saying.”

“What are you proposing, Hopps? That we "start over"?”

"This isn't a school yard, so no. What I propose is this: We can do just what Nick did today. We take the last day and write it off. We deal with the mess we already have and when we have the time for it, we can address the rest.”

“Like your romantic interest in your partner.”

“Much as it hurts to put that on hold now, I’ve been waiting for a long time. I can wait a little longer. This mandatory leave is a chance for us to deal with the biggest concern, your behavior and your issues with Nick, so talk to us. We’ll listen. You help Nick reconnect with his father, get a chance to grieve or cry or whatever you need, and we see where we are after that.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you get out of it?”

“What I get is a happier partner and that’s enough for me.”

“For now.”

“That isn’t your concern, or even mine at the moment. I’m giving you a chance to have your say and show Nick and I who you actually are. Despite everything that's happened, none of us know each other very well. I'm willing to give you a chance to prove that the last month was a fluke. Who knows? Maybe you'll get two friends out of this, instead of a nervous breakdown.”

The rest of the enforced leave, which turned out to be eight days, was… emotional. The three mammals spent almost all the time they were conscious in conversation. Much of it was light;
quips, jokes, airy banter and chit-chat, but then there were the conversations that left one, two or
even three of them in tears or ranting.

Or both.

Jack didn’t realize how much anger he’d been restraining, how much he blamed himself for John’s
death, how bitter he’d become, or the depth of the lies he’d been telling himself. Several times he
found himself weeping into Nick’s chest or onto Judy’s shoulder. After one particularly bad rant
he’d had about the years he’d wasted on revenge, he’d ended up red eyed, fists clenched and
cheeks stained and soaked with tears, when Nick crippled him.

“I don't think you're obsessed, Jack.”

“What?”

“You said you spent years on a revenge obsession. I disagree.”

“Oh? Then what was it?” Jack’s question was rife with incredulity.

"You spent a decade and a half stamping out a criminal empire. You didn't go on a killing spree.
You investigated, made arrests, documented, testified. You were an agent. You protected innocent
animals and saved lives using the skills he taught you. That isn't revenge. That’s continuing his
legacy of service. You spent fifteen years honoring his memory. That’s not obsession. It’s
devotion.”

Something in Jack broke and the tears hadn’t stopped for hours. And all that time, they were with
him. They held him as his frame was wracked with sobs and as the misery and grief finally started
to flow out of him. Hours later, he woke with his head resting on Wilde’s lap. Wilde was stroking
his ears, soothing him. Judy walked in from the kitchen with a cup of tea for him. After a few sips,
a stammered apology was stopped by a fox’s paw pad on his lips. All Nick did was shake his head.
An ear ruffle later, Jack gave up trying to apologize.

Jack felt lighter than he had in years and it was a good thing he did. After the weight of feeling
expressed through the rest of that day, he couldn’t handle any more. Fortunately, Nick provided
some levity. For once, the fox didn’t say a word. He just went to the smartphone mount on the wall
and put on some music. His choice for an opening song was surprising, but welcome; “Here Comes
My Baby”, by the Tremelopes.

Energetic and bittersweet, it fit Jack’s mood. He sat and let the music roll over him, lifting his
spirits. Nick pulled Judy up and they danced with great energy and little grace all over the living
room. Jack was content to sit and enjoy, but the police partners had other plans. Jack was abruptly
pulled up from his seat by Nick and unceremoniously shoved into the arms of his fellow rabbit,
while the fox moved into what passed for “dancing” solo. His protests were met with complete
disregard and eventually, he just gave in. The rest of the evening was spent in dance and song and
laughter that grew less tentative as the music played.

Nick’s taste in music was eclectic and the variety was both pleasing and surprising, if somewhat
questionable. Rock, motown, pop, electronic, classical and jazz rolled out of the speakers over the
course of the evening. Ewe2, Pant-thera and Metallicat mixed with Harry Elefante, Anteathra
Franklin, The Spice Gaurs, Dropkick Marsupials, Ariana Groundhog, Mad Cow Posse,
Ram-stein, Gypsy Kats, Ellie Gelding, David Guerilla, Credence ClearOtter Revival, Gnu-Kids on
the Block, System of a Dromedary, Whitney Horseton, Dharma Wallaby, Ozzy Oxbourne,
Rhillama and more.
The memory of that night pulled a smile onto Jack’s face, which was quite the feat, considering his situation. Jack had work to do. No, Agent Savage had work to do, and he was getting none of it done where he was.

Despite his personal-life crises and the imminent problems associated with the Echo file being unsealed, there were the more immediate problems caused by their sudden departure; the training that had been put on hold while Savage had been "on sabbatical" with Hopps and Wilde, for a start. Upon their return, the time lost had needed to be made up. There was a schedule to keep and they were definitely behind.

The several weeks immediately following their return had been disgustingly busy. That was largely thanks to the newfound energy Jack seemed to have discovered during his break. His reputation as a ‘typhoon in a tea cozy’ was lived up to and exceeded from the very first day back.

On the clock life was a frenzy of activity. Missed classes were made up in better than due form and the quality of the teaching was noticeably better. The officers of Precinct One began to end their days with very long, hot showers and experience nights of extremely deep sleep as the new and improved Agent Savage put them through their paces. The improvement seen as a result of this newly motivated instruction was equally impressive, as Bogo grudgingly admitted.

Off the clock life was no less busy, at least for two rabbits and a fox. Afterhours, Jack was kept occupied for a decent amount of time each day training his new friends in the art of counter-espionage. They were long hours, but necessary and increasingly few. Both his pupils were already trained in many areas and were quick to learn. He quickly found that he was doing less teaching and more polishing. What skills they didn’t already possess were quickly acquired and their inherently competitive relationship drove them to hone their new skills with a gusto Jack found almost humorous.

This was especially true when the “distress” was added to lock-picking. The theory was that adding stress to the task would simulate a situation in which the outcome meant life or death. Unfortunately, with those two, timers didn’t quite apply the necessary stress to the exercise.

“Time! Another failure. You’re dead, Wilde.”

“Funny enough, I’m still breathing.”

Jack sighed. He’d been doing a lot of that.

“Come on, Nick. Don’t you have any sense of urgency?” Judy chided.

“You’re one to talk. How many have you succeeded at again?”

“…None…” she replied.

“You were saying…?”

Jack rubbed a paw across his muzzle and sighed. Again. “Alright. That’s enough,” he interjected, knowing he had to get them back on track or risk losing the rest of the evening to their banter. “You have equally terrible success rates.”

Judy grumbled while Nick huffed.

“What’s missing? This is supposed to be a life and death simulation drill. Escape and live, or fail and die. It’s the most realistic of all the situations you’re likely to find yourself in and the most likely, by far!”
“We know, Jack,” Judy groused.

“Then, enlighten be as to why it doesn’t show in your performance.”

“I don’t know. I honestly, don’t know! I know it. In my head, I know it, but I can’t quite feel it. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose so. You’ve been training hard, and with the added stresses of your activist obligations. At least this is the last test.”

“Thank Gods…” followed a snarky vulpine mutter.

“Yes, thank you, Wilde, for your input.”

“What do you want me to say, Jack? I’m burned out and I only have work and this. We’ve been at it for nine weeks.”

“No. You finished up in seven. You’ve been tutoring me for the last two,” corrected Judy.

“Quite,” agreed Jack. “You put off this test so you could do it together. It’s… sweet of you.”

“Not helping,” Nick grumbled.

“Not my job, Red.” Jack gave the fox a cheeky smirk.

“Yes, it is, actually. According to you, it is, anyway,” Nick pointed out. “So, help!”

“Oh, very well. I could lock each of you in the washroom of the opposite sex at the end of the lunch hour. That might motivate you.”

“NO!” the pair replied in unison.

“Pity… Well, we need something to make you each feel motivated to escape.”

“Hang on. What is the purpose of this exercise? The actual tactile experience you are trying to expose us to,” prompted Nick.

“I am trying to create a situation in which you feel the visceral fear for your life and maintain your poise enough to…”

“Ok, let me rephrase. Does it have to be fear of death?”

“Um… well, no. Loss, or pain; something imminent and viscerally repellent.”

“Does it have to be a locked door? Would handcuffs be ok?”

“Yes…? What are you thinking, Wilde?” Judy’s expression mirrored Jack’s words.

“Handcuff us and set a timer. When the timer goes off, the one that isn’t cuffed tickles the other.”

It was an idiotic idea, but one that had borne fruit. Judy had been motivated to pass her test. Wilde failed twice, much to Judy’s delight. Jack was unsure if the failures were genuine, or a contrivance to allow Judy to touch him. Contrivance or not, Judy’s paws had roamed long past what was needed for the test and lingered. The jealousy that had flared hot and raw in his chest was not a welcome emotion.
Jack had been laboring to end his projections and bury the emotional overlap that had made such a mess of things, with limited success. Fortunately, that was only a serious issue when he was around Wilde for any length of time and that was only at the ZPD. It was at first, anyway.

As the hours of training waned, the hours of personal liberty waxed and soon there were entire evenings and mornings, sometimes whole days that the three had free-ish. Outside of the ZPD, Judy and Nick still had personal lives and much to his consternation, so did Jack, for once. While Judy struggled to balance her desire to disappoint no one and reduce her commitments, Nick had his own commitments to attend to, which were somewhat less time consuming, and Jack had to figure out how to have a personal life. There was nothing to stop him, but he was severely uncertain. It was an odd vacuum in his life; a sense of absence he was unaccustomed to. One Nick filled as much as he could, which was uncomfortably often for both rabbits concerned, but for very different reasons.

While he spent much of his newfound freedom with his two friends when they were free, that didn't fill in all the now lonely hours. Special Agent Agnes Birchclaw was momentarily speechless when her boss quietly (and a little nervously) asked her to arrange a team dinner at a local eatery. Jack had spent several evenings getting to know his team on a personal level and once the ice broke a bit, he found he enjoyed it far more than he expected.

As the official and unofficial trainings came to an end, preparations began for the official and unofficial next steps. The final weeks of the official training went well past what had been initially promised in terms of educational experience. Jack seemed determined to remake the ZPD into a force to be feared. When the operation finally began against the smugglers and their associates, the ZPD demonstrated their new acumen superbly.

Over the course of four days, a series of coordinated raids took place. Agent Savage's people provided support and intel, while the ZPD executed the strikes. The results were quite satisfactory, in Jack’s opinion. Eighty-four smugglers were arrested. Contraband and documents were seized, incriminating other criminal organizations and a dozen high profile mammals, including government officials and local notables.

Casualties at the precinct were minimal at four officers wounded or injured, no fatalities. Officer Snarlov received minor bruises and cuts in an altercation during an apprehension, Wolford received a minor concussion, Grizzoli was the victim of environmental hazards, receiving moderate burns to his arms and chest, and Trunkaby suffered a sprained knee during a chase.

On the other side of the butcher’s bill, a total of eight criminals wounded or injured, two fatalities, mostly from gunshot wounds. One of the cells was smuggling fully ballistic weapons and decided to fight using their merchandise, rather than surrender. The firefight had been brutal, if brief, and the perps had been brought down with a combination of non-lethal measures and SWAT involvement.

The jewel in the crown, though, was the four containers of live cargo seized at the docks in the Marshlands District. Three of the four were shipping containers found containing the victims of mammal trafficking, bound for the slave markets in Amphibia. The fourth was a selection of adolescent beavers, snow leopards, chinchillas and red pandas that were en route to a fur farm. The fur farms were known for cruelty and abuse of the worst kinds, including "propagating their own stock". Once this case was done, Jack's colleagues in the international sphere would be eager to begin the hunt for the fur traders.

However, despite all these successes, Jack had been less than satisfied. Something felt off. Weapons, a variety of drugs, mammals, luxury items and consumables all were present; medical
devices, a collection of ancient Pandani vases and Etuskian bone sculptures, several firkins of aspsynth… but nowhere near the amount of money that should have been present.

It didn’t make sense. In the case of a standard operation of this type, there was always liquid capital around for use. Bribes, supplies, emergencies, transportation, sales and receipts; there was always need for cash to be available. They’d taken three cell leaders and an underboss at a distribution hub, but there was nowhere near enough. It was barely even enough for payroll and no one had any answers. Why was there so little cash? The puzzle kept Jack preoccupied almost completely when he wasn’t otherwise preoccupied.

Things were not the same. Jack, for the first time in what felt like centuries, had a personal life and he had no idea what to do with it. It was an adjustment. Now, he actually had things to be preoccupied with. His mind was not solely occupied with his duties and his hours were not all work and deception. He had new ways to spend his down time and company he looked forward to keeping. Of course, time was not as endlessly available as he would like. That was a new complaint to adjust to, as well. He still had work and there was training after hours with Hopps and Wilde, who also had their own personal business to attend to. Nick had his own private business and Judy had her activism, so his friends were not always available. This led to Jack being tentatively social in other areas.

These significant changes and others were not missed by the other mammals around the three. The two rabbits and the fox were getting along. Spending time together during breaks; even, meeting socially. The atmosphere around them and the tenor of the training changed dramatically. Gone was the dark, viscous tension that had plagued the first three weeks. Now, there was new life and a vibrancy that no one missed and no one could explain.

Well… Not quite no one…

Angie walked into Jack’s office with her arms full of the latest reports for him to review and sign off on and placed them precisely on his desk, next to the other neatly arranged piles. “So, are you seeing your couple this weekend?” she asked in a cool, conversational tone.

Jack looked up from his desk, brow wrinkled before her words registered and confusion colored his features. “My what?

The caracal barely managed to hide her smirk, not that it looked much different from her usual expression. “Your couple. Are you seeing them again this weekend?”

"I have no idea what you're talking about. My cou- you mean officers Hopps and Wilde? Yes, then I'm seeing a couple of friends this weekend, but they aren’t a couple.” Obviously still confused.

"That is who I meant, but not what I meant, Agent Savage.” She turned to go, shaking her head.

"Special Agent Birchclaw, come back here and explain yourself!"

"Yes, sir. What's to explain, sir?"

"You said "my couple". That isn't "a couple of friends." Explain what you mean."

"Permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"Permission to be frank, sir?"
"...granted..."

"Permission to use your first name, sir." Now, Jack was given pause. Angie was the only agent he allowed to call him by his first name and only after hours. Whatever she was on about was personal.

"Close the door." Was all he said by way of assent. Having done so, the petite feline asked again.

"So, Jack, are you seeing your couple this weekend?"

"I asked you to be clear, not repeat yourself."

"You know, Jack. The couple you're seeing."

"Angie, they aren't a couple and I see them daily."

The feigned lightheartedness dropped from her face. "The couple you're "seeing", as in "dating", Jack."

"We are speaking mammal to mammal, now, agent Birchclaw, so I will let this slide. However, if you ever insinuate such a thing again, I will expect your resignation."

"You've never terminated anyone without sufficient reason, Jack."

"Very well. Convince me with your "sound reasoning” and your position is secure."

"No problem there." Jack was unsettled at her confidence, and her smirk. “Define dating, Jack.”

“In this childish context, or generally?”

“This one obviously, Jack. And while we’re at it, let’s hear your personal definition, not some textbook quotation.”

“Dating, v. The act of spending of time with another mammal, often to exclusion, in the interest of creating an emotional bond, possibly leading to a romantic commitment.”

“Perfect.”

“Your evidence?”

"You spend almost all your free time with them, you go to dinner with them at least twice a week, you're less formal with them than anymammal else."

"Those are facts, Birchclaw. Also, perfectly normal for mammals engaged in a friendship. How does that mean I'm "dating" them?"

“I wasn’t finished. Since you got back from your sabbatical, you've been social with your team. A first. There was that little joke at the morning meeting about getting a few pairs of the shorts you borrowed from Hopps; another first. One some of us hope you weren’t joking about, incidentally. You came back from a week with them a different mammal, Jack. Less stiff. More approachable. You're cracking jokes, engaging in casual conversation, smiling, laughing. No mammal changes like that without something to motivate it."

"That's proof I'm finally being a mammal and not a paragon and that they helped me get that way, not evidence of an emotional investiture, let alone "dating”. Do you have any actual evidence?”
"You mean other than how much personal time you spend with them? How many offers to have dinner or lunch with us that you pass on to see those two? What was that about “to exclusion”?"

“It’s hardly to exclusion.”

“There was that date with that cute buck, last month..."

“And it didn’t work out. I’m not adept at social flirting, Birchclaw.”

“The Great Jack Savage is inept at flirting? Stop pulling my tail. If you’re going to try to whitewash this, be less feeble about it. Before you get indignant, I saw your date’s face at the end of your lunch with him. He was ready to say yes, if you got on one knee.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Yes, but not by much. Jack, you had a good date with a buck who wanted a second date to start, seconds after the first one finished and you ended it.”

“Gently.”

“Yes, you were a perfect gentlemammal and neatly placed him in the friend-zone; a buck who would have been good for you and you knew it.”

“What’s your point?”

“To exclusion...?"

“One instance does not a pattern make, Angie. That proves nothing but poor decision making on my part. It does not mean that I’m pushing opportunities away because I’m fixated on a desired partner, or partners, as you keep implying.”

Angie rolled her eyes. "Sure, Jack. By the way, Officer Wilde left a message for you. Here." She held out a folded paper note.

Jack reached for the note and was momentarily blinded by a flash.

As he grimaced and rubbed his eyes, Angie's voice, excessively smug and filled with victory echoed in his ears. "If all you say is true, sir, then how do you explain this? Is this how a mammal looks when getting a note from a colleague? A friend?"

Jack blinked his eyes clear and looked up, only to have the irritation drain from his face along with the blood. The picture displayed on her iCarrot screen was crystal clear. It was a picture of him, typically reserved Jack Savage, reaching for the paper in her hand. Eyes wide open, a broad, soft smile plastered on his face, ears up, forward and eager. Disproportionately pleased to take it. He was practically sparkling. And all that despite the topic of discussion.

"It reminds me of something. Doesn't it for you?" Jack looked up sourly at his grinning fellow agent. "Your expression looks just like Officer Hopps, every single time she sees Officer Wilde, doesn't it? What is it that everyone thinks about those two? Everyone thinks they're dating, or so close to it as to make no difference, don’t they? From all the time she spends with him? And all their familiarity at work? And the banter? And the nicknames? Don't they, Agent Fluff...?"

“That might, might imply I have a fixation on Wilde. It does not mean I’m dating the two of them.” The phone on Jack's desk chose this moment to ring and desperately seeking an escape from his subordinate's interrogation, he slapped the speakerphone answer button. "Savage."
"Hey, Jack!" Judy's voice chirped from the speaker. "I only have a minute, but I wanted to let you know where we're meeting for drinks and dinner, tonight. It's 7:30 at Full Moon Cafe, ok? Nick couldn't get reservations at Sandy's like you wanted, but he did pick up that psychological suspense film you wanted to see, The Otters, I think? Anyway, it's your choice of movie this time, so it's your turn to bring the wine. Can you go light on the tannins this time? I gotta get back to patrol. Nick says hi, by the way. See you tonight!" And she was gone.

Jack was frozen until Angie cleared her throat. "So, boss, do I need to clean out my desk?"

"I'll see you in the morning, Birchclaw."

"Don't forget the wine, sir."

Jack had been unhappy at the end result of that conversation and his ill mood had lingered until he’d met with his “couple”, for dinner. The grump had lasted all of six minutes and his drink order, before Judy had started asking what was wrong.

Her and her damnable empathy.

She hadn’t let up through the entirety of the meal. She was gentle and coaxing, persisting despite rebuffs are redirections. She even pulled Nick in over dessert to get it out of him “in the interest of preventing any regression.” Jack had been put out at her turn of phrase, but the expression on her face was worth it when he did finally tell them on their walk back to Nick’s apartment. It was priceless.

“Agent Birchclaw is under the impression that I am dating you two, as a couple.” Was all he needed to say, before her eyes bugged and she lost the ability to speak. Nick snickered around a mouthful of pecan tart before asking Jack to elaborate. He then related the conversation in its entirety, including Judy’s deliciously timed phone call. By the time Jack finished his retelling, Judy was alternating between looking daggers at her partner and hiding behind her ears. Nick, on the other hand was holding his mirth back in no way whatsoever. Jack’s feelings on the fox mirrored Judy’s in that moment.

 Thankfully, said moment passed, expertly swept aside in a shuffle of banter, joking and teasing. None of them wanted to pursue it. It was obvious that Judy regretted pressing him into speaking. Jack got some satisfaction from her contrition. Unfortunately, she became so self-conscious after his little revelation that she was practically mute. It wasn’t until they were almost back to Wilde’s apartment for their movie that she regained some of her usual buoyancy. The emotionally charged atmosphere had gradually diminished, but never quite vanished, however. It was clear that a lot was being felt, but not said.

In retrospect, Jack couldn’t blame Birchclaw for her assessment, distressingly plausible as it was, despite being incorrect. Since their return, they had gone on several “dates”, the three of them. Blood rushed to his ears as another thought rolled through his mind.

Quite a few of them just with Wilde, as well.

Jack fought a losing battle with his cheek muscles and smiled at the memories. While Judy had been struggling to disencumber herself of her excessive personal obligations, Nick and Jack had possessed much fewer limitations on their time. That led to many evenings in one another’s company. The fox was a good companion and made even the most drab of evening plans enjoyable. Especially, Jack unhappily admitted to himself, when after a couple drinks and he got more tactile.
It was encouraging; relieving, even. Jack knew he was still dealing with his emotional baggage and getting his psyche back together. The lingering emotional connection to Wilde was just the last of the grieving process, which (as Jack understood it) was potentially a long one. At the end of the day, he had a heart lifting prospect ahead of him: as the baggage waned, the friendship would wax. At the end of the whole grieving process, he would have a close male friend for the first time in decades. The idea brought a genuine grin to his face.

Besides, Jack knew for a fact that the fox felt amicably towards him, not amorously.

Red flirts with everything that moves. Of course he’d flirt with me, especially with our colorful, albeit brief, history.

With that, Jack shook off the doldrums and his earlier folly. He had a “date” today with his other, rabbit, friend. Yes, it was to shop for clothes, but Jack was willing to suffer through it to enjoy one of the few days solo with Judy. Nick’s presence was helping him heal, but it was a bit taxing after a while. Too much sentimental fallout. It’d be nice to “get out with the girls”, as Judy put it. She was also bringing along a “fashion consultant” friend of hers, whatever that meant. It would also be a very nice break; something of a last hurrah before the madness returned. Echo’s file was due to unseal in less than a week and once that happened…

Gods only know what’ll follow.

In either case, Jack collected himself and departed from his new digs at the less ostentatious, but far more secure Gilded Paws Hotel, just outside the city center. He’d been forced to relocate after the debacle at the Palm and was glad to do so. The new rooms he had were much more his stylistic preference and significantly less expensive. After everything the ZPD had been through on his behalf, it was the least he could do. It also helped that the new location was significantly closer to Precinct One and roughly equidistant to either of the haunts his friends favored.

A short walk later, Jack made it to the rendezvous in the garment district slightly after 10:00, still bemoaning his overstuffed and increasingly difficult to organize clothing situation.

He had plenty of clothes. The distressing Dr. Moreau and bunnicula suits aside, he now owned a baker’s dozen worth of suits, several sets of casual clothes and cold weather clothes that he was sure he might need a maximum of twice in his life. Now, here he was meeting Judy and a fashionista, or whatever, to buy more! Jack feared something was wrong with him for agreeing.

At least I don't have to worry about that creepy shoe fad.

Jack shuddered at that distressing fashion trend. Mammals didn't need shoes. They had been a necessity for equines and certain other hooved species once paving was something civilization did, but the improvements to materials science over the last century and change had made the old metal cloppers a matter for the history books. The most an equine or anyone else needed was an over-the-counter hoof, claw and talon hardening treatment once a week. It cost a pittance! Yet, for some reason, some mammals spent exorbitant amounts of money on shoes.

Jack blamed that diva, Gazelle, for the trend. She was an excellent performer and her taste in backup dancers was quite delightful, in Jack's opinion. She was a role model to many young mammals, had done worlds of good for species tolerance and minority rights, and even done outreach and support work for the LGBTQIE and alternate sexuality communities. She was a genuinely good mammal. That did not give her the right to bring back shoes.

The fashion statement had become a blight on good taste, not to mention good sense and Jack did not approve. What made it worse was that the soles of said crimes against good sense were
textured to be the same as the mammals who wore them! If they weren't, they'd be a slipping hazard! Absurd! Simply absurd. Mammals had feet and the instincts to use them correctly. The species wouldn't have survived, otherwise.

It was during this disgruntled mental tangent that Jack's company arrived. If he hadn't been worried that his new life was dulling his edge, he was after being snuck up on by a contender for the title of World's Largest Polar Bear.

"Hey, Jack. Ready to get going?" Judy snickered behind a paw in response to Jack's momentary panic.

"Certainly! Certainly. Let me just put my skin back on. Be right with you." He took a moment to collect himself before turning to his friend and her enormous companion.

"So. This, uh, enormous individual is your fashionista friend?" Jack ventured, with no small amount of disconcertion.

Judy giggled and Koslov chuffed a rumbling laugh out. Otherwise, there was no change in his impassive expression. Jack found the incongruity unsettling. A tiny, high pitched giggle was also heard and Jack's ears didn't fail him.

"I see. You have another companion."

Koslov rumbled another laugh and knelt down, bringing his paws to Jack's eye level. The rabbit couldn't help drawing the comparison of having an avalanche looming over him.

I suppose that's the feeling they're attempting to cultivate. Most effective.

In the hulking ursine's paws stood a tiny arctic shrew. Jack knew immediately who he was addressing.

"Mrs. Fru Fru Big, I presume."

"You know me?"

"It is impossible not to, madam. Your family aside, you're quite the talk of the social columns. Oh! It is Mrs. Big, I hope. Or did you take your husband's name of Frostscratch?"

"Oh, thank you! I didn't change my name my husband did. He's much happier this way. His family was always a bit cold towards him." Jack's eyebrows rose at the statement, but he wisely chose to let it pass.

"I see. So, Mrs. Big, I take it you are our fashion advisor for the day?"

"Please, call me Fru Fru. This is Koslov, my bodyguard, and any friend of Judy's is a friend of mine. So, I will be your fashion guru. Judy tells me you need a completely new wardrobe and I am the shrew for the job! Shopping is my favorite pastime!"

Jack could see why. She was tiny, but all her clothes were designer labels and her jewelry, makeup and accessories were all top notch. That did not, however, mitigate his displeasure with Judy.

A whole new wardrobe? We'll be here for months!

"Shall we go? We have a lot of ground to cover."

Jack, resigned to his fate, nodded the affirmative and traipsed off on the heels of the enormous
bear. Judy, who had remained uninvolved in the conversation, though she was amply amused by it, finally joined them in conversation and they were off. Five and a half hours or so later, they were mid-fashion show and Jack had a newfound respect for fashion models. He was tired. Weary was a better word.

They had been to a dozen boutiques all over the city. He was convinced he now had more clothes than he could ever wear and most of them he didn't comprehend the need for. What happened in the fourth shop summed it up beautifully. It was their longest stop, after all.

They'd gone to the place for what Fru Fru called "a solid pair of hip huggers." Jack immediately thought of a boa constrictor he knew once upon a time, but it couldn't have been that. As it turned out, she was trying to get him blue denim trousers, though why she didn't just say "a pair of jeans" was beyond Jack's comprehension.

And why do they need to hug anything? They're work clothes! What's the point?

He’d drifted through the racks until he found his waist and inseam measurements, collected a few he thought would be worth trying on and set off to the dressing room. He was met there by his entourage, who had many more pairs of jeans for him to try on. They'd commandeered his selections and summarily deposited them in the "no" pile. The next forty minutes were highly uncomfortable.

Jack ended up leaving with four pairs, all of which were too small and one, much to his displeasure, had sparked Fru and Judy into flat-out fangirling. They were black, lightly distressed, stretchy and tight; more like tights than trousers with little shiny sequin accents on the hips and ankles. They were horrid. All he'd gotten by way of explanation was, "You'd wreck a gay bar in those. You have to get them," from the shrew.

What I have to do is bury them.

The rest of the morning had gone much the same, as had more or less the first hour and a half after lunch. Now, they were set up in another boutique that Fru Fru seemed very familiar with and Jack was working through all the clothes he’d been shanghaied into buying. Again. As if it wasn’t enough to try them on once during the acquisition portion of the process, now it was all about the combinations. He felt like a doll.

While he had been burning hours (and his fur it felt like) changing clothes with a disgusting frequency, his audience had been enjoying tea and critiquing. They voiced opinions on everything, most of which he barely understood. They had him swap different bits whatever outfit he was wearing until they found a combination they liked, then they assessed alternate options and variations…. Jack was entirely lost. His disconnection became distress when Judy started making a list of things they’d need to pick up “next time.” His one consolation was he’d been spared those infernal jeans and been happy about it, but the ladies had not forgotten them. They had chosen to save the fun for last.

“Ok, Jack. It’s time.”

“We’re done? Oh, thank the heavens.”

“Oh, uh… Not quite. There’s still these.” Judy held up the so-called club-wreckers with a few other choice items, some of which Jack didn’t remember purchasing.

I don’t even know of a club, let alone one I’d frequent. At least it’s the last one….
Disgusted, Jack wiggled, literally wiggled his way into his last outfit. He hated it seconds into the process. The jeans fit like they were painted on. They weren't uncomfortable. Far from it, they were quite easy to wear, just a lot tighter than Jack preferred. Next was what Jack could only assumed was a shirt Wilde would consider formalwear. It was a rich purple, patterned in black and teal, reminiscent of Wilde’s preferred garments. Only, this version had taste, Jack grudgingly admitted. The one concession Jack had been granted was that it was a buttondown number and was relatively lacking in the outrageousness he’d had dropped on him so far. It was comfortable and figure hugging, but not restrictive. His paws were moving to tuck it in properly, when Judy’s voice cut through the curtain of the changing cubicle.

“Don’t tuck it in, Jack! It won’t fit. And put these on too!” So saying, a grey paw slipped through the curtain bearing a black pleather belt with a textured silver buckle and a pair of black, silver accented foot wraps. Grumbling, Jack added the “final touches” before jerking the curtain back and stepping out. The rabbit he saw in the mirror was not him.

The jeans did, in fact, hug his hips, along with everything else below the waist. The cut and sequins accentuated his hips, giving him a feminine flair, while the shirt brought out his masculine aspects. The belt buckle and foot wraps drew attention to his natural lapin curves and lean musculature, respectively. The dark, strong colors contrasted with Jack’s fur tones, making it seem luminous, while the purple and blue made his eyes blaze.

He was brought out of his moment by movement in his peripheral vision. Judy was giddily snapping pictures. Jack’s ears dropped as his paw found his his hip and a disgruntled pout crossed his visage. Naturally, both females squealed and the pictures continued. Jack didn’t bother saying anything. He knew he’d be ignored.

Once the impromptu photoshoot was done. Jack was finally allowed to sit down, which he did gratefully. Judy was flicking through the spoils of her photographic endeavors when she got a text.

“Guess who’s checking in.”

“Do I have three chances, or should one be plenty?” Judy smirked and quirked an eyebrow. It was all the answer Jack needed. “Wilde.”

“Who else?” The phone chimed again, drawing Jack’s jaundiced eye Judy’s way. “And he likes what he sees, apparently.” The slightly put out tone of her voice was sidelined in Jack’s mind as panic flooded through him.

“You sent him a picture?” Jack squeaked, as he snatched at her phone.

“Uhhuh.” Judy turned the device to show the picture in question, her grin rife with unrepentant amusement. It was the outfit, but what sold it was his grump, the paw on the cocked hip and the lowered ears framing his face. He had to admit he looked pretty good. Ok, he looked great; resplendent and androgynous and completely at odds with everything he’d ever considered a part of who he was. What was worse, he made it work. Fru and Judy had done well choosing the outfit. It suited him beautifully from the color scheme to the accents and he knew it. Unfortunately, he also knew that the grump would only fan the fire of Nick’s enjoyment. The bloody fox loved it when he looked petulant. It’d been demonstrated too many times to even be a question.

Confirmation of Jack’s assessment came upon reading Nick’s reply.

::Wow. That’s... Hot, cross bun never looked so good::

Does he ever stop with the puns?
It was blessedly shortly thereafter that Judy departed for the washroom, commenting on drinking too much tea. Jack took the opportunity to get himself some tea and have a sit. Maybe that would dull the rosy tinge in his ears and the flutter in his chest.

He found himself in a quite companionable silence with his remaining two companions. One of which belted out a snore that sounded more like a tractor trailer downshifting. Jack glanced at Fru Fru with a smirk and saw the shrew cast an amused grin at her bodyguard before turning it Jack’s way.

"I guess with a secret agent and a super cop around he can take a little break.", Jack commented.

"Yeah. He works too hard for me. I love the big grumpy lug, though. Let's let him sleep."

"Yes, let's. Would you care for something to drink? Tea?"

"No, no. I've had mine. But while we're alone I want to ask you something."

"Not about my work, I hope."

"No. Nothing like that. About... Well, how long have you been interested in Nicky?"

"Suddenly, I'm very uncomfortable with this conversation."

"Don't be. I won't say a word and I mean that. It's obvious with how you react to his compliments that you're emotionally invested. Romantically, if I were to guess."

"You sound unsettlingly like a psychiatrist."

"That's because I am one, Honey."

"You're what?"

"Oh, I'm not licensed, but I do have a Ph.D. in psychiatric medicine."

"Y-you ha-have a..."

"Daddy encouraged me to go to school and I always loved it. You know his work. I never needed a job, but I had to do something. I'm not a druid princess, after all. I went to school until I met my husband. Now, I have him, little Judy, JuJu and Nicky! The point is no more school for me for a while. I'll have to be content with my current degrees."

"Which are...?"

"A Ph.D. in psychiatric medicine, a Master's degree in mammal behavioral science, an MBA in international trading management, a bachelors in art history, and a minor in Pandani film."

"Bloody hells..."

"Not what you expected, huh?" She said with gleeful relish.

"Not at all. ...Do you want a job?"

She giggled before replying. "Thank you, but no. I want an answer to my question. How long have you had feelings for Nicky?"

"They aren't for him. They're projected emotions. I was involved with my partner many years ago,
who was also Nick's father. He died and I never grieved. I... repressed it all, until I found Nick.”

"Yes... Then you’d be forced to. Judy did mention some of that to me. Nothing personal! She was upset and I got her to vent to me. She just told me about your behavior towards Nick and how it confused her.

"O-ok. So, you can piece the rest together, I suppose. He and Judy helped me work through the worst of it. I'm getting better. Once this baggage clears up, Nick will just be a friend instead of a surrogate."

"I see. So, you had episodes where you mixed up Nick and his father, right?"

"Yes. Quite a few of them."

"When was the last time?"

"When we... when we were in hiding in the Nocturnal district. I woke up to find Nick cooking. I couldn't tell whether I was seeing him or John. It... was a bad one."

"What happened after that?"

"I had a rant. I... I lost it, mostly on myself. How I'd wasted my life,“ Jack looked into his tea. “Nick turned it around on me. What he said... it broke me." And here he had thought he was done with the emotional sharing.

"You had a release."

Jack cringed. "I cried for hours. When I woke up afterwards, they comforted me. I haven't had an episode since."

"Huh."

"What?"

"I'm just impressed. That's all."

"With what?"

"That you survived."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you know about grief death in your species."

"Yes, rabbits can mourn ourselves into cardiac failure when our mate dies."

"It's pretty obvious John was your mate, as far as your emotions and subconscious were concerned, at least."

"I- I can't deny that."

"So, I'm impressed. Especially with the obvious intensity which your emotions manifest."

"It was hard. Many hard years. But, now I'm getting over it! I'm grieving and not dead, so I'm doing alright, aren't it?"
"Mostly."

"Well, yes, I suppose I could be doing better."

"True, but not what I mean." Jack looked askance and Fru Fru continued. "Jack, I need you to listen to me and not get upset ok? I know it's a lot to ask, just let me finish."

Jack nodded slowly, full of apprehension.

"Good. Jack, this may sound weird, but grief doesn't wait. I mean, you already grieved back when he died. You know the five stages, I assume." Jack nodded uncertainly, not liking where this was going. "Ok. You made it through denial quickly, probably because you're a realist, but when you got to anger, you stopped in your conscious mind. There, you repressed the process, which might have saved your life, but your subconscious wouldn't let it go at that. It can't. You kept your conscious mind from experiencing the emotions that could kill you, while your subconscious processed them. Fear, bargaining and acceptance were all unconscious milestones, but you couldn’t express the emotional backlog until you were forced to. Luckily, you didn't release them until you had the emotional support to handle the load."

"With Hopps and Wilde."

"Exactly. They helped you stay grounded and helped you endure the flood."

"So, what does that mean?"

"Um, it means that the "baggage" you mentioned isn't there. All of the backlogged feelings you had probably came out in that one huge rush. You've got scars from your loss, but you've dealt with it to a point where you can live with it, now. It likely also means that you aren't projecting anymore. You probably haven't been since that night."

"Wait a moment. Are you saying what I think you are?"

"That the emotions you're experiencing for Nicky have nothing to do with your previous lover? Yes."

Naturally, it was that moment which Judy chose to return. It took reminding her of the “are you seeing your couple” conversation to stem her concerned curiosity and even then, Jack knew it would only be a matter of time. Assurances of future explanations later from him and Fru Fru’s “professional” assurances that he needed a little time managed to ease the police officer from launching a full investigation. Then, Judy checked her watch and went into panic mode. It was already 4:00 and she had an event.

"One of my last, thank gods!"

Jack was too stunned to do more than help the groggy Koslov and now hyperactive Judy with loading all the bags and parcels into the limo. Ten minutes later, Judy descended from the vehicle, asking Fru Fru to drop Jack at Buck & Doenuts. Still distracted by his revelations, Jack couldn’t be bothered to remember why. Another quick drive saw him to his destination and he alighted to the sidewalk with all the focus of a poleaxed prize fighter.

“Now, Jack, just have a seat and relax for a bit. I’ll see that your things make it to your hotel.” All Jack managed was a tired nod. “Look, just let yourself digest it. When you’re ready, my best advice is to trust yourself. Ok? You’ll be fine.” Jack nodded again, feeling weary again.

After their exchange, Fru Fru sat back and Koslov drew her into her the depths of the vehicle.
Before the door closed, the white-furred giant leaned down for a quiet word of his own. "Listen to little mistress. Trust heart. It smarter than head. But no hurting she-bunny. Hurt her and be bun-cicle."

So saying, the door was closed and the limo swiftly vanished into the late afternoon traffic.

Jack plodded to sit on a bench not far from where he had been dropped. A nice shade tree provided some relief from the heat of the day and Jack tried to relax.

So they’re real… Bloody hells….

He sat and ruminated, letting his eyes roll shut. The little thoughts of the moment wander through his mind. It was quite relaxing, but unhelpful. Jack was very much out of sorts and thinking didn’t help any more than not thinking.

Before long he was granted opening night tickets for his very own daydream theater’s grand opening for an extended montage of snippets from the last few months. All the little moments came swimming up from the depths for cameos. The day he’d fallen asleep on leaning on Wilde in the park after brunch, the afternoon that was suddenly midnight because they were talking and lost track of time, Wilde convincing him to share a blanket because his heat was acting up, the night at the bar where he had his ears ruffled for the first time; the nights out to eat and play, the more frequent nights in relaxing in his company. Months of little moments. Each one precious and perfect at the time, now made catastrophically meaningful in retrospect.

He was at a complete loss and completely lost. He didn’t know why he was at his new favorite bakery in the city. He knew he was supposed to be there, but the why of it escaped him. It escaped him right up until he heard a familiar voice next to his ear.

“I didn’t think that picture was a preview for our evening, sugarfluff. I feel horribly underdressed for takeout and a movie at my apartment, now.”

Jack suddenly could hear nothing at all over the drum solo in his chest.
Nick made his way home after an extremely interesting day; one that held the promise of great things on the morrow. It was cold and crisp and he felt anticipation that had nothing to do with the imminent possibility of flurries. He scuttled home with a tense smile on his face and an urgent need to get to his laptop.

It was the one of the few days of late that he actually had both free from his job and without social obligation. Under normal circumstances, he’d have no issue with little time alone. He didn’t like being alone and took every opportunity he could get to enjoy the company of other mammals; two mammals in particular. However, today, he had work to do. Very personal work that he had been putting off for far, far too long. More accurately, he’d been trying to do it, but every time he tried, some other bout of lunacy would pop up and his plans would get derailed.

The main event of this merry-go-round of bat-shit nutjobery his life had become was the unsealing of the Echo file. It wasn’t a quick firestorm. It took some time to get going, but when it did, it was spectacular. While he was being honest with himself, Nick had to admit it was pretty awful, for all he had prepared for it.

The fracas hadn’t started with a bang. Once the file had been unsealed, there wasn’t an immediate rush by anyone to get into it. There was no rabid media reaction, no vengeful specters from the war, seeking vengeance. There wasn’t much of anything. The first of the interested parties were historians and a few political editorial writers; all of whom made proper appointments.

The file was enormous, so it was a few days before some intern got around to looking at the less historically or politically relevant areas, like the next of kin section of the personal data and thought to check if they were still alive.

After all, assassinations and skullduggery are far more interesting than some dead guy’s eye color and shirt size.

Once they stumbled on the fact that not only was a descendant alive, but they were a high profile public servant and had recently been involved in a somewhat risqué public spectacle, however, the attention became quite enthusiastic. Someone told someone who cross-verified and sold the info to someone’s handler in some tabloid. It took a while for the scoop to trickle through to the heavy hitters in the media game. Then, it got interesting. Unfortunately, things really kicked into high gear when all the worst fears of the EweTube clip ordeal were realized and some unfortunate mammal suggested it was Savage in the clip. Then, the attention (and speculation) went from a minor surrus to a torrential roar.

Thanks to the fleas, of course.

There were five camps. One hated Jack and wanted the police partners in bed as soon as possible. The second wanted Nick out of the way so “nature could take its proper course” between the two rabbits. The third wished nothing but the best on the cutest gay couple in the city, and for Judy’s swift removal. The fourth was best noted for its hopeful chant of “Debauchery!” They wanted the most salacious of all possibilities to come to pass, in form of a threesome, even for just a night. The fifth just wanted to see something, anything, to happen.

Nick and both rabbits were repeatedly subjected to the less than gentle attentions of the mainstream press and the less than respectful badgering of the paparazzi. Fortunately, they each had their own personally preferred methods of dealing with both.
Jack played the aloof, untouchable government spook card. His position and clout granted him
certain resources which bought him a certain degree of personal distance from the public, when he
chose to employ it. The best that the photographers got of him were long-distance photographs that
were grainy and unfocused enough that they may as well have been hunting a yeti. The paparazzi
interrogators never got close enough to even shout questions, let alone receive answers.

Meanwhile, Judy employed a different technique. She had learned the art of verbal misdirection to
a distressing degree of aptitude and used it with sterling results. Her many, many months of public
speaking, glad-handing the notables of the city and attending social events as an activist had made
her distressingly difficult to pin down, as several reporters discovered to their dismay. She usually
started off playing the dumb bunny and before you could say “Jack Savage”, the reporter was on
the receiving end of a long public service statement, hearing a pitch for minority tolerance or
predator rights, or otherwise engaged in a topic completely different than the one they had started
with and no idea how they got there. And that was only when they could catch the nimble little
minx.

She’s become quite the little politico, hasn’t she?

Nick was very proud of her. She handled the press like a seasoned professional. Quite the change
from that gods-awful press conference during the Nighthowler debacle. Nick couldn’t help but
smile at how far his little Carrots had come.

For Nick’s part, he lived up to the legacy of his father. He was infuriatingly impossible to keep a
hold of, as far as anyone involved with the media was concerned. He already had refined skills in
urban escape and evasion, misdirection and creating distractions from his decades on the street.
That made him formidable in his own right. However, once you added in the polishing and
expansion of those skills from Jack’s tutelage, plus Nick’s impossibly thorough knowledge of
every back alley, alternate route and shortcut in the city, he became as containable as smoke.
Reporters, whether singly or in droves, found themselves lost in dead ends, listening to vulpine
cackling as they struggled for an interview, day after day. Before long Jack wasn’t the only
mammal calling him the Laughing Bastard, Jr.

Fortunately, the interest of the press was not an unmanaged free-for-all, this time. Mayor
Hilldigger was very proactive and, much to Nick’s surprise, very effective. Upon further
consideration, Nick supposed that it was only to be expected. Not only was the mayor a career
politician, but being an anteater, he had an insight into dealing with insects, like the paparazzi. The
colloquial term for them was “fleas”, after all.

Nick also suspected that the mayor’s involvement was in no small part due to the gentle
encouragement of one Chief Bogo. Therefore, it was also no surprise when an enormous fruit
basket and two bushels of kimchi chips from the Hopps Family Farm were delivered to him from
an anonymous appreciator.

All in all, the press had been managed and the most zealous of the fleas were dealt with efficiently
enough for City Hall and the ZPD to arrange an appropriate response. Nick, with vast coaching and
no small amount of supervision, gave a single press conference and had an interview with ZNN.
Both were carefully scripted and choreographed with due consideration to all parties involved. In a
nutshell, nothing was said, for all the words spoken. Again, Nick suspected heavy bovine influence
in the entire process.

Between the careful management and the elusiveness of the mammals involved, the interest of the
public was eventually forced to withdraw to a low simmer. A low, unwilling simmer, at that. Both
Jack and Bogo had worked hard from the shadows in their own ways, to manage the firestorm and
it was evident that they had done a very thorough job of it.

That’s also not to say that there weren’t other things going on in the lives of the unwillingly famous mammalian trio. At the precinct, there were the usual patrols, raids, cross training; the smugglers to wrangle of course. A dozen city notables had either been indicted or fled, fifty-odd associated gang members and money-laundering fronts had been taken down, and paperwork… so much paperwork; so much and so much of it together. That theme continued into the not-precinct-related portions of their lives. Right at the top of the list was the pleasure of the hustle and the occasionally unforeseen consequences thereof, at least for the precinct’s resident jokester.

It had been quite a day, today. It had started out innocently enough, but took a surprising turn early on, right around his usual coffee break. Nick had been slogging through another discouragingly huge mountain of paperwork, when Jack appeared at his side.

“Nicolas, are you free tomorrow?”

Nick turned his bleary eye towards the source of sound. “I should be. Why do you ask?”

“You aren’t on the schedule, but you may have plans.”

“For you, Jack, I have all day. Tomorrow, anyway. I need to finish this off, today. Now, what’s on your mind?”

Jack was adorably flustered as he continued. “I- Uh… Well, there’s this festival thing in the RD, tomorrow. Supposedly, a must-experience…”

Understanding and a glimmer of mischief bloomed in Wilde’s mind, as he started to see where this was headed. He replied with a smirk, “And you’re new to the city and want to see the lanterns?”

“Supposedly, it’s an all-day thing.”

“Oh, it is. Quite the event. Before you ask, yes, I have attended, but it’s been years. You sure you want to go with me?”, Nick was laying it on thick and he knew it. If Jack was going to ask him on a date, he’d have to work for it. Also, it was cute seeing Jack stammer his way along.

Before Jack could answer, Judy came bounding up, interrupting, “Hey, Nick, Jack! Can you swim?”

“We aren't flushing ourselves down a toilet again, are we, Hopps?”, Nick snarked.

“Not the point! Gah! I managed to block that detail out until now. Thank you for reminding me.”

“It was your idea, Hopps.”

“Don't remind me…”

“I want to ask, but I'm afraid of the answer.”, Jack interjected, his face full of discomfort at the possibilities.

“Nighthowler case.”, Nick supplied, before replying to Carrots. “And now that you recall the trauma, you remember I can swim.”

“Ok. You can swim. I assume you can, as well, Jack.” The buck nodded, increasingly confused, before she continued. “Do you want to?”

Nick couldn’t help himself. “Right now? We just got to work!”
Judy rolled her eyes in fond irritation. "Tomorrow, featherbrain. There's the river float event in the RD. We have off and there's a law enforcement discount for most of the extras."

This was too good. "I dunno, Carrots…"

"It's a day of floating on inner tubes past floating bars and street food stalls. You can wear those goofy glasses of yours. Come on, Jack! Help me out here!"

Before Jack could reply, Nick said, "Jack kinda beat you to bringing it up, sweetheart. We just started talking about it."

Judy deflated. "Oh... Oh, Um...."

As funny as it usually was to see them flounder, it wasn’t getting the paperwork done. "Good grief... Carrots, Tiger Bunny, do you want to go to the Lantern Festival, tomorrow?"

"Obviously, we do, smartass." Judy shot back.

Nick acted as though he hadn’t heard her. "It does sound appealing. It's downtime we could use and it looks quite restful."

"You're being ridiculous, Wilde. We both want to go. Stop teasing.", Jack retorted.

Nick slipped into full hamming-it-up mode, "But I don’t want to disappoint either of you. You each asked me. What is a damsel to do with such suitors..." Nick completed his one-mammal melodrama complete with the back of his paw across his eyes.

Jack’s exasperation was forced as he turned to the other rabbit, saying, "Of, for.... Hopps? Do we want to just circumvent him? Or tie him to the railroad tracks like a proper melodrama?"

"Circumvent. He might like it if we used rope.” She replied, ignoring her partner’s snickering and eyebrow wiggle. “Wilde, we’re meeting at Jack’s hotel tomorrow morning. 8:30. Bring a bathing suit. That good, Jack?"

"Very."

So saying both rabbits smirked their way back to their own days. Nick, on the other hand, grinned. They’d just handed him one of the best days he could have. They knew nothing about the festival. That much was obvious. They’d probably only looked at the fliers around the city and looked no deeper. Probably.

Odds were they'd look into it tonight, but Jack would be side tracked by the cultural events and Judy would be distracted by the games and food. They'd miss the roots for the leaves and thereby miss the purpose for the festival, itself.

When they did find out, it'd be wonderful fun. Hopefully, it’d be at the festival itself. If they did get clued in beforehand, it would be a disappointment seeing their faces, but he’d still enjoy their rampant discomfort; that is, if both rabbits deigned to show up. Nick just hoped they did meet up at the appointed time. Nick figured Judy would have to, as she made the plans, her own self. She’d feel committed. Jack would feel obligated to, as he’d asked first and they were meeting at his hotel. All Nick would have to do is appear and it’d be a wonderfully delicious day, no matter what happened.

This created a perfect opportunity. One he had been striving to create for some time, unsuccessfully. However, one fact needed to be made clear. Nick Wilde had a very love-hate
relationship with winter.

On the one hand, the climate was much more agreeable to him. The city center and most of the "warm" districts of the city had that hard edge of heat blunted just a touch. It was a pleasant change. Especially, in the city center proper, where the weather of the world still held sway. The air was brisk and cool and deliciously invigorating. It suited his thick coat and predator's metabolism quite well. He avoided Tundratown like the plague during the season, though. The gods only knew why, but the city didn’t bother turning down the climate walls in that district for the winter. It was truly unpleasant. Maybe it was true what they say about keeping your man-tackle chilled and increased fertility. It’d explain why there were so many polar bears.

That, or they’re milking that whole “hibernation” thing…

That, unfortunately, was about the extent of his enjoyment of the season. On the other side of the equation, there was his species' mating season in winter and, oh boy, did he not appreciate that. For roughly two months every winter, the city was a cesspool of red fox pheromones. Every unattached Reynard would be a snappy, anxious dickhead, while the single vixens would be aggressive teases, at best; at worst, domineering vamps.

Before becoming a cop, he paid it mind only to avoid foxes as much as he could. Having every member of your species and most other vulpine breeds behaving like hormone-driven sex maniacs was uncomfortable enough. Being targeted by them was far worse. Especially when you had little interest. More than once, he ended up smelling like a tart's boudoir thanks to an excessively assertive vixen, who thought he'd make a good evening's diversion. Fending them off was a pain in the tail. Sometimes literally. Every year he considered buying stock in Musk Mask Deodorants, Inc., just for how much he ended up spending in those two months, himself.

It'd be nice to get a little something back for my trouble.

Since joining the ZPD, however, it was worse. He was single. Eligible. A government employee. Moderately famous.

Vixens love me... Ugh…

His sentiment was rife with the irony of that statement. "Love" was both the wrong word and an understatement. He had things most females and quite a few males wanted; income, stability, and notoriety, for a start. Thankfully his personal finances weren't common knowledge and he worked hard to keep it that way. Otherwise their "love", which was spelled like "opportunism" but pronounced differently, would have kicked up to an even more discomfiting level. After all his publicity, it was bordering on comical. One of the most achingly frustrating days for him was The Day of Roses: Valentine's Day. It did nothing for his self-respect, or self-esteem.

It may as well be called St Vulpens Day, for all the fox musk in the air.

Pheromones were a funny thing in Mammalia. Since sentience had been achieved and mammals had evolved into their present-day forms, estrus seasons were something that still happened, but the effects weren't quite as limited as they were back in the savage days, or quite as severe. Every mammal was impacted by the pheromones of other mammals, only to varying degrees. An elk might get a little more pep in their step when a nearby alpaca was in season, but that would be about it. Members of the same family of species would be more affected; a lion in season would turn a lynx's head if they passed on the street, for example.

Members of the same species, though, the effect would be significant. Fox mating season was winter and by the point that V-Day rolled around, the pheromones would have him crawling out of
his skin, day in and day out, with no outlet or interest in the mammals who were (sometimes literally) throwing themselves at him.

St. Valentine’s Day… The Day of Roses… And here, I get nothing but thorns.

Ultimately, it boiled down to one fact. Vulpines, especially red foxes, were very populous in the city and the highest point of their mating season was around a popular romantic holiday. The city was practically bathed in fox musk, despite record sales in Musk Mask products annually, and it had become so ubiquitous an association that Cupid had grown to have red fur and violets were the most commonly given gift between sweethearts, after sweets. It was a miserable time of year for Nicolas P. Wilde.

At least, that was how it had been. Now, things were as little different. In addition to his usual haul of dubious fox admirers, he usually had a few mystery gifts on his desk to ponder by the end of the day and now, not one, but two snags of the heart-strings variety to contend with.

Nick had fallen in and out of love many times. He’d experienced lovesickness. He knew the symptoms. When Jack reached for him in the bar, Nick was shocked and a touch disbelieving, but not worried. He certainly hadn’t expected to be kissed that night, but it didn’t bother him. Not that he had been presented with an opportunity to resist, but he could have ended the kiss after a solid peck and felt none the worse for it. At the time, he’d considered it a fair trade; a kiss for some closure. Not a bad deal. Not much different than a hustle. That was until lips connected and Nick received 1.21 gigawatts straight to his sheath. When his brain re-engaged, it was several seconds before he pieced together that he’d tongue dueled with a buck rabbit, loved every second of it and done so in public.

And apparently on camera...

Leaving Jack that night, Nick knew he was in bad shape. The emotional connection was there. That indefinable spark that he’d experienced every time he’d fallen in love was there and stronger than he’d ever had it before.

Returning home, he was nervous and shaken. It only got worse when he laid eyes on Judy. He felt no less for her than he did before he left, but he felt severe anxiety after how he reacted to Jack’s kiss. It took a while (and a few drinks) before he could settle.

I needn’t have worried. Judy damn near blew my fur off in the atrium.

He loved Judy. Had for ages. When she dropped him and planted her lips on his, it only confirmed how he felt, one-thousandfold. It was world-changing. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the first time it’d happened. It did take the Number One spot, though. Judy’s kiss was a solid magnitude 9.2 on the Erection Scale, with severe aftershocks and long-term changes to the landscape. When Jack had drunkenly smooched him, though, it was a 8.8, at least. All that said, while Nick could go spear-fishing salmon from the groin when he remembered that moment with Judy, he didn’t quite with Jack. Barely. It took an extra half-second most days.

Nick was in no way unaware of the sexual tension. Aside from the howling obviousness, he had a functional vulpine olfactory system and he wasn’t a moron, so he knew. He was also infinitely grateful that rabbits had a less sensitive sense of smell than he. They could only smell his musk, not his near-constant state of arousal around either of them.

Oh what a tangled web we weave...

Unfortunately, Shakesboar wasn't going to help him feel any better. Yes, he was deceiving the
mammals he cared about. This situation wasn't entirely undeserved. However, it was feeling less like the "when we first practice to deceive" and more like the "when we first practice B&D" version of the saying. The tension was murderously distressing, but in spite of that, he was enjoying it. Somewhat.

The mainstay of Nick’s distress over the situation stemmed from two points. The first was that he was at a loss when it came to his rabbits. He knew very well what he felt and had an inkling of what they felt, but it wasn’t certain. Yes, his partner and their “boyfriend” were rabbits, so being the mildly competent city mammal, he did the only thing that could be expected of being curios about another species; he hit the web.

As soon as he made it to his apartment, he got his laptop up and running. If it was anywhere, it'd be online. He wasn't researching ancient bloodlines or obscure history. It was a very populous species’ sexual habits. If there was one thing he knew was online, it was sex.

In his research over the last few weeks, he found a plethora of articles regarding lagomorphs, mostly on Wikipangolin. Many looked more or less on the up and up, but he felt a tinge of uncertainty. Everything he read online, no matter the website, had way too much stereotypical information for him to take seriously.

So much for the helpfulness of modern technology. That’s what I get for going to a publicly editable source…

Not only was it just bald-facedly laughable that so much unintentionally speciesist nonsense was commonly posted online, but both rabbits were highly atypical for their species. That fact helped in no way whatsoever.

Nick sighed as he closed his laptop two hours later and placed it on his coffee table. He groused to himself as he cleaned up what was left of his small, tofu-heavy salad and opened a bottle of his favorite blueberry amber ale. He washed his plate and cutlery, reviewing his options and sipping beer.

It was his one evening free in way too long and he had to be prepared for the morning. His searches had availed him very little of any reliability. When the Wiki sites had run dry, he’d looked elsewhere. He saw little that was believable, let alone helpful. The closest was the “having the talk with your kits” website for lapin homeschooling and even that wasn’t very helpful. It assumed a degree of familiarity with bunny behavior that could only be expected of a website designed for the species. If you were a rabbit, you’d more than likely already know. You wouldn’t need it spelled out for you.

Fortunately, as vexing as it was, Nick was aspiring to take his detective’s test within the year, just like his partner, so he did have some decent deductive and analytical skills. He only wanted one simple piece of information: how to tell if a rabbit was interested.

He knew from Jack’s ribbing on the tram that there was at least theoretically such a thing for their species. Most species had them, after all. On their little tram trip Jack had let drop a whole lot of information about doe rabbits. Generally, if there was a quirk like that for one gender of a species, there was for the other. Odds were Jack, being a buck, had a tell, too. The real question was whether or not Jack had been telling the truth. There was a lot of evidence supporting his claims, including Judy’s reactions during that conversation and her behavior at the station. Nick wanted to believe him. He frankly had no reason to doubt it. He just couldn’t help it. Which brought him to reason number two; his self-esteem.

I'm just a two-bit hustler made good. Worth nothing but my bank balance and the novelty of being
the first fox with a badge.

He knew that he had done more than just become a novelty officer and closet millionaire, but it wasn’t always so easy to see. He was very uncertain of himself when it came to a lot of things in life and love was certainly one of them. That’s what led him to his research. Despite everything he’d seen and known of his best friend, he couldn’t quite convince himself that she was genuinely interested in him. Even with Jack’s enlightening him regarding the punching thing, he couldn’t convince himself. She was a gregarious rabbit. She wasn’t stingy with her affection towards her friends. Even the largest pachyderms would get hugs high fives and fist bumps when she was in a mood for it. The only thing was that he never knew her to actually punch any of her friends but him. Ever.

Unfortunately, that only led back to the other side of the coin. Was that punching proclivity a rabbit thing, or just a quirk of hers? What do buck rabbits do as an indicator of desire?

In most of the literature, there were just references and the assumption that reader already knew what they were. It made sense, given that health classes were usually species specific. Nick also tried some cultural anthropology sources from ZU, but they were very dense reading, bordering ponderous. He couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Ironically, he found the answer, or enough to figure it out, that very night.

He was traipsing through a lapidae cultural website, depressed at finding so little, when he found a collection of doggerels and nursery rhymes. He needed a laugh after the hours of fruitless work, so he had a read. They were sweet and adorable, as long as nothing about foxes was mentioned. It wasn’t surprising that his species was usually the villain, but it was mildly disappointing. It was instantly worth it, however, when he got to the story of Tom Thumper and Mary Bops.

The story was simple. Buck meets Doe, they fall in love and start a family, very responsibly. The whole thing was exactly what Nick had been searching for, but the important part were the final lines:

Green leaves eat and often sleep. Away from foxes run.
Bucks will thump and does will bop, but kits have all the fun.

Suddenly everything was clear. Flabbergasted, Nick leaned back I his chair. It was so simple and so obvious. Bucks thump their feet and does punch. Nick ran his forepaws over his ears and scratched at his scalp, before dragging his paws over his face in frustration. Where was this information a couple weeks ago?

For all his presentiment, he was the embodiment of confidence. Nick Wilde had great self-confidence and self-respect. Being a fox, let alone a hustler, he needed them. What he didn’t have was self-esteem. With two such spectacular rabbits and all the signals… well, he didn't even know enough to know if they were mixed, until now.

Nick dropped his empty beer bottle into the bin and cracked a water bottle, before flopping back onto his couch. He'd previously picked up a little. Enough to attempt a test, but it got all out of hand, immediately.

It had all started when Nick stumbled upon Judy asleep at her desk, for the third time in a week. There she was, her little fluffy cheek resting on her keyboard, the fourth or fifth page of the letter “m” streaming as the cursor flew. It was adorable. She looked so peaceful, the fact that she snored, notwithstanding. Nick had done the only thing he could have; he snapped a picture. Then, he gently lifted her downy cheek off her keyboard, shifted it up and let her settle again. She didn’t even stir. Leaving her to her recumbency, Nick pulled his jacket off the peg on the wall and dropped it on her
shoulders and left her to it, while he checked on one thing; the other bun.

Nick wasn’t one to make assumptions, but he had a sneaking suspicion that rabbits were prone to workaholic tendencies. If Stuart & Bonnie Hopps were any indication, the hard-work mentality was a good thing and generated spectacular results, as seen in their enormously successful farm and equally enormous family. The industriousness of rabbits was not to be taken lightly.

The crux of Nick’s concern was that while the elder Hopps’ had a huge farm and family to devote their boundless energy to, their daughter didn’t. She had a day job. One that she devoted days and nights to without reservation. Her father had a home life as well as his work and learned to delegate, as had her mother. They’d found a balance, while she worked herself insensate. Nick was convinced Jack was the same. He’d had nothing but work to devote himself to for years, so Nick was fairly sure he’d be at least as bad as Judy, now that he had a personal life.

As it turned out, he was correct. The novelty of a home life was taking its toll on Jack. Nick found Jack asleep, just like Judy. The main difference between him and Judy was that while she was snoring like a longshoremammal on her keyboard, Jack was merely snuffling a bit and drooling on a stack of requisition forms. It was equally adorable and confirmation of his suspicions of rabbits, at least in part. Nick followed suit, therefore, and snapped a picture of Jack, drool and all, before shifting the stack of forms out from under his cheek. Nick then went to Bogo for a quiet, casual conversation.

“You want me to do what?” Chief Bogo asked as he looked up from a massive stack of reports.

“Sir, I respectfully request a day of personal leave for both Officer Hopps and Agent Savage.”

The fox was being formal. Not a good sign. “Officer Wilde, I realize the last little while has been a bit out of character, particularly for you three, but this is still a police station. I do not authorize personal leave for one officer on the request of another, even when they are partners. Especially, when the necessary paperwork has not been filled out. And Savage is not in my employ. I merely handle the scheduling.” He said as he returned his attention to his desk.

“So, Sir, if I did get her to fill out the paperwork and Savage submitted a schedule change and replacement for his duties, you would consider the request?”

Bogo groaned. Wilde was getting into the technicalities, so it was only a matter of time before full-on lawyering occurred. The only option was escape. “I would consider it, yes. However, as said submissions have not been made, there is nothing to discuss. Now, If you’ll excuse me?”

As Bogo made his way to the door, Wilde reached out and grabbed his arm. “Wait, Sir! Please, wait!”

The Cape Buffalo’s stare at the offending paw on his forearm was disbelieving. The stare at the fox once his paw was removed was bordering on murderous. His tone was glacial. Holding up his hoof, he intoned, “One, don’t you ever touch me, again. Two, don’t you ever touch me again. Now, it is only out of sheer morbid curiosity that I will give you a chance. One chance to convince me not to put you on parking duty in Tundratown for a month for your display of blatant disrespect. Now, what are you willing to risk that for?”

“Sir, with everything going on, I’ve been keeping an eye of both of them. They are demonstrating workaholic tendencies and I believe that a firm warning now would be more effective than dealing with a mandatory work-life-balance seminar for the precinct when two of the highest profile mammals in the precinct need formal disciplining, or medical treatment.”
Bogo’s face dropped. Dread filled him from hooves to horns. The Mammal Resources seminars on ergonomics and healthy working habits were the stuff of his nightmares. Days of coverage were lost to each one, shifts were devolved into shambles and hours of overtime shredded his budgets. They were the bane of his existence, as an administrator, even more so than the red furred embodiment of smug, before him.

Drawing his bravado together, Bogo replied, “What proof do you have of this, Officer Wilde?”

At this point, Nick produced his photographs. “Third time this week I’m aware of, Sir.”

Bogo was appalled. The fox was dead to rights. If the red menace knew about it, he was certain others would know, as well. If mammal resources found out about it… He had to act first.

Any port in a storm. “What do you suggest, Wilde?”

“A day off and a… firmly, but gently worded email, perhaps? Something to make it abundantly clear that you are aware of the situation, and are displeased? Possibly with tactful assurances of terrible prices to pay if such disregard for their own wellbeing ever happens again? It would act as proof that you’ve been proactive in the interest of your officers, not penalized them and are handling their problems in a universally beneficial manner.”

“Very neat, Wilde.” Bogo was no fool. He leaned in, eye to eye with one of his most frustrating officers and asked quietly, “Now, what do you get out of it?”

“Sir?”

“You, Wilde. What do you get out of this?”

“I get out of a boring seminar and two rabbits cured of work-induced narcolepsy?”

“You also are scheduled off-duty tomorrow on the rotation.” Bogo commented, speculatively.

“I am, Sir.”

“Are you volunteering to cover for your partner?”

“I, uh… I would, Sir. Unfortunately, I have a commitment I can’t get out of.”

“I see… Quite convenient, isn’t it?” Bogo commented, his insinuation obvious.

“It really isn’t, Sir.” The fox replied with clear distaste.

“Oh?”

“Tomorrow, I will be traveling to the northern section of the Alpine district to serve an eviction notice. It’s quite a long, cold, windy trip. One I am frankly dreading. I will have to leave before dawn and I will return, at best, by mid-afternoon. At that point, I’ll need several hours to thaw out.”

Bogo couldn’t argue with Wilde’s blatant displeasure, as he spoke. Making the fox sweat wasn’t worth belaboring the point, much as he usually enjoyed it. He grudgingly gave in. “You have an hour. Get me the forms. One second later and you can forget it.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll return immediately, Sir.”

So doing, he managed a day off for his compatriots. Nick did, in fact, have it scheduled off and he
wasted no time in checking that Finnick could cover for him. It wasn’t exactly a lie, what he told Bogo. He did have a job to do in the Alpine District, but he also knew of a wonderful managerial tool called "delegation". It meant that he could assign responsibilities he didn’t like or couldn’t do himself to mammals in his employ. It was beautiful.

It failed him.

“Sorry, Nick” Came the gruff baritone of his former con-partner. “I gots some family problems, so I’m out tomorrow. Make it a sick day, or whatever. I’m out.” And the line went dead.

Finnick being gruff and shot with his words wasn’t new. Having anything to do with “family” was. Nick knew the pint-sized bruise distribution specialist had no blood family left. Family meant something very different to him. His family was composed of the mammals he trusted and cared about. “Family problems” probably meant someone was going to the hospital, possibly in several pieces. Nick didn’t think any more about it, but sent a text to his old friend.

::You covered?:

::Yeah. In whipped cream::

It was an old code. Nothing good was about to happen, but he didn’t need to worry about providing an alibi. A small relief. Nick could count on Finnick to take care of his own and cover his own tail. He also knew that he didn’t get like this over nothing and wouldn’t make sure of what he was about to do in advance. Whoever was about to get it, deserved what was coming. He sent a quick prayer to Fortuna and Karma on his friend’s behalf, before returning his attention to his present predicament. Now, his friends had the day off and he had the privilege of freezing his tail off.

The universe runs on irony and bad puns, as mom used to say.

Now that he was out of the picture for the day, he had to figure something out that would arrange the day in his favor. His goal was simple: test the rabbits. The hard part was arranging it. He needed them together, relaxed, comfortable and feeling flirty. He also needed to be with them. That first part would only happen later in the day, so he had to get them primed before he showed up.

A plan began to form.

Knowing they’d be a bit off-center after the sudden schedule change, Nick made a few arrangements, including calling a certain cheetah who also had the next day off. Nick knew Claws would immediately suggest a girls day out if he found out Judy was free, so he nudged the giant ball of fuzzy enthusiasm her direction. Once the idea was put in her head, Judy’s first thought would be Fru Fru, because the shrew and the cheetah got along in disturbingly good ways. It was like they were twins. Horribly, horribly mismatched twins. Once Fru, who was all about the pampering, was involved, it’d be off to the spa, for certain.

Nick made sure to call Dani to give her the day off in earshot of Judy after she woke up, citing a schedule mix-up in Finn’s absence. Judy couldn’t help but ask what was going on, which was the perfect segue into discussing her narcolepsy. Moments into that conversation, Judy checked her email to see Bogo’s confirmation of her mandatory day of leave and the reason for it. Then, Clawhauser appeared. It couldn’t have been more perfectly timed.

Texts to Fru and Dani were followed under a minute later from both rodents confirming. Fru knew the best spas in the city, while Dani had a mani-pedi place she swore by and she swore very rarely. Judy had been about to ask Nick along, despite “I know it’s not really your thing, but…” when he had to drop the bomb that he was busy. Her ears wilted, until Jack was mentioned.
"Hey, Jack!"

"Officer Hopps, we are still on duty. It's Agent Savage until clock out. You know that." Jack replied with a long suffering drone.

"Don't be such a stick in the mud. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I have my morning briefing and a meeting at 1:00, followed by..." Jack droned tunelessly.

"So, nothing that’s vital to the survival of Mammalia, right?" Judy interrupted.

"You're being pushy and interrupting me, so you obviously want me to do something that day. What is it?"

"Don't sound so enthusiastic, Jack. I might think you don't want to go."

"Go where?"

"Clawhauser is off duty tomorrow, so am I."

"Does that expository statement answer my question in any way?"

"It does when I say that Dani and Fru Fru are free, too, and we're having a girls day out at the spa."

"Still not getting it, Hopps."

"And I thought Nick was dense... I'm asking you if you want to join us... What?"

"Aside from the fact that I’m not a girl...?"

"Neither is Clawhauser."

Jack decided not to quibble over gender roles and sexualities, in favor of stammering, “I- I’d be honored.”

“It’s a spa day, Jack, not a knighthood.”

“Uh- Yes, quite right... Um, what about Wilde?”

“I said girls day out, Jack. He’s not one of the girls.”

“But, I am?”, Jack asked wryly.

“I’d say so. Don’t think I didn’t catch you giggling with Dani and Fru, the last time we all got together.” Judy smiled at Jack’s embarrassment. “Besides, Nick has work.”

“I didn’t see him on the shift schedule.”

“Personal life work. Something in the Alpine District, or Acorn Heights.”

“That reminds me, I’ve been meaning to talk to him about getting an apartment there.”, Jack commented as he started scribbling reminders to himself.

Judy rolled her eyes, before getting him back on track. “Yes, yes. Very important at a later date. So, I take it you’re in?"

“Yes. I’ll clear my schedule.”
“Hear that, Angie?”

“Already on it! Only the meeting left to reschedule!” It was then that Nick and Angie had stepped out, grinning. Jack had been quite put out, but was smiling as they made the rest of the plans for the day.

Nick smiled at the memory. Through all of it, Nick had preened. The master hustler still had it. One of my most satisfying hustles.

He peeled himself out of his reverie and started getting ready for bed. He had quite a day to prepare for. He’d need his rest. As he dropped his now empty water bottle into the bin by the kitchen counter, he laughed at himself for that day. The “girls day out” had turned into a drunks night in.

He ended up trapped in his apartment, more accurately, the disaster area that had once been his living space. He’d offered it as a base of operations and as an easy way to meet up with them in the afternoon. He had a regret, or two, when he arrived. Mostly the state of his buns. They were both a bit the worse for wine and cuddly. Not with each other. Just with him. In front of their friends. Slightly awkward. When he walked into his abode, still a bit chilled from his journey, he had a brief moment to be appalled before his mugging.

I should have seen this coming.

A sappy romantic movie was playing. It was what some would call a “bunny flick”: just enough plot to drape a liberal dose of weepy drama over, with at least one pointless misunderstanding, a quasi-breakup, 20 minutes minimum of emo weepiness, a reconciliation and enough clichés to not threaten a mammal’s expectations. The kiss at the end was the inescapable cherry on top. In Nick’s opinion the genre was insipid drivel, but it sold, so it was made. A decent bunny flick wasn’t unheard of, but they were achingly rare; The Thomas Hound Affair being one of said few.

Maybe, Under The Toucan Sun, as well. Not a bad flick.

As Nick stepped into the main living area he was increasingly concerned with each step. Food wrappers were spilling out of the overfull rubbish bin and several wine bottles were haphazardly spread across the countertop. A couple more littered the floor, obviously toppled from the counter as the libations flowed. Nothing hugely surprising, really. The largest complaint he had as a resident, was the occasional drop or splash of wine on his floor.

Nick sighed and grumbled to himself as he wandered through the mess. He was put out at the long trip he’d taken for so little reason. The wrappers and bottles weren’t an issue. The spillage wasn’t a problem. It was unfortunate that it happened, but it hadn’t been there long and it wouldn’t stain the hardwood if he cleaned it up properly. What bothered him was that he’d been forced to miss out on so much fun.

If only that deadbeat chinchilla had paid his rent I wouldn’t have had to serve an eviction notice today, but no… Just my luck. I hope Finn gets back soon.

What was supposed to happen was mani-pedis at 9:00 in Sahara Central, then a couple hours at the spa, shopping in the Rainforest District and then back to his place to relax. He was supposed to meet them there about 4:00, but got delayed. He’d told them to help themselves to some wine from his kitchen when he let them know he’d be delayed in the Alpine District and Judy knew where the snacks were. It looked like they hadn’t eaten anything substantial since lunch, but they’d had plenty of wine. Not enough to cause problems, but certainly enough to bring the word “lubricated” to mind when he saw them. However, things looked promising for him getting some answers on
the degree of lapin interest.

When they saw him, that was when the fun began; the awkward, awkward fun. The awkwardness came by way of Judy’s wine-encouraged interest in pinching and Jack’s enthusiasm for suggestive humor. Any hope of getting answers quickly vaporized. For a moment, Nick was even unsure who the predator was. Otherwise, it was just a relatively quiet evening at home with inebriated friends. A delivery dinner, some terrible B-movies and a friendly (if horrifying) game of Cards Against Mammalia with several gleeful, loudly intoxicated mammals. Nick was very glad he got the Biggest Blackest Box. Some of the results were distressing in the extreme, though hilarious.

When they weren’t laughing uproariously or cringing, Dani and Fru spent most of the evening giggling with Clawhauser at the antics of the excessively affectionate rabbits; Nick himself enjoyed the floor show (and the attention), while Koslov focused on emptying a flower vase or three of Pigeon Noir, and yielding to unconsciousness.

All in all, it was an excellent evening’s frivolity. It was well worth the disaster area that his apartment had become. Slightly less so the teasing and lost opportunity for answers. The repeated mugging by slightly tipsy buns had gotten several amused looks. Some, like Fru Fru’s, were a charming smirk over her wineglass, while others, like Dani’s, were much less circumspect.

Nick had bent over to pick up a fallen bottle by his entertainment stand, on his way to change clothes when Dani, who’d enjoyed her share of wine, commented, “Now, there’s a sight for sore thighs, right JuJu?” The rabbit in question had forced herself not to do a spit-take, while the others choked, struggling to contain their amusement. They all failed miserably.

Nick couldn’t resist. He wiggled his bum, replying, “You like what you see, little squirrel?”

Everyone got a good laugh at that and everyone caught the red in Judy’s ears. Not everyone caught the color in Jack’s. Only Nick and Fru had, that he saw, which was strange. The way Jack covered himself, she could only have seen if she knew to look. It made their goodbye at the end of the night very interesting. Fru was very… suggestive in her departing comments. Something about “not having too much fun.”

Nick blamed her comments, along with his forgetting the rest of what she said on the wine. He also blamed the wine for Dani’s Elkton John medley on her way out to the elevator and Clawhauser’s abortive attempt at dancing on the coffee table, while screeching “…on the catwalk! On the catwalk, yeah! I’m gonna shake my little tush on the catwalk!”

Thankfully, his “tush” is significantly smaller these days...

At the end of the night, seeing Fru and her escort on their way was fairly simple affair. Nick was expecting the hard part to be waking said bodyguard. Koslov could sleep through a brass band at point blank range and had on several occasions. However, so much as a squeak from his charge and he’d go from comatose to battle-ready (and hung over) in a blink. As Nick had no interest in destroying what was left of his home by brawling with a likely still-drunk polar bear, he left it to Fru to handle.

A gentle nudge and offers of water pulled her back to the land of the living with unimpressive ease. Once Fru was roused, she squeaked at Koslov, who rumbled to life while she extricated herself from Dani’s tail, which she was using as pillow, blanket and teddy bear. Koslov hated that term. “Teddy on bear look absurd. No clothes plenty. Teddy for clown.” His wife was apparently appreciative of his sentiment. Eventually.

Thankfully, Fru understood moderation in her consumption, especially after their day of pampering
and was only groggy for a few moments. After a good yawn and stretch, she was her usual self, if a
touch on the tired side. Dani was still loopy, but sober enough to make it upstairs to her apartment
and Benji blearily called for a taxi, once he was coherent enough to dial.

Once the squirrel, cheetah, shrew and polar bear were departed to elevators, limos and cabs,
respectively, Nick turned his attention to the aftermath. The mess was spectacular. He set about
documenting the damage before getting to work. A few panoramas and a set of stills displaying the
crime scene later, Nick collected a bucket, mop, wet wipes, dustpan and brush. It was time to clean.

Almost.

In a moment of evil genius, Nick took a moment to grab a few volumes from his bookshelves and
gently made mischief. Both rabbits were snoozing peacefully, next to each other. Not touching, but
an inch or two would see them propping each other up.

Grinning like a fool, Nick slipped the books between the recumbent rabbits. Struggling to restrain
his laughter, he snapped several pictures. Jack and Judy each shifted in their sleep, but failed to
wake, despite the camera flashes. It was perfect; a sleepy little photo shoot. Satisfied with his
mischief, he chose his favorite shot and set it to his phone’s lock screen, before getting to work. He
was tempted to change his home screen, but the impulse was fleeting. There wasn’t enough money
in the world for that.

Sopping up the alcohol and sweeping the debris into the trash was a short job. Getting rid of the
tacky residue was slower and more labor intensive. All in all it was an hour and a bit, mostly due to
the necessity of quiet. For all the drinking they'd done, Nick knew Jack and Judy were both light
sleepers.

When it was time, Nick gently shifted his paws into place and carefully lifted Judy from her resting
place. The loss of the warmth of her spot caused her to fuss gently, but she stilled once Nick held
her to his chest, bridal style. As he carried her down the hall to her room, she let out a very
unladylike snore and Nick was sure he'd either wake her, or rupture something with his repressed
laughter.

Space was a luxury, so when he could, Nick went big in the comfort department. His bed was
large, like his couch, and very comfortable. He preferred his couch for sleeping, but in this case,
his bed was perfect. Nick laid Judy down across the head of the bed. She fit easily and with room
to spare.

Next was Jack. While Judy had been limp and a bit loud in her sleep, Jack was fitful. As Nick lifted
the inebriated lagomorph, Jack flailed weakly in his sleep. Latching on to his bearer, Jack
continued struggling until he muzzle-planted into Nick's shirt. A deep inhalation later, Jack was
completely relaxed and utterly precious, gripping Nick's shirt and kicking a bit in his sleep while
curling into his arm.

Nick carried the other rabbit to the foot of his bed and tried to lay him down, only to find that while
he'd relaxed in every other way, Jack had done the opposite with his grip. After several gentle
attempts to dislodge his captor, Nick was forced to concede his shirt, so he could address the last
few details.

Leaving his rabbits...

When did they become my rabbits? Oh, gods… I have a pair of bunny sleepers!

...on the bed, Nick took a few minutes to perform one final survey of the disaster area, snickering
all the while. Finding nothing amiss, aside from Clawhauser’s cell phone under the coffee table, he poured three glasses of water. One, he drank quickly himself. The other two glasses, he carried to his room and set at his bedside, after turning off the television.

His bunnies were cuddled into his stolen shirt and another deliciously mischievous idea unfurled between his red ears. Taking out his phone, he took several pictures of his still sleeping friends. A quick edit later, his shirt appeared to be a rumpled sheet and the space between the two shrank from about two feet or so, to a matter of centimeters.

Perfect teasing material. Mention how much her parents would love to see it and she'll lose her mind! It’ll be adorable!

Satisfied at his quick work, Nick changed into a pair of pajama bottoms and a ratty t-shirt, before slipping out to the washroom.

Upon his return, Nick gently settled a comforter across his friends, before collecting one for himself. While his back was turned, Judy stole most of it for herself, rolling and bunching it around herself. Smirking, Nick took another picture or two and got Jack a blanket of his own.

He took a moment to ruffle some ears, intending to head to the couch for a good rest, but something stopped him. For just a moment, he allowed his paws to settle, cupping a lapin cheek in each palm. The rabbits reacted. Judy rubbed her cheek into his paw and trilled gently, before settling into a deeper sleep. Jack's paws folded over his wrist and he kicked lightly with a foot paw. Longing, bittersweet and ethereal, drifted through Nick as he let his mask drop.

They were amazing, his rabbits. Good friends to him and better than he deserved or could hope for, yet there they were. Icicles had a better chance in Sahara Square than he had with either of them, but... after the Nox, things were different. He cared for Jack and he couldn't claim his attachment was limited to friendly. There was too much shared emotion there. He couldn't deny what he felt. Unfortunately, he already couldn't deny what he felt for Judy, either. Now he had a second impossible attraction to deal with.

Now, it's my Id, as well as my subconscious that's a dick...

They were special and not just to him. Two of the most exceptional mammals he'd ever met and he had to have a thing for both. If he didn't have repeated psych-evals to confirm his sanity, he would swear he was stark raving mad.

It didn't help that everything in the Nox was exacerbated by that bewildering "date" they'd had. Angie's assessment had been pretty spot on. Before that evening Judy's behavior had been... Erratic is a good word.

Prior to their “date”, her behavior towards him had been swinging wildly between a variety of extremes for months. It had gotten to the point where one day she'd be so sweet he'd need a shot of cute-cillin to combat the effects of adorabeetus. The next day she'd be cold, bordering on clinical and snappish about everything. The next, sweetness and flirting, again. Sometimes it was a matter of hours, or a single conversation. It was confusing and frankly painful.

After that day, though, something changed. Not the unpredictability, but the tenor. The flirting felt less forceful, much fuller and sincere enough for him to feel his virtue (such as it was) to be threatened. The crabbines, similarly, was replaced by what Nick had to call impatience, because he had no other word for it.
Only the previous week, they’d been enjoying a moment of companionable silence in their cruiser during patrol, when Judy's quiet giggling drew his attention. "What's tickling you, rabbit?"

"Carrots."

"Huh?"

"That nickname. I hated it so much when you started calling me that."

"I called you that to be a jerk."

"And it worked, but now I like it."

"That's good to hear, I guess, but why didn't you like it?" Judy raised her brows in response. "Other than the speciesism thing, of course."

"Do you know what carrots are to rabbits?"

"Food?"

She couldn’t keep herself from rolling her eyes. That was so typically him. "They're also a treat."

"They are a sweet vegetable, I'll give you that. I never really enjoyed them as a savory food, personally, but I’m a little lost. They’re a staple of the rabbit diet, I believe. How is a staple a treat? What?"

Judy giggled. "You're more rabbit than you realize." She enjoyed his bewildered expression for a heartbeat, before continuing. "They're a staple, but not for their nutritional value, which is minimal. Carrots are like candy to us. Rabbits eat them savory, but that's for the salt and minerals, like hiding medicine in a candy bar. We prefer them sweet. We even use them as sweetener."

“Obviously. Carrot cake being a prime example.”

“We use it elsewhere, as well. Like in coffee."

"Like carrot sugar?"

"Exactly. Refining it is pretty simple. They're also a substitute in relationships."

"And you've lost me, again."

"We call sweethearts "carrots". My dad's called my mom "carrot" for as long as I can remember. Like a bear calling their mate "honey", or "cricket" for foxes."

“You know about that, huh?” Nick asked a little bashfully. That particular endearment was not one he liked. To him it’d always sounded weird, so he’d hoped to keep it a secret.

Secret’s out, Nicky.

“I sure do, cricket.”

Nick was confused by this point. Well, more than before, anyway, and intrigued. “Cricket” wasn’t a mild endearment, for vulpines. It was for lovers, yes, but it was also a little teasing and a little taunting. It wasn’t to be used lightly, or with someone you didn’t know well enough to know how they’d react. For instance, Call Finnisk “cricket” and you’d end up in traction for a few months.
It was also basically verbal foreplay. Judy might not know quite what it meant, but Nick wasn’t about to underestimate her. Once was enough for him to learn his lesson.

Time to play along.

“Cricket and carrots. Sounds like a kids show. Or a really odd salad....”, he ventured. She nibbled her lower lip and she smiled. It was captivating. She wasn’t acting like a partner, at least not the kind of partner that wears a badge.

“You have much to learn of salads, gra-“

“Call me grasshopper and we'll see whose bunfu is stronger.”

“Oh? You're ready for another make out session with the mat, then?” Her smile was fierce and saucy.

Down Boy.

Not to be outdone, Nick rejoined with, “With or on is fine by me.” Her red ears were the first real point he’d scored in this weird conversation. “So... Your dad calls your mom Carrot?” Judy nodded and suppressed a smirk. Nick didn’t miss it. Nick grinned internally. "Really?"

"Uh huh!"

"Um..." A small realization crept into Nick’s awareness. It was an uncomfortable one. “Carrots?”

"Yes?"

"Is that why he got so upset when I first met him?"

She was grinning cheekily, bordering on mischievously. "A little. I mean, you're a fox so he was a little nervous about that and you're the first male I've ever brought home and he's a dad..." Nick was a bit scared, now.

"First male."

"And only, at that time. … and to date. Actually."

Too many revelations! "And the first thing I did was call you by a lover’s endearment in front of him?" Nick was mortified, in retrospect.

"Yep! He didn't know which possibility upset him more and he overloaded."

"Which possibility...?" He asked before his brain registered.

Her grin was sharp and predatory, almost sadistic. She had him right where she wanted and he knew it, but could do nothing. “He didn't know if you were being speciesist, misogynistic, or that you might be calling me that because we were rutting.” Nick blanched. “Typically, that name doesn't come up until after the couple knows just how "sweet" the other is. It's also a euphemism. Three guesses how." She offered, wiggling her brows, daring him to ask. She was enjoying seeing him discomfited, the little furball!

Nick opted to evade. "So that's why he fainted."

"Uh huh. And why mom had that little chat with me right after we got there."
"Wait. She thought we were..." Not good.

"Still does."

"What?" Not good! All the not good!

"Don't act surprised, Slick. You made your own bed. According to Bonnie and Stu Hopps, I'm in it."
Nick’s jaw, like his mind, was hanging limply. Not so, other things. “She's wanted me to find a male for ages. Then, you show up calling me endearments, acting nervous around my parents, being flirty as you always do, being affectionate... once she knew you weren't speciesist or a misogynist it was the only answer she could come up with."

"Didn't you explain? A fox in a rabbit warren, of course I was nervous!" He whisper-shouted.

"I tried to, but she wouldn't hear of it. She was too happy. Why are you pouting?"

Now, it was his turn to be put out. "I finally get why the Ewetube clip upset you so much."

"Yeah. Stinks getting credit without actually doing it, huh."

"Mmmmh."

"We could just fix it."

"And how would we do that, Fluff?", he said with slightly more sarcasm than he’d intended.

"You bring the whipped cream and I'll bring the handcuffs?"

He was blindsided. It was the second time he’d ever been rendered speechless. He knew it. She knew it. She loved it. Thankfully, they’d been called in for an assist on a robbery moments thereafter, so he could distract himself from the massive embarrassment of the afternoon, and the equally massive boost to his libido that was caused by her playing him like that. Nick knew he liked smart females. He did not know how much of a turn on it was for him, until then.

He didn't know what to think. Was she upping the ante on their usual verbal sparring? Had she finally found a key to flummox him at will? Had she spent so much time around him that her teasing was finally equal to his own?

This isn't a Schwartz measuring competition, Wilde, and you aren't Darth Helmutt. Settle down, Nick.

He didn't know what to make of it, but he couldn't stop one thought from drifting through his consciousness every once in awhile.

Maybe she was serious.

Unfortunately, Jack wasn't helping matters. Jack had admitted he was projecting in the Nox and Nick couldn't help but feel a little stab at that. Lets face it, there was nothing complimentary in that fact. Nick had started out as a stand-in, nothing more. In turn, Jack had been a thorn in Nick’s side and a source of jealousy. Hardly an auspicious beginning to the tale. At the time, that was as far as Nick really cared, despite the unusual circumstances and other forces in play. In the time since then, however, that had changed on his end. Judging from how he’d been behaving, it might just have changed for Jack, too.

The buck was still strict and demanding at the office, but less of a curmudgeon. More personality
shone through, even on the bad days and Nick enjoyed seeing him come out of his shell. Smiles were hard won and Jack's resistance made them more satisfying, until he stopped resisting. Then so much more came through. Jack's personality wasn't much different than the persona he had presented for all those years, but there were still surprises that were glorious to see.

Jack's sense of humor was very dry. He could dead-pan better than Nick could aspire to. That coupled with a blinding strip of irreverence, a sharp wit and cheekiness that Nick thought he'd trademarked had reduced Nick to a puddle of hilarity along with the populace of the room more than once, and that was at the office.

After hours, Jack was almost worse. He was unused to being himself in public, but once he warmed up there was a lot Nick found to appreciate. Before long, appreciation became the wrong word. Nick didn't know the word, but the increasingly frequent moments where Jack laughed along with he and Judy, showed genuine emotion and the increasingly less rare moments of affection... well... "addicting" was the only word Nick could find.

Later that night, Nick’s eyes snapped open in the dark and for a moment was very disoriented. Something felt wrong and familiar. Uncomfortably so. He was about to scramble to his feet when he felt himself dragged back down by dead weights on his arms and shoulders. That was the familiar part. When the weights in question sighed and nuzzled him, the distressing part clicked in. Apparently, sleepwalking was another lapidae trait and both of them had eschewed their comforters and nice, soft bed in favor of finding a heatsource; him.

I should remember to up the heater when they visit… It would not do for them to wake up like this. They’d kill me. Or each other.

Nick very carefully extricated himself and left them there temporarily as he prepped the bed again. The residual warmth was enough to distract them from pursuing him, but they were getting restless by the time he was done. Nick relocated both rabbits, again, and settled them under individual piles of blankets, this time. Once he was sure they had taken root, Nick checked the time and put away his own bedding. It was already 4:30. He wasn’t getting any more sleep. Instead, he dressed and ran out to a 24 hour shop for oranges and spicy tofu. At least the buns would wake up to a decent hangover breakfast.

Unfortunately, it was still quiet enough for his inner monologue to run the show, which it did until well after both rabbits had roused themselves, freaked out at their sleeping arrangements, and hunted him down. They were quite indignant around their hangovers until they saw the pictures from the previous night and paused long enough to remember what happened. Then, they were all apologies and very pink ears, until they had eaten and shambled off to their homes to recover. It had been an interesting morning.

Thus, his first serious attempt went down in flames. So much angst and uncertainty and energy wasted, only to be cleared up by a kits’ nursery rhyme. Unbelievable.

At least, now he knew.

He knew that Judy punching him was a serious show of desire, just like Jack’s thumping was. That thought drifted on the surface of his mind for a moment, before taking a plunge through his memory, illuminating every time that his stoic friend thumped in his presence. The spa day alone was several times; most of their nights out alone together, most of their nights out as a trio, too. Suddenly, he was seeing his relationship with Jack in the same light he was seeing his relationship with Judy, after their talk on the tram.

He’d never gotten a chance to talk to Judy in the Nox. They’d all agreed that it was a day that
wasn’t really up for discussion. His “dream day” was just too odd and they’d all been happy to sweep it under the rug, for very individual reasons. He was half convinced it was all just temporary insanity on everyone’s part, anyway. If he was honest with himself, he kind of regretted that…

So much had happened, then, and so much since...

Nick knew he had a thing for rabbits and until this evening, he knew he never had a chance with either of them. They were both... indescribable. He was lucky to have them in any way at all and he knew it.

He knew he loved Judy, but his attachment to Jack wasn’t exactly minimal. He was loyal, hard-working, demanding and frank. Off the clock, he had a dry sense of humor and a good head on his shoulders. He was kind. He matched Nick in wit on many occasions and was very well educated. All good things, to the reynard. All good things in a friend. If it was that simple, the fox wouldn’t have had a problem. The complexity (and the problem) came from the emotions that were evoked by Jack’s weakness, his vulnerability; as cheesy as it sounds, the mammal under the fur. The rabbit Nick knew wasn’t one he could deny being attached, or attracted to.

Especially with his recent fashion choices…

Jack was also getting along with Judy very well. It was rare that any of them were without the company of at least one of the other two, off the clock. That was part blessing and part curse. Very little time alone meant very little time to talk. Most of what happened just before their unscheduled break from work had been swept under the rug.

That would change tomorrow. Originally, it had been Nick’s plan to test their indicators of desire on their day out, but that was pointless, now. Why test what was already proven a dozen times over?

Other than purely for the fun of it?

Every year, the Rainforest District held an aquatic festival to celebrate the longest night of the year. It was an enormous event, where a mammal could enjoy the river, float downstream and relax. There were food stalls, bars and games on both land and water by way of pontoon floats and piers, all the way from Headwater Park to the Delta. It was a day of fun and relaxation. It was also a religious event celebrating the lives of those who had passed on and one or two things besides.

Nick had attended when he was younger, but that was a long time ago. He barely spared it any thought, even when the flyers went up around the city. Not so, for everyone else, two rabbits included.

Nick sat on his bed and just let the knowledge of what the next day would entail roll over him. His realization became relief, then gleeful anticipation, then delight, and his grin grew at each and every change. He leapt up and did a little dance in his enthusiasm, before finally wrapping up his preparations for the next day.

When he met up with them at Jack’s hotel in the morning, there wasn’t an ounce of tension in him. He was going to enjoy this day immensely and if he had his way, so would they.

The dress code was relaxed, bordering on sparse. Mostly beachwear and the like. There was a lot of exposed fur. It was obvious Judy was a touch scandalized, but after the eyeful she got in the Nox, she got used to it quickly. She did not get used to the equally relaxed behavior of the attendees.

It only took a few minutes after they arrived for their little group to get attention. They passed the
entry gate, showed their IDs to the donkey at the welcome kiosk, and received waxed twine bracelets denoting their ages and eligibility for drinks, before heading for the changing booths. The line was growing quickly and they were ushered along with little ceremony. Nick discretely palmed three of the complimentary blue beads at the gate and after a moment’s thought and a snicker, three red and three yellow, as well. They made it to the changing rooms without incident and soon were in their swimwear.

Nick was sporting his usual gaudy fashion, in form of pawlenese floral patterned board shorts in blue and yellow, with an equally loud shirt in white and green. He would have fit in perfectly at a tourist beach. Meanwhile, Judy had donned a modest lavender and white striped tankini that matched her eyes and hugged her curves, whereas Jack emerged from his cubicle in a pair of black running shorts that made his fur and stripes stand out. The three took a moment or two to surreptitiously appreciate what there was to see, while they packed their things away into a watertight cooler they rented for the day. Their relative peace lasted only until they got their personal effects stowed. Then, things started getting weird for the buns and hilarious for Nick.

They were all but mobbed five feet in.

It started innocently enough. The rabbits preceded Nick into the main venue, while he carried the cooler. An arctic hare buck in a speedo approached the rabbits and started flirting with Judy at just about the same time that a petite red fox vixen in a one-piece all but draped herself over Nick. A moment later, a Yunnan hare doe in a bikini was batting her eyelashes at Jack, which Nick found hilarious. Judy was torn between jealousy over the vixen and discomfort at dealing with her own suitor. For his part, Jack, who should have handled his own suitress with ease, was slowly being overwhelmed as more females materialized, looking to make a connection.

Before long, both rabbits were fending off interested and rather forward mammals, and not all from the lapidae family. Nick was enjoying himself after extricating himself from the vixen, right up to a marmot getting a little feely with Jack. At that point, he inserted himself into the little mob, holding out a paw with two large blue beads.

“You forgot your beads, guys.”

While Jack and Judy shot confused looks at him with beads in paw, most of the hangers on dispersed. There was much grumbling heard to the tune of “let down” and “figures”, as several formerly interested mammals wandered off. One gutsy doe slipped Judy a business card before departing and Jack received several offers for later if he was interested. Both rabbits stared, slack jawed, for a moment before Judy rounded on her smirking partner and uttered one word.

“Explain.”

“What’s to explain, sweetheart? You forgot your beads.”

“Those obviously mean something, Red. I think you’d better fill us in.” Jack commented, sounding none too pleased. “What the hell was that all about and what do those beads mean?”

“First, a fact that might help. This is one of the oldest festivals in the city, predating the treaties and the founding of Mammalia.”

“So it’s an ancient tradition. That doesn’t explain anything, here, Nick.”, Judy barked.

“It’s a cultural mainstay in the city, if somewhat obscure. I was surprised that I hadn’t heard of it before now. Is it an open secret, or something?” Jack pondered aloud.
“Yes, it is, Tiger Bunny. It’s also a fertility festival. Not to mention it's a meat market.” Then seeing their confusion, continued, “It's hookup central, buns.”

Jack looked somewhat stricken, while Judy managed to exclaim, “What?!?”

“Honey Bunny, you'll have thousands of mammals in swimwear hanging out together for a day.”

“What has that got to do with it?”

“Like I said, meat market. Lots of mammals, scantily clad, water games... lush foliage to get lost in... it's a dating day for adventurous couples and singles with a mind to change status. It's a hook-up event. That’s the secret part, or should I say, less publicized.”

“It's been going for years. It couldn't have started that way…”, Jack muttered.

“Centuries, actually, and it started out even more risque.” Two pairs of bugged out eyes locked on to Nick at that. “Used to be a mid-winter celebration that coincided with some species’ mating seasons. The longest night and the return of the sun coupled with the celebration of lives ended, with the prospect of new lives beginning. The whole pattern of nature and balance thing. It updated to keep with the times, after the city was founded and the Ecclesiastical Congress met to unify the disparate faiths of the species, which resulted in the Unified Order of Celestials and the Temples of Greater and Lesser Gods.” By this point the rabbits were staring less in shock and more blankly.

He decided to pare it down. “There are spiritual events during day, mostly off-river, but accessible if you're so inclined. See? Equal parts spiritual, social and all in good fun.” Nick held out his phone, with an eyebrow wiggle. “Flexible dress code.”

Judy managed to recover enough to comment. “Holy fox! You really were a priest!”

“In-training, only, Carrots.” Nick corrected.

“I feel ridiculous for even asking now.” Jack commented wryly, before looking at Nick’s phone.

“What the bloody hells is “speed dating?””

“We have to leave.” Judy squeaked around her ears.

“Why do you say that, Fluff?”

“Wha- I- We-”, Judy sputtered in near apoplexy, before collecting herself and growling, “Nick, we are public servants. We can’t be seen at something inappropriate like this.”

“In what way is this inappropriate? Look around. I see four of our coworkers, already, and unless I’m mistaken Bogo and his wife are over there, in line to check in.”

Judy followed Nick’s line of sight and blanched at the accuracy of his assessment. She was further distressed to see Clawhauser in line, as well. If he spotted them it'd be common knowledge in seconds.

Jack, who had dragged his eyes up from Nick’s web browser in response to his mentioning the Chief, croaked, “Is that Birchclaw, as well?”

Judy was trying to decide whether to blush, or go white as she shoved Nick down an aisle, out of line of sight for their boss, as Jack hastened after them. Once they were a comfortable distance away from the entry plaza, Judy grabbed Nick’s collar and dragged him down to her eye level.

“If it weren’t for all the witnesses, you’d be dead, Wilde.”
“Calm down, Carrots. You’re making a scene.” Nick admonished, sourly. Judy was a heartbeat from losing her mind when he continued. “You looked into it yourself, didn’t you? It’s a family-friendly event, right?”

“It said so online, but—”

“No “buts”, Carrots. Take a deep breath.” Once she did, he continued. “Do you really think the chief would be here if it wasn’t on the up and up?”

“He’s right, Hopps.” Jack said, as he pulled himself together. “Bogo would be the first to shut it down if there was anything questionable about it.”

Judy visibly forced herself to calm down before she asked, “Nick, cut the games and just explain. I am heartbeats from going home and there isn’t enough that you can buy me from Bark & Bite that will fix it, I’m so angry with you.”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t look past the surface.” For once, her death glare didn’t phase him. “Look, carrots, this is exactly what the websites said: a religious festival and a day on the water. Lots of cultural and R&R possibilities. That doesn’t change until after the Lantern Shrines leave dock around sunset.”

“What happens then?” Jack conveniently supplied. Like clockwork.

“Basically, the Lantern flotilla signals the end of the children’s portion of the event. Once they float their paper lanterns with their wishes and prayers, they go off to bed. For the rest of us, it depends on if you want to stay for the rest of the party. Before you ask, it’s food, drink and kits-free by firelight, unless you just want to float around and relax. That’s cool, too.”

Judy was finally calm enough to ask a reasonable question. “So what’s the deal with the beads?”

“Blue means you’re taken, or not interested. Red means you’re fair game. Yellow means same-sex-welcome. It’s color-coding for simplicity’s sake. The beads go on the bracelets and only mammals who have attained their majority are given those. No bracelet means, no booze, no flirting and off the water once the lanterns float; all enforced by the lifeguards and supervising priesthoods.”

“And you didn’t mention it before, because…?”

“Would you still have come?” Judy glowered at Nick and he shrugged. “Judy, I didn’t mean to upset you, but this isn’t anything more than you want it to be. It can be a day to find a mate, a day for culture and spirituality, or just a day off on the river. Make of it what you will.”

Judy fumed resignedly, “You should have said something earlier.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “But I understand why you didn’t.”

“Now that the panicking is over, we need to decide if we’re staying. Since I’m already here and I like mammal watching, so I’m sticking around. Jack?”

“I’m staying. I could use the R&R. There are also a few temples I’d like to visit.”

“A spiritual side to the super spy? Interesting. The lanterns are also something not to be missed. Judy?”

“Impossible todd.” Nick smirked. She’d caved and feeling a little guilty for overreacting. It was as
clear as the pink in her ears. “I- Uh- I suppose I should stay. Some of these events look fun and after the stress I’ve been under, I need the decompression. Besides, this temple is beautiful. I’d like to visit it.” She stated, holding up a pamphlet from the welcome kiosk.

“That's the main temple to Aqua, Terra's sister. Serenity and Fertility. That's what the festival is all about. Well? Shall we go?”, Nick drawled as he moseyed over to the piers to rent some tubes.

“I’m still not comfortable with this, Nick.”

“For a rabbit, you're awfully squeamish about things like this. Yes, it's an event where mammals can go to meet other mammals; potentially to date and/or mate. Nothing unusual. It's like any bar on any night, ever. You don't have to partake in those events, unless you want to. They're mostly for single mammals, anyway.”

“I am single, Nick.”

“Not today. Today, you have your pick of options for putting off unwanted attention, instead of hiding behind me, as usual. Aside from the beads, you’re here with two escorts. Lucky bunny…” Nick said with a leer, holding out his paw. “Unless, you’d rather take a red bead and find yourself a pretty little buck? Or are you feeling experimental and want a doe? That’s a yellow bead.”

That comment earned him a punch to the bicep. The punch lacked any power, as most of her blood needed for muscle use was tied up in her ears. Jack’s chuckling was the perfect accompaniment. Nick was amused that only the blue beads he took ended up getting used.

About ten minutes later, Nick was floating along in an inflatable donut with a net-bottom, listening to Judy enthuse about the lifeguards in acolyte’s robes and chatter with Jack about all the things she wanted to do. Not for the first time, he was glad she was so quick to put her ill moods behind her. She was back to her usual self and all the angst from earlier forgotten.

Such a resilient bun.

The rest of the day was spent in various forms of loafing. Rather, that was Nick’s goal. He met with decent success, but even the master hustler wasn’t immune to the enthusiasm of Judy Hopps and the persuasive powers of Jack Savage. A majority of the day was indeed spent relaxing, but not so much of it buoyant.

Much of the morning and early afternoon was lost to game booths, food vendors, prayers and sightseeing. Judy seemed hellbent on winning prizes and trying delicacies, while Jack’s main interest seemed to be the local shrines and the diverse architectures and materials used in constructing the temples themselves. The diversions added variety to the day and provided different venues for Nick’s mammal watching. That wasn’t to say that they didn’t spend time on the water. They spent plenty of time afloat, but hey had plenty of opportunities to avoid getting waterlogged.

However, as the afternoon drawled on, their collective enthusiasm mellowed and eventually, they were content to enjoy the sights from the water and enjoy the floating vendors, rather than hunt down their fancies on land. Other than periodic stints to dry out, they didn’t leave the water and even then, they didn’t go far. Jack joked that they were turning into lizards, with how they were sunning themselves on rocks. He earned a chuckle or two, but it was blunted by sun-induced lethargy, food and the ever-present ceremonial libations.

They lazed their way through the afternoon into evening and as the light faded, Nick perked up. Throughout the latter part of the day, the behavior of the mammals around had grown increasingly
frisky. Casual contact had become the norm, helped along in no small part by the libations available at practically every turn. They weren’t potent, but they were plentiful as the three of them discovered. It certainly contributed to the relaxed atmosphere, for a start.

Nick managed to pull himself together enough to point out that the lanterns would be released soon and managed to corral his bunnies over to get their candles and waxed paper lanterns. Tradition held that the lanterns were a remembrance for the departed, as well as a chance for wishes to be granted. Thus, it spoke at all ages.

Once the rabbits and fox had floated their hopes for the year with all the others, they waited for the floating Lantern Shrines to pass. As they waited, they noticed an increase in "frisky behavior".

The Shrines passed them leisurely around dusk. The last of the kits and cubs were being ushered back to their parents by acolytes and lifeguards, saying “Stay in front of the lanterns, kids.” As the three pylons passed, the river basin underwent a magnificent change from sunlight to firelight. Lanterns of every color were lit and floated, or hung from trees, transforming the area into a patchwork of vague colored light and shadow. Stronger drink came available, music drifted through the trees and the frisky behavior intensified, becoming positively lurid.

Hours later, Nick was floating to rejoin his rabbits in the small cove they’d commandeered, with yet another round of drinks in tow, when he was anemically accosted by his favorite doe rabbit. “Is this what you meant by mammal watching? You came for a sex show?” Judy tried to be sour, but was too giddy from the day and ruined her feigned anger with giggling.

“Plenty of vixens about.” Jack commented cheekily, grinning as he did.

“I didn’t come for the vixens, Tiger Bun, and it's not a sex show, Carrots. Mammals do know how to be discrete.” A moment later, he added, “It’s more the soundtrack.”

“Oh gods, Nick, you are unbelievable.”

“Ones belief…”

“Does not define reality, blah blah blah, only your perception, blah blah blah. You really are insufferable.” Judy mocked in turn.

“So you don't want the Jungle Juice I got you, tipsy bun?”

“I only wish I was… Is there alcohol in there?”

“Only a little.” Judy’s coughing punctuated his follow up. “By Koslov’s standards. I’d recommend nursing that for a while.”

“You really are a bastard, Red.” Jack chortled, as he sipped his drink. Tossing a bottle to Judy he called “JuJu! Water!”

“I can be... but!” Both buns started a bit and tended at his sudden outburst, expecting gods only knew what. “If you love me and you know it, clap your paws!”, Nick said, suiting actions to words.

“Let’s go, Nicolas.” Jack deadpanned.

“But no one clapped, but me! Ow!” Sudden stinging pain in his ear accompanied a loud popping sound.

“You smacked my ear, carrots.”

“Yep! And it clapped. Don't you feel loved?”

“Me thinks your love is impure.” Nick whined.

“You wish.” Judy chirped.

“At least we know, now.” Jack chimed in.

“That she loves me? Knew it from day one on the force. She said so and everything.” Nick groused playfully.

“No. The sound of one hand clapping.” The buck snarked.

“Oh my… you two have spent way too much time around me. It's a pity you didn't clap, Jack.” Nick shot back with a wink.

“I still could… should I slap your other ear, or your rump?”

“You've both become rather violent, lately. And what is with rabbits and the butt slapping?”

“Inga does it too, Wilde.”, Judy crooned.

“But I expect it from her. From two upstanding mammals such as yourselves? Not so much.”

“You can't see if I'm upstanding when I'm half submerged, fox. Food for thought?”, Jack commented, as he grinned.

“Come on, Nick. Pick your jaw up and let's get some food.” Judy giggled.

It was late and the festival was winding down. Nick decided he had to have just a touch more fun with his rabbits. They had spent the entire day teasing, flirting, joking around and having an uproariously relaxing and enjoyable time. They’d eaten, drank, and cruised through the evening, carousing with the rest of the district. Now, they were close to the delta and the night was ending. There was just enough time for one last tease.

He started chuckling. That got the rabbits’ attention. As they were floating in connected innertubes by this point, it wasn’t a surprise.


Judy laughed around her panic. “Don’t even joke about that!” It didn’t stop her dissolving into giggles, though. She was well and truly relaxed. More so than Nick had ever seen her. She looked like she’d melt away if she crammed any more bliss into her little frame.

Nick cut in, “Did you know this was also a festival to Fortuna?”

Both rabbits looked flummoxed. “I had no idea.” Jack commented, blinking cutely. Jack was also in a near-goo state of relaxation.

Nick’s grin grew. “Now you know and you should also know that it’s bad luck to leave the festival without taking part.”
“Excuse me? We've taken part in every event I could drag you both into!” Judy replied as energetically as she could for having lounged all day.

“We also did the lantern thing!” Jack pointed out.

“That's attending, not participating, honey bunny and the lanterns count as part of the day festival. It isn’t day, anymore, Jackie.”

“What does that even mean?” Judy squeaked, sounding slightly panicked.

“It means that you need to share a kiss with another mammal before the festival ends, or you get a year’s ill fortune all for your very own.” He ran a finger down Jack’s hindpaw and flicked Judy’s toe before finishing, “Lucky feet, or not.”

“Um, that leaves us all at something of a loose end, Wilde.” Jack said, after rescuing his piddies.

“Not really, Jack. C’mere.” So saying, Nick grabbed Jack’s float and pulled him across the water, spinning him around as he did so. Nick planted a chaste, but firm kiss between his jaw and ear. “Now, you’ve been kissed by the mammal you invited. You’re good.” Jack’s thumping foot comically started to spin him on his float.

“And you, Carrots...”, Nick purred as he looked into her stunned and slack jawed visage. She clued in a moment too late and tried to flee, but was encumbered by the water and a slippery inner tube. Nick’s paws found purchase on her lithe frame and she was pulled inexorably into heart palpitations. Nick’s lips met the fur at the base of her ears, just by the dumb luck of her innertube twisting under her. Heat flooded through her and every nerve in her body overloaded.

Nick let the kiss linger for a long heartbeat. It was the shortest, sweetest eternity Judy had ever known, before Nick quietly rumbled into her ear, “I’d never leave you high and dry, Carrots.” He punctuated this statement with a light nip at the flesh of her ear. Her paws clamped over her mouth as a throaty moan attempted to escape.

The heat beating off her frame as she reacted was not missed by the fox and he could not help himself. “You might want to take a dip, sweetheart. You get any hotter and you’ll be a steamed bun.”

“Terrible, Red.”, came Jack’s breathless, half-hearted admonishment and Judy took his advice and slipped under the surface of the water after leaving a solid bruise on Nick’s shoulder. He’d feel it when the drink wore off, but her didn’t care.

“You might want to join her, sugarfluff. You’re looking a bit peaky, yourself.” Nick cheeked back.

Jack slipped below the surface of the water with an amused expression and Nick enjoyed a moment of gleeful triumph at getting the drop on both rabbits. It wasn’t to last. All Nick had the time to do was register that gravity wasn’t working right, before he was flobbering about underwater, himself. When he surfaced, scrabbling for a grip on his inner tube, two pairs of small arms grabbed his just under the shoulder.

Jack whispered “Turnabout is fair play, Red.” before planting a kiss in the same spot that Nick had kissed on him.

Judy, in turn whispered, “It’s two on one, Wilde. Remember that.” before taking her own revenge. She didn’t bother with a kiss, instead choosing to take his ear between her teeth and run her buck teeth along the edge of his ear all the way to the tip, where she applied lips, teeth and tongue for a moment.
Nick had just enough time to feel his back arch and tail bristle, before he was slammed back underwater, again. When he resurfaced, it was to the tinkling laughter of the two rabbits as they paddled off on their own floats towards the nearest pier for a last snack. It took a moment or two for him to get his feet back under him, but he did it grinning.

Nick got home late, after seeing Jack to his cab and Judy to her apartment. Jack sent a text confirming that he made it home safely. Judy sent a text confirming that she was safely in bed. Both texts arrived as Nick was trudging through the hallways to his little slice of quiet peace. They’d had an amazing time, to hear them talk, and they’d enjoyed the day too much for words, ironically expressed in a dozen texts apiece.

Nick let himself into his apartment, letting the door swing shut behind him. He didn’t bother with the lights. He could see fine in the dark, despite being underground. The appliances provided plenty. He let his cooler slip from his fingers and hit the ground by the door, before kicking it gently over to the runner table by the hall. He’d return it tomorrow.

He had spent today in the company of two mammals; one he loved and one he adored. He’d teased and flirted and driven them up the walls all day. They had all had a marvelous time and Nick got exactly what he wanted.

Does punch and buck thump.

And how…

Nick sighed and made his way to his bed. He melted onto it. Everything else could wait until morning. He had decisions to make, but he knew that moments like these were few and quickly nothing more than memories. He wanted to just enjoy the afterglow of the day, before figuring out his next step.

He was drifting in the in-between space of the mind before the mind finally quiets and dreams take over, when a voice bubbled to the surface of his psyche. It was deeper than his and had a mocking lilt, but the words weren’t mocking, themselves.

Listen to me, Nicky. You never know how long you’ll have anything, so enjoy it while you can and what you love? Fight for it. You have a big heart, little reynard; bigger than mine. Put it to good use. Don’t be afraid to love. It’s never wasted.

Nick lay there, blasted, but not upset or afraid. It’d been an age of the earth since he heard his father’s voice. For the first time he could remember, he felt truly at peace as he slipped into dreams.
Chapter 12

Benjamin Clawhauser had seldom been happier and he was a very happy mammal, by nature. It wasn’t that he didn’t have bad days, or bad moods. They just never seemed to last long. He wasn’t determined to be positive, or anything. He simply didn’t see the point in dwelling. He didn’t get depressed when his brother and his wife died, or when his mother got sick. They were sad events, yes. He hurt and mourned as he fretted his way through them, but when they were over and he picked up the pieces, he had his friends and his work to support him. Moments of tragedy didn’t tend to linger. They were like fireworks: sharp, sudden and quickly past-tense.

It was when the disappointments accumulated that really hurt him. He didn’t dwell, so he kept moving tried not to think about it. A prime example was his love life. He didn’t have much luck in that department.

Once upon a time, back when he was a younger, leaner mammal, he had a girlfriend. They were a good match. High school sweethearts, they decided to attend the academy together, both graduating in the top 15% of their class, earning posts at precinct 11, Sahara Square. Everything was going their way, until towards the end of their rookie year. Ben ended up in a situation that no officer wants to be in, but the nature of the vocation makes it nearly impossible to avoid; he took a life in order to preserve his own.

It was by the book. An elk buck, a career criminal with a long history of violent offences didn’t take kindly to Ben or his partner at the time, a warthog named Earnest, stopping his armed robbery. The resulting altercation left Ben with a minor leg wound from illegally sharpened antlers, Earnest hospitalized with severe lacerations to his chest and stomach, and the suspect in the morgue at Ben’s paw. The guilt from the suspect’s death, justified or not, and his partner’s injuries ate away at the unfortunate cheetah, despite being officially cleared of wrongdoing and a complete recovery, respectively. His girlfriend at the time couldn’t take the emotional strain and left him. He transferred to the front desk and he worked through his survivor’s guilt with the help of the precinct shrink and his family.

His hard work and skills eventually garnered the attention of Chief Bogo, who recruited him away to Precinct One, where his interpersonal skills and administrative acumen earned him the respect of his colleagues. It also led to meeting one of the greatest friends and supporters he had, Mrs. Bogo. He’d known her for years, now, and she had yet to lead him wrong.

Clawhauser sashayed his way to his usual post, behind the front desk, as usual and set down the bag he had carefully brought from home. His mother had been very clear. The beignets were not to be touched by him. They were for his friend as a thank you for dinner the night before. She was to receive them and he could ask for one, once she got them. Ben was very certain he would do exactly that, as his mother had added “If she doesn’t get them, I’ll know about it and there will be consequences.” to her instructions. She always knew. He had no idea how she knew, but she always did.

It must be a mom thing.

Psychic mom-powers aside, Ben felt he should at least make sure Angie got her package. He was very grateful for her company the night before and if his mother hadn’t come up with these delightful balls of fried awesome, he would have been at a loss.

I’m hopeless at this kind of thing. Thank gods mom’s thinking ahead.
Fortunately, Ben didn’t have to endure the temptation for long. Birchclaw, herself, traipsed through the doors to the atrium a few minutes after he got settled and he waved her over with all the bountiful enthusiasm he had at his command. Angie, for her part, approached the desk with a purpose, struggling to restrain the smile tugging at her lips. Her remaining focus was quickly shredded by Clawhauser’s gleeful, preemptive strike.

“My mom made these as a thank you for you and I’m really confused. Can I have one?”

His speedtalk blew straight through everything she was thinking. How he managed to do that was beyond her. She managed to rally herself before he really got going. “Your mother?”

“Yeah. I live with her. I have since she got sick.”

“Wait. Your mother’s ill?” Birchclaw went from pleasantly surprised to nearly incensed, almost instantly. “Is she ok? Why did you stay out with me last night, then?”

Her obvious upsetment snapped him into realizing how what he said had sounded. “NO! No. She had a bad reaction to an antibiotic a few years ago, when she got Pneumonia. It made her sicker for a while. I moved in to keep an eye on her. I ended up staying. Now, we’re company for each other. And I help when my niece comes back from college. Birchclaw?”

The deluge of information was just a little more than she could process, so she tried to file it away for later, with mixed success. She wasn’t about to get side-tracked like the previous night, but the more she learned about this chubby, ridiculous feline, the more she found herself intrigued. It made her glad she’d also thought ahead for the day. “One, breathe. Two, no you can’t have any beignets. If any are left, you can have one at lunch. Now, put away the cereal and leave the donuts in the break room. You can have this for breakfast, instead.”, she said, holding out a self-sealing sandwich bag.

“Is this tree bark?”, he inquired curiously, peering at the suspiciously desiccated slices of what he assumed were tree sheddings.

“Salmon jerky.” She chirped back, happily giggling. “My mother makes it from an old family recipe, her great grandmother got it from arctic wolves back in the day. Never find better. It’s my breakfast most days, but today, I have these lovely beignets, so you get that. See you at lunch!”

And she was gone, leaving a very confused cheetah behind.

It was at that moment his closest friend of the female variety made herself known. “Soooooo….”

“Gah! Oh, Jess! Hi! I didn’t see you there!”, Clawhauser exclaimed breathlessly.

“I know. You only had eyes for the pretty kitty. What gives, Benji?”, Jessica Bogo inquired in turn. It was unusual to see her friend so distracted, especially by a female of any type.

“Yeah, she’s one of the trainers from the ZPA, working under Agent Savage. She took me out for gumbo last night.”, Ben replied cheerfully.

Jessica’s expression betrayed her complete surprise. “....And what did you give her just now?”

“Um, beignets? I think? My mom is really good at making them.”

“Your mother cooked for her?” Clawhauser couldn’t miss her reaction at this point. We couldn’t quite grasp was why she was behaving that way.

“Um… Yes?”, Then replied nervously.
“Oh, Benji…”

“Wha-what’d I do?”

Jess sighed with fond exasperation at her friend. For being so astute with other people’s relationships he was blindly incompetent with his own. Obviously, he need a little help. “Listen, Cuddles, I’m taking Adrian out for lunch after my 10:00 appointment and it sounds to me like you have plans then, too.”

“I- I might. I don’t kno-”

“You do. So, you and I are moving up our coffee date this week to tonight. We need girl talk.” She made to leave, but turned back at the last moment, cheekily adding, “Unless, of course, you end up with dinner plans.”

“What? I don’t get it.”

“See you after work, Cuddles!”, Jess called as she scampered out the door.

“Oooh! I hate it when she does that.”, Ben groused as she vanished.

Jess’s behavior and the knowing expression as she left the building left him bothered and preoccupied until almost noon. He wasn’t a complete fool. He had a decent idea of what Jess was going to ask about, later that evening; an area of his life he tried very hard not to think about at all. He wasn’t looking forward to it, very much. At least he had lunch to look forward to. Then, he would be distracted from juggling his work and his worries by Birchclaw’s return.

“Hey, big guy. Enjoy your breakfast?”, Birchclaw piped as you walked up to the welcome desk. She was finally going to be able to sit down with Benjamin and having real talk about her boss and his coworkers’ situation.

“Hey, Birchclaw!. Yeah. It was good. Not what I’m used to, but good. I’m really getting hungry now, though.”, Ben replied, enthusiastically. His breakfast had been satisfying, but not very filling. It wasn’t his usual fare. He needed something substantial, for lunch.

“Protein has more energy. Higher quality foodstuffs let you do just as much without needing to refuel all the time. Quality, over quantity.” She said with a wink. “Isn’t it your lunch break soon?”

“I can take it whenever. I usually just go to O’Hara’s. All the guys go there, so they have the best gossip!”

She couldn’t help but smile. “That really is your thing, Isn’t it?”

“Well, kinda. I am the desk sergeant, so I get to talk to everyone, but O’Hara’s is special. It’s where the relaxation happens, so people are chattering!”

Angie couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “You are such a social butterfly. Anyway, sounds good! Let’s go.”

“You sure? It’s almost all cops and can get pretty rough around the edges.”

“I think I can handle it.”, she replied with a confident smirk. “I also wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah…” Ben replied nervously. “We got a little sidetracked last night. You wanted the gossip on Hopps and Wilde, right?”
“Yep! That isn’t a problem, I hope?” Angie inquired, still grinning. He was cute when he was scrambling.

Did I seriously just think that?

“No! No. Not at all. They’re a hot topic these days.”

“Good! Let’s go.” She turned to leave, hoping to leave her errant thoughts behind, as well. She was still sore at herself for getting sidetracked the previous evening and was determined to stay on target, this time. “I could use a good hot meal and I- ...what?”

He was fidgeting and acting nervously. “Um...Can I have a beignet?”

“Sorry, big kitty. They were too good.” Angie’s amusement and her smile made him pause in his disappointment for a heartbeat. It felt good. It was a familiar feeling and one associated with bad memories, so rather than wallow, he trotted off after her.

Lunch at O’Hara’s was a chaotic affair. Many officers on split shifts or ending patrols ate there before heading home or back to their paperwork, along with a healthy contingent of the office staff and support teams. It was a cop bar, but it was also popular with the civilian populace of the area for two reasons. The food and service were excellent, for one, and with the sheer volume of officers present post-shift, there was nothing close to ill-mannered behavior. It helped that the owner’s own daughter was on the force. He gave a healthy discount for public servants.

Ben had been a regular there for ages, as could be seen in the endless welcomes he received upon arrival. For Ben, this was a regular day at his usual lunch spot. For Birchclaw, it was an enormous eyeful on just how well known and liked her lunch companion was. The greetings were quickly followed by both interest in his companion and wave after wave of gossip. It took some time, but eventually the populace of the bar allowed the pair of felines to sit and remain undisturbed for long enough to both sit and order. Ordering only took moments, as Mr. Isaac O’Hara himself vacated his post at the bar to say hello and swap a few choice tidbits.

Angie was impressed and a little awed by the reception. The warmth of it was jarring and her companion was apparently known and loved by literally everyone in the place. When the initial shock wore off, the felines quickly fell into the pattern of the previous evening and chatted away their lunch hour.

Between mouthfuls of food, and only occasional interruptions by passing chatterboxes, Angie was brought up to speed on the complex and intricate web of relationships that made up Precinct One. She supplied him with questions and Ben supplied insight into the mammals around them, particularly the potential couples. Loopy Lupesson and his partner Daphne O’Hara were of particular interest to him.

The pair were in plain clothes, nestled into their usual booth, after a long shift. She was fiddling with the remains of something in an alfredo sauce and he was nursing a mug of beer. It was clear that she was flirting and he was ignoring it. It was very much the cliché of the feline female playing with their prey. She was stunned to find out they’d been like that for six years. Apparently, that wolf was either a bona-fide idiot and the lioness was hopeless, or it was just their game and the “prey” was exceptionally good at playing back. Specifically, hard-to-get.

Needless to say, the meal ended and they happily traipsed back to work. Angie made it all the way to her next class before she registered that they had discussed practically everything under the sun, except Hopps, Wilde and Savage. Again.
This barely registered with Ben, as he had whole new swathes of gossip to process and he still had Jess’ teasing rattling around his mind. All too soon, it was clock-out and he was settled into a table at Bark & Bite for his weekly coffee with her.

Jessica Bogo smirked as she stirred her sugar and cream into her coffee. “So……”

“I know that tone, Jessie. What’s on your mind?” Ben, for all his shortcomings, wasn’t an idiot. He had a decent idea of where this was going.

“That little kitty friend of yours from earlier today. Been seeing her long?”

If aardwolves could purr in delight, she would be. She was all but radiant. That said, Ben wasn’t about to make this easy for her. She’d steamroller him regardless, so why make it too easy? “She’s been working at the precinct for about a month.”

Apparently, she wasn’t in the mood to play. “That isn’t what I mean and you know it, now cough up. Bad cop is Addie’s specialty, but I can manage it, if I have to.” Jess said, as she set her spoon on her saucer and stopped dancing around the shrubbery.

Still, Ben deflected. “He loathes that name, you know.”

“He loves it, but it conflicts with his big-bad-chief persona at the office. Well?”

Ben sighed in miserable resignation, before replying. “I’m not seeing her, Jess. We had dinner last night and lunch today.”

“Wow, Cuddles. I meant no offence. Something bugging you?”

“The girls at B&B assumed the same thing, last night. We went for coffee after work and ended up getting gumbo at a place in the bayou called Momma’s.”, Ben grumbled.

“Holy anthills! That place is definitely not your usual fare.”

“My mother was even more surprised.” He groused.

The unhappiness in his voice was clear. It hadn’t been her intent to upset him. “I’m sorry, Ben.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just a little ruffled.”

“I see. Do you like this molly?”

“She’s a queen, actually, and I don’t know. She’s the first female I’ve been out with alone in a long time. And before you ask it wasn’t a date. Just dinner.”

“You sound upset about it.”

“I’m not. Not about that. We had lunch today at O’Hara’s. It was fun. I’m sure a few of the guys are whispering by now. It’ll die out in a few weeks.”

“It’s not the gossip that’s bugging you. You know how that stuff works better than anyone. What is?”

“I enjoyed dinner last night and lunch today was fun, but I’m not going to get my hopes up. Everyone assumes we’re a thing and it’s only been a day. It’s stupid and it... reminds me…”

“Oh, Claws…”
“Yeah. I’m just waiting for her to let me in on who she’s actually interested in, so I can make the introduction. I got used to being the approachable one in the precinct, but she’s new and doesn’t know how it works. It’s just like when I started at the desk, waiting on the “we can be friends” line, again. It hurts, being reminded.”

“You don’t know if that’s what she’ll do.”

“Oh, come on, Jess…”, Ben scoffed, before meeting her eyes. Her stare could melt steel beams. “Ugh… Fine. You’re right. I don’t know, but I have no reason to think otherwise and I’m not getting my hopes up. I’ll enjoy the company, but I won’t be surprised when she wants to meet someone else with my help.”

“Fine.”, she retorted, primly. “I can’t blame you, but I won’t encourage you.”

“Didn’t expect it…”, he grumbled into his drink.

“Ben. You can’t expect me to encourage this defeatist attitude when it comes to your love life.”

“I don’t expect anything.”

“It’s damn well time you did. Benjamin Clawhauser, you are one of the best mammals I know. You’re sweet and kind and loving to a fault. You’ve been treated like the receptionist for the ZPD love life, yes, but that doesn’t mean that no female is interested in you. You haven’t found her, YET. And you won’t if you just give up.”

“We’ve had this conversation before, Jess.”

“We have and we will again, most likely. I’m not saying you need to be aggressive about it, just don’t be closed to the possibility. Yes, she might get you hurt, again, but she might also be genuine.”

Ben gave up, before she really got into her spiel. “Oh, alright. We’ll see where it goes, but I'm not getting my hopes up. If you’re wrong, I’ll know in a month. Then, you can buy the conciliatory ice cream.”

“Deal. And if I’m right, and in a month when she’s still around and not angling for an introduction, you’re coming on a double date with me and Adrian.”

“What?”, Ben choked out around a sip of coffee.

“You heard me.”, she replied grinning. “If I win I’ll need to gloat and you know Adrian will take us somewhere fun. That soda shop in Old City, maybe?”

“OOOH! That has the best ice cream floats in the city!”

“See? Now, you have a reason to hope. A small one, but a reason.” She grinned at his childlike joy. He was so simple at times. She wasn’t fooled that it was anything but an act, but his glee was infections. It was one of the reasons she liked him so much.

He wouldn’t meet her eyes as he asked, “Why, Jess?”

She didn’t expect him to turn serious on her. “Why what?”

“Why do all this?”

“I like you, Ben. You’re a friend and I like to see my friends happy when I can and supported when
I can’t. Besides, I need to keep Adrian’s work wife happy. Life is better for everyone, Addie included, when you’re happy. It’s win-win.”

“It’s appreciated, Jess.”

“It’s a pleasure, Ben. Now, you enjoy your coffee and tell me all about what's happened with Hopps and Wilde.”

It was much to Clawhauser’s chagrin that a month later, there was no change on either front. The situation with Nick and Judy had changed in no way, except it’s intensity. The sexual charge felt between the two had grown to nearly tangible proportions, while progressing in no way whatsoever and Savage was a new wild card in the little drama. Ben was surprised that mammals weren’t getting turned on just by being in proximity to any of the three. That or the formation of a lust-black hole between them.

Is there such a thing as critical lust mass?

Also, Birchclaw was still, in fact, around and was only asking after the availability of one mammal at the ZPD: him. They had fallen into the habit of eating together a couple times a week and she had seemingly taken him in paw, where his diet was concerned; guiding and giving advice whenever she could. His mother was in cahoots with her, despite never having met his “friend” at work. Ben was increasingly uncomfortable with all of it, but couldn’t find it in himself to complain.

This was all enough for Jessica Bogo to claim victory on their little wager and, much to his embarrassment, demand that he invite Angie out for the day with them. Jess refused to provide any details beyond the date and to meet them at the Bogo’s residence in the Meadowlands on the day she chose.

That was how the flustered and slightly distraught tom found himself sandwiched between Jess’ teasing and Angie’s enthusiasm at the main event for the Basho, seated in the reserved box for former Bulls and their guests. When Jess had baited him with a double date, he had no idea it would be something this high profile. He was hoping for the soda shop and a visit to the museums, or something. He was not expecting to be just off center stage, behind the Judge’s Box for the biggest event in the Zootopian ruminant social calendar!

Angie was ecstatic. She admitted on the way to the venue that she was a major fan of the hand-to-hand and technical dance competitions. Her joy at attending the event was as clear as his own unsettlement. She was practically bouncing. Jess, on the other hand was endlessly smug. She was taking her win at twice face value and had already decided that he and Birchclaw were an item. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ben kept reminding himself that all he had done was stupidly agree to a wager that his friend was taking out of all scale. Yes, Angie had stuck around for a month. That did not mean they were dating, or were even close. His concession to the double date was supposed to be a little acknowledgement that he wasn’t always right about these things. This was something else entirely.

To hear Jess talk, the whole thing had been arranged by Ben, himself, as a surprise for Birchclaw. If he thought he’d been embarrassed asking her to join him the next day on a day out without giving any details, it was nothing compared to his distress when Jess told Angie it was all Ben’s doing. He’d stammered his way through inviting her and had regained the ability to use polysyllabic words a few days later, but was rendered completely speechless thanks to that. It may have been painted like it was just a little favor or two from a friend, by the aardwolf, but judging from Angie’s reaction, it was anything but small.
Since then, he’d managed to forget the out-of-paw situation, as long as Jess didn’t smirk at him too much. It got easier when the event itself began and the day got moving. By the time the strong mammal competition was in recess for the day and the exhibition fights were underway, Ben felt much better. He felt positively gratified at his boss’ expression when he opted for the Lean & Spicy Seafood Platter at lunch, until he saw Jess’ smug factor go to defcon 3. Shortly thereafter, there was an avian dance troupe performance and everyone was distracted. The remainder of the day went smoothly, as he did his best to continue to chat with his companions and not give Jess any more ammunition.

It wasn’t until he and Angie said their goodnights to the Bogos that things got awkward again.

The drive to Angie’s home from the Meadowlands was less tense than much of the day, for Clawhauser. Leaving his overzealous friend and his boss behind was a huge load off his mind. He owed Angie an apology for dragging her into his wager with Jessica. As a small blessing, Angie seemed totally oblivious to his turmoil and chattered merrily the whole way to her house. This was both a relief and a problem for him, as he didn’t want to ruin a perfectly good day.

He parked outside her house in a residential area in northern Sahara Square, full of apprehension. He did not want to do this.

“So, big guy, the night is still very young and the kittens are with my mother, tonight. Want to come in for a movie? I’ve got the Sapiens series. We can watch Sigourney Wooler blow stuff out of airlocks and laugh at Don Hounds’ overacting.”

He nervously replied, “Sounds great! But um… Look, Angie today was a-”, before being silenced by her paw.

“I know, Ben. Jessica told me everything.” She smiled at his bugged eyes, before removing her paw from his mouth and continuing. “I’m not upset. It’s probably the best first date I’ve ever had.”

To say the least, Ben was confused. “Wha- First date?”

In turn, Angie smiled and pecked him on the nose with a quick kiss. “You’re cute when you’re confused.” She popped the car door and climbed out, saying, “Come on, Ben. I’ll warm up dinner, later. Right now, I have some cuddling to do with my new boyfriend.”

A month later, he felt like a changed male. He wasn't about to go ring shopping, or anything.

Dating a female for a month, no matter how amazing as she was, was only a month. A lot more needed to happen before anything like picking dates occurred.

That's not to say there weren't changes. For starters, he'd lost weight. He wasn't the sveltest cheetah ever to be seen, but he wasn't a candidate for world’s largest purring bowling ball, either. Birchclaw helped him see that there were other options available and that made a world of difference. He was no longer a sugar addict. He was a foodie. The compromise she insisted on was simple. Eat what you want, but work it off, and everything in moderation.

“Cuddles, I'm not saying you shouldn't eat and enjoy it. I want you to. I'm glad you're trying new things, but you also need to be healthy.” She said as she nestled into his lap, on her couch. It was another blissfully quiet night, at long last.

“I know… I just…. well, I don't hate exercise. I'm just so out of practice. And I'll never be 112lbs of lean muscle, again.”

“No no no, baby. I don't care about that.”
“You don't?”

“No. What you look like isn't important. Wait. That came out wrong.” Ben snickered. “What I mean is I want you healthy. If that means thin, fine, but I don't want you to get all health-nut.”

“Why not? It's like the cheetah ideal.”

“Screw the cheetah ideal. I like you with a respectable chub. It’s cuddlier!”

“Heh. That's true.”

“I want you around for a long time, Ben. That means healthy. Fit? Maybe… if that's what you want to try for, but healthy is the goal on my end.”

“Ok. So how do we go about it?”

“We start slow and get you used to it as we go. We'll go on walks and just get faster when you're ready.”

“You're much more in shape than I am. Won't I slow you down?”

“I can add another work out to my week, or something. What? What's wrong?”

“We work too much to do that AND spend time together. We'll barely see each other at all!”, he exclaimed.

“Maybe there's something…” Angie wracked her brain. The tom had a point. Their schedules were problematically busy and time was hard to find as it was, for a relationship that she was coming to value significantly.

“Ooh! I know!” Clawhauser exclaimed before giggling. “You could run circles around me.” Angie’s expression betrayed her complete and utter confusion. “I mean, we run side by side until you pass me. Then you cut across my path, circle back, go until you're behind me again and then catch up.”

“O. M. Goodness. You meant it literally.”

“Well, yeah. That way, we can do it together and you'll get more of a work out. As I get faster, it'll be harder for you to out-pace me and circle back, so it'll balance on it's own.”

“It'll also be easy to see progress and measure improvement. Ben, I'm… that sounds insane, but it might actually work.”

“I'm not just a pretty face.”

“You do have a nice tail.”

“Hey!”

It took a while to get going, but with his new girlfriend supporting him, he started to exercise regularly. Once, they crossed paths with Wilde and Savage on a lunch-hour walk. They must have looked a little odd, with him in running clothes, plodding along and Angie circling him like a moon in low orbit. He heard Wilde comment “reality's leaking again.”, before turning a corner and sharing a smile with her. They may have looked odd, but it worked. He shed weight and felt better for it. It wasn’t enormous, but it was noticeable. When his coworkers started noticing, it did nothing to quell the rumors that had been going since their first evening out. It was a very
interesting day when he had to request a smaller uniform size from the chief.

Ben’s mother also noticed and couldn’t help herself being nosy, as only a feline and a mother can be. Once she wheedled the details out of him, Ben had a devil of a time fending off his mother’s requests to meet his girlfriend. The only excuse that helped was “I don’t want to scare her off by rushing.”, which was true.

It was also selfish. He wanted to keep Angie all to himself for a little longer. He was getting very attached and was still very uncertain. His limited first-paw experience with dating and self-confidence issues made him hesitant to progress. He didn’t want to have to explain any more than necessary if things didn’t work out.

Angie must have sensed something, because she decided to make the first move again, and make it a big one.

“Cuddles, do we have plans for Valentine’s Day?”

“Well, it's next week, so I got reservations at a nice restaurant and I was thinking a movie afterwards?”

“I like that idea, but not for Valentine's Day. We can do that next time.”

“I'd like you to meet my kittens. I've told them about you and they're very curious. They want to meet you.”

“Really?!”

Angie had not expected such a big reaction. He looked like she'd just given him the best present ever! “Yeah… they want to meet mommy’s tom.” The sonic boom startled everyone in the precinct, all the way down to Records and the firing range.

………

Officer Lupesson loved winter. It was the best time of year for an arctic wolf. The variant climates he worked in were a challenge, which was why he worked so hard to make it to Precinct One. Sahara Square was a nightmare. The two years he spent in service there were the roughest of his career. Dry or not, the heat was unbearable. Tundratown was more his speed, but the polar reach... there was such a thing as too cold, even for an arctic wolf. The 11 months he'd been assigned there had been plenty. The RD wasn't bad, just in smaller doses. Too humid and he was glad he'd only cross trained there. All in all, he was happy he got the job in city center.

Any of the precincts in Sahara central would have been fine, but when an opening came up in the most prestigious station in the city, he couldn't pass up the opportunity. He'd been on the beat just over 3 years and done well enough to get the transfer. That was eight years ago, now. Not bad for a wolf who just turned thirty. Just enough in all the districts to keep him on his toes, without becoming distressing. Wonderful stuff.

Even so, he did love winter. All except the most miserable of all holidays, right smack-dab in the middle of February, ruining his otherwise perfect season. Romantic Ineptitude Awareness Day, as
he thought of it. The Day of Roses.

Most of the time wasn't too bad. At least it hadn't been. When he was younger, he'd seldom cared. He'd completed school early and gone to the Academy to help his family. He never really had time or interest. He had his siblings and mother to take care of, then. By the time they were better off and he'd finally had the time to take an interest in dating, the accident had happened. From there, he couldn't even if he wanted to. Not that it was a big deal. That was the one area of his life that didn't change.

Through high school and the academy, all the way up to six years ago, he'd done what every other single male did on that day. He went out for black bean noodles with the other bachelors, followed by a couple beers at The Howler’s Den and then home for an early night. No sense in prolonging the loneliest day of the year.

He did that every year until the accident and after it, he’d doubted it'd change. Holy Mother Luna, was he ever wrong. He was coming up on his seventh time enduring the holiday since he got hurt and he'd only had one that kept the old pattern. The new pattern was, if you can believe it, more distressing.

Loopy Lupesson knew he wasn't a great catch for a female and he was oblivious in the extreme. He couldn't get a date if his life depended on it. He wasn't unattractive, or ugly. He was rather fetching, as male wolves went, but he could never get a date. He knew it. He'd been forced to come to terms with it years ago.

It was ironic and very frustrating, therefore, that once he finally got himself used to the idea that dating was a non-option for him, that he was paired with the biggest flirt on the force as a partner. Officer Daphne O'Hara was by far the one officer most likely to play the tease. She even outdid that ridiculous fox in coquetry. More than once, Loopy swore he actually saw the chief's fur get grayer while talking to her. She was a mammal resources disaster waiting to happen. It hadn't yet, but that was probably because when she was flirting with males, they were statistically less likely to take offense at innuendo and therefore less likely to report it. When she did it with females, it was just joking with the girls.

Loopy had to admire her gall. If he was honest with himself, he admired her legs, too. It took real gumption to be so brazen in the office, especially around the chief. Her one saving grace was that she did it completely universally. It was just how she was. Given time, everyone got used to it.

Every year at this time, she would start dropping hints the size of boulders that they should go out for the holiday. The first year, he thought she was being cruel. Felines were stereotyped for playing with their "prey" and her being both an unrepentant flirt and a lioness, Loopy had only been able to come to that conclusion. Until the next year, when it happened again. And again the year after. And the one after that.

After six years, Loopy was convinced she was serious when she asked him to dinner, but he always declined. He didn't want a pity date. He was miserable enough on this day as it was. He didn’t need his nose rubbed in it by a younger female, no matter how good she looked. He also had higher priorities.

His days were mostly full with work and classes and he didn't feel like humoring her. She flirted every second she was awake. Considering how much time he spent with her every day he, of all mammals, would know. A day on patrol with her was a nearly-non-stop barrage of suggestive comments, innuendo and double entendre, with a little coy baiting every once in a while. You know, just to keep things fresh.
She probably does it in her sleep.

It was a thought that thrilled and disturbed him. He wasn't sure if it was the idea of her in bed, or the possibility that she was just that brazen. He felt weird thinking about her like that. It wasn't that she wasn't attractive, or that he didn't have the drive. He did. He was fully functional and anatomically correct. He also saw her at work every day. He didn't want to make things any weirder than they already were. He also didn't want to torture himself. Either way, as thrilling as the thought was, he didn't pursue it.

He was a clueless wolf. She was a flirtatious lioness. Yes, she looked good, but... well... that's where he left it. It doesn't pay to dream about the impossible. Pipe dreams were best left for that brief eternity between sleep and full consciousness. He had a degree to complete and a secret to hide. That was enough. Pipe dreams could wait until he had something else to distract himself with.

Like retirement.

In the meantime, he had his shift and in all likelihood, a cheeky partner to turn down, today. This year he decided to go on the offensive. Almost every time they talked, she initiated, but this time he was determined to keep her off balance. Maybe he'd finally come out ahead, for once.

Finding her at their shared desk, he dove straight in. “So, you got plans tonight?”

“I do, as a matter of fact. Dinner and drinks.”, she preened.

“Nice guy?” An uncomfortable mix of anxiety and relief blew through him.

“One of the best! Cute, too.” She was practically gushing. She obviously liked this male.

More power to him.

“Lucky guy.”, he commented.

“All he has to do is say yes.”

“All he- what? I thought you said you had plans.” He turned to face her and she was staring straight at him.

“I do. Well?” She looked at him expectantly.

“Well, wha- oh, sweet moonlight...” The penny dropped. It was him she had plans with.

“You're so cute when you catch on.”, she cooed.

Now, he was annoyed. “Come on, Dee... really?” He was relieved, too, but wasn’t about to acknowledge it.

“I'd love to, but that's not happening until the third date. Well?”

Third date? What third date? We haven’t even had one!

“Don't you have other males? Lion males?” he asked in exasperation.

Her mood soured slightly. “Ugh... Leos... the only leos I attract are egotistical dirtbags. Not interested. I’m looking for something less obnoxious.”

“So you're willing to settle for teasing me? I'm touched.”
“Come to dinner and it’s guaranteed...” She purred. Seeing his irritation, she dropped the teasing. Her sincerity surprised him. “Please, Loopy? You always say no.”

If she kept asking like that, he’d crack. He opted to evade. “I have class.”

“They're online and you have four more days to do your response questions.” His surprise made her smile. “Yes, I paid attention during the last four years.”

“MHmmm...”

“What were you planning to do tonight anyway? Black bean noodles and two beers at The Den before doing homework and going to bed?”, she asked plaintively.

“How did you-“

“I've paid attention. You've done the same thing for five years. It's an easy pattern to predict, Mr. Criminal Profiler-In-Training.” That earned her a little half-hearted grumbling. “Don't get your hackles up. It's just dinner. I'll even have those greasy noodles if you want. Just have dinner with me. It's only once! Please?”

He was going to regret this. He just knew it. “Ugh... fine. We’ll go to dinner.”

“Yes!” She was out of her seat and dancing with glee at the third syllable.

He smiled a little, before shaking his head at himself.

Where is my spine?

“Thank you!” She said as she glomped onto him, pulling him into a hug.

My spine is being crushed by my partner. Great. At least the view is good.

He slammed down on that line of thought and slowly extricated himself from her very nice feeling embrace. “Don't get all worked up. It's just dinner. Now gimme a couple minutes. I've gotta get Wilde his damn coffee, then we have patrol.”

She was grinning like a cub. “You still haven't finished paying that debt?”

Her smile blunted his grump considerably, as he groused. “And I've paid triple... No, I haven't. First, he vanished for a week, then he's practically impossible to find! I keep buying coffee and end up drinking it myself. I don't even like coffee!”

“Then why drink it?”, she asked, genuinely curious.

“I'm not wasting something I've paid for! That's just silly!”

“It's just a cup of coffee.”

“Maybe so, but that can be a lot. Don't look at me like that. You know where I came from.”

“Sensitive wolf.”

It was no secret Loopy grew up in an older, rougher section of the city. He was prickly about it, too. He wasn’t ashamed of his roots, but he didn’t like to remember it much. Once he got his family moved to a better area, he did his best to put that part of his life behind him. Dee, for all she frustrated him, helped.
“I’ll have to find out how sensitive...”, she continued, biting her lip.

“Sweet moonlight, Dee, do you ever stop?”

“Nope! Not even when I get what I want. Now, come on. Let’s find your elusive fox.”

“He’s not my fox. He’s Hopps’ fox. Though gods know how that works.”

“Pretty well from what I’ve seen. They’re the cutest couple!”

“They aren’t a couple.”

“Only a matter of time.”, she replied, breezily.

“Wonderful. A fox and a rabbit, what, living together? What next?”

“A wolf and a lion? We could try sleeping together first. You know, to try it out? Could be fun...”

The sing-song tone of voice she used for the last word made the hair all over him stand on end. He wasn’t sure if it was in a good way, or not. “dinner” was looking more frightening by the moment.

“Is that what you meant by them working pretty well?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you, O’Hara. I saw that lascivious gleam in your eye. Should I be worried about your web browser history...?”

“Good to know you were looking.” She said with a smirk. He could have sworn her ears were red, too. “And yes, you should. It’s very educational! I mean, with their size difference? Even if he was hung like a gnat for a fox, he’d split her like a log!”

“Oh, gods... thanks for that mental image. Pass the brain bleach?”

“Nah.”

“Pain in the ass.”

“Third date, partner, though I didn’t think you were in to that.”

His mind seized for just a moment. That was all it took for gravity to pull the cup from his nerveless paw. As the coffee hit the ground, all he could do was say “Damn it.”

……..

It was just past 8:30, when Ben Clawhauser plopped himself down beside his girlfriend with a big bowl of popcorn in paw. His first evening with the kittens had been absolutely exhausting and a complete success. Right from the start, the smallest of the mollies, Agnes, had stared at him with enormous eyes, before shrieking “It’s so fluffy I could die!” and latching onto his tail. The others took a little longer to warm up, but not long.

Very quickly, he found himself wrestling with the feisty Edith, as the largest of the girls, Margo, grilled him about his intentions towards their mother. The slowest to join in was Jerry, the only tom of the litter, and also the runt. When he came out from behind his mother’s legs and tackled him when Edith called for reinforcements, it got really fun. Even the reserved Margo joined in, once she realized Ben could walk around with all of them attached to him. All throughout, Special
Agent Angie Birchclaw giggled merrily.

They had cavorted all over the living room until pizza had arrived and then, they had to keep the kittens from gobbling their food, just so they could hurry back to playing. After eating, they watched Pig Hero 6 and played Uno until the little fuzzballs were nodding off on the floor. Once the kittens were snuggled in bed, deftly sawing logs, Angie pulled him into a long deep kiss.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome! For what? What’d I do?”

“My kittens had an awesome time tonight. It’s been a long time since they had so much fun.”

“I had a great time, too, baby. You’ve got some amazing kids. Not really a surprise, considering who their mother is.”

“Sweet talker.”

“I’m taking a correspondence course.”

“You’re spending time around Wilde. He’s infectious.”

“If what he has gets me kisses like that from you, I’ll take it.”

She turned him around to hide she goofy grin that spread across her face and shoved him towards the kitchen. “Ok, Cuddles, go make popcorn. I’ll pick a movie.

About an hour of cuddling into a terrible naval action flick starring Steven Sealion and Tom E. Lee-Jones, Ben realized that his girlfriend was distracted. “Hey, baby. You ok?”

“Me? Yeah. Just bushed. The kittens are asleep and my day off is tomorrow, so I can finally relax...”

“Your boss is at it again?”

“Oh, yes... he's all fired up.” She griped.

“Regretting your "promotion" to his right paw?”

“Not exactly, no. I had no idea that a punishment detail as his driver would end up with me in his inner circle. Funny how the world works. It's an honor, but gods, is he demanding...”

“Jack riding you guys hard again?”

“He never stops.”, she groused before chuckling.

“What's funny?”

“Andy would love it if he did. No! Seriously, she would. She has a thing for small prey.”

“What kind of thing?”

“The "I liked it when my ex topped me" kind of thing. “

“Andy, the jackal?”

“Uh huh.”
“Andy, the undefeated Judo champ.”

“Who dated a marmot biker, yes. She likes it small, tough and rough.”

“Wow. Maybe you should talk to Nick for her.”

“Why?”

“He knows everyone. He may know a feisty, small prey with a thing for tall, lean and spotty.”

“Speaking of Wilde...”

“Oh ho...”

“Nothing like that just yet, sugar.” She said, blushing slightly. “I have a question about him. Is he seriously as oblivious as he seems?”

“He's one of the sharpest mammals I know!”

“Except when it comes to romance, from what I see.”

“Oh that? Yeah. The poor guy just doesn't see it.”

“So, he doesn't know Jack's crushing on him.”

“That, I’m pretty sure he’s figured out, by now. I've already added him to the list.”

Angie blinked a few times, processing. “Now, you're telling me about this list, honey.”

“Oh! You know how I keep track of the gossip?”

“Yes, baby. You're an incredible information gatherer.”

He preened a little at her praise, but didn’t get sidetracked. “Well, I keep an eye on who’s crushing on whom and I’ve seen a lot of interest headed a certain fox's way. He has a lot of admirers.”

“You sure they're "admiring"?”

“It’s more like “ogling”, or “lusting”, but close enough.”

“Now, you have my full attention. Tell me some!”

Ben grinned at her enthusiasm. He was so glad she was a rumor hound, like him. “Well, Officer Sandpaw for one. She started looking after that seminar on forensic scent indicators. She liked Nick's insight. Then there's Ivy, Bogo's secretary.”

“The sugar glider?”

“Yep! She’s always liked the confident ones. The treats he drops off for her don’t hurt. She has a real soft spot for spicy cicada crackers and candied fruits. Wilde loves buttering her up with them. There’s Officer Snowfleece...”

“Isn't she the snow leopard in the gun range? She hates Wilde!”

“Until he turns around. She's all about the cold words and the warm bed, especially when a certain big, red, fluffy tail is involved. She has a thing for fluffy tails and Wilde, well... When he came back from a three-week assignment in Tundratown his winter coat came in. He practically doubled
in size. She told me she wanted to tie him to the bed and use him as a scratching post.”

“That’s horrible!”

“Depends on the itch she’s scratching.”

Angie’s mind boggled. “O-oh, wow… There are some kinky mammals at the ZPD.”

“And most of them have a thing for Wilde. There’s Mary in the motor pool. That badger wants to
get him in the shower and use him like a loofa. It’s always the quiet ones that have the biggest
kinks. Angelina, the tapir in forensics, loves his smell. The wombats in IT…”

“Aren’t they both male?”

“And married to each other.”

“Oh. My. Gods…”

“And that's just on the day shift. Night shift has a few and I'm sure he has more.”

“And he doesn't know? How?”, she asked incredulously.

“He's a natural flirt and he's cute. It's nothing to him. Besides most of the attention is directed at
him from behind.”

“That's no excuse.”

“Baby, I don't know why he doesn't, but he doesn't. He flirts a lot. With everyone. Sometimes hard.
From his end, it always seems genuine. He likes to talk and joke and be cheeky, but he never goes
past that. If you ask me, he got too used to flirting without being serious. You know, “attention
without intention”? ”

“Flirting without intent.” She commented wryly. “Have you been at the legal manuals again?”

“I’m studying for my Lieutenant’s test. I want my bars, but that isn't the point. I think he got used
to not seeing anything come of it. Like me. He gave up.”

“Or didn't care.”

“Now, he does.”

“Oh, he does, does he?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s definitely acting differently. My money is on him crushing on Judy.”

“I say Jack.”

“How about both?”

“Oh... oh my... yes! Iniquity and bebauchment at the ZPD!”

“That isn't a word.”

“It is, now. Don't you want them as a trio?”

“I... yes. Yes, I do.” He admitted with absolutely no prodding.
While he fantasized about the massive drama unfolding before them, her mind was sprinting. “I take it back.”

“Take what back?”

“Nick being oblivious. I'm glad he is.”

“What? Why?”

“Could you imagine if he was aware of how much attention he gets? He'd be even smarmier than he is already!”

“Nope!”

“Oh, yes he would, Cuddles.”

“Well, yeah. He'd be completely out of control, but it wouldn't do anything.”

“Uhh... how do you figure? He has a, what... a dozen mammals or so that you know of interested in him?” She asked, to which her boyfriend dutifully nodded. “So how do you figure? It'd be drama on par with Days Of Our Nine Lives!”

“It'd be drama, but he'd never go for any of them. He'd go for Judy. Hands down.”

“Uh-uh. If he went for anyone it'd be Jack, but he'd enjoy playing the field, first.”

“Not Nick. He'd flirt more, absolutely, but only to make Judy jealous.”

“You mean Jack.”

“I meant what I said, kitten. Judy.”

“Ok, Spotsy, time to back up your faith in Judy as his bun of choice.”

Now, it was serious. He never lost a bet when it came to relationship drama at the ZPD. “The stakes?”

“He goes for Jack? You take me and the kittens to Wilde Times Amusement Park for a day.” She had never seen him so intent and it really turned her on.

“Oh, such a hardship...” He snarked. “A day with my queen and her amazingly awesome kittens at an amusement park! How shall I survive! I need funnel cake, stat!”

She giggled at his overacting. “Ok, mister smarty cat, so what if it's Judy?”

“Hmmmm... you bring yourself and the kits to meet my mother.”

“Oh, such a hardship!” She’d expected Gazelle tickets, or something. Not a cakewalk. “From what you've said she'll be all over the kittens. Easy win, there!”

His sly grin made her pause in her celebrations, however. “Except you'd be the first female I've brought home in ages and she'd spend the whole visit asking when they'd be her grandkitties.”

Her heartrate tripled for a variety of reasons. “Ok...! No pressure, there... thanks, Sugar.”

“Just hope Jack wins, my queen!”
“I’d better...”

Claws chuckled as they settled back into what was left of their movie. It wasn’t a long wait.

“So...”

“Yes, my queen?”

She loved it when he called her that. Far more than she should. “So, what if it's both?”

“We mock Nick for running on double J batteries?”

“Oh gods, I never thought of that! That's hilarious!”

“Only if it's true. How about this? If it's both, we do both. It'll be an awesome weekend of visiting my mom and then the amusement park. The kittens will have a blast!” Ben was pleased at the simplicity and ease of making the decision. He was, therefore, confused when she didn't immediately agree.

“How about something more for us...?

“Something else? What are you thinking?”

“Something else? No; a bonus.”

“Lol! Double J batteries for the power boost?” Angie swatted him around her laughter. “Ok. First, we do the weekend for the kits. The next, we go out, just us.”

“I'm liking what I'm hearing so far. Go on, my big, strong tom.”

“Flatterer. Hmm... dinner and dancing at the Palm? Maybe stay the night? Get the kits for brunch with both grandmas, just so they can get some extra fussing in?”

Angie Birchclaw just about melted where she sat. Everything she could have wanted for a weekend with her boyfriend, and he made sure her kittens were included. Without another word, she turned off the movie they had been blithely ignoring and dragged her cheetah off to bed.

It was the best Day of Roses for either of them in years and it was about to get better.
Chapter 13

Storms in Zootopia were usually a non-issue. The city planners and urban engineers, despite their reputations, were not hopelessly incompetent, blindingly useless escapees from the local asylum for the criminally lazy. The city itself was fully prepared for even the most severe of natural occurrences. Category 4 tropical storms, like the one currently sitting over the city, among them. That's not to say that "prepared for" meant "cake walk".

There was nothing easy about weather in Zootopia. Severe weather was a challenge anywhere at the best of times. In Zootopia, there were a special set of challenges to address. Namely, the fact that there were more artificial habitats crammed together there than anywhere else on the world. The climate walls that maintained the city and enabled so many species to live in one place comfortably were masterpieces of modern materials science, engineering and applied thermodynamics. However, they still had moving parts, required maintenance and suffered from material fatigue. The Bureau of City Infrastructure had a gargantuan budget and prided themselves on keeping the Walls in peak condition, the roads smooth and the habitats stable. That was why this bloody storm was wreaking so much havoc.

Heavy-bore storms and severe weather tended to react oddly to the city's eclectic topography and habitats. The odd variants in temperature usually tapped smaller storms and drained them out before they became an issue. The rain tended to stay in the Rainforest District, thanks to the Alpine District's mountains, but whatever managed to get past that, hit Tundratown and emptied their tanks as snow. A passing storm didn't stand a chance. The Cat-4 and higher storms were a different story.

Big storms, as though to remind Mammalia that Mother Nature was not to be trifled with, tended to settle over the city and linger, almost as if trapped. When this happened, a bit more work was required from the denizens of the various districts in order to endure.

Some had to take semi-drastic measures. The Nox, for example, rolled enormous, reinforced steel doors closed and shut down any connection to the surface, except the air circulation systems and a few freight elevators. The Alpine & Meadowlands districts pulled into themselves, like hermit crabs and hid as close to the ground as they could, if not under it. Whereas, the Bayou, Delta, Canal, Docks and Rainforest districts just opened their rainwater sewers to full capacity and turned the sprinklers down a little.

Center stage for the stress of the storm was, fittingly, the neighboring districts of Tundratown and Sahara Square. The world over, animals marveled at the achievement of having an arctic paradise within meters of a desert wonderland. It was bragging rights par excellence and Zootopia capitalized on it. However, it came with a price.

When a large storm settled in for a long visit, it turned out that the artificial mountains turned against them. The warm, moist air of the RD and the so called "wet districts" blew up the mountainside and fed the storm moisture, while on the other side of the city, the meteorological hot plate that was Sahara Square poured heat into it. The hot air created a sort of bubble that prevented the worst of the weather from hitting the arid district, but that left Tundratown pinched between a hot and a wet place with a massive funnel directly overhead. Not a pretty picture in the form of snowpocalyptic precipitation.

In this situation, there was only one recourse: turn the climate wall up. It sounds counter-intuitive, but the only defense the district had against massive downpour was to solidify it as much as possible. Then, it was just snow. Snow, they could handle. Snow was nothing. Snowmelt was
something else entirely, something potentially deadly not just for the citizens, but the carefully
cultivated structure of the city itself. It was a nightmare to artificially create the permafrost base
that the district was built on and that was why the Tundratown-Sahara Square climate wall had
been running at maximum capacity for over a fortnight. Just about long enough for things to start
going wrong. Instabilities were detected in some of the support systems and almost overnight the
city was up to its muzzle in problems.

That was how Judith Laverne Hopps of the ZPD found herself stuck in a snowdrift.

The emergency call went out two days before. All hands on deck. The climate walls were unstable
and lots of not good was happening. Judy and Nick were among the first to respond and had been
in the field since.

Since then, while the engineers and technicians worked around the clock to get the city stable,
again, the police were pulling triple shifts keeping it alive to be stabilized. The emergency services
were swamped and every mammal in the city's employ was out trying to save it, right down to the
rubbish collectors.

The worst of it was the snow spilling across the Wall into Sahara Square and the resultant flooding.
That was where Judy had spent roughly the last 38 hours.

Owing to her small size and ability to calm others, she was stationed at the rear and been assigned
to help with the evacuations, route sandbag deliveries to the mammals constructing temporary
levies and, finally, as of two hours ago when the Walls came back online, directing cleanup
operations.

She had been running on coffee, adrenaline and willpower for over a day and was visibly tired
when Chief Bogo came to relieve her, personally. The massive bovine was uncharacteristically
gentle when he spoke to her. Her dedication and hard work during the crisis impressed him deeply.
Then it irritated him, when she broke off their conversation mid-sentence to bark orders at a relief
crew.

Rather than discipline her, he opted to send her home to rest, complete with a mandatory forty-
eight hours of recovery time. She had earned it and then some. Her ears full of the Chief’s
promises to track down her partner and get him home, she headed out. As she drove, she let her
mind wander.

She was feeling what she liked to think of as work-high. It was a weird feeling of satisfaction and
accomplishment, coupled with an excessive adrenaline and endorphin rush. She knew it sounded
weird, but it was no different than runner’s high, just more intense. It would last for hours and keep
her awake far longer than she wanted to be. That was a good thing for her tonight, as she had a
long, roundabout drive to her apartment. When it finally wore off, she’d sleep like a tranquilized
feline in a sunbeam.

She chuckled at herself as she drove along, remembering Nick calling her the weirdest adrenalin
junkie he knew. He may have been right. Judy had no idea if the feeling was something that she
shared with her coworkers, but she saw most of them with the same goofy, exhausted grin after
especially taxing days. It was probably something to do with meeting expectations and the
alleviation of pressure. In reality, she didn’t care. She just enjoyed it.

Speaking of things to enjoy…

Thinking about the fox triggered a small side effect of the afterglow that came with her adrenalin
high and suddenly, her fox was all she could think about. If she was honest with herself, this was
nothing new. Her high had everything looking rose colored. Not a thing was bothering her and, while she was awake enough to drive, she was not awake enough to keep her mind from wandering a bit. For once, it didn’t wander straight back to the gutter, but for some reason meandered to a slightly different memory. Judy had no idea why this popped into her mind, but she suddenly recalled what she realized in retrospect was a major relationship moment for her and Nick; meeting the mother. Pity it was back before she figured out she knew what she wanted.

Lillian Wilde had passed close to two years previously, but Judy had met the vixen and become good friends with her in the months between their first meeting and her death. It was obvious from the first few minutes of their luncheon where Nick got his sense of humor.

Nick had invited her to lunch with his mother and himself. He was supposed to pick her up around 11:00 and spend the afternoon at the vixen’s home in a quiet corner of Sahara Square, near Hyena Heights. She managed to stay completely calm and nowhere near panicked until roughly two hours before she was supposed to wake up for her morning run, at 5:00. By 11:00, when Nick arrived in his Coyotah Prius, she was nauseous and fidgety. Nick laughed at her the entire ride.

Judy felt both ridiculous for her anxiety and perfectly at home minutes after they arrived. Lily Wilde was just as full of terrible puns and jokes as her son. Listening to them blather at each other had her head shaking and her eyes rolling double time. They were hilarious together. Judy saw where Nick got his showmanship and consideration, as well. It was obvious the vixen was putting on a little show like she and Nick did at the station, to amuse her guest and the fact almost all the nibbles waiting for them were vegetarian was a conscientious touch she didn’t expect. Most predators, especially elderly ones, weren’t so conscientious of prey guests.

Another thing Judy didn’t expect was that Nick’s mother didn’t call him “Nick” very often.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Wilde.”

“Lily, dear. Call me Lily.”

“Um, ok. Uh... Lily...”

“Yes?”

“Why do you keep calling him Pie?”

"Oh, I call him “Pi”. His middle name is Piberius, honey."

"Mom!" Nick whined and Judy spectacularly failed to contain her laughter.

"What's the matter, Pi?"

"I was saving the reveal on my middle name."

"For when?"

"Did never work for me? Yes, yes it did."

"Oh, stop. It's an old family name and tradition. Besides, I've called you Pi for years and you never cared."

"Your reasons for it were funny. I can't deny anything that humorous."

"And I'm your mother, so you can't stop me, anyway."
"When you have no teeth, learn to like mush."

"Good boy."

"What are your reasons?" Judy put in during a small break in the volleys. Her hostess grinned oh so familiarly and Nick rolled his eyes as she began.

"One, it's cute just like him. He's just so adorable! Just look at those floofy cheeks!", she chirped, as she pinched his cheek. He rolled his eyes again and tried to hide his reddening ears. Judy grinned behind a paw. "Two, it's easier to say than “Nicolas”. Three, I'm the only one who uses that name, so he'll never miss it when I call him. Four, it's his favorite dessert. Blueberry-lemon, honey. I'll give you the recipe." She said with a wink, earning a pink tint in the rabbit’s ears. "Five," she continued with a rapacious smirk, "Pi is a long, complex, barely comprehensible number that has many uses and irritates practically everyone, so it's him in numerical form. It's perfect!"

Judy laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Told ya," Nick smirked.

Unfortunately for Judy, the laughs didn’t stop there. The abdominal workout she got left her sore for days afterwards. They were just getting to sitting down to eat, when the topics of desserts came up again.

“So, his favorite dessert is blueberry lemon pie? I never would have guessed that, considering how often he filches the ones my family sends me…”, Judy deadpanned at her unrepentant partner.

“Blueberry or pecan. He always did like nuts. Hanging out with Honey, that squirrel he had a crush on…”

“Squirrel?”

“Oh, yes, dear. He's always liked petite females, but she was a bit ... shall we say beyond feasible? Tiny little thing.”

“Tiny?”

“Why yes! She didn't even come up to his waist. Still... he was nuts over her.”

“Oh, gods, mom…”, Nick groused with a chuckle.

“What?”

“So much set up for one joke.”

“I see where you get your sense of humor.”, Judy snarked at her partner.

“Did he tell you the three humped camel one? Terrible, isn't it? One of his father's,” she informed her guest with a wink. “Don't look so shocked, dearie. We're a forgiving family.”

“To a fault, sometimes,” Nick added.

“True, but we’re better mammals for it. If you've got to have a fault, that's not a bad one.”

“The flaw that makes the masterpiece.”
“By that standard, you'd fill a museum wing, Nick,” Judy riffed, joining in on the fun.

“Hah! Oh, son, I like her. Tons of sass in a tiny package. Just your type of female.”

“Oh! Uh, we aren't dating, Mrs. Wilde,” Judy quickly interjected, lest there be a misunderstanding. There might have been a hint of regret in her voice.

“Uh huh...”

“We aren't, mom. Seriously,” corroborated the todd in question.

“Of course not. Just like you weren't dating Honey back in high school... and it's Lily, dear. Remember? No need to be formal.”

“You dated Honey?”

“Never officially?”

“It was official if the state of your sheets was anything to go by.”, Lillian stated, as though discussing the weather, instead of her teenaged son’s sex life.

“Mom! Good grief... We never dated.”

“Stop being nit-picky.”

“We never went on a single date. We just rutted a lot.” Both foxes chuckled at the instant rosy tinge to Judy’s ears.

“That I can believe. What was it you said, then? "The crazy ones are better in bed, at least once you undo the straight jacket", I think. It was during his "edgy" phase,” she stage-whispered to her rabbit guest, who was already snorting with laughter.

“Look, it was ages ago and before she realized she liked vixens, not todds. And why are you looking at me like that?”

Lillian rolled her eyes at her son. “Don't mind him, he was never good at knowing where he stood with females.”

“What has that got to do with it?”

Both females hadn’t bothered to restrain their laughter.

Several hours later, when they were on their way back to her place, Judy was glowing. It had been an exceptionally good day. Once Lily had gotten her laughing, Judy had barely been able to stop long enough to eat or drink anything. That was one reason that “brunch” lasted close to four hours before they began making their way back to Judy’s apartment.

“So, Pi, you up for a Farscale marathon to solve out the awesome day, or are you feeling more Deep Space Swine? I got the new stand-up routine by Eddie Lizzard from my sister, too. I’ll throw in pizza, later, if you’re on the fence.”

“Hold up there, Carrots.”

“I know for a fact that you have no plans for the rest of the day. Were Lily and I too much for you? Do you need a nap after the vicious females raked you over the coals, Pi?”

“Hardly, Carrots. I’m happy to hang out with you the rest of the day, but ix-nay on calling me Pi.”
“You call me Carrots. It’s nice to have a nickname that irritates you, too.”

“It doesn’t irritate me, Judy, but it’s not a nickname you’re allowed to use.”

“Hang on. You went all serious on me.”

“My mother said it’s an old family name and a tradition, right?”

“Yeah? So?”

“So, Pi is her name for me. Only she can use it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Uhhuh. Fox custom. Middle name is for family use. Nickname from it is for mother’s use only.”

“Is she really the only one who can call you that? Is this another hustle?”

“No hustle, Carrots,” Nick chuckled. “If you want confirmation, ask Finnick. Middle name: moms and mates only.”

“Moms and mates? I thought it was just your mother.”

“I didn’t think the other one applied. Yes, the only other mammal allowed to call me Pi is the one that makes an honest todd of me.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Damnit.”

“Come on, Carrots! All you have to do to call me Pi is marry me. It’d be worth it, wouldn’t it?”

The happy memories lasted her all the way until the black ice.

Sitting in a snow drift was not how Judy saw her morning ending. The climate walls being back online unfortunately did nothing for the washed-out roads, mudslides or flotsam that either destroyed the roadways, or rendered them impassable. Unfortunately, again, the roads most affected were the ones closest to the wall, that led out of the district. If Judy wanted to get home, there wasn’t much she could do, as she discovered. There were few routes available that could see her out of Sahara Square, and most of them by ferry. She wanted to get to Sahara Central and not by way of Outback Island, or the Banyan Bayou, so there was only one left: tunnel TS4, also known as The Trans-Sibearian Passage. To get home she was stuck going straight into the teeth of the storm. The only way home was through Tundratown.

As previously discussed, Tundratown was really, really good at handling snow. The roads were clear even in the worst weather, or so the District municipal council liked to brag. Therefore, black ice was the last thing on the tired rabbit’s mind as she slipped into the only open tunnel between the desert and what she was now thinking of as a winter blunderland, mid-reminiscence. A thin sheen of water was all that Jack Frost needed to make a perfectly usable road into an ice rink.

Jerk Frost, more like.

Judy’s griping was nothing but sour grapes and she knew it. For all her advanced training and extra classes in road safety and technical driving, she was not invulnerable to bad luck and environmental
hazards. She was stuck. Very frustrated and stuck. Her glow from earlier had faded and her mood had soured.

The cruiser hit the ice at exactly the speed limit, but on that curve just outside of the tunnel proper into Tundratown, that was all it took for a spin out. Fortunately, it was a soft spin and a short one. Too short for her to do more than register that the cruiser was not in her control, before impact. She didn’t hit anything but a snowbank on a ditch, but it was enough. The cruiser got stuck, but otherwise was undamaged, as was the driver.

Good luck all around! That was about the time when either Nick or Jack would comment on “lucky rabbit’s feet” and say something amusing to lighten her mood. Alas, the last she heard of her partner’s condition, he was in fine form and out with the wolves doing a low-light patrol, hoping to keep looting to a minimum. His night vision made him slightly more useful in the field than she was, despite his small stature. He could get to higher places than their larger, heavier compatriots, as well. She hated being separated from him in dangerous situations, but being with the wolves, Nick was likely safer than anyone. Wolves take their packmates seriously, even the temporary ones.

Naturally, to Judy’s vexation, there was nothing in reach of the cruiser’s winch that could act as an anchor and there was no official assistance available, not for something as minor as a stuck cruiser with no injuries. When she called in she was informed of same and told to sit tight for anywhere from one to seven hours. A service vehicle should be able to get around to her somewhere around then. Upon hearing that, her patience finally ran out. She texted Fru Fru and requested a ride.

The shrew was ecstatic to help and, once the rabbit filled her in, insisted that Judy stay with her, rather than make the rest of the trip home to her shoebox of an apartment. Judy considered arguing the point for half a heartbeat, but gave in without saying a word. Her exhaustion was finally catching up with her and she wanted nothing more than a little downtime. Preferably, with a hot meal and a lot of sleep on the side. She flopped back into her seat, turned on the hazard lights and turned up the heat. If she was going to be stuck waiting for a ride in a blizzard, she’d do it comfortably.

While she was waiting for Fru Fru’s limo, she called in that she was seeking refuge from the storm with a resident and that the cruiser was locked up tight. Surprisingly, she got a resoundingly positive response. The formerly sluggish dispatcher likely had a large dose of boss-standing-behind-me syndrome. She confirmed and coded off-duty before hanging the mic up with a chuckle. Once that was done, all she could do was wait.

Judy hated waiting. She barely possessed patience. She had her share of it, but it was largely taken up with things other than work. By nature, she was predisposed to activity, something her job provided amply. Indolence, or lethargy, were not things she indulged in. Or, she hadn’t until she had been seduced into learning the art by her fox.

Sitting in the driver’s seat of her cruiser, she drenched in blush at one of her more recent “lessons in relaxation” as she thought of them, with her fox. The Lantern Festival was a day that, well, she didn’t have words for. At least, not any that she’d admit to knowing in front of her parents. The day on the river was one she would never forget, no matter what happened in the rest of her life. It had already been five weeks and the day felt like it had only just ended. She had been teased, riled and terrified like she had never known was even possible and she loved every second of it. All because it was him doing it.

For months, things between them had been improving, escalating. The days were sweeter and the dreams were, too. Some of them were actually starting to come true. It was achingly slow to her,
bordering on glacial, but every day they were closer than they had been the day before. Closer, but miles and miles and libido tauntingly frustrating miles from where she wanted to be. None of that was news. She was close to desperate for something, anything, to happen to change the increasingly turgid status quo. Preferably, before she popped outright.

As frustrating yet wonderful as her situation with Nick had grown, she also had to contend with her new relationship with Jack and there, she was even more lost. She had no idea how to see the buck. He was her friend, yes, but there was a lot more to consider, in her increasingly complex little world. Her biggest concern was whether or not he was rival for Nick’s affections. Or even if “rival” was the right word. It was obvious that there was more than air between them. Something almost tangible. There was no denying it. Every time she thought about it, jealousy flared through her. Jealousy and guilt, more accurately. Her conflicted feelings towards Jack were not limited to their situation with her fox. Rather, the rest of her feelings only served to make the conflict more substantial.

Since they had cleared the air after the first few disastrous weeks of acquaintance, she and Jack had become very close. In some ways, well past what could be considered “platonic”. He was practically family to her. He was kind, engaging and fun, yes, but what really made the situation difficult was that he was understanding and supportive of her. That was definitely something she wasn’t used to from another member of her species. Not even her family had really been there for her when she was chasing her dreams. They came around a little once she’d caught them, but when she ran away to the farm during the Night Howler case, they weren’t there for her. They were confused and wanted to help, but they were missing something; a vital, visceral connection to her context that left all their “support” feeling tentative and insipid. It was as genuine as could be, but it felt like a fish comforting a dragonfly that had lost its wings. There was a deficit of understanding that cost them much of their sincerity. With Jack, that deficit was absent.

Jack was the only other rabbit she knew of in anything like law enforcement. He was already a legend when she was a kit, and now he was one of her closest friends. It was like a dream come true! One she’d only indulged in during her brief interest in spy novels as a kit. By rights she should be thrilled. If she was truly honest with herself, she was. He was one of the best friends she could’ve hoped for, right down to helping her deal with her family. The political acumen he had developed over a long career and many dealings with many mammals gave him an edge that she lacked. It also helped that he had a certain degree of detachment that kept his judgement clear.

He was very diplomatically minded, which was another asset in dealing with her family. On several occasions, he had come through for her in giving advice and direction for dealing with her meddlesome mother, panicky father and the myriad siblings that she had. She was amused afterwards, when he started drawing similarities between the little cliques within her own family and the dynamics of kingdom politics in the medieval era. It made her wish she’d paid more attention to Mrs. Woolcowitz’s droning in her History classes at school.

She had to assume that it was very easy for him to deal with such minor issues considering his normal forum of political conversation was the upper echelons of government and international diplomacy. Family matters for one small town country rabbit warren were hardly a challenge, or so she would think. He certainly seemed to have no trouble with it, but he also didn’t make light of it. He addressed her relationship with her family with the same focus and attention that he handled his job. It made her feel galvanized to have someone take her and her concerns so seriously, especially a kindred spirit of such distinction.

Unfortunately, the familiarity did not stop there between the two rabbits. Being so singular among their own species it was difficult for her not to think of Jack as effectively an older, male version of herself. Their experiences were different but in an extremely similar vein. He had endured
hardships and alienation just as she had. They’d had to work extremely hard to get where they were and earn what they had largely on their own, in the face of prejudice and opposition. That was something that none of the other officers or even her partner could relate to in the same way. Yes, Nick had his own concerns and endured his own trials, but to have someone so similar to herself present in her life, at long last, she truly didn’t feel alone. The easy camaraderie and comfort from two such kindred spirits so far outside the species expectations was nothing if not cathartic.

It had grown to mildly embarrassing proportions. It was common practice in rabbit warrens to use siblings in place of furniture. That is, if a pillow was not to be found, a sibling could be used in its place. They were cuddlers by nature. Judy had found herself using Jack in exactly that capacity on several occasions of late. It was something she did purely unconsciously, as if it were natural. Indeed, the first time she did it Jack was dumbfounded. She didn’t realize until the deed was done how uncharacteristically familiar an act it was.

For her to treat him with such casual ease very clearly indicated how their relationship had progressed. That, she surmised in an instant. It took a little more work to get it translated to Jack’s understanding. His unusual upbringing and years of disconnection from what might be called a “normal rabbit home life” meant that he didn’t have the same basic knowledge of rabbit culture. What was perfectly normal for her was bizarrely unusual to him. He possessed a mentality closer to that of a loner predator species when it came to personal interactions, which didn’t really surprise her. That mentality didn’t take long for her to overcome, however. Soon Jack barely took note of the casual familiarity between them any more than she did. Eventually, he even began initiating the contact.

Yes, it was clear that they were not exactly “platonic” in their relationship. Jack had grown on her to the point of feeling more like a sibling, and one of her closest, than anything else. Despite the fact that they were almost 20 years different in age, they were almost like littermates.

He was an excellent friend and her level of comfort with him was frankly shocking to her. He added something genuinely remarkable to her life. He consistently made it better. The undefinable something that he added to her world made everything better and she could not be more grateful for it.

Unfortunately, that made everything so much harder.

Judy had very mixed feelings about the last few months. There were good things with Nick. There were good things of Jack. There was undeniable tension with Jack over Nick and really that was the only sticking point. It felt kind of like she was fighting with a gay brother over mate. I was not a comfortable experience for her once she realized that. It was one of the few occasions where she actually felt like she wanted to go out and have a drink, without either of her companions. She restrained herself, but it was a fight. Of course, this was all just supposition on her part. She had never been in that position, in reality.

Except for that one time with cousin Riker back in seventh grade…

Thinking at all over again for a five thousandth time wasn’t getting her anywhere. The simple fact of her conflict wasn’t a surprise. If she just sat for a heartbeat and thought calmly, she knew her situation wasn’t even all that unusual. It was just another love triangle. It didn’t make a huge difference in the grand scheme of things. All she had to do was keep working and eventually Nick would be hers.

Unfortunately, if she stayed calm and thought it through, that same sense of inevitability shortly thereafter would shatter. She did not feel so sanguine about her position. She did not know whether she was a shoe-in for landing her fox. Jack and Nick were nothing if not close on their own terms.
One long, deep breath would see her calm, another saw her panicked, again. It was nauseating. She’d call it a vicious cycle, but... At the Lantern festival, she’d had close to the perfect day. Her mate and her de-facto littermate and the best day she’d had since she had her badge pinned to her chest. The cherry on top had been Nick’s little “joke” at the end of the night. When Nick had kissed her everything had felt perfect, but that was only half of it. When she saw Nick kiss Jack, she felt a flare of jealousy and shock the likes of which she didn’t know she could experience. He wanted to thrash Nick for pulling that stunt. She wanted to bludgeon Jack, even though it wasn’t his fault. She wanted to completely lose her mind in a fury of jealous bun. It was the alcohol and relaxation that made her too sluggish.

That’s what she told herself the whole way home. She was tipsy and relaxed and not her usual self. That was why she didn’t have a hissy-fit of jealousy. That was why she’d reacted so insipidly to Nick grabbing her. That was why she failed to escape. That was why she reacted so strongly to a little nibble at her ears. That was why. She told herself that and believed it the whole way home, while Nick escorted her. She repeated it to herself all the way through her evening routine and to bed.

Once her texts to Nick and Jack were done and she finally laid herself down to sleep, she couldn’t settle. She kept replaying the day in her head, right down to the end, but rather than feeling jealous, or angry, all she felt was giddy. And aroused. She fought it for a while, but she was sick of lying to herself about so many things. Within an hour of her head hitting the pillow, she had to admit that seeing her fox kissing Jack was one of the most arousing things she’d ever seen. So much so that she opted for a shower before bed. A long one that left her with a new layer of complexity on her jumbled feelings.

Judy shook herself out of her unhelpful emotional reverie as she saw lights coming down the road in her direction. Moments later, the unmistakable forms of Raymond and Kevin, two of her favorite acquaintances in the Big household could be seen through the snow. As the two moderately-sized polar bears trundled through the blizzard toward Judy, she prepared herself for the imminent cold of moving from her nice warm cruiser to the no-doubt refrigerated limousine that had been sent for her.

The Big Family boys were good guys, but they weren’t much on conversation. Judy knew that their trip to the Big compound would be a quiet one. This was very good in her opinion, because she didn’t feel particularly chatty. This was also a very bad thing, because it left her with nothing to distract her from her ruminations.

Thinking about Jack, her family, Nick and all the other lunacy going on in her life only brought to mind one of the more interesting events in the last few months: the trip she had taken home to Bunnyburrow, two weeks ago. That trip had been with Nick and Jack in tow. It was supposed to be one of those “work-life balance” things that Bogo was so keen on these days, and it sounded like a wonderful idea.

Could I have been more disappointed?

The level of awkwardness achieved during that particular visit to the family farm was one for the record books. The most normal part of the trip had lasted only from their arrival at the house to Bonnie and Stu hugging her. From there, it was all downhill. Her parents misunderstood who was sleeping with whom, or trying to, for a start.

The day they were supposed to leave for the long weekend, they chose to take a half shift just to get a head start. Towards the end of their shift, Judy had been slogging through another mountain of paperwork, cataloguing a morning’s worth of pickpocket arrests, when her ever-ebullient partner
had decided that she was getting too much done and scared the living bejebus out of her.

“Judy!”

“What is it, Nick? I'm in the middle of this report.”

“I'm pregnant.”

“What?!”

“Now that I have your full attention, I stopped at Anya's Taqueria. Burrito?”

“Thanks, but no. I’m too homicidal right now to eat.”

“Your loss, Fluff. Ready for tonight?”

“I would be if I wasn’t being interrupted.” She groused as she turned back to her desk. “I was just getting into a flow, too.”

“What’s the matter, Honey Bun? Not looking forward to our trip home?”

“What’s this “our trip home” stuff? It’s my family’s farm, but you aren’t family.”

Not yet, anyway.

“So you say, but what was all that about your parents thinking we were sleeping together, Carrots?”

“I should never have told you that.”

“You regret it? I’d have thought my expression alone was worth dropping that one on me.”

“Heh. Yeah. That was pretty good.”

“Never regret, Hopps. It’s as futile as chasing your tail.”

“And just how often do you do that, Wilde?” Jack inquired, as he entered the room.

“Haven’t since I was in diapers. I found better tails to chase,” Nick blithely replied, complete with smirk and eyebrow wiggle.

“Incorrigible,” Jack muttered.

At this point, Judy knew she was getting no more work done. With Jack and Nick apparently done for the day and waiting on her, all they would do was distract her until she gave up. She did the wise thing and cut her losses, before she started to get annoyed. Her reports would have to wait until they got back in four days.

The hardest part of the whole ordeal was getting the truck.

A perk of visiting the farm was doing her parents a solid and delivering some supplies. Since she was coming out anyway, when she visited, she’d usually do a one-way rental on a small box truck, so she could ferry things the farm needed without having them pay the shipping fees. Usually, it was machine parts, raw materials, or supplies for the farm itself, but there were also orders she’d get from her mother requiring visits to the Iflea loading docks. It was terrifying how many replacement dishes a rabbit family could need, with that many little, clumsy paws.
She also did some of the grocery shopping for her mother. The spice wholesalers now knew her by sight, as did a cantankerous, old Hunan hare at the exotics supermarket in Tanuki-town. Judy had stumbled upon the little market in her first year. It was the largest a hole in the wall she’d ever seen. An ancient converted warehouse, hidden under a metropolitan rail line, the place was a goldmine of inexpensive vegetables and imported exotic treats. It was where she had discovered kimchi; a culinary delight she had brought home by the gallon to share with the rest of the Hopps clan.

Now, it was a standard part of the household diet and a major source of income for the farm. Her mother had been frustrated with the fact that kimchi continues to age and ferment after it's been unsealed. Many of the family liked the sour, bitter taste it developed over time, but she tended to prefer it a little fresher. Yes, cooking with it was easier when it had aged a touch, but she found she craved that light, almost sweet character that it had when it was just finished its initial fermentation. This led Bonnie Hopps to attempt to dry the foodstuff, thus creating one of Chief Bogo’s favorite snacks: kimchi chips.

The Hopps family farm now consumed hundreds of gallons of the stuff every month. It had become such a hit that The Hopps matriarch had developed her own recipe. Now, Judy would visit her little hidden gem of a market for massive spice and ingredient orders, when she was going to visit her family. Just one more way she was doing her family proud.

Sometimes, she’d act as middle-mammal for personal deliveries, as well. Her relatives would have goods sent to her address from Llamazon, or whatever mail order website and she’d bring them with her when she came out. That occasionally made her apartment more like the storage shed that Nick teased her about, than a residence. It also led to some uncomfortable moments for the doe. Accidentally opening a package she thought was hers only needed to happen twice, before she learned to triple check the name on any package that showed up. There were some things she simply didn’t need to know about her siblings. It was not her job to keep porn out of the house and it was no business of hers why her sister Nadine needed a leather corset, gimp mask and fishnet stockings.

That was why she now had frequent renter accounts with both Budgie Rental Cars and Rent-A-Rack. She rented a box truck every four to six weeks. It was only reasonable to get a decent deal on it. Her parents appreciated the savings, too.

This time, the delivery was a fairly small load of personal packages, a large farm order from Iflea and the usual spice order from the Hunan Market, plus a lumber order for her dad, a new loft winch and more fermentation jars for her mother. She also had water pumps, hosing, plumbing components, four solar panels, medical supplies and fifty kilos of office supplies all to get on one truck.

This was no surprise to Nick, as he’d been on these excursions, before. Jack, on the other hand, was much less than pleased.

That is the last time I leave it to Nick to warn Jack about anything. I really should have known better.

Judy had to admit Jack’s expression was funny, when he found out that he’d have to do more than just sing for his supper. The buck was in fine shape, but there is a big difference between fit and fit for farm work. Manual labor was decidedly not what Jack had expected. He pouted the whole way to the Rent-A-Rack location, where they’d collect their vehicle for the journey.

“Don’t worry, Jack. All we have to do is load some of it here. Most of it will be taken care of by the mammals on the loading docks.”
“And once we get to the farm a veritable army will be there to help unload it. You know what they say, “many paws make light work.””

“They also say that idle paws are the Devil’s workshop.”

“Not to worry, Tiger Bunny! My paws are seldom idle.”

“That’s just what concerns me,” Jack replied grimly, earning a laugh from his companions.

When they arrived at the pick-up location, it only took moments for Judy to find her usual contact. She was quickly going through the familiar motions of the rental and left to do the final inspection of the truck. She returned to find Jack, as usual when she left him alone with Nick, blushing and Nick himself smirking.

“Rent-A-Rack… What a name to pick for a company, even if it is run by deer. Are we picking up a box truck, or a stripper? Don’t get me wrong. It’s a long ride and we could use entertainment, but I’d prefer to just choose the music.”

Judy was quick to stomp on that line of thought. “Not after the last time! I am not sitting through another two-hour playlist of weird rap. Jack and I will take care of the music. And who the hell is Mackerelmore, anyway?”

“His stuff wasn’t bad, Carrots. Otherwise, that was hideous, wasn’t it? I still owe Finnick for that little joke of his. At least he slipped gave us Enter Sandmole and Sympathy for the Gerbil, for variety.”

“I’m pretty sure he did that to taunt us.”

“Yeah… He is quite the trickster.”

“Oh, sure. Play into the stereotype.”

“Hey! That’s profiling and I resemble it.”

It was clear to Judy that Jack did not enjoy being railroaded, as he barely engaged in their banter. Of course, it might have been the lack of coffee, as well. He preferred to be in control of his situation, whatever it happened to be. However, as a mature, sensible rabbit, he knew there were times when events transpired outside one’s purview of influence. He clearly knew that sometimes one had to allow for the unforeseeable. It was distressing how often the unforeseeable came in tandem with a certain red fox and, recently, to do with her.

She didn’t mind. She was finally playing back at the two males who routinely confounded her. What finally made that possible was the loss of her uncertainty. She had always been able to level the playing field with her partner and even beat him at his own game from time to time. She’d been able to do that since they met. From then on, she’d mostly kept up with the smirking tease machine. However, once she realized how much he meant to her, there were a couple areas where he could win, hands down, with ease. Namely, anything to do with flirting or innuendo.

She wasn’t a dunce about any of it. She knew what they were, but she was a novice at best. Flirting in Bunnyburrow wasn’t exactly practiced as a form of high art. All it took to make their interest clear was about five minutes conversation and you’d know if a rabbit back home was interested. They were as subtle as lightning in a clear day.

Or a sledgehammer to the knee…
Nick, though was an artist with words when he wanted to be. Bad puns and jokes so bad they deserved burying were his usual fare, but every once in a while, he would drop something on her that left her unable to do more than blink and blush for a few moments. When she realized she was more than crushing on her partner, that started to happen a lot.

It was only during that heinously embarrassing night out months ago that she finally was able to start playing back. Until that night it had always been her trying to rein what she thought was a schoolgirl crush, even after it was proven that it was far more. And, even after it was proven that he had an interest in turn, she couldn’t quite crack that mentality. I wasn’t until Nick drove the point home like a railroad spoke that it clicked in her head. Then, the game wasn’t so one-sided. It dawned on her that she had a full hand and cards to play, and she realized that she could, and should, play them if she wanted to get what she was after.

“Well?” Jack prompted.

“Well, what, Agent Fluff?”

“What do we do about this?”

“We have to do something?”

“Nick, for once could you take something seriously? This is a problem.”

“Not, really. By your definition, we are dating. Don’t worry. There aren’t any specific regs against it.”

Judy managed to re-engage her brain enough to chime in, “Uhh… Yes there are, Nick. The whole section on fraternization in the office? Remember that?”

“Likely better than you do, Fluff.”

“Oh really…”

“Did you ever think you would need it?”

“…No…”

“So, how thoroughly did you study it?”

“Well enough.”

“Meaning you have the gist, but not the specifics. I, on the other hand, did study it thoroughly.”

“Of course, you did. Because you had a reason to. Uhhuh…”, Of course he didn’t have a reason. The only reason he’d have is if he was considering bending those regulations. The only reason he’d consider that is if he wanted a relationship with someone in the office and want it enough to risk Bogo’s wrath and the involvement of Mammal Resources, possibly Internal Affairs. He’d only risk that if he was absolutely sure the relationship was worth it and wanted it regardless of the risks.

Nick shook his head and Jack stifled his giggling before the fox continued, ignoring Judy’s eye-roll. “Officers and affiliate personnel are discouraged, but not forbidden from engaging in romantic relationships, with two exceptions; Immediate superior and subordinate in the same chain of command, or circumstances which create a conflict of ethics, or interest. Otherwise, so long as there is no negative impact on discipline, safety, judgement, or performance, and appropriate behavior on duty is observed, there is no regulatory reason to deny such a relationship. However,
any decision is left to the discretion of the senior commanding officer of the precinct or taskforce.”

“That sounds like a textbook quote,” Jack commented, cautiously.

“That’s because it is.” Nick smirked back.

Judy was floored. “Uhhuh… So, what does this mean?”

“It means, Honey Bunny, that you and I are clear to “engage in a romantic relationship” as long as we don’t give Chief Buffalo Butt a reason to split us up. It’s at his discretion and he could put us on probation until we prove ourselves capable of handling it, but that’s it. There’s also no regulations against engaging in a, shall we say, “non-traditional” relationship. You have your work with Gazelle at Burning Mammal to thank for that. The city changed the regulations to allow for more diverse relationships after seeing that much grassroots support. One thing you can count on: politicians caving where votes are concerned.”

Jack chortled and Judy stared as the fox continued. “Also, because Jack’s technically only on loan to us from the Academy and to them from the government, he’s not even a direct affiliate. Especially, now that he’s a consultant and no longer our instructor, or our taskforce head.”

“Wait. You’re saying that we can be a couple and he can “date” us and there’s no problem with work? Are you serious?” Judy was struggling to keep her heart from leaping out of her chest for joy.

“Very.”

Judy had to know why he had paid so much attention to all this and why he had obviously thought it through so thoroughly. It implied everything she could have dreamed of. All she managed to choke out was, “W-W-Wha-Why?”

Jack, misunderstanding, echoed her, “I have to say I’m curious about that, as well, Wilde. Why should I date you two?”

“You mean you don’t want to?”

“I didn’t say that! I mean- You aren’t a couple! I could be involved with you or Hopps singularly.”

“But that isn’t what Angie was talking about, now was it? If she thinks that, then there will be others.”

“I conceded that point, but again, why as a couple?”

“You mean you don’t like us?”

Jack sputtered, “Again, that isn’t the point!”

“Then, how’s this? If we confirm their suspicions, it’ll create a minor stir at the station for a couple hours, then it’ll be a non-issue. Then they’ll lose interest.”

“Did the waitress slip a hallucinogen into your dinner?”

“I can’t feel how colors taste right now, so not that I’m aware of. Why?”

“Because you have to be hallucinating to think that it’d be a “minor stir”, let alone passé in a matter of hours. It’d make the front page in seconds and last for weeks!” Jack practically shouted.
“We imply that Hopps and I are involved and that you are involved with us. It doesn’t have to be stated, but you’ve already obliquely admitted as much to Birchclaw. If we make your concern more about respecting our collective privacy and less about correcting them, they’ll back off. They won’t believe a denial, anyway.”

“I can’t believe you’re suggesting this so soon after that press mob! Did you happen to forget that? I know you were a bit out of it that day, but you should remember that, at least!” Judy ranted. She was annoyed about the press thing, yes, but more so at having the conversation so horribly side-tracked.

“I’m counting on it, actually. Bogo was threatening fire and madness on anyone who even spoke the word “interview” after that insane week he had shaking the fleas off our tail. No mammal would ever think to inform the press. They’d never find the body. It’ll become an open secret in the precinct.”

“And how do we do this? Announce it over the PA system, perhaps?” Judy’s sarcasm was bordering on caustic, by this point.

“We just stop saying “you’re wrong about that” and instead say “could you keep it down?” That way we aren’t denying it, but we aren’t confirming it. The rest is their assumptions, just like the press with the eweTube clip. The fact that we’re asking them to keep it down implies that they’re right. Then they’ll shut up either out of respect for us, or in fear of Bogo.”

“And if we did it to Clawhauser first…” Jack mused.

“…Then everyone would know within ten minutes and it’d be dead in an hour. Exactly.”

“Let me get this straight… In order to get people to back off about us dating, we should let them think we are dating, only we aren’t…” That was the last straw. She wasn’t getting the answers she wanted directly, but she was a cop. She could deduce what was going on and it was time she put her foot down. They could sort the rest out later. “Nope! Not happening!”

“What? Why not?”

“I have to admit, Hopps. It’d likely have the desired result.”

“No! I’m not doing it. I don’t like taking credit for things I don’t do. Like the EweTube clip, thing? Yeah? No. Not happening.”

“Come on, Fluff! It’d make all our lives easier.”

Judy didn’t even look as she reached for Nick’s tie. She simply found it in her fist and used it the way she preferred: to help her partner focus. She dragged him down, so she could look him in the eyes, as she said, “The only way I’m agreeing to Jack “dating” us, is if you and I are actually dating. Then, yes, he can. Again, only if he is actually dating us.”

At this point both males’ eyes popped, but she didn’t even try to stop the tirade that had built up inside her. “I am not doing a fake relationship, let alone the convoluted mess you’re talking about just to get mammals to leave us alone. That’s insane and if you suggest it again, I will pummel you into sarcastic red jelly.”

Nick’s ears plastered themselves to his skull and Jack was snickering behind his paw. “If we’re dating then we’re dating and that’s. It. Now, are you my male, right now? No, no you are not. As you aren’t my male, we aren’t dating, so Jack can’t date us. When that changes, then he can. Now, let’s get to your place for wine and cuddling. Come on, Jack!” So saying, she left Nick crouched
on the sidewalk and dragged Jack away.

That had been a rather awkward, if affectionate evening. They had settled in to watch Finding Bingo, needing lighthearted entertainment to take the edge off the intensity of the evening. It helped that their viewing was equally easy to ignore as all three of them got a little lost in their own thoughts. Judy’s thoughts centered on her mortification at being so forward. That was certainly had never expected to state what she wanted out right. It simply wasn’t done! It was unladylike and sluttish and what would Nick think of her?

Her anxiety was for naught.

Judy had thought she had made herself quite clear and all but turned on the landing lights for the fox to guide himself neatly into her bed, but the infuriating vulpine managed to completely bloody miss it!

Is this why vixens are so pushy? Because todds are such utter blockheads? How is it that hard to miss? Should I get “I want to shag you cross-eyed!” tattooed on my ears, or spring for the neon sign with a flashing arrow to hang over my bed, reading “fox wanted”?

Thankfully, her calls ahead to the lumberyard and market were worthwhile and the pick-ups only took a couple hours. Loading up the other sundries at her apartment was a quick affair, as her family hadn’t gone overboard in the last month. All they had left to do was stop at Nick’s garage to pick up her dad’s special order parts.

Stu Hopps was by no means a gear head, but he did love old tractors. He inherited a pile of junk in the back of Barn No. 4, by the old farmhouse, that turned out to be the remains of a mid-1950’s model Olive 60 Row Crop Tractor with cultivators. On his birthday, every year since its discovery, he had asked for parts or donations to see it restored and functional, again. It was a part of his family’s history and he hated to see anything shown less than proper respect. It was the turning point between Nick and Stu, when Nick stumbled onto The Old Martha Project and started helping out with it. Now, Nick used his connections to get custom made parts and advice on the repairs. Stu wouldn’t let anyone touch his baby, but he was more than grateful for the assistance.

That was why they had to stop at Nick’s garage and led to Jack all but drooling at the Aston Meercat DB5 convertible that Nick had in storage.

The memories of Jack’s fanboying and the begging for a ride made Judy smile as she was ushered into the parlor of the main Big estate mansion. The buck was a hardcore gear head and a fan of Lop Gear. His argument of, “How can you not love it? It’s a crabby sheep, a gay otter and a dwarf mini lop arguing about nothing, while causing havoc everywhere they go, and let’s not forget, The Stag!” was quite convincing. While she still wasn’t a fan of the show, the argument did work on Nick enough that he decided to drive it out to the farm. Judy’s confusion was short-lived as the fox reminded her that her mother also wanted a ride and this was a good opportunity.

It was a big change of plans and Judy wasn’t thrilled. The truck was a one-way rental and she had counted on the train ride home to get a little time with Nick. Jack had confided that train travel made him sleepy, so it would have been a perfect opportunity to steal a little time for herself with her fox. Jack, naturally wanted to ride shotgun and Judy was anything but thrilled at that further change in plans. It took Nick promising to let her drive it back to Zootopia to make her relent the sad-bunny eyes.

By the time they arrived, Judy was tired, annoyed and lonely. Surprisingly, Jack appeared to be in equally low spirits. Nick had followed her the whole way and, apparently, Jack was less than thrilled at going the exact speed limit the whole way, despite the fact that it was in one of his
favorite sports cars of all time. His grump was short lived as two things happened. The first was Nick tossing the keys to Jack. The second was a little slower in coming.

Before Jack could ask anything, Judy put a paw on his shoulder and said, “Just brace yourself, Jack.”

“Why?”

“Country bunnies are enthusiastic with their welcomes.”

“And the Hopps’ are especially,” Nick quipped.

There was a little bit of attention that went their way when they arrived, but they were equally quickly dismissed. That hadn’t surprised Judy in the least. Deliveries were a daily occurrence and the car had been somewhat hidden behind it. It wasn’t until she stepped into view and belted out a long, high pitched whistle that the hundreds of ears in the main yard popped up and heads by the dozen snapped their attention on them. A number of the nearest squeaked and scampered off to the house and fields. A weird tension filled the air and a low rumble began. This part always made Judy smile.

A giant grey-brown carpet burst from the house and coalesced from the surrounding area before rolling their way. A murmur of “Judy!”, “Judy’s here!” and “Aunt Judy!” built as the tidal wave of tiny rabbits began moving their way.

With a grin, Judy said, “Any time now, Nick.” And the fox stepped out from behind the truck.

The tension in the air went from vibrant to electric as the tidal wave of bunnies became a tidal bore, roaring "UNCLE NICK!" and headed straight at the fox.

“Here we go!” was all Nick said, before sprinting off.

Judy was left laughing with a bewildered Jack, as the horde of giggling buns charged after their red quarry. “What's happening?”

Judy pulled Jack towards the house as she explained. “Their welcoming ritual. He runs until they catch him. It happens every time he comes with me to visit. They really like him. He baits them so they burn off some energy and get their ya-yas out. Eventually, one of them catches him. Usually, Mina.”

“What happens when they catch him?”

“He gets buried under a huge pile of bunnies for a bit, while they all greet him and hug his tail.”

“Sounds like he enjoys it.”

“He loves it. He needs to start being careful of some of the older ones, though. Last time we visited, he was joking about someone cop ing a feel.”

“So, you aren’t the only Hopps girl with a thing for foxes,” Jack muttered to himself, as they made their way to the house. It was quiet, but Judy caught it. It made her afraid, but she wasn’t sure why.

Unfortunately, that was the last of sane portion of the afternoon.

Nick, now aware of her parents’ assumptions from his pet name for her, had been so uncharacteristically tentative, it was like he was walking on egg shells. Bonnie was afraid that Nick
was having an agoraphobic reaction or something, owing that he was a city fox. Naturally, Stu burst into tears at the prospect and nearly panicked both Jack and Nick by all but tackling the fox into a bearhug and bawling. Both Nick and Jack did their unintentional best to infuriate her and exacerbate her parents’ misunderstandings; Nick by trying to act normally, while not calling her and pet names at all in front of them. It was so forced and unnatural it made them fear for the state of their non-existent relationship. Jack, in turn, added to the madness by being very supportive of both his friends and making awkwardly dry jokes or wry comments. He alternately came across as annoyed or flirty with both of them. Her parents were so confused.

Her mother looked so concerned when Nick started out being formal with her and her father had been curious. Then, he made the assumption that Jack had replaced Nick in her affections and it was emotional overload for the middle-aged buck. His happiness that his daughter had decided on a rabbit must have conflicted with his sorrow at losing Nick and he lost it. Again.

Her older siblings, naturally, capitalized on the chaos to push their own agendas and the whole thing and ended up being a huge Abbot & Cowstello-style farce. Her little sister Mina led the charge on the now-available fox, while they tried and failed to get her father to stop crying long enough to straighten everything out. It was one time she wished Nick had been around to help explain, but his escape and evasion skills were being put to the test, avoiding a collection of unattached Hopps siblings, of both genders, and the horde of kits that joined in just for fun. It was left to her and Jack to deal with her parents. Meanwhile, the fluffle of smaller kits that stuck around went on a question rampage. Jack quickly was overwhelmed.

“Are you an’ Uncle Nick not getting married now?”

“Is that why you never marked each other?”

“Aunt Lucy said you were just rutting.”

“Are you and Uncle Jack rutting, now?”

“What’s rutting?”

“Can I have Nick?”

“I want his tail!”

“Mina said it was her tail!”

“She said what it attached to was hers.”

“Does Mina want his pants?”

It had taken almost an hour to get everything back to something close to sane at the house. Once Stu understood that nothing was wrong and none of his fears had come to pass, he stomped off in a huff shouting orders at the able-bodied to get the truck unloaded, while his wife followed, chortling. His embarrassment and the amusement it generated were both short-lived. No sooner had Judy gotten her parents straightened out than she had to go rescue her fox. With Jack’s help, they managed to corral the horde and save the vulpine’s tail.

None of the pursuing rabbits were happy to hear that Nick wasn’t available. Mina in particular was unwilling to concede defeat, calling it a tactical withdrawal. “You haven’t marked him and you aren’t married. Whether you’re rutting or not makes no difference until you mark, so he’s still fair game, even if you have primacy.” Judy fumed at her little sister’s back, as she strutted haughtily away after winking at Nick. The exaggerated sway of her hips making it clear that she was not
done trying to entice the fox. The fact that it succeeded in catching Nick’s eye before he traipsed off to help unload the truck only made Judy’s vexation worsen.

The situation was made no better by Jack’s sudden query about Mina’s comment on “primacy”.

“I’m sorry, Hopps. I’m afraid I don’t know what that means.”

“You may want to just go with “Judy” while we’re here. “Hopps” will just lead to a lot of confusion.”

“Fair enough, but you’re evading.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I’m not sure I can handle a lesson in Lepidae mating culture, right now.” Then, it dawned on her that Jack was a rabbit and his request made no sense. “Wait a second. You don’t know?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“At risk of sounding rude, you’re a rabbit. How can you not know?”

“I understand your confusion. I should know, but I don’t. My parents were shunned, back home. Other than my parents, I’ve had no real contact with rabbit culture of any kind. My knowledge is purely academic and nothing about “primacy” is discussed in the anthropological papers I’ve read.” Judy goggled at him. This was not even close to what she expected. “My family was old blood. When my mother wanted to marry my father, they were disowned and banished. I was the only one of my littermates to survive two years and my father passed when I was young, in a forestry accident. My mother passed when I was fifteen. I joined the service and that was my life, so unfortunately, I know almost nothing of rabbit culture at all.”

Judy managed to force her brain back into gear, but was sadly slow in catching up. “Your family was old blood?”

Jack smiled. “Yes. Old country squires for centuries. Though, to tell a family secret, my grandmother was a Dutch hare.”

“Ok…? Uh…” She couldn’t tell if he was joking. “Right. Rabbit mating culture. Good grief, where to begin…”

“The beginning?” She shot Jack a sharp look and he grinned.

Judy put on her best doe-eyed look and broke out her most saccharine voice. “Well, Jack, when a mommy and daddy bunny love each other very much…”

Jack hastily interrupted. “I don’t need the whole “the Birds, The Bees and the Bunnies” routine. Just give me the bones of it.”

“I can ask one of my brothers to do that for you, if you like,” she replied, mockingly.

“Just the facts, Hopps.”

“OK. Well, first off, we operate on a modified crèche system. Sort of. While we all raise the kits as a community, we all know who our parents are but it’s mostly a formality. Out here family is family. The kits are everyone's responsibility.”

“Isn't that risky for inbreeding?”
“You’d think so, but no. There are several burrows in the warren. Branches of the family are separated that way by matrilineal line.”

“OK, one part at a time. You’re matrilineal?”

“Partly. We’re matrilineal in the warren, but patriarchal with outsiders. Politics and commerce, etc. Relations within the warren are discouraged, but are permissible if the bloodlines are far enough apart. It’s uncommon, but it happens. That ancestry mapping website does wonders for simplifying the problem. Besides, we can smell each other’s scents. Too close to home is really easy to tell. Us country bunnies aren’t as scent blind as city mammals. We can tell who is related and how, pretty well.”

“You’re a city mammal, Judy, or at least I’d say so.”

“My sense of smell is a little blunted anymore, but I’ll be fine in a few days. Anyway, it’s not like I have to worry about finding a mate too close to home.”

“True enough, I guess. Would you still do the genealogy check?”

“Absolutely. There are tons of rabbits, but I’d rather be sure.”

“Makes sense. Next, you said not in the warren.”

“Yep! Past that, carnal relations are kind of flexible.”

“So… Cousins can marry?”

“It’d fit the country bumpkin stereotype, but no. “In the warren” means exactly that. No marking or mating anyone in the warren unless they’re adopted, or came from a previous marriage.”

“Sounds hard to manage.”

“I said it was rare. Even in my family it’s only happened twice in my lifetime and my family is huge.”

“What were the two?”

“My aunt Isabel married a buck her sister divorced, when I was seven and my cousin Alistair married the adopted daughter of his older brother when I was fourteen. Both caused quite a stir, until the genealogies were verified.”

“What happened?”

“They got married. As long as the genealogies check out, it’s no big deal. Worst case scenario, they get a DNA test.”

“Oh. That’s incredibly convenient.” Jack pondered for a moment, before continuing. “But I get the feeling that you meant something else when you said carnal relationships were flexible.”

“My sister Angelica seems to make it a point to find sterile males. She’s had 4 mates and no kits. Eventually, she just went for the artificial option. That or she slept with the doctor.”

“What about her ex-mates?”

“Ex…? Oh! No. They aren’t exes. She loves them and they all get along really well, so they stuck together.”
“What?”

“Yeah. You city mammals have this idea that you're the most open minded. Welcome to Bunnyburrow. Prepare to have your mind blown.”

“I don't understand. This is the countryside.”

“Keen observation, there, Jackie.”

“Doesn't that mean traditional values, etc? How does that work?”

“It's simple. There are a ton of us. The traditional mold doesn't fit all of us. When your families are as massive as ours, you're going to have close relatives that have orientations and preferences outside "traditional" expectations. I have at least 5 dozen siblings that are same sex oriented. Probably more, now. Polygyny and polyandry both happen fairly often, especially when caring for kits becomes challenging.”

“Out here, there are three rules. Family is family; Help where help is needed; Kits come first.”

“Beyond that, it's just details and no one’s business but the ones involved. That only changes if harm comes to kits. Then it's a community issue.”

“Love is love.”

“What was that?”

“Love is love. One of John's sayings. He didn't have a lot else that needed saying and I never understood him, but now, I see a little of what he meant.”

“Good.”

“I'm still confused though. Why isn't this common knowledge?”

“Because it's our business and no one else's what we do in our bedrooms. Or anywhere else for that matter. Besides, why reinforce the stereotypes?”

Nick chose that moment to wander towards them, his fur showing obvious signs of ruffling from dozens of small paws. “The bunnies here keep that particular part of their culture private. They don't want our conservative city-mammal sensibilities to be offended. Yes. The irony. Oh, the irony!”

“But you know,” Jack retorted, his tone of voice implying his curiosity.

“I do,” Nick replied with a wink. “I was adopted. Judy vouched for me after I saved her life a few times. Then, the horde accepted me as one of their own. I’m an honorary Hopps. You will be too, if this conversation is any indication.”

Jack looked like he had no idea how to take that statement any more than he knew how to react to being invited out with the girls. It made Judy feel warm inside to think of him as family, but in light of Mina’s recent declaration it also made her feel uneasy. Of course, Jack wasn’t finished.

“So what is primacy, exactly?”

“I'll field that one, Carrots, um, Judy.” Nick chimed.

“Just stick with calling me Carrots. It’s making everything weird, otherwise.” Nick looked sheepish and scratched at his neck a bit, while Judy continued. “Jack, primacy is all about rank. The
relationships can get a little complicated out here, so mammals decide on the order of precedence at the start of these kinds of things.”

“So, it lays out who’s in charge?”

“Sort of. More…”

Nick Interjected, “…who gets first nibble.”

“Nick!” Judy face-pawed.

“That’s me! Listen, Tiger Bun, primacy is a little bit about who sleeps where, but it’s mostly about communication. The more complex the relationship, the more open and honest the participants need to be. Otherwise, it’s not a huge deal, generally. In any rabbit relationship, there’s usually enough sex drive to go around and then some, but if there’s ever a question of it, primacy is what decides it. Quite literally, it’s who comes first.”

“There’s more to it than that, Wilde!” Judy protested.

“Yes, lots of legal tidbits that don’t matter here and now.”

“Embarrassing oversimplification aside,” Judy glared at Nick pointedly. “Primacy means order of authority, yes?”

“In rough terms. It rarely becomes a concern outside of complex divorces, or medical problems. In those cases, specific legal steps need to be followed and more mediation may be involved, but even then, it’s pretty quick. No one wants to waste time in a medical emergency, or getting out of an unhappy marriage. Prenuptial agreements are a booming business, out here.”

“So is birth control,” Nick chirped.

“So you want to sleep in the barn tonight?”

“If I have company to keep me warm, sure! Who’s up for a camp-out?” Nick smarmed, as he threw an arm around the shoulders of each of his rabbits. Judy saw Jack react almost exactly as she did, dropping her ears to hide the pink tinge caused by the fox’s suggestive tone.

She knew Jack had an interest in Nick, just as she was sure Jack knew about her own wants. After the Lantern Festival, it was glaringly obvious to all three of them, but no progress was made. Even then! Judy understood why, but that didn’t stop the atavistic fury at the fox.

Nick knew. He had to know. After driving her to distraction all day on the water, he had to know she wanted him in the most visceral and emotional of ways. Given Nick’s toying with Jack, as well, the fox had to know about the buck’s desire, too. So why in the nine hells didn’t he do something about it? Something, anything, would be better than this endlessly frustrating limbo, fraught with ambiguous sexual tensions.

Judy found herself pacing absentmindedly as she attempted to distract herself by thinking about the rest of the trip, but there wasn’t much to help her accomplish that. Visiting the farm was just that; visiting the farm. It was a normal for visit to see her family, after the initial fracas.

That first day, the only point of note was Jack taking her mother out for a drive with Nick’s car. Otherwise, it was just another night at the house. The next day offered nothing more substantial, despite being very enjoyable. In the morning, she was on light house duty as a semi-guest, while Nick ended up helping with a malfunctioning winch and Jack was put to work in the fields. The
afternoon was field work for everybody and Jack was shown around. No matter where she went all day, she found someone she wanted to talk to and catch up with. The third and final day, there was the trip into town. The most eventful part of that foray into the mundane was when she ran into her obnoxious ex-boyfriend, in town after lunch.

Nick was a sucker for the ice cream at Sassy’s Ice Cream Parlor and the Bunny Hop Drive Through Diner did the best veggie casserole in the county. Judy wanted to show off a bit and when Reggie wandered in, while they were at dinner, it was too good an opportunity to put the nasty rabbit in his place, while giving Nick another little hint.

Reginald Longear was a species supremacist; the kind of isolationist xenophobe that gave a bad name to everyone around them. In her defense, he kept it hidden when he was young for appearances sake, but he couldn’t hide is distaste for her friends of other species. Once Judy discovered his vehement hatred of anything non-rabbit, their relationship ended. In the years since their split in high school, his distaste had turned more intense, and the fact that it put his neighbors off made him bitter. That made his arrival at the Diner that much more satisfying, despite being unwelcome.

Naturally, when he saw his ex-girlfriend sitting at a table with a fox, he couldn’t resist. After an increasingly nasty exchange around the fox without including him, Judy’s patience wore out and, looking her ex square in the eyes, stated, "Reggie, this is Nick. Yes, he's here with me. Yes, he's a fox. Yes, he's from the city. And yes, Reggie, before you even try, he's better than you. At everything."

She smirked at Reggie calling Nick a fancy talker, despite the fox remaining silent the entire time before dropping her next bomb. "You’re wrong about that. His tongue isn't silver. It's solid gold, especially when he uses it right." The eye-bug reaction from the buck was all the lead-in she needed. “And just for the record? Almost anything would be better than you and your eight-second buck shot.”

The giggling in the Diner was muffled, but audible as the other patrons who couldn’t help but overhear, restrained themselves. Reggie then tried to turn his ire on Jack, another traitor to the species, who pre-empted with, “I can vouch for the tongue.” The snickers became howls and Reginald Longear fled with his ears on fire. The fellow patrons of the eatery were very appreciative of their “joke” on one of the local reprobates.

Joke… What joke? The joke’s on me.

Judy was frustrated, bordering on despondent when Fru Fru arrived in the parlor.

“Judy!”

“Hey, Fru Fru! I love your necklace.”

“Oh, thank you!” Her friend settled on a nearby chair jestured for Judy to help herself to the tea and finger foods. When Judy began nibbling listlessly at a cucumber sandwich, Fru commented, “You look miserable, Judy. What's wrong?”

“Nick. Jack. The usual.”

Fru Fru sighed at her friend.

“I know. You've heard it all a hundred times before. I feel like a broken record.”

“You do sound like one, sometimes.” The shrew lifted and lowered her shoulders at Judy’s frown.
“I’m sorry, sweety. I want to be supportive, but I don’t know what to tell you.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything. It’s a mess. We’re more intimate every day, but never any closer. I’ve been as blatant as I can be without acting like a... well...”

“Like a tramp?”

“That’s a better word than I was going to use.”

“Honey, we both know you’re a lady.”

“I feel like an idiot. What does it take to get him to DO something?”

A high pitched huff escaped Fru Fru and she took a sip of her tea before asking, “How much do you know about fox culture?”

“How much? I should know more, but...”

“I know how busy you’ve been, JuJu.” Fru moved over to a chair and sat. “So, I did a little reading on your behalf. Judy, Most predator species evolved so that the females take charge in making the relationships happen. The only major exceptions are with lions.”

Judy chuckled. “That I can believe. At the precinct, we have DelGato. The term “Leo Ego” was practically made for him.”

Fru Fru smiled. At least her friend wasn’t too depressed to make a joke or two. “Other than lions, when it comes to getting a relationship started, the females take the lead. After that, it depends on the couple and species, but it is about fifty-fifty on who wears the pants in the household after that.”

“Why did predators have to evolve this way?”

“Because it worked, honey. That’s what it took for the species to survive.”

“Yes, but why? Why is it the females that have control?”

“Because males are stupid. Well, I shouldn’t say that. Being sexist won’t help.”

“No. They’re just stupid when it comes to romance.”

“Hah! We’ll let that one go. Judy, I don’t know why it’s this way, but it is. It’s how males tend to work, especially predator males. Didn’t you have a few bucks like that around, growing up?”

“Ugh. Plenty.”

“There you go, honey.”

“... so what do I do?”

“Put on your big doe panties and make a move that he can’t ignore or deny. He’s probably just as scared and uncertain as you, but he’s also a gentlemamal. That means he won’t do something that would hurt you and gods know he’s probably panicked about that. He’s so in love with you and so stuffed with self-doubt he’d probably speak in public at Mystic Springs Oasis before finding the guts to ask you out.”

Judy’s eyes widened then narrowed at Fru’s summation of the complex emotional issues...
encompassing the tangled knot that was her relationship with Nick. “Thanks for the perspective...”

“Judy, he's terrified of hurting or losing you. He's had every indication in Mammalia that you want him, but he was raised to be a good Todd and he's insecure. That probably means he thinks he doesn't deserve you and he won't risk his most important friendship for his own selfishness. It’s also a fox romantic characteristic for the female to ask for the first date.”

Nick, panicked and insecure? And she was the Queen of Sheep-ba.

“So, when does the male do anything?” she practically whined in frustration.

“The vixen asks for the first, the male for the second. After that, it depends on how formal the couple is. I don’t think Nick’s very big on formality. If you ask him for the first date, he’ll probably do the rest.”

“This is so frustrating.”

Fru Fru reached out to pat her friend’s leg with a paw. “I know, honey, but it’s what you’ve got to do to get your fox.”

“Not that. Not just that, I mean. If I’d had half a brain, I’d have looked into this myself ages ago. We could be bloody married by now, if I had!”

“I think you’re getting ahead of yourself, JuJu. Stop beating up on yourself. It won’t help. Think of it this way, he’s waiting for you to do your part, so he can sweep you off your paws. It's sweet. Kinda.”

“In a bone-headed way, yeah.”

“Judy, you aren't in any position to talk. I love you like a sister, so try not to be too angry with me, but you've got it just as bad as he does.”

“I'm not angry. Just... hurt.”

“I'm sorry, hon.”

“Don't be. It's the truth. We're both behaving stupidly.”

“You're in love. Stupid is a big part of it.”

Judy let her head roll back with a sigh. “I guess so. I'm so scared, Fru.”

“I know it’s scary. The things that really matter are the scariest. You and Nick remind me so much of my husband and I starting out. We were terrified and anxious. Daddy threatening to ice him every day didn’t help. I know. Mob daughter problems. Sometimes, it was twice on Sundays.”

“No!”

“Would I lie? Judy, my point is, you’re scared because it’s important to you. I love you so much, Judy, so I'm going to be cruel to be kind. You want your fox? You better go get him. Drag him into some bushes and rut him through the bedrock, if you have to, but go get him. You and he are acting like does, waiting on the other one to be the buck and make a move and he's male, so he'll be an idiot about it. If you don't bunny up, there is a buck out there who also wants that fox. If you don't do something, Jack will.”
Chapter 14

For the first time in months, Jack finally felt like he had his paws under him. As he stepped out of the shower and on to the fur dryer he couldn’t help but feel exultant. He was happily settled in his new apartment and acclimating to life as a semi-normal mammal who had a residence. There was a lot of novelty to be had in this new and disorienting stage of his life. Neighbors, for one.

Jack’s experience with neighbors had been limited to surveillance, deception and avoidance when on the job. Off the job, the mammals next door were mammals who happened to be occupying the next room in the hotel. Now, he had an alpaca couple on one side and a beaver family on the other, with an unattached wallaby doe across the hall. It had made Jack nearly jump out of his skin when she’d said good morning and struck up a conversation the day he moved in. Since then, he had grown to look forward to the pleasantries he shared with her and his other fellow dwellers of floor seven in the Arching Birch Luxury Apartments.

The building itself was a lovely old brownstone. There was a rooftop garden, an area for recreation, spacious apartments and easy access to trains, buses, schools and shops. It explained why so many families lived there.

The apartments were designed for medium-sized mammals. A wolf would be cozy, a cheetah would be a little tight, and a fox would have sprawling space, so for Jack, it was ample bordering on cavernous. Several smaller mammals, like himself, lived in these slightly larger domiciles as the space came at a decent price. Several rabbit and opossum families were scattered around the building, along with a smattering of larger mammals. An aardvark and a panda lived on the fourth floor, a single mother wolf and her cub were at the end of the hall on five, and there was a pygmy bear pod that had bought out the whole of the first floor.

Prior to moving in, Jack’s only experience with neighbors in a residential context had been Judy’s neighbors, whom he had the misfortune of making the acquaintance of when he met her at her place, before their trip to Bunnyburrow. His assessment of them was anything but glowing and it almost put him off the idea of finding a permanent residence, at all.

Meeting them had all the shock of meeting Inga, with none of the charm. At least she had an excuse. In the two minutes he endured their presence, they were excessively rude, inquired if he was hoping to rut her, got aggressive about “stealing her from her boyfriend” and the consequences that’d happen if he tried, and stormed off to yell at each other. Judy naturally heard the exchange through the distressingly thin walls and yelled at them for harassing her friend. The remainder of the exchange had left Jack even less comfortable and more disbelieving, as more and more of her neighbors got involved in the argument, through the walls. Interestingly, Judy smiled through the whole thing and once they were all bickering at volume, had led him off by the paw. All she said when he asked what the hell just happened had been, “Don’t mind them. They’re just protective,” with a fond smile curving her lips. It had been one occasion where Jack seriously questioned the doe’s sanity.

As Jack stood in the stream of warm air, buffing the last of the damp out of his fur, he smiled. Judy was something special. If Jack was interested in does, he’d be in a dead heat with Wilde for her. It was an admission Jack never thought he’d make about a female, but there it was. It was a further irony that he was, instead, in a dead heat with her for Nick, after a fashion.

Jack enjoyed Judy’s company and they had grown close over their term of acquaintance, far closer
than he had realized. He credited himself with being a decently self-aware mammal and observant of his environment, yet somehow, Judy continuously blindsided him. Inviting him out for days at the spa and elsewhere with the girls stunned him. Her consideration, as evidenced by bringing him coffee or tea when he was feeling rough, made just how he liked it surprised him every time. Even going out of her way to accompany him to the shops, or to kill time after a shift. It was just how she was to her friends and Jack was endlessly pleased that he got to take part. However, that was just the tip of the iceberg.

He’d never been very affectionate, or been close enough with anyone to explore it very thoroughly, so when Judy started lounging on him it took him completely by surprise. He initially had no interpretation of her behavior as anything but a sexual advance, which both confused and panicked him slightly. If she had tried, she wouldn’t have been the first female since he’d come semi-out of the closet that thought she could convert him. Several horridly uncomfortable instances flashed through his mind. Most had grown to be humorous, but there were a few that were more… aggressive than others, which still warranted a shudder. At the time, the fact that it was Judy made his brain seize.

Her embarrassed explanation of why she did it surprised him, again. He was aware that he was unusual for a rabbit and very disconnected from lapidae culture, but it was still a shock. It took some calming down and explanation before he said it was fine, as long as there was nothing sexual about it. Judy had stammered assurances until Jack had felt slightly put out that she didn’t find him any more attractive now than she did at the bar in the Palm. Still, she had refrained for the rest of that afternoon from cuddling with him.

Then she sandbagged him again the very next time they hung out by doing it again, but it was the fact that he stopped minding it that hit him hardest. When he made the connection that he actually enjoyed her affection and reciprocated, he was glad he was alone at his apartment. Otherwise, he’d never live down the existential fruit-caking that would have been witnessed.

The most flabbergasting moment had to have been when she invited him to visit her family. If he had not been exclusively same-sex oriented, he would have been panicked. Instead, he was bewildered as always, but much more gracious in accepting than he had been the several previous invitations he had received. Judy’s knighthood jab when she had invited him to the spa day still bugged him a bit. He had no idea he was actually that socially ill-practiced.

I’ve out-shmoozed magnates and diplomats all over Animalia without getting a hair out of place, but that doe asking me to hang out for an afternoon and I’m a poleaxed turkey. Unbelievable…

Jack stepped off the fur dryer, with a final check to make sure he was well and truly dry, before he made his way to his grooming tools laid out on the counter. He’d picked up a full set of brushes and combs, a fur care conditioning kit, even a claw and whisker trimming kit. It was another novelty in his reality to take such time and care when it came to his appearance. He was fastidious with his appearance and always had been. It was a mark of a professional to look the part in full at all times. However, that had also been his attitude when it came to clothing until lately, and that was blown to hell.

Once upon a time Jack possessed enough clothing to do the job and look proper while doing it. He had his uniform suits and a few special pieces, no more. Only what was needful. Now, he had a wardrobe worthy of a professional clothes horse. The reason for that, other than his new acquaintances in the Big family and elsewhere, was the same as his reason for the newfound interest in fur grooming, whisker maintenance and manicured claws. While going out with the girls was enjoyable, and he secretly was only chagrinned at the irony of being considered one of them, he only enjoyed the pampering for the immediate enjoyment of it.
Let’s face facts. Manicures, pedicures and fur-conditioning massages feel really, really good.

It was relaxing, sure, but the aftereffects were something he had to grow to appreciate. That got easier when certain attention went his way from a certain vulpine, by way of a compliment, or two. Granted, that night Jack had enjoyed his fair share of wine and Nick’s propensity for exaggeration was well documented. However, Jack’s ears had stayed glued in their down-and-harder-to-see-the-blush position for as much of the night as he could manage.

Jack shook himself and tried to blunt the goofy, bucktoothed grin that crept across his muzzle, as he started on getting his coat in order for the night. He had plans and they required focus and attention to detail. Naturally, those were the last two things on his mind as he worked. His little bunny brain slipped into reminiscences as his paws fell into the old pattern of brushing his fur. It didn’t take much. The habit of a lifetime, even with a hefty dose of extra care, it took little mental effort which left plenty for further trips down memory lane.

When they had finally arrived at Judy’s family farm, Jack’s mood had been anything but high. Nick’s driving did nothing, absolutely nothing, to do the DB5 justice. It was a classic, high performance, precision machine and he drove like he was a near-sighted geriatric, putting along behind Judy’s truck the whole bloody way. Jack had been bored stiff, aside from the conversation and even that was somewhat muted by his displeasure.

He did find some distraction when Nick commented that they were on the Hopps’ family farm and be at the house in about an hour. The incongruity of the statement gave Jack pause, until he realized that Nick wasn’t joking. It was at that moment that Jack realized just how huge the Hopps family, and it’s lands, were. The farm had to be the size of a county all on its own! As Jack started to explore the idea, Nick decided to not answer any questions, which only irritated Jack further. When Jack pressed him, the fox informed him that he’d get a tour, but it was the privilege of the Hopps’ to brag about their farm and he’d have to take it up with them.

That left Jack in even more of a funk, but a distracted one. The more he saw, the more impressed he became. His distraction lasted all the way to the house.

While he goggled at the barns, silos and outbuildings, they slid off the road and onto the drive. The farmhouse was tucked back from the road proper, leaving an enormous lawn space between the house and the road. Scattered haphazardly across the lawn were apparent toy stations; footlockers that were almost all open and spilling toys into the grass. Behind the house, full-scale playground structures were visible, as were several wooden pavilions and screened-in gazebos. The Hopps’ yard looked more like a park space than a lawn. Also, scattered about the semi-wooded yard and play spaces were tire swings on trees, free-standing bench swings and lawn furniture and hundreds of rabbits.

Adult lagomorphs occupied the furniture and kept an eye on the younger ones, while enjoying books, drinks, conversation and other diversions. Wandering groups of teenagers and school-ages kits of varying ages lounged in the shade of trees, ambled about, talked, played, argued and loafed. The youngest rabbits, who were constantly in a state of movement, played with rampant enthusiasm in every way imaginable with every variety of toy. Jack counted dozens of games in progress, from competitive team sports on a series of playing fields and pitches, to tea parties all overlapping. It was havoc.

Once he’d disembarked from Mr. Toad’s Mild Ride, Jack was again distracted by the fact that everything related to farm work seemed to be built for pachyderms. Judy assured him that was because of the volumes of produce they dealt with, but it only served to increase Jack’s wonder at the scale. The amount of vegetation they had to deal in to warrant so many structures of such size
was gargantuan!

His attention snapped back to the here and now by Nick’s car keys sailing through the air, into his paws. He then witnessed the oddest welcoming ritual he’d ever seen. It was reminiscent of something he read as a student about medieval prey mammals driving out predators, before the Accords. Neither the rabbits spreading the word upon their arrival, nor the swarm of rabbits coming to greet their sister, or aunt, or whatever she was to them was a surprise. The booming roar of “Uncle Nick!”, followed by the charge was both surprising and intimidating to say the least.

As they got closer to the house, Judy filled him in on what was going on. He heard several of the older rabbits commenting “And they’re off!” and laughing at the antics of the younger kits. Other comments centering on Skulk Hunts and the state of his tail when the fluffle would be done with him drifted their way as they made their way to the main house, where the majority of the adults were congregating.

Jack finally found his voice as they approached the porch, “Is it your whole family?”

“Nope! Just the young ones. The rest of us will wait until the fluffle are done with him. It’s safer,” came a jovial chortle from behind them.

“Mom! Dad!” Stu and Bonnie Hopps trotted up and hugged their daughter.

“Welcome home, Jude.”

“Hey, Bunbun. Who’s you’re friend?”

“Mom, Dad, meet Jack.”

“Jack…”

“Savage. Jack Savage, Mr. & Mrs. Hopps. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

That had been a very uncomfortable introduction. Both Hopps’ were very polite, but there was an undercurrent of confusion that Jack hadn’t understood initially. At first, Stu had been a weird combination of pleased and disappointed, while Bonnie had been a bit anxious behind her fangirling and kept shooting glances at her daughter. It passed fairly quickly and before long, the conversation was easy moving, give or take a little hero worship which passed equally quickly. It surprised Jack how quickly he felt at ease with these country rabbits.

The kerfluffle eventually returned with Nick, who was draped with a collection of kits, grinning like a fool. One teenage doe was chatting with him and a gaggle of smaller bunnies were keeping pace, firing questions as fast as they could breathe. When they regrouped, the last of the introductions were made and many, many hugs were shared. Jack noticed some of the kits eyeing him nervously. Nick noticed as well and told the kits he was a friend of theirs from work. A little more encouragement and they were swarming around, asking questions and being generally nosy and touchy. It was innocent enough at first, but when they started asking if he was Judy’s rut-buddy, things got a little awkward.

By the end of that conversation and the associated chaos, he was out of the closet, Stuart was anxious and Bonnie appeared relieved. They had swapped demeanors. It was quite comical, in a disconcerting way. Also, openly disappointed was the teenaged doe who had been walking with Nick earlier. Her name was “Mina” and she seemed quite put out that her sister hadn’t decided to settle with a buck rabbit.

Mina looked a lot like Judy and was apparently her favorite sibling. Bonnie confirmed that Mina
was the sibling Judy was closest to outside her own litter. She had attained her majority after Judy’s last visit and had certainly grown up, to hear Bonnie talk and Judy complain. Bonnie’s airy comment about the closest siblings squabbling the hardest did nothing to diffuse Judy’s grump. Nor did the fact that Mina had grown up in many ways. She was shorter than Judy by a touch, but had a much fuller figure and smolderingly intense hazel eyes.

By Jack’s initial assessment, it was understandable to a point that Mina would be unhappy at her sister’s choices. There were bound to be some members of her family that would want her to bring a buck home and Mina had been almost ecstatic when she heard her parents talking about Jack as Judy’s boyfriend, but the reactions didn’t fit at all. When Mina sauntered off waggling her hips for the fox, Jack understood all too well what was going on, but it wasn’t until the next morning that Jack figured out the extent of it.

Jack’s first dinner at the Hopps farmstead was a hearty alfresco buffet meal. Everyone served themselves from the enormous spread of soups and sandwich platters in the main kitchen, ate outside where they preferred, washed their own plates at one of the dozen sinks and then left to enjoy the evening as they pleased.

Jack was flabbergasted at the scale of the meal and the easy efficiency the family of rabbits conducted themselves with. Hundreds of plates and bowls were used, washed and put away with little to no fuss. Leftovers were put away, pots scrubbed, platters wiped and everything was clean, dry and away within an hour of the meal’s beginning. Every rabbit knew their role and what had to be done from cooking to clean up. When Jack had asked Stu how it was possible, all he got in return was “many hands make light work. Once the kits understand that, it’s no problem.”

The rest of the evening had gone very well, starting with the house tour, as led by Bonnie Hopps herself. The lady of the house was obvious in her pride at the home she kept and Jack saw why. The house on the surface was basically what he expected given what he had seen so far and knew of the size of the Hopps family. To hear her talk, the farmhouse proper had a second-floor suite for Bonnie and Stu, while the first floor was mostly where the elders of the family lived. The main living room had a fireplace and several squashy chairs and rockers, which were occupied by elderly rabbits. To the right were the pantries and kitchen complex, complete with seating for a couple hundred rabbits. Bonnie complained briefly about the trouble of eating in shifts, but in that bragging way that let her show off, while she did.

Jack smiled as he followed the matronly rabbit down the hall, back to the main living room. He was briefly concerned, as she led him to a pair of enormous carved mahogany doors. Bonnie paused for dramatic effect before pushing the doors open with no more effort than she would a screen door. Jack was suitably impressed with the skill of the mammal who hung the doors, until he looked beyond them, into an enormous open space.

“Welcome to the Hopps Warren, Jack” Judy commented at his awestruck expression.

On the other side of the huge doors was a room that had to be at least a hundred feet across. Wood paneling and brass fixtures traced the walls around the perimeter several doorways opened to what appeared to be sitting areas, or study rooms decorated in the same manner as the center area. It was beautiful and tasteful in a country theme, but the biggest point of note was that there was no solid roof, just panels of glass. The ceiling was a glass dome that reminded Jack of a greenhouse. Sunlight streamed in through the glass panels and gave the room a welcoming, cozy feeling without being oppressive.

In the center of the room was a railing around the edge of a huge pit that dropped down. Jack realized that it was a mezzanine and as he looked over the edge, he saw that below there was
another that was slightly smaller in diameter than the one he stood on. Several, in fact, nested inside each other for six floors, down to a clear space in the center. On each mezzanine level seating and tables were situated to act as common areas, making use of the natural light to the fullest.

Bonnie preened as she told Jack about the similarly set-up satellite rooms while she guided him to one of the sweeping staircases that led to a lower level. The layout was simple. Hallways branched off the center at each level, which led to bedrooms and bathrooms until the end of the hall, where another common room would be located. All the common areas were free to be used by anyone, but the bottom of the well was where family meetings were held and holidays were celebrated. By the time they resurfaced, evening was beginning and most of the kits were back outside, playing. Jack’s overwhelmed expression got a few chuckles from the mammals on the porch. His respect for Bonnie was considerable, by this point. It was clear as day that while her husband ran the farm, she ran the house. He was tempted to offer her a job overseeing a military camp or two. It wouldn’t have been much different, and possibly be easier than her daily duties.

“So, what do you think, Jack?” Judy had smugly inquired.

“I think I’m a fan of subterranean living,” Jack replied, after which the chuckles became good natured laughter.

Nick and Judy had sat with her father and some of her older siblings, catching up, while they sent Jack and Bonnie out in the DB5. Jack’s respect for the middle-aged doe climbed further still when she turned to him and said, “Jack, I don’t care what Nicky said. I am not sitting in this beautiful vehicle and letting you drive me around like I’m Ms. Daisy. Let’s see what this car can do!”

When they got back, wind-swept and disheveled, there was a moment of anxiety when Jack handed the keys back to Nick. It lasted until Nick smirked up from his position lounging on the couch and joked, “So, did you catch air on the dip by the creek bridge, or hit a four wheel drift on the long curve in the west fields?”

Bonnie saved him by chirping, “Both!” over Jack’s flailing.

Judy chimed in as well, “So, Dad doesn’t have to defend your honor?”

“He’d just want his turn, dear.”

Jack had choked a bit at that exchange, but quickly let it drop. There were some things he didn’t need to know about, at least not yet. The day had been a bit overwhelming already and he needed to save a little embarrassment for the next day. He had a feeling he’d need it.

The rest of the evening passed with the help of botany jokes, ridiculous tales from the farm and Judy’s childhood, snarky commentary and generally catching up. The talking lasted until the yawning became too pervasive to excuse.

Unfortunately, sleeping arrangements were a bit difficult to arrange around Bonnie and Stu’s confused expectations. The crux of the issue was that their visit was in the middle of what Bonnie called “visiting season” and they had a huge number of relatives who had come to see them that weekend. That meant that the guest wing, which was in the main house, was full except for one room. Luckily, it was sized to accommodate larger mammals than just rabbits, so their foxy houseguest would be fine. It was just the specifics of it that caused some concerns.

While Bonnie was fine with Nick and Judy sharing Judy’s admittedly rabbit-sized room, Stu had reservations about propriety. It sounded like an old argument. They went back and forth while Judy
muttered to herself and Nick chuckled, until Stu suggested the guestroom bed was big enough for Jack and Nick. Then, Judy had objections, Bonnie was startled and confused, Stu was frightened at her vehemence, Nick was straining to not die of laughter and Jack struggled not to draw attention to his reddening ears.

Once his laughter died down, Nick had been a gentlemammal and sent Jack to the guest room, while he took one of the couches in the greatroom. This solved the immediate problem, but everyone was a little off kilter as they went to their respective beds. Especially Bonnie, who seemed very relieved, bordering on pleased, that Nick wouldn’t be in the same room as Jack. The only other mammal who seemed at all pleased by the end result was Mina, who was never far away as long as Nick was around. The reason for her delight was the same as her reason for being disappointed Jack wasn’t Judy’s mate, as they discovered the next morning.

Jack woke to Judy’s indignant screech just after dawn. Dashing out of his room, which was conveniently just off the greatroom, he saw that his suspicions hadn’t even come close. Judy was dragging Mina off Nick’s chest where she’d been sleeping. Mina, for her part, was dressed in a t-shirt so thin it was almost sheer and a pair of shorts so small that bikini bottoms looked generous by comparison. The sultry temptress air she was going for was slightly ruined by the stream of very unladylike profanity issuing from her mouth as Judy dragged her away from Nick by her ears.

Mina was reluctant to move, as the fistfuls of Nick’s fur attested. Nick in turn was half-awake and struggling to make sense of what was happening, while getting whatever was causing the pain to stop. All he accomplished was wiggling around, which Mina seemed to enjoy significantly. Judy, in turn, found it infuriating. It was comical in the extreme and Jack laughed until Nick came fully awake, hanging partially off the couch, upside-down.

The fox shot a low whistle his way, followed by, “Maple leaves again, Jack?”

Jack resolved to never sleep in just his boxers again.

Some minutes later, Jack reemerged from his room, in a fresh set of casual clothes and red ears. His embarrassment only intensified as several of the older kits gigglingly greeted him as “Maple Sugar.” He made it past the legions of smaller bunnies to where his hosts were seated. Where Bonnie was chuckling embarrassedly behind a paw.

“I’m sorry, Jack. That’s partly my fault. I said you were sweet for rushing out like that and then Nick’s maple leaves comment… well…”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Hopps. I’ve been called far worse.”


“Maple sugar?” Nick chimed in. Stu snickered behind his newspaper and Judy elbowed them both.

“I take it black.”

At which, the room turned to him and chanted in unison, ”Like my soul!”

Jack froze wide eyed. "Wha..."

Bonnie came to his rescue with a cup of hot black coffee and a paw on his shoulder. "You can thank the good Mr. Wilde for that one. He said it as a joke one morning and the fluffle heard him. It's become their standard response."

"That was the creepiest thing I've ever experienced."
Everyone had a good laugh at that and Jack, oddly, felt at home. The rest of breakfast went smoothly. Pancakes appeared along with jams, syrups and fruit so fresh it practically glowed. Jack’s mouth watered in anticipation and any semblance of dignity fled after his first bite. He couldn’t hold in the appreciative moan. The food was just too good. Not even Nick offering him maple syrup dampened his enjoyment. He elected to accidentally clip Nick’s shin with his chair, instead of dignify it with a response. It was an amusing meal for all.

Following breakfast, the majority of household dispersed to attend to their chores, in some cases their second set. Nick accompanied Stu to the machine shop to help with a finicky winch motor, leaving Jack with Bonnie and Judy. Jack offered to assist with the chores, but was found to be entirely useless at working in the fields, despite his borrowed overalls. His tea brewing skills, on the other hand, were found to be quite satisfactory. The majority of Jack’s morning was spent brewing and ferrying gallons of tea to the multitudes of rabbits in the fields.

By lunch, he was tired, but pleased. A hearty bowl of root vegetable soup and a salad made of beet tops, dandelion greens, and edible flowers restored his strength enough to enjoy a little discomfort on Nick’s part as Bonnie started telling stories on the porch.

“Oh, it was the sweetest thing!”

“Bonnie, please?”

“Yes, Nicky, I know you hate this story, but it was so precious!”

“Anyway, the very first time Nick visited with Judy; it was just after, what was it, bun?”

"A six-week cross training in Tundratown," Judy offered while failing to stifle her giggles.

"Yes, that's right. Well, we knew he was a fox and we had spoken to him on muzzletime. We knew he seemed nice, but we were still a little nervous."

"About letting a fox into the warren?" Inquired Jack.

"Hm? Oh, no, dear. We were fine with that. Judy vouched for him, so we didn’t need to worry about anything like that. It was the reaction of the kits we were worried about. They know Gideon, obviously, but we're parents. We were concerned the kits would be afraid of a stranger and it'd make Nick uncomfortable."

"Sounds like quite the dilemma."

"As it turned out, we needn't have worried. When Nick stepped out of the car and the kits got a look at him, it was love at first sight."

"There's something I'm missing, Mrs. Hopps. He's a handsome fox, but why did the kits love him?"

Nick was suddenly glad his fur was red. "Oh, that stint in the cold brought in his winter coat. He practically doubled in size. He was the fluffiest thing they'd ever seen. His fur was puffing out everywhere and he was so cute!"

Ignoring his mortification, Judy chimed in, "It was pretty spectacular."

"Once those kids saw the giant orange fluffball, they were all over him," Stu chimed in, around a mouthful of parsnip.

"Literally. It was like a tsunami. A cuddly, enthusiastic tsunami made of tiny 'Carrots'. They
attacked in a horde," Nick added in a putupon tone.

"It wasn't that bad, Nick," Judy chided.

"Oh, yes it was, bun-bun. I've never seen the fluffle so excited. Once they got a hold of him, it was a good two hours before we got him dug out for formal introductions. The kits were just not listening. The whole weekend, he had kits hanging off him and curled up on him. Especially, that tail. It started the tradition of the fluffle Skulk Hunt when Nicky visits."

"I'm glad to see that hasn't changed...." Nick drolled, side-eyeing a couple of the cheekier kits, who had camped out on his rear appendage.

"Oh, stop, Nicky. You love it."

"So do you, Mom," Judy commented, dripping amusement. "As I recall, you enjoyed a foxtail pillow one afternoon, yourself..."

"Now, stop that, Judy. It's not nice to tell stories," Bonnie quipped back, ears tinged pink.

Mina decided to put her two cents in. She walked up behind the fox as he reclined on his elbows and rather brazenly draped herself over his shoulder, before chirping, "It's like she's your substitute mom! Embarrassing you in front of your friends!" Between her halter-top and cutoffs, Nick got a very obvious show.

Everyone got a good laugh excerpt for Nick who was nonplussed and Judy who balked at her sister’s familiarity as much as what she claimed were clothes. "You are so not helping, Little Carrots."

"You love it." So saying she hopped up and kissed Nick on the cheek, before turning to Judy, who was bug-eyed and furious. "He isn't yours yet, big sis, so it's all fair." And then she bounded off with Judy in hot pursuit.

Bonnie shook her head and smiled fondly at her two daughters as they hared off. The remainder of that day was a flurry of activity. As they had arrived later in the day, Jack hadn’t had a chance to see the full extent of the farm, beyond the view from the car. He was guided on a buggy tour after the meal by an extremely shy pair of teenaged bucks, named Finn and Kit who showed him that even his morning assisting in the fields was only scratching the surface.

The Hopps family farm was thousands of acres and dozens of fields that allowed them almost complete self-sufficiency as well as a healthy spread of seasonal cash crops. The half-dozen buildings he’d seen on his arrival were impressive, but they were just older structures that were classic of such a pastoral scene. Jack in no way whatsoever expected the acres of indoor hydroponic growing houses, or the equally immense structure of greenhouses that his soft-spoken guides, for the first time, spoke about with clear pride. It was shortly thereafter that Finn and Kit demonstrated that shy was the wrong word and “bashful” became much more fitting. Once they warmed up, they were much less shy. They were young enough to have some timidity when it came to their orientations and pursuing their interests, but given the intensity of that interest, Jack was relieved he would only be around for a few days. He didn't want to be a target for adolescent lust, let alone a tipping point.

It was evident that the Hopps family, while traditional in many ways, was very forward-thinking. Bonnie met the tour at the greenhouses and Jack learned that Judy’s influence on her siblings was quite significant. Several of her siblings had followed her to university and returned to the farm with big ideas and bigger ambitions. The hydroponics setup was the doing of three of her younger
brothers that she and Stu had encouraged to become plumbers, while the enormous greenhouses were a two-litter-effort of the nineteen rabbits immediately Judy’s junior. The hydroponics farm produced enough food to feed the family through the winter and more that went to winter markets, or wholesalers, while the greenhouses were where flowers, summer delicacies and exotic plants were cultivated. The rest of the fields had been given over to cash crops and specialty harvests.

A particular point of pride for the family matron were the bioengineers of the family; two littersmates that hated each other, but were brilliant at crossbreeding plants without resorting to direct genetic manipulation. They were working towards better and more nutrient-rich yields in the harvests, using entirely natural means. Her only complaint was that they’d make more progress if they stopped bickering.

Jack met dozens of rabbits and failed to remember most of their names. Each one had jobs and responsibilities on the farm, but they weren’t limited to being farmhands. They each had dreams and followed them, no matter how modest. It seemed to do good things for them and the farm, as well as parental pride. Every time Jack crossed paths with Bonnie or Stu, they were smiling at their progeny and all they had wrought.

Another, more tentative, point of pride came trundling up to the house, as the tour was ending. The faded blue van sputtered down from the road and was met with a huge crowd of rabbits of all ages, all eager to see the mammal who drove it. Jack was swiftly abandoned by his guides and the straggling mob of kits that has accumulated as they’d traveled.

A portly fox descended from the van and greeted the mob. They followed the fox around to the back of the van and helped him unload dozens of trays of pies and other baked goods. Many hands did make light work, as Jack discovered. The van was emptied and mostly reloaded with bushels and crates of produce before he made his way there. Judy joined him moments later for introductions.

“Jack Savage, meet Gideon Grey. Gideon, Jack. He’s a colleague, visiting for the weekend.”

“A pleasure to meetcha, Jack. Any friend of Judy’s is a friend of mine,” Gideon drawled.

Gideon’s pawshake was very firm. His being a baker, this wasn’t a surprise to Jack. The tubby fox worked with his hands daily, so he was by no means weak, and despite his initially amusing drawl he was clearly as shrewd a businessmammal as he was a skilled baker. Judy’s queries about sales growth in Zootopia attested to the first, and the blackberry lemon tart Jack received on the house was testament to the second.

It wasn’t the freebie so much as the quality that made Jack’s positive opinion of the larger vulpine improve considerably. At the first bite, Jack’s eyes rolled up in his head and he moaned embarrassingly enthusiastically before sitting on the van’s bumper before he fell down. Judy’s giggling and Gideon’s chortle were not lost on him, but he was too engrossed in his gustatory delight to care. You couldn’t get pastry like this anywhere. Not even Bark & Bite had it this good.

As Jack savored, Judy commented, “Another satisfied customer, eh, Gid?”

“I’ll say. Glad to see my work appreciated, even if it’s, uh- unusually vocal.”

“Not very dignified, there, Jack,” Judy said with a pleased grin.

“Stuff dignity,” Jack replied.

The merriment was cut short when one of the smaller bunnies hopped into the van and upset a can
of cinnamon, on one of the stowed baker’s racks. Jack found himself cradling his tart away from the cloud of spice, while getting his back covered in it. Fortunately, the pastry was saved and unscathed. Unfortunately, baker’s humor came to bear…

Judy quirked an eyebrow at Gideon. “What’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Judy. I can’t help it.” Then, pointing at Jack and full on belly-lauging, Gideon choked out. “He looks just like one of my cinnamon rolls!”

Judy snickered and Jack grumped around another mouthful of heavenly pastry.

…Followed by a second round of vulpine humor.

Nick, who had wandered over just in time to hear the tail end of their conversation, started laughing along with his fellow fox when he saw Jack. He started waving to get the laughing mammals to restrain themselves and Jack heard “Oh, no” from Judy’s lips moments before Nick got the quiet he needed.

“Pure cinnamon bun, too good for this world!” Jack struggled and failed to maintain his grump, as Gideon doubled with laughter, Nick flopped into Judy and they both ended up laughing in the dirt. Jack joined their mirth as soon as he was sure he wouldn’t choke on the last bite.

Then, Nick had to make it worse as he, still giggling, said, “Gid, Bonnie wants a word about the Autumn Festival, when you get a chance.”

“Sure thing! Just let me close up and stop crying!”

Nick laughed and rolled to his feet, scooping up both laughing rabbits and tucking one rabbit under each arm.

“Nick!”

“Wilde! Unhand me, or so help me I’ll…”

“You’ll do nothing unless you want me advertising that I’m selling hot cross buns from here to the doors.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I, Tiger Bunny?”

“He would,” Judy commented.

“We’re nothing of the kind!” Jack fumed half-heartedly.

“Hot cross buns! Hot cross buns! One a penny two a penny! Hot cross buns!”

“Is he calling us attractive, angry and cheap?”, Judy commented.

“That or we’re religious and suffering heatstroke.”, Jack groused.

“I could do the Doublemint bun jingle, instead,” Nick offered.

“Oh gods, what is wrong with us?”

“You want a list? Tolerating him is item one.”
Nick’s smugness was insufferable. It was worse how much he and his fellow rabbit enjoyed it, sharing a happily resigned grin, as they wandered back to the house.

Jack had no idea how Nick managed to do half the things he did, let alone get away with them. Whether it was a supernatural hand guiding him, an uncanny talent for shenanigans, or some manner of infuriating skill he’d acquired over the years, that damnable vulpine continuously managed to bewilder him. He was a chaos generator in a red suit. A living embodiment of unpredictability. It worked very, very well. It also looked very good on him.

That bloody fox…

That bloody fox who had helped him get set up with this place, just after the Day of Roses, six weeks previously. The bloody fox who finally changed his mind about putting down roots. The turning point of which was that damnable bouquet; the one he’d had pressed and framed. It was currently the only thing hanging on the walls in his apartment and a pertinent distraction as he left the washroom.

Jack finished his preening and had to admit, his fur had never looked better. He had brushed and conditioned his fur until it shone and lay just so, across his form. He looked good. A little self-obsessed, but good. There was a point at which a mammal started to verge of narcissism, with the amount of personal grooming one could do. There was also a point to showing yourself off to your best advantage.

If you wish to catch good fish, you must use good bait.

Tonight, Jack was fishing and the fish he hoped to land would take real work. As he was the bait, he needed to make himself the best bait he could be. That was why he’d contacted Mr. Tepis of the Nox for a special wardrobe; one that Jack alternated between calling his battle armor and his mating plumage. He was certainly preening enough for it to be the latter.

He had decided that is he was going to do this, he was not about to allow himself half-measures. That was why he asked Mr. Tepis to make the trousers of his new ensemble low-rise versions of the ‘club-wrecker’ jeans. They were form-fitting and more revealing than he was comfortable with, but he knew they would catch the eye of his quarry. The fabric was also significantly thinner than the denim, which left precious little to the imagination once they were on. The matching waistcoat was simply cut, and just a touch feminine in how it lay on his waist and hips, but it didn’t conceal his masculinity. It played up his androgyny and allure, very neatly.

The cloth was a grey so dark it was almost black, textured as only cloth from the Nox could be. It was pleasing to look at in regular light, but in low light it’s texture and character was spectacularly evident. Between the low waist and the waistcoat, there was just enough of his belly and lower back exposed that natural movement would draw the eye, especially against his light fur. It would also draw attention to the last vestiges of his cold-weather dewlap, left over from the winter.

The fedora that came with the ensemble was a nice touch, but it wasn’t until Jack was dressed and he donned the hat that he appreciated the effect. It gave him a certain male flare that had been missing, while forcing his ears to flop down behind his head, framing his face. Looking at himself, he had no idea whether he was male or female. What he did know was that he felt ridiculous, but looked amazing. All those little shopping excursions had not been a waste.

As he looked himself over one last time in the mirror, he felt a small stab. He felt horrible in some ways for what he was about to do to both of his friends. His one consolation was that, whatever happened, something would finally change.
Jack was more used to observing mammals than most. It’d been, quite literally, his most commonly used skill for over a decade and that included eating without dribbling on himself. It was obvious how Nick and Judy felt. He was right there with them. The tension was murderous and he’d had enough. Something had to give. Unfortunately, he saw that Nick and Judy were both stymied by their issues of self-image and cultural expectations, so it was left to him to take the plunge. What he was about to do would change things and mammals he cared about might get hurt, but this couldn’t continue as it had been. That was why Jack had called in his voucher for Softpaws Jazz Club and made reservations for two.

Softpaws, as it was commonly known, was a hold-over from the Roaring 20’s, one of the few remaining clubs from the height of the Jazz Age. It was a basement walk-down in an old brick building with only a garish red neon sign to indicate it even existed. The understatement of the street presence was made up for in the club itself. The building was built with pachyderms in mind, but the basement, like all basements, was low ceilinged and would feel cramped for even smaller pachyderms. It was perfect, however, for small and medium sized mammals.

The original owner, an ambitious European polecat, built the club as a front for a speakeasy concealed behind the bar. Ironically, the music was a bigger draw than the alcohol and the club took off. Eventually, the speakeasy was refitted to become a larger seating area and the club expanded. It couldn’t handle mammals larger than a lion inside, but the outdoor seating wasn’t far from the stage and usually filled to capacity.

The club felt spacious, but cozy and the mezzanine that ringed the walls only added to this feeling of comfortably enclosed space. Large wooden columns were spaced haphazardly around the club and supported reserved seating for smaller rodents. They also helped balance the acoustics. All in all, it was a hole in the wall of the best kind; music, drinks and nibbles if desired. It was one of the most easy-going locales in the city.

Jack chose a night where Judy was busy to arrange his evening with Nick, had his outfit made, even gotten a cologne that smelled like violets. Just a touch, but enough that Nick would eventually catch it. He’d even told Judy that he was taking Nick out for the night. It was sad, but much as Jack wanted to go for broke, he wasn’t about to play the fox thief. His goal tonight was to tip the scales and force the fox to act. He’d present his case and he’d make it clear what his desires were, but he’d let his fox decide where the chips fell. All he could do was hope that it would be enough to spark something, anything into happening.

If I’m lucky, a little stress relief will be forthcoming shortly thereafter. Pelvically, I hope.

Jack got to the club ahead of Nick. It wasn’t far from his apartment and it was a soft evening; perfect for a stroll. As it turned out, it was a stroll with an audience. As the shadows lengthened through sunset, the play of light and shadow made Jack’s outfit looked better and the second glances he got when he left his place were double-takes with a side of staring by the time he got to Softpaws. It made Jack feel a little guilty at just how satisfying it was. The more mammals who stared, the more likely he’d make the impression that he was going for.

A dent.

Jack waited at the bar until the fox arrived. As he sat, he amused himself with all the things that he never expected. He never expected his forced retirement from the field to be anything but a point of shame for him. As it turned out, it was a blessing. He never expected to put down roots, but now he had an apartment; one he was slowly furnishing with the help of another unforeseeable: his friends. He never expected to actually feel relaxed, or welcome anywhere as much as he was in the field, but here he was, perfectly content amongst mammals he’d only known a few months, tops.
He was even learning to be genuinely sociable, not just a charm machine on demand. He began to slip into memories of his most recent forays into being social. The trip to Bruin Barrel was a hoot.

Paddington Bruin was a black bear whom Nick had helped set up as a brewmaster. With Nick’s financial assistance, and a little vulpine guidance Jack was sure, Paddy and his wife, Whinnifred, had bought a dilapidated factory in the RD and retrofitted it. It was initially a moderately successful brewery, boasting a fair set of micro-brewed beers. However, where the Bruin Barrel label really shone was in its particular ursine touch: mead.

Honey wine was typically a rarity that was highly sought after by bears and played a large part in ursine weddings. It was where the term “Honeymoon” came from, after all. Paddy and Whinn had taken the specialty beverage, pulled it out of the niche ursine market and made it accessible for any mammal that wanted it. Once it was available at retail, the sales for the liquor soared. Almond honey wine was a massive hit with the arboreal rodent populace, while berry and other fruit honeywines were a hit across the city. Once they opened a made-to-order option on their website, orders from engaged bear couples flooded in. Roughly seventy seven percent of their total annual sales were from the mead. As Nick was the initial investor, he couldn’t have been more pleased.

When Jack and Judy had accompanied the fox to visit his friends at the brewery, Jack had possessed no idea what to expect. A great brown bear in a rain slicker thundering up to the them and pulling Nick into a hug that had Judy cringing was just the start. Paddy had dragged them through the facility, bragging at every step, before sitting them all down in the taproom, where Whinn had pulled, or poured tasters of every elixir they brewed, for their consideration. Several cups in, Jack knew he’d be hungover to hell the next day, but it was worth it. Their hosts were exceedingly warm, especially Paddy after a few rounds. Thankfully, Whinn was quite capable of handling her spouse in his cups.

When Paddy started singing “whinny the pooh” it was obvious she was displeased with him, even if it was meant affectionately. He got as far as the "Stuffed with fluff" line, before she struck. Turning to her guests, she stated very clearly, “If "Fluff", here, wants to be stuffing anything, he won't sing another note."

“Yes, honey.”

Judy had choked on her drink, while Nick had laughed himself to tears. Even Jack couldn’t contain his laughter.

It was as Jack smiled and played with his drink that his foxy companion for the evening finally showed up; fashionably late, as always. Jack didn’t mind. He was grateful for the extra time to set the scene and get himself calm. It was very gratifying to see Nick’s mind absorb what he was seeing.

“Good evening, Nicolas.”

“Evening, Tiger…Bun. Wow, Jack. Dressed to kill, are we and all for little old me?”

“You like what you see, Nicky?”

“I invoke my right to remain silent.”

“So, Yes.”

Nick was saved from Jack’s self-satisfied grin by the hostess, a young female Jaguar, informing them that their table was ready and they still had a few minutes before the next set began. Jack
happily made his way forward, but paused to give Nick the chance to walk ahead of him. Nick shook his head and gestured for Jack to go ahead of him.

Jack smirked, saying, “Age before beauty?”, and was delighted to see Nick’s ears flush. The fox was too flummoxed to even think to hide them. Jack’s grin grew in time with his friend’s fumbling.

Finally, Nick managed, “Compliments like that could give a mammal ideas.”

“So could dangling a predator’s natural prey in front of them.”

Nick laughed. “Don’t you worry, Jack. A rabbit walking in front of me won’t fill me with the urge to run you down and devour you.”

In a moment of fiendish inspiration, Jack padded over to the fox and adjusted the knot of the tie he wore. When he was done, he let his paw slide lightly down Nick’s chest. Locking eyes with him, Jack grinned and whispered, “Pity.”

As he turned and headed over to the waiting hostess, Jack could feel the weight of Nick’s eyes on him. The jaguar managed to remember the menus and started moving just in time for Jack to hear Nick mutter to himself, “I’m in trouble.”

You have no idea, Nicky. No idea at all…

Once they were seated, they busied themselves with the menus. Jack, half-heartedly, while he laughed inwardly at Nick trying to conceal his ogling. Jack smirked to himself as he hailed the waitress. He was ready to order and gods help Nick if he wasn’t.

The evening passed in alternating short sets from local jazz musical talents and low key conversation. The patrons were a very mixed crowd whose only common characteristic was the appreciation of music and like-minded company. After the initial impact of Jack’s outfit and greeting, it took some teasing and a cocktail before the fox loosened up enough to get his usual rhythm back.

In between sets, they swapped stories and banter, most of which they knew, but enjoyed in the retelling. Nick spun barely believable tales about some of the odder animals he’d come across in his life. Among them were criminals and other less savory types, but he also had met some truly odd individuals, who seemed to simply wander through life, like they were stars in their own, bizarre movie. One such animal was a duck he’d come across briefly, named Jeff. Jeff referred to himself in the third person as “The Duck” and loved two things: White Russians and bowling. The only rule that Jeff lived by was “The Duck abides”. In turn, Jack told stories of eccentric acquaintances, like Professor W. E. Coyotah and his obsession with desert avians, or celebrities he’d met in his travels, like David Hassleheiffer.

The anecdotes floated on the air with the music and mirth, while the cocktails bled the tension out of them. After a couple hours, Jack was acutely aware of how often Nick was running his eyes over him. The look in his eyes was warm and welcoming, but hungry. That spurred Jack to make his next move of the night. They’d sat for a few hours, enjoying the smoky ambience and each other’s company over drinks, when Jack finally worked up the nerve.

“Care to get a bite, Red? I haven’t had dinner and I could definitely eat.”

“Drinking on an empty stomach, Jack? I thought you learned your lesson.”

“I’ve had two Bunbay Sapphire G&T’s to your three neat Glennquiddich. I think I’m ok. A little food and a glass of water will see me right by morning.”
“Assuming you’re a good bun and don’t have any more.”

“The one has nothing to do with the other,” Jack replied with a smirk, as they left the club. “And I make no promises on either count.” Jack enjoyed Nick’s momentary fluster before continuing. “How does sushi sound? There’s a place around the corner. I know it’s a bit outside your norm, but I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“What makes you think I’m unfamiliar with sushi? It’s a personal favorite!”

“Are you serious? I’ve never seen you eat fish.”

“Omnivore, remember? I can eat just about anything.”

It was subtle at first, but Jack noticed something about Nick as they spoke.

“I always thought you a vegetarian. You rarely eat anything other than salads and fruit around me.”

“I can eat anything. I choose to eat mostly fruits and vegetables. I don’t eat sushi or sashimi very often because I spend a lot of time around prey. It’s hardly polite to make your dinner companions uncomfortable.”

Nick had stopped looking his way quite so often and it became apparent why as they passed a small group of rabbits. Almost every head turned his way and in an openly appraising manner. The flash of possessiveness and the twitch in the fox’s paw were not missed by Jack, but Nick played it off and Jack played along.

“I assure you, I am completely comfortable with you eating fish, and I’m fairly sure Hopps would be, too. Don’t foxes need a lot of protein to stay healthy?”

“I manage that with tofu and nuts, mostly, but I do love a nice cut of fish. Baked salmon with a sweet glaze, or seared halibut are always welcome. Monkfish is heavenly in a good curry soup.”

“You don’t eat other meats?”

“Well, other than that genetic dead-end known as turkey, I don’t eat anything avian and I consider insect protein to be mostly junk food. I’ll have them occasionally, but only when I get a real craving for it. Otherwise, veggies, tofu and the occasional naughty bunny are my preferred dining.”

They had been walking and collecting stares for some minutes by this point. Jack had noticed Nick’s paw drifting out as though it would drape itself across his shoulders more than once, before the fox seemed to catch himself and pull back. It was amusing to see the restraint, to a point. The fox was aware of his drifting paw. He was not aware that he was walking closer now than he had been when they left the club. Close enough for Jack to feel the predator’s body heat.

“Naughty bunnies, huh…”

“The naughtier the better.”

“Uhhuh… Wilde, sometimes I think your mind lives permanently in the gutter.”

“I bought it a condo there last year. Shorter commute,” the fox replied with a wink.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Well, rather than delve into your lurid fantasy on the street, shall we?” As he spoke, Jack gestured to the small sushi shop they had arrived at.

“You’d rather hear about it inside? Sounds good!” Nick replied. He was finally getting a feel for
the night and was able to hold his own in sparring. Or so he thought.

Jack held the door and as Nick passed, he gave the fox a firm slap on the rump. “Behave yourself, Red. Naughty bunnies aren’t just around to be devoured. We can bite back,” before breezing past him, into the restaurant, his ears tickling Nick’s muzzle as he passed.

They were seated quickly and settled right back in to wandering far afield in anecdotes, absurd jokes and suggestive one-liners. They had little to limit them aside from the basic propriety of being in public and even that was bendable, to a point. Eventually, Jack turned the topic to one of the more incongruous of Nick’s acquaintances; one he only knew second and third paw: the infamous Honey Badger.

“Why do you employ her?”

“She's a friend and I trust her.”

“She's a certifiable loon!”

“She's not a bird, Jack. She's nuttier than your new neighbors, though.”

“Quibbling won't help, Red. Why did you hire a paranoid, conspiracy theorist whacko that thinks the sheep are out to get us to manage an assisted living facility for ruminants?”

“Because she's a paranoid, conspiracy theorist whacko who thinks the sheep are out to get us.”

“Wha- Why? Are you insane?”

“Nope! She is. Jack, what do the residents of Foxglove Assisted Living want?”

“According to your website, an attentive and responsive staff, immediate response to emergencies, security taken seriously and all the services to make living a breeze.”

“Well quoted. They also want in-home monitoring, in case of medical problems. That means video surveillance in the residences.”

“I get that. It's a huge invasion of privacy.”

“Not if they know about it. The system was voted in two years ago. They wanted it.”

“Ok, fine. They want to be spied on. What does this have to do with Honey?”

“In Honey's world, that's license to snoop. She treats it like a personal invitation to monitor the very mammals she thinks are out to get her. She's as attentive as you can get. She rarely leaves the monitors!”

“Wait a moment. You use her paranoia as, what? An asset?”

“Like having a magazine editor with OCD. She's watching them so carefully, she's responded to emergencies before they were even reported! Last year, an elderly ram fell and hit his head. Honey saw it, thought it was an act, called the in-house emergency responders and ambulance before the ram's wife even found him. It saved his life. The aneurism he got from the head injury would have been fatal if he had gotten to the hospital even thirty minutes later.”

“I don't believe it.”

“Believe it, Sugar-fluff. It got her a civilian service commendation.”
“And Foxglove got a boost to its reputation, I presume?”

“Residency applications increased by 23%. It funded the expansion they're working on, now. Honey’s thrilled that she'll have more sheep to keep an eye on.”

“Unbelievable.”

Some time later, the two arrived at Jack’s apartment. The meal had been pleasant, if very flirty after Jack’s behavior when they arrived at the restaurant. It was a good thing that they were seated at the counter and constantly under the very stern eye of the chef. Otherwise, gods only knew how far they would have ended up going with their teasing. By the time they excused themselves at end of the meal, neither of them had any pretense left. It was almost laughable. Jack felt a little bad for what he was about to do to the poor fox, but only a little.

Nick had insisted on walking Jack home and it was perfect. Utterly cliché and predictably Nick. For all his faults, Nick was a gentlemammal; one who never expected anything to come of his flirting. The fox suspected nothing at all, right up to his door. All he’d done in response to Jack’s offer to come in for a cup of coffee, was smirk knowingly and say, “Sure, Jack! I’d love a cup,” before following the rabbit into the darkened apartment; Obviously still thinking that he was teasing. Nick kept his smirk right up until the door clicked shut and the deadbolt slid home.

“You wanna get the lights, Sugarfluff? I’m fine, but you don’t have night vision.”

“Low light doesn’t bother me, Red. I can find my way by feel.”

“Or sound, I suppose. You rabbits have amazing hearing after a-Aah!” Nick’s snark ended in a surprised gasp, as Jack’s paw slid around his waist and up his chest.

“See? Touch is all I need to find my way to what I want, in the dark.” Jack applied gentle pressure and guided Nick until he was pressed back up against the door.

Nick managed to choke out, “Jack-“, before the buck shushed him with a finger on his lips.

“Nicky, listen to me. If I had my way, I wouldn’t let you speak again until morning. I’ll leave it to your imagination how I’d do that. Now...” Jack slipped his thigh between Nick’s knees and made a space for himself to occupy, right against the larger mammal’s body. “As it is, this isn’t just about the fox I want so badly, I can taste it. And, yes, Nicky, I do want to taste you. Tonight, isn’t about that, though. Tonight, I’m calling your bluff. It’s cards on the table time. You know perfectly well that Judy and I both want more out of this. You’ve joked and danced around it for long enough.”

Nick’s voice was barely a whisper, “It isn’t that simple, Jack.”

“Yes, it is, Nick. It’s that simple. The time for playing the game is over.” Jack rolled his paws over the chest of his quarry and reveled in the feel of the mammal under the cloth. “I know how foxes work. The vixen makes the first move. With rabbits, that’s the buck’s job. Nick, I’m making the first move. Now, either you’ll take charge and ask Judy for a date, or I will for you. I intend to take you up on the offer of dating you as a couple and I will make that happen. In spite of your reluctance, if I have to.”

By now, Nick was trembling under Jack’s paws. “Well, that explains a few things.”

“What does?”

“Bucks make the first move. We’ve been in a Chihuahua stand-off...”
“Right down to the staring and shaking.” Jack joked, until he felt Nick shift uncomfortably. “You didn’t know?”

“I knew, but…” Nick shuffled embarrassedly. “I never made the connection…”

Jack rested his forehead against the fox’s chest and laughed, softly. “Crossed wires.”

“Talk about irony. Jack, I want my buns. Both of them. I wasn’t joking when I made that offer. The joking was…”

“…a matter of course with you. I know. It’s your reflexive defense mechanism. So, what will you do?”

“Be a big vixen for a change and ask Judy out on a date, like I planned.”

“Like you planned…”

“I’ve wanted to since the Lantern Festival. I knew then. It’s just been…hard.”

Jack smiled as he rolled his hips against Nick’s. “Yes, it is. You’re harder than Pandani algebra.”

“Not that kind,” Nick whined. Jack was pleased as the fox’s paws finally came to rest on his shoulders. A thrill shuddered through him, as Nick continued. “So far, it’s just…When I have the words, I don’t have the opportunity and when I have the opportunity, I can’t find the words.

“The great Nick Wilde, reduced to a stammering kit at the prospect of asking a pretty girl out.” Jack laughed and shook his head, hearing Nick huff in annoyance, in the dark. “I said it was simple, Red. I never said it’d be easy. But it has to happen. What’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid. It’s a huge risk and I’m scared of losing what I have. With both of you.”

“It’s less of a risk than you think. Nick, I’ve only been in this little fix over you for a handful of months. I can see exactly what we all want. Judy has been waiting patiently for far longer. I can’t imagine what she’s feeling.”

“I can.”

“If you need to, think of it as replacing friendships with something better.”

“That’s cliché and unhelpful.”

“Great risks for great reward?” Jack cheeked.

Nick’s head flopped back against the door, as he chuckled, “Even worse.”

“Well, you’re feeling better enough to be picky, so how about this?” So saying, Jack pulled Nick’s muzzle down for a long, passionate kiss. The buck was hellbent on savoring it, as he didn’t know if he’d get another. Jack could almost feel the fox melting under him before finally releasing him.

“The sooner you ask Judy, formally, the sooner you can do that back to me, because you aren’t getting another until our girlfriend is on board.”

“You really think it’s a guarantee?” Nick eventually managed to gather the wits to ask.

“…I don’t know. I want to say yes, but I can’t. I know Judy wants you and she will always have the first place in your heart. I can’t see her turning you down, but I don’t know if she’ll be willing to share you with me.”
“Call it a hunch, but her little tirade that night makes me think she’d be fine with it.”

“Only one way to find out, Nick,” Jack replied, failing to suppress his trembling. A small smile curved his muzzle as Nick's hands drifted over his back, between his waist and hips.

“You're as scared as I am.”

Jack nodded from where his forehead rested, on Nick’s chest. “I know there’s a chance it won’t go my way, but I’m not going to risk losing her friendship by making the full play for you and I can’t take this anymore. I may get hurt, but whatever happens, you won’t lose me. I’m sticking around for the long haul, in whatever capacity I end up in. Just, please, stop running and do this. It’s long past due and it hurts too much.”

“I don’t know what to say, Jack. I’m sorry.” The buck could feel his fox wincing at the thought of causing pain to his buns.

“You don’t owe me an apology, as long as you stop dragging your feet. Just be honest with her and the rest will happen naturally. Just bloody do it, so I can kiss you again, or finally give up on my little fantasy of you initiating for once.”

“Jack?”

“Yes, Nick. I am Jack Savage and I am sick of being the one in charge. I want to be able to let go and be cared for by someone I trust for a change. I’m not going to say I want to be the girl, if that’s what you’re waiting for. You can only expect so much, Wilde.” In response, the fox chuckled weakly. “Now, you need to leave, before I do something inappropriate. The circus is in town, judging by the state of your trousers, and I would love to see it perform. A rabbit only has so much self-control.”

“What about that coffee you offered?”

“That was offered with breakfast. Call it “on hold” until you’re in a position to collect. Now, go.”

Jack waited until Nick was almost to the stairwell, before calling out one last time. “Oh, and Nicky?” The fox flobered drunkenly to a halt with his paw on the handle for the door. Jack took a moment to relish the fact that he had affected his fox so strongly.

Maybe he finally listened.

He leaned against the door frame and purred, “If Judy is dumb bunny enough to turn you down, you know where to find me. Coffee isn’t the only hot, strong and satisfying item that comes with breakfast.”
Chapter 15

Nick hated hospitals. He had only entered the horrid places four times in his life, as a patient. The day he was born was the first and he maintained that it was under duress. The second was for a sprained wrist, from the playground when he was eight. The third was a mandatory procedural medical review due to breaking up a barfight three weeks ago. The deer that scratched him with his antlers as he fell over had gotten the worse end of the deal, as stomach pumping procedures were a lot less pleasant than a couple butterfly closures and some anti-bacterial ointment.

And then, there was this. This was easily the worst visit to date, as he had no recollection of arriving. He remembered very little. It’d taken a bit of work for what he was told the first few days of his residence for him to be coherent. Even what he had been awake for since he came to was a bit disjointed. Supposedly, he had been hopping back and forth between awake and unconscious for quite a while. He still didn’t know how long, because every time they tried to bring him up to speed, he fell asleep. The nurse told him so.

This being the first time he’d woken up that he could recall without a skull-splitting headache, vertigo, or focus issues (narcolepsy included), he tried to piece together what he could remember. The clearest memory he had was the long weekend at the Hopps’ farm. There, he felt a little of what he assumed was missing memory. He knew there was something bugging him about the trip and that it had to do with the night he and Jack went out. It was all very disjointed. The doctor had been very clear that it would come back, eventually. He just had to be patient.

Normally, one of my strong suits. So why do I feel this strange sense of urgency. It’s not life and death, but I feel sick to my stomach. Why?

Nick was getting a little tired of being incoherent. Until a few months ago, he was the picture of in control. His personal life, his career and his head were all neat and orderly. Within reason. He thought he’d left this kind of incoherence behind with the idiocy of his early twenties, along with pub crawls, tequila and raccoons who knew Finnick. Since Jack had arrived in his reality, everything had been nuts and this was the second time he’d ended up being confused about what was dream and what wasn’t.

The doctors said the necessary things to put his mind at ease and did so while he was lucid enough to both grasp and appreciate them: “Out of the woods” and “We expect a full recovery.” After that, Nick was a bit lost as to what happened. He remembered a lot of things that made his head hurt. Symphonies arranged for claws and chalkboard, colors he could taste, fractured memories, voices of loved ones both dead and alive. Horrible feelings, all conflicting and overlapping. The doctors were more technical, throwing around terms like “psychoactive drug withdraw”, “synesthesia hallucinations”, “synaptic cascade” and “dissociative episode”, but no more helpful. Frankly, none of it mattered to him.

The only thing that he cared about was waking up yesterday afternoon. It was the first time he had woken up entirely lucid, since he was attacked and it broke whatever was left of his heart, after the beating it took.

Nick’s eyes cracked open and light lanced through his head, making him wince. He noted that his wince was barely any movement at all. He couldn’t manage any more than that. That was his first red flag. Achingly slowly, he slid his eyes open more. The first thing he noticed was the blinds were drawn and the indirect lights were set low. It was barely the level of twilight in the room, despite the daylight edging around the blinds. It was still bright enough to make his eyes water.
The next thing he registered was the bland hospital room and heart monitor. Then, he noticed that
he felt like hell. His head felt like it had been tenderized with a jackhammer. Everything hurt. Light
hurt, sound hurt. Moving his head was agonizing. Not only did his head hurt, but the muscles of his
neck shrieked their protest at being used. Sadly, that was the tip of the iceberg. The whole of his
body felt destroyed.

Breathing made his ribs and abdominals ache. Every muscle in his body felt like he’d done the
ZPA training courses carrying Bogo and Clawhauser as free weights and he could barely move.
The small act of lifting his head from his pillow pulled a raspy groan from his throat. Even his
throat felt raw; felt like he’d spent hours gargling hot glass.

Gods… Did I go on a week-long bender in a cement mixer? What in Karma’s name happened?

“Nick?”

The fox’s attention was drawn away from taking stock of his situation by the tiny, scared voice. It
took him a moment to locate the source, but when he did, his heart crumbled. His partner looked
like she’d been through an emotional meat-grinder. Her red, frightened, almost hollow eyes met
his. Her face was a patchwork of tear tracks, ruffled fur, misery and fear. She stared at him,
seemingly unable to believe it was really him.

“Carrots?” he rasped, “You ok?”

The rabbit huffed a watery laugh. “You… You’re asking if I’m ok?”

“I’m in a hospital bed, so I’ve got doctors looking out for me. Frees me up for the important things
like my partner,” he replied with a weak smirk.

The rabbit choked out a watery laugh, before her face crumpled and she burst into tears. She
climbed off the chair she was standing on by scrambling up onto the mattress. Painfully gently, as
if she was afraid he’d turn to dust and blow away, she draped herself across his chest, buried her
face in his shoulder and sobbed. Nick gingerly raised a paw and stroked her back, muttering
comforting words, as her frame wracked.

It was possibly the worst he’d ever felt, seeing her so upset. He knew he’d not been the best of
partners, friends or anything else, but there weren’t words for what he’d done to the most precious
mammals in his world. Granted he hadn’t poisoned himself, but he’d done plenty otherwise.
Thankfully, a badger in a lab coat that Nick vaguely remembered being his doctor entered the
room after a few minutes, pried Judy off his chest and sent her to clean herself up.

He didn’t possess much strength and he was already tired again. The doctor wasn’t surprised and
kept her comments brief and simple. He was horrified to discover he had been brought in over
three days prior. After he was attacked, Jack had found him. He also provided the hospital with
information on what he had been dosed with. That was something he needed to discuss with Jack,
but it would have to wait. The doctor had a lot more to say and none of it pretty.

For thirty hours, it was touch and go. During his conscious periods, his hallucinations had been
extremely vivid and he had screamed and thrashed for hours. He had been restrained after breaking
a panther orderly’s arm with his grip and that accounted for some of the bruising all over Nick’s
frame. Sedation hadn’t been an option, as it would likely have killed him, so he’d had to ride it out.
Finally, when the worst of it had passed Judy was allowed in. She hadn’t left the room for more
than a minute at a time, since.

Others had come and gone. Jack and Bogo among them. Apparently, there had been an altercation
between them, but Nick was skeptical. They weren’t likely to squabble at such a time. It was a mystery. One he pondered after the doctor had departed and he slipped back into sleep.

Now, he was just waiting to leave. He’d barely had the strength to make it through the initial conversation with the doctor the day before and had remained mostly unconscious for all the time between then and waking up this morning. Most of that intervening time was consumed by the consumption of food that possessed no flavor and unconsciousness. The only constant was that Judy was never absent when he was awake, no matter the hour of the day.

He knew he had to talk to her, but here and now was not the time or place for it. In the first place, she was a wreck. In the second, he would probably fall asleep during the conversation. Well, yesterday, he certainly would have. Today might work out, but he still had a lot to deal with before he could even think about a heart to heart with Carrots.

First up was a meeting with Judy, Bogo, Jack and Angie to discuss what had actually happened, what it meant and the next steps. Probably something about new security measures. Nick hadn’t paid much attention when Judy had told him. His narcolepsy had been acting up. In all likelihood, he would be moving to a safehouse, but not until he had another chat with the doctor and got final clearance for release.

After that, Nick was less sure of his plans. If he were to take a guess, he would presume that was by design. Not only would he likely not remember much of what had been said previously, but, considering he just survived an attempt on his life, security was high on the priority list. Need-to-know would be the name of the game, and one thing he knew from dealing with security was that the mammal who needed protection often needed to know the least. Whether he needed to or not, he was going to know every bit of what was happening, whether they told him willingly or he pulled it out of them piecemeal. Assuming, of course, he could stay coherent and find the energy to pull off the interrogation.

In the meantime, all he could do was wait.

As of this morning, he finally felt clearheaded enough to function and the dizziness had passed enough for an unassisted foray into the washroom. He only wobbled twice and he was fairly sure Judy got an eyeful thanks to the hospital gown, but he made it all the way there and back under his own power. He saw Judy’s paws reflexively clenching and twitching the entire way; her desire rush to help him barely kept in check. She was treating him like he was made of rarest porcelain. He couldn’t honestly blame her, but there were some things he would prefer she didn’t assist him with. Most of what he used the washroom for as a start.

A shower with a bunny-loofa would be nice…

Nick mentally checked himself. He was drifting, again. One of the more noticeable effects of whatever had happened to him was his libido was certainly acting up more than usual. It wasn’t as bad as heat season, but it was close and very distracting. Pretty much anything could set him onto a libidinous mental tangent. With his added trouble focusing, it was difficult to keep his mind above the beltline for longer than a few minutes at a time.

Speaking of overdeveloped sex-drives…

From somewhere in his mental morass, the memories of visiting Bunnyburrow and the idea of sex drives gone wild congealed into the shape of another rabbit; One that was far, far too young for him, legal or not.

Nick loved the city. A whole different reality from one block to the next. Turn a corner and it was
a whole new experience in smells, architecture, color... it was a thing of beauty. It still amazed him how different each species was and how differently they perceived the world. Each species had its own culture, but also seemed to have its own sense of style, proportion, color usage. It was one of the reasons he loved the museum of modern art, as a kit. So many perspectives. Now, as an adult, he could appreciate the same things just wandering around town.

That was why Bunnyburrow confused him, at first. Too much uniformity. Too many subtle variations on a theme. Too many names that went with too many mammals that all looked too similar. That was how he coined the term Mini-Carrots, and oh, boy had that stupid joke come back to bite him.

When Nick had first met her, Mina had been sweet despite her teenage sarcasm, a little timid, and adorable as all rabbits were. She was a middle-teenaged doe who took a while to warm up, despite her adoration of Judy. It was so sweet seeing the younger doe run up and fling herself at her older sister during his first visit. It reminded Nick of Judy’s propensity for ballistic affection and he wondered briefly if it was a family trait. If the kerfluffle’s antics when greeting him was any indication, it was.

He’d thought she was so very much like Carrots. She possessed the same drive and energy, the same spirited vivacity as her older sister. However, unlike Judy, the teenager was all fire and no direction. It was very obvious that she needed direction and she wanted to do something serious with her life. She just had yet find it.

Then, he’d stumbled upon her secret.

It hadn’t been anything special for him, but it had come to mean worlds to her, he’d recently discovered. It’d been his second, maybe third visit to the Hopps’ farm? He’d been wandering through the fields, having given the fluffle the slip for the fifth or sixth time since his arrival and he’d been wondering why his visits seemed to center on being chased by a horde of tiny fluffballs, when he found himself in an isolated part of the nearer fields, by the north woods. He remembered Judy saying the woods weren’t much used aside from summer, when hiking, bonfires and skinny-dipping were in vogue. As it was only late spring, he felt fairly safe.

He flopped down on a mossy spot against a tree trunk and quickly fell asleep. He had a couple hours to kill before he was needed for dinner and the rest would be welcome, as avoiding the rapacious hordes of Atilla the Bun was exhausting work. Alas, his reprieve was brief. He was pulled back to consciousness about twenty-six winks shy of the full forty by a loud, metallic impact. For a terrifying moment he thought it was a battle gong of some kind and he’d have to run to protect his tail, again. Then, he realized that his waking with a start had startled someone in turn. Mina was staring wide-eyed, clutching a hammer and an improvised chisel much the same way he was clutching his tail.

For a tense moment they simply stared. Mina recovered first.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hiding from the fluffle. What are you doing here?”

“Nothing!”

“Obviously. Hammer, chisel, loud noise. Nothing going on here at all. Are you practicing as a safe cracker?”

The younger rabbit fumed for a moment before throwing her tools and a few other things into a bag
and spitting, “Don’t tell anyone!” before sprinting into the woods, towards the house.

Nick was naturally both curious and concerned. What on earth was going on? He traipsed over to where she had been sitting and found the rock with the one glaringly fresh mark on it. It took him a while, but he eventually worked out what it was: A stylized rendition of a serpent, only partially complete. Once he knew what to look for, he started looking at other rocks around the fire pit and was increasingly intrigued by what he found. The serpent statue was one of an incomplete set of the zodiac animals, there was a complete set of the Celestials engraved into stones around the edges of the clearing. There were even rough drafts of some other works scattered about; literally, hiding in plain sight. The artist’s progress was easily discernable, especially the volume of pieces strewn about. Nick pulled out his phone and started taking pictures.

After dinner, Nick helped clear away and Judy got swamped by her siblings for more stories from the city. Nick made a discrete fade away from the gathering mass of rabbits in the greatroom and tracked Bonnie down, before she joined the fun and games. A not-quite-fabricated story about seeing Mina drop something when they crossed paths earlier in the day resulted in a grateful mother rabbit’s directions to her kit.

He found Mina in a seldom used parlor in one of the lower levels. She’d been so focused on what she was doing that she didn’t hear his walk up behind her. She had a small cardboard jewelry box with her and a sketch pad. The box was open on its side and spilling from it were sketches; concept rough drafts for her art. There were dozens of them.

This time, he got the drop on her. “Very pretty. Looks nothing like your work at the fire pit.”

When she peeled herself off the ceiling, her response was sullen. “They’re for larger pieces. Not like anyone will see them.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not good enough… Why do you care?”

“Why wouldn’t I? They’re good artwork.”

“Right… And you’re an art expert.”

“Not really. I do know what I like, though, and I know a few artists.”

“Con artists…”


“I know. I heard you before. We all did. You know everyone.”

“I also know someone who appraises art when she isn’t making it, or lecturing about it.”

“So?”

“So, I sent her pictures of your work.”

“You what?!” The doe shrieked.

“Easy on the volume, Mini Carrots. I’m right here.”

“I can’t believe you! I told you not to tell anyone!”
“I didn’t. I sent a picture or thirty of some artwork I found to a mammal who knows her stuff. I didn’t mention you by name, or otherwise. So, technically, I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Y-You! You… Utter…”

“Gods, you are so like her. Here. I’ll send you her response to you. You can see for yourself.”

“You can’t send me anything! You don’t have my number!”

In response, Nick held up a finger and tapped away with his other paw. A quick text to Bonnie later and he had Mina’s number. All it took was “Mini Carrots is being difficult. Can you send me her digits, so I can annoy her back?” and Bonnie asked no more. Seconds later, Nick was sending repeat texts to Mina. It didn’t take long for the teenaged rabbit to lose what little cool she had left.

“What is wrong with you?!”

“Oh, your sister could answer that one…” Her angry reply was preempted by about twenty text notifications. “You might want to check that, Mini Carrots.”

“Oh my gods… Will it get you to stop?”

“No promises, but it’s a good bet.”

“Fine.” Mina pulled up her texts listing and angrily tapped through to the only unknown number on the list. “Who the hell is “Zero?””

“Her street name from her tagging days was Sub-Zero, or Suzy Zee. You might know her now as Suzanne Zorronski.”

“Bullshit.”

“My boss would take umbrage at that.”

“There is no way you know Suzy Z. She’s a famous painter and you’re a…”

“An ex-hustler, turned cop? Yeah. Way back when I was in the hustling game, I spent a lot of time in Tundratown. It’s a little cold for taggers, so it really stands out when you do see it. I followed her work for a while and eventually met her. We’ve been in touch off and on since. Why don’t you take a look at what she said about your sculpture?”

A few seconds later, Mina remained unconvinced. “No way it’s her. I don’t care what this person said. It’s nice and all, but no way it was her.”

Nick rolled his eyes, as Mina turned and started to clean up her things. “You’ve heard her speak, right? She’s a guest lecturer at ZU and The Art Institute of Zootopia.”

“Duh. She did a ToddTalks presentation, too. Still doesn’t make it her.”

Nick’s phone was already ringing as she answered and when the call connected, he clicked over to speaker. “Nick Wilde. I haven’t heard from you in months and now, it’s twice in a day? You feeling alright?”

The voice from his phone’s speaker stopped Mina’s paws and dropped her jaw to knee level. “I’m fine, Zero. Listen, my phone’s acting up. Sending those pics was fine, but it must be the service out here in the sticks. I didn’t get your response.”
“Seriously, Nick? Where are you?”

“Bunnyburrow.”

“Holy crap, you weren’t kidding when you said you had a new life. Never thought I’d see you leaving the city.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whole new world out here. You should visit.”

“Pfft. Not happening. Now, I gotta ask. Where did you find these pieces. It looks like they were dumped.”

“Not dumped. I think the artist likes to work outside.”

“Whatever. It works. Do you know who did it?”

“I’m not sure. I think it’s one of my partner’s siblings. The rocks are on her family’s farm, so odds are decent.”

“Well, whoever they are, they need to get to art school.”

“You sure, Zee?”

“No question. Their work is unrefined, crude… definitely in need of training, but there is serious talent there. It looks like they’re using unusual tools. Maybe something like an old screwdriver, but they make it work. Reminds me of my old wall art, back in the day.”

“Hah! Yeah. You’ve come a long way, Zero.”

“You’re the only mammal who still calls me that, other than Anne. It’s kinda nice. “Professor Zorronski” it a little stuffy.”

“Zero suits you and your tats better.”

“She thinks so, too. Look, if you find this rabbit, or sheep, or whatever, give them a push towards whatever art school is around. If you need a hand, call me and I’ll talk to them. Now, I gotta go. Anne’s waiting on me and I can’t be late for date night, again.”

“Later, Zero. My best to the wife.”

“We aren’t married, smartass. She hasn’t said yes, yet.”

“Good luck with attempt number, what, twenty-seven?”

“Twenty-nine. And shut up!”

The line went dead and Nick’s smug level climbed a notch or two.

Mina squeaked, “That was her!”

“Uhhuh. That was Zero. Still think I’m full of it?” Rather than answer, Mina stared. “Look, Mini Carrots, I’m not going to tell you what to do. You heard it from an expert. You’ve got talent. If you get some classes under your belt and decide you want to do an exhibition, or something, I know a few galleries that would probably be happy to show your work.”

It was just helping out a friend's family and showing off a little; a little encouragement for a
burgeoning artist. An artist who burgeoned straight out of the proverbial closet. Maybe he'd been a bit on the heavy-pawed side calling in what amounted to heavy artillery, but he'd meant well. For what it was worth, it worked. Mina had pulled her sculptures out of the woods and shown her parents. They'd been skeptical, but agreed to send her to art classes. The rest, as they say, was history.

If only it was that simple.

She had very definitely grown up since then. The somewhat awkward teenager who was insecure about her art had slowly been replaced by a much more self-possessed, much more confident young adult who was on her way to the city to study sculpture.

Not young anymore, Nicky. She’s a full-blown adult now.

The thought made him shudder, a bit.

He’d always joked with her; teasing the little sister that was so similar to his Carrots, that she looked up to her as a role model. Her trepidation wasn’t just about her art. She confided in Nick later on that she saw how successful Judy had become and was terrified of not measuring up. He’d encouraged her and tried to be supportive, but he only visited a few times a year and they were rarely in touch, otherwise. He didn’t think much of it.

Mina, on the other paw, did. A lot. Apparently, for a long time. The little sister grew up, filled out, got confident and went on the offense in both her art and personal life. She decided to just go for it and good for her! Uncomfortably, he was one of the “its” she went for, in addition to formal training at the AIZ.

It was only the one trip so far that was awkward, but there was the previous visit where there was a feel copped on more than his tail. He’d suspected her for it at the time, but hadn’t been certain of it. Now, he was certain. Now, it was obvious that a bit of thirst for fox ran in the family. He’d caught a few of Judy’s sisters mentally undressing him and a couple of the same-gender-centric bucks were getting more forward. Even Bonnie's occasional ‘tail pillow’ was suspect, though that may have been paranoia. There was the occasional whiff of keen rabbit and unusually familiar contact, even among the exceedingly tactile rabbit species that concerned him. It was possible it was an unconscious reaction on their part. That or his ego was reaching truly embarrassing levels of inflation.

Or the drugs are messing with me and I’m still hallucinating.

It was an idea he had grasped intellectually, but the reality of rabbit relationships hadn't really crossed his mind, despite his interest in Judy and all the quasi-joking about an "alternate relationship" with her and Jack. It wasn't even a thought he'd taken seriously outside of daydreams. He'd been too stuck in his own little mental rut of how relationships worked. Now, it was brought into stark relief. The so-called flexibility of lapidae relationships wasn't common knowledge, but he was an insider. He'd seen plenty enough to not be surprised by anything he'd seen. It was pretty staggering, in retrospect.

Theoretically, if he mated and married Judy, Judy's siblings still had a shot at bagging him, as long as she didn't object and he was in favor. When that realization hit, it felt like he was fighting the vertigo effect of the poison, again. One small part of his mind posited "could be fun", before the rest of him shut the idea down as too uncomfortable to consider. He’d wanted Judy for a long time and, until Jack showed up, only Judy. Nick wasn’t sure how that specific exception worked, but it did in his head. As far as he was concerned that was all that mattered. From what he knew of rabbit romantic culture, he didn’t need anything else.
Thinking back, his natural proclivity for flirting may not have been wise to leave unrestrained, even if it was him joking around. It was fun making the bunnies blush, but Judy told him once upon a time that flirting for rabbits wasn’t a subtle art. That was why she’d had such a hard time dealing with him at first. If that was true for all of them, he was in serious trouble and not a good kind.

At the least, he’d owe apologies and have lots of disappointments to make up for. The last thing he’d wanted was to hurt anyone. If he was honest with himself, it wasn’t actually such an issue. He’d heard Judy explain his flirting away and he’d been publicly reprimanded several times, gently of course, for letting too much charm out with her family. Most probably that was enough and anyone who had a quiet word with her would get all the assurances they’d need. That would take care of most of it. However, if Mina was any indication, there was a handful that took it seriously, regardless. A handful that might attempt to collect.

Judy had also warned them that it was just him and not exactly serious on his first visit. Her exact words were “He can't help it. If he isn’t charming the pants off someone, it’s an indicator he’s sick, like if he has a dry nose.”

To which, Bonnie had inquired if he had charmed her pants off. Publicly.

His quip of “Carrots’ pants are quite safe, I assure you, Mrs. Hopps.” May have been the wrong thing to say, as that was the first time he used that nickname around them. Considering the fracas that had caused, he really needed to think before he spoke more often. It also didn’t help that his response was open-ended and vague and interpretable in several ways. Thinking back, that might have been the first time he ever saw Judy well and truly blush.

Naturally, he had to follow up with, “The beet crop looks good this year,” to everyone’s amusement. He hadn’t felt bad about it at the time, especially as he got a bruised shoulder out of the deal.

It didn’t make him feel better, now.

His guilt pulled him to memories associated with it. He did not enjoy his mind being so out of his direct guidance. He flashed to the night out with Jack, what little he remembered. He got about as far as leaving the club and walking somewhere, before things got vague. He remembered Jack looked amazing and got a lot of attention.

Nick did not like how that attention from other mammals directed at Jack made him feel. It was the same feeling that Nick tried to avoid when he visited the farm with Judy. That was partly why he stayed busy “helping out” as much as he did, while they were there. It was easier to conceal his jealousy when it wasn’t an immediate concern and he didn’t have to see it. It bothered him seeing her with male friends and he didn’t like it. Jealousy didn’t look good on him. It didn’t look good on anyone. He hated feeling possessive, especially of her. He didn’t have a claim on her. He didn’t on Jack, for that matter and it was his own fault in both cases.

Never let them see that they get to you.

No one caught on. Not at the farm, or anywhere else. Not in all the months, years, since he started feeling that way. He was fairly sure his attraction wasn’t a secret, but his jealousy was. The master hustler still had it. Maybe if he didn’t, they would have had a conversation like the one that he’d been working up to for ages, a long time ago. Instead, everyone was hurting and he was hospitalized.

That made something in his memory writhe, like it wanted to surface. He knew he had something that needed remembering that had to do with his guilt and possessiveness, but it just wasn’t in reach. The doctor said he’d have some holes in his memory, but it was temporary. Fighting it
wouldn’t help. He just had to wait and it would come back. Most of it, anyway. The majority of his time under the toxin’s effects would likely stay buried.

Thank Karma…

Nick was pulled from his depressive, rambling internal monologue by Judy rematerializing with an orderly and wheelchair in tow. Some minutes later he was cruising into a conference room, somewhere in the labyrinth that was the hospital complex. Judy might have been acting as an escort, or just hovering, but she was never farther than arms-length away from his chair. Nick was touched, but also horribly unsure of where he stood with her.

The holes in his memory were doing him no favors and a few times he caught her looking at him in a way he couldn’t describe; almost as if she wasn’t sure he was really there. He was also aware that whenever she looked away from him, her paw would wander over and touch him. The moment she looked back, she took her paw away as if she wasn’t aware she did it. He didn’t care, really. If that was what she needed, she could have it. The only reason he didn’t hold her paw and save her the trouble was that he didn’t want to make her feel awkward about it. If she was unaware of her own actions, he didn’t want to call attention to it and embarrass her. She looked a little better than she had when he’d first seen her yesterday, but the wear was visible. He may have been through the wringer, but he’d been unconscious for it. She’d had a ring-side seat.

Before long, they were joined by Bogo, who was uncharacteristically nervous. The reason for the anxiety of their boss became evident when Special Agent Birchclaw arrived in the company of someone who might have been Jack. If Judy looked wrecked, Jack looked like a different mammal. He was in his work uniform; black suit and tie. His eyes were cold, hard and distant. There was no humor, emotion or even flexibility in his expression, or anything he said or did. Not that Nick had much opportunity to crack a joke, or even muster the energy. There weren’t even pleasantries to be observed, by way of a greeting. When Jack entered the room, the briefing simply began.

They were immediately relocating to the Empyrion Hotel in the Alpine District. It was a government-sponsored recovery facility for military and government employees, specifically patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The staff had been vetted through Jack’s people and a wing had been specially reserved for their use through a series of subterfuges that Nick didn’t have the focus to follow. Two other teams would be present in the same wing masquerading as "resident patients" and associated psychiatric staff to act as added lines of defense. Past that, all Jack would say was that there would be plenty of added security.

As it was positioned on a mountaintop and serviced high profile mammals, it was a secluded, secure, and controlled environment. Hard to get to, as only one funicular railway granted access to the facility and it only ran by appointment, or emergency. The only other method of access was by air and that was not advisable. The high winds made any attempt to fly in risky at best, even for avians, and the cold was a severe deterrent to anything cold-blooded.

From what Nick could see, Jack was in Agent Savage Mode. Not exactly a surprise, but there were three things that convinced Nick that all was very much not well. The first was that Bogo grew increasingly uncomfortable the longer Jack was speaking. If the rabbit ever looked directly at the water buffalo, the eye contact was broken as quickly as possible by his boss. The second was Birchclaw. She was behaving with a degree of rigidity that was frankly unsettling. She could do all-business with the best of them, but there was a big difference between professional and wooden.

The third point was the worst. Jack made eye-contact with Nick only once in the entirety of the briefing. Nick had expected professional distance, seriousness, even anger. Nick did not expect the vagueness, the rage or the misery barely held in check in his stare. Jack locked eyes with Nick for a
split second as he entered the room and refused to look at him directly for the remainder of the time they occupied the same space. The only point where Jack showed any reaction was when Bogo referred to the attack as an assassination attempt.

“No,” Jack’s voice was uncharacteristically forceful. His tone condescending, mocking.

“Excuse me?” Bogo replied.

“That was not an assassination attempt. That was a message.”

“Would you care to elaborate on that, Agent Savage? My officer is in the hospital after being poisoned and you claim it wasn't an attempt at murder. I need your reasoning.”

“Simple, Chief Bogo. He's alive. Before you get all pissy with me, understand that I know the poison, the animal who manufactured it and why it was not attempted murder.”

“You know? How?” Bogo was aghast.

“I recognized the symptoms.” The silence in the room was pregnant and Jack wasted little time. “Officer Wilde was shot with a dose of what we called Lullaby during the war. It was a mixture of plant toxins and animal venoms along with some other nasty bits; a chemical cocktail designed to kill with cold blooded efficiency. That's how I know it was a message. If he'd been hit with the real thing, he'd be dead.”

“How was it not the real thing? He died four times.” This was news to Nick. He did not like this news. No wonder Carrots was wrecked. Nick was confirmed in his suspicions that she was aware that she was touching him for reassurance as her paw landed on his arm and gripped, trembling.

“No. He was resuscitated four times over a 30-hour battle with the medical staff. Lullaby was designed to kill in minutes. The component chemicals include extracts from certain plants, fungus and cacti, along with Kane toad and snake venoms. The principle is simple. Induce fear hallucinations, send the adrenal system into overdrive and cripple the lungs. Panic-induced self-suffocation; the body can't breathe, so it burns up its oxygen and the victim suffocates. I knew many victims of this toxin,” Jack steeled himself. “I saw the lab report and it confirmed my suspicions. The one component missing from the mix was the toxin that attacked the lungs. They wouldn't make that mistake. This was designed to hurt, not kill.” The more Nick heard, the less he liked.

“You said you know who makes it?” Judy asked. Her attention had narrowed to a razor-edge at the possibility of having a lead to hunt down.

“One clan of frogs. Nasty little prigs. They created and manufactured all the poisons used for assassinations during the war, until Echo took them down. It's clear that someone in the clan has survived the shame and is looking to regain his family honor.”

Nick decided to intercede before anything got worse. “Jack, I think we need a little context, so we can follow.”

Jack sighed, before looking at the ceiling and gritting out, sarcasm gracing every syllable. “Amphibian honor is a touch draconian. Failure often meant death. In the case of a major screw up, like what Echo arranged for them, it meant death for the whole clan, except for one. The rough translation of the term for that lone survivor is “The Living Shame”. By leaving one left alive, the emperor in his “infinite forgiveness” was allowing the one survivor a chance to regain their family standing. In typically amphibian cruelty, the rest of Amphibia was forbidden to even speak to this
survivor, lest they share in their fate.”

“So, you're sure it's this Living Shame? What’s the frog’s name?”

“Yes, I am, as no one else would have the expertise and his name is not your concern.”

“So, Echo was responsible for his family's fall, so he's getting revenge. Right?”

“Nothing so passionate. This was just making a point and calling me out. He knows this will get me involved.”

“Why?”

“Killing Echo’s son would be a good start, but to regain his family’s honor he would been to repay every aspect of John's actions that led to his clan’s fall. That adds a touch of complexity to it.”

Bogo chose to rejoin the conversation. “What conditions would he have to meet?”

“Kill Echo, ruin or kill his family, defeat and kill his protégé, and return the favor twice over for the specific event. In terms of what he could actually do? Echo is dead, so killing him is impossible, but he could claim victory there by circumstance. Echo’s wife has passed and only Nick remains, so he is at risk. Then, besting and killing his protégé, myself. Lastly, a tit-for-tat on Mammalia.”

“Then why didn’t he kill Wilde? And what does tit-for-tat on Mammalia mean?” Bogo promoted for more information, his need to know overcoming whatever hesitance he had shown at the beginning of the meeting.

“To answer the first, pettiness and cruelty. He proved he could kill Nick at his leisure and called me out with the same action. By hurting him instead of killing, he hopes to demoralize us. Cold-blooded, calculated psychological warfare.” Jack took a long breath before continuing. “Tit-for-tat, in this case, means he would have to hurt us the way Echo hurt him. In the event Echo arranged that resulted in his clan’s fall, a lot of damage was done to the Amphibian security forces. Particularly, to their personnel.”

“What does that mean, Savage? Stop beating around the bush and tell us.”

“It means he would attack Mammalia’s security services in some way. It’d be open season on any mammal who wears a badge or uniform, cops included. By Amphibian standards that means family and friends, as well.” Jack allowed the enormity of that statement to sink in for a moment. “The one saving grace in all this is that Amphibian honor follows a very strict code. The repayment of the event is the last step; the coup-de-gras if you please. First, Echo would have to die, then his family, etc. If we can find him and neutralize him before he kills Nick and myself, the threat to Mammalia will cease to exist.”

Nick sat and digested while the others debated the finer points of Amphibian codes of honor, reasonable assessment of threats and political influences or consequences. One thing bothered him and he had been chewing over since he heard Jack use verbal slight-of-hand to say it without stating it. Nick gathered himself and asked the question.

“Agent Savage.” The room quieted at Nick’s voice. “What did you mean by claiming victory in Echo’s death? If he is dead, how could he claim victory? Doesn’t Echo’s death mean that his revenge in impossible?”

Jack’s voice was low, cold and deadly; filled with malice and memory. “Lullaby was used to kill
John. It was his clan’s tool, so his clan’s victory.”
The briefing concluded on that note.

Not an auspicious conclusion…

Nick was distracted from these discomfiting revelations by Judy telling him she would return in a moment and not to move. Nick would have thought she was joking about him being in a wheelchair, except for the haunted look in her eyes. She quickly left the room for a private conversation with Agent Birchclaw. Nick for his part, was trying to glean what he could of the situation from the others. Bogo was a stress-riddled ball of anxiety, Angie was imitating a frightened robot, Judy was a mess, and Jack looked like he was doing worse than Judy, but trying to hide it. Nothing he didn’t know, for the most part, but Jack’s reaction was extreme, even by what Nick knew. There was something else going on. His memory writhed again, but nothing surfaced.

As Jack left the room, Nick pretended to be fading; well some of it was pretend. As soon as Jack was out the door, Nick saw the tremor that shook the striped lagomorph. It wasn’t much, but it was there. Trembling paws, tense jaw muscles from gritted teeth, shoulders stiff. Jack was holding together, but only just. Nick realized the nastiness he exhibited during the meeting was not directed at anyone but himself.

Nick didn’t have long to ponder this any more than he had the energy, as Judy returned from her conversation with Birchclaw. She placed a small pile of cloth into his lap and they headed off to chat with the doctor to get do’s-and-don’t’s list and plan for follow up treatment, if any. He wanted to ask what the cloth was, but found himself waking up some minutes later with a badger in scrubs who looked like she was envious of his minutes of sleep. She doctor had the bedside manner of a tired vulture.

“…You should have sort of acid flashbacks for a while… Expect intense dreams or nightmares… Ghosts at the edges of sight. That kind of thing.”
“That sounds completely vague and unencouraging,” Nick commented, sarcastically. “Could you be a little less helpful?”

“OK, look. I know you’ve been through a lot. I empathize. But I was two hours away from ending a seventy-two-hour shift when you arrived. That striped rabbit pulled my military file and shanghaied me to be your primary and I’ve barely slept since. That puts me at over one hundred sixty hours on the clock with less than 15 hours of sleep. I’m dead.”

Judy stepped in. “We understand. Can you just stream of conscious, or something? We’ll figure the details out later, but can you just give all the information to us in a shot?”

“Information doesn’t transmit in an injection… Wait. You meant figuratively.” The look shared between Nick and his partner made it clear that in any other circumstances, they would be distracting this badger until the mammals in white coats showed up. It was one more layer on the onion of uncomfortable this morning had become.

“OK… What you were exposed to triggered a cascade effect in your brain. Your neurons were over-stimulated. You’ll probably have some trouble focusing with strange memories popping up, dreams too. Maybe feel like time is flowing oddly. It’ll pass. The chemicals are mostly out of your system and the rest should flush out within another day or so. Drink lots of water. No stimulants, so coffee or caffeinated teas are out. You need to sleep and recover. Your body took a pounding and your heart, too. You're fine now, more or less, but I'm putting you on limited physical activity for at least a week. No lifting anything over 10lbs, no heavy physical labor. I recommend taking walks regularly, or other light physical activity, as that will stimulate the healing process. Um... let's see... that should be it. Officer Hopps, you're staying with him?”
“Yes.”

The doctor unceremoniously dropped a packet of documents into her paws. “Make sure he follows these instructions. If he has serious trouble breathing, or experiences chest pains, call us immediately. It's highly unlikely he will experience any aftereffects, as he is in excellent shape, but his heart had a work out. He'll be easily winded and sore, so don't worry unless it's obvious he's in real distress. It will be very easy to tell. Just to be safe, keep an eye on him for... another 12 hours. By then, the risk will be past and the last of the toxins either excreted or fully broken down. I think that's about it...”

Nick had never been more pleased to end a conversation in his life. Even Judy’s neighbors or Inga could have been more pleasant conversationalists. They were almost to the door, when the cherry landed on the sundae. “Oh! Before I forget. You are clear for sexual activity, just bear in mind your other limitations. I think the soreness should help keep you in check from being too vigorous.”

“Excuse me?”

“You're medically cleared to rut, but I suggest your partner do all the work. I thought I made that clear.” Nick could feel the heat radiating from his police partner’s ears.

“That’s wonderful news, but I'm sorry, doctor. I don't see how that's relevant.”

“You're a co-wait. This wouldn't be your first serious injury, would it? First brush with death?”

“Yes..? I hope so, anyway. My memory is a little wobbly, right now.”

The badger pinched the bridge of her muzzle and sighed, before what appeared to be reciting from another memorized text. “Following a life and death struggle, or severe injury the body reacts on a very primal level. Being so close to death can spark a drive to find an affirmation of life. As it is arguably the most basic biological imperative, it most commonly manifests as a desire to mate.”

“So I'm going into an induced heat from a near death experience?” That explained a few things.

“Nothing so dramatic and it’s not a guarantee. Your body will just be very keen on proving that it isn't dead by doing what it was made to do. Speaking in purely biological terms, the body exists solely to pass on its DNA, so sex is the most basic affirmation of life. It also can help relieve the mental and emotional stresses from such an experience, provide support, etc.”

As they moved to the door, hoping to escape the examination room before any more uncomfortable conversations could happen, Nick heard Judy ask, “Doctor, do you know a quokka named Inga, by chance?”

“No... no, I don't think so. Why?”

“Just curious. Thank you doctor.”

Nick chuffed a laugh and winced at the soreness in his ribs. Judy giggled and placed a paw on his forearm. They shared a small, tired smile and made their way to the lobby. It was time to go home.

Almost.

A small mountain of paperwork was still in need of completion, under the gaze of an Ibex buck in a nurse’s uniform who was even less personable than the doctor they had just left and probably for the same reasons. Once that was done, they were ushered very expediently into an unmarked car.
Judy took care in buckling him in so extreme, it was comical. He was half-expecting a roll of bubble wrap to appear along with a roll of packing tape. Instead, the little pile of cloth made another appearance. Once he was cinched in to Judy’s satisfaction, she quickly shook out what appeared to be a pair of trousers and a vest that niggled his mind. With the ease of long practice, they quickly became small squares of folded fabric and were placed on the seat, but not between them. Judy strapped herself into the seat right next to Nick and he wondered for a moment if they could have just saved time by sharing one seatbelt. Fortunately, he was spared further musings by falling asleep, again.

Over the following hours, Nick shifted between awake and asleep intermittently, staying mostly asleep when in motion and waking when he changed vehicles. Whatever convoluted system Jack had arranged to get them from the hospital to the safehouse, it was no doubt well-planned and designed to throw off any attempts at tailing them, but from his point of view it was a lot of time expended in cars getting the crappiest tour of the city he'd ever seen. There was little disappointment in his world, when he spent a majority of it inspecting his eyelids for leaks. Least of all at what he discovered was the final transfer.

As they pulled up to a side entrance to the funicular railway that led to the Empyrion Hotel, Nick drifted awake. They were in the Meadowlands. That much, he could smell. He could also smell that distinct spread of aromas that indicated he was near the mountains and the higher winds that came with them. As he looked out the window, he was unimpressed as he always was at the expanse of the Meadowlands landscape. Thankfully, he was headed the opposite direction and up the mountain. He left the vehicle, for what he felt had to be the fifty-third time that day, with Judy taking the lead as soon as her paws touched the ground. He was still tired and barely registered anything between leaving the car and boarding the railcar. He simply allowed Judy to guide him by the paw. Once they were seated, the doors closed and the railcar began to move. Nick slumped in his seat and groaned.

Judy took the rare opportunity of his consciousness to check on him. “Glad to see you can make noise other than snoring, Slick, even if it isn’t any more articulate.”

“I don’t snore and I’m plenty articulate. You said so yourself.”

“You snore if you have a cold. Don’t think I forgot that little bug you picked up last year, but you do whine if I scratch your ears while you sleep.”

“You didn’t…” Judy’s guilty smile confirmed his suspicions. “Naughty bunny…”

“Just a little… You don’t seem that upset.”

“I’m not. That would require effort and right now, I can’t be bothered. Besides, I love having my ears scratched.”

“You do?”

“Uhhuh. Don’t get that much, though. Personal space and all.”

“You can be a little touchy about it.”

“It’s a fox thing,” Nick thought about shrugging, but decided it required too much work. “I think it’s safe to say you’re an exception to that rule.”

“Really?” Whoever could have guessed that two syllables could look so pleased. She looked like a kit at Yule, just after they open the present they’ve always wanted.
“Yeah, Carrots. Really. If I wasn’t OK with you touching my ears, I would have woken up and stopped you. You’re fine.” Nick chose this moment to yawn loudly. “License to scratch my ears is all yours.”

“So, I did it right?”

“I dunno. I’d say you did pretty good, because I stayed asleep, but you’ll know it if you get it right.”

“How will I know?”

“You’ll see.”

“You know I’m going to keep trying until I get it, don’t you?”

“Oh darn. One of my favorite things from my favorite mammal. The horror…”

“Your sarcasm isn’t always funny, Nicolas Wilde.”

“You have no room to talk. You think locust crossing the road jokes are comedy gold.”

“Only when delivered by Gordon Ramsay. Why did the locust cross the road? Because you didn't rutting cook it!”

“Foul-mouthed bunny.”

“I can't help it! It's funny!”

“Mi mi mi, I don't like crass humor, mi mi mi…”

“Shut up, smartass.”

“Again, with the butt fixation…”

“It's not a fixation!”

“Obsession?”

“You wish. “

“You wish I wished.”

“You wish I wished you wished.”

“Terrible 90's song.”

“What?”

“I win!”

“Damn! Ok. Another Random Banter point for you.” She was pouting, again. Yet another thing she did that was so cute, it should come with a warning label.

“What’s wrong, Lady Sulks-a-lot?”

“You're still points ahead.”
“You’re improving, sweetheart. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

“I don’t want to get better. I want to win.”

“Winning for you would be an even score. Preferably at 0.”

“No, a winning score would be me ahead by one, at the end of the day.”

“That may never happen, Carrots.” Her pouting was so cute it was painful and he was in enough of
that, already. “I said it may never happen. You’re up against 20+ years on the street in a battle of
wits. Plus, I’m a fox.”

“A fox with a dirty mind.”

“Naughty by nature, bun-bun.”

“More like nutty by nature,” Judy groused, halfheartedly.

“Careful. That’s Dani’s favorite group.”

Nick was glad to see Judy slip into their old pattern of blathering at each other. She was smiling
and her shoulders were less tense, but she still was never farther from him than arm’s length. He
relished her closeness and the return of the easy flow of silliness they had come to enjoy after the
tension and drama of the last several days. She was almost back to her usual self.

Disappointingly, Nick was not and before long the was drooping, again. It was so frustrating that
he couldn’t seem to remain functional for any substantial length of time. It didn’t help that Judy
was warm and close and he realized she was talking, but he’d missed it all.

“Hm? Say what?”

“Lie down, Nick. You’re halfway asleep already.”

“More than half. I need a pillow.”

In response to him pretending to be difficult, Judy reached up and started scratching behind his
ears. A moment of melting later, his head was in her lap. “Now sleep, dumb fox. It’s about an hour
to the hotel. I’ll wake you when we’re close.”

“Neck hurts…” The position he was in was one he’d dreamed about for ages, but as always there
was a difference between dream and reality. He needed neck support. A second or so after his
barely intelligible complaint, he felt his head lifted and something shoved under his neck. When his
head resettled across bunny thighs perfect comfort was his and he was asleep as soon as her paw
found his ears, again.

He dreamed.

It was very rare he remembered his dreams, but when he was gently nudged into wakefulness by
his partner, he remembered. It wasn’t much, but he remembered being at dinner with Jack. Fatty
tuna, eel and sea urchin, soy sauce, sushi rice and wasabi. For a moment, he remembered dinner
perfectly; every bite. The severe chef, the sake, cedar drinking boxes, Jack leaning on the counter
grimacing like the fox that ate the cricket.

Nick snapped to full wakefulness and waited for the rest to come back. He could feel it just outside
his grasp. He also felt Judy’s paw petting around the base of his ears. His burst of wakefulness
faded and he realized it was another false start. When it was just remembering a dream, he had all
the energy he needed. The moment the rest of him caught up, was another story. He was still
exhausted, felt tenderized and very sore, but not as bad as it had been when he woke up that
morning. He was also disgustingly relaxed. What she was doing with her paws should be banned as
an addictive substance. He was tempted to become a liquid.

“Judy, if you keep doing that, I may never move again.”

She sounded inordinately pleased with herself when she responded. “I think I’ve got this down
pat.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I didn’t know foxes could purr.”

“I guess you did figure it out and it’s not purring. Felines purr. Foxes rumble.”

“I’ll have to verify that, but for now, come on sleeping fuzzy. You can continue your nap in your
room.”

Nick pushed himself upright, only vaguely aware of the fact that he was not in the same position he
has started his nap in, and allowed Judy to guide him again. He did have the presence of mind to
grab the improvised neck pillow, whatever it was, before leaving the railcar and being led along
like a kit. He didn’t mind. It meant he had more energy to direct into not falling over. For all the
naps he’d been getting, he still felt narcoleptic. As he passed a window, he looked up and realized
it was only just after midday. He wasn’t hungry, but he knew he would be eventually. He tried to
mention it to Judy, but all she did was shove him back so he plopped onto the couch.

When did this get here?

He tried to move, but Judy stopped him. “Nick, sleep. I’ll take care of food and the rest of it.” He
didn’t bother arguing. He stuffed his neck pillow behind his head and surrendered to sleep, again.

He dreamed again. A dream about sushi, a rabbit dressed to kill at two hundred yards and promises
of dark roast in the morning.

When he woke up again, Nick felt refreshed. He wasn’t back to full capacity by a long shot, but he
felt well and truly awake; rested. He rolled his head up and noticed two things immediately. The
first was the fact that it was sunset. The sunlight hitting his eyes was actually what woke him up.
The second was that his neck pillow had fallen apart and gotten wrapped around his muzzle. He
tried to pull the offending cloth off his face and discovered that his left arm was immobilized by a
beautiful grey rabbit who had latched onto it in her sleep. His right arm was still free and when he
recognized immediately what had trapped it. It was Jack’s outfit from the night before. It smelled just like him. Realizations began to dawn on Nick and he felt a wave of
dizziness come over him.

Scent memory association.

That had to be it. For a canid, scents accounted for a huge amount of the sensory input they got
from the world. A scent-blind wolf was considered handicapped, as roughly sixty percent of how
they perceived the world came through their sense of smell. Foxes weren’t quite that dependent,
but it was close. There were studies showing that smells were more closely associated with
memories than any other sense popping up all over the place in the last five years. It had even
gotten as far as being mentioned in part of his training at the ZPA. The clothes Jack was wearing
that night was like an olfactory record of that night and he’d been using it as a pillow. Between his body heat and shifting in his sleep, any scent particles would have been able to aerosol and hit his sniffer.

Nick disentangled himself from Judy and laid her down on the couch cushion as gently as he could. Then, he slipped away with Jack’s clothes in tow. He knew what might help, but he didn’t want to do it. Not that he had a choice if he wanted to know what had happened that night. He did, but he really didn’t want to use this particular method. It only took a few minutes for him to locate his suitcase which had been packed for him in one of the bedrooms and the adjoining washroom.

Once a new set of his clothes were in paw, he locked himself in the washroom and turned his attention to Jack’s. A quick sniff told Nick a lot. There was food, smoke and violets for a start. The club and dinner had been the majority of the night, so it made sense they’d be prevalent. The aroma of violets made Nick smile tiredly. He knew Jack had chosen that scent for him; close enough to a fox’s musk to stand out to him, but nothing special to any other mammal.

Nick steeled himself for what he had to do.

And now for, by far, the single most creepy, stalker-ish thing I’ve ever done…

Nick took the clothes, bunched them up and rubbed them vigorously together, before stuffing his muzzle into them and inhaling. The friction and movement would kick up any odors the cloth contained and hopefully spark his memory into finally working.

It wasn’t dramatic. It wasn’t painful. It still took his breath away. He remembered it all. Jack’s seduction, their talk, the ultimatum-turned-afterthought. Step by step, the missing pieces in his memory clicked into place. The scents of Jack’s desire and his own, tension, hope and then fear followed by terror and grief. As the last gauzy veil lifted in his mind, the memory boiled up and he rode it.

At the end of his date with Jack, because there was no denying it was anything else, Nick remembered he’d shambled out of Arching Birch Apartments the drunkest he’d ever felt while sober. He’d managed his customary chuckle at the name of the building, but it fell a bit flat. He did so love his puns and subtle references. Everyone he knew tolerated them to varying degrees. A few even enjoyed them. At the time, a few choice instances pulled a giggle from his throat. The giggling made him retch. That was about the highpoint of that part of the evening.

He staggered away from the building to a bench on the edge of the park nearby and sat. The park itself didn’t have a name. It was just a small plot of green in the middle of the city and served as a sort of unofficial town square for the neighborhood. During the day, there was activity and life that filled the small green space. Kits and cubs played, parents chatted, food vendors occasionally set up shop for an afternoon.

Now, it was night and the space was empty. It was the perfect spot for a bit of privacy at short notice. Nick raked his paws over his ears and tried to work the kinks out of his neck for a moment, before giving up and facing facts. This was not how he had expected the night to go. It hadn’t been what he had expected at any point from meeting Jack at the club on, either. Granted, he hadn’t expected an invitation at all, let alone for it to turn out to be the most spectacular date he’d ever been on, in the first place, but the night ender was possibly the last thing the fox had considered possible.

He was faced with the very simple reality of his situation. He was a bastard, just like his father, but not the laughing sort.
I took the joke too far.

Humor had always been his best defense. Laughter makes things small. It weakens insults, takes the sting out of failure, even brightens bleak times. It also hurts. In this case, it hurt two of the few mammals he truly cared about. In Jack’s case, the hurt was relatively small. In Judy’s, well, that was another story.

Nick had known everything since the Lantern Festival. He had finally gotten the confirmation he needed, so he could make a move! All that he did from there was chicken out. Jack was right. Judy had been patient and put up with his cowardice and insecurities for so long, she deserved a sainthood. Nick felt ill at what he had put his Carrots through.

Wallowing won’t fix anything. You’re being a kit. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and do it.

Nick pulled out his phone and tapped through to her speed dial. He took a long, deep breath to steady his paw and tapped the call icon. That was the last act he did under his own power.

He felt a sharp impact to the side of his neck. For a breath, he had a flashback to the pit in the Natural History Museum when Bellweather shot him, but that was blown from his mind as pain ripped through him. The last thing his conscious mind grasped before being overwhelmed was Judy’s voice coming from his phone, as he shook uncontrollably on the ground. He tried to call out to her but he had no idea if he was even able to speak. Colors swam in his mind, disjointed sounds slammed his psyche like hammer blows and a ragged thrum filled his senses. Before darkness took him, Nick realized the thrum was his larynx and his heart doing a primal scream solo to a 300bpm baseline. Idly, Nick realized he was probably dying.

It wasn’t as painful as he’d feared. He wasn’t about to collapse, but he did not feel good. He felt dirty inside and out. Fortunately, he was in a position to take care of both those problems. He shucked his clothes and turned on the shower. He set it to slightly below what he considered hot and set about scrubbing the ick out of his fur. When he was done and the water running off him was clear, he stuck his head under the stream and slowly amped the heat up as high as he could stand. After a minute there to let the warmth penetrate all the way through him, he worked the temperature slowly down until it was as cold as he could stand. He went back and forth a couple times, letting his body freeze and boil alternately, before settling on a tepid setting and soaking himself fully, one last time.

Once upon a time, he had known an eccentric old marmot couple who taught athletics. They called what he just did a “recovery shower”. They spouted all manner of quasi-scientific gobbledygook about confusing the body into going into a hyper recovery mode. At the time, he’d been too young to really take them seriously and even now he wasn’t so sure their theorizing was anything but the ravings of a pair of fitness-nuts. What he did know was that for whatever reason, the shower worked. It always helped him recover from aches and pains and he needed that now.

After squeezing as much water out of his coat as he could, he blasted the remaining moisture out of his coat with the fur dryer and dressed. He had something to do.

When Nick stepped out of the washroom, he was almost bowled over by a frantic rabbit. Waking up and finding him gone, she had flown into a panic. Luckily, that had only been moments ago. Otherwise, she may have burst into the washroom to find him, or worse, raised the alarm with the staff. Gods only knew what would happen if his vanishing had reached Jack.

When she found him, her relief was palpable. She was immediately right next to him, trying to make sure he was ok; checking for injuries, making sure he hadn’t fallen or had any dizziness. It was sweet, if somewhat invasive. He also couldn’t argue with her concern. If the roles were
reversed, he’d probably be worse. That thought sobered him like a bucket of ice water.

Judy didn’t miss his change of demeanor and feared the worst. She took his paw and guided him back to the couch. “Nick? Are you sure you’re ok?”

As he sat, he sighed and didn’t let go of her paw. “Judy, sit down. We need to talk.”

“I’m sorry, Nick. I’m sorry. I’m just-“

“No, Judy. I’m the sorry one. And before we get into a competition about who’s sorrier, just hear me out.” So saying, he pulled her onto the cushions next to him. Rather than sit, she knelt and tucked her feet under her, facing him. It made her a little taller, almost eye-to-eye with him. It didn’t help him in the least.

It was the same way every time. He had all the will, the want, the need and now he even had an opportunity too perfect to pass up. It was everything he needed, more than he could have hoped for and just like every other time, his mind went blank. All the smooth talking, easy confidence he’d ever had evaporated the moment he looked her in the eyes. The last time he’d tried, he forgot verbal communication entirely. She thought he tricked her into a staring contest, one he’d lost along with a bet for who was paying for dinner. That was embarrassing, but that was then. He’d wriggled out of the situation with only a small prick to his pride and the price of a meal he intended to pay for anyway. Now, he didn’t have a choice. It needed to happen.

"Judy, I... I'm sorry. I just don't know any other way to say it." Nick’s paw reached out and cupped her cheek, lifting her face to his. He had just enough time and presence of mind to see her register what was happening before their lips met. Then, his eyes were closed and he couldn’t take it back. When he pulled away, she stayed exactly where she was. "I love you, Judy Hopps and I am so sorry I took so long to say it."

Judy was only stunned for a moment when the kiss broke. Once the words were out of his mouth, it was her turn. Her paws latched onto the collar of his shirt and pulled him in for another kiss. And another. When she finally let him come up for air he registered that he was on his back, she was straddling him and hadn’t let go of his shirt. Her feet were keeping him pinned by his shirt tails. He’d never enjoyed being trapped more.

From somewhere around his chest, she said, "I've been waiting, you dumb fox."

"We both have. Both too scared and too... whatever. It doesn't matter, now."

"What finally got you to admit it? Almost dying?"

Nick chuckled. "No, but that did help. It was Jack."

"Jack? How?"

"The night I was attacked we went out."

"I know. That jazz club and dinner."

"Yeah. ...It was a date. I didn't realize it until the end, but it was. Jack called me on my fears and delaying. Made me realize how much I was hurting you both. He gave me a solid reality check and sent me off to fix it. That's why I called you that night. I wanted to see you and finally tell you, but I-"

"-got poisoned. Your mother would have something to say about that."

“Irony and bad puns. I know.”

“What did Jack say?”

"Basically, that it had gone on long enough. He wants his chance at being with us, if it's in the cards and that can't happen while we have cold feet."

"So he does want you."

"He kissed me and kicked me out to talk to you. He told me I wouldn't get another until you were on board and were ok with it. When I called you I was hoping I'd be able to apologize to you and ask you to dinner, or something. Explain what had happened. This isn't how I expected to end up telling you."

"He said that?"

"When he kissed me he said, and I quote, "You aren't getting another until our girlfriend is on board.""

"Cheeky."

"Not really. He knows you may say no to him being involved with us. But unless we're together, he won't even be able to ask. He knows you're first in my heart, Judy. He said that too and he was right. I doubt he has any malice in what he did. He just wanted to light a fire under my tail."

"I know. Why are all the males I know so stupidly self-sacrificing?"

There was a long, pregnant pause in the conversation. Nick knew she was absorbing everything he'd said and was coming to grips with it, while he chewed on the implications of her last statement. She was in the same position she had ended up in when she tackled him; straddling his hips, standing on his shirt tails as he slouched on the sofa.

His concern grew as the silence did. Before long, he couldn’t take it and spoke. “Carrots?”

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long have you known?"

"About what? There's a lot of options to answer that with and I'd rather not answer wrong. You can be a little elbow-y when I do that."

He heard her let out a little sound that might have been a giggle, or a sob. "About us."

"About how I've felt? A long time. About how you felt? I'd hoped for ages, but I didn't know for sure until just before the Lantern Festival."

"But you didn't say anything..."

"I was kinda... scared... you know... didn't want to screw things up with us." Sounded like an unbearably lame excuse, even to him.

Nick became aware that he was in imminent danger, when Judy began to vibrate. She was trembling. He didn’t know if it was from anger, or frustration, or hurt, or what, but he knew that she was restraining herself from something by just a hair’s breadth. He had already met his yearly
quota of near-death experiences this week, so whatever was about to happen to him would either kill him outright, or simply rewrite his sense of reality. Her voice did not lessen his sense of immanent mayhem. It was low and thick with an intensity that frightened him.

"Nick, do you like this shirt?"
Chapter 16

Judy’s mind was occupied with one simple, irrefutable fact.

He finally rutting said it!

Six seconds ago, she was riding another round of the ‘Life-With-Wilde Emotional Rollercoaster’ that she had come to know and tolerate for the sake of her fox. Another of her unavoidable misinterpretations of his mercurial emotional state. She’d adopted that term a long time ago in place of her original term for it, as “emotionally truncated git-dom” wasn’t helping her stay calm most days. Nick was being unhelpful and acting in ways she couldn’t grasp. It didn’t help that the fox was so theatrical and unpredictable that everything he said could be either a set up for a terrible joke, or his last words.

It was not lost on her that she had nearly heard his last words, as he shrieked her name through her phone’s speaker. That was the start of possibly the worst week of her life. She’s spent hours waiting in the hospital with no word, vaguely aware that other mammals were coming and going. Minor conversations happened that she only paid a passing attention to; enough to end them, so she could go back to her vigil.

Eventually, she got the moment of hope and terror she had been waiting for. A doctor had come into the room and called for her, by name. Judy couldn’t remember anything about the mammal, other than they were taller than she was. The rest hadn’t mattered. That was when she discovered Nick had listed her as primary contact in case of medical emergency. She was the only one allowed to see him, until she was brought up to speed and could make decisions. That was a privilege normally reserved for family.

As his partner in the police she had certain powers in this situation, but even Bogo had to wait. Family was first, always, and apparently she was his family. She had never felt so happy and miserable before. The weight of responsibility was one she was prepared for and only blunted her happiness at finding out he thought so highly of her a little. The circumstances were horrible, but the statement was still there; a statement that only seemed to grow more painful as the hours wore on.

It was a reality she thought she was prepared for. Death and pain were a part of life. Inescapable and, in her line of work, more likely sooner than later. She was not prepared for seeing Nick in pain, let alone bound to a hospital bed. Her refusal to leave once she was in the room was something the hospital staff had gotten used to, not that she had given them a choice. Traumatizing the orderly who tried to remove her after the initial viewing hadn’t been her preferred method, but it seemed she left her subtlety at home. In any case, once she made the necessary decisions and other mammals were allowed in, whatever plans the staff had for maintaining visiting hours was a joke. Jack saw to that.

What Judy saw was her fox, but not.

For a time, she sat staring blankly. Then, Jack was there, holding her paw. She didn’t know if it was conscious on his part, but it was welcome. Jack seemed far more shaken than she was. He’d been the one to find Nick, so it made sense. It was a blessing that she had him there. They were exactly the support the other needed. As time passed, Jack seemed less shell-shocked and Judy took solace from having a shoulder to cry on. It only lasted until Bogo returned, asking to speak to Jack. A short while later, Judy heard raised voices. Jack hadn’t returned, neither had Bogo for some time. When he had, he’d looked like he’d seen a ghost, or a demon.
Judy had been worried, but her boss just waived her concerns off and told her to stay with Nick while he and Jack made preparations. Unnecessarily obvious instructions, which she had almost rolled her eyes at. She had no intention of leaving that room for longer than she had to. She would be there when Nick woke up.

She was.

Her joy was short-lived as, while he did wake up, he wasn’t at home. That nearly broke her. She couldn’t stop the tears as she tried to grasp that he wasn’t there. It was another day before he finally woke up as himself, but the intervening hours were a torture. When he slept, he wept in his sleep from fever dreams, or nightmares. When he was awake, he babbled, or screamed. At first, she couldn’t make any sense of it. She wasn’t even sure he was using language and it frightened her.

Slowly, achingly slowly to her, he started speaking in a way she understood. It was a time after that before he said that made sense. Then, she wished he didn’t. In his dreams, Nick was reliving the miseries of his life as though they were still fresh. The doctor’s assurances that he would remember nothing of this, did little to comfort her.

Then, finally, it was him.

The staff had felt safe enough to remove the restraints only hours before he woke and Judy had moved her chair to the bedside. She was a mess and despondent after hours of fear and stress. Holding his paw as he slept was the only comfort she’d had since Jack had left. It was also in the admittedly vain hope that if he had an anchor, he would come back. Once the restraints were gone, she hadn’t stopped caressing his paw and praying he would wake up.

Her head was resting on the mattress when she felt him stir, again. Judy braced for another round of insanity and hoped he would be calm enough to forego the restraints. What she got instead was her partner back. She saw his eyes open and there wasn’t the same emptiness she’s seen too many times. Confirmation. She needed confirmation. She didn’t even realize she spoke, until it was done.

“Nick?”

“Carrots? You ok?” His voice sounded like gravel. It was the sweetest four syllables she had ever heard, until the words “I love you, Judy” escaped his lips, moments ago. Hearing him stutter through something he was having trouble with was a depressingly common occurrence. He usually had trouble with expressing his emotions. She had gotten used to it. The last thing she ever expected was that he would just give up and kiss her a moment later, let alone finally say the words she had been waiting for.

Waking up with him absent after she had gone to sleep holding his paw was a shock. One she didn’t need. After all the misery she had been forced to endure, it was oh so very much not needed. Or welcome. But it was worth it. Oh, so worth it. More than two years of waiting and hoping and lusting and the red-furred lunatic she had fallen for had finally rutting admitted he loved her! The kiss helped, too.

In fact, anything and everything else was blasted from her mind. There was food she had ordered sitting on the table and clothes to put away, for a start. When she had gotten Nick to the couch, she had only just managed to get food sorted out before her exhaustion caught up with her. She’d reasoned a little nap would be fine. When she woke, finding him gone had filled her with a single-minded need to find him. Nothing else mattered. The follow up to finding him very efficiently melted whatever of her reality there was left; it was just them.

Now, Judy just had one small problem. She had a little conditioning to overcome. Over the course
of the endurance trial her life had become, she had trained herself very well in self-restraint. She had gotten used to blunting her desires. She couldn’t just jump his bones, after all.

On the outside, she was finally at long bloody last having the conversation that would change her friendship with the male she loved into the romance she had dreamed about for so very long. On the inside, in a part of her mind she was only aware of in dreams, there was another discussion happening. Her libido was attempting to reason with her, though smacking a little sense into her was also an option.

Much to her dismay, as the months passed she got used to restraining herself. At first, it was because he was a predator and a fox and she knew that they were not as tactile or affectionate as rabbits were. She wanted to respect his personal space. Before long, he convinced her that he enjoyed it, so she started giving herself some leeway with the hugs and cuddles, but once her little crush started she was sure he couldn’t possibly feel the same way, so she avoided going further. Over time, she saw that he got used to it and she wanted to push for more, but stopped. She didn’t want to push for more because it might make him back off. Worse, she didn’t want to get her own hopes up on what she absolutely knew was hopeless.

Then, he started initiating the affection a little and she had to fight not to push, again. It was in the hopes that he did reciprocate and she didn’t want to scare him off, but she also wanted him to initiate more. He didn’t. Then, it became about being happy with what she got while she waited.

The waiting was over, now. All she had to do was convince herself of it.

It was simple; like convincing herself that scratching his ears in the car was ok. The first time she did it, they were in the third? Fifth? Maybe, sixth leg of their trip to the funicular rail station. He was out cold, again, and slumping practically into her lap, anyway. She figured it was as close to an invitation as she was going to get and she was close to desperate for more contact with him. She knew constant physical contact was not something Nick enjoyed overmuch. He’d explained once that it was a characteristic of solitary predators, like foxes, and she had respected it as much as she could. He also explained that close friends and family were notable exceptions. She decided she qualified after all the months together and the last several days of horrors she’d endured. It didn’t take long for her to give in.

When he found out, she hoped he wouldn’t be too upset, but she hadn’t expected permission. Having him willingly place his head in her lap was an unlooked-for treat that nearly made her little bunny heart leap out of her chest. It only got worse as he started settling in his sleep.

As she scratched his head, he responded by shifting into more comfortable positions. They just happened to include wrapping an arm behind her and hips almost hugging her, while he nuzzled the side of his head into her stomach. It was sweet and Judy had nearly blushed herself to death when the arm wrapping behind her ended up with his paw on her thigh. It spurred her to be more explorative with her paws, eventually leading to some very interesting finds. One was that the base of his skull was the perfect spot to scratch if she wanted his leg to twitch. Another was that rubbing just above his eyes made him sigh and smack his lips. The crowning jewel was that the spot under his chin, just where his jaw and ear met, made him smile in his sleep and purr, or “rumble” as he called it.

The first time he did it, Judy froze in terror. Instead of waking up in a flurry of incoherent flailing, as he usually did when he was suddenly awakened, he had licked his chops, yawned and taken root even more firmly in her lap. So many conflicting feelings boiled through her. She had a front row seat to a first-class view of his tongue and teeth, with a little extra thrill from being snuggled even tighter. The doctor’s parting comments blitzed through her mind, unbidden. Suddenly, the car felt
slightly warmer than the surface of the sun.

Judy decided not to think about any of it and worry more about her partner’s comfort. Her paws returned to their task and soon he was rumbling like a small engine. She was thrilled that she had figured out what he meant. She had gotten the hang of petting him. He’d told the truth. It was kind of obvious. She set to it with a vengeance; hoping to coax him into even greater states of relaxation and make up for lost time. This was a delight she would never get tired of.

She realized her mistake after a few minutes. She was trapped under his sleeping form, held in place by his paw in a near-groping position, his chin was flush on her lap and his cheek was pressed against her belly. The rumbling came with the added bonus of making him vibrate slightly. It wasn’t much by fox standards, certainly nothing compared to a felid’s purring, but it did penetrate her smaller, bunny frame in all kinds of interesting ways. The vibrations were difficult to ignore before long, especially in light of some of the conversations they’d had that day and she found herself biting her lip to muffle herself very quickly. The trip up the mountainside was slightly torturous for the rabbit. She hadn’t stopped for even a moment.

It only made her present internal conflict more heated.

Pun entirely intended.

As one part of her mind posited a reason for restraint, another provided counter argument. All her self-imposed reasoning and excuses, her worries and fears finally had their moment to come forth and be judged in light of Nick saying those three little magic words that changed everything.

But first, her libido needed to make a statement. When it finally registered for her that he had kissed her and said the words, she reacted. Her body moved on its own and she was too poleaxed to do anything more than enjoy the feeling of his lips on hers. Repeatedly.

When she finally regained control of her senses, the internal battle raged within her. Granted, it was less a battle than a rout; a demolishing of all the walls of excuses she’d built to keep herself from doing anything... well, anything at all, really. The rationales she’d carefully created and reinforced shredded like wet tissue under the force of her desire. They were obsolete and worthless. They didn't last long.

Judy was a little unsettled by the fact her internal monologue was sounding more like a dialogue.

Nick might not reciprocate? Blown out of the water!

Consequences at the station? They'd probably cheer. Very likely money would change hands.

Media? Sod them. That was why lawyers existed, as well as the media relations groups in the ZPD.

Family disapproval? They loved him. Her parents thought they were rutting already, as well.

What about Mina? What about her? She'd have to back off along with everyone else, or ask permission like mannerly rabbits were supposed to.

What about Jack?

What about Jack?

That thought niggled in the back of her mind. There was something she needed to do. Something very important. Something that was moved to the back burner of her mind at light speed, as her fox’s paws landed on her back.
Her brain re-engaged enough for her to stammer, "I've been waiting, you dumb fox."

The conversation was in no way a surprise to her. She knew most of it already. She suspected the rest. Jack taking Nick to the jazz club and dinner was a date. She knew it the moment Jack had told her his plans. It was something she had assumed every time those two went out together. Ironically, it also let her think when her and Nick did so, that they were on a date, as well. That made the turgid agony of their, now-former, situation bearable inside her own head.

Hearing Nick admit to everything was the important thing; his feelings for her, his attachment to Jack, the desires of the buck himself, and Nick’s plans to talk to her the night he was attacked.

The only surprise was hearing Nick confirm Jack’s methodology in trapping the fox. It was clever and well thought out. She would have kicked herself for not thinking of it herself, but that would have been pointless. Besides, she liked where her feet were. Also, if she were going to be kicking herself, she would have to do so for thinking she’d have possessed the guts to go through with a plan like Jack’s, in the first place.

She was embarrassed at herself as she said, "I know. Why are all the males I know so stupidly self-sacrificing?" She owed Jack for what he did. She was just as bad as Nick. Too tied up in her own head. Too scared to take Fru Fru’s advice. Too... everything. It was shameful that they, an adult fox and an adult rabbit, had needed someone else to actively make their relationship happen. She was lucky Jack hadn’t just taken Nick for himself. He could have. He probably should have. Yet, he didn’t.

She was not going to waste this chance. She just needed to buy a little time to get over her ridiculous hang-ups. In the part of her mind that wasn’t talking to Nick, the monologue she’d started had morphed into a flat-out dialogue, much to her dismay. She had enough issues. She did not need to add schizophrenia to the mix.

Her libido’s input was simple, “Well, that's neatly taken care of. On to sexy times!" "We still can't!" Practicality retorted. "Why not?" inquired Curiosity. "He's recovering."

Libido was quick to pounce on that one. “Recall that awful chat with the doctor? He's clear to rut and it's been well over 12 hours. It's all clear.”

“But-” Practicality was flailing.

“So, what's the problem?” Libido pressed.

“But...” Practicality was locking up.

Logic weighed in. “Seriously? That’s the best you can do?” Contrariness decided to answer for Practicality, who was completely out of it. “But.”

“Enough with the buts! You sound like a motor boat, or one of those chicken things.” Libido was getting impatient.

Naturally, Short Attention Span and Curiosity took the opportunity to team up. “The ones with the inbred congenital speech impediment?”
Logic chimed in, again. “Yeah. A whole species with Tourette's syndrome.”

“Not sexy,” Common Sense commented.

Curiosity decided to be tenacious, for once. “What's with Avians and the weird compulsive disorders?”

Captain Obvious did her job, commenting, “We're getting off topic.”

"Carrots?" The lull in conversation she had registered had apparently stretched a little too long for vulpine comfort and Libido was getting fed up. “Sweet buttered monkey bread! Enough with the birds! He's getting concerned. Do something! Say something!”

"How long?"

Libido was slightly mollified. “Well, at least my influence is winning out.”

Blessedly, Nick misinterpreted.

Libido followed up her jab with another. “Don't worry. It'll fit.”

Oh my gods...

That line of thought didn't help. It also only amplified the bloom of heat that seemed to start at her core and follow her blood, flowing like burning liquid lust through her. Nick’s joking was just enough to keep the blazing desire within her in check. The huff of air that escaped her in response to his attempt to lighten the mood was all she could manage. She hoped he would think it was a laugh.

That was when the final straw fell on the camel’s back. Judy heard Nick say, "Didn't want to screw things up with us." Of all the pathetic excuses that she could have heard that was right at the top of the list. It was the same one she’d used so many times. It was the “reasoning” that had kept her from actually doing anything when she knew she had to; when she knew there was no other option, if she wanted to finally have the relationship she’d been dreaming of.

Now, hearing Nick say it, she knew exactly how paltry it was, along with every other excuse she’d been using. Nick had almost died. She had witnessed it. For some reason, she had held on to them until now. No more. Life was too bloody rutting short for wasting time, or denying her own happiness because she was scared. Whatever issues she’d had holding her back, vaporized. There was no room left in her for more fear. She'd had plenty. She had to act before he slipped away again.

She heard herself, but barely recognized her own voice, as her body came to against his. "Nick, do you like this shirt?"

"Um, yes...? Good shirt. Cure for nudity."

"Sorry."

Judy clenched her toes, bunching the fabric between them and kicked as hard as she could, up and away from Nick’s body. Fabric gave, seams tore and buttons broke under the force. Judy pushed herself up with hooded eyes to appreciate her handiwork. Nick was dressed in nothing but tatters and rags from the waist up.

Before Nick could even react, Judy slipped her paws under the tattered remains of his former garment and buried them in his fur. Her paws were followed quickly by the rest of her as she all but dove into him. She ran her paws over his chest and sides as she molded her body to his. She
nuzzled the cream-colored ruff of his chest as she inhaled his scent. She savored his heat and the coarseness of his outer coat as she dug her fingers into his downy undercoat. The combination of sensations was practically narcotic.

Her small, blunt claws traced his skin as she combed through her paws through his coat, eliciting a sharp gasp. “C-c-carrots! W-wha...”

"What I am doing, Nick, is finally getting my paws on you."

As she spoke, she lifted herself off him just enough to make eye contact. What had smoldered in the back of her eyes for so long was finally cut loose and became a blaze. Nick’s expression was somewhere between awed and afraid as her little paws went to work removing the remains of his deceased garment from his frame. He, wisely, did not resist. It was possible he was hypnotized, or scared for his life. It was also possible he thought he was dreaming. Judy wasn’t concerned. Whatever he was now, he’d be hers in a moment.

"I have waited and waited. Now, I am going to show you what you’ve been missing out on; what you never have to miss out on again."

Nick choked out a few sounds that were all consonants, while Judy briefly dismounted to the floor, so she could make short work of his remaining clothes. Before the fox could gather enough brains to escape, Judy went for a stunning blow and her shirt landed with the other rags on the floor. She was pleased to see Nick’s eyes turn to green dinner plates. They only seemed to grow as jeans yielded her hips to his view. Once her waistband was at her mid-thigh, she tried an experimental wiggle to see how he would react. His eyes followed the movement of her hips like spectators at a tennis match and the rest of him went rigid. She stopped wasting time.

There was no preamble. Taking their time was something they would do later, when it didn’t feel like every nerve was on a live wire. Her one concession to what passed for foreplay was a kiss that made the sun seem cold and made Nick blush his fur a darker red. Then, she guided his paws to her waist, before she fulfilled every birthday, yule and shooting star wish of hers for the last three years. After that, he was hers and nothing else mattered.

Quite some time later, Judy drifted back to consciousness through a thick haze of endorphins. She was laying where she’d collapsed, on top of her fox.

She was sore. Very. And incredibly happy.

Even the biggest buck she'd slept with was a runt compared to Nick. It had been a... challenge. She was very pleased she'd found herself equal to it. Going by how vocal he'd been, and the clearly claw-worn state of the sofa, he'd enjoyed himself, too. Much to her delight, she'd discovered her fox wasn't just going to lie down and take it. He also wasn't just gifted in terms of his equipment. He actually knew how to use it. Her seventh or eighth mind-wrecking climax attested to that. Even the knot had been fun. Next time, she had to remember to see just how sensitive he was, once they were tied. That was, of course, if she retained coherent thought, at all. Not a guarantee.

She lay there, propping her head up with her paws and just enjoyed him. He was beautiful. She could hear his heartbeat, feel his breath. He was alive. Alive and hers.

Her mate.

Looking down at him, she realized Nick was exactly that: her mate. They hadn't marked, yet, but she knew it wouldn't be long in coming.
She buried her face in his chest and let the feeling of joy wash through her. She reveled in it. After the last... it felt like centuries, but it wasn't even a week.

She’d needed this. Needed to feel him and know he was himself. Seeing what that poison did to him was horrible. Fits of raving, babbling, cursing... it hurt so much to see and she could do nothing but sit and watch. The worst was when his eyes were opened. It was his face, but he wasn't in there. That's what terrified her the most.

She knew bodies were fragile. She was a rabbit. No matter how badass or tough she was, she was a fragile little bunny. She needed to be smart and skillful, even more than strong to do her job. Getting hurt was too easy for her to do anything but her absolute best to stay safe. Nick was a bit heartier, as he was a predator and a good bit bigger than her. He had more mass to absorb injuries, but not a lot. In their time together, he'd shown similar awareness of the risks that she had. Judy supposed it was a little obvious, as they'd both be well aware of their limitations and the correlating risks, by now.

Judy was not aware of how fragile the person was; not just the body they were in, but the mind. A few milliliters of liquid had taken her Nick away, but left his body there. He'd come back this time, but that was no guarantee he would if it happened again. That thought scared her.

She looked at her sleeping lover and understood.

Affirmation of life... it wasn't just for him. For all the touches and making sure; keeping him in sight, it wasn't enough. Feeling him alive inside her, holding her, moaning her name and confirming with every kiss and caress that he was alive; that was enough. That was proof for her.

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It was a good start, anyway. She wanted more proof. The fear was still fresh and it wasn't far away, even in her afterglow. She needed to know it was him; that he was there with her and safe. Again.

Heat bloomed through her and she smiled as he shifted slightly under her. He was waking up. With a smile that was equal parts mischief and passion, she gently shifted into position. She would wake him up properly and make sure he knew he was alive. Alive and hers. It would just be this once. This wouldn’t be a routine thing. It couldn’t be. This was purely for scientific purposes, of course; to make sure the first time wasn’t a fluke.

Who am I kidding? This’ll be hourly as long as I can get away with it.

Maybe later they'd have to figure out how to make the the new ‘them’ work in normal life, when things finally settled down a bit, but that was when “normal” came back from vacation. Right that moment had nothing to do with normal. She had woken up to a situation that had been a fantasy of hers for ages. Nick certainly appeared to be ready to prove he was alive, again. He was asleep, but not for long.

As Judy slid him home, his eyes started to flutter. She was most of the way down his length when his eyes snapped open. His expression of confusion gave her pause. "Am I dreaming, again?"

In response, she gave him a smirk and clenched down on him. As his back arched, her smile only grew. "Does that answer your question?"

In reply, his paws landed on her hips and he rolled fully into her. "Better than a pinch, Carrots."

Quite some time later, again, Judy peeled herself off her fox. It was dark. That didn’t surprise her. Neither did the cold food on the table from when she ordered it after their arrival. She had called in the order just after they arrived and Nick fell asleep. In the subsequent hours of somnolence, panic and making up for lost time it had gone cold. It wasn’t until she actually pulled the lids off that she
recalled what it was she’d ordered. The veggie wraps, fries and rice pudding were all stone cold, but that didn’t stop her from grabbing one of the wraps and scarfing it ravenously. Another vanished before she stopped gorging herself. She had forgotten how hungry she got after sex.

As she was working her way through her second bottle of water, she tracked down her phone. It ended up under the sofa, somehow. The time read just before 5:00AM. Early. Not terribly, but enough. Her alarm wouldn’t be going off for another half-hour, or so. She wanted to go back to him and cuddle. She was already addicted and had no intentions of fixing it.

She was also still anxious about being away from him. Everything they had endured was still very fresh and, despite repeatedly confirming he was alive in the best of ways, still too real. It was difficult for her to accept that his deep breaths and strong heartbeat from minutes ago was real and that it was him, not the stranger she’d seen in the hospital. She wanted to check again. She wouldn’t, but she wanted to. She did also have other responsibilities than to her poor, deprived sex drive. For one, she needed to take care of Nick.


Making sure he was comfortable and following his doctor’s instructions was her top priority. She needed him well, healthy and healed. Rutted through the furniture would come later.

And I’m a teenager, again.

She was hearing innuendo and suggestive puns at every turn, even in her own head. It wasn’t a good thing. Not for her focus, anyway. It was doing wonders for her imagination and the goofy, borderline demented, grin that was plastered across her face. She supposed that’s what happened when you got your wish. Especially, when it came in form of everything you wanted and in every way. Judy slapped a paw across her mouth to stop her giggling. She did not want to wake Nick and standing around was going to accomplish nothing, unless you counted squealing like a teenager at a concert and dancing around for joy.

That thought gave her a small reality check. Dancing wouldn’t be very comfortable for a little while. Upon further consideration, she decided a shower was in order. Not only was she a complete mess, but she could smell sweat, sex and gods only knew what else on her own coat. If she could smell herself, she was probably pretty pungent. When the hot water hit her fur, the pheromone slap almost choked her. She did not smell of sex. She reeked of it. Her wolf co-workers would be dizzy from her passage. Fortunately, they weren’t present.

Yes. Shower very good idea.

It reminded Judy of the last time she went with Fru Fru to get mani-pedis at Faux Pas nail salon. They met outside the only Chip’N’Dale’s club in Little Rodentia. The high-pitched catcalls were painful to her sensitive ears and the pheromones in the air were so thick they were almost visible. Especially when the ‘Rescue Rangers’ took the stage in all their uniformed glory.

Once Judy got over the initial shock of the water hitting her over-sensitized and sore body, she set about getting herself clean. Gingerly, in some cases. The suite they were assigned came pre-stocked with some basic essentials. She wasn’t a fan of Vidal Baboon, but it would do. Hopefully, they wouldn’t be staying long enough for her to miss her usual Furball Essences.

Judy knew full well why her mind was so firmly in the gutter; moreso even than usual. It was drilled into her head along with the rest of her classmates, in Health Class. Rabbit physiology being what it was, the educators of Bunnyburrow High hadn’t had much of a choice. She knew what was next. Every adult rabbit did. She hadn't had one in nearly three years because of her pining for the
fox, but she knew the feeling very well.

Heat.
Rabbits didn’t have a season. They went into heat following coitus. Her species having a naturally high reproductive motivation meant that heats happened pretty commonly for most rabbits. Even lapins who weren’t sexually active could go into heat if they felt the right combination of safe, comfortable and loved. It was as though mother nature had decided they would be the living embodiments of physical love and desire. It was something her species was quite pleased with, usually. The jokes were a bit annoying though.

Typically, suppressants were used to limit or prevent the effects outright. Judy had also used contraceptives when the occasion called for it, while she had dated before going to the Academy. After that, she didn’t have much of a dating life, until Nick. There had been a pawful, but none got past seeing her fully dressed. A few hadn't even seen her with her overcoat off. She’d only needed to break out the suppressants once her little crush on her partner had grown from bunny-love into flat-out desire. Once she knew she was ears over tail for him, keeping her heat at bay was a running battle.

It was not a concern anymore. A fox and a rabbit couldn't produce offspring, so contraceptives weren't necessary. As for suppressants, just no. Not now. Not this time. Not ever again. As long as she was with Nick, she would ride out her heats the old-fashioned way: using her mate as the saddle.

It wasn't as though she had much of a choice, either. The suppressants only took the edge off temporarily.

Not that it mattered, anymore. She was done with bucks. She was done with males. For her, it was Nick, or nothing. She had every intention of relishing every moment.

As she slowly scrubbed, she turned her mind to the tasks ahead of her for the day. It was a freakishly short list, compared to her usual routine. Very quickly, she was out of things to sort out for her day and she was on to gloating. Some mammals might call her crazy, or worse, for pining so long over one male, but if last night was any indication, it was worth the wait in spades. He kept up with her despite being on the mend, was built… very well and actually knew how to use what he had. She had more female relatives than she could count who had mates that were disappointing in that regard. She had hoped and prayed.

Prayers answered! Ow…

Judy would need to adjust to having a sex life, again. The adjustment would be glorious. Her sisters would be so jealous! Disappointed, too, in some cases. She wasn't about to even consider loaning her fox out any time soon. She didn’t think so, anyway. She was in the honeymoon stage, which was a close cousin to the stoned-out-on-sex stage. Not to her sisters or brothers. No one.

Then, Jack popped to mind. Now, there was a mass of overlapping conflicted feelings, she didn’t have the brain-power to handle at the moment. Fortunately, the gutter supplied plenty for her to think about that didn’t require any real thought. The idea of seeing Jack and Nick doing something like what she and Nick just did was enough to make her fully zone out for a minute or two. She knew he was possessive. Early in a relationship, that was common for rabbits. Nick wasn’t a rabbit, but he was more familiar than most outside her species with the intricacies of lapidae relationships. That said, she wasn’t worried about Nick’s reaction. It was a conversation they’d have when it was germane. Right now, something was bugging her. Something didn't feel right.

Now the thought was in her head, it didn't feel right without Jack. It felt good. Good enough for a lifetime, but incomplete. Something buck-shaped was missing. It was a realization that gave her
pause for a moment.

Rabid possessiveness with a single exemption. Not what I expected so soon…

Unfortunately, that one niggling issue’s resolution wasn’t all there was rattling around in her head. There was something else related to jack that was demanding her attention. That something could wait just a little bit longer. She wanted to enjoy the moment, right here and now, while she could. It wasn’t every day dreams came true. It wasn’t every day that dreams came at all. Judy realized she had a chance at living that particular dream as often as she could get Nick out of his clothes. She had to fight not to binky at the thought. Showers were bad places for such behavior.

Unfortunately, her attempt to set her little mystery aside was only semi-successful. Jack refused to leave Judy’s awareness. Something bugged her about him and she wasn’t sure what. She was high on fox, so it did surprise her. It also annoyed her. She knew she wouldn’t be able to get back to her enjoyment of the moment until she knew what was rattling around at the back of her mind. She resigned herself to it as she started rinsing the suds out of her coat.

Judy missed him. Aside from the first hours of her ordeal, Jack hadn’t been around. She knew he was off taking care of other things while she sat by Nick’s side. She did feel bad about that. She could have reached out to him, or tried to talk to him, but she was too consumed with worrying about Nick. It was a lousy excuse and she wasn’t cruel enough to deny it. She was also still irritated with the buck for his behavior at the briefing at the hospital.

As she stood in the fur dryer, Judy grumbled to herself about being shut down by him when he mentioned he knew who was responsible. She had only had eyes for Nick, she knew, but the prospect of having a target to hunt… That was something else entirely. Nick was out of the hospital and getting better, but the animal responsible for putting him there was still at large. That was unacceptable. It would also be a short-lived state of being, if she had anything to say about it.

At that moment, Judy saw the pile of clothes on the floor that wasn’t hers; dark trousers and a vest. Jack’s clothes. The ones Angie had given her when they had spoken at the end of the briefing.

Birchclaw had pulled her aside, she said, to discuss the arrangements for the series of transfer en route to the hotel. In reality, it was begging for help.

“Angie, what's the issue? I need to get back to Nick.”

“Jack and Bogo are with him. He’ll be fine for a minute. I need to talk to you. It's about Jack. I'm worried.”

“What about?”

“You saw him in there. You can practically feel the bloodlust radiating off him.”

“That's kinda extreme, isn't it? He's angry, but he’s focused. It's understandable.”

“Angry I could understand, but you haven't been with him the last few days. We've gotten calls from directors and assistant directors from all over the intelligence community. I've had to sit in on some of the calls. They're all scared shitless, Judy. Scared of Jack.”

“What? Why?”

“When he left the hospital? He got a call. There was an emergency meeting over Nick's attack. He went straight there and whatever he did it said frightened the whole of them. I hear it in their voices. Every time Jack speaks there's a tremor in their voices when they respond. The kind you
“I know he and Bogo had words as he was leaving. He was obviously uncomfortable around Jack today, but scared for their lives? That’s a bit much, Birchclaw. Jack isn’t a monster. If he lit a few fires under a few tails, I’m not going to nay say it.”
“T’m not asking you to, but you have to do something. The Jack I know is an amazing mammal. You and your partner helped him be something other than Agent Savage, mammal of legend. You made it possible for us to meet that Jack. Now, he’s back to the way he was, or worse! To hear the whispers, he was the same in his early days with the agency. There are a lot of bloody stories about Jack from that time. That’s not the Jack we know and love.”

“Angie, Nick is a mess and barely conscious. My paws are full with him. I’m not sure what we can do.”
“I know, Judy. I’m sorry, but please help Jack. That’s all I’m asking. Please?”
“I… I’ll try. I’ll do what I can, but what can I do if we’re isolated on the mountain and you’re all down here?”

“He’s planning to relocate to the hotel. He’s making himself the last line of defense. We're due to catch the last funicular rail car up tomorrow morning, before the hotel gets locked down. It’s part of need-to-know and he wasn’t planning to tell you, but I’m his right arm and I’ve decided you need to know for his own good.”

“Alright. That gives me a little time to work with. Listen, I’ll do what I can, but Nick is my first concern. Just let me know when you’re going to arrive. Maybe what room you’ll be in?”

“Keep your phone on you. I’ll make sure you get in to see him.”

The recollection sliced through the lazy haze of her mind like a chainsaw through pawpcicle sticks. How could she have forgotten? How could she have not remembered something that important? Dumb bunny. Bumb, dumb bunny!

Her train of thought slammed into a series of realizations. At the briefing, she had been too angry at being shut out of the investigation and too concerned for her partner to register it. Then, she was all caught up in getting him sorted out and settled, then his confessing and the aftermath. She’d been so distracted and anxious that she shelved her entire conversation with Birchclaw for later and never gotten around to dealing with any of it!

It clicked.

Jack had looked bad. He was stressed to fracturing when they first met and he’d looked better then. He had a history of reacting strongly to emotional losses and grief. His partner was killed using the same thing; his lover; a direct relation to one of his best friends and emotional attachments. He used anger to get through his loss, then. He was only just healing from grieving. He was fragile. Then, this happens.

Oh, gods... Angie wasn’t kidding about the fear.

Judy sprinted to her phone. To her horror, there were missed texts from Angie. A quick read and her panic attack was downgraded to a profound sense of urgency. Jack and Angie would be arriving in about half an hour and they still had a lot to do. More accurately, she did. At the top of the list was rousing her partner from the stupor she’d rutted him into.

It didn’t take too long to get Nick awake. It wasn’t in the manner Judy would prefer, given her
recent escapades, but it was effective. Her first attempt to shake him awake was met with a waved paw and a grunt. It was cute, but not what she needed. All the ways she’d use to wake her siblings who weren’t early risers back at the farm were rather mean and not proper for a new lover, not yet, anyway. Instead, she opted to indulge in another little forbidden fruit. With an impish grin, Judy began scratching his belly and chest.

The result was almost immediate. Just as his leg started kicking in earnest, his eyes popped open and his paws clamped over hers.

Her grin was unmoved as she asked, “Are you awake?”

“Are we a rabbit?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Then, we are awake.” Then, Nick groaned as he flopped back onto the couch.

Judy’s concern was brief, as he chuckled and stretched. Gods, he looked good. “Feeling alright, partner?”

“Carrots, after what we did last night, I feel better than I have in years. Still a bit sore, though.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. And enough with the questions. Right now, two plus two equals either Crème Brûlée.”

“Oh, please. You aren’t that bad off.”

Nick ticked off on his fingers, “Just recovering from injury, exhausted from ordeal, lots of traveling yesterday, rutted out of my gourd several times by the love of my life after I finally told her how I feel… I’d say that’s a couple major life-changing events in a short period of time, plus the near-death thing. I’m allowed to have a little trouble in the cognitive department.”

Judy couldn’t believe her ears. Thankfully, the rest of her could and reacted. Nick was temporarily rendered forcibly speechless, as he had an ebullient rabbit occupying his lips. When she let go, they didn’t need words for a bit. Judy broke the silence.

“You’re going to pay for that. Just so you know.”

“Bring it, Fluffbutt.”

“Oh, I will. Don’t you worry. Now that you’re awake, though, you need a shower and then we need to have a conversation.”

“We haven’t even had a date and we’re having a relationship conversation?”

Judy smiled fondly at his joke, but now wasn’t the time. “Nick, I’m pretty sure the last couple years count as dating and just to cover myself, I did get you dinner last night before I ruthlessly bedded you.”

Nick couldn’t help but quip, “Ruthless, indeed…”, with a suggestive smile and hooded eyes. Judy was not deterred; just staggered for a moment.

“It’s not my fault you weren’t awake to eat it the first time, or interested the second.”

“Better things to eat.”
“Damn it, Nick! Keep it up and all we’ll do is rut for the rest of the day!”

“Not seeing the downside, there, Honey Bunny. We have nothing else to do.”

“We do, actually. You need a shower, then we need to put together a battle plan for talking to Jack.”

Nick immediately sobered. “You’re right. I don’t know when we’ll see him though.”

“He’ll be arriving in about fifteen minutes, so we need to hurry a little.”

Nick scrambled up, stiffly, and headed towards the shower. “Understood. Crisis, now, virtue destruction later.”

“What virtue?”

In response, all Nick did was wink before shutting the washroom door and Judy was left alone. Only then did she realize she’d had the entire conversation without even a towel from her shower. In her haste, she’d gone from the fur dryer to the couch. She was mortified for a heartbeat, before she realized she just didn’t care. She had higher priorities.

Unbidden, the memory of her first trip to Mystic Springs naturalist club on her first case came to mind. It amused her how much she’d grown up since then. Once, seeing nude mammals made her incredibly uncomfortable. Now, it wasn’t even a point of note.

Maybe, I should suggest we get memberships, just to see his reaction.

Judy dressed quickly, pausing only when she heard Nick through the door, commenting expletively on his personal aroma. As he had a better sense of smell than she did, she could only imagine. Once she was dressed she considered sitting on the couch, but thought better of it. She had just gotten the smell of sex off her. She didn’t want to re-marinate herself in it again just yet. Instead, she opted for sitting on the bed in the room adjacent to the washroom. It was part to let the couch air out, partly because she wanted to be closer to him. Not that she didn’t want to flat-out join him, but that would have to wait just a little bit. She added that to the list of things that had to be done as soon as possible.

Judy’s plotting was interrupted by a beeping from the luggage. She only needed a few moments to zero in on the small bag that contained Nick’s personal effects from the hospital. His phone was in the process of begging for food. She located the charger and an outlet, thus saving the electronic pop-tart from starvation. As it chirped its gratitude, the screen lit up with Nick’s default background. The picture she saw was not one she expected, but was very fitting for the imminent conversation: The infamous “Honey Buns” picture of her and Jack at Buck & Doenuts, trying out the new Honey Sugar Bun.

Judy didn’t recall the exact circumstances. All she remembered was Nick had run late leaving the precinct, so she and Jack had decided to grab a bite while they waited. Jack got his usual orange-zest scone, while she had her preferred strawberry-key lime tart. It wasn’t long before Li unearthed himself from whatever rock he was under. Judy swore he could sense her presence. Blessedly, it also wasn’t long before Tanya had materialized, shooing the lascivious old goat back where he was supposed to be: working, in the kitchen. By way of apology for her baker’s harassment, Tanya had offered a discount on some new, experimental sweet buns. They’d accepted and settled into a good nibble, only to find that the buns were more liquid than anything else.

For all the mess, the buns were heavenly; sweet and toothsome with a little crunch and a doughy,
gooey center that was delicious in every way. They were roughly a third of the way through their admittedly enormous treats when Nick had arrived. Without pause, he walked up, plopped into his seat, whipped his phone out and snapped a dozen pictures of the two rabbits.

They'd been sitting side by side, using a single huge plate for their two buns, so they were in perfect picture-taking distance to each other. They'd also been too busy enjoying themselves to realize that their muzzles and cheeks were positively dripping with the Honey-based filling.

The picture he had made his background was particularly delightful. To the fox it was, anyway. To her and Jack it was horridly embarrassing. They were dripping syrup, wide-eyed in surprise at the camera flash, ears straight up and cheeks bulging. They looked like squirrels at a banquet. Nick had laughed and laughed, while they had struggled to wipe the sticky goop off their muzzles and paws. It took trips to the washroom to actually get themselves mildly clean and while they were doing that, the infernal vulpine got another bun and managed to polish it off with almost no mess.

Judy's incredulous "Ha- How?" Had earned the two rabbits nothing but a blithe comment about candid tongues and some very suggestive chop licking.

Judy snapped back from memory lane as she heard the shower cut out. Remembering that one moment sparked so many other memories. She knew exactly what she was going to say to Nick, when he got out of the fur dryer. If she had been on the fence before, she wasn't now and she was positive of what she wanted. When she first said it, she'd been half-joking and a little angry. Now, it wasn’t a joke and she was dead serious.

“We’re going to get our boyfriend.”

Nick blinked a couple times, as he finished his step out of the washroom. “OK. I’m all for it, but can I get dressed, first?”

“I’m being serious, Nick.”

“I understand that, Carrots, but I’m not doing it naked.”

It took Judy a moment to process. “Wait. You agree?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Judy was flummoxed. She was ready for a whole discussion and had points laid out, ready to go. Now, she was undercut but unquestioning agreement from her boyfriend and she was lost. As she stood staring at him, Nick got dressed with increasing discomfort.

“Carrots, if you don’t blink soon, I’m going to get uncomfortable.”

“Sorry. I- Um…”

“Did I throw you off by agreeing too quickly?”

“Kinda? I had a whole speech prepared and everything.”

“Do you want to do it now, so you can get your flow back?”

“Yes! No. Oh, I don’t bloody know…”

“Carrots, let me take a guess. It doesn’t feel right without him here, you were on the fence, but it’s unavoidable and now that the idea is in your little bunny head, you can’t stop thinking about it,
right?"

“If this is some kind of weird fox gestalt mind-meld thing that happens after sex, you should have warned me.”

“No, Carrots. This isn’t and ESP STD. I just know you.” That placated her a bit. It made her happy to know he knew her so well. Naturally, his follow up made her smile. “You also aren’t the only mammal who does their best thinking in the shower.”

“Clever fox.”

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

“No. You’re beautiful.”

She saw the red in his ears and it thrilled her as he responded with, “Wow, Fluff. Way to make me all self-conscious.”

She grinned. “It’s nice to be on this end of it, for once.”

“Meanie.” Nick stuck his tongue out at her. “Now, before we go get him, what else is on your mind?”

“Just one request.”

“Fire at will, Commander.”

“No FurWars jokes, right now. I’m being serious.”

“Seriously adorable.”

“Nick…” The fox responded by smiling and prompting her with raised eyebrows. “I want you to mark me.”
Chapter 17

Jack was still. He hated stillness. It was impossible not to think when he was still. He was very used to using activity as an escape, not that he’d ever admit as much. The last week was an excellent example. He’d done a very good job of that, this week.

But that was then.

Now, he was stuck on a funicular rail car. One that happened not to possess any boosters for Wi-fi or cellular signal, whatsoever. At the hotel, there was an intranet setup that was only linked to the outside world through several layers of security and more firewalls than you could shake a RAM stick at. The only cellular repeaters in the area were linked into the same system. As neither system was installed in the railcar, the entire trip was in isolation. Jack’s greatest fear, and one growing by the moment, was that something would happen while he was isolated and couldn’t lead the response. If anything did happen, it was entirely possible he “would level the mountain to get down it”. That was a bit of gallows humor he’d overheard from two overtired techs as they finished prepping the mobile satellite links and other equipment he and Birchclaw were transporting with them. At the time, he’d thought it was a good idea. He still did.

In the meantime, he was stuck with just himself and his thoughts. And Birchclaw, but she was so uncomfortable around him after the last week that he was amazed she allowed herself to be sequestered in an enclosed space with him at all. Jack felt a small pang of guilt at that.

Just add it to the list.

Yes, he had a list of things he wasn’t proud of. Specifically, one that had to do with everything that had happened since Nicky was attacked. Birchclaw was just one of the items on a long, humiliating and personally disastrous list. He had hoped, not long ago, that she might be considered a friend. He had mostly given up on that hope after the conversation he had with Bogo at the hospital.

Jack felt the waves of depression, misery, guilt and sorrow roll over him, just as it had every time he couldn’t keep the memories at bay. He knew he was a prick at times and he knew his reputation all too well. This week had not only cemented it, but added whole new layers to his legend. Thankfully, his mind was ever orderly and the horror show of his behavior began right at the beginning.

He found Nick. That alone was enough for the little rabbit to feel the crushing weight of horror and misery to return full force. It felt as though his heart was being crushed as his guts roiled. He didn’t recall anything he’d done after seeing (or hearing) the fox. He didn’t recall anything he’d done after seeing (or hearing) the fox. He didn’t even want to think about it then. The Chief had asked him to make himself available the next day to give his statement. That was all. He did not deserve what happened next. Nor did anyone else.

“Agent Savage, I know this is a hard time for you, but I need you and Hopps to give statements on this evening’s events. It doesn’t have to be now. When you are able to, come in to the station and
we’ll get it over with.”

Jack sighed. He was not used to compassion. Before he could reply, his phone chimed. What he read in the text message changed him. “You’ll be waiting a long time, Chief.” He started chuckling.

“Savage, listen to me…” As Jack’s laughter grew, Bogo’ discomfort did, as well. “What exactly do you find funny?”

“Savage.” Jack shook his head, seeming to shake off his laughter. What replaced it scared the water buffalo. The little rabbit’s eyes were like nothing he’d ever seen before. “Tell me, Bogo. Do you know where I got that name? I wasn’t born with it.”

Bogo shook his head, growing increasingly uncomfortable in the presence of the smaller mammal. Something was wrong. Jack was not unaware of his erratic behavior, but he didn’t care, either. Anger built in him. Slowly, the little spark caused by the text grew. He was already aware of why this had happened, but he hadn’t let himself really grasp it. Now, he couldn’t avoid it.

Those incompetent, bureaucratically-minded, egotistical kits who had been chipping away at his resources, reducing his powers and ignoring all the warnings he made as the last mammal alive who could claim to be an expert on the situation, were calling a meeting. They wanted to assess the situation and formulate a response. They hadn’t even done him the courtesy of making a call, relying on a simple text to summon him. As the thoughts rolled through his head, it fanned the fire. It grew and grew and at the speed of realization, it made hellfire seem comfortably warm by comparison.

Something in him gave way and suddenly, he was back again; Black Jack, The Deathshead Rabbit. It was scarily easy to slip back into the old mindset. Back when he was young and hungry to prove himself he’d done horrible things with his mentor; the worst of which he did with relish to the mammal who ended his mentor’s life. He’d buried that part of him with John; buried the evil bastard he’d been in the hopes of redeeming himself and John through discipline, decency and absolute professionalism.

That was then.

Now, he did not have a friend, colleague and secret to mourn and avenge. He had a living mammal to protect; one he loved and could love openly. That was not a job for a professional. He’d left the majority of the work securing Wilde and Hopps to professionals and look at what that got him. Diminished resources, bureaucratic excuses and now his principle was barely alive. All because he allowed it to get this far. He’d relaxed too much, gotten too close. He’d fallen hard. From grace. In love.

And now he was here.

He was not an avenging angel. He was not a professional. He didn’t need to be those. What he needed was Black Jack, The Savage Rabbit. The nickname he’d earned as a joke from John, which he’d adopted and used to motivate himself. A professional wasn’t needed. What was needed was Jack from the old days to fight by the old rules.

A monster.

“I did it out of spite. Savage is what John called me to mock me, when I was assigned to him. “The savage little bun”. When I was ordered to choose a pseudonym by the Taskmaster, I chose Jack because I hated the name. I chose Savage because that was what I had to become to do my job.”
Jack turned to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To do my job.”

Bogo called after him, but there was no force behind the demands for him to stay. Jack could hear it. Adrian Bogo, Chief of Precinct One, one of the most forceful and intimidating mammals in the city was frightened. Not enough to fail in doing his job, but his efforts were token, at best. Jack knew he’d do nothing once he was gone, except breathe a sigh of relief and thank whatever gods there were that he’d refused to listen.

By the time he arrived at the building which housed the offices for the security services, Jack’s fury had blossomed into something living, or so it seemed to Agent Birchclaw and every single other mammal who came into his presence. Something of the intensity billowing around him sparked an instinctive reaction in most animals around him. On the floor where the meeting was to happen, several dozen highly trained agents and mercenary operatives were present, hard at work. When the elevator doors opened to admit Jack, the whole atmosphere changed.

Later, one of the survivors said that the temperature of the room dropped as Jack stepped off the floor. Immediately, mammals gave him a wide berth. Several demonstrated atavistic reactions of submission, or the fight or flight response. Canids dropped their eyes and tilted their heads to expose their necks. Several felids and prey made themselves as small as possible – a few frightened hisses escaped, much to the field agents’ shame -, one cheetah even flopped onto its back to expose their belly. An elephant fled the room as quietly as a pachyderm could (and they can be damn quiet for such large mammals) and one of the goats straight-up fainted, canting over sideways like a fence flattened by a storm. Those agents did not deserve their terror any more than the panther and dromedary guards at the conference room door deserved the broken bones.

The door slammed open, rattling off the wall and juddering loudly through the room. Within the room, mammals reached for concealed weapons, or jumped to their feet. They saw what was coming and too few of them were afraid. They were self-assured by their vaunted positions; they were fools.

A small, light grey rabbit with black stripes and scars moved into the room with a deadly purpose. Shambling along with him, because he had no other choice, was a tiger. The tiger was in an enormous amount of pain, as Jack had three of his fingers bent in unnatural directions and a nerve pinched, all with a single paw. The poor fool was the last of the security detail who had responded to the guards’ call for backup.

A maned wolf stood indignantly and shouted, “Savage! How dare you!”

In one fluid motion, Jack released the tiger and leapt at the wolf before he could close his mouth, grabbing the lupine’s tongue. The vice-like grip the rabbit applied to the fleshy appendage pulled a pained yelp from the wolf’s maw, but Jack wasn’t done. He twisted and yanked the tongue to the side, very effectively dropping the large predator to his knees, with his Jack maintaining his grip as he stood on the table top. Jack locked eyes with the now-weeping canid.

“Maxwell,” Jack’s voice was cold enough that the polar bear across the room got a chill. “One more syllable out of you and you will howl red, after I use your own teeth to saw your tongue off. Clear?” The only response he got was whimpering, so he pressed down on the trapped muzzle until the teeth drew blood. “Maxwell, am I clear?” This time, Jack got an answer he could accept. The hot, acrid smells of urine, humiliation and terror wafted through the air. Jack grinned sickly, saying “Good boy,” before releasing the canid to collapse on the floor in humiliated pain.
A rhino stood, opening his mouth to speak, but Jack pre-empted him. “April 23, 1977.” The blood drained visibly from the pachyderm’s face and he meekly sat, trying to make himself small.

“Now, I won’t waste time telling you incompetent pissants how badly you screwed up this time, so I’ll make it simple. You were warned, and now, aside from the fact that the last living descendant of John Hamish Wilde, the one mammal you were supposed to protect, is struggling for life, everything is just perfect.” The massive amount of sarcasm in his voice indicating just how badly they had failed was not lost on any mammal present. “As of this moment, you work for me. This case is under The Agency’s jurisdiction and I am the senior agent on it. You will provide all your information and records to my team and your resources will be at my disposal until this situation is resolved to my satisfaction.”

An old lion spoke up. Only his many years working with the enraged rabbit gave him the leeway to speak, albeit very tentatively. “Jack, we know what’s happened and are working on it. You can’t expect us to just do as you say because you want it. Protocol must be followed and the only mammal capable of ordering us is the Taskmaster and she…”

“Is present and in full support of Agent Savage,” came a wizened but firm voice from the shattered doorway. The kangaroo that stepped into the room was old and matronly, but her bearing and the accompanying title silenced the room.

Jack forced a note of respect into his voice. “Thank you, Taskmaster.” Then he turned back to the other mammals present. “Now, I will say this only once, so make sure you listen well. You will place the entirety of your resources at my disposal and do so without reserve. I will not tolerate anything less.”

The lion spoke up again, hoping to moderate the situation from going any further out of control. “Savage, that’s-“

Jack boomed straight over him. “As there seems to be a lack of basic comprehension, allow me to be clear and I’ll use small words, so you fuck-wits can keep up. Everything I know, I will use. All your secrets, all your weaknesses; everything I’ve learned over my career. I will burn your world down around your ears and make you dance skinless in the ashes, if I have to. What I will do to you will make Voss’ fate look like a lover’s caress. Am I clear?”

A turgid, petrified silence was all the answer he needed. “Then, what are you waiting for, embossed invitations? MOVE!”

The room was vacated in under a minute. All that was left was Jack and the Taskmaster.

“The threats were unnecessary, Jack. They knew they fucked up.”

“Oh, but they were. I requested politely. Then I suggested professionally. Then I warned in the strongest terms available as an expert and in four languages, to boot. I was ignored. Now, after being relieved of my post supervising the Echo situation, this happens. You expect anything less than my anger at their glaring incompetence and misplaced self-satisfaction? Their arrogance created this mess and now, they were all set to pass the blame around. There is no time for their ass covering. Now, like a good parent, as I am unable to put them over my knee and give them what they so clearly deserve, and some would enjoy, I will do their work for them and clean up their mess.”

“When this is over, you will have many enemies. You’ve burned your bridges.”

“I’ve never enjoyed a fire more. The fact that it got to this point is disgusting. I have no desire to work any further with any of them, after this.”
As he passed the Taskmaster on his way to the door, she stopped him with a raised paw. “Jack, when this is done, you and I will have a conversation.”

“I understand.”

“Good hunting.”

“Thank you, Jillian.”

That meeting, if you could call it that, was just the start. In the hours that followed, Jack put the fear of bun into every mammal he came into contact with. No one would ever look at a rabbit the same way. It was not a fact he was proud of. As he sat on the opposite end of the rail car from Agent Birchclaw, he reflected on exactly how far he’d fallen and how much he’d lost.

His team had become quite close knit over the weeks and months they had worked together. Once he’d loosened up, he found he was surrounded by mammals he could relate to and enjoy. Over time, they had gotten close, Jack supposed. The scope of the change could best be seen in the only other passenger. From where Jack sat, he could see it plain as day. Once upon a week ago, Angie Birchclaw was what Jack might tentatively refer to as a friend. If they had been alone together for any period of time, conversation would have flowed, or at least she would ruffle his fur until he started responding. Now, she stood rigid and silent as far as she could get from him. He could only wish it was because she was furious with him, as that was recoverable. She was not angry with him, or at least not just angry. She was afraid and he had given her good reason for it.

Jack hadn’t harmed any of his team, not in traditional terms, but twenty-two-hour work days and dealing with his titanic presence had left most of them in near-babbling incoherence by the time he left to relocate. Most of them had been sleeping at their desks, or wherever they ran out of gas, for days. He was sickeningly aware of how hard he’d been pushing them and himself.

For his part, Jack had slept perhaps a dozen hours since Nick was attacked; all of them unwillingly. He had been living on coffee, anger and willpower since, with an occasional energy bar thrown in to keep his stomach from eating itself. The few hours he’d slept had been riddled with the kinds of dreams that physically hurt, upon waking. Every time he clawed his way back to consciousness, it was violently, with tear-stained cheeks, gasping breaths, a heartbeat that pounded in his ears and the screams echoing in his mind. They drove him to push himself and everyone else harder. It also encouraged him to avoid sleep.

Such deprivation was not a good long-term solution and Jack knew it. That was why he was slightly glad he was going to the Empyrion. While he was there, he could make use of the case of scotch he’d ordered delivered to his room. Alcohol was one method he was familiar with for dreamless sleep. Again, not a good one, but that didn’t matter. If worst came to worst, he could always make use of the in-house pharmacy as a last-resort.

Or, I could just take a very short, very fast flying lesson without the glider.

It was a hollow thought, as he knew he’d never do it. He had too much to do and mammals to protect. However, it was a gallows comfort that he at least had a final out if he failed.

If I fail, again…

Regardless of his failings, the available alternatives and consequences, Jack was grateful for Birchclaw in a way he doubted she would ever know. Given the current atmosphere, he wouldn’t even know where to begin rebuilding the bridge necessary to even offer his thanks to her, let alone the others. She had been a bulwark through the whole ordeal; managing, delegating, following up,
motivating. She did it all. She also kept a clearer head than he had at points. She deserved a medal, if not sainthood.

It was Birchclaw who pulled everything together and even suggesting he move to the Hotel. “You can command from anywhere. Command from where you can keep an eye on him.” It was the advice that prompted him to relocate the headquarters. Now, if he could only survive being out of touch until they docked at the hotel.

His grim mindset was not helped by his lessened capacity for focus. All the stress and exhaustion had taken its toll on him. Jack wasn’t a young buck anymore and no longer accustomed to fieldwork, let alone at the level of intensity he’d been working, lately. It was challenging to stay focused, especially with the rhythm of their transportation and the early morning sunlight warming him. He now regretted passing on the thermos of coffee he’d been offered.

Jack was weary and it weakened his discipline. Every time his focus lapsed, something slipped through what was left of his fractured shell; bursts of emotions and memories bubbled up to torment him. Even the good ones tore at him, reminding him of his weakness, his failures. One of the memories that hurt him the most was from the Nox. He found it ironic that memories of his healing hurt the most.

It was their fourth or fifth night in their isolation, not that he could tell by that point. After the first day there, he lost track of when it was day or night. Emotional upheaval for hours at a time tended to do that, especially when noon was effectively the same as midnight. Even his internal clock gave up trying.

The three of them were sitting around the parlor of Nick’s second home in their new clothes from Tepis Tailory and it was all just so surreal. Jack was in a simple three-piece lounge suit and Nick wore a smoking jacket to go with his casual breeches and cravat-festooned collared shirt, while Judy wore a flowing, yet figure hugging dress. It looked like they were acting out a scene where Hercule Parrot, Arthur Herrings and Miss Lemming were in conference. If the topic hadn’t been so depressing, he would have laughed. They were even partially in character. The anachronistic dress and setting found the three mammals acting oddly formal as they sipped their tea. Thankfully, that peculiar atmosphere was vaporized periodically, when Inga stopped in on her rounds.

They had spoken for hours around the topic of John and where he fit between his partner and his family, but eventually Hopps had artlessly cut right to the heart of it. Jack shook his head, remembering. She was almost a savant like that.

“Your dad was kind of a jerk, Nick.”

Nick chuffed, “Tip of the iceberg, Fluff.”

Her blush was adorable, even to Jack as she sputtered, “I mean! Gah! I’m sorry.”

Jack rescued her from herself and Nick’s invariable jokes, saying, “Sadly, I must agree. He was an absolute prick.”

“And that from the spy who loved him,” the fox commented, wryly.

“You know as well as I do that you don’t choose who you love.”

“True.”

“So… Why do you think he was a prick?” Judy pressed.
“Oh, I have my reasons,” Jack muttered into his cup.

Nick laughed. “You aren’t getting out of it that easy, Jack. One, you owe me answers and I’m asking. Two, this is why we’re here, isn’t it? Other than the press and Bogo’s threats, of course.”

“Oh, very well. You win, but you’re answering the same question, Red.”

“That’s easy. He abandoned my mother and I.”

Judy spoke up. “Weren’t you, like, twenty-two, or something, when he left? That’s a little old for him to “walk out” on you, isn’t it?”

“A facet of Fox culture, sadly.” Jack provided in response. “Because they were so hated and often isolated, fox families tend to be very close knit, despite their tendency to be solitary. It isn’t unusual for a vulpine family to support each other long after what we would consider normal by other species’ standards, particularly between parents and kits.”

“We’re so used to relying on ourselves or having nothing but family that when a family member dies it hurts badly. If they leave it’s worse.”

Jack nodded and continued. “It probably doesn’t help that you are a child of the 80’s, right?”

Nick nodded and Judy raised her eyebrows, looking for more. “The 80’s were not the most stable of times in the city. There were species riots and backlashes. Then, the reforms they sparked and the fallout from that. All that chaos isn’t so far in the past. It wasn’t a good time to grow up as a fox in the city, was it, Nick?”

“No. There were days when mom wouldn’t let me leave the house, because she was afraid. We only had each other.”

“Hell, even Bellweather’s actions could be traced back to that time,” Jack added, almost as an afterthought.

“I guess it makes sense.” Judy admitted. She was learning a lot and it was plain to Jack that while she was happy to learn it, it was a lot to take in and she felt silly for not knowing ahead of time.

“It does,” Nick continued. “But that wasn’t the worst of it.”

At that even Jack was surprised. “I’m sorry, but I only know about the reason I stated. Is there more to it?”

“Not from a cultural perspective. When a family member leaves it’s kind of a slap to the face to the rest of the family. Even when divorces happen, the parents stay in touch and take care of the kits. A parent leaving and cutting ties is an insult. My dad cut ties when I was almost twenty. It hurt worse because he left when Mom was sick.” Nick looked miserable and angry. Jack thought he knew the circumstances, but this little tidbit was news. “Foxes don’t have the best immune systems in Mammalia, so when we get sick, it can get bad pretty easily. She got a cold while he was gone, again, and it turned into pneumonia. He only showed up to tell her he was leaving. The one concession he made was they stayed legally married, so she would get what little medical benefits he received.”

Judy looked horrified and Jack was sickened. “He told me that his relationship ended mutually, because he was always working.”

“The final decision of the court was uncontested permanent separation due to unintentional
abandonment.” Jack felt ill. “It didn’t change much.”

“What do you mean?”, Judy asked quietly.

“It’s not like he was around much, anyway. I didn’t think about it until he was gone, but after he left I realized he was basically absent all the time, anyway. I saw him two or three weeks a year, maybe a couple more weekends. When I was a kit he was around more, but after by eighth birthday I saw him a lot less. He wasn’t even around when I had my run in with the junior ranger scouts. I guess that was when my opinion of my dad started souring.”

Jack had inquired then but hadn’t gotten the rest of that story until later that evening. The rest of that evening was a lot of confessions about what John had done and not done. They figured out what had actually happened. It was clear he loved his wife from what Jack remembered from John filing for separation. It tore him up for a long time, but he always felt more at home in his work. Jack remembered his partner commenting to the effect of “I’m a fox. No one will trust me anyway, so I may as well live up to the expectations. Here, I can make it work to benefit Mammalia and secure a legacy. It’s not much, but it something.” Nick’s sucker punched expression and Judy’s gasp led to Jack hearing the scout story. The parallel it drew between father and son did nothing to lighten the mood and soon afterwards Nick decided to lie down.

That recollection did little to comfort the striped rabbit as his ascension continued. The remainder on his trip was spent trying not to stare at Birchclaw’s back in remorse and keep whatever was left of his attention on things that didn’t upset him. He was largely unsuccessful. Jack’s relief was as intense as it was short-lived, when they disembarked. All his eagerness to dig back in and take up the reins of the operation were scuttled five minutes after they arrived at the suite which was to be his headquarters.

To his horror, Hopps waltzed in straight past Birchclaw, as if she was expected. Jack found himself stunned immobile and speechless. She wasn’t even supposed to know he was here! The only answer was that Hopps had been informed by his right arm. Just as he was shaking the stupor off the second crippling blow landed and Wilde walked in. Jack knew he should have seen that one coming the moment Judy came into view. She would never let him out of her sight after everything that had happened. Now, there was nothing he could do. The turmoil and regrets collided with the joy of seeing him and the self-hate, leaving Jack shaking and unable to decide what he should do. He couldn’t very well thrash Birchclaw, burst into tears on Hopps and throw himself at Wilde to make sure he was real, after all.

Nothing happened until after one of those options eliminated itself. Birchclaw slipped out of the room, closed the door and they all heard the push button lock on the door knob click. It wouldn’t actually contain them if they wanted to leave, but the statement was clear.

Naturally, it was Wilde who broke the ice. “Hey, Sugarfluff. You’ve looked better.”

The reflexes and training of decades were all that kept Jack functional. He had an in, now it was just a pattern to follow, if awkwardly. “And you’re looking better.”

“I’ve had a good day,” Nick commented, as Judy walked past him to sit on the couch.

At that point, Jack noticed the scents. His struggle to keep himself together got harder. Judy and Nick had scent marked. An archaic practice in Jack’s opinion, but it still carried meaning. “I see you’ve consummated your relationship. Congratulations.” In the old days it meant life-mates, and came to mean marriage once civilization progressed further. Anymore, it usually meant a form of permanence or other, in the relationship. At the very least, a claim on their future.
It hurt.

The pain came from a few things. Not long ago it was a joke that they might work something out that he would be a part of. That was impossible, after his failure. It was too much to hope for at the time and in retrospect, just a pipedream. It only hurt more as he realized that John never could have, nor ever would have, marked him. He was a relationship of convenience, then, and not something to be made public. Now…

I’m an afterthought.

“We’re committed, Jack, not married.”

“How very nice for you, now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

He had to leave. Find something else to do until the hurt died off a little. Jack was happy for them, but he was already worn. He didn’t have the strength to keep it together around them and their newly minted relationship. Maybe in a few months, after he’d found and killed that disgusting amphibian, he’d be able to reconnect and find a way to live with it. If he was ever forgiven, of course. Jack doubted that would ever happen, even if he managed to earn it.

To his distress, Jack’s egress was stopped by a hideous shirt that wouldn’t move away from the door and his thoughts were stopped by four words. As soon as he heard them, Jack knew he was lost.

“Jack, I'm not dead.”

“And I intend to keep it that way.”

“No, Jack... Tiger Bunny, you don't need to go on a vendetta for me. I'm not dead.”

“Not because you were protected.”

“Is that what this is about?”

“John died on my watch. He died because I was lax. You aren't him and you aren't dead, but not because I protected you. I was sloppy again and the only reason you’re alive is because of a frog's sadistic whim. I failed! I failed, again!”

“You haven't failed, Jack.”

“I found you. I know what that poison can do. You went through hell because of my shortcomings.”

“Good thing I don't remember most of it, then.” Jack couldn’t believe his ears. “Didn't you say this was a weapon that impacted more than the victim? So, isn't this exactly what he wants? You clamming up? Isolating yourself? Breaking us up into easier to manage pieces?”

“It isn't that simple, Wilde,” Jack forced out through gritted teeth. He had to keep the anger at himself alive, or he’d fall apart. He was struggling, but he was keeping the fire alive.

Judy chimed in from her seat on the couch. “Yes, it is Jack. If it's anyone's failure, it's all of ours. You trained us. We should have been on guard.”

“I made sure that he wouldn't be, that night.”

“Is that what this is about?” Nick asked. Jack could have taken a bullet to the gut better than the
softness of his voice. “Guilt from our date? Judy knows everything. We talked it through. I told her everything.” There was no anger there. Just patience and care.

“I'm not angry. Not with you, anyway.” Judy put in. “If Mr. Wilde, here, hadn't taken so long, we wouldn't be in this pickle.”

“Thanks, Carrots. The view from under the bus is real nice.”

“You love it.”

“This isn’t a joke!” Jack’s voice was rising to a shout and he couldn’t stop himself. “None of this removes my guilt! Not joking! Not blaming others! Nothing does! I was lazy. I let myself get comfortable. I knew the dangers and I got too caught up in-; “He couldn’t say it. The fire was moving to his eyes, but not in the way that scared mammals. It was the burn he knew was a precursor to tears. He was cracking. “I shouldn’t have let my feelings get in the way of my responsibility to keep you safe!”

Nick didn’t help. “Fuck responsibility. I like you better this way.”

“We didn’t help you make a life for you to throw it away,” Judy seconded, moving next to him. He was trapped.

Turning back to Nick, Jack was pleading. He needed them to be angry. He needed them to not understand, yet. If they did and they were acting like this, then they had forgiven him. That wasn’t right. They couldn’t! “Me having a personal life nearly killed you! If I hadn't been distracted by falling in love with you, I would have been able to fight harder to keep the resources together and maintained the security protocols! This might not have happened! You’d still be-”

Jack didn’t know when the tears started, or when Nick had pulled him into his chest. He simply found himself surrounded by warmth and strong arms and fox musk. Jack clung to him like a lifeline and wept. “Jack, I'm not dead. Whatever the reason, I'm not. That's what matters. I owe you so much for everything you've done.” Jack felt his chin lifted and he looked through his tears at the fox he loved. “And I have a lot of wasted time to make up for.”

The kiss was quick, but the fact that it happened at all left Jack breathless. The little bit of his brain that remained functional inspired his paws to latch on to Nick’s shirt front as he looked to Judy for confirmation. The little smile and nod he got in turn was all he needed. Jack clawed onto the fox and kissed him like he was drowning, repeatedly, before crawling up his chest and bawling into his shoulder. Nick picked him up and accompanied Judy to the couch. It was some time before they moved and many tears were shed.

Eventually, Jack calmed down enough to complain. "What have you done to me? I used to be stronger!"

"You weren't stronger. You were dead inside, but still breathing. Now, you're alive and catching up on what you missed out on." Nick supplied, stroking Jack’s ears.

Jack mumbled into his chest, "I hate you so much right now."

"That's fine. You're telling me you hate me, while smiling, crying and hugging me. That's a win in my book."

"Congratulations, Jack! You're an emotional bunny, now!” Judy chirped. “We have club jackets and meet on Tuesdays.”
"You two will be the death of me," Jack groused, halfheartedly.

"Just the parts that you don't like," the doe retorted.

Jack growled, "How am I supposed to stay angry with you when you keep making me smile?"


"You don't have a whole lot of room to talk yourself, Red."

"None of us do," Judy remarked with a suggestive smirk. "At least, not after last night."

Jack took that as his que to segue, "Speaking of things to catch up on…"

Judging from Nick’s intimidated, bordering on fearful, expression and Judy’s giggle, Jack saw both of them had an idea of what Jack was getting at. Jack briefly hoped Birchclaw could keep herself occupied for the foreseeable future, but that was a minor detail. Very quickly, the only thing occupying Jack’s mind was removing the few layers of cloth between himself and what he’d been lusting after and denied for months.

“Nick, do you like these pants?”

“Oh, shit.” Nick muttered under his breath as he cringed. “Yes…?”

“Then get them off, before they’re ruined.”

“At least you warned me…”

They didn’t get far, at least geographically speaking. Jack felt he had waited long enough and moving anywhere else would just be a waste of time. His enthusiasm didn’t present much opportunity for relocation either, not that he met any resistance. Nick’s eagerness, for all his feigned concern, matched his own and it was not long before Jack got what he wanted: his paws on a very naked fox.

Jack tried to bear in mind many things as he finally found his way to russet fur. Nick was recovering. He was still hurting; tired. Barely functional. Then, the scent under the smell of soap hit him again and the game changed. Scent marks and sex, amplified by body heat, hit Jack’s nostrils and something clicked in his head. His world contracted. All that was left was the hunger he’d ignored, or restrained for far too long.

As Jack’s paws began to fumble and shake in his haste, he found help from an unexpected quarter. He hadn’t thought actively about the other rabbit in the room since his sex-drive went critical, so he was surprised when he found a second set of digits working the buttons on the fox’s shirt. Judy must have sensed the change in Jack’s mindset, as she left her spot on the couch and came to help. Jack was surprisingly grateful. He was nervous and it showed. It helped having another pair of paws to assist the already-worn and still recovering predator out of his clothing. It also helped that the fox himself was willing to let his partner, or partners, set the pace.

Her clothes joined the pile on the side and a whole new set of scents played havoc with Jack’s instincts. Yes, he was gay. He was also a rabbit. He could feel himself react to the pheromonal markers of a member of his species entering heat. He also had the mammal he wanted more than anything in front of him and waiting. Suddenly, what Jack was reminding himself of was less about Nick’s limitations and more about his recent accomplishments. If the fox was well enough to rut Judy as thoroughly as it seemed from his scent, he was well enough for another round.
Quite some time later, Jack was leaving the shower on wobbling legs. It had been a long time since he’d had sex, or even had the interest. It was obvious that the interest was back and he was making up for lost time. He was also definitely out of practice, as his unsteadiness attested; a deficit he would have to rectify with all possible haste.

As he returned to the bedroom, he had to pass the space that, until minutes ago, was the stage of an exercise in advanced debauchery. Once in the bedroom, he found things much as he left them. Nick was laying on the bed trading salvos of cheekiness with Judy, who was seated reversed on the desk chair across the room. He was the last to bathe and good gods, had he needed it. Shortly, they would see to another need or two: food and, Jack prayed, hopefully, a little reconciliation with his right-armed mammal. In the immediate future, Jack needed clothes.

And to join in on the fun!

“There are entirely too many bodily fluids on that floor!”

“...and other phrases you never thought you'd hear spoken out loud,” Nick shot back.

Judy chimed in, “At least it’s hardwood. If this was carpet, it'd be dead.”

“No, it’d be shag, baby! Yeah!”

Both rabbits rolled their eyes and Jack pulled on his trousers as he retorted, “You are so lucky you're still recuperating.”

“Don't I know it. And don’t get me started on “hardwood”.” Jack face-pawed and Judy giggled. “I do have to say, though...”

“Oh gods...”

“... I've never felt better.” Nick finished after a beat. The bunnies blushed. Jack was glad to be pulling his shirt over his head and had an excuse to hide his face. Judy had to content herself with examining her lap. Nick naturally took advantage of their distraction. “I always thought the song was a joke.”

“What song?” Jack asked, before he thought.

Judy sputtered, “Jack! No!”, but was too late.

“Marvin Nightengayle, Sugarfluff!” Nick chirped before breaking into song. “Oh, when I get that feeling I want sexual healing...”

“Oh. Oh, Judy... I'm so sorry...”, Jack said as he shook his head in disgust.

“Oh, come on! It wasn't that bad.”, Nick whined,

“Yes it was!”, both rabbits said in unison.

Judy followed up saying, “Jynx!”

“And I am now a minority in this relationship.” The fox groused good naturedly

“You knew that the moment you seduced us poor innocent bunnies into your den, Mr. Fox,” Judy purred.
Jack chuckled as he finished dressing. “Besides, Wilde, you get a lot out of it. Small price to pay for what you get.”

“I'll be voted down every time, never be right, and get rutted through the floor.” Nick counted off on his fingers. “Works for me.”

“I really wish you were less passive.” Judy’s comment was met with Nick’s indignity and Jack nodding in agreement.

“I'm not passive. I'm simply accepting of the situation as you've presented it.”

“That doesn't make me feel better.”

“Yes, Wilde. Don't you want to be in control, at all? What happened to that whole dominant male thing from earlier?” Jack joked as he wormed his way into his clothes.

“I thought you said you didn't want to be the girl in the relationship,” Nick retorted with a grin.

Jack mumbled something, too low for the other two to catch.

“What was that, Sugarfluff?”

“Oh, sweet buttery biscuits, Wilde. I liked it! I liked being topped, ok? I liked not being the bloody one in control. And yes, I'm cursing like you now, Hopps!”

Judy’s grin was rapacious. “I don't care if you curse like me, Jack. It's cute.”


“Or what? You'll blush me to death?”

“Too late,” Judy chimed in.

“Oh my gods...” Jack’s blush was reaching whole new levels of red. “What have you two done to me?”

Surprisingly, it was Judy who replied. “Given you an opportunity to be yourself, instead of a rabbit alive in his own legend?”

“That is the sweetest, most depressing thing I've heard in months,” Jack grumbled.

“I try. Now, come on. We have things to talk about, but first I need food. And I want to eat, too.”

Judy smacked some vulpine rump as she passed, assuring him there would be plenty of time for eating, after breakfast. Or, more accurately, lunch. They opted to go to the dining room of the hotel and see what could be had, as opposed to room service. They all suspected they would quickly tire of being in the rooms, regardless of what they did in them.

The Empyron Hotel was a very Nouveau Victorian affair from the outside, complete with intimidating lines and crenellations. Apparently, the architect had hoped to comfort the customers of the hotel by creating the feeling that their residents were entering a Victorian style castle, of sorts. It was decently successful, as far as creating an impression went. The impression was so intense that the original hotel went under after two years. That was partially due to the architecture, but mostly due to its location. As a semi-secluded escape it was perfect, but at the price it required and the limited amenities outside the hotel itself, plus the isolation and difficulty of getting to and
from it, it’s appeal was too limited for longevity. Its closure was a foregone conclusion.

Thankfully, Mammalian government saw an opportunity and bought the hotel out, converting it to its present incarnation as a specialized rehabilitation facility. The façade of intimidation came into its own as a comfort to the wounded and weary, who found solace in the sense of safety, as much as the separation from regular life. The feeling only grew once they were in the front doors. Dark stained woods and broad, high windows created an ambiance of solidity and security, while not becoming oppressive. The furniture, in various sizes, was an eclectic collection of styles and forms which fit the décor, but failed to become boring.

Jack had missed all of this during his arrival. Then, it was just another place. Now, it was something else. It surprised him how relatively easy it had become for him to recover. The last time he’d had a catharsis like that was in the Nox. Granted, it had been a backlog of fifteen years and not without consequences. This time, he was on a mountaintop instead of in a cave and everything was seemingly on the mend.

Jack’s ruminations on consequences were rolling through his head as he accompanied his friends to the Dining Hall. It looked more like an upscale restaurant than a cafeteria, or café with small, neatly set tables scattered around the large space and long tables on the side. That was where they found coffee and a light luncheon in a buffet style. They also found one bedraggled caracal queen, nursing a large mug of coffee as she looked over papers and fiddled with her phone. Pulling himself together, Jack sent his two friends ahead of him. He had something he had to do.

As Jack approached, her nervousness was easily visible. She had no clue what to expect and was waiting for him to make the first move. It saddened him to admit that her fear and reservation was entirely deserved. Jack sighed internally and faced up to the repercussions.

“Agent Birchclaw…” Jack stammered. “Angie, I owe you an apology.”

Jack watched, confused, as the feline blew out the breath she’d been holding and visibly slumped with relief. “No, you don’t, Jack. You owe me a drink or fifty and a couple days off.”

“Pardon?”

She pinned him with a level gaze and said, “Boss, over the last week you’ve been a prick at points and a real ball-buster, but I get it. Wilde means a lot to you. It isn’t a surprise that you went a little nuts.”

“I’d say a bit more than a little…”

“Whatever. The point is, you’re back now.”

“I still feel indebted to you.” Jack’s embarrassment wasn’t fading. “And the rest of the team! I have no idea how I’ll face them.”

“Just talk to them, Jack. They understand. Some of them have been there.”

“My behavior was inexcusable.”

Birchclaw stood, facing his squarely. “Agent Savage, would you do any less than this for any of them?”

“No.”

“Then, all is forgiven for me and once you talk to the guys, it’ll be the same for them.” Angie
softened. “But next time we go out for a team building dinner, it’s on you.”

“Agreed.” Jack said with a relieved smile.

At some point in their conversation, Nick and Judy had arrived. As the tension bled out of the air, the fox put his paw on Jack’s shoulder in support. Jack leaned into the paw and felt better. That quickly changed when Angie smiled and said, “Come on, Agent Fluffer-Nutjob. Eat up. Meet me back in the suite when you’re done. We have work to do.”

When Jack pulled his jaw off the floor, he asked, “Agent what?”

“You can thank your boyfriend for that one.” His subordinate’s smile was the picture of feline self-satisfaction.

“I shall shortly. And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Drop the act, Jack. It’s particularly unconvincing when you smell like each other so strongly.” The level of discomfort in the little group rose a bit. They had done their best to scrub the evidence out of their fur, but it was obviously insufficient. “I know what happened, boss. I can smell that much. Even if you’re still working out the details, it doesn’t change the basic fact.”

“Oh, very well.” Jack blushed, before asking, “Angie, is that nickname common knowledge?”

“Only behind your back.” She tossed over her shoulder, as she walked towards the exit.

“How lovely.” Looked daggers at Nick.

Nick looked sheepish, but unrepentant. “I only said it once.”

Jack glowered at the fox as they sat to eat. They’d been considerate enough to bring him a plate and coffee, so he gladly tucked in. Agent Birchclaw had one last guffaw at the trio before she left to see to her tasks, but not before Judy warned to stay away from a particular area of the floor until the cleaners visited. Angie’s look of disquieted concern was enough to make Jack chuckle around a mouthful of salad. It was good to know he could upset her a bit in turn even if it was indirectly. Jack decided to continue the trend by getting Nick and Judy back a touch for the zingers he’d suffered.

Pointing at a particularly unpleasant looking arrangement of feathery, white flowers with his fork, Jack commented, “Ugh... reminds me of the last time I was in Avia.”

“Bad trip?” Judy inquired, as Nick’s mouth was full of gods only knew what. His cheeks were stuffed like a chipmunk’s in fall. He had to be starving with how hearty his appetite was.

“Bad food. Birds are intelligent, but not the most fastidious of creatures in some ways. The Conclave of Flocks kitchens...” Jack shuddered as he recalled the memory.

“The chefs were less than scrupulous in their presentation?” Nick finally managed after a massive swallow.

“The presentation was fine. It was the use of their own plumage as garnish that got me.” Both his companions looked put off at the idea. Then, he dropped the bomb. “I felt down in the mouth for days.”

“Oh. Oh gods, Jack. That was awful,” Nick actually dropped his utensils on his plate and groaned into his paw.
“From you that is the highest of praises,” Judy snorted.

From there, the conversation turned to miscellaneous topics. Nothing unusual, aside from the rose tinting that seemed to color everything. Jack felt very odd, considering how happy he was. There was also a note of bitterness in the glee, however. Apologizing to Birchclaw was one thing. Addressing the rest of his tally was something else entirely. He’d harmed and terrified a lot of mammals, lately. The majority would recover with a little counseling. In the cases of the directors, he felt no pity at all. However, the security personnel he’d disassembled were a different matter entirely. They’d receive the best medical care available, as a matter of course. They were injured in the line of duty and there were provisions in place for exactly that. It did not remove his guilt in any way. Jack knew something would inspire him regarding making amends.

Worst to worst, I can ask for help. I’ve got good mammals with me, now.

As an afterthought, he added “very good”. That sparked an involuntary reaction in Jack and an awkward conversation at the table.

“Jack, after what we did this morning, I’d have thought you’d be at least a little sated. I know you’re a rabbit, but…”, Nick said, nervously.

“What are you talking about, Red?”

“You’re thumping,” Judy tittered.

“I’m just… happy.”

“You forget, we know what that means.” Judy pressed, unrelenting. “I always did and now Nick does, obviously.”

“For a while, yeah…” Nick admitted. “So, what has you so worked up, Jack-jack?”

As Jack resigned himself to a stammering explanation, but Judy came to his rescue. “Someone’s missing the obvious!”

“Excuse me?” Nick asked with a raised eyebrow. “What exactly have I missed?”

“Surely, you haven’t forgotten after all your extensive research into rabbits what happens to does, post coitus.” Judy answered, putting crisp emphasis on the last two words.

As Jack blushed a touch and silently thanked the gods and Judy for her intervention, Nick mulled her words over. It was dangerously obvious to the buck when Nick worked his way around to the logical conclusion, as evidenced by his rapacious grin. “Hang on a second there, Tiger Bunny. Are you saying Judy turns you on?”

“Aren’t things complicated enough right now without this conversation?” Jack wanted to curtail this line of thought as quickly as possible.

“The cat’s a little bit out of the bag, now, Thumper,” Judy chimed as she cleared their now-empty dishes to the receptacle nearby.

“Ugh…” Jack would never live down that nickname, now that Wilde had gotten hold of it. “Wilde, do you have to make everything ten times more suggestive than it needs to be?”

“It’s more like twelve times, and yes. Yes, I do.”
Jack glowered menacingly at his favorite fox. It didn’t work, so closing the distance was the next step. Jack was very much inside Nick’s personal space when he answered. "Nick, as I am sure you know, pheromones have affected all mammals since we attained sentience. Any mammal in their heat cycle will affect those around them, but more so mammals of the same family of species and even further members of the same species, correct?"

"Oh, verily." Nick’s grin was not helping Jack’s composure.

"Yes, Hopps is going into heat. She's a rabbit. So am I. Therefore, I am very sensitive to it and it does affect me. However, it does not make me want to "plant my carrot in her garden", to use an adolescent euphemism. I'm not about to switch-hit just because she's going through estrus."

Nick chuckled. "That's an amusingly comforting thing to hear."

"It does, however, make me want to unearth your carrot and have a nibble." Nick went wide-eyed at that statement and tried to back out of Jack's personal space. "Right here. Right now." Jack pursued, pushing his fox back until his back hit the wall. Jack grinned predatorily as he continued, inches from Nick's muzzle. "So, before you ruffle my fur again, know that I no longer see the point of self-restraint and I have years of pent-up sex drive that's just itching to be released. Therefore, unless you want a shishkabun special in the next four seconds, don't. Push. Me."

Nick tried to pull himself together, saying, “I think we've exhausted the options available to us for the moment.”

Judy was suddenly next to them and purring. “Oh, Nick... You poor, naive fox. Remember what you said? You big, bad, sophisticated city animals think we're all innocent, poor widdle country bunnies. So cute. So sweet. Newsflash, foxy, we aren't just good at multiplying and flexible about it. We're creative.”

“I know about the bunni sutra...”

“Hah! The bunni sutra was all we thought you city folk could handle knowing without offending your delicate sensibilities. You better start working on your flexibility, Wilde.” Her toothy grin seemed more threatening than tiger claws to both males. “You’ll need it.”

“But but ...!”

“Come on, Nicky,” Judy continued as she led the way back to where Agent Birchclaw was no doubt waiting. “It's no one's business but ours what we do in the bedroom. Or how. Or how many times. Or with whom, however many there are. We keep our private lives private and let mammals make their own assumptions. Mammals assume we fit their preconceived notions and stop thinking past that. We let mammals dupe themselves for us.”

“You use their prejudice against them.”

“Uh huh! It's a... what is it...? What's that word? That word you used to use, but apparently suck at... oh, yeah! It's called a hustle.” She winked. “Sweetheart.”

“I've never been more turned on in my life. Wait, then why do you get so flustered?”

“When?”

“Whenever I joke about sex? Or flirt? What about when you met Inga?”

“Really? I need to explain that?” Jack chuckled at her discomfiture and noted that Nick was
leading, again; both walking and in conversation.

Not so passive, after all.

“Oh, Nick... Whenever it was you...” Judy sighed. Jack wondered how the fox was so good at turning conversations around on them. “Think of it this way. How would you react if your crush walked up to you and started talking like you do.”

“Oh...”

Judy continued before the blood-loss to her ears robbed her of the ability to speak. “Then, for Inga, she started going off like she did... in front of the male I've wanted for... yeah... are you getting this...? At all...?”

“Oh, Judy? Um... how long has this crush thing been a, uh...” Nick asked, uncertainly.

“A thing for me?”

“Oh...”

“Do you want it measured in weeks, months, or nights spent awake furiously masturbating?”

“Oh...”

“Rabbit. Remember?” Judy was glad she wasn’t the only one blushing, now. “You're in for the ride of your life, foxy. Nightly.”

“Twice.” Jack added.

“So... how long do rabbit heats last?”

“22-28 days.”

“Dead fox walking.”

At that point, Judy excused herself to little does room with ears so red they could keep a family of mice warm in tundra town. The males wandered through the suite until they found Angie. She was in the second bedroom; the one furthest from the still-unaddressed mess on the floor. Jack took a moment to call the housekeeping staff, again, before joining Nick and Angie in the briefing room. Birchclaw looked impressed and uncomfortable, at first, but once Jack got her on the job, she was perfectly professional.

Her distaste was also present, as only feline distaste can be, as she had to do one of any agent's least favorite jobs: collating raw data reports. As Jack’s de facto second in command, she got all the reports and was usually responsible for their analysis, distribution for follow up and final assessment. The reports were also usually accompanied by broken-down analysis and metrics in the form of spreadsheets. Lots of spreadsheets. They were commonly referred to as “grids.” Today, she apparently had a lot of them, as the printer was already chirping that it needed ink. Angie was experiencing gridlock.

Sadly, everything she had to show them this afternoon had to do with clandestine activity in the city. Exactly what Jack needed to know and what every agent feared.

“I'm worried Jack. It's getting crowded around here and all my recent data points to something big on the horizon.”
Nick was less than helpful. “What do you mean big?”

Birchclaw wearily searched for a way to explain herself to someone unfamiliar with agency protocol. Oddly, one of her favorite indulgences came to mind. She needed comfort food, anyway. Out she pulled the cellophane wrapped snack food and she held it aloft for her bemused audience, after opening it. “Let's say this Twinkie represents the normal level of covert chatter for the greater Zootopia area. According to this morning's analysis, we're talking a Twinkie 35 feet long, weighing approximately 600 lbs.”

Jack whistled and Nick said, “That's a big Twinkie.”

Judy chose this moment to return, phone in paw. “Hey, Bogo just called. How are the grids holding up?”

Birchclaw grumbled, “Not good.” Around a mouthful of questionable, cream-filled sponge cake.

Nick deadpanned, “Tell her about the Twinkie.”

“What about the Twinkie?”
Chapter 18

Nick sat, reminisced, and worried. Much to his vexation, it was all he could do. He was aware of the reasons for his relative stasis, but it did not comfort him. Nothing would. Being forced to sit and wait while others put themselves in danger was not likely to accomplish much for his peace of mind. He hated the fact that he was hobbled, despite the fact that it was his friends who imposed said strictures.

Friends and lovers.

The fox was still adjusting to his new circumstances. A life turned upside down in every respect was something he had hoped never to endure again after his twenties. He tended to prefer small, gradual shifts which culminated in a larger overall change. Grand-scale upheaval was usually a painful experience and, in his experience, elicited a loss. The last time his world had gone topsy-turvy, it had been in the aftermath of a small incident involving a questionable floor covering and an arctic shrew. It had resulted in Nick experiencing the life ecclesiastical for some time before sacramental spirits and a pretty acolyte or two spurred him elsewhere. Not a bad interlude, as interludes went, but not one he enjoyed remembering. He’d enjoyed life at the temple, and the abbess was understanding while not asking many questions. It ended too soon, and poorly for his conscience. The fact that he was awaiting the outcome of another meeting with the same shrew created a mild sense of déjà vu. He hoped it passed quickly. It was not a parallel he enjoyed.

At least the parallel isn’t exact. There is still some hope.

Yes, Nick had trained to be a priest to Karma as an escape from Mr. Big, all those years ago. Some of his education still lingered. There was also his upbringing to consider. Karma was the goddess of balance. Rewards and retribution. She delighted in irony, to read the Book of Balances. There was much irony in his present predicament, particularly when laid against the last time his life had gone bat-shit, window licking insane.

Previously, Nick had been limited in his movements, living in fear, desperate to go unnoticed and alone. Now, not only was he without his usual freedom of movement, but he was also living in fear and becoming quite desperate. The irony, and Karma’s delight, lay in the differences. He was trapped by mammals who cared about him, instead of a mob boss’ goons. He was afraid for his rabbits, instead of himself. He was desperate for them to come home safe, or even to get word from them, rather than simply for his own safety. Added to those disparities was the irrefutable fact that he was not alone. He was very much not alone. That was what made the anxiety so intense in his mind. The ironies were classic Karma. There was, however, one last question.

Her endgame.

The entirety of his situation was Karma to perfection, but it was only a set up. How she would play her final piece was his focus. He knew he would pay a price. He knew he had not been a good mammal all his life. If Karma decreed he had been truly bad enough to warrant punishment, he could lose both his rabbits and everything he had worked for. Whereas, if she mollified by his recent life, there was a chance he would escape with a lesser penalty. Nick had a suspicion of what it would be if that was her decision.

It was unlikely he would face a severe retribution, but the fear still gnawed at him. Far more likely was the possibility of a less apocalyptic penalty. Nick was a mammal who had many secrets. His greatest secrets were already out to the mammals who mattered in this case, but still felt odd. Sadly, his smaller secrets could still come back to bite him a bit, as one was likely about to do soon. It was
too fitting a revelation for the goddess to pass up on, unless she was feeling mercurial, of course.

Clemency from the mayor had given him a financial freedom and legitimacy that he had only dreamed about prior to meeting Judy. Then, dreams began to come to realization and his world changed. The cash he had hoarded for decades suddenly felt like dead weight on his conscience. At the same time, he was not fool enough to think that a masse donation to a convenient charity was a wise move. He’d worked for too long and far too hard to simply discard the proceeds gained from dancing on the dubious side of the law.

It was shortly before he was to leave for the academy that an idea occurred to him, largely thanks to Judy. He had been investing for years, building capital and protecting whatever nebulous future he had been working towards before meeting the rabbit. He didn’t see why he couldn’t perhaps continue that theme, but with a slightly different marketplace.

The first mammal he approached was a floundering tailor in the Nox, by the name of Abraham Tepis. His work as a tailor was top notch and he just needed a little investment. That was something Nick was able to provide and, quickly, he became a part-owner of the shop. Other investments were forthcoming and a few of his older ones were legitimized. An amusement park, several apartment buildings, a number of various businesses, a retirement community; all in need of revitalization. All good investments for a risk-taker. All turned out far better than he had ever hoped. It had also resulted in a small side-benefit; one he had not intended in any way, shape or form.

Nick put the letter from Mr. Tepis on the coffee table with the rest and sighed. He had been blessed with good mammals in his life and they all cared. Letters bearing Dani’s neat block letters, Abraham’s elegant cursive, Finnick’s scratches and Honey’s absurdly complicated codes and dozens more littered the table. Even Flash had sent a missive, albeit a brief one. It still meant a lot to Nick, as the three sentences likely took the sloth several hours to write. They were all supportive and heartfelt expressions of concern for a friend and benefactor. They also told him far more than he cared to know.

As he sat, the fox’s mind wandered back over the years. It hadn’t been hard to see the potential in Wild Times Amusement Park, when he first invested in it. His cash infusions had saved the park, revitalized it and eventually led to his owning a controlling interest in the business. That was before he’d gone straight. Now, it was one of his greatest points of pride.

He remembered Abraham’s joyful embrace when he’d made his deal with the bat and the gratitude of Dani as she peeled herself off his chest and dragged the stunned Joey into their new apartment. Honey was the only one to express her happiness in interpretive dance, though. She was always a little fumbly when it came to talking about her emotions and she hated to touch anyone except the one goat she accidentally befriended in a chatroom. How she and Billy got together still made him uncomfortable, but they were crazy together and that’s what mattered.

Nick stewed in his mind and tried to avoid falling asleep. He had to stay awake until his buns got home. A yawn stretched his jaw for him and he settled a little further back into his seat. It wasn’t as though he had anything else he could do. The Empyrion had plenty of amenities, but no television, or radio. The altitude and location nestled in the mountain peaks made transmissions nearly impossible and maintaining a hardline connection untenable at best. They also tended to upset some of the more temperamental residents.

Otherwise, there was anything a mammal could ask for, and none of it interested Nick at the moment. The full gym, spa, infinity pools, personal trainers, counselors, library, solarium, restaurants and gardens all held little appeal for him, despite the absence of a price tag.
It was incredible what a steady diet of excessive sex and boredom could do to a mammal. In three weeks, he’d lost weight, could touch his forehead to his knees and had never felt more relaxed in his life. His usual smug grin had taken on an even more laconic character and he was thoroughly used to physical displays of affection, almost to a distressing degree. In the suite of rooms he Judy and Jack now occupied at the hotel clothing was essentially forbidden past the front door, as Birchclaw had discovered to her distress.

It was just one more major change he had adjusted to. He’d never cared overtly about his own nudity, preferring pajama pants, or shorts for his own lounging. It was just what he’d gotten used to. Apparently, casual nudity was commonplace in rabbit warrens. It made sense to him once it was explained. With that many mammals in one place, bare fur wouldn’t stay shocking for very long, especially considering it was all family. No one would care. That did not stop Nick from dropping his coffee mid-sip when Judy started wandering around completely nude on a regular basis. She got a good laugh out of that. She got a better one out of Jack when the buck nearly jumped out of his skin during the same incident. Nick had joined her. Jack had been put out with the whole thing. Ironically, it had also been the buck who had resisted casual nudity the hardest. It took a lot of convincing to get him to believe that his scars weren’t off putting, but it had been worth it.

Everything had been worth it.

His past, present and everything looming in his future seemed rose tinted and manageable.

The door slamming shook him out of his reverie and reminded him that there were still a few things to inspire anxiety in his reality. One of which was the irritated expression on his violet-eyed girlfriend’s face.

“Hey, Carrots. How was Fru Fru?”

“She’s fine. The kids are, too. Mister Big and his boys are doing well.”

“Always good to hear.” Nick was quite content to exchange pleasantries with the mob boss of Tundratown through intermediaries.

“He sends his regards,” came the monotone addition.

“Most kind of him. Now, why are you looking daggers at me?”

“He sends his regards,” repeated the doe with the same lack of inflection.

Nick was growing disquieted at Judy playing games. She was definitely playing games. “How very kind of him?”

“And his respects,” came Jack’s voice from the door. “As I understood it, you and he were not in good graces, so why is he sending his respects?”

“Especially when that is reserved for mammals who have earned his respect,” from Judy.

“A difficult accomplishment with the Boss of Tundratown. Especially, in light of your history with him. Something about a toupee.” Jack’s eyes held a mischievous gleam as he winked at the fox.

“It was a rug,” Nick shot back, smiling.

Judy remained unamused. “Oh, sweet cheese and crackers, Jack. I am trying to be serious.”

“No. You were in interrogation mode. Why don’t we just ask him and then tease him mercilessly
about his taste in home décor?”

“Can we not? After this long, I’m kind of over it,” requested Nick.

“Oh, no, Red,” Jack replied with a grin. “It’s all new to me, so you get to suffer until I’m tired of it.”

“Great,” Nick groaned.

“Can we get back on topic?” Judy directed to both males, hands on her generous hips for emphasis.

“Must we?”

“Yes. We must,” insisted Judy.

“You want to know why Mr. Big would say something so out of character, since I haven’t earned his respect?”

“It’d be a good start.”

“Well… I, uh… earned it?”

“We surmised as much, given we’re both experienced investigators,” huffed the increasingly irritated Judy, her eyes narrowing at the source of her annoyance.

“Really?” quipped Nick. It was too easy a shot to resist even though he knew he’d pay for it.

“Alright, smartass. Enough sass, or no bunny booty for you tonight.”

“I didn’t agree to that,” Jack quickly interjected.

“You will if you want answers.”

“Sweet mother of moonlight, help me. I earned it by showing it!” Nick’s exclamation came in a rush.

“I’m impressed, Wilde! Your tactic of irritating an interrogation subject actually works” The sudden praise was enough to draw both males’ attention to Judy’s, now grinning, face.

Nick’s groan earned him a chuckle or two from his companions.

The fox stood and walked over to the opened bottle of scotch on the counter of the en suite kitchenette. Pouring himself a finger of the amber liquid, he said, “I’ll tell you why he respects me, but I need something from you both, first.”

His offer of a drink to either of the others was declined with fittingly confused looks. It wasn’t like him to need a libation just to talk about himself. Their amusement tempered into reserved understanding that he was no longer joking. Nick was seated and had a sip before he began.

“I need you to tell me I am talking to my closest friends; mammals I trust and who will hear me out.”

“Red, we know about your past. You never did anything so bad you can’t be forgiven. Especially, in light of your contributions to the City in the last few years.”

“Come on, Nick. You know us better than that.”
“This isn’t something I’m ashamed of, but it is something that will change how you see me.” There was an odd hesitance in his voice that was joined by a squirm and followed by a swallow of scotch. The rabbits shared a look at Nick’s displays of nervousness.

He was not ashamed of what he had done, but it was absolutely something that would change things between them. It frightened him, but there was no avoiding it, now.

“Carrots, you’ve asked me before about what you call my “philanthropic beneficiaries”. You’ve met a few. You know what some of them are like.”

“Yeah. A couple former pick pockets, a bat with a weird movie fetish and a quokka with no filter,” Judy elaborated based on her few meetings with Nick’s employees.

“And Abraham.”

“Who?”

“Abraham Tepis. The tailor you met in the Nox. They’re just a few of them.” Before the questions could start, Nick plowed on. “When I was forgiven my uh… financial…”

“Your back taxes, you mean,” Jack clarified.

“I wasn’t negligent!” Nick spouted, trying to regain a little of his levity. “I filed my taxes every year. I was simply… flexible with some of the details, that’s all.”

Jack snorted. "To be that flexible, you'd have to be a contortionist."

"I like the sound of that. "Financial contortionist” has a nice ring to it." Nick chirped, merrily.

"It's better than convicted felon." Judy was growing impatient. Her arms were crossed and her foot wass starting to twitch in anticipation of thumping. Not a good sign.

Nick couldn’t help one last rejoinder. "So is a sharp stick in the eye. I’ll pass on both."

“Does this little tangent have any bearing on why you’re suddenly so anxious, Red?”, Jack prompted.

“Yes.” Nick sighed before he shot back the rest of his drink. “I’ve been earning for a long time and I invested my money. I always had liquid capital, but I knew any money I had would vanish if I didn’t put it to use. It’s basic finances, but none of my money went into illegal ventures. I knew legitimate investing was the only way to go. I just didn’t report it and kept everything small-scale, in cash and on hard copy. When I was granted clemency, I took the opportunity to go totally straight. All my investments. It came out a lot better than I had thought.”

“Hang on a moment,” Jack interjected, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I know Judy blackmailed you into helping her, but the figures don’t add up. Even if we take your boast of $200 a day as true, you still had to live. That costs money and every day wouldn’t have been that good.”

“Or that bad. My boast was an average. There were worse days, but there were also days where I pulled in a lot more. As for living expenses… Well, let’s just say that when Judy apologized to me under the bridge, she didn’t know she was apologizing in my living room.”
“What?!” Judy exploded, her visage a wild mixture of emotions.

“You were homeless?” Jack’s brows drew together into a thundercloud over his eyes. Nick barely resisted commenting as much. Probably for the best.

“It cut down on living expenses. And hold off on deciding if you’re feeling angry, upset, guilty or confused until I’m done, Fluff. There’s more,” Nick snarked with a shrug. “Once the Nighthowler case was wrapped up, I knew I needed to make myself a real candidate for the Academy. That meant the months leading up to it were spent becoming one. Finding a place to live, cutting ties with some old contacts, cleaning up my finances. All that fun stuff. No real surprises there, I hope.”

All Nick get in response was a pair of expectant looks and a little impatient foot tapping.

“I decided to try to do a little good while I was at it. Carrots, you said once that I was always a good mammal, but I needed a chance to be more than a hustler. I knew a few mammals who were just like that. Suddenly, I had the money to help them and, finally, the motivation.”

The look of dawning comprehension crawling across their bunny faces was adorable, right down to the nose twitching. Jack was looking more awed by the minute and Judy was doing the little paw-grabby motion she did when she was really enthusiastic.

“I used my investments to do a few things to help a few old friends out. Abraham Tepis is a gifted tailor, but his delicate touch was, once upon a time, employed as a safecracker. His shop was struggling, so I invested. It saved his business and kept him from having to go back to dirtying his paws. I did that in a lot of places. Grifters who wanted to go straight, mammals who needed a way out, but couldn’t get a loan to start up. I took the risks on the mammals who were legitimately trying. It was easy to spot the con-mammals and liars, so I didn’t get taken for a ride and my investments were generally profitable.”

“So, you invested in startups and turned a profit in under four years? That’s almost unheard of in legitimate economics,” Jack inserted incredulously.

“True. However, those are just some of the more recent ones. I’d been investing illegitimately since I was in my early twenties. Those are perfectly sound and profitable.”

“Once you went straight, of course.”

“Yes, Fluff. I already went over that one.”

“Then give me an example.”

“Wild Times Amusement Park.” In the face of Judy’s laughter, Nick pressed on and slowly the giggles petered out into slack-jawed incredulity. “I started feeding money into the park when it was still a pred-only establishment. Made a few suggestions about making it more profitable, called in a consultant or two. Over time, the park came around, opened up to prey and I ended up investing enough to have a meagre controlling interest. When I went straight, I made the employment system part of the Elective Community Service System. Over 70% of all employees of the park are ex-cons and former juvenile offenders. It’s a second chance for a lot of mammals who made a mistake and need help with a new start.” Seeing Judy revving up to ask, Nick hurriedly continued, “Don’t worry, Carrots. None of the mammals involved are violent offenders, or career criminals.”

“The park really is named after you?” Judy squawked.

“Gods, no! It was always Wild Times. They offered the add the “e”, but I didn’t want to advertise.”

“I’d say you were successful,” Jack grumbled.
“What has your ears in a knot, Jack? Didn’t you know about all this?” Nick was genuinely taken aback by the buck’s reaction, especially as he knew that a thorough investigation had been performed on him by both the Agency and the ZPD.

“Most of it is in your dossier with the Agency, but not your motivations. It also seems the extent of your investments was severely misrepresented by our analysts.”

“Just a parboiled minute! You knew?” Judy’s outburst was directed not at him, but at Jack, thankfully.

“His finances as an officer are part of the public record,” Jack replied crossly. “Just as yours are and despite the years prior to his joining the ZPD being sealed, The Agency has access to all documents relevant to active cases, so yes. I knew. I didn’t share the information because it was irrelevant and private.”

“Alright. I’m sorry. I’m just…”

While Judy forced herself to calm down, Nick continued in a rush. “Judy, I didn’t tell you or anyone else, especially after I went to the academy. The last thing I needed to do was be the fox cop who supported criminals.”

“The papers would have destroyed you with that,” Jack speculated idly.

“Bang goes my reputation, my career and my credibility,” Nick confirmed. “Bogo and Internal Affairs were very thorough, but as you said, existing investments are one thing; the motivations behind them aren’t part of the documentation.”

Judy found her voice enough to ask, “How much?”

“That’s a little personal, sweetheart, and I don’t have a number off the top of my head. What I can say is that I am heavily invested in Nymphaea Liou, LLC.”

“Nym- Nick that’s one of the largest property management firms in the City!”

“You’re looking at the sole stockholder.”

As Judy goggled, Jack mused, “I’m taking a shot in the dark, here, but the name means something, doesn’t it?”

“My mother was a red fox named Lillian.”

“And the Liou variety are red. That is so sweet!”

Jack’s gushing mockery was cut short when Judy almost growled, “You’re telling me that every business you own a piece of is supporting ex-cons going straight?”

“Um, yes?”

“And you kept it secret because you didn’t want to compromise your career or the ZPD?” Nick’s ears slid back against his head as she stalked over to where he was seated.

“Yes?” His voice was squeakier than he liked, but couldn’t help himself. Especially when she grabbed his shirtfront and pulled him down so he was face to face with her.

“And this isn’t some weird, Robin Hood complex or something?” Her voice was low and deadly.
“Wha- No! I wanted to earn a legal profit and do a good turn for mammals who couldn’t catch a break! That’s all, I swear!” Nick was all but panicking until her lips smashed into his.

His unspoken question was answered when her hooded eyes joined her smirk and she purred, “It’s called a hustle, sweetheart,” into his ear.

“Judy?” The word felt a little odd on his bruised lips, but he was too happy being alive to care.

“Nick, I’m not happy that I’m finding out this way, but you’re doing a good thing. Just let me have a day or two and I’ll be over it.”

It took a moment or two before Nick found the breath to ask, “Do you have any idea how big a turn on it is when you do that?”

“Yes,” she replied with a pointed look below his beltline.

Jack coughed to cover his amusement, “All this is well and good, but what does it have to do with Big? Your personal financial matters aren’t his business, as far as I can tell.”

“It doesn’t, but it behooves one to show respect to major players when you’re working in their territory. I was being completely above board, but investing in Tundratown businesses that involve former criminals can require delicate handling.”

“He asked to see you?”

“I went to him. Before I even spoke to Mr. Tepis, I told Big what I intended to do. He made his usual threats and told me either I keep my nose clean, or he’d take it personally. I have no doubt he’s kept an eye on my activities. Apparently, he likes what he’s seen.”

“I can understand why he might see you investing as a threat to his business, but what you did by talking to him then and your work since hasn’t been enough to genuinely earn respect. Tolerance, yes. Indifference, maybe, but not respect,” Judy commented.

“There’s something you’ve left out. Is that what you’re so embarrassed about, Wilde?”

“Not embarrassed, more… leading up to it. The thing is, you’re right, Big didn’t consider me a threat and he didn’t care as long as there wasn’t a conflict. What earned his respect was what else I did, kinda accidentally, as a part of it.”

“What do you mean?”, Judy shot back.

“I mean, sometimes just a job isn’t enough to get an ex-con set up, or keep a former resident of a juvenile detention center in line. It isn’t just money. A lot of repeat offenders end up that way because they’re afraid.”

“That isn’t news, Nicky.” Jack commented. “A moment of panic can make one mistake into two and another trip through the criminal justice system turns a kit who made a mistake into a repeat offender.”

“I got upset after one of the cubs from Wild Times got put away again for something stupid, so I helped the park create dorms and a buddy system. Older members get assigned a new release to supervise. It led to fewer parole violations and less repeat offenses. It also added a sense of purpose and responsibility to some of the older ones. It’s supervised by the parole officers and Park management, so there’s plenty of oversight and a double check, so the parole officers and managers can’t pull anything either. It’s not perfect, but it’s helped.”
“While that is impressively done, what does it have to do with Big?”

“It was kind of a domino effect. Once mammals left the program, they stayed in touch; using Wild Times as a reference and the like. Sometimes, they looked for leads in other businesses supported by Nymphaea, or kept in touch with former supervisors in the program. Before long, a lot of the businesses were talking to each other. Business agreements were made, references and support given and a little community formed.”

“Are you telling me you built a support network for former criminals?”

“That’s why Big would consider it a threat! With so many mammals owing you, he’d think you were trying to set yourself up as a Don!” Jack shook his head slowly as understanding dawned.

“I’m not! I swear! I’m not a mafia boss. I’m an accidental community leader.”

“This is unbelievable. Next, you’re going to tell me that Finnick is your underboss, in addition to being superintendent of your properties in the Nocturnal District,” Judy snorted softly.

“Um… He’s one of my general managers at Nymphaea. Not an underboss.”

“Bloody hells…”

“See? This is why I was so nervous about telling you! If you’re going to react like this, I can only imagine how Bogo would react!” Nick bounded to his feet, hands waving about as he endeavored to make his point anyway he knew how. They had to understand, even if no one else ever did. Losing his place on the force would be a blow, but losing his buns...

Jack reached the panicking fox first and managed to get him seated again. “Nick! Breathe! Breathe. We’re sorry. Judy, joking is over.”

“Sorry, Nick.” The words were offered quietly, but were full of concern as she watched her fox carefully.

“Look, I know what it looks like,” Nick’s muffled voice spoke between his hands as he rested his face against his palms. “That’s why I went to Big in the first place. It’s taken until now for him to be convinced my intentions aren’t criminal. Bogo and IA? Not so easy a sell.”

“Well, the chief would probably believe you eventually,” Judy offered.

“Not Internal Affairs. There are a few goons up there that would love to have an excuse to go after me, again, despite the fact that all this was in place before I signed up.”

“OK. So, we don’t tell Bogo,” stated Judy decisively.

“Who are you and what have you done with Officer Hopps?” Jack snarked.

“Har har.”

“Well, Nick, I must say that I am impressed. All joking aside, this is pretty inspiring as far as revelations go.” Jack stated, leaning back in his seat. Nick chuckled weakly in response. “You don’t seem any less nervous, for having gotten all that off your chest.”

“There is, uh… One other little thing.”

“Oh, gods… What else could there possibly be? Are you secretly the mayor, or something?” Judy desperately hoped he would say no.
“Not quite…”

The doe winced, bracing herself.

“Just spit it out, Red. Quick and clean.” There might have been a bit of bracing on Jack’s part, too.

“Here goes,” Nick muttered to himself, before taking a deep breath and squaring up to his audience. “The thing is that it isn’t just a business community. The problem with being an ex-con is there’s a lot of pressure to return to the life. Sometimes it can get a bit… intense. Especially, from mammals who feel they’re owed.”

“Like old coworkers making offers that one can’t refuse?”

“Exactly.”

“So, what does that mean for you and this little community you lead?”

“Well, we look out for each other. We keep our ears open and pay attention to things that could harm members of the community. If we hear something that constitutes a threat, we spread the word so the mammals at risk can go to the police, or hide until it blows over.”

“Perfectly reasonable,” Jack commented.

“Makes sense,” Judy agreed.

“I’m still waiting for the punch line,” Jack added.

“This means that a lot of information gets passed around and all of it ends up funneling up to me.”

Jack was a touch quicker on the uptake. “Are you saying what I think you are, Nicolas?”

“I’m saying that there are a lot of mammals who tell me a lot of things. Often times discretely.”

Seeing Judy’s eyes bug, Nick quickly amended, “Nothing illegal. Just things of note. Anything that needs police involvement gets reported anonymously, but there are some things that aren’t police-worthy that still scare mammals enough to have them pass it on, eventually, to me.”

“Wait. What? How?”

“Old codes that were used by criminals years ago that fell out of fashion. Not all of the mammals involved in protecting each other trust open communication, no matter how clean and legal it may be. A few of the old-timers brought them back and used them as a backbone of the communication network. It made everyone involved feel a lot safer.”

Jack finally sputtered back into life. “Hang on a bloody minute, Red! Are you seriously telling me you are receiving clandestine communications and have been for gods only know how long?!”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” Nick replied sheepishly. “I’m also telling you that my latest reports may have gotten us a lead.”

If looks could kill, Judy’s glare could have split atoms. “A lead. On the case. The case you are not on because you are the target of a vulpicidal, megalomaniacal frog? That case?”

Nick sighed. “That case.”

“Oh, well. That’s alright, then. Please, do enlighten us as to this new information.”
Nick marshalled himself. He’d expected disbelief and anger, but it didn’t make it any less unpleasant.

All cards on the table, I guess.

“I got this satchel of get-well cards and letters.”

“We know. We delivered it,” Judy replied curtly.

“In it were a lot of cards and letters from friends.”

“Part of your network,” Jack surmised.

“Some, yes. In the letters were coded reports of things that no one had paid attention to until I was attacked. Once I was hurt, everyone started talking. Finnick and Honey put it all together. Some sheep in Foxglove complained about weird smells and new burrows near a favorite golf course and it sparked her curiosity. She tracked down the spot and the got the permit numbers. After that she hit a dead end, but Finnick managed to backtrack the money. Everything was paid in cash, so Honey’s hacking couldn’t follow, but there was a stamp on the bills from a bookie Finnick recognized. A reptile bookie in the bayou, named Hiss.”

“Hiss? Are you sure?” Jack’s eyes narrowed and his ears perked.

“Positive. Finn wouldn’t make a mistake on something like this.”

“You know him?” Judy directed to Jack.

“Yes. He was an asset from the old days. I arranged for him to come to Mammalia. He’d never do something like this.”

“The evidence suggests otherwise.”

Jack waved off Judy’s comment and continued. “You don’t understand. The terms of our agreement with him were that if he were ever to be linked to an Amphibian threat, or make contact with any agents or affiliates of the Empire, he would be deported back to where he came from.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. He’d go home to Reptilia.”

“No. He’d go to Amphibia, where he’d be killed as a traitor. He and his family were exiled from Reptilia for backing the wrong side in a political coup a century ago. They ended up with the amphibians and are held to their laws. For betraying them at the end of the war, he was sentenced to death. I barely managed to get him out of the Empire before they liquidated him.”

“Liquidated?”, Nick huffed in amusement.

“Not a euphemism.”

“Eww…” Nick and Judy made equally appalled faces.

“There is no offer or threat that would make him help them. Even a death here would be a blessing compared to what awaits him in the Empire. He’d never have anything to do with this.”

“Or anything else to do with Amphibian interests,” Judy added rather absently, still trying to remove the image of “liquified” reptile from her thoughts.

“Why would he be involved, then?” Nick pondered aloud.
“I doubt he is… It may be a play to tie up another loose end from the war. He could curry favor and embarrass rivals if he managed to get a traitor like Hiss returned for execution. It could also be a bizarre coincidence. Either way, he’s our next step. Unless, of course the Spymaster of the city has done that already?”

“The what?” Judy’s ears flicked.

“Come on, Hopps. Stop playing dumb.”

Judy turned a narrow violet gaze upon her favorite todd, before running a paw over her ears. “I need a minute,” was all she said before she quickly and quietly left the room.

“That could have gone better,” Nick commented dejectedly.

“Worse, too,” Jack commented.

“I guess.” Nick grumbled before flopping onto his back and covering his eyes with his arm.

“I understand why she’s upset. I have to admit I’m a bit annoyed, too, but not with you. Not exactly.”

“Well, can you fill me in, so I have some idea of how to handle this?”

Jack’s look of fond annoyance was missed entirely by Nick. The rabbit sighed and slid off his chair to pad over and pull the fox back into an upright position. Once that was accomplished, the rabbit climbed up and hugged him. Nick wasted no time in returning the hug. He needed the support.

“Red, she needed a moment to digest what you just told her. She will be back. Judy is not going to leave you over this.”

“I know, but I’m still scared.”

“Believe me, I get it. Secrets like these… well, I’ve lived with them a long time. You handled telling us pretty well, all things considered.”

“And you’re taking it pretty well.”

“I have a tolerance for shocking revelations, but I understand why Officer Hopps is so upset. Beyond anything else, she has to grasp that you’ve been doing this all without her knowledge. She has to feel a little betrayed. Not to mention a little chagrined that she has been unaware all this time considering you’re her partner and she’s going for detective.”

Nick groaned loudly. “It wasn’t intentional! None of this was! The whole network just kind of happened. I started off wanting to go straight and try to do a little good here and there, so I covered my tail with a dangerous mammal who didn’t trust me. The rest was out of my paws.”

“You are doing a good thing. A lot of good things,” Jack assured his fox.

“Thanks.”

“I have to ask, though…”

“Hmm?”

“Where on Gaia’s green earth did you find the time?” Jack’s amazement pulled a watery laugh out of the fox. “Between the Academy and everything else, how did you set all this up?”
“It was mostly Finn and Hon. It may be a surprise to you, but Finnick is incredibly good with numbers. I put him in charge of keeping an eye on some investments for me and paid him for it. Six months later, he’s asking me what a good name for a financial services company would be. That was when I found out he’d done more than I ever could have dreamed of and Nymphaea was born. He brought me up to speed and since then, he’s been the brains, her the technical and I’m the final word. They even built in safeguards against themselves and tested them externally. They ask for my input periodically and I sign off, but between the two of them they have it handled.”

After a moment’s thought, Jack replied, “If you’re looking to tell Judy something that would ease her mind, all that would probably help.”

“Uhhuh… “Hey, Judy! I accidentally created a city-wide non-criminal syndicate, while I wasn’t paying attention.” Sounds completely plausible.”

“No. What you told me sounds plausible. That sounds like being a drama llama.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. I’m used to it.”

“Judy!” Nick exclaimed, nearly tipping himself, and Jack, off of the couch.

“Hopps. I presume you heard the version that doesn’t belong on RuPaw’s Drag Race?”

“I did. And you were right. It did help.”

“Judy, I-“ Whatever Nick had intended to say was cut off by Judy’s finger on his lips and driven from his mind when her fist impacted his shoulder. “Ow!”

“That’s for keeping secrets.” Then she kissed him before burying her face in his chest and releasing a shuddering breath. “And that’s for everything else.”

“Judy?” Nick queried nervously.

“No more secrets, Nick. Even if it’s nothing but good. No more secrets. You too, Agent Savage.”

Jack gently chuckled, “If we are to bare all, that will take quite some time.”

“Once we aren’t fighting for our lives, we’ll take a holiday. We’re earning plenty of holiday hours,” mused Judy.

“I’m thinking someplace warm and sunny, with drinks that have little straw hats,” Nick nodded in agreement.

“Clothing optional would be nice. That way we could avoid his terrible shirt collection,” Jack added.

“They aren’t that bad!”

“Yes, they are!” Judy snorted in laughter.

“Simply ghastly,” Jack smirked.

“Philistines,” Nick snorted in indignation, though it was ruined by the look of utter relief on his face as he cuddled his buns.
Judy sat for the third time in thirty hours on the excruciatingly slow funicular railcar, making her descent back down the mountain. Her mind was still reeling from what she had learned about her partner and friend.

And boyfriend. Don’t forget boyfriend.

Her inner monologue was being especially unhelpful. Finding out Nick was well off wasn’t a surprise. The scale of it had been a bit unexpected, Judy had to admit. Her fox wasn’t on par with the old money families, or true financial magnates in terms of capital, but he was close. He wasn’t a heavyweight by any stretch, but he was certainly pushing the upper limits of middleweight and that was just when it came to money.

The “community” Nick had founded and led had stunned her. Not the fact of it and that was a surprise in and of itself. What startled her the most was her sense of pride at why he had done it. Her first reaction was confusion, then disbelief. Then, before anger or anything else, came pride. It wasn’t until she started realizing the implications that anger and hurt had come into play.

It made her feel immeasurably stupid not to know something so hugely significant about the one mammal she was closest to. It was right there. Literally right under her nose and she missed it entirely. It was a humbling realization of her own ignorance.

Then, Jack piped up.

She knew the buck was doing what was needful and it had certainly worked, but his methods...

As subtle as using a sledgehammer for dental work... How did he survive as a field agent for so long with that kind of heavy-handedness?

While she was displeased with her rabbit friend’s behavior, she also appreciated his candor. He’d clarified the situation in a way that she was too close to see. It still felt horribly weird to think about, though. Her boyfriend was on par with Mr. Big in terms of influence and had informational resources on par with Jack’s, in the city.

The term “spymaster” still rattled through her head. It was an anachronistic term, barely used since
the last of the monarchies dissolved and the last of the city states ceded the power of rule to the central government of Mammalia. A spymaster was usually referred to as a Spider. They created and maintained networks of spies and informants, managed information, addressed threats and acted in the interests of the kingdom or principality. Basically, what Jack did, but Jack was an agent in a clandestine organization. No matter how you slice it, Jack had oversight. Nick, on the other paw, was autonomously empowered. Spymasters answered only to the ruler themselves and Zootopia didn’t have a king. It was a silly mental tangent, but assuming Nick thought that way, who would he consider his “ruler”? 

The idea was absurd. Chief Bogo dancing the Macarena in a luchador mask and tutu was more likely to happen than Nick bending his neck to anyone. Besides, this wasn’t the Renaissance, when such things happened.

Unfortunately, the fact remained and it tortured her. Nick had this huge amount of power and while he insisted it was on the up and up, something felt off. Judy had no doubts that Nick was not involved in anything illegal, but he was also not the type of mammal to leave something so powerful unused. Everyone at the Precinct knew the fox hoarded information like Clawhauser hoarded tasty treats. Let something slip in his earshot and it would be remembered, possibly used in a prank or as part of a “negotiation” to change shifts later. DelGato would never be loose-lipped around either her or Wilde ever again. Judy shuddered as she recalled the prank war two autumns previous.

The arrogant lion had expressed a distaste for spiders. Therefore, naturally, Nick had slipped live spiders into everything from the feline’s overturned coffee cup to his locker and desk drawers. DelGato spent the entire day leaping out of his skin as arachnids seemingly appeared everywhere he turned. By the end of the day Nick was reprimanded, if lightly, by Bogo and the Precinct councilor had DelGato scheduled for trauma counseling the rest of the week. Their first session couldn’t begin until the big cat was coaxed out of the shower after trying to scrub the heebie-jeebies off himself for the seventh time. Nick was banned from participating in prank wars, unless he himself was attacked first. A couple rookies had made that mistake and regretted it sorely.

In light of that, the situation was only made worse by the fox’s ability to read mammals. Officers Trunkaby and Wilde actually got along quite well. So much so that they occasionally ribbed each other. It was cute, Judy thought, to see the snarky fox square off against the sweetest pachyderm on the planet, especially when he lost. However, Nick’s tendency to give her suggestions on what to give her girlfriend around holidays was uncanny. Five times, Nick had made suggestions. The single instance Francine didn’t take the recommendation was the one gift she got wrong. Badly.

How could someone so observant, who never ignores an angle or fails to exploit an opportunity, fail to make use of something as massive, or powerful as the network he had created? Especially, considering the whole thing and every mammal he’d helped cared enough to take the attack on him personally and act. It made no sense to her.

“Penny for your thoughts, Hopps?”

“They aren’t worth a penny.”

“That’s a depressing thing to say. What’s wrong?”

“Oh! No! I didn’t mean that. I meant… Oh, hells. I don’t know.”

“That came out self-deprecating because you’re distracted and not paying attention?”

“Yes…”
“Let me guess. Fox issues?”

“What else?” Judy raked her paws over her ears and tried to get her thoughts in order. “I’m just really overwhelmed, Jack.”

“Understandable. Especially, considering that latest little number he did on us.”

“I thought you handled the news pretty well.”

“What? That Red is part mafia don, part spymaster and did it all under our radar? Not at all, Hopps. Not at all.”

“So, you’re upset about it, too?”

“Yes. I’ve spent decades in espionage. I know the territory. He managed that without even setting off a ripple. I didn’t catch anything, even when I was vetting you all prior to my arrival. It’s a hell of a blow to the ego.”

“And a little scary.”

“You’re wondering what else he’s hiding.”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“You aren’t exactly hiding it. You don’t have a poker face, Judy. It’s rather endearing.”

“And you have one that’s too good.”

“I know.”

“Jack, there are a lot of things we need to talk about.”

“We agreed to that last night, Jude. When we aren’t under threat, I promise I’ll tell you everything. After I retire, I won’t need to keep secrets.”

“I’ll worry about you retiring when it happens, but there is one thing that I need to know now. This isn’t something that can wait.”

“And It’s something that Nicky shouldn’t be involved in?”

“He should, but I’m impatient. I’m also concerned and I wanted to talk to you about it first. Rabbit to rabbit.”

“Very well. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s about… Echo.”

“Ah… I was wondering when this would come up.” In response to Judy’s confused expression, Jack continued. “Nick and John. Father and son. My interest in both? Kinda creepy? Am I getting close?”

“Partly. I mean, yeah, it was a little disconcerting at first, but what do I know? We’ve already proven that love doesn’t listen to reason and we don’t get to choose. I’m already over that whole thing. What concerns me isn’t that you loved John and now Nick. It’s more…” Jack looked quizzically at her, waiting for her to finally ask. “Are you sure you’re seeing them as separate mammals?”
“Oh…”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I don’t mean to question you…”

“But you do. And I don’t blame you. Especially after the confusion that plagued our first few months together.” Jack sighed. “I did promise you honesty and this won’t work without communication.”

“As we just demonstrated last night,” Judy commented with a wry smile.

Jack rolled his eyes in response. “Quite. Judy, you know I had an issue with seeing them as the same. That isn’t a problem for me anymore. I know it’s just my word, but I can’t really offer more.”

“I believe you, but trusting you to know exactly what your feeling is a little difficult for me. It wasn’t long ago that you were an emotional ruin. You’ve made huge steps, but so much progress in a short timeframe is a little surprising.”

“You’ve been talking to Fru, haven’t you?”

“A little. Well, she’s been talking. I’ve been listening.”

“And you’re afraid I still see Nick as John and my emotional investiture is fallacious.”

“Don’t say that word around Nick or you’ll give him ideas.”

Jack’s chuckle was puckish to say the least. “No promises. All joking aside, I understand your concern. All I can say is that the more I get to know Nicky the more that isn’t a problem. I loved John for so long, but he was not a good mammal and he did not treat me like I was something of value to him. He never mistreated me, but I was only ever an afterthought. He cared, but…” Jack trailed off.

“The job came first.”

“Always,” Jack agreed. “He was a cold-blooded bastard and the best mammal I knew. No matter how much I cared, he didn’t. Not to the same degree.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. At last, that part of my life is behind me. I’m happy. Every day I see more and more differences between what John was and what Nick is. I had them confused at first, but there is no way I can do that now.”

“What do you mean?”

“John never marked me. He refused the one time I asked. He claimed it’d give us away, but the mission we were on lasted long enough where even his mark would have faded before we would be discovered, I let it go then, but it was very telling. He tried to make it up to me, but that stuck with me for a long time. But Nick…”

Judy smirked as Jack rubbed at his head. “You’re blushing, Jack.”

“I can’t help it. It feels surreal.”

“You’re also grinning like a fool.”
“You’re one to talk,” he grumbled lightheartedly.

“So how are they different? I believe you, but more convincing wouldn’t go amiss. Also I’m curious.”

“Oh, fine… Nick’s sweet in all the ways John was sharp. John only came to me when he wanted something, usually in form of stress relief. Nick likes casual affection and cuddling and…”

“All the things that make you look like a giddy fluffball instead of a hard-bitten badass?”

“Thank you for putting it in perspective.”

“Oh, come on, Stripes.”

“What do you want to know, Hopps? Which is better in bed? Talk about creepy…”

“No! Oh, gods, no… eww… It’s just… What’s different?”

“Everything. Nick’s his father’s son, but also his own mammal. There are similarities, but they aren’t definitive points. It’s be easier to tell you how they’re similar.”

“It’s that big a difference?”

“Oh yes. Like comparing you to your mother. There are some similarities, but not many and fewer every day.”

“Oh yes. Like comparing you to your mother. There are some similarities, but not many and fewer every day.”

“Ok, now I get it.”

“If you want to go to a creepy level again, I have a suggestion…”

“Don’t you dare!”

“You don’t think Bonnie could handle a good foxing?”

“Oh. Gods…” Judy groaned. “Pass the brain bleach…”

An hour later, Judy wanted mental bleach for another reason. They had made it to the bar where Hiss ran his bookie business from, but once they arrived it was clear no part of their task would be easy. Somehow, the giant reptile had managed to surround himself with a collection of lunatics who all hated each other. Right at the front door the evidence of it clear as day. The shouting match between the Shetland pony who wore the shirt with “bouncer” scrawled across the chest and the mongoose behind the bar was plenty.

The mongoose was particularly unpleasant, muttering about snake kabab as he waved them through to the back. Once the two rabbits were behind the bar, the insanity seemed to intensify. There was a manatee stocking the wet bar on the canal, smoking something rancid and flicking pebbles at the mongoose. The mongoose was making workhorse jokes about the bouncer and the bouncer was taking potshots at the waitress. She was a Jamaican coney and the sweetest mammal they’d seen all morning, until they got back to the office where her boss and his accountant, an elderly buffy flower bat, were working.

The bat was grumbling into an ancient mobile phone with the thickest island accent Judy had ever heard. The topic was as bewildering as the rest of her visit, so far. Jack, to her irritation, was unfazed.

“No. No. No want caribou. No want cheetah. No want sloth. No care if slow is better for deep

“I'm a python!” came a sibilant-heavy shout from the next room.

“You is a tube sock full of whining!”

Some truly disturbing popping sounds came from the adjoining room, causing Judy to take a half-step back. “My back!”

“Ooh... De poor slithery Atlas.... You put the world on you shou-;“ the waitress cooed through the doorway, before bursting into mockery, “Oh no! You no have shoulders! Ahahahahahaha!”

A series of unsettlingly loud cracks rebounded off the walls and Judy couldn’t help but ask. “What’s wrong with him?” Jack smothered a chortle and leaned against the wall by the door, seemingly enjoying the floor show.

“Would you be wantin’ de whole list, honey?” the coney inquired, saucily.

“It's his imagination,” the bat stated.

“It's my sacroiliac!”

“Yeas. Yeas. You sacred-idiot-sack,” the accountant retorted, tossing the phone into a drawer. Turning to the rabbits, she continued. “When him was behbeh him was angriest shoelace. Now him just giant lazy noodle. Sleep on heated bed all day. Complain.”

“Serves me right for hiring from Croc’s List…”

“You best keep that forked tongue civil, messtah. Don't think I don't know you be stickin' it out at me behind me back!”

“It's how I see, you infuriating flying rodent!”

“Oh, yeas. You not see so good, but still stare at little white tail all de time...” Turning to Judy she continued, “De dirty perv like de white tails. Oh, yes. He need to keep his forked tongue away from de bunny tush. Lost his last masseuse dat way.”

“Do not be mockin’ de snake tongue!” the waitress cut in. “He good wit dat! Or so he say.”

Jack smoothly cut in. “He says a lot of things, but his sibilants still need work, don’t they Hiss?”

“Jack?”

“The very same.” He kicked off the wall and leaned into the doorframe. “I hear your back is bothering you, again.”

“Oh, dear boy… It’s atrocious. Please, for old time’s sake…”

“You know the drill, Hiss. Against the wall. I see you installed the bar, already.” So saying, Jack
motioned for Judy to follow him. She did, but with increasing levels of disconcertion.

Judy watched as the enormous snake dripped creakily off the huge daybed in the middle of the room and oozed jerkily over to the far wall. As the python settled his length against the wall, she took careful note of the ballet bar that had been installed. Under normal conditions, she would assume it was placed for mammals roughly tiger-sized. It became clear why the bar was so specifically placed as Jack placed his hind-paw on the snake’s back, just to the side of where she assumed the spine would be and stepped up. The bar was a little above his head and just about perfectly placed to act as a brace to push against, which he did.

A sound similar to walnut shells breaking emanated from where Jack’s foot pressed into the snake’s back, using the bar as a brace to push down against. Judy winced and then grew disquieted at the moan exhaled by Hiss.

“How’s that?”

“Jack, if you ever want to change professions, I’ll take you on full time.”

“Not happening, but I’ll bear it in mind. Now…” Jack moved a little further down the snake’s back and repeated the process, which quickly became a side-stepping progression. Be quickly instructed Judy in how to perform the massage and they made short work of two laps down the python’s body and back up. All the while, he was acutely aware of the coney’s envious glare and the bat’s considering look at Jack, but only from the waist down.

Once they were done their serpentine hike, both rabbits hopped down and a much more relaxed, more fluidly moving snake addressed them.

“Jack Savage, as much as I want to believe you’re here to visit, I know better. What’s happened?”

“Bad things Hiss and you might be caught up in it.” He preempted the snake’s assurance with a raised paw. “I know you aren’t knowingly involved. You aren’t suicidal.” Jack’s smirk took the sting out of the words, but not the meaning. “I need to know anything you can remember about any strange mammals who came through here roughly two weeks ago.”

“You mean any mammals who had scales under their skins?”

“More like mucous-producing, but yes.”

Now, Hiss was deadly serious. “Amphibians? Here?”

“An old case back from the grave. I’m looking to put it back there as soon as possible.”

Judy chimed in. “It’s possible they were better disguised than you’re used to.” Looking at Jack she commented, “We can only assume their techniques for deception have improved since your last run-in with them.”


“Nothing comes to mind that was obvious, but I do remember two stoats and a wolverine who came in to collect on a bet placed by a third party.”

“Is that unusual?” Judy queried.

“It happens, but not often,” Hiss replied. “Rare are the gamblers who trust a courier to not take an
extra transportation fee out of the winnings, on the quiet.”

“What did they say?” Jack was not trying to hide his eagerness.

“The only thing I caught was the three of them agreeing on how delightful it was to be back in a bayou, despite not being natives to the district. Not terribly unusual, I know, but they did complain about “home” being too dry and rough on their skin.”

“An odd complaint for three mammals who are generally unaffected by such issues.”

“Skin problems can affect every animal, but three with the same unusual complaint in a work group? Less so.”

Jack was musing aloud and it concerned Judy. “What are you thinking, Stripes?”

“I think Stoats are easy disguises for salamanders and a large lizard can pass for a wolverine with some training.”

“We have a lead?”

Jack’s grin was cold and predatory. “We have more than that, Hopps. We have a short list.”

Turning to his serpentine comrade, he said, ”You have my thanks, Hiss.” And he was moving.

Judy had just enough time to hear Hiss’ laughter and “Just like old times…” before she was running after him.

“Jack. Jack! What do you know?”

“Enough for a reassessment.”

She grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around on the pier. “Tell me!”

“Hopps, there are only so many places that fit what we’re looking for, now. We know he’s on an island. Now, we know it’s inhospitable to amphibians. If we take the number of archipelagos that have loose trading laws and apply those limiters, there are less than six. If we take a hunch and assume that it’d be a good place to grow the toxic plants the frog’s known for, it’s down to two. That’s narrow enough for a naval survey. We’re looking for a bio-weapons plant. There is no amount of camouflage that’ll conceal it.”

“So, you can find him?’

“I can find him. Get back to Nick and stay there. Keep him safe until I get back.”

Judy didn’t ask any more questions. She sprinted back to the waiting railcar and tapped her foot the whole way home and not just for her impatience. Irritation and concern were also very present in motivating her hind paw. In her enthusiasm at seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, she’d acted rashly. It wasn’t until she was trapped on the funicular car that she realized Jack hadn’t said how he’d handle it.

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