The City of Change

by Sable1456

Summary

Note: It's the final sequel to my "No Second Chances" and "Moonlight", my previous fanfictions on Nick Wilde, Judy Hopps and the city of Zootopia. I strongly recommend to check these out before this one :)

Since publishing of the Spencer Young's Manifesto, there have passed two years. The initial storm has quieted down, the trembles have ceased. But the life goes on and Nick and Judy can't complain for theirs to be mundane; before they even notice, a series of bizzare events pushes them into a crisis like none before.

Notes

The final book, after not-so-long pause! Like previously, I base to some extent on an official map of Zootopia, which can be found over here: https://icey1456.deviantart.com/art/Zootopia-Transit-Map-official-Zootopia-Artwork-655347962 and which I strongly recommend to see before reading. Most of streets mentioned really are out there.

I'll stick to the dates and hours that served me so well before, I hope you'll find them useful as well!
Ryan opened his eyes slowly and looked around carefully. Other kids in the room were fast asleep. He crawled out of his bed and reached for the bag and clothes hidden under the bed. He changed the pajamas for warm clothes he had prepared, made a fake shape of himself from spare pillows he had stolen the other day and hanged the small bag on his back. He opened the door to corridor and looked around. The orphanage was as silent as ever. The camera hanging in the corner could see him, were it even to work; Ryan had been sneaking out of his room in night for million times now and they never saw him. He made his way two levels lower, found one of the girls’ room and knocked on it very quietly. It opened almost immediately and grey bunny couple years younger than him slipped out of the room.

“Everyone sleeping?” He asked and she nodded.

“Mhm,” she confirmed shyly, watching the wolf young with worries.

“Alright then, time for me to go…” Ryan paused awkwardly and then, hugged her strongly. “Take care, Mia, don’t let those bullies get on your and Thane’s heads, will you? And tell your brother that if he lets anything happen to you, I’ll come back and kick his ass,” he threatened half-jokingly and she giggled.

“I will,” she promised. “Be careful, Ryan.”

“Hey, it’s just a short ride. I’ll find him in no time and I’ll send you a card once I do,” he promised and she nodded weakly. And then, he noticed a small package in her paw. She handed it to him.

“I made you some sandwiches with peanut butter. For the travel,” she explained and the young wolf smirked.

“You’re the best,” he couldn’t help, but smirk, as he accepted her small gift. “Alright, let’s go before someone spots us,” he suggested and Mia agreed with a nod. She opened the door gently and they walked inside. They passed by five beds with sleeping girls and one that was empty and Mia opened the window carefully. Ryan hugged her one more time, whispered a goodbye and then, threw his bag out and then followed it immediately. He landed in the grass, just by the hedge and heard the window closing on the other side. So that was it, not turning back now. Yong wolf found his bag in the darkness, threw it over the shoulder and ran through the darkness to the fence. He climbed it hurriedly and, sitting on its top, took a moment to watch the orphanage he hated so much; a dull, grey, four-level building that was his prison since he ever remembered. But now, his life was changing. He was taking it in his paws. And he was going to get Mia and Thane out too, any time soon.

With no more time for reflections, he jumped down on the pavement and walked the empty street casually. Half a mile further, he stopped at a bus station and waited there for a couple minutes until a bus came. The driver watched ten-year old wolf suspiciously, but said no word, while he took his seat and waited for it to reach his destination.
He found himself at the Sahara Square Railway Station almost half an hour later, left the bus without a word and then, found and boarded his train. Ryan located his empty compartment, closed the door and covered the windows with curtains. In private, he checked the contents of his bag; his wallet with little money he had left, some food, including the one Mia made him, a phone his father gave him just for this opportunity, a jacket, two favorite toys of his and a plushie Mia gave him earlier that day, so that she’d remember them. Finally, he found the two tickets he had; one for two mammals, him and his mother who was supposed to be driving with him and the other one for the remaining seats of the compartment, just to be sure that no one would be seated with him for whole night; anyone would easily figure out that he was travelling alone then and call the police. The wolf smiled to himself. His dad was so brilliant. He had everything figured out so well that the plan was doomed to success. Still, when the train departed from the station finally, Ryan sighed with relief. For a moment, his sight stopped at the sandwiches. In the excitement, he had barely eaten any dinner and now, he was getting really hungry. He ate most of them at once and then, sated as rarely, made a pillow out of his jacket and lied down on the compartment’s seats. He fell asleep in mere seconds.

During the journey, he was woken up only once, when the conductor checked his ticket and asked about his parents. He seemed to have bought Ryan’s story, as no one bothered him until they reached the Lake City. He got out at the Central Station in the morning. It was just as crowded as he could have only hoped for; Ryan almost immediately vanished among hundreds of mammals hurrying somewhere, each in their own direction. The young wolf, having lost anyone that could have remembered him from the train, went to a fast-food restaurant; there was no better place than it to wait out with no one asking you weird questions. Ryan order some ice cream and fries, waited a few minutes and sat by a table for one in the corner. He ate slowly, watching his phone carefully. It was almost 11 am. It should be ringing any second now, but it did not even once. It lasted like that till 2 pm. In meanwhile, he had changed the restaurants thrice, and watching the phone more and more nervously. Could have something happened? Did his father lose the number or did something delay him?

Ryan left another restaurant and made his way through the station yet again, when he caught a familiar picture on a newsagent’s just by him. He bought the newspaper with a photo he recognized and began to read the news from Zootopia. And then, his paw began to shiver, his eyes grew watery, the newspaper slipped out of his paws as he clenched his fists painfully and cried desperately. A police officer approached him carefully.

“Are you alright? Where are your parents?” She asked, but he only pushed her away and began to run desperately. The officer soon caught him and he struggled and whined and tried to bite, but she held him firmly. Finally, the young wolf gave up and, still whimpering, told her everything.

7.26 pm. Friday, September 4, 2020

Lady Jennifer Tompkins, also known as “The Duchess”, checked herself in the mirror with dissatisfaction. She was supposed to look wonderful in her dress and she had thought she did when she bought it few days earlier, but now, it was falling flat. She spun slowly to see herself
from every angle and sighed with disappointment.

“Everything alright?” Her sixteen-year-old daughter, Olivia, peeked in curiously. Lady Tompkins only sighed with frustration.

“How do I look?” She asked and her daughter watched her suspiciously.

“Um… good?” Olivia assured a bit doubtingly. For someone as confident as her mother questioning her looks was quite a rare view. “Real good, I’d say?”

“The bandage is stained,” she waved with frustration her left paw, which was covered in thick, white cloth. “I’ve changed it like three times and it’s still stained. And just look at this!” The wolf watched her chest furiously. “You can see all the bandages under it! It looks awful!” She huffed angrily. “Can you help me…” She was trying to reach the zip lock on her back.

“You’ll bleed everything, if you take them off and it will hurt a lot,” Olivia reminded her. The Lady took a deep, frustrated breath.

“And just look at that,” Duchess snarled angrily at the fresh scar covering her lip. “It’s just… how can I go anywhere like this??”

“Mom…”

“What’s going on?” Suddenly Alex, Olivia’s twin brother, appeared out of nowhere.

“Alex, to your room,” his mother ordered him angrily. The last person she needed was her sassy son.

“Hey, I’ve said nothing wrong yet!” He protested.

“Yet. I’m sparing you monthly grounding. It’s called prevention, boy,” she snarled, watching her reflection with frustration. Alex did not move, but eyed his sister carefully, longing for any sort of an explanation.

“Mom thinks her bandages and scar look bad enough that she shouldn’t be going for a date with Mr. Osbourne,” Olivia explained to him.

“Nonsense,” Alex frowned. “Do you remember how you got them, mom?” He asked and his mother turned at him, but said nothing. “By being a freaking badass. There was a rutting bear in our house trying to kill all of us and get these documents from you and you just jumped to his throat to protect us. That guy would smear any other wolf on the floor. But not you. You knocked that freak out and that was rutting awesome. Honestly, you should be walking with these bandages with pride, because they’re telling whole the world how freaking awesome you are and Mr. Osbourne totally knows it,” he told her firmly and Duchess chuckled, turning back at the mirror.

“I guess,” she smiled.

“You never worried about the eye. Why should such a tiny scratch bother you?” Olivia added.

“I’m just…” Lady Tompkins laughed nervously. “It’s my first date since ever.”

“And you’re gonna kill it!” Alex elbowed her and at this same moment, the doorbell rang.

“Speaking of which… Should I let him in?” Olivia suggested, but her mother shook her
head and left the wardrobe, snatching her purse in meanwhile.

“I’m already coming,” she assured and headed to the door. She unlocked the door and pressed the knob, opening it, when Alex stopped her again.

“OK, so here are the rules. You’re back before 11 pm. A minute later and you’re grounded. Come back sober. Take this, you never know what happens,” he dropped a small taser into her purse. “And remember, it’s just a first date, so no…” he paused under the pressure of her sight and laughed aloud. “Sorry, mom, I had to. Have fun!”

“I will. Good night, kids,” the Duchess replied and walked toward the gate with the gentle, confident smile she carried around usually. Her children watched Officer Osbourne greeting her by kissing her paw, opening the car door for her politely and then, sitting by driver’s seat and driving away with their mother. Olivia seemed rather concerned.

“It’s sad,” she said finally.

“What?”

“That he’s going to spend half of his monthly salary for the car he rented and the dinner he’s taking her for and still, he has not a chance,” Olivia explained.

“Not a chance?”

“With mom? Half the Happytown has been hitting up on her with no result.”

“Half the Happytown was hitting up on her money and influence. And he seems like the first guy to be genuinely hitting up on her,” Alex corrected her. “And besides, have you seen her this stressed before?” He asked and his sister dwelled on the question for quite a moment.

“I… I think not?” She admitted reluctantly. “Do you think she…” Olivia paused, but he just reached for his phone and started checking something.

“Do you think Marco Taylor’s is opened tomorrow?” He wondered.

“And what would you need from Marco?”

“A new suit, obviously. If my mother’s getting married, we’ve got to look perfect,” he explained and Olivia laughed aloud just at the thought. But gradually, the idea was appearing less and less funny. Could it be?

11.03 am, Monday, April 5, 2022

Anastasia Reynolds knocked on the door of the mayoral office. She heard an invitation and came inside to see the same old, good raccoon that had been sitting in there for last five years; mayor Charles Ketchikan.
“Oh, Anastasia! Please, take a seat!” He offered, greeting her with excitement. The wolf smiled weakly and sat in front of his desk.

“I’d like to congratulate you on the reelection, sir,” she shook his paw and the mayor chuckled.

“Oh, it gave me quite a stress! Those made up accusations just before voting nearly cost me the election! Shame on those newspapers, publishing anything they find! They’re lucky I’m not suing them,” the raccoon shook his head with disbelief. He didn’t know that it was Anastasia Reynolds who delivered the sources for these scandals with little to no time for mayor to defend himself.

“That’s how history is written, sir. One well-timed scandal can turn whole the election over,” Anastasia pointed out.

“But not today! Two percent! That’s how close I dodged the bullet this time!” He chuckled. “It’s good that city trusted me. I know Heveryn and I can’t even imagine what ruin he could bring. Have you ever met him?” The raccoon asked curiously.

“I don’t know him much,” lied Anastasia. Mayor couldn’t know that while she practically funded his campaign, she also looked over his rival’s fundings.

“Oh, he is a personification of everything that’s wrong with this city. Greedy, xenophobic, arrogant and awfully corruptible. But he’s also devilishly charming and charismatic, hence such popularity,” he explained. “Nothing good would come out of his election.”

“That’s why I supported you, sir,” Miss Reynolds pointed out and the mayor chuckled.

“For which I am eternally grateful! And speaking of gratefulness, I’ve studied your project of modernization of the climate engines of Tundratown and Sahara Square. I must say, I liked the idea and the numbers standing behind it, but after consulting the project with experts, I’m not sure if it’s as beneficial to the city as you’d hope it to be,” Ketchikan said with regrets.

“Why is that so?” Anastasia brought her voice to sound neutral, as she counted millions of dollars slipping past her.

“The refrigeration technology has been developing real fast in last decade and it certainly will, for another decade or two. The current systems are working amazingly given their age and should carry on for at least next two decades, even if we assume the worst climate changes possible. We can postpone this investment for at least a decade and receive a much better result for comparable price. I believe you understand,” Ketchikan explained.

“I can wait. It is just a decade,” Anastasia assured.

“And in meanwhile, the city will be modernizing the gas mains in entire Savannah Central next year. There’ve been numerous incidents of malfunctions and leakages. If you’re hoping for a contract, we’ll be announcing an open tender on June,” he suggested politely.

“I will take part in it. Thank you very much,” the young wolf treated him to the most charming of smiles and Ketchikan returned it. He then sighed pushed his chair away from the desk, jumped off it and stood by the window. Anastasia followed him.

“Wonderful view, isn’t it? Tell me, girl, what do you see?” He pleased and she hesitated for a moment.
“The city. Old good Zootopia, same as ever,” she replied politely, but he chuckled and shook his head.

“The buildings might be the same, dear Anastasia, but this is the city of change. Everything’s changing. The balance is shifting. It has been since ever I have been elected and, sadly to admit, I rarely had much to do with it. Do you know who did instead?” Asked the mayor and his guess shook her head.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” Anastasia replied.

“Detectives Judy Hopps and Nicholas Wilde. Whenever there’s been an earth-shaking event in last five years, these two played a major role in it. It’s amusing, isn’t it? How two officers have more to say in some cases than the mayor himself.”

“I’m afraid that’s the way of life, sir,” Miss Reynolds pointed out politely and the mayor nodded.

“Indeed it is, young lady, and you should remember it. We may be all high and mighty, looking down on the city like Lionheart or Bellwether used to be and then, someone small and seemingly meaningless like Hopps or Wilde will come around and bring out all the bad things we have done. That’s simply the way of life.”

“Then what to do about it?” Anastasia asked.

“Do you know why Lady Tompkins has outlived Mr. Thunders, metaphorically at least?”

“No, sir,” Anastasia shook her head.

“Because most of her actions served the greater good with the least harm to the inviduals, quite oppositely to him. She has few enemies among the people…” The mayor eyed Anastasia carefully. “And someone who serves their people should not be destroyed by the great ones of the world unless she fails,” he said and Miss Reynolds shivered. Was it a warning? Ketchikan surely knew how she hated the Duchess, how she had been trying to make her life harder in last two years.

“I understand, sir,” Anastasia replied, barely containing the fury. “I should be going.”

“It’s been pleasure to host you, Anastasia. Visit me more often, could you?” Mayor pleased.

“I will,” Anastasia lied with a polite smile. She shook mayor’s paw, congratulated him on the reelection yet again and left his office. To say that she was angry, would be an understatement. Mayor Ketchikan could have been an interesting mammal and an excellent partner for future businesses. But Anastasia Reynolds didn’t need a partner or any help with her businesses. What she needed was a pawn at mayoral office, a chance for whom she lost for another five years.

“Oh, well. Father had what I have and he got along just fine. I can handle it on my own,” she muttered to herself with the plan already crafting in her head.
A grey wolf in his mid-twenties knocked on the door of orphanage’s director. Upon invitation, he pressed the doorknob and stepped inside to see an old, quite chubby honey badger. She smiled upon a familiar face, even if her smile was a rather bitter one.

“Ah, James. Please, sit down,” she encouraged him and the young wolf took his seat.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Ubik.”

“You’re here to see the boy, aren’t you? They’re on a trip today…”

“I know, I know. A lot has changed around here,” James looked around and she nodded.

“Reynolds Reparation Fund at its finest. They’re decent mammals in the end, these Reynolds,” admitted the director. “About the boy, I’ve consulted your case again and…” She paused and he already knew what she was about to say.

“Rejected,” he stated bitterly.

“It’s not that simple, James. You have some criminal past. You live in a small flat, earn just enough to live on your own… No one is going to give you the boy, even if it would be the right thing to do,” she explained helplessly and saw him clenching his fists in fury.

“He’s my family! I have my own house! Why can’t I just…” He raised up and yelled at her and then, dropped back on the chair helplessly.

“If you want to take him, you need more money, James.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? Boss will give me no raise. No one will hire a guy with my past and give him more money than he does. Loan doesn’t solve a damn thing. Where am I supposed to take money from, Reynolds Fund?!”

“Technically…”

“I have no basis, Mrs. Ubik. And besides, guys smarter than me tried to hustle them, none have succeeded,” he reminded her and she hesitated, considering some idea deeply.

“Have you ever considered Duchess, boy? No offence, but she’s looking for your kind of…”

“It’s because of Duchess and her Spencer Young, that my brother is dead,” James replied scornfully, mad with just the idea. “I will not ever work for her.”

“It’s just a rumor and she could solve your…”

“I don’t believe that this fox pulled that thing off on his own. There’s no freaking way he gathered these guys, waltzed into Reynolds residence and murdered him just like that! I don’t believe that!”

“I understand. I’m sorry, James, but I can’t help you and you need to find someone that can. If not Duchess, then…”

“I’ll figure something out. Thank you, Mrs. Ubik,” he stood from his chair and shook her
“Just don’t do anything stupid, boy.”

“I’ll try not to,” he promised, leaving her office. As he was back on the street and on his way home, he searched the contact list for a number he received recently from an old friend. He dialed it.

“State your name and business,” ordered a female voice.

“My name is James Greymane and I have this number from our common friend, Terence Okami. From what he mentioned, I might be just the guy you are looking for.”

“We’ll see about it. Come to my office tomorrow at 3 pm. Not a minute later,” she ordered.

“Of course, ma’am,” he promised and then, she hung up. James smirked. His fate was on its turn, hopefully for much, much better.

2.54 pm, Friday, May 8, 2022

“So…” Chief Bogo coughed, watching carefully the guest he was having in his office; a young, tall and slim female grey wolf, who could pass for a fashion model, rather than an actual police officer, even if she was dressed in her uniform. There was this sort of disturbing self-confidence, not to say vanity, glowing in her green eyes. “Officer Isabelle Alvarez. You come to us from Tundratown ZPD… You’ve served under Blizzard for a couple of years, haven’t you?” He noticed.

“I did. Is it a problem, sir?” she replied with the most charming voice Bogo might have ever heard, as she adjusted herself in a seat. Bogo thought at first, as funny as it would be, that she was trying to seduce him or something, but he now figured that looking so dazzlingly dashing simply was natural to her.

“No, of course, not. I’ve seen that you had some very good results under him, but I couldn’t fail to notice that your performance reports from the last two years have been much, much worse,” he pointed out carefully.

“This is why Chief suggested moving me here. Alvarez wolves in ZPD were always… associated with Blizzard and Thunders. With the storm which Spencer Young raised, my two cousins and uncle were fired as the part of the corrupted Blizzard’s old guard and I was getting all sorts of the wrong attention.”

“You were not involved in any of these schemes,” Bogo noticed politely.

“You remember those times well, Chief. A witch hunt, that’s what it was. ZPD cut itself away from everyone connected with Blizzard. Many officers lost their jobs only because they
knew him too well. Plenty others were moved around the town, just to be gone from their home district. If what we’ve done to Wilde was wrong, then so was what you’ve done to us,” Officer Alvarez blamed him.

“We were very careful in our accusations, Officer. No one without guilt was punished,” Bogo stated firmly and she wanted to protest, but stopped under pressure of his sight. “After the backlash Wilde faced, we made sure for the thing to not repeat. I understand the frustration of yours, given how many friends of yours were fired, but you should realize this was the right thing to do. Their deeds may have been of old, but they should always be punishable,” he told her. Officer Alvarez hesitated, but then, took a deep breath and surrendered.

“I understand, sir. I suppose you’re right,” she admitted.

“I know it’s hard to admit it, given that you knew them well and not from the side Spencer Young revealed,” Bogo said and she seemed to lighten up a bit. “I will gladly welcome you in my Precinct, Officer. It certainly would be a shame for such a talent to wither and it certainly would, back in Tundratown.”

“Like a flower in the snow, sir,” she pointed out and Bogo smirked. Like a flower... the analogy surely fit her perfectly.

“One of my detectives will be retiring in a few days. I’ll assign you to his partner. He’s younger than you and higher in rank, but he is a decent wolf. You should get along,” Bogo explained.

“Of course, sir. When do I start?” She asked rather excitedly.

“We’ll take care of the paperwork over the weekend and I am expecting you on Monday. The roll call’s at 8.30, you’ll be introduced to your new partner. That would be all for today.”

“Of course, sir,” Officer Isabelle Alvarez raised herself from her chair. She saluted the Chief and left his office. Barely had the door closed behind her, his terminal rang.

“Yes, Clawhauser?”

“Sir, I was supposed to remind you about the analyst you are supposed to hire,” the cheetah said.

“Oh, of course. Thank you, Clawhauser,” Bogo hung up and found the couple of CVs he had lying somewhere on the desk. He leafed through them, chose several of them and threw the rest into a trash bin, wondering why he hadn’t done it before; the sort of mammals that were sometimes applying to this sort of jobs was ridiculous. From the few that made it through the basic selection, Bogo chose one and called the number attached.

“Mr. August Fares? Chief Bogo here.”

“Oh, so you did call back! How can I help, sir?”

“You’ve made really good expression on me during our previous meeting. Are you still interested in the position of the ZPD analyst, sir?” Chief asked.

“But of course! When could I start?” August Fares seemed really excited about whole the thing.

“Please come on Monday at 8.30 to the roll call. One of the officers will walk you around
the station and we’ll complete the formalities then.

“Yes sir! I’m looking forward to employing my skills for the good of the city, sir!” He exclaimed enthusiastically.

“So am I, Mr. Fares. Until Monday,” Chief Bogo said, a bit disturbed with this sort of fervor. The last time he had someone like this, she stirred the city like no one and had two mayors arrested in three months. Did he really need this again?

“Yes sir! Until Monday!” August Fares assured, probably even saluting to the phone. His enthusiasm really was disturbing. Chief Bogo sighed deeply as he hung up. Just another day, two new faces in his Precinct. Life goes on.
7.54 am, Monday, May 11, 2022

As he had been doing on almost every working day for last few years, Nick parked his car by the street just opposite to Judy’s flat and watched her running out, jumping down last couple stairs, crossing the street carefully and then, joining him at the passenger’s seat and fastening her seatbelt.

“Good morning,” he greeted her, as Judy reached for her coffee, which was already waiting. Nick used to be buying those from a cafeteria just by his house, but recently, he started trying to brew his own, milling the beans, brewing her and spicing and then bringing in thermo-isolating cups. Some of the first creations were failures, but he quickly learnt on those and now, he only brought the masterpieces like this one, spiced perfectly with cinnamon and something she did not recognize.

“Cardamon,” he said, as if reading her mind, “I hoped you’d like it.”

“You’ve got to use it more often, it’s amazing,” she assured, as he joined the traffic and the two were on their usual way to ZPD. Judy glanced at Nick, focused on the road. For just the six years they knew each other, he changed very, very much, both physically and mentally. But with all the things that changed, one did not; they. They were just what they had become at the end of Nighthowler case; the two best friends willing to put their lives on the line for one another. Many times were the two of them tested, always have they come on top. Judy was really proud of the two of them and how far they went, but recently, she also started feeling some sort of dissatisfaction. As if she was missing something she couldn’t put a paw on. Something that she could understand better and better every time she saw Max and Kaylee and yet, was afraid to name it…

“Everything alright, Carrots?” Nick asked with concern.

“Um, yes. I think so,” she assured. “I just phased out for a moment,” she explained with a nervous chuckle and he shrugged. They continued the ride in pleasant silence interrupted by seldom car honks and made it to the station couple minutes before the roll call. Nick went to their cubicle to find a pendrive that he was supposed to return to Andersen, while Judy greeted with Clawhauser.

“Hi, Benji!” She waved him.

“Oh, Judy! Have you seen a new officer?” The chubby cheetah asked between the bites of
a donut. Bunny’s ears perked up.

“A new officer? Is it this time of the year already?” Judy doubted. She’d certainly have heard of the betting pool, wouldn’t she?

“Yeah, Isabelle Alvarez. She was transferred from Tundratown and what a beauty…” Clawhauser said dreamily. “They say her new Chief didn’t like her and that’s why she moved,” he added quickly and Judy nodded. She remembered the surname; several Alvarezes were fired after Spencer Young’s revelations, as they played vital roles in some of Chief Blizzard’s schemes.

“We’ll be getting along much better, I hope,” Judy assured with a confident smile. Instead of judging by names, she started with an assumption that a new face meant a new possible friend.

“She seemed nice,” cheetah assured. Judy was about to say something, when she noticed someone approaching the desk she was standing by. It was a rabbit, about her age. While he was not too tall and of average built, he looked rather handsome. His fur was just as grey as Judy’s, but eyes dark brown. He was dressed in beige slacks with black belt and a short-sleeved checked blue shirt, on his shoulder was hanging a laptop bag. The buck was looking around the place curiously, as approaching the reception desk.

“Can we help you?” Judy offered. The rabbit stopped and watched her, completely speechless for a couple seconds. As Hopps giggled, he only blushed and cleared his throat quietly.

“I… Chief Bogo said that I was supposed to come to the roll call today. I’m… My name’s August Fares. I’m the new ZPD analyst,” he introduced himself, offering a paw to Judy. She shook it looking him in the eyes; he had a firm, but not too strong grip and really nice smile.

“Detective Judy Hopps, pleased to meet you. And this is Officer Clawhauser,” she introduced her co-worker and the two exchanged pleasantries. “I think I know your brother, Timothy,” she pointed out.


“If you’re going for the roll call, I can show you the way,” Judy assured and glanced at the clock. “And I think it’s about the time. Come on,” she guided him and August followed her immediately.

“So, um… you’re Detective Hopps? That Detective Hopps?” He asked, as if disbelieving his own luck. Judy couldn’t help but to bring herself to think of him as cute.

“Do I not look like her?” She teased him.

“No, I just… um…” August paused, embarrassed and then, he swelled his chest high and spoke with much deeper voice. “Aren’t you a little short for a police officer?” He asked and Judy giggled. Both a movie reference and Bogo’s parody just on point.

“I guess I am,” she admitted. “By the way, call me Judy.”

“And I’m August. Once again, pleased to meet you,” he assured.

“And once again, so am I,” Judy giggled. “You’re funny, I bet Nick will like you. My partner, Nick Wilde,” she clarified, seeing that he did not recognize the name at first.

“Of course, famous Detective Wilde. I hope he will, it’d be a real honor to get along with
heroes like you,” August assured. Judy wanted to disregard this unnecessary flattery, when she realized that he really held them in such high esteem.

“I’m looking forward to working with you as well,” she assured and pull the door next to her. “We’re here. Come on,” she invited him and he walked inside a bit uncertainly. He stepped among all the wolves, lions, bears, rhinos and elephants a bit intimidated, but he was trying to pretend he was not and that he was not noticing all the attention he was being given. Judy pointed him one of the free chairs in the first row while she sat on the opposite side with Nick. Just at that moment, Bogo stepped in. He watched all the officers gathered and noticed that someone was missing.

“Where is Reynolds?”

“Which one?” Wilde asked sassily and some mammals chuckled.

“Most likely in the Rabbit Hole, sir,” guessed Wolford.

“Wilde, go after both of them. And remind them that they can flirt all they want after working hours,” the Chief ordered and fox jumped down his seat. He walked over to the door, opened it, looked out and then, stepped aside and let both Max and Kaylee in.

“Fast as the lightning, sir!” Wilde joked. The wolf and rabbit apologized for being late, took their seats and the Chief continued.

“So, first things first, we will be soon parting with one of our old friends,” Bogo started. “Detective Victor Barnes will be retiring and he’ll move to Zootopia Police Academy in order to educate the new recruits in there. Victor has been with us for nearly thirty years now, for the better and for the worse. Among his many cases, he dismantled Firebat’s gang and helped us go through the crisis after arresting mayor Dawn Bellwether. Congratulations, Victor, it has been an honor to work with you,” Bogo said and everyone began to clap. The old sheep lifted himself from his chair and cleared his throat.

“Thank you. It’s been an honor to work with you, guys. For anyone that wants to celebrate with me one last time, we’ll be meeting on Saturday evening in Tom’s bar, around 7 pm,” he announced and everyone cheered joyfully. Whole the station was going to come, it seemed. With a slight smirk, Barnes sat down, muttered something to his partner, Max Reynolds, and then, Chief continued.

“From the other news, earlier on Saturday, there will be held the annual Great Parade and, traditionally, it will be responsibility of Precinct 1 to monitor the event. Starting today, you will be assigned to tasks of securing the parade. Detective Barnes will be in charge of whole the operation…” The clapping Nick incited abrupted throughout the room and Bogo waited it out with patience and amusement, even clapped himself a bit. He was parting with an old friend, after all. “…while Technical Officer Reynolds will select two TOs more and handle the technical side.”

“Understood, sir,” Kaylee saluted.

“Now, the officers selected for the securing the parade are…” Bogo began to read a long list, naming almost all of the officers in the room. He then proceeded to the last news of the day.

“We also have some new faces here with us. The first addition to the force is Officer Isabelle Alvarez from Tundratown ZPD,” Bogo introduced her and a young female wolf stood up and greeted everyone. “She will be a new partner to Detective Max Reynolds, taking place after Detective Barnes,” Bogo added and Alvarez found the wolf with sight and smiled to him
beautifully and waved. Max replied with a polite smile, while his wife monitored Alvarez carefully, but said nothing. “The second mammal joining us is our new analyst, Mr. August Fares,” introduced him Bogo and the rabbit stood on his chair, as if it helped anyone see him better. Still, everyone noticed that he was the only one dressed in the civvies.

“Hi, everyone. Like Chief Bogo said, I am an analyst, specializing in statistical analysis, probability and pattern seeking. I’ll be honored to work with you,” August introduced himself and sat down.

“Mr. Fares is a civilian worker of ZPD. Technical Officer Reynolds will show him around the place today,” added Bogo. “Alright, everyone knows their tasks. To your jobs, men,” the Chief ordered, thus finishing the roll call. Everyone raised from their seats and Barnes gave away couple initial orders. Nick and Judy exchanged pleasantries with couple friends and went to their box; they still had a paperwork to fill before they’d help others with the parade. Kaylee whispered something to Max and she walked over to August Fares in order to walk him around the place, while Isabelle Alvarez walked over to her new partner.

“I’m Max,” he offered a paw.

“Isabelle, friends call me Belle,” she replied with a gentle, encharming smile.

“I’ll stick with Isa, could I?” Max asked instead, sort of throwing her off.

“Um…sure, suit yourself,” she agreed smiling.

“Come on, I’ll show you our box,” the wolf suggested and guided her around the station. He found their box and shown her an empty desk, by which she was going to work starting today.

“Detective Barnes was your previous partner, right?” She guessed.

“Mhm. I really liked the guy. A bit of boor, but a lovable one,” he chuckled. “Speaking of whom… we probably should be going to help him out with the thing, just let me take…” Max searched for something in his drawers and cursed under his breath. “Kaylee must have it. Let’s go to the Rabbit Hole, should we?”

“The Rabbit Hole?” Isabelle asked, slightly confused.

“Technical Officers’ section. It’s underground and Kaylee rules around the place so… A Rabbit Hole,” Max explained with a chuckle.

“Oh,” Isabelle replied only and they walked down to TOs offices. On their way there, she was watching the wolf very carefully, her sight stopping for quite a moment at his long, puffy tail. She raised her sight only when they came inside the offices and Max found Kaylee’s desk. She was discussing something with today’s second newbie, August Fares.

“So, a quick introduction, everyone. Kaylee, this is my new partner, Isabelle. Isabelle, this is my wife, Kaylee,” Max introduced them to one another and the wolf watched bunny skeptically.

“Your… wife?” She asked, a bit dumbstruck.

“Any problem with that?” Kaylee sounded rather defensive, but ready to bite.

“No, of course not,” assured Isabelle coldly. For a moment, two ladies were electrifying one another with sight in silence.
“So… I’m August, pleased to meet you!” August Fares intervened, offering his paw to Max and the wolf shook it gladly.

“Good to meet you as well. Has Kaylee shown you around?” Max asked.

“We’ve just started,” August said.

“Yeah, still plenty to see and I need to prepare his station and install his software. I’ve got to ask for couple licenses, it might take couple days,” Kaylee added. “Did something happen, sweetheart?” She asked her husband.

“The pendrive,” he explained with a smile.

“Oh, of course, there you go,” she handed him a pendrive she had in her pocket. “Going with Barnes now?”

“Isa, actually,” Max narrowed at her partner, as she stood silently. Kaylee didn’t pay her even a sight.

“Of course. Have fun. And remember, today at 5 pm,” she stood on fingers and he leaned toward her and they kissed. Max waved with head at his new partner and Isabelle followed him, eyeing Kaylee for a moment. Both August and Kaylee guided them with their sights until the two of them left the room. August glanced at Kaylee carefully.

“Um… she’s kinda… hitting on your husband? Even though she knows he’s married?” He stuttered with disbelief.

“Yes, she is,” Kaylee agreed with disgust, but then she smirked. “She’s no threat though, but she might be learning it the hard way,” she said with amusement.

“Really? I mean… she’s kinda hot,” August pointed out carefully.

“She is. Still, she’ll be disappointed. And if she pushes too hard…” Kaylee’s fist clenched slowly. “I’ll make that Is-a-Belle into a Was-a-Belle,” she concluded and Fares chuckled, even if quite certain that she really meant it. And as much as she tried to hide it, he saw how much Isabelle Alvarez disturbed her subconsciously.

“Hopefully it does not come to it,” he said. “Where did we stop?”

“Oh, the computer station. Like I said, you need to run through this and configure your account,” she handed him several pages of instructions. The requested licenses should be there in couple weeks. Now, I guess I’m supposed to walk you around the station, but before that…” Kaylee pointed at August’s bag. “Show me what you’ve got.”

“Oh, this… I brought my own, since I thought it could come in handy…” He put the bag on his desk just by the monitor and started unzipping it. “But I guess I won’t be allowed to run any police analyses on it?”

“None containing sensitive…” Kaylee paused, staring at his laptop. “O. M. G. Is that…”

“Yup, Dragon, the Gaming Series,” he opened it up and turned on. “The…”

“The G93?! What the hell?! Where did you get it?! It costs like…” Kaylee yelled with excitement, as she watched the system logo flash by and login screen appearing. The bunny was staring at an elegant, black laptop with monstrous components inside and some insane performance
possibilities. August put in the password and the screen switched pleasantly quickly to a neat desktop with some nerdy wallpaper. The bunny checked the icons he had at the desktop.

“You don’t have licenses for all of these, do you?” She asked skeptically and he blushed slightly.

“Oh well, the student license…”

“The pirate license, you mean. You do have nerve to buy such an expensive thing just to…”

“And I actually won the laptop. I’d never afford the thing.” August added. “A math competition. Long story, got kinda lucky, scored the main prize,” he explained.

“That must have been some awesome competition,” she said.

“Prizes were good. So, um… yeah, it runs fine.”

“What games?”

“Huh?”

“What do you play?” Kaylee wanted to know.

“Oh, well, some nerdy stuff…”

“We’re all nerds in this room, August. Just different sorts of,” Kaylee reassured him and couple voices from behind other desks agreed with her.

“So, Digital Card Games, board games, some RTS…” He hesitated and seeing no reaction of hers, continued. “FPS occasionally?” Now her ears perked up. “I mean, just the casual things like Wastelands…”

“You’ve got Wastelands on this?” Kaylee asked excitedly.

“Well… Both first and second. I wanted to started the second, but I had no buddies to play with…” he paused seeing Kaylee’s smirk. “Or do I?”

“Now you do. Me, my sweetheart and Mike… Mike, wave for us, could you?! We’ve got a fourth player, I think!” Kaylee yelled and they saw a pig’s paw waving with an enthusiastic shout. “We were looking for a fourth teammate. Are you in?” She offered and August nodded eagerly.

“Sure thing,” he turned the game on and logged in. “Your nick?”

“WolfSeeker,” smirked the bunny. August sent her an invitation, chuckling at the nickname. “Alright, switch it off, we’re at the work here. I’m supposed to walk you around the station, am I not?” Kaylee pointed out and August switched the laptop off.

“No one will steal it here, will they?” He joked.

“If someone does, you’ll have your first case,” Kaylee smirked. “Come on,” the brown bunny took him around the station, rather empty at the time, introducing him to the couple officers that were there here now, but didn’t have a chance to meet him before. She showed him everything that he should know, including which coffee automats to avoid and where worked that one bears that disliked the rabbits. When they passed by Nick and Judy’s box, one of the few non-empty
ones, she caught the way August watched Hopps.

“Don’t,” she warned.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t try to hit on her.”

“Is Detective Wilde her boyfriend?” August asked and Kaylee sighed.

“Well, theoretically not, but…” She was missing the right words. “It’s complicated. Trust me, you don’t want to waltz into it,” she explained but realized how unconvinced August remained. “I mean, if you really have to, then you can try, but someone will only get hurt.”

“I can always try,” August noticed enthusiastically, as they passed by. Kaylee shook her head.

“I warned you,” was all that she said, as they continued the tour. They concluded it at the shooting range, where August noticed that Kaylee was carrying a dart gun with her.

“Can you shoot well?” He asked curiously and she chuckled. She drew her gun, aimed at the target without really looking and pressed the trigger with a confident smirk.

“Oh, I’m a natural,” she assured and turned at the board; she scored merely six points. “Let’s try it again. I’m a natural,” she repeated and pressed the trigger again. This time, she scored a blind nine and nodded with satisfaction.

“Wow,” he said and she just shrugged.

“I play FPS a lot,” she joked. “So, I wonder, what a guy like you is doing in here?”

“Huh?”

“Young, intelligent, after some decent studies, I bet. A civilian, to that, skipping the Academy and coming straight here. And also, no offense, a rabbit,” she explained.

“Actually, I wanted to go to some usual white-collar job, but after the events two years ago… I figured police could need a guy like me. Someone that sees patterns and will not miss an intrigue, even well concealed,” August explained. “And you?”

“Long story short, I had an abusive, sociopathic friend of old push me into this. I meant to quit quickly at first… but I found my new family in here and I stayed,” Kaylee explained. “It might seem harsh at first… I mean not for you, you’ve got some nicest greeting from Bogo I have ever seen, but anyway, this place grows on you quick. Some of us may be jackasses, but we’re the kind of jackasses you can bet your life on,” she assured.

“Good to know. By the way, did I get it right that you’re in charge of Precinct’s Technical Officers?” August asked, rather impressed with such a quick promotion.

“Um… yes. We have some very young team nowadays, since the most experienced ones retired all at once just few months ago. Chief needed to choose someone for the head of the section… and everyone suggested it should be me,” she explained rather shyly.

“That’s cool.”

“I guess. Alright, let’s go back to the Rabbit Hole. You’ve got to take care of your
computer…” Kaylee glanced at the target with two darts sticking out of it. “And I’ll need to write a report on the darts I’ve just spent,” she explained awkwardly and August laughed with amusement.

11.23 am, Monday, May 11, 2022

Judy Hopps checked couple details of the case on the computer and then, continued to fill another form, this time the one on spending the several darts she had used against the perps she and Nick had arrested couple days earlier. As computerized as ZPD could be these days, an average Detective produced a tremendous amounts of paperwork. As Judy continued to scribble on her paper, she glanced at her partner’s empty seat and then, heard somebody’s steps.

“Nick, could you…” She turned in her seat to see not Wilde, but August Fares, smiling nicely.

“Hi,” he leaned against box’s wall with shoulder.

“Hi, August. Did something happen?” Judy asked.

“Oh, I just wanted to thank you for showing me a way to the roll call and I figured…” He paused and gulped nervously. “Would you like me to take you out for a dinner?” He offered shyly. Judy hesitated, but very shortly. August seemed like a decent buck, why not to give him a chance?

“Sure, when?”

“How about Thursday evening?” Offered August.

“She’s busy on the Thursday evening.” Nick Wilde appeared out of thin air right behind his back. August scare-jumped, turning away to see the fox, grinning toothily.

“So, um…”

“And on Friday, we’re going to celebrate Barnes’ retirement. You should be there too,” the fox passed by him and took his seat. Instead of sitting down to his work, Wilde kept giving him a toothy smile, which was only stressing poor August even more.

“Don’t you have something to do, Nick?” Judy huffed at her partner angrily.

“Yes, writing the report. Really, don’t mind me,” he assured reaching for his pen, but still watching August Fares with a most disturbing grin.

“So…” August coughed, trying to collect the remains of his confidence.

“Nick, could you go and buy me a coffee?” Judy ordered harshly. The fox glanced at her and recognized that she really was pissed off. He shrugged and lifted himself from his chair.

“If you’re asking so nicely…” He lifted himself from his chair and left the box with Judy’s annoyed sight guiding him away. “Pleased to meet you,” Nick patted August on the shoulder and was gone. Judy sighed with frustration and turned at Fares, smiling kindly.
“So...” She started.

“How about Monday evening?” He proposed.

“Cool. Sounds cool.”

“7 pm?”

“Mhm,” she nodded.

“OK, I’ll pick you up from your house. We’ll go to a restaurant... but the rest shall be a surprise,” he smiled mysteriously.

“Sounds great,” Judy assured.

“Alright, take care!” He exclaimed joyously and headed back to his office, when he turned back suddenly. “Oh, I’d probably need your number. And an address,” he said with embarrassment. Judy giggled and they exchanged their numbers quickly. Just after August went back to his office, Nick came back with a coffee he put on Judy’s desk.

“There you go,” he snickered and sat down by his desk, focusing back on his work. Judy eyed him slowly and then, sighed with frustration.

“Sometimes, you’re just... mean, you know?” She blamed him.

“Come on, did you see his face?” Nick chuckled, still treating it all like a good joke. Or was it just a mask of his?

“That’s exactly what I mean,” she stated, not amused one bit.

“Don’t you remember how your last date ended? Statistically speaking...”

“Nick, please,” she interrupted him, not in the mood.

“Never tell me the odds?” He chuckled, but she said nothing. He had a point; statistically speaking, the chance of that date being a disaster was terrifyingly high, but she really didn’t like to be reminded of it. “OK, never mind me and my warnings, then,” Nick shrugged carelessly and for a moment, they continued to work in silence.

“Mind if I drop in today? I might have found something about our side project,” Judy said after a while.

“You’re always welcome, Carrots,” Nick assured. “Anything big?”

“Sketchy, for sure. Big? It’s really hard to say,” she explained. The fox nodded and they continued to work in silence. Judy glanced back at Nick, focused as he was filling the papers. Was it just her or was something way off about him?

Chapter End Notes

So... I hope you won’t mind if the book starts really slow (I think I’m repeating myself, am I not?). And that it might feel more about Kaylee and Max than Nick and Judy at
first. Don't worry, we'll get some decent WildeHopps soon :D
The side project

Chapter Summary

Beyond work, we've all got life. We all have our little, innocent side projects.

1.25 pm, Monday, May 11, 2022

Since the Grand Parade was taking place on Saturday, not all officers assigned needed to assist the preparations immediately. Detective Barnes had delegated some of them to perform other tasks and so, Detective Max Reynolds and Officer Isabelle Alvarez were driving through the city in silence with him behind the wheel and her pretending to play with her phone while watching him constantly. Max could see it and it rather amused him, but he did not comment on the thing. He liked Isabelle immediately, as she struck him as a cheerful, positive girl.

“So… Are you in ZPD for long?” She wondered.

“It’ll be four years on June. And you?” Max asked.

“Almost six now. Why didn’t you go to Tundratown, but here? You’d have plenty friends around there. And we’d have met earlier,” she pointed out half-jokingly.

“All dad’s friends would look over me, that’s why. I needed some freedom,” Reynolds smirked. “But honestly, it was mostly about a girl. Whole this ZPD thing was, at first.”

“Kaylee?” She guessed, but he shook her head.

“No, old times. And you? Why did you join the force?” He turned at her and she shrugged with a giggle.

“My uncle was here, my cousins were here, what else was I supposed to do? I wanted to be a model at first, but ended up in here anyways,” she giggled and Max had to give it to her, that she had most bewitching laugh. “So… are you married for long?” She changed the subject suddenly.

“We’ll have our first anniversary on Friday,” he said proudly.

“Yeah, thought so,” she muttered and Max watched her carefully, as they stopped at the traffic lights.

“Why?” He asked a bit tensely.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” she shrugged it off, only intriguing Max even more.

“I’m open to critique, Isa,” he assured and started driving slowly again as the lights changed.
“It’s just…” Isabelle hesitated. “I’m sorry, I really don’t mean it in a bad way, you seem like a nice guy, but I went through this same thing and… are you sure that she’s treating you right?” She asked shyly.

“I… excuse me?” Max jerked his head, more amused than offended, and she turned away with embarrassment.

“I mean… I’ve been through this before. Two years ago, I met a guy. He was the sweetest of his kind, released himself from clutches from his poor, abusive family. Living him felt like a fairy tale at first. But then… he wanted to control me, just like his parents controlled him. He read my texts, he kept checking who I was meeting with and monitored every guy that I’ve ever talked to. Before I even noticed, he closed me away from everyone, but himself and… I’ve had some hard time breaking myself free,” Isabelle confessed.

“I’m sorry,” Max said with pity. “And thank you for your care, but Kaylee’s not like this,” he promised with a confident smile. “She did have some messed up family, but she’s better than that.”

“Well, good for you,” Alvarez replied completely unconvinced and it stung Max painfully. Could Kaylee really be like this? No, there was no way. Before ZPD, there always was someone keeping her away from the world, forcing her to suffer lonely. Max refused to believe that she could ever do this same to anyone and certainly not to her own husband.

“I bet you’ll find some decent guy in time,” he assured, but she just shrugged.

“I’m not really looking for anyone for the time being. I mean, if some wonderful guy fell into my paws…” she eyed him subtly, but Max, as ignorant to subtle hints as always, did not even notice it. “…I guess I’d try and take my chance.”

“And that’s the right attitude,” he congratulated her. “There are some decent single wolves at our station. And not only wolves, if it suits you.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Isabelle agreed, but again, he didn’t seem to take it as a personal compliment, so she just coughed a little awkwardly. She tried to say something more, when radio spoke.

"Reynolds, Alvarez, we’ve had a robbery at liquor store “You can drink anything!” at Flock Street 8 just few minutes ago. Go and check it," Barnes ordered them.

“Got it,” Max confirmed and Isabelle switched the siren on. “You can drink anything. That’s a catchy name,” he noticed with a smirk.

“Reynolds, Alvarez, we’ve had a robbery at liquor store “You can drink anything!” at Flock Street 8 just few minutes ago. Go and check it,” Barnes ordered them.

“Got it,” Max confirmed and Isabelle switched the siren on. “You can drink anything. That’s a catchy name,” he noticed with a smirk.

“I think we’ve had couple mayors winning with the slogan,” she agreed half-jokingly as she watched Max going from 25 to 60 mph in mere seconds, while overtaking several cars without hesitation and with a decent safety margin. She could clearly sense that Max was some skilled driver, but decided not to comment on it as long as they were speeding through the town. They arrived to the place in a minute or two and stopped right before the store. Max and Isabelle secured the place, stopped passersby from coming inside with a police tape and, after the cashier unlocked the door, looked inside. It was rather small, but filled with bottles of all kinds and sizes from the floor to the ceiling. The glassed door was cracked and just at the entrance, there lied a broken bottle of some expensive alcohol. The cashier, a young gazelle, was standing in front of them, trying not to laugh. Isabelle and Max eyed at each other. Stress reaction?

“Good afternoon. I am Detective Reynolds and this is Officer Alvarez. Could you step
outside and tell us what happened in here?"

“Hans Pearson. It’s a…” And then, he laughed hysterically again. He took a long step over the puddle of alcohol and they stepped outside. “I’m sorry, it’s just… OK, so the guy walks in and locks the door behind himself. He’s a massive, tall horse. He has a mask on his face, but I can see that he’s brown. He draws a knife and says that he wants all the money I have, to not play a hero and so on. You can see it all on the cameras,” Hans pointed up to the two cameras watching them carefully, one inside and the other outside. “I tell him that we’ve just opened so we’re empty, so he demands the most expensive bottle instead. I comply, I mean, come on, he has a knife. I turn around, reach for some top shelf alcohols and then, a thought strikes me. He has some really squeaky, childish voice, so I ask him if he’s 21. He claims so, obviously, but I don’t believe him. So he reaches for his wallet, takes his driving license and puts it down. I put the bottles as well and then, he grabs them, runs out, slamming into the glassed door breaking one of the bottles, unlocks it and runs out again,” the cashier explained, chuckling.

“Did he take his ID?” Max asked carefully and the gazelle smirked.

“Nope,” he showed them a Driving License of some horse and cackled. “I’m sorry, I just… What an idiot!” Two officers looked at each other with amusement and Isabelle took it in her paw and studied carefully.

“Um… the case is over?” She noticed with a chuckle.

“We’ve got to secure the evidence, confirm everything… but yeah, looks like it,” Max agreed with a cheerful case. “Mr. Pearson, would you mind to wait outside while we secure the proof? It shouldn’t take long,” he promised and the gazelle complied. Isabelle Alvarez began to secure the proof, while Max reported to the radio detailed personal info of a robber. The camera recordings and strands of fur they found in the cracks of the window soon confirmed Mr. Pearson’s version of events. Before 3 pm they already had the perp at the station, before 4 pm, they had the confession out of him. Max Reynolds and Isabelle Alvarez, with their perp arrested and waiting, began to write the report. At 5 pm, with the report soon to be finished. Max bided farewell to his new partner and picked Kaylee up from her Rabbit Hole. Normally, he’d stay there for an hour longer to close the case, but not today. For today, was the day.

5.29 pm, Monday, May 11, 2022

The 7th Savanna Central Orphanage used to be quite a gloomy place the first time when Max and Kaylee saw it, bringing to the mind a single word; ruin. The walls were shabby, the corridors were cold, the rooms soulless. But in last two years, it had changed for the better due to several donations from Reynolds Reparation Fund. Now, the place was going through thorough renovation with the workers reinstalling new insulation. Kaylee and Max passed by them, greeting them politely and came inside, greeted by the director of the orphanage; a rather old and chubby honey badger. She adjusted her glasses and greeted the two of them with energetic shake of paw.

“Right on time, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds,” she said with appreciation.
“We wouldn’t want to be late, Mrs. Ubik,” Kaylee assured. They stepped inside and the orphanage’s director walked them inside.

“As I understand, there are no problems on the legislative side?” She asked and both Reynolds shook their heads.

“The formal side of adoption process should be concluded soon,” Max assured. “These children… could you tell us about them? You have been very vague before.”

“Of course,” she assured. “Mia and Thane Cloverine were born on 3rd March of 2010. When they were two years old, their parents, Julio and Ester, had a car accident in result of which they and five of their children died. Only Mia and Thane survived by sheer luck. With no family to look after them, they ended up in here and remained until 2017, when they were adopted by a family couple streets away, but soon returned here,” Mrs. Ubik explained.

“Why?” Wondered Kaylee.

“Abusive household. The foster parents neglected the children caring only about the money they got from state for upbringing them. Their classmate helped them run away back here and after some nasty confrontation, the kids stayed here.”

“How did they take it?” Worried Max.

“They were mostly relieved for being back, given the short time it left little to no trauma. I sent them to a child psychologist couple times, but we had some very limited funds at the time…” Mrs. Ubik watched Max with a smile. “And which has changed recently thanks to your decision, Mr. Reynolds.”

“I just did what was right,” Max replied shyly. He needed no glory for it. He was sick of having basked in it after Spencer Young’s case anyway. “Mia and Thane… what are they like?”

“Mia’s a quiet, shy child. She really likes to draw. Just give her crayons and some paper and you’ll have her occupied for whole day. She also loves fairy tales and would love to be a princess one day. Thane loves robots, he keeps building some with the little bricks we have and he really is creative about them. Both of them stick together and we didn’t want to separate them; that’s why we’ve had some troubles with finding them a family before,” she said and then, stopped before one of the rooms.

“They’re playing over there,” Mrs. Ubik informed them. She knocked on the door and, without waiting, pushed it open. Inside, Max and Kaylee saw some freshly renovated playing room full of toys with two young bunnies playing. Mia was sitting by a child’s table, drawing something passionately. She was a grey rabbit with brown eyes, which she now raised to watch the visitors. Thane, on the other hand, was a brown rabbit browsing through a massive stash of bricks, searching for something passionately. He only paused when Mrs. Ubik called them.

“Mia, Thane, these are Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds I’ve told you about before. They wanted to meet you,” she introduced them.

“Good afternoon,” youngsters said simultaneously, watching both carefully, especially Max.

“I’ll leave you alone for a bit. If you needed anything, just call me,” suggested Mrs. Ubik and left, closing the door behind her. Kaylee and Max smiled to the kids, as she walked over to Mia and Max sat with Thane.
“What are you drawing?” Kaylee asked, but saw that the little girl only shied away. “That’s a nice castle. And this beautiful princess… It’s you, isn’t she? She has this same eyes,” she guessed and the girl nodded with a smile.

“Mhm.”

“Could I draw with you?” Kaylee asked and Mia nodded again and she sat down on a child-sized chair, but then switched for the floor instead. Mia gave her a sheet of paper and shared the crayons and the two of them continued to draw in silence.

In meanwhile, Max sat by Thane, who was already back to the bricks.

“Hi, there. What are you building there?” He asked.

“A robot. His name is Quest and he’s a fire guardian,” Thane showed him a partly finished, bipedal robot. “He carries a mighty fire bow and a mask that allows him to see very, very far. He can shoot down his foes before they see him.”

“Can he fly?” Max wondered.

“No, only the wind guardian can!” Thane refused with outrage. “And he’d need wings!”

“OK, OK,” the wolf apologized with embarrassment. “And where does your guardian have a quill?” He wondered.

“What?”

“Quill. For arrows,” Max explained and Thane wondered.

“Hmm… Can you make him a quill? I’ll finish the arms,” he suggested finally and Max agreed eagerly. “You’ll need three parts like this one and find something to keep them together,” the young rabbit shown him an element and Max began the search. The two of them finished the parts, Thane completing the arms with only red and black elements, while Max, realizing the colors held importance to the kid, finished the quill sticking to the code. Then, they connected it to the back of Quest, the fire guardian, exchanging ideas how to do it best and finished with doing several arrows. As they finished, Thane put the robot between them and watched it with satisfaction.

“They’re your favorite, aren’t they? The bricks?” Max pointed and Thane shrugged.

“They’re fine. Before the renovation we had very few bricks and only I liked playing with them, but now everyone does, so they’ll dismantle Quest in a week,” he said sadly.

“We can make a photo of him, so we can rebuild him any time,” suggested Max reaching for his phone. “I can send it to Mrs. Ubik so she’ll print it for you,” he said and Thane nodded eagerly.

“That would be awesome!” He agreed excitedly and Max took several pictures from different angles and saved them to Mrs. Ubik, asking to print and give to the boy.

“So, another robot?” Max suggested and he shrugged. “Or do we play with them?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what else do you like? Board games?”

“They’re OK,” Thane didn’t seem very convinced, but then, his sight stopped at Max’s
dart gun’s holster. “Is that a gun? You’re a cop, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. Do you like cops?”

“They’re OK. When Ryan tried to escape, a cop that caught him was really nice to him,” Thane explained, still watching the gun. “Can I see it?” He hoped. Max hesitated, shrugged and then, took out the clip and handed it to him. Thane watched it curiously from all angles.

“What do you say?” Max asked.

“It looks awesome. Can we look inside?”

“We don’t have any…” Max tried to protest, but then he saw a screwdriver in rabbit’s paw. “…tools. Will you know how to put it back together?” He asked.

“Mhm, I once put a radio back together,” Thane assured.

“Did it work?”

“No, but it never did,” he replied and Max chuckled.

“Oh well, if you want to, but let’s clear the bricks first. We don’t want to lose any parts in these,” he agreed. Even if Thane would fail miserably, he could fix it on his own. He and Kaylee have been doing it a hundred times now. The young rabbit exclaimed excitedly, they put the bricks back in the box and they started dismantling the gun, with Thane doing most of the job, while Max was advising him and explaining how certain elements worked. The fun of bringing the gun to basic elements and back together took them a while, but, with wolf’s minor help, Thane managed to bring the thing back to the original state. In meanwhile, girls borrowed their robot and tried to draw him, to present the result to the boys. Both of them agreed that Mia’s one was way prettier.

“You have a lot of training before you, darling,” Max shook his head with pity.

“I know, I know. Mia, you said you wanted to play a board game with all of us, didn’t you?” She asked and little girl nodded shyly. “What do you say?” She turned to them and both Max and Thane agreed. Mia picked her favorite game, they sat down by the table and started to play. Couple games later, Mrs. Ubik came reminding them that it was already half past seven and the visit should be over by now, as it was the dinnertime. Max and Kaylee parted with the children, agreed with Mrs. Ubik on the next meeting and, guided by her, left the orphanage.

“So, what do you say?” Max wondered, as they walked down the outer stairs.

“Honestly… I just… I love the two of them so much already… We’re taking them home aren’t we? We can’t leave them here like this! They needs parents and…”

“Of course, we are,” Max assured as embracing his with a smile. “If I ever doubted in the idea, then now…”

“Hey, you!” Somebody yelled from behind and they turned around carefully. Just by the orphanage door, there stood some young wolf, no older than Mia or Thane. He was of grey fur and some ridiculously threatening demeanor for a twelve-year-old. Kaylee shivered suddenly, as the boy snarled at them.

“Yes, pup?” Max replied politely, but coldly as ice.

“Are you the ones that want to take Mia and Thane?” He demanded to know.
“So what if we are?” Reynolds spoke harshly. He didn’t like the way the kid looked at them.

“Know that if you hurt them like the previous guys, you’ll regret it too,” the boy threatened him and then, the orphanage door opened with a slam, showing Mrs. Ubik.

“Ryan! Back inside! Stop bothering these people!” She yelled at him furiously. “My apologize,” she turned to them, but Max just nodded politely.

“It’s alright,” he assured and they continued to walk to their car. As they were inside, he realized that something was still bothering Kaylee. “What is, darling?”

“This kid… I just… his eyes reminded me of someone I wish I could forget,” she confessed.

“Gerard Greymane?” Max guessed and she nodded.

“Gerard Greymane,” she confirmed with a shiver.

7.53 pm, Monday, May 11, 2022

Judy Hopps announced her arrival with a doorbell. Nick opened almost immediately and invited her inside. The bunny sensed some delicious smells coming from the kitchen and Nick, as if reading in her mind, explained.

“I'm making my own pizza. It should be ready in minutes,” he said. “I hope you're hungry.”

“I am,” she assured and they went to the kitchen to pour themselves some of the juice. Judy glanced at the oven and its deliciously-looking content.

“What do you say? Is it not… falling flat?” He dropped a pun and she giggled.

“We’ll see,” she only replied, grabbing her glass and following him to the dining room. She put a bag with her laptop on the table and unpacked the computer, while Nick brought out the pin board and hung it on the wall just next to TV. In his paw he had some photos and stripes of names with short descriptions. He pinned a first picture with a name they knew well to the center of the board.

“Anastasia Reynolds,” he said and, as always when Judy saw her, she shivered. There was something disturbing in this polite, self-possessed wolf, something she couldn’t quite put a name on, but couldn’t stop it from bothering her.

“Let’s start with rehearing what we have. We’ll get to mine stuff later,” Judy suggested and he nodded, pinning another name to the board.

“Jason Wolford,” he said, like anyone needed introducing their friend from ZPD. He
connected him with Anastasia with a string signed ‘Couple’ and then, added a photo of a house next to it. “He broke up with Miss Reynolds right after Spencer Young’s Manifesto coming out. How did he put it again?”

“That she was a cold-hearted, bossy b-word,” Judy reminded him.

“And that he was going to regret it and she made sure of it. Wolford’s parents nearly lost their family house due to the debts, and if not for Max’s creative accounting…” A new picture and respective connections appeared on the board, this time of Reynolds and his wife. “…they certainly would. This is when Max and Anastasia fell in conflict lasting till these days,” he finished.

“And then, as Anastasia and Jason broke up, she also said that she was going to elect a new mayor,” Judy pointed out and Nick added a photo of the mayoral office. The bunny shivered with excitement. It was how all of this started; when Wolford mentioned to them about Anastasia Reynolds ambitions. Judy thought at first that Nick would just disregard it or her worries, shrug them off and laugh at an idea of investigating it. But he did not. Instead, they started digging on their own, seeking new facts for quite a moment now. That was their role after all, to watch the paws of the high and mighty. To control them and, if necessary, blow the whistle.

“So, this year’s elections,” Nick continued with a nod and put two photos of two most significant candidates; mayor Ketchikan and Mr. Heveryn. “From the start, Anastasia Reynolds supported mayor Ketchikan. Together with some of the board of Reynolds Industries…” Several new photos appeared. “…They funded considerate part of his campaign. They tried to drag Max in it as well, but the idea failed, as he gave his best to keep himself and Reynolds Reparation Fund apolitical.”

“And he succeeded in doing so,” Judy added, remembering well how much effort it brought Max to maneuver between everyone trying to pull their strings on him. There’d been even a recurring joke of the phone calls he was receiving. Whenever Max picked a call from a journalist, he’d hand it to random ZPD officer and they had to make up the silliest excuse they only could. Game lasted for few more months and they suspected some called them only to hear officers making fun of them.

“To amusement of all of us,” Nick agreed, recalling several calls he had handled. “So, funding of Ketchikan’s campaign was limited to Anastasia, Reynolds Industries and usual donators. Heveryn, in meanwhile, received nearly twice the Ketchikan’s funds from multiple mammals we couldn’t find anything particular about,” he concluded and saw the smile at Judy’s face.

“We’ll get to it later. Go on,” she insisted, wanting to keep her small bomb for the end.

“Alright. Two weeks before the elections…” And then, they heard the oven beeping and Nick paused in the middle. “Some pizza?” He offered and they made a short break for a dinner. A few minutes later, Nick, with a pizza slice in his paw, continued the lecture, while Judy ate by the table. Delicious aroma filled the air.

“Ketchikan scandal,” reminded him Judy.

“Right. Two weeks before the elections, Ketchikan could count on approximately forty-two percent of votes, with Heveryn having only thirty-three. Daily Sunny, a usual gossip newspaper, delivered evidence of Ketchikan’s affair with a teenage otter, Layla Otteran, completely ruining Ketchikan’s family-friendly image. In a week, Ketchikan lost eight percent point with Heveryn gaining most of it. Layla Otteran remained invincible at first to attend a single interview where she confirmed everything only to sink into thin air yet again,” Nick introduced the situation.
“Terribly sketchy, but some mammals bought it,” Judy concluded. “In meanwhile, Ketchikan tried to denounce her credibility and the photos that were taken of the two of them. Experts he hired failed to deliver enough proof of his innocence…” Nick snorted with laughter and she couldn’t agree more. Presumption of innocence in public opinion was fiction these days. “…before the first round of elections and Heveryn nearly scored the majority in result. Then, there was the week until the second round when Ketchikan counterattacked, proving that the photos and the accusations in general were fabricated and delivering a touching confession from his wife. By sheer luck, won eventually by two percent points,” Nick concluded.

“Do we know who stood behind Otteran and whole this fraud? Because we know it was fraud now,” Judy wondered, but Nick only shrugged.

“Layla Otteran, if she even exists under that name, has vanished into thin air. We know that Daily Sunny, the newspaper behind the news, really dislike Ketchikan, but they claim they were tipped off anonymously.”

“So we can call it a dead end,” Judy pointed out and Nick nodded.

“A dead end for now. But we’re not here to remind ourselves that we’re stuck, are we?” The fox pointed out and she nodded with a giggle. Judy finished her pizza slice, once again congratulating Nick on how good it turned out to be and then, she joined him by the pin board with her own papers and photos.

“I’ve done some research on Heveryn’s sponsors,” she started and pinned a list of nearly fifty names. “Heveryn went broke rather recently, there was no way he could fund his own campaign. And certainly not on the scale he did. So, instead of paying up on his own, he found some rich contributors. The forty seven mammals present here contributed over ninety percent of his electoral budget. Most of them are absurdly rich, some don’t even come from Zootopia. Some are young, the others are old, some know him personally, the others not. They share no common features in general. Mostly,” Judy made an effective pause. As silly as it must have been, she had actually practiced this lecture of hers. “If we rounded it up to only selected few…” She grabbed a red marker and circled over twenty names. “…The ones that contributed right as the campaign kicked off, to be specific, we’ll get a list of twenty four mammals that covered sixty-eight percent of his electoral budget. Yet again, they may have seemingly no common features.”

“Seemingly,” Nick emphasized, letting her enjoyed her triumph. They spent too long on that thing with no results to steal any of it from her now.

“Seemingly. Because these names bear some connection. You see, all of these mammals belong to a certain non-profit organization called Start Anew. Their website is… practically non-existent, I’m afraid, but the list of its members is public,” she explained, attaching the organization’s logo to the pin board and connecting it to the list of names.

“Their purpose?” Nick asked.

“Not a clue. I’m not sure if they really do have any. I called someone from the upper ranks about it, under fake name and from a booth, obviously, but they didn’t seem like they knew either,” Judy explained, rather amused.

“Totally not shady.”

“Not one bit. And you won’t believe who founded it nearly thirty years ago. He’s gone by now and you do know him, if it serves as any sort of a clue,” Judy said. Nick wondered on it for a moment and then, he saw a photo she was waving.
“Thomas Ezekiel Reynolds,” he said, as Judy pinned the photo to the board.

“Exactly. Some of his friends run that organization, by the way. And to top things, they had received some major donations from another ghost non-profit organization, which got some decent money from another ghost non-profit organization which belongs to… drum roll, please!” She requested and fox tapped his claws on the table. “Anastasia Reynolds!” She announced and connected the two with a string. Nick just stared at it in silence.

“No way.”

“Way.”

“No freaking…”

“I checked millions times, Nick,” she protested.

“Carrots, you’re not saying that Anastasia Reynolds sponsored both Ketchikan and Heveryn…”

“And she also delivered the affair materials to Sunny Daily. One of major Heveryn’s contributors on that list is also an Editor in Chief of Sunny Daily. She sponsored both of them; that’s exactly what I’m trying to say,” the bunny assured and fox stared at the board with astonishment. He sat down on the couch, grabbed a slice of pizza and was putting all the pieces together. Judy sat by him and grabbed another slice as well. These were ridiculously good.

“Actually, that’s rather brilliant,” the fox admitted. “She was funding both sides, which meant she controlled the flow of elections. While Ketchikan was winning at first, the fake affair almost costed him the victory…”

“And this must have been Anastasia Reynolds intention,” Judy concluded. “After that thing, no one believed that he’d manage to win nonetheless.”

“The question is, why?” Nick asked. “Ketchikan’s friend of Reynolds, everyone knows that. Why to ditch him like that?”

“Maybe it doesn’t apply to Anastasia?” Judy asked, not really convinced.

“She wouldn’t be funding his campaign openly.”

“Maybe Ketchikan’s political ambitions don’t match hers?” She guessed again.

“She’ll have an ally in him in any investment she’ll make, just like she had in last two years,” Nick disagreed.

“Then maybe an ally is not what she needed? Maybe she needed a pawn instead?” The bunny tried for the third time. “If Heveryn won, Anastasia would be in a great position to lobby him, given the effort she made to install him there. She certainly has some hooks on him. Ketchikan, on the other hand, is too experienced of a politician to be manipulated like that,” she suggested and Nick liked the idea too.

“Heveryn did appear in Young’s documents several times, although without much of context. But then again, we now know that Young’s documents were lacking…”

“And someone else could be holding the rest. Anastasia, for example,” Judy finished for him. They watched the board and then turned at each other. “Do you think… There really are more
documents like the ones Spencer got?” She wondered.

“Maybe there are. His Manifesto said it itself; the thing was incomplete and lacking at times. But whatever he missed, could have been destroyed long time ago,” Nick pointed out.

“True,” Judy agreed with concern. After what happened with her father and his name, Anastasia Reynolds would probably be wiser than keeping this sort of incriminating documents.

“So…We’ve found quite a lot, but nothing really illegal, even if morally questionable,” Hopps pointed out.

“And I doubt if we’re finding anything more around mayoral elections.”

“Yeah… Lots of work for nothing, isn’t it? We thought that she was planning some sort of coup d’état and…” Judy said with regrets.

“And she really was, but she acted rather carefully and smartly. Even if she failed,” Nick disagreed. “We’ve found the truth. If one day, it could do some good, we’ll reveal it. And for now, we’ll keep watching her paws, just in case she tries something sketchy again. What do you say, Carrots?” he smiled encouragingly and she returned it.

“We will be watching her,” she promised and then, watched the board again. “I wonder… Was this how Zachary Young started his search? A pin board and photos?”

“He started with death of his wife and concluded with death of his own. Let’s make sure none of these befalls us,” Nick replied gloomily and Judy shivered. They knew Anastasia Reynolds personally and two years earlier, such a thought would seem ridiculous. But now they knew the true nature of her father and saw clearly that she had chosen a similar path.

“It will not,” Judy moved a bit closer to him and leaned with her head against his shoulder. “If I have any saying in here, none of this will repeat. No more bloodshed,” she promised. Nick ruffled fur of her head playfully.

“No more bloodshed.”
Chapter Summary

When the air and earth trembles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7.53 am, Saturday, May 16, 2022

The Grand Zootopia Parade, held traditionally on the third weekend of May, was the time when all the mammals throughout the city celebrated their uniqueness and differences and was truly the day when “Anyone could be anything!” like Mayor Lionheart and many after him used to say. For Judy, a bunny who came from Bunny Burrows far, far away believing in these very ideals, it was the most wonderful day of the year. For Judy, who also happened to be one of the police officers responsible for the safety of whole party, it also was one of the most exhausting and stressful days of the year with thousands mammals out in the streets, relying on her to come back home safely.

“You really are overthinking it,” Nick said, casually drinking his coffee, as he was getting ready to leave the car.

“Maybe I am, but I’d really love to see the Parade from a civilian point of view for once. It must be amazing if you’re not worrying about everyone’s security and…”

“Oh, it is,” Nick assured with a smirk and she rolled her eyes. “Just chill out, Carrots. Eyes wide open, ears up and scanning, but the heartbeat at the healthy one-hundred and twenty,” he suggested. Judy tried to protest, but then, they heard the radio.

“Wilde, report,” said Detective Barnes, in charge of whole the operation.

“We’ve just arrived at the place, getting out of the car in a minute. You should see us on the cameras.”

“I’ve got them,” Kaylee said. “Tell them to check out the alley in the north, there are some shady guys lurking just beyond my reach in there.”

“You heard Reynolds,” Barnes said only.

“We’re on it,” Nick promised and they left their car. Judy locked it and looked around; the streets were closed off, ready for the crowds and festive platforms that would arrive around the noon. The sun was shining bright, a gentle breeze blew pleasantly just few streets away from his mother’s house. Nick and Judy walked over to the alley Kaylee mentioned before, but whoever was hanging out around there, was now long gone. As they were walking back to the car, Judy asked him about something that was bothering her now for a moment.
“How do you know what’s a healthy rabbit heartbeat?” She asked suddenly and Nick chuckled nervously, caught off-guard.

“I know you for years, Carrots,” he said vaguely.

“That’s not explaining it.”

“I know you for years. We see each other almost every day, if not in work, then in the free time. When we were in Bunny Burrows, we shared a so-called kind-sized bed for over a month. I know a lot of weird things about you,” he pointed out.

“Were you measuring my pulse when I was sleeping?” Judy asked, slightly creeped out.

“Did I say so?”

“Didn’t you imply that?”

“I don’t know, did I?”

“Are you starting it again?”

“What?”

“Isn’t it that game when you answer a question with a question?” Judy specified.

“Are we really playing it again?” Nick seemed just as surprised as her.

“Shouldn’t you be the one telling me?” The bunny protested. Nick opened his mouth to reply, froze for a moment and then, five seconds passed and the unspoken rule guaranteed Judy victory.

“Well, we’re not playing anymore,” he admitted his defeat.

“So, how did you know that? The heartbeat thing,” Judy asked, unsure if she wouldn’t receive some super creepy explanation. She couldn’t think of a non-creepy one, actually.

“Your father complained to me about the diet a doctor gave him when we were back in Bunny Burrows. He said he needed to drop the heartbeat back to one-two-oh,” Nick explained.

“Oh,” Judy only said, surprised with a legit answer.

“Yeah, totally not stalking you,” Nick gave her a toothy smile and she chuckled.

“What a relief,” she only said.

“Speaking of stalkers, how’s August doing?” He joked.

“Oh, he’s not… He’s really nice, you know. We haven’t talked much given how busy we are, but I’m looking forward to getting to know him better. And so should you,” she advised him.

“Alright, I’ll ask him out right after you’re done with him,” Nick said and she rolled her eyes with annoyance.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do,” he smirked and she eyed him carefully with some alarming thoughts in her mind.
“Nick, I’ve got to ask, are you envy of him?” She asked.

“What about?” He asked surprisingly straightforward and Judy realized his point suddenly; he had nothing to be envy about. He was just another rabbit, after all.

“Oh, I just…”

“Carrots, we’re adult, free mammals. You can take invitations from whomever you want,” he reminded her, amused with her embarrassment. She muttered something incoherently, but did not bring up the subject again. After all, this was going to be a busy day, they’d have plenty to look after without worrying about their personal relations, at least today.

1.09 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

After a long and busy night, concluded with getting stuck for two hours in an awful traffic jam caused by the Grand Parade organization, all that Lionel O’Dyna, right hand to Lady Tompkins aka “Duchess”, wished for, was some sleep in his bed. He climbed the stairs of his block of flats yawning, when he noticed some hyena walking down the stairs. He could say for sure that he had seen the guy for the first time; he was no older than thirty, dressed in black hoodie and carrying a backpack. Even though his face was mostly hidden, the fox was sure that he didn’t live in here, but Lionel just shrugged it off and continued walking up. He was by his door on the top level, reaching for the keys already, when he heard the neighboring door opening and a familiar voice calling.

“Ah, Lionel! Why don’t you come inside for some tea?” Mrs. Sylvia Wilde invited him and he hesitated. On one hand, he hadn’t been sleeping for last thirty hours. On the other hand, he was already past the point when an hour could make any difference.

“With pleasure, ma’am. Actually, I’d kill for some coffee,” he assured and the old vixen smiled, disappearing back inside and leaving the door wide open. He followed her to the dining room and sat down on couch, looking around the place. He really liked this flat, so tidy and cozy, even if not too big. He stopped for a moment by the photo frames standing on the commode, featuring the most important stages of host’s life.

“Are you not at the parade, Lionel?” Mrs. Wilde asked, coming with cookies and two cups of coffee. He took his and breathed in the characteristic aroma.

“Oh, I’ve never been too keen on it,” he explained. “And you, Mrs. Wilde?”

“I used to love it, since it’s so loud and sparkly… But now it’s just too loud and too sparkly, if you know what I mean,” she replied and he nodded agreeing.

“I can relate,” he assured and drank some of the coffee.

“So… I heard that Lady Tompkins is getting married. I even received an invitation,” the old vixen said. “It’s funny, I always thought that you’d… you’d be named on such an invitation.”
“Oh, I…” Lionel cleared his throat. If he was embarrassed, he didn’t let it slip. “I owe my life to the Lady and I’d give it to her, but after my wife was murdered, I made an oath to never remarry. I believe you understand,” he said and Mrs. Wilde nodded.

“Of course, I do,” she assured.

“And besides, I’ve never had any romantic feelings toward the Lady. I wouldn’t be a proper right hand, if I did,” he explained further. “I believe your son is watching over the event?” He changed the subject.

“Yes, he is,” Mrs. Wilde nodded with pride. “Although you wish he’d be working with you, don’t you?” She smiled slyly, but Lionel only sipped some of his coffee in silence.

“Duchess is relieved Wilde and Hopps serve again. They’re the kind of police officers this city needs,” he only said and continued to drink his coffee.

“Most certainly, they are,” she agreed, reaching for her drink as well. They continued their conversation for half an hour more after which, struck with weariness, Lionel excused himself and went back to his flat. Just as he parted with the old vixen, he saw another neighbor of his standing by his door with a paw at the doorknob.

“Hey, Jeff, I’m…” Lionel called him, when the young tiger pushed the door, not having noticed him. And then, the fox heard a roar, saw flash, felt sudden, sharp pain and then, nothing.

1.54 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

Judy gasped with delight as a wonderful platform shaped into a sandy pyramid crowded with mammals dancing in fancy, leaflike suits all over it and yet, she stopped her sight only for couple seconds to continue monitoring the crowd with partner. The general rule was to dress unusually, the fancier, the better. And so, Nick and Judy could spectate a galaxy of eye catching and witty creations, starting with traditional and native clothes, continuing on to parodies and satires of historical and political figures and concluding with all sorts of game, comic and movie characters. Once in a while someone would walk over to the officers and fist bump them, Judy even requested a selfie with an incarnation of her favorite pop singer and Nick congratulated a raccoon with crutches parodying Mayor Ketchikan with ridiculous care for the details. All in all, they had some wonderful time and yet, gave their bests to look over the celebrations to continue with no incidents. They continued receiving warnings and advices from Detective Barnes, but saw nothing demanding an intervention.

"Say, Nick, what would you come dressed at, if we had a chance to attend next year?" Judy asked, but he only shrugged, as he played with a camera he, like all the officers, had attached to the chest. It gave Detective Barnes and TO Reynolds more information than they’d require.

"I'd figure out something. And you?"
"Oh, I think I'd go for a..." It was at that moment, that air around them trembled. They felt it at first as a fuzzy feeling in their chests, only then followed by a deafening roar of an explosion in near proximity and debris of shattered windows falling all around them. Officers looked around searching for the source of explosion, but it was nowhere near the Parade. The crowd of mammals and platforms froze for a terrifyingly long moment as all the music and chattering stopped all at once, but then, officers escorting ordered to move on. Thankfully, except for couple scared shouts, no panic erupted.

"Hopps, Reynolds, go and check it," ordered Barnes.

"Understood. It sounded like a gas leakage," Nick confirmed despite high pitched screech in his ears as they ran narrow alleys on their way, passing by panicked passersby and piles of broken glass they could ignore thanks to special armored boots they wore at special occasion like this. Nick and Judy dashed through the streets the fox knew so well until they reached a street even Judy recognized. They stopped in front of Nick's family home, or rather what remained of it after the explosion at the top level. It looked bizarre, like a piece of cake that someone has taken a very clumsy bite off, scattering brick and glass crumbs everywhere. What remained of the flat that was an epicenter of explosion were merely couple pipes with water trickling from two of. Not even walls or neighboring flats seemed to survive and whole the building seemed on brink of collapsing. And then, Judy realized that one of the damaged flats belonged to no one else than Mrs. Sylvia Wilde.

"Holy, rutting... What do we do?" Asked Max with horror as he and Isabelle Alvarez joined them.

"We have to evacuate it. Max, you go to lower levels. I and Nick will go to the top. Alvarez, I want no one in front of the building," Judy took command immediately.

"Guys, whole the thing can collapse any second now..." Alvarez tried to protest, pointing at the cracked walls.

"That's exactly why we're going in!" Nick snarled back. With no more of her protests, the three of them charged inside. Judy turned to see Isabelle snarling resentfully and then, yelling everyone to step back with some nasty interludes. Max stopped at the first level to encourage calm, but quick evacuation, while Nick and Judy bolted upstairs.

"Hubert, Francis, we'll need your help!" Nick called two coyotes and they followed him to the top. The highest level looked like a war zone rather than a living place. All the walls were either cracked and charred or nonexistent. Air carried stench of gas, dust and burnt fur and flesh. Just at their feet lied a fox Judy recognized immediately: Lionel O'Dyna. He was conscious, coughing and trying to lift himself. The bunny crouched by him and asked if he could move. He coughed and nodded lifting himself to his knees. He looked messed up and his clothes seemed slightly charred, but except for that, he seemed alright. One of coyotes helped him stand up and Judy asked him to walk the victim down to the exit. In meanwhile, they walked over to the second casualty lying in the corridor. The view was horrifying: a young tiger looked like a huge doll that someone had tossed against a wall with tremendous force, leaving it on the floor with limbs and neck bent at unnatural angles and left side of body burnt nastily. The door, torn from hinges with power of explosion, was lying just next to him. Nick pressed a finger against tiger’s neck only for formality and shook his head.

“We can’t help him anymore,” he said. “Hubert, go with Carrots and check that flat, I’ll go and see about my mother,” he ordered and the two of them passed by the tiger on to the next flat, while Nick tried to force his family house’s door.
“What about other flats on the level?” Judy asked, but coyote only shook his head.

“No one lives in there nowadays,” he only said. They walked inside to see an old wolf trapped under a cupboard. They released him immediately and the coyote helped him evacuate.

“Hubert, take him down, we’ll take care of the rest,” she ordered. “Nick, how is it?!” She called the fox, still struggling with the door.

“It’s blocked from the other side! Help me push it!” Nick called them and Judy and Hubert tried to help him, but there was no use. The door wasn’t even locked, it must have been the bricks and pieces of roof that blocked it effectively.

“We need to get in other way around. Maybe through that destroyed flat?” Judy suggested and Nick nodded.

“Hubert, go down, join rest of the evacuees. We’ll handle it from here,” the fox ordered and the coyote did not argue. “Reynolds, we need help at the top level as soon as you can arrive,” he said to the radio.

“Copy that, I’m leaving evacuation of the bottom levels to Alvarez and Wolford,” Max replied and Nick and Judy walked over to what had remained of Lionel O’Dyna’s flat. There wasn’t much of it, just some of the entrance hall and then, couple pipes sticking out in the distance morosely. The explosion caused the supporting wall between O’Dyna and Wilde flats to shatter partially making a small entrance, but it was a long jump form an inconvenient position.

“Can you make it?” Nick asked and Judy looked down. Even if she missed, she’d fall only one level lower; nothing deadly and certainly worth the risk.

“I can try,” she ran for couple feet and then leaped forward, bouncing with her both feet. She made it to the wall, caught a brick sticking out and landed on the wet floor, nearly slipping. “I’ll open the door, you wait there!” She shouted at him and disappeared inside the flat. Nick nodded and returned to the corridor only to see Max coming.

“How’s the situation?” He asked.

“It’s almost empty, only my mother’s stuck. Carrots got inside and will open the door for us,” he explained and the wolf nodded. His sight stopped for a moment at a dead tiger, but he said nothing of it. They heard Judy coming from the other side.

“There’s no way I’m removing all the rumble on time!” She called them.

“Try breaking the hinges! You can find the hammer in the third kitchen shelf!” Nick advised and a few moments later, they heard her slamming the hinges with hammer. Couple slams later, she managed to break them both and Max and Nick lifted the door and carried it out to the corridor. Nick charged inside. He found his mother lying on a couch in the dining room in an unnatural position with brick debris surrounding her. Her forehead was covered in blood. He checked her pulse and breath and sighed with relief. Both were in norm.

“We need to carry her out carefully, she might have damaged neck,” the fox said.

“On the door?” Suggested Max.

“Staircase’s too slim, it won’t fit in. We need something…” Nick’s sight stopped at the shredded curtains covered in light red dust.
“Max, take the curtain rod off. Carrots, take a sheet from bedroom. We’ll make a stretcher,” the fox decided and he ran to the bedroom with bunny in order to get another rod. They were made from wood, but Nick really hoped they’d suffice. They came back to the living room and Max and Judy began to make an improvised stretcher, while Nick grabbed father’s wedding ring and put it in the pocket. He also found family album on one of the shelves. He opened a window and yelled at Fangmeyer standing below.

“Take care of it!” He yelled, as he tossed it to the tigress. It fell couple feet from her and she grabbed it and gave him a thumb up. As Nick came back to the others, they had just finished their job. All three of them took the old vixen carefully, Judy holding her head and protecting the neck, and put her on the stretcher. Nick and Judy then lifted it gently, while Max cleared the path for. They made it out of the flat, barely fitting in the corridor’s turn and started to walk down the staircase. In between the third and fourth floor, Max pushed Judy violently, accompanied by some tremendously loud rumbling. She, Nick and stretcher lunged forward for half of the level, only barely managing not to fall over.

“Max, what are you…” The rabbit turned around angrily only to see that there was no Max behind them, only rumble blocking the staircase. “Max?!”

“I’m alright! I’ll find another way!” The wolf promised. Nick hurried Judy and they continued to walk down the stairs. They were one of the last ones leaving the building, to see numerous fire engines, ambulances and police cars with dozens mammals taking care of the victims and securing the area.

“Reynolds is stuck…” Nick tried to tell Fangmayer, whom they passed by, but she only pointed to the third floor of the building.

“Don’t you worry,” she said and they saw a fire engine with ladder picking Max up and having him down on the ground safely. Then, paramedics took injured Mrs. Wilde from them and drove her to the hospital, but both Nick and Judy remained at the scene. They wanted to help more, but Fangmeyer, now in charge of the action, told them to just step back and rest and so, they sat down on pavement on the other side of the street from where they had a view on all of the action. It was terrible; the top level of the building had already crumbled and collapsed and it looked like the third wouldn’t withhold it for long and whole the thing would collapse eventually. Judy glanced at Nick with worries.

“Nick?” She asked, but he only laughed. It was a bitter, pitiful laughter and yet, a laughter. He fell on the pavement, watching the sky, now polluted with dust and smoke.

“We did our best, right?” He only said and Judy nodded.

“Yes, we did,” she confirmed and then, she saw Max and Isabelle coming over. Reynolds was covered in brick dust and looked awfully messy, but the silly, ignorant goof that the wolf was, he walking toward them with a cheerful laughter.

“There you are! What a mess, isn’t it?” He stated the obvious.

“Are you alright?” Judy asked with concern.

“Feeling alive like never before,” Max assured, trying to dust himself off with couple swipes, but not changing anything in the end. “But let’s not try it again for a while, shall we?” He asked and Nick raised himself slowly. For a moment fox’s sight stopped at what had remained of his family house, but he covered it then with a cheerful smile.
“Yeah, I’d prefer being buried only after I die,” he joked and then turned at Alvarez. “How’s the first impression on our Precinct? Nothing like peaceful and quiet Tundratown, is it?”

“Oh… it’s… fine,” she muttered, a bit overwhelmed with the entire situation.

“Isabelle did wonderful job there too,” Max nudged her with a shoulder as he praised her. “If not for her going in, we’d never manage to evacuate everyone so quickly and…” Max stopped in the middle of sentence as a police van stopped right by them with a screech of tires. It’s back door opened and from it, sprang out Kaylee, rushing straight for her husband.

“You imbecile!” She yelled at him with tears in her eyes and then, lunged toward him and hugged him passionately. “You stupid, reckless moron!” She scolded him and he chuckled awkwardly.

“Hey, I’m alright. I’m glad that you…” He tried to turn it into a joke.

“Where’s your camera, you bloody fool?!” She yelled at him hugging him stronger and then, Max looked down at where his camera was supposed to be attached and felt shivers. “I watched whole the action, you stupid! And when that staircase dropped and I lost your visuals, I thought that you… you…” She wept pathetically and Max hugged her strongly, patting on her back.

“I’m alright. Safe and sound,” he promised and kissed her on her cheek. “I’m here,” he promised, but Kaylee burst into a pitiful cry, venting out all the bottled up emotions. Nick, Judy and Isabelle continued to watch it in silence with a dreadful realization that those were merely mere milliseconds and sheer luck that allowed all of them to be standing there. If Max didn’t notice the staircase collapsing, if he slipped, if he were half a second late… Too many ifs for one short moment. Just a day after their first anniversary, to that.

Detective Barnes approached the five carefully, watching Kaylee and Max with understanding. As the bunny was pulling herself back together, he cleared his throat catching everyone’s attention.

“Thank you. If not for your quick reactions, we’d have many more casualties than just that one tiger. I believe you’ll receive official congratulations very soon as well,” he said and turned at Wilde. “Your mother has been taken to the Zootopia General Hospital. Go and talk to Wolford, he’ll take you there. Hopps, Alvarez, report to Fangmayer, she’ll assign you with tasks. Due to the Parade we have a limited number of officers. Reynolds…” He paused to see the messy, dirty wolf, red with the brick dust.

“Yes, sir?” He asked with a goofy smirk.

“You’ve handled the media before. There’s a crowd of journalists waiting over there,” the old sheep pointed behind him at the tape closing off the area. There was quite a crowd awaiting indeed. “Go and talk with them a bit. Then, go to an ambulance and have yourself checked,” he ordered and Max nodded with a smile.

“I’ll take care of it,” he promised.

“Crane? TO Reynolds, I mean? We should be going,” Barnes turned at the Technical Officer. She hugged Max stronger one more time and then, released him.

“Be safe,” she said and he nodded with a smile.

“I will,” Max promised and she followed Detective Barnes back to the truck. The four
officers watched them drive away back to monitor the Parade. As they passed by the tape closing off the area, Judy jumped up to her feet.

“Alright, people, we’ve got work to do!” She encouraged them and Max and Isabelle went toward their own destinations. As Nick stood up, Judy placed a paw on his shoulder.

“It’s going to be alright,” she promised and the fox smiled back confidently.

“I know,” he replied with a smirk that carried nothing of happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Quiet start, quiet start... Time to drop the bomb, ladies and gentlemen.
The paycheck

Chapter Summary

With the job done, one deserves respective payment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

1.50 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

James Greymane was waiting in his car, surprised with his own calmness. It might have been not his first crime, but this time, it wasn’t about the act itself; it was about the scale. And this time, the scale was rather big. The wolf browsed the contact list of the phone he had bought especially for their heist. It contained currently merely four names: “Boss”, “Ryuk”, “Diane” and “Miles”. For a moment, he struggled with thought of calling Diane, simply to kill the time. And then, he saw just the guy he had been waiting for; a tall and slim spotted hyena dressed in the black with a hoodie covering his head was making his way toward the car. He stole an apple from a stand and bit into it with a smirk. The hyena opened the passenger’s door and sat next to the wolf, putting a bag with laptop at the back seat.

“How did it go, Raymond?” James asked and smirked as his friend snarled.

“I’ve told you million times, it’s Ryuk! Yagami Ryuk!” He yelled, taking hoodie off and reattaching the three piercings on his left brow and a single, silver earring. The hyena had taken them off for the break-in only due to James’ explicit order and multiple persuasions from Diane.

“Sure thing. Your red eyes, Yagami Ryuk-sama,” Greymane mocked him with oriental accent while he handed the hyena his colored contact lenses. Ryuk put them on with a satisfied growl.

“Finally, back to normal,” he muttered. James almost laughed, but he contained it at the last moment.

“You’ve done it?”

“I got his laptop, but he came back earlier than we thought. If he comes to the flat too early, there will be no explosion and…” Ryuk paused as his companion started the engine. “Are we not waiting for the bang?”

“And what for? So that everyone can see a suspicious car driving off right after the thing blows off?” Snarled James. “We’re moving,” he said and without a word of hyena’s protest, they drove away. Before Ryuk even opened his mouth, James knew that he would protest. Rebellion was a national sport to this guy.

“I told you it’s a bad idea. We should have just shanked him…”
“And have the murder investigation,” finished for him Greymane. “Assuming that you’d be able to shank Lionel O’Dyna in first place. I don’t know if you’ve ever met him in person…”

“I haven’t.”

“… But you can’t just shank a guy who knocks a wolf with a single punch,” James reminded him. “But even if you managed to kill him and get away, we’d have a nasty investigation. And now, they’ll be only investigating the gas incident… Oh, crud,” James cursed, as they went stuck in a traffic jam caused by the Parade. He turned back hoping to find another way, but then a car stopped just behind them. The wolf sighed with frustration.

“We’re far away enough,” assured Ryuk with a smirk. He could still see the building in the distance and that was all that he needed. James didn’t like it though. He’d feel much better being on the other side of the city by the time of the explosion.

They were stuck in the traffic for next half an hour with no signs of explosion. James had reported to Diane before and was now browsing the web. Both of them realized that Lionel O’Dyna must have come back house too early, but none of them dared to say it out loud.

“Maybe we should…” Ryuk tried to suggest something, but then, a massive explosion shook the air. The hyena laughed triumphantly as they both watched the building which suddenly disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“We overdid it,” Greymane stated, a bit terrified. Ryuk shrugged.

“Maybe a little bit. Are you calling the boss now?”

“She’ll call us on our own, that’s the deal,” replied Greymane as he honked at the car before them. It looked like they were going to be stuck there for quite a while.

3.48 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

It took them nearly two hours to get through the massive traffic jams throughout the city back to Tundratown and the small flat that belonged to James Greymane. The wolf tried to open his door with the keys only to realize it was already unlocked. He glanced at Ryuk warningly and hyena’s paw wandered to the pocket of the hoodie, where he was holding the knife. James opened the door slowly only to see a female coyote in her early thirties, sitting on his bed with a laptop and cell phone, browsing Internet on both. The wolf sighed with annoyance, as he took off his jacket.

“Diane,” he muttered and she smirked.

“Hey, guys. Whole the city is talking about you, you know?” She said, as they stepped in and Ryuk closed the door with a kick.

“About us?” James asked carefully.

“About the explosions you caused, dummy. You overdid it, but they say you killed only
one mammal. You’ve got the laptop?” The coyote asked and Ryuk threw the bag on the bed. “Cool, I’ll break in and download everything before we hand it to the boss. Just in case,” she explained.

“How did you even get in?” James asked, but she did not reply, busy with the computer. “Diane?”

“Oh, with these?” She waved him house keys without even looking at him.

“And how did you get these?”

“You forgot to get them back after we broke up, remember?” She smirked and continued her work. Ryuk was watching them with utmost amusement.

“After I broke up with you and that was exactly the reason I did. Can I have them?” He asked, but she shook her head.

“Sorry, finders keepers,” she replied, hiding them back in her purse.

“Give them back,” Greymane snarled.

“Shhhh, I’m busy now!” She ignored him and continued working. Ryuk cackled, only annoying him even more. James checked the time and put the jacket on. “Already leaving? I hoped you’d make me a coffee or something.”

“I promised to help in the store at 5 pm, we’ve got stocktaking,” he explained.

“Still early for that. And you make some best coffee,” she tried to compliment him to keep him in for a little longer.

“Raymond will make you a coffee,” the wolf used Ryuk’s legal name simply to annoy him a bit. He couldn’t be the only laughing stock in the room, after all. “I’ll call you when I have any news from the boss,” he promised on his way out.

“Love you, James!” She called after him.

“Yeah, whatever,” he slammed the door. Already outside, with cold Tundratown wind blowing in his face, he reached out for cigarettes, when he felt his phone vibrating. He saw a short message from the contact named Boss: “7 pm. The office. Bring PC and DI.” James felt shivers and it certainly wasn’t the chilly air. Today was his big day.

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6.57 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

James Greymane and Diane Inesi, both dressed as elegantly as they could afford, which meant much more in the case of Diane, watched the city of Zootopia, as the glassed elevator in Reynolds Industries was taking them to one of the top levels. The coyote tried to hold his paw, but he slipped away subtly, yet firmly.
“Do you remember how you took me to the prom?” She asked with nostalgia.

“I do.”

“My parents didn’t like you one bit,” she confessed, like he hadn’t figured it out yet.

“Oh, I know. They still don’t,” the wolf shrugged. “And how this elevator remind you of the prom?”

“It just… reminds me,” she said, adjusting the bag with laptop on her shoulder. “I remember how they warned you that you’d better not drag me into any troubles,” she chuckled. “Oh, they’d be so mad if they knew!”

“Yeah,” James felt the stings of remorse and not because of her parents. He suddenly started feeling bad about dragging her, a young girl from good family with decent perspectives, into his own business, even if technically, he could have handled it on his own.

“Something wrong?” She asked, recognizing the silence of his.

“Just… nervous,” he explained and at that moment, the elevator slowed down and stopped. They were now nearly at the top of Reynolds Industries HQ. The top levels were nearly empty at this hour, but the level remained well-lit, the dead corridor bringing a thought of classic horror stories.

“Can I help you?” An armed guard, a threateningly looking rhino, approached them suddenly.

“We had an appointment with Mrs. Reynolds for 7 pm. Greymane and Inesi, our names,” the wolf explained.

“Proceed onward. Her office is at the end of the corridor,” he guided them and the two continued. James knocked on the door and, hearing an invitation, opened the door for Diane. She smiled charmingly at him as she stepped inside, followed by the wolf immediately. The office they found themselves in was designed in modernistic style, very raw and cold. The wall in front of them was all windows, by the others stood minimalistic bookcases filled with files, binders and the books. Right next to them, hanged a surrealistic painting, looking like someone had sprinkled paint of all colors over it with not much of thought. In the middle of it, written with blood was a single word: “MURDERER!”

“Yes, it is my mother’s Number 3. This same that your big brother stole together with Spencer Young after they murdered my father,” said Anastasia Reynolds, as she watched her guests. She spoke with no hint of grudge and it only disturbed James more. If there was one mammal that he was afraid of, then it was her, this cold, heartless wolf and now, he was standing in the middle of her empire.

“Good evening, Mrs. Reynolds,” James said, as they walked over to her desk and shook paws. Their boss invited them to sit down and reached for a pilot; with couple presses of a button, a small screen just next to them started rolling down and a projector began to heat up.

“Good evening. I assume that the bag is…” Mrs. Reynolds watched it curiously.

“Precisely, ma’am. The task is done,” confirmed Diane with an excited nod.

“You can speak freely. The cameras are off,” assured Anastasia Reynolds. “Before the big job, I gave you a… test task to see how you’d do. The job was simple; kill a certain mammal
without police finding you and steal his property, by any means you like. You took your time and I appreciate it. I believe you thought through everything. Now, please tell me, what do you find most important when given such a job?” She asked and James and Diane glanced at each other with concern. What’s the point of such corporate mumbo-jumbo?

“Um… getting the job done?” He asked and Mrs. Reynolds giggled, as she turned at the coyote.

“And what would you say, Diane?”

“Well… getting away with it, I guess?”

“Indeed. After all, what’s good in getting job done, if it gets you arrested, right? And if you fail, but no one even notices your attempt, you can try again and again,” Mrs. Reynolds agreed. “That’s why, even more than getting away with the thing, I appreciate discretion. And this…” Anastasia Reynolds turned on some recording and both James and Diane turned to see the news with a view of the partially collapsed building and the crowds around it; James and Ryuk’s job. “This is not discreet.”

“This is malfunction of gas installation, ma’am. And that’s what people will say,” James assured confidently.

“Maybe yes. Maybe not. The investigation will last months. A lot of questions will be asked. Someone will, sooner or later, bring out presence of Mr. Raymond Allen, so called “Ryuk Yagami”, in the building just before the explosion,” she spoke and dropped them CCTV photos of the hyena in black hoodie leaving the building around the time of the incident. James felt chills down his spine.

“I…”

“With advantage of knowing what to look for, it took me two hours to figure it out, James. But this is not the main problem here. Fault like this, I can cover. I can still pull some strings in ZPD and help you get away with it,” Anastasia Reynolds stared at him in silence, but James replied nothing.

“What is a problem then?” Diane asked finally. She could see that her friend was paralyzed with terror, his paws twitching, as he was comprehending the direction of this conversation.

“This,” said the entrepreneur and unmuted the recording. Both Diane and James listened to it carefully.

“…and in result, seven mammals were injured and one killed. The wounded ones were transported to Zootopia General Hospital, state of one them being critical, but nothing threatening the remaining. The only fatal victim, a tiger Jeffrey Fa…” At that moment, Mrs. Reynolds paused and watched terrified faces of both.

“The problem is, you killed the wrong mammal,” explained Mrs. Reynolds to them. “Not Lionel O’Dyna, the right hand of Duchess, but some poor passerby that knocked at the wrong door at the wrong time.”

“But… but… We booby-trapped O’Dyna’s flat! No one should be supposed to open the door when he wasn’t there at the time!” Protested James frantically. “He lives alone and no one has his key!”
“Did you lock the flat after leaving?” Mrs. Reynolds asked and watched the terror written all over his face with no satisfaction. “No, because you broke in. You had no means to lock it afterwards. You slipped. You demolished a building, killed a mammal and injured several others, deprived couple dozens families of their houses, brought attention of Duchess herself and yet, you didn’t make sure that it’d get the job done. And that, James, is not something that I could let slip.”

“He’s in the hospital, I could still…”

“No, you cannot,” forbid him Mrs. Reynolds firmly. “I don’t need it and the suspicions that would undoubtedly rise if he was killed in his own hospital bed. His death would be convenient… but it did serve as a test, rather than actual benefit to me. And you failed the test quite spectacularly, James,” she declared.

“So what now?” He asked coldly.

“Nothing, I suppose,” Mrs. Reynolds shrugged. “Just like you said, no one should connect the explosion with you or Ryuk. You should just live on. We’ve never met. And about the laptop, I’ll be taking it, of course. As for payment for this little favor you paid me…” Mrs. Reynolds opened a drawer and counted money. “Three grand for the effort and to cover costs. It should be just…” She said, when James Greymane snarled and jumped from his chair straight at her. He tried to grab her, but Mrs. Reynolds pinned his paw to the desk and pressed a taser against his throat, holding a finger on the release button. Diane raised from her seat, panicked.

“Hey, hey, we don’t have to refer to violence…” She held James by shoulders, but he did not even twitch.

“She’s a wise girl. You should step down and walk away while you still can,” Anastasia Reynolds advised him. The wolf stared furiously in her eyes, but she remained unimpressed. And then, he stepped back with a hateful snarl.

“Whatever. Keep it,” he snarled angrily and rushed out of them. Diane watched him with worries and then, turned at Mrs. Reynolds.

“Take the money. And for the safety of the three of you, make sure he does nothing stupid,” she suggested. Diane nodded, took the money and with quiet goodbye, followed James Greymane. She caught up with him only outside the building. He was standing in the middle of pavement with his fists clenched and shoulders twitching.

“James?”

“That stupid bitch!” He yelled, kicking down a trash bin unfortunate enough to be in his near proximity. “We could have done it! It was just a stupid accident! I could have fixed it, if she only gave me a rutting chance!” He kicked the trash bin again furiously and it turned over.

“James, please…” Diane tried to catch his paws and succeeded after a short struggle. She looked him in the eyes, although he avoided them with utmost effort. “Listen, maybe it’s better that way? She won’t be dragging you in any sketchy businesses of hers, you won’t be messing with Duchess…”

“I still need money to get Ryan from the orphanage. Without Reynolds…”

“Zootopia’s not just Reynolds. Go to Mr. Rouge. Or to social care. Or I don’t know, to a newspaper. You’d make a loud, controversial story with your name and brother. Or you could…”

“It’s not going to work,” he said firmly.
“And how do you know?!” She scolded him.

“Because I’m not going to beg for the money!” He yelled at her furiously. “I’m not going to kneel and beg! I want to earn it fairly and…”

“I don’t see how murdering someone is any fairer than asking for help,” she replied and he laughed, releasing himself from her grasp.

“Oh, that’s the problem now! When I told you first, you had no reservations!”

“You said you were going to kill a criminal, not blow up a freaking building,” she protested quietly, realizing that the few passersby there were, were staring by now. “And you killed an innocent guy and hurt others and then it’s just… it’s wrong, James.”

“Yeah, sure. Because a girl that never struggled in her life could be telling me what’s right and wrong! Go to your daddy, let him buy you a dress and, I don’t know, a car, and leave me alone,” he said angrily.

“Promise me that you won’t do anything stupid,” she demanded.

“I already did by involving you,” he replied.

“James,” she pressed firmly.

“Oh, get lost, will you finally?” The wolf snarled angrily. “Like a rutting boomerang. No matter how many times I throw you away, you always land at my feet,” he said and regretted his words immediately. As stubborn and ignorant to his complaints Diane was, he really did hurt her this time.

“Yeah, well maybe this boomerang is the one person that really cares about you!” She said angrily, but before he got a chance to defend himself, she turned on her heel and walked toward the car. She was about to get into the vehicle not even paying him a glance, when she stopped and turned around.

“When… If you fall in trouble… You know whom to call,” she said.

“Yeah, Ghostbusters…” His voice cracked. “Just get lost, will you?” He muttered and she smiled bitterly, as she got back into the car, started the engine and drove away. The wolf followed her car with sight. He never could understand that girl. She was so good for him and it kept biting her right in the ass. And yet, she kept being there for her, even after he dumped her twice… thrice, actually.

“You’ve got to find yourself a guy, Diane,” he said to himself and then, his phone vibrated.

“Yes, Ryuk?”

“How did it go?” The hyena asked excitedly. “Are we doing it?”

“O’Dyna’s alive and Reynolds stood us up,” the wolf explained bitterly.

“See? I told you to simply rut her!”

“What, without a single date?” James cracked a joke.

“Well, girls out of your league seem to have a thing for you,” Ryuk riposted with a
chuckle, but all that responded him was a long, depressing silence. “Diane?” He asked finally.

“The usual.”

“You really should pull your shit together, man, or she’s going to find someone finally,” Ryuk suggested.

“I thought you’re supposed to be our revolutionary. Screw the system, screw the officials, screw the marriages, this signature of giving yourself away to this artificial creation of the bureaucracy and so on,” James pointed out.

“Oh, I am, but the path of the revolution is meant to be followed only by the toughest of the toughest and you’re a sissy that needs the system to survive, James,” the hyena explained absolutely seriously.

“Thanks for words of encouragement,” muttered the wolf.

“One day, you might be able to break with your bindings, friend. And in meanwhile, rut Reynolds and Duchess equally. I still feel like screwing both of them over. So… what do we do?” The hyena asked and James hesitated for a moment.

“Remember that thing Miles brought up recently? We could still do it, everything’s basically settled up. Meet me tomorrow in the evening. I’ll call Miles and we’ll talk it through.”

Chapter End Notes

So, a bit of different perspective on the case and how the things go...
Chapter Summary

Insomnia

n.
Chronic inability to fall asleep or remain asleep for an adequate length of time.

6.01 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

When Judy Hopps made it to the Zootopia General Hospital, it was already late in the evening. She got to the third level jumping two stairs at the time and hurriedly found the room number that she was given before. The bunny knocked on the door and stepped in carefully. She saw Mrs. Wilde lying in the bed, connected to the disturbing number of medical apparatuses with the beeping cutting the silence in regular intervals. A single bouquet of flowers was standing in a vase on the small bedside table. Just by the bed, with his head in his paws, was sitting Nick Wilde. Hearing the door opening, he lifted his head and greeted her with a smile that carried not a sign of joy.

“Hey, Carrots,” he said and she hugged him without a single word. They lasted in it for a short, silent moment and Judy sat by him.

“How… how is she?” She asked with worries.

“The building’s walls were made of some old, cheap bricks, so the shockwave not only threw her against the wall, but casted a hailstorm of debris at her. She has major internal injuries, of both abdomen from debris and lungs from the shockwave. There was also some metal splinter sharp enough to have pierced through the skin and go stuck in the abdomen. They operated it and then, moved her here two hours ago,” Nick explained.

“So, she’ll be fine?” Judy asked hopefully, but he just shrugged.

“They say her state is critical. She has blood in her lungs, she can hardly breathe, even with the apparatus. This night will be crucial, she’ll either get better suddenly or she’ll…” he paused, with utmost effort managing for his voice to sound neutral. “I…” He clenched his fists and Judy put a paw on of them. Her warm touch was soothing his nerves.

“Just let it out,” she suggested.

“The last time I saw father, mom was taking me from the restaurant. We were celebrating the first month with actual incomes from Suit-o-pia. Back then, as we were leaving, I said not a word. At the funeral, I had no courage to walk over to the coffin. I never had a chance for a proper goodbye. And now…” A tear flowed down his eye, a first tear Judy had seen in the six years she knew him. “We were just a minute’s run from her house. I wanted to walk over to her and say hello in the morning, but I thought that it was silly and that I could just drop in after the Parade…
“You couldn’t know,” Judy tried to comfort him.

“And yet, it’s not making it any easier,” he replied bitterly. “How is it at the scene? Did you find anything yet?” He changed the subject suddenly.

“It’s… a huge mess. The building has not collapsed further, but it might any second now. They want to inspect it as much as they can and then, bring it down so that it can be rebuilt. As for the mammals that lived in there, we’ve got some impressive shout back from the mammals across city. They offered clothes, food, places to stay... No one should be left behind. About the investigation, Prosecutor’s Office delegated their man, prosecutor Julian Moore, to lead the committee of experts that will investigate the explosion. Guess who’ll represent the ZPD.”

“Shoot,” Nick shrugged.

“Max Reynolds. Isabelle Alvarez should assist him as his partner. They’ll want to speak with us soon, as we were the only ones at the top before it collapsed. And we did have the cameras with us,” Judy explained. “About the Parade itself, turns out there were some panic attacks after the explosion. Couple mammals ended up in the hospital, luckily no fatal incidents. I’ve been helping Barnes, Kaylee and others to take care of it for the entire day, though.”

“Kaylee was here just an hour ago. Barnes also dropped in. He said that he’ll be forced to postpone the party in the end,” Nick giggled, as if he had something way funnier than he did. “It’s idiotic, isn’t it? A broken gas pipe, a spark and… and you just watch everything crumbling into pieces.”

“The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart and all they can do is stare blankly,” Judy quoted shyly.

“Fitzgerald’s Great Catsby. But I’m not alone,” he recognized with a weak smile that she returned. Suddenly, he turned away and then, chuckled. “I remember… I was nine or maybe ten… and my classmates heard there’s an awesome spot at the top of Millennium Tower construction site, so after the school, we just caught a bus to Downtown. It was almost empty at the time as the works had been paused. So, Finnick, I and two other guys climbed, first the stairs, then the scaffolding. We were at like twentieth floor, when I said that the view’s pretty amazing already, so they called me chicken and dared me to climb the last few levels. They were barely started, so you had to make couple long jumps just to make it. The kid I was, I figured I’d climb to the very top and then, call them chickens if they don’t follow me, so…” Nick chuckled. “I climbed. And then, when I was supposed to make the last jump, I slipped. I don’t remember much after I hit myself on the head for the first time, but Finnick later told me that I had hit every single beam on my way down, five levels till I stopped at some platform.”

“Ouch,” Judy said only and he nodded, aching just at the very memory.

“I woke up in the hospital, couple days later as it soon appeared. Broken leg, broken arm, mild concussion. By sheer luck nothing beyond that. Mom was waiting by the bed and when I saw her face, I immediately regretted waking up.”

“Was she mad?” Judy asked.

“Oh, you can’t even imagine. She scolded me like never before in my life and trust me, that expression really stands for something. But then, in the middle of yells, her voice started
trembling, her eyes got watery and she hugged me and started to cry. I didn’t know what was happening. My first thought was that I might not be getting grounded,” he explained and Judy giggled. “That day, she told me many things that I failed or didn’t want to understand back then. I never could fully relate to how it must have felt to her, to have nearly lost her only family. Back as a kid, I did not even try. Later, I thought I did. Now I finally know I wasn’t even close,” he concluded the story.

“I remember how I broke my arm when I was a kid too,” Judy said. “I was climbing a tree, fell just on a rock sitting under it. It hurt awfully, so I went back to house for mom to see it, but parents had some important guests. When I told them that my arm hurts, dad just glanced, said “Ah, that’s just a scratch!” and said they’d look at it later, so… I took some ice, went to my room and waited.”

“With a broken arm?” Nick asked with amusement.

“They said I’m supposed to wait,” she explained. “So I waited. Whole the afternoon. I would have waited till the evening, but my moans brought some older sister of mine and she went to see what was going on. When she saw my broken arm and I told her that parents told me to wait… Oh my. She stormed into the dining room and made some real scene. If you’ve ever seen a kid scolding their parents like they were five-year-olds and them just standing with their heads low and tails between the legs…”

“I don’t think that would be possible in the Wilde household,” Nick said.

“To that day, I haven’t thought it would be possible in Hopps household either,” Judy agreed. “The long story short, my parents were apologizing to me for like a month,” Judy finished her story and both of them chuckled.

“And I remember how mom went to…” They continued to tell one another stories starring their parents, with each feeling a bit better. Judy quickly lost the sense of time, but there must have passed at least an hour, when they heard knocking at the door. Much to the surprise of the both, it was the newest ZPD employee, August Fares. The rabbit had a bandage wrapped around his head and a small bouquet in his paws.

“Good evening,” he said a bit awkwardly. “I’ve heard that your mother was injured, Detective, and…”

“It’s Nick,” the fox offered his paw.

“August,” the rabbit shook it with polite smile. “I figured, I’d pay visit. I hope that she gets well soon,” he handed the flowers to Nick and he put it in the last empty vase.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it,” Wilde assured. “Did something happen?” He pointed at the bandage covering his forehead.

“Oh, I was at the Parade, in the crowd. When the gas exploded, there was some panic, someone pushed me over, someone kicked me in the head… I woke up two or three hours ago,” he explained. “I… I’ll be going, I wouldn’t want to interrupt anything. Good bye,” he said and was about to leave, when he stopped at the doorstep. “I’ll be ordering a taxi. If either of you wanted to go back home with me…” He suggested.

“We’re alright,” Judy assured, yawning.

“You should get some rest, Carrots,” Nick disagreed.
“I’m fine.”

“It’s been a very long day and the prosecutor will probably want to see you tomorrow,” the fox argued and, as he saw how she glanced at Mrs. Wilde, he added, “I’ll be by her for the night.” Judy watched him carefully. Two hours ago, she’d not leave him for all the treasures of the world. Now, that she saw his mind was at peace, at least to some degree, it came a little easier.

“Alright,” Judy hugged the fox one more time, held Mrs. Wilde’s paw and bided the two of them goodbye. Then, she left the room with August Fares and they headed for the staircase.

“So… how bad is her state?” August asked shyly.

“Next few days will be crucial,” replied Judy. They walked down the stairs and as they passed by the first level, they heard some familiar voices. Judy stopped August and they listened.

“Ma’am, I can’t do that…” protested a doctor with whom Judy had spoken earlier that day.

“You can and you will, Mr. Blackburn,” stated firmly no one else than Lady Jennifer Tompkins, also known as The Duchess. “Whenever state of either of them changes, I want to know it immediately, even before you inform the families,” she ordered.

“I understand that Mr. O’Dyna is your close friend and associate, but Mrs. Wilde…”

“Did I not make myself clear?” Lady Tompkins interrupted him harshly. “Whatever happens, you inform me first.”

“I…”

“I consider this conversation over,” Duchess said and walked out of the room. Judy and August barely managed to climb back upstairs to not meet with the wolf, snarling something angrily to herself as she headed for the exit. Judy and August looked at each other.

“Was that Duchess? What does she want from Nick’s mother?” Asked Fares with disbelief.

“There’s one way to find out,” Judy said and the two of them followed Lady Tompkins to the car park just by the hospital. As she was opening her car, Judy called her suddenly.

“Mrs. Tompkins!” She said. The Duchess turned around and watched the two rabbits curiously.

“Ah, Detective Hopps. And your friend would be… Mr. Fares, I presume?” She guessed correctly, which clearly disturbed August. “Why do we always meet in such dramatic circumstances, Hopps?”

“Would you care to explain your actions, ma’am?” Judy demanded. The Duchess watched her curiously, but then she smirked.

“Only if you specify which actions I am to explain.”

“Involving with Mrs. Wilde’s treatment,” Judy explained.

“Oh, this. Simply my good will,” she shrugged it off.

“The last time you helped Nick out of good will, you tried to recruit him. What do you
want from him now?! Why don’t you just leave him alone?” Judy argued angrily and August suddenly felt completely out of place in the confrontation of a gangster and police detective. Duchess’s chuckle only disturbed him even more.

“Am I this untrustworthy that not even Judy Hopps believes in my good intentions? You hurt me,” she laughed, but then, her face turned serious. “Do you know how much a stay in hospital can cost sometimes? When your insurance doesn’t cover every tiny medical intervention? Hundreds of thousands. But if I know of it beforehand, I have a power to meddle in and, with creative bureaucracy, reduce the number to mere dollars. Big help with little cost,” explained the wolf.

“And what do you want in return this time?”

“Nothing, Hopps, because none of Wildes will ever know of it. I trust it to you,” she replied and, seeing Judy’s suspicions, continued. “I know how it feels to not to be able to afford for your own parents’ treatment. And besides, sometimes, you’ve just got to do the right thing and expect no praise.”

“No catch at all?”

“Sometimes, there’s no catch at all,” Duchess assured with a smile and suddenly, Judy felt ashamed. Wasn’t she the one that was supposed to be always looking for the silver linings?

“I’m sorry for the accusations,” she apologized and Lady Tompkins waved it off.

“After such a day, no wonder you’re ready to bite,” she did not mind it one bit. “Get some rest and from tomorrow, find whoever did it.”

“Excuse me?” Judy’s eyes perked up. “Do you mean…”

“Exactly what I said,” nodded the Lady.

“If you know something, you should…”

“Just talk with Lionel. He’ll repeat everything to you everything he told me, I assure,” Lady Tompkins promised. “Goodnight.”

“Lady Tompkins?” Judy called her one time more and she stopped.

“Yes?”

“No private investigations this time, could you?” Judy suggested politely, yet firmly.

“Someone blew up a building in my district. Someone nearly killed my right hand and hurt and deprived of houses the mammals that I consider myself a guardian of. I think you’ve learnt by now… I’m not a forgiving type,” Duchess stated with a spark in her eye. “Goodnight, Hopps, Fares.”

“Goodnight,” replied Judy, as they watched her drive away. August was staring at her with astonishment that made Judy feel suddenly awkward.

“Wow.”

“What?”

“That’s how you deal with Duchess? The Duchess? You’re… you’re really brave, you
“We do have history,” she explained vaguely. “Do you think she… do you think she was telling truth?”

“What Mrs. Wilde or the explosion?” August asked.

“The explosion. She seemed sincere about Nick’s mom,” Judy specified.

“It’s easy to verify and we’ll question Mr. O’Dyna anyway. All that she really changed was telling you about it. But what for?” August wondered.

“To make sure police will treat it seriously,” guessed Judy. “Which could mean… Well, let’s not read too much into it. Max Reynolds will be leading the investigation anyways,” she shrugged it off and August nodded, reaching for his phone to call for a taxi, when he saw one passing by and stopped it waving his paw. They both got inside, August said Judy’s address and they drove toward the destination in silence, lost in their thoughts. It carried them to Great Pangolin Complex, as both August and Judy turned out to be living just couple streets from one another. Fares walked her to the door.

“About the Monday, we can postpone it, if you need to. There’s a lot happening,” he suggested as they stopped. She hesitated.

“There always is a lot happening. Let’s keep the Monday. If something pops up suddenly, we’ll be thinking, alright?” Judy said and he nodded eagerly.

“Cool! So… Until Monday?” He guessed and she nodded.

“Until Monday. Goodnight, August.”

“Goodnight,” he replied, still watching Judy, as she was disappearing behind the door.

8.47 pm, Saturday, May 16, 2022

The first thing Max did after coming back home, was taking a long, hot shower. He stood in the water for long, long time, letting the steam off as he was finally realizing how exhausted he was after the long day he had behind him. As he left the bathroom, dressed in new clothes and with the refreshing feeling of having just taken a shower, he found Kaylee in the kitchen; she was just finishing making the dinner. Max watched her impressed; she still had strength to not simply settle for a defrosted pizza that he had suggested. She strained the macaron, separated it into two, obviously unequal servings while Max turned the kettle on and reached for cups.

“Tea? Orange juice?”

“Juice,” Kaylee settled and he smirked. One day, he was going to teach her to drink tea, but certainly not today.
“Then juice it is,” he found a box of juice and filled one of the cups. He opened his drawer and browsed all the teas he had, while Kaylee was putting on each plate delightfully tasting, spiced vegetables. Max was watching her without a words until she noticed and paused, a bit abashed.

“What?”

“I just… I’m so impressed that even after a day like this, you find strength to make such a dinner,” he said and she blushed with a smile. She took the plates to the table and sat there. Max brewed his tea and joined her on the opposite side of the table. They dined in silence, only interrupted by Max’s praises of the food, which Kaylee was accepting with embarrassment. He could see that something was troubling her.

“What’s wrong, darling?” He asked.

“It’s nothing…” She tried to shrug it off, but after the hundred times Max had been telling her that her feelings were important, he didn’t even have to repeat himself anymore. “I was so mad at you back then, you know? When I saw you standing there safe and sound and laughing like nothing had happened.”

“Oh, you must have been,” Max only admitted with a giggle. “I’d kill me, if I were you.”

“If I were a wolf, I swear I would,” she said and then, brought out a smile. “Sometimes, I wish I wasn’t part of ZPD, simply for that I wouldn’t have to know about everything you do at your job. Damn it, I’d sleep much more peacefully then,” she said and he chuckled, reaching for his cup of tea.

“What, already thinking of retirement?” Max joked.

“Only after you. There’s no way I’m retiring now that I know how reckless officer you are. Someone has to watch over your back,” Kaylee pointed out. “And besides, I can’t be leaving them now that they left me responsible of whole TO Section.”

“And I’ve got an exciting investigation ahead. It’s so good to live in such interesting times, isn’t it? At least we have a lot to do,” he said and Kaylee watched him doubtfully.

“Interesting times? These are hardly interesting times,” she disagreed.

“Really? Then what are they?”

“The interesting times are when maps in the history books go all flaggy and arrowy. We’re not even in the ‘factors leading to’ section, so we’re not living in the interesting times and thank Lord for that.”

“When you put it that way… Yeah, I like what we have now. The… ‘peaceful development’ section?”

“Success of equality movements?” Proposed Kaylee.

“Cultural revolution?”

“Or maybe ‘ZPD cleans up after the bad, rich officials every five minutes’? It carries the spirit of these days, doesn’t it?” She noticed cynically.

“I guess it does,” agreed Max. “Sometimes, it feels like we’re maids. We’ve just cleaned
up this mess, can we keep it clean for like, ten minutes?!” He complained and Kaylee laughed.

“But no, there’s always work,” she concluded.

“There’s always work,” Max nodded. Kaylee continued to eat, but then she paused and looked him in the eye.

“I’m glad that you’re alive,” she said and the simplicity of the statement struck him. For a moment, he had no idea what to say whatsoever.

“I’m… yeah, me too,” he only muttered awkwardly.

1.59 am, Sunday, May 17, 2022

Max reached for phone and checked the time. A minute to two in the morning. That meant that for last four hours, he had been staring at the ceiling trying to fall asleep. He closed eyes for millionth time with no effect, snarled angrily and lifted himself off the bed carefully not to wake Kaylee up. She shivered and tried to search for him with paw, so he gave her a pillow. She pressed it against herself and continued to sleep blissfully. Max walked downstairs, to the kitchen. He turned the kettle on, opened his drawer and browsed the teas searching for some sort of relaxing tisane. He had at least several kinds, as far as he remembered. Browsing through them, he glanced at the medicines lying in the corner. There wasn’t really much, but one thing brought his attention immediately; a small white box. He reached out for it and watched it carefully. Doxycycline; the antibiotic that, as a side-effect, had paused development of his genetic disease, FFI, also known as fatal familial insomnia. When doctors came up with the thing, Max was eighteen and already with the first stage triggered. He was suffering from insomnia resulting in phobias and panic attacks. The antibiotic cancelled those out and allowed Max to forget of his defect and probably the worst month of his life. A month that seemed to have lasted forever, when at times he could sleep no more than half an hour a day.

“It’s not happening again, is it?” Max asked himself. Without much of a thought, he took two doxycycline pills and swallowed them. It wouldn’t change a thing and he laughed nervously realizing it suddenly. All that he could do was taking it regularly and hoping for it to work. With this thought in his mind, he sat down in a couch and turned on TV.

“I haven’t slept for four hours in my bed. I can watch some news as well,” he muttered and switched to ZNC 24, hoping for something interesting.

“…tragedy indeed,” said Mayor Ketchikan during the conference which was held earlier that day. “Today’s tragedy and the support for its victims that has already come in immersive amounts show how wonderful and caring city we are. And I promise that we, as the city, will provide them all the support required as well,” Mayor promised with his usual, encouraging smile. Watching him on the news Max thought that this guy was born to handle the cameras.

“What support do you mean, Mayor?” Somebody asked.
“The biggest priority is to provide the victims a place to stay. The city has recently acquired newly built block of flats just quarter a mile from the place of explosion, at Elm Street 96. The victims that lost their houses and should express such wish, will be relocated there, off-rent for first twelve months. Beyond that, each family will receive financial help for the new start. They have just lost everything and we certainly do not want them to fall in debts,” Mayor elaborated.

“It sounds like a lot of money, doesn’t it? Can the city afford it with this year’s tight budget?”

“It shall be covered with the money city received from Reynolds Reparation Fund. I believe Detective Reynolds will have no reservations,” the raccoon smiled and Max could swear he winked at him. The Mayor had put a lot of effort in the campaign to cut off from Thomas Reynolds’ actions on one hand and show that he was the supporter of the Fund on the other. Even despite Max’s numerous claims of apolitical attitude, people often associated this venture as Ketchikan’s success just as much as Max’s.

The wolf listened to the interview for a few moments more, but hearing nothing that he hadn’t learnt before, he surfed through the channels again, searching for anything interesting. He stopped at another channel and another interview from today, this time with Alvarez. It must have happened just after the evacuation, as she seemed exhausted and shabby and still, more fit for magazine covers than Max would ever be in his life.

“…bizarre. Like someone wanted to take it down, but changed his mind in the middle,” Alvarez confessed. “I was just standing there, my mind trying to process the thing and then, Hopps just said: ‘Me, Wilde and Reynolds are going in. Alvarez, you make sure no one stands in the street.’ Totally cool, like she was seeing such things every day. I tried to protest, point out that the thing could fall any second, but then, Wilde looked me dead in the eye and said: ‘And that’s why we’re going in.’” Alvarez took a deep breath and shook her head.

“And they went in,” concluded the journalist.

“You can say a lot of things about Wilde and Hopps, but to me, they’re probably the best, most devoted officers I have ever…”

“Max?” Kaylee called him from the upstairs. Max stopped watching the news and turned at her. She was dressed in her sleeping gown and looked really disturbed. “Everything alright?” She asked with worries as she walked down.

“Yeah, just… watching some news,” he explained. Kaylee sat down by him and watched with him without a word. The interview with Officer Alvarez continued.

“Your new partner seems rather smooth-tongued, huh?” Kaylee pointed out, half-sleeping.

“Oh, you have to give her that. And with that pretty face of hers, she’s wasting herself being not in the PR section,” Max admitted, as they watched Alvarez concluding the interview. Kaylee yawned deeply.

“How about some sleep? We have work tomorrow,” she suggested and he forced a weak smile.

“Yeah, I guess,” he agreed and they walked up to the bedroom. Max didn’t tell her a word of how he had been trying to sleep for half of the night already, but he was quite sure that Kaylee knew anyway. She even tried to stay awake with him, but fell asleep in few moments in their cozy
bed. Max continued to watch the dark ceiling in blank, terrifying silence.
Realizations

Chapter Summary

First discoveries, first leads...

Chapter Notes

With some awful delays, but book resumes. I've had some tough time recently, but chapters should be appearing regularly for some time now :)

Welcome back!

10.17 am, Sunday, May 17, 2022

Nick leaned against the wall and watched his old family house on the other side of the street… or rather what remained of it. The top level had collapsed just when they were evacuating his mother, so there was no much left of it, just a pile of bricks at the top of the ruin of the building and a family album that he managed to save, safe at his house.

“Detective Wilde, I presume?” The fox heard a voice from behind and saw an elegantly dressed weasel in his late forties, walking over to him with. He recognized him immediately from TV.

“Indeed. Prosecutor Moore, isn’t it? Detective Hopps mentioned you,” Nick shook his paw and noted in his mind that the weasel had much stronger grasp than he’d even expect.

“Oh, I was so happy to meet her in person. Such a cute rabbit,” Prosecutor Julian Moore assured and smiled at Nick’s chuckle. And then, both looked at the damaged building. “I’ve heard that your mother’s state has improved?” He asked with genuine concern and Nick nodded slightly.

“She made it through the night. The doctors are optimistic,” he confirmed.

“What a relief. Only one victim… It’s a miracle, Detective, that after such an incident we have only one fatal victim. Most of the power of explosion must have gone through the roof and the floor and thankfully the flat under Mr. O’Dyna’s was empty at the time. Walls of the neighboring flats somehow withstood it mostly… truly, a miracle,” the prosecutor shook his head with disbelief.

“Have you seen many such explosions?” Nick asked.

“Too many, I am afraid,” Mr. Moore confirmed. “Let us join the rest, shall we?” He suggested and led the fox. Just behind the corner were waiting Judy Hopps, Max Reynolds and Isabelle Alvarez. They all greeted Nick cordially, Judy even hugged him.
“Have you even slept? How’s your mom?” She asked with worries.

“Barely. And better. Much better,” he promised and she smiled joyfully.

“What a relief. And get some decent rest today, will you?” Judy said and he nodded with an amused roll of his eyes. “This same applies to you, Max, you look like you haven’t slept for whole night,” Judy said and he only laughed nervously. Nick watched the wolf carefully for a moment and then, Prosecutor Moore cleared his throat.

“Shall we proceed?” He suggested and all the officers agreed. For starter, prosecutor walked around the building with them, continuing to ask Nick, who had lived in there for quite many years, a lot of questions about it. The fox satisfied his curiosity at most of the times and the prosecutor continued to note every single word of his in some incredible pace. After the local vision concluded, Max and Isabelle headed to the hospital to question Lionel O’Dyna and the Prosecutor invited Nick and Judy to join him to ZPD; he wanted to watch their body cameras recordings with their commentary, so he could get even more out of them.

At the station, they settled for a generally unused questioning room, to where Kaylee Reynolds delivered the recordings. The Prosecutor bought himself a coffee from automat and they took their seats. The recordings were relatively short, but the Prosecutor gathered all four from Nick, Judy, Max and Isabelle and played them simultaneously.

“I hope that you don’t mind? I like to see the big picture all at once,” he excused himself and none of them opposed; they had lived through it in the end. He paused first at the time of the explosion, when they were still watching the Parade.

“Can you tell me how it felt when the explosion went off?” He pleased.

“First, there was a sort of tingling sensation in chest. Then we heard an explosion and immediately afterwards, widows around broke,” Judy said and Nick nodded.

“I believe that would be the ordering,” he agreed. “It was surprisingly loud for being so far.”

“So I heard,” the prosecutor noted something in his notepad. He rewound the recording and listened to the explosion again and again and again. Nick and Judy listened to him carefully.

“Everything alright?”

“The explosion develops very slowly. It’s an usual indoor gas explosion,” he spoke more to himself than them. “Triggered by a spark or some small fire, not another explosion. Nothing loud, at least,” he continued to note and then, he noticed that both Nick and Judy were staring. “Oh, beg your pardon. I’m just trying to make out as much out of the explosion sound as I can. To a careful ear, it can say very much. In this example, the characteristic fwoosh noise grows gradually, which disqualifies an initial explosion setting it off,” he explained and played it again.

“Yes, I can hear it too,” Judy nodded, but Nick only shrugged.

“And I’ll take it on faith.”

“Mhm,” Prosecutor Moore continued with the recording. The next point where he stopped at was when they arrived at the scene. The prosecutor paused at the sight of the buildings and had Wilde describe exactly, how big part of it was damaged. The prosecutor made a 3D sketch, naming the flats and everything that he found important.
“Haven’t you ever thought of being an architect, sir?” Judy suggested, watching his work.

“Oh, I am, by education at least,” the weasel assured. “So, you decided that you’re going in. Why?” He asked and they watched him with confusion only to realize that it was a genuine question of his.

“It could collapse any moment and we needed to evacuate people, especially from the top levels,” Nick explained.

“What told you that it could collapse any second?” Asked Mr. Moore.

“The explosion?” Fox felt that he was stating the obvious.

“Buildings rarely fully collapse after an explosion on the top level. Did you have any evidence or was it simply caution?” He wondered.

“The long cracks. You can see them here, here and here,” Judy pointed out and Mr. Moore noted them immediately.

“And the roof was at weird angle. Anyway, we didn’t want to take chances,” he explained. The prosecutor nodded with understanding and they continued, pausing several times, asking some questions and making notes, but he stopped again when they reached the top level. He paused and watched the views of what had remained of fourth level’s corridor with tiger’s body lying in its middle. The prosecutor was analyzing it carefully, trying to make out of it as much as possible.

“So, Mr. O’Dyna was found here, just in front of Mrs. Wilde’s flat. Was he burnt very seriously?”

“Luckily for him, not. Just minor burns,” explained Judy and she saw that the prosecutor was squinting his eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“At the time of explosion, he was standing… twenty feet from his door? Unshielded in any way and yet, he was hardly burnt and quite alive… The walls aren’t really charred either. Peculiar, most peculiar…” he scratched his chin.

“Is something wrong?” Nick asked.

“I wouldn’t want to come to any conclusions before we finish. Let us proceed,” he suggested instead. He watched the rest of the recording in silence, only couple of times interrupted, pausing and asking some questions. As they finished, the prosecutor sat in silence gathering his thoughts. Nick and Judy watched him in silence.

“There’s… something unusual to this explosion,” he spoke finally. “Thank you for your insight, Detectives, I’ll make sure to…” And then, his phone rang. The weasel picked it up immediately. “Yes? Mhm. I understand. Well…” He glanced at Nick and Judy. “I don’t see a reason not to. We’ll be waiting. Goodbye,” he hung up.

“Did something happen?” Judy asked.

“Detective Reynolds has just spoken with Lionel O’Dyna, he claims to have heard some most disturbing things. Normally I wouldn’t do it, but you two are police officers, so you probably should stay and hear it too.”

“Thank you,” Judy said and Nick nodded agreeing. It was always good to know a little
Max Reynolds first paid a short visit to old Mrs. Wilde. More than happy to hear that her state has improved in last twenty-four hours, he and Alvarez went to Lionel O’Dyna’s room. The fox was sitting in his bed, giving out orders on the phone. He was in surprisingly good state; minor, bandaged burns covered right side of his body, but except for that and a sprained wrist, he seemed quite alright. Seeing his guests, the fox cut the phone call short and greeted them politely.

“My name is Detective Reynolds and this is Officer Alvarez,” Max introduced as they shook paws. He felt subtle tension between the fox and his partner, but did not comment on it. “Already on the work, Mr. O’Dyna?”

“Hospital or not, I have clubs to look after, now that the Lady is so occupied with her own duties,” he explained. “Damn doctors, telling me that I have to stay,” he muttered and Max smiled.

“And what would be that the Lady is so occupied with nowadays?” He wondered.

“Why, her wedding,” the fox explained, but wolf intuitively sensed that it wasn’t all of the truth. Not with what Judy had told them of her meeting with Duchess earlier that day and her willingness to lead her own investigation.

“But of course,” Max nodded, as if recalling the fact. “Mr. O’Dyna, could you tell me when was the last time you left your flat?” He asked and the fox hesitated for a moment.

“On Friday afternoon, I think.”

“Do you remember exact time?” Max asked and once again, he wondered.

“I was at Diamond at six, so I’d say… half past five?”

“Do you remember your last hour in the flat?” The wolf wondered.

“Nothing particular. I cooked myself some early dinner, watched TV as I ate it and then, washed the dishes, checked the time, dressed up and went to the Diamond. I wasn’t really hurrying. In fact, I was a bit early,” the fox explained.

“You said you were cooking. Were you using the gas stove?” Isabelle wondered and he nodded.

“I was, but I remember shutting gas off right after I was done,” Lionel stated confidently.

“You would smell it while eating if you left it open, wouldn’t you?” Max pointed out.

“So, you left the flat. What then? With details, unnecessary even, please.”

“I locked the door, went down passing by Chris Vega, a weasel living at the second floor,
got to the garage, drove to the Diamond. I remained there until... eleven pm, if I’m not wrong. Then I went to the Twilight, another club. The main water pipe broke, so we had to close the club for night, handle the crowd. I stayed there for whole night helping to fix situation.”

“Any idea how it happened?” Isabelle asked, but he only shrugged.

“These are pipes. That’s what they do, they break,” he replied.

“Beyond the pipe breaking, nothing particular that night?” Asked Max.

“Some drunk underage tried to attack one of the bouncers in Diamond when he refused to let him in, got his tail kicked. Politely,” he added under disapproval of the police officers. “Nothing unusual.”

“What did you do after leaving the Twilight?” Inquired Isabelle.

“I went back to Diamond to check the alcohol supplies upon Lady’s request. As I was finished there, I drove back home, but got stuck in the traffic due to the Parade. Around one, I was back at home, but before I got to my flat, Mrs. Wilde invited me for a coffee. I spent in her flat half an hour or so. When I left, at the corridor, just by my door, was standing my neighbor from third floor, Jeffrey Fangmeyer. He didn’t seem to notice me, but opened the door to my house. And then, everything exploded,” he finished.

“He opened your door? Did he have a key?” Max asked.

“Not that I know of,” shook his head the fox.

“Are you certain you locked your door when leaving?” Isabelle doubted.

“I am,” Lionel O’Dyna confirmed firmly. “I am the right paw to the Duchess. A guy that forgets to lock the door behind him wouldn’t last a week in this line of work.”

“Of course,” Alvarez agreed. “But Fangmeyer opened the door. Do you know how it could have happened, then?”

“There was some mammal I met when I was coming back. He was walking down right when I was climbing stairs. A hyena I think. Tall, dressed in black hoodie. I’m quite certain he didn’t live there.”

“We can verify that easily,” Max assured.

“Along with checking if he wasn’t simply visiting someone,” added Alvarez. “Do you remember what happened after the explosion?”

“Not. much. Wilde and Hopps arrived. Someone helped me walk downstairs, I was taken in to an ambulance,” the fox concluded and Max finished noting.

“Thank you for help, Mr. O’Dyna. I wish you quick recovery,” Reynolds assured and shook fox’s paw as he smiled bitterly.

“Thank you,” he shook his paw, then Isabelle’s, eyeing her coldly. Alvarez, a bit abashed, hurried out of the room, but O’Dyna stopped Max from following her immediately. “Detective Reynolds, I don’t think it’s an accident that Alvarez was assigned to you.”

“Oh, I know. We get along so well,” Max tried to laugh it off, but the fox seemed not
amused one bit.

“Right,” he only said and Max left, catching up with Alvarez, waiting a dozen or two feet away.

“Anything more?” She asked, but Max shook his head.

“What was that about with you and O’Dyna?” He asked instead and Alvarez sighed with shame.

“My surname. He thinks I’m like my family,” she explained. “And probably that I am working for Miss Anastasia Reynolds even now,” she said and Max watched her carefully.

“Are you?”

“To a b…” She paused, realizing that she was speaking of his sister. “To someone that watched all police officers of my family being fired and not moving a finger to help them? No, thank you,” she said with indignance. “She tried to call me several times, though,” she said and shown Max her phone with the call history; she had one accepted call from his sister a few weeks ago and then, at least five that Isabelle rejected.

“You certainly would be a valuable asset to her,” Max pointed out.

“Everyone’s an asset to her,” replied Isabelle. “O’Dyna told us some most interesting things, though, didn’t he?”

“Indeed,” nodded Reynolds. “I’ll call the prosecutor, I think he should be still at ZPD. He’ll want to know of it immediately.”

“Good idea,” Alvarez agreed and Max reached for his phone. After short, vague exchange, he hung up and informed her that they would indeed going to meet up with him, Wilde and Hopps to gather the hitherto facts.

When they arrived, Prosecutor Moore and Detectives Wilde and Hopps were waiting in the same room where they had been analyzing the videos. Max and Isabelle greeted everyone again and they reported what they had learnt from Lionel O’Dyna.

“So, according to our only eye-witness, the explosion occurred exactly at the moment when that poor tiger opened the door,” summed up the prosecutor, most disturbed. “Not only that, for a reason he can’t figure out, the door was unlocked even though he believes to be in possession of the only key. Disturbing, most disturbing, especially when we consider that the main corridor remains nearly uncharred and hardly damaged, given the power of explosion. It could imply that the initial spark was located not in the kitchen, as usually in this type of incidents, but in the entrance hallway,” the prosecutor viewed plan of O’Dyna’s flat and everyone leaned over. “Normally, gas expansion would kick the door out and scorch half of the level, killing Mr. O’Dyna right where he stood. But if it was initiated just by the door…”

“There would be no gas on that side to expand,” Judy finished for him and the prosecutor nodded.

“Precisely.”

“So the gas exploded when the door was opened. What caused it?” Nick asked.

“It could be something innocent, like static discharge… but it could be not. And it doesn’t
explain the unlocked door or a mysterious hyena seen a few moments earlier,” the prosecutor confirmed Wilde’s fears. “Given the facts, we have no choice but to consider intentional involvement of the third party in the incident. Detective Reynolds, you and Officer Alvarez should identify and find the mysterious hyena. He might be imperative to solve this mystery. I shall further analyze the explosion itself, try to recreate its course. Detectives Wilde and Hopps, once again thank you for your insight. Everyone, I believe it goes without saying that none of these facts leave the room,” the prosecutor eyed the police officers and all four of them confirmed without hesitation. “That would be all for today then. Thank you for gathering. Oh, Detective Wilde?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Can we count on Duchess to lead her own investigation?” Prosecutor Moore wondered.

“Without a doubt.”

“And could we hope that she’ll share her discoveries with police or prosecutor’s office?”

“It’s very hard to tell. Nowadays, maybe. You could try seeing her in her fiancé’s presence. He has some influence over her and he is a police officer,” Nick suggested.

“True, true indeed. Thank you,” Prosecutor Moore nodded.

“You’re welcome,” Nick replied as he and Judy left the room. Since they had no other duties today, they headed toward the exit, the fox remaining awfully silent.

“Is everything alright?” Judy asked.

“No and it won’t be, until I know for sure what really happened in there,” Nick explained and then, sighed deeply. “I’ll be going to check on mom. Wanna tag along?”

“Sure,” Judy confirmed with an encouraging smile. Seeing it, Nick could hardly even consider a chance that things would not turn out alright in the end. And then, Nick’s phone rang; an unknown number that he recognized immediately: Zootopia General Hospital.

2.19 pm, Sunday, May 17, 2022

Nick rushed through the empty hallway, climbed the stairs, three with each leap and sprinted through the corridor, having left Judy far behind. He made it to the doorstep of his mother’s room and saw her, lying in her bed and reading a book. The old vixen, seeing her guest, put it back and turned at him with a weak smile.

“See?” Nick brought out the slyest smile he had in his arsenal. “I told you that you need some serious refurbishing.” He could pretend that he hadn’t ran for last thousand feet, but he could hardly help the watery eyes or his voice cracking.

“I know you always hated the kitchen,” old vixen coughed. “Come over here, boy,” she said and Nick stepped inside. He hugged his mother gently, sighing with relief, and then, sat down
by her bed. At that moment, Judy caught up with them.

“It’s good to see you up, Mrs. Wilde,” the bunny smiled charmingly, as she walked in. She hugged the old vixen as well and took her seat by Nick.

“So… is it all gone? Did many mammals die?” Mrs. Wilde asked.

“The flat is gone. Whole floor collapsed right after we carried you out and the building will be bulldozed in a few days. It’s falling to pieces now,” Nick admitted sadly. “For victims, only Jeffrey Fangmayer died, he was standing by O’Dyna’s door when the explosion happened. Lionel and couple mammals more were hurt, but no one as seriously as you,” he explained.

“We had a lot of luck that most of third floor’s inhabitants were absent at the time. Otherwise, there’d be much more victims,” Judy added.

“Doctors said that it was a gas explosion,” Mrs. Wilde recalled.

“Everything suggests so. Max is leading the investigation along with Prosecutor Moore and they seem to have crafted their theory already,” Nick assured, not mentioning that they knew it as well; it’d be better for some suspicions not to be spread until they’d be certain of them.

“Of…” Mrs. Sylvia Wilde coughed harshly. It seemed as if breathing was still causing her troubles and all the apparatus connected to her seemed only to confirm it. “Of course,” she managed to stutter. “So… it’s all gone.”

“Not everything, mom. You’re alive,” Nick smiled at her. “We didn’t even know if you’d ever wake up and you’re up so fast. And besides…” He reached for a family album that was lying at the night table. “In all the turmoil, I managed to save it along with dad’s wedding ring.” He gave it to his mother and her eyes sparkled.

“Oh, you, crafty as ever. Don’t you tell me that you carried it out with me,” she chuckled.

“No, I simply threw it out the window. That’s why it’s so messed up,” he explained as the old vixen leafed through the pages. Some of the photos in the front were black and white, while some of the pages in the back still remained unfilled. According to the descriptions under some of these, the album had at least one-hundred years. It was completed with a genealogic tree added in the back, actualized over the years.

“It wouldn’t be the first time for it to fly,” smiled Nick’s mother. “Your father’s father dropped the backpack with it into a canyon as they travelled through the northern wilderness. It took them three days to find it back then.”

“Ancestors would be pissed if I lost it now, right?” He pointed out with a smirk.

“Oh, they would. And speaking of your ancestors… it seems like your mother has nowhere to live for the time being,” she coughed off. “It might not be a problem for now, but…”

“You can live with me. I do have an unused room waiting,” he declared immediately.


“Looks like we have our first volunteer for the clean-up!” The fox clapped enthusiastically.

“Nick, city declared they’ll prepare temporary flats for…” Mrs. Wilde tried to argue.
“Mom, don’t even pretend that you wouldn’t love to move in, even if just for a week, simply to see how I really live. Don’t try to trick me into begging,” he cut it immediately, even if with some dose of amusement. His mother rolled her eyes theatrically.

“Oh, if you insist…” She laughed under pressure of his skeptical sight. “Looks like you’ll be living with your mother again.”

“Actually, it will be you that will be living with me this time,” Nick pointed out. “And besides, Ketchikan assured they’ll rebuild our block in no time. It’s on Reynolds Fund this time and with Max’s blessing, so we can count on something lavish,” he chuckled.

“Ketchikan finds it awfully easy to spend somebody else’s money, doesn’t he?” Mrs. Wilde noticed.

“Who doesn’t? I mean, except for our rightful, untainted Carrots,” Nick ruffed fur of her head playfully and she elbowed him gently. “We’ll be spending that cash too, besides. Since all you still have are this album and your wedding rings and mayor declared he was offering financial help for all the victims.”

“Like you said, I needed refurnishing anyway,” Mrs. Wilde giggled and her eyes lowered down on the album. She never was the materialistic type; the wedding rings and her family album were the only earthly possessions that she ever really cared about. Still, it did hurt her no less than it did Nick, to think that a house where she lived for nearly forty years was unquestionably gone. The wallpaper ornaments she remembered by heart, the furniture that she could recognize by smell, the rooms that she could dance through blindly… She suddenly missed even that leaky window frame which no one could have fixed for last twenty years or the small set of disgusting china her grandmother had bought back in 1950s. Or those curtains she had just bought, they were such lovely curtains…

“Oh, I’m going for some serious shopping when they let me out,” the old vixen said and coughed again. Nick smiled and nodded.

“Yes, we are.”
It’s always sunny in Savannah Central,” crossed Judy’s mind as Nick put on his sunglasses, even though it was morning and he was browsing Internet on his phone. The bunny parked their police car at the assigned spot by the sidewalk and was about to get out when Nick stopped her.

“Carrots, find three differences,” he snickered, showing her a photo on the phone. It was a street view of Flock Street, more or less from this same point of view as they had now. Judy rolled her eyes, but decided to play the game.

“Cars are parked differently, that's for sure.”

“Mhm.”

“And it’s different time of day.”

“Yup. Alright, one more. It’s much subtler this time,” he pleased and she pretended to hesitate. She squinted her eyes, as if she were searching for the thing intensively.

“I’m not quite sure, but is something wrong with this ATM? I mean, we have it in one piece over here…” She pointed at the phone and then, lifted her head. “And there, all that remains are couple metal rods and plastic scattered all over the street?” She guessed and then, giggled. “OK, that was silly, even for you.”

“Doing my best,” he assured, as they jumped out of the car simultaneously and walked over to the crime scene. Part of the street had been closed off already and there were two police officers keeping crowds off. They greeted the reinforcements with relief.

“Hi, I’m Detective Hopps and this is Detective Wilde. We’ll be taking over,” she greeted a young horse standing by what remained of the ATM.

“Officer Hooves and that’s Officer Grizzoli in the back,” he shook her paw and then, Nick’s. A grizzly bear waved them from distance, in middle of argument with some passerby. “It looks like someone rammed an ATM in the night and then drove away with it.”

“And we mean no ram or rhino here,” Nick watched the marks carefully. Where ATM
had been few hours earlier, now were just couple metal rods sticking out. It was a generally safe
district and someone figured placing an ATM not built into a wall would be reasonable in this case.
It looked like they had been proved wrong the hard way.

“So, they smashed it coming from this way,” Judy figured. “They collected the ATM
itself and most of the debris… but missed some in the middle of the street. It was dark when they
did it.”

“A beaten-up car wouldn’t bring so much attention in the middle of the night,” Nick
agreed. “That must have left the mark and quite a noise. Are the forensics on their way?” He asked
and Officer Hooves nodded.

“I called them right away.”

“Any witnesses?” Judy hoped.

“Nothing, unfortunately. We were called by some random passerby almost an hour ago,
but it was long done. Some old lady claimed she had been woken up by some loud noise around
three am, so we assume it’s the…” Officer Hooves paused, as wind blew a brand new banknote
right at Nick’s feet. The fox took it in his paw and watched carefully.

“IA series twenty-dollar banknotes. They’re flying everywhere around,” Hooves
explained as Nick packed it into a plastic evidence pack and put in the back pocket.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to follow the car with these given today’s wind,” the fox
muttered. “What about CCTV?”

“None at this street.”

“And in near proximity?” Judy asked and realized that he hadn’t checked it. “Go and look
around, OK?” She suggested and he nodded. He walked over to his partner and the two of them
walked two separate ways, searching for any cameras. Judy turned at Nick.

“What do you say?”

“It’s clumsy. Lots of plastic remains scattered, which suggests it could have been their
first time. We should check nearby junkyards and car repair shops for recently wrecked cars.”

“Forensics will help estimate the model. Speaking of whom…” Judy turned and they saw
a forensic team walking over; two otters and two armadillos. They exchanged pleasantries with
Nick and Judy and got to their jobs. A few moments later, Hooves and Grizzoli came back with
two separate lists.

“We found couple shops with CCTV around, there’s also monitoring system at Oak
Street,” Hooves explained as they handed them over to the detectives. “We’ve got another call
from Sousten Street. They need back up, so if it’s all…”

“We’re not keeping you, thank you for your help,” Judy assured. She and Nick bided
them goodbye and Hooves and Grizzoli got to their car and drove away. The fox took the lists from
his partner and read through them.

“I’ll find their phone numbers and try calling them, you check on the forensics,” he
suggested and she walked over to one of the otters, Wendy Otterton.

“How does it look?” She wondered, as the otter was securing some evidence.
“They were trying to clean up evidence, but rather clumsily. This isn’t from ATM,” the otter raised with pincers a piece of car paint and put it in a bag.

“So we’re looking for a dark green, messed up car, a pick-up most likely, given that they must have taken an ATM with themselves,” Judy guessed.

“It seems so,” confirmed the forensic. “From the marks, it seems that the car hit the ATM with speed of approximately sixty or seventy mph. It was some tough one, it seems to have made it out rather undamaged.”

“Good to know. Do…” Judy paused, seeing that Nick was waving at her. “Please keep me posted if you find anything important,” she pleased and ran over to the fox. “What is it?”

“I checked on couple of these stores, they promised to send over the recordings. In meanwhile, I found that the ATM belonged to Zootopia National Bank and they redirected me to the official responsible. Guess who’s that.”

“Not a clue,” Judy shrugged.

“Our old friend, Aveline Hawkes,” he said and it took Judy only couple seconds to recall the name. It was the vixen whom Donovan Jacobs had tried to frame into assisting him in theft of painting “Number 3”, but Nick and Judy quickly delivered proof of her innocence.

“What a coincidence,” the bunny said with surprise.

“Isn’t it? She agreed to meet us in her office at ten, it’s just couple streets away.”

“See? I told you to keep her number,” Judy smirked and Nick elbowed her playfully.

“Yeah, right,” he glanced at his phone. “We have an hour or so. If the forensics guys can handle the scene, we could go around the streets, ask for access to any private CCTVs. What do you say?”

“Let’s just tell them that we’ll be gone,” Judy agreed. They checked on the team, searched for more stores with exterior cameras and then, quadrant to ten, headed to Zootopia National Bank.

10.01 am, Monday, May 18, 2022

Some mammals simply don’t mind the years passing by and Aveline Hawkes seemed like a perfect example of such. Four years after they last met, the vixen greeted Nick with most enthusiastic hug and Judy with a firm handshake, completely unchanged from how they remembered her.

“Detectives! Oh, so much has happened since we last met! Please come to my office, we’ll discuss everything!” She guided them enthusiastically. “Mark, make sure no one disturbs me for the next hour!” She called some associate of hers and guided them to her humble, but cozy
“I’d offer you a coffee, but stuff that Mr. Spencer buys is simply hideous,” the vixen apologized as she offered them seats. “And before we start, I must say that I’m very disappointed in you, Detective Wilde!” She scolded the fox, who found himself dumbfounded.

“For… what reason, if I may ask?”

“Four years and you have not called me even once!” She scolded him and, before he got a chance to defend himself, laughed. “Oh, I don’t mind, really. After the type of men I’ve been through I’m not looking for any serious relationships either. I certainly wouldn’t mind if we had a coffee together once in a while, though. For old times’ sake.”

“I promise I’ll do better,” Nick assured and eyed at Judy. She could barely contain a laugh and he didn’t even blame her. Not often would they meet someone that could abash him as easily as that vixen. “So, whole four years. How this time passes by, right?”

“I promise I’ll do better,” Nick assured and eyed at Judy. She could barely contain a laugh and he didn’t even blame her. Not often would they meet someone that could abash him as easily as that vixen. “So, whole four years. How this time passes by, right?”

“Indeed. My Lily grows up so fast and there happens so much… And then there was that gas explosion just couple streets away from my house… I saw your mother in the hospital, I hope she recovers quickly,” the vixen wished.

“She woke up just yesterday and doctors say she recovers faster than not one thirty-year-old would. Any of your friends suffered too?” Nick asked.

“Yes, Lio. Lionel O’Dyna, I mean,” Aveline explained. “He is my older sister’s husband. Was, actually…” The vixen paused for a moment and then, shook her head. “We’ve got work to do, don’t we? I heard that one of our ATMs was rammed.”

“Indeed, sometime in the night.”

“I’m not suspect this time, am I?” Joked the vixen.

“Unless you have any fake ID cards with you, I don’t think so,” Nick assured and she chuckled. “But to the business. Were there any disturbing incidents with this or any other ATMs in recent past?”

“Nothing outstanding, I’m afraid. We’ve got couple incidents from recent weeks. I’ll gather the files and recordings and send them over.”

“Last week’s recording from the destroyed ATM would be most desired as well,” Judy added.

“It can be done.”

“So, can you tell me how you learnt of the ATM missing?” Nick wondered.

“I received a call from security in the night, at… at 3.12 exactly,” Aveline Hawkes checked on her phone. “These new ATMs suffered from frequent connectivity errors, so they found it not very alarming. New… they’re actually ancient, rebought from some small bankrupt bank. They intended to check on them in the morning, but you called me with the news beforehand.”

“Do these ATMs have any security system that could help us out?” Judy hoped.

“Except for internal surveillance, hardly, I am afraid. After that bizarre case of our stolen safe, I insisted on installing GPS trackers and it was done in some shady districts… but not just at
the brink of Downtown. This one didn’t have even a paint bomb… you know, the thing that blows destroying all the banknotes when someone tries to get inside by force. I guess they’ll learn now. They always learn the hard way,” Aveline shook her head with disappointment.

“What about the banknotes inside? How much money can we talk about?” Judy asked and Aveline browsed through her files.

“According to system, that certain ATM had 1,567 five-dollars, 3,193 ten-dollars, 6,470 twenty-dollars and 1,070 fifty-dollars, which gives us in total 222,665 Zootopia dollars in 12,300 banknotes. While we have no systems of tracking the banknotes by their serial numbers… It would be quite an invigilation, wouldn’t it?” The vixen pointed out.

“Orwellian, truly,” Nick agreed.

“Yeah. Still, we seem to have one promising lead in form of IA734-series twenty-dollar bills. They were just printed and delivered to National Bank ATMs just two weeks ago. Out of ten thousand that exist, about five-hundred are in the streets, while at least 2,527 were in the stolen ATM. The remaining are in possession of National Bank and I already requested for them to be frozen, which should be done within hours.”

“They make quarter of the stolen cash,” Judy pointed out. “And if they’re freshly printed, they’ll be easily recognizable too.”

“Sounds like a good lead indeed, if only they decide to use them,” Nick agreed. “Is there anything more like that?”

“We’ve also had nearly thousand ten-dollar banknotes of HG197 series, but they’re from 2013 and there are several thousands of them still in use currently. Unless you find their high intensity in a certain region, it’d be a false lead anyway.”

“True,” Judy agreed. “And what about fifty-dollar banknotes? Not many ATMs offer those,” she pointed out and Aveline Hawkes browsed through her files.

“Indeed, but I don’t see much of tendency about these, they’re mostly some old…” She paused for a moment. “Well, we have something in here. HT984 series, nearly three hundred banknotes in the ATM. Fifty-dollars flow very little, so should they try to get rid of them, it could bring attention. But again, they have couple years as well and there are plenty of them in the streets now. I’ll send you over the list of all the numbers, obviously, for you to further analyze.”

“It would be for the best,” assured Judy. “Well then, it looks like these banknotes will be our best lead. “Thank you for your help and please send the materials over as soon as possible,” she said and all three stood from their seats. Aveline Hawkes shook a paw of each of them vigorously.

“Of course. Should anything new pop up, I’ll inform you right away,” she promised. “Good luck, Detectives.”

“Oh, we need no luck,” Nick said with smirk. “Until next time, Miss Hawkes.”

“I’ll be waiting,” the vixen winked at him and the Detectives left the office. As they were walking out of the bank, Judy couldn’t help but giggle.

“You should call her, you know?” She pointed out.

“Huh?”
“Ask her out for a coffee. She doesn’t seem interested in anything serious, but staying in touch would be nice. And besides... you never know,” she explained.

“I guess you’re right. I’ll call her when there won’t be so much happening.”

“There always is a lot happening,” Judy pointed out and he just shrugged.

At the crime scene, the forensics team had just finished their job; having secured all the evidence, they sent it over to the laboratory to further examine it for the exact results. For now they knew that it was a dark green pick-up car that rammed into the ATM from north. It was where the ATM camera was pointing too, but neither of them were too optimistic about it. With no much else to do for now, they went to search for any CCTV in nearby that could have caught their burglars. They soon proved to be lucky with a small pawn shop just south of the incident’s location. Its owner, an elderly goat named Yuri Kozlowski, had invested heavily in the security and monitoring and one of the cameras had a decent view on the street. With not much crowd, he left the shop to his assistant, while he took Nick and Judy to a quite cluttered backroom. They started watching the camera recordings from the previous night. At 3.14 am, they saw a wreck of a pickup, Hanza Crawler to be precise, passing in hurry. Nick paused at the frame where they could see whole the car clearly. It was a pickup with something in about size of an ATM covered with tarpaulin in its back.

“No plates,” Judy pointed out. “Very clever or very stupid.”

“A bit of both, I suppose,” Nick agreed.

“And... no, it’s got to be a coincidence. Check who’s at the passenger’s seat,” the bunny said and the fox raised his eyebrows. He could hardly see the driver, but the passenger was some middle sized mammal in a dark hoodie covering his head. He could still see enough of the muzzle to recognize the species, though.

“A hyena in black hoodie,” muttered Nick with shiver. “Oh, he’d better pray that it is merely a coincidence.”

“Mr. Kozlowski, could we take the recording?” Judy asked.

“Of course, I have a copy anyway,” the old goat assured and handed to the police officers. They thanked him for his assistance and came back to the car to report that they were looking for a demolished green Hanza Crawler, probably with no plates, last seen at 3.14 am at the Pack street. The rest of day they spent driving around the mechanic workshops and junkyards, hoping for any lead, but found themselves completely unsuccessful. At 5 pm, with several decent leads established, they called it a day. Nick rode Judy back to her place.

“So, today’s the date?” He asked with a smirk.

“Yes, it is. Wish me luck.”

“No sociopaths this time! Or niggards, boors or...” Judy slammed the door and he chuckled. “Oh, don’t thank me!” He drove away with laughter and Judy rolled her eyes. Nick being Nick, what more to say.
August arrived on time with precision of an average atomic clock; the moment Judy’s phone clock switched from 6.59 to 7.00, it rang announcing August. Judy picked it up immediately.

“Hey!”

“Hello. I’m waiting outside,” August said.

“Alright, I’m coming!” She hung up, left the flat having closed it beforehand and walked outside to see August waiting by a small car of his. He was dressed in a dark grey suit with a black tie with a matching umbrella that he was now using as a cane. On his head, he had a brown hat with a black stripe, which he took off, bowing cordially, as he watched her delighted.

“Good evening, Judy,” he said and she chuckled, as she walked downstairs.

“Good evening, August,” she allowed him to kiss her paw, enjoying this theatric cordiality of his. “Have you ever watched Singing in the Rain?” She wondered and he jerked his head curiously.

“I might have, why?”

“Because you do look like Gene Kelly,” she pointed out with amusement and he chuckled along with her.

“I just might,” he admitted as he went over to open the door for her. They took their seats and August started the engine with a sigh of excitement. “It’s a lovely evening, isn’t it? Even though it might rain.”

“Oh, I hope not,” Judy said. “How is your head? Feeling fine after Saturday?” She worried, still remembering how they met in the hospital two days earlier.

“Quite alright. You need more than a kick to the head to count me out,” he assured, glancing at her shyly. “Wonderful dress, by the way. Red fits you so well.”

“Oh, it’s a… A funny story, actually. I got it on job,” she explained.

“Really? Do tell,” he encouraged her.

“We were trying to bait thieves of Haddock’s Number 3. Really, one of the most interesting cases I’ve ever had. Anyways, we went undercover and I took personality of Susan White, a social activist attending the party at Mr. Rouge’s. They painted me white, bought me this dress and sent in to look for anything suspicious. I could hardly recognize myself. And then I got drugged and kidnapped. It was a funny night,” Judy explained.

“You have very interesting definition of funny, you know,” he pointed out with admiration, as Judy noticed with surprise. Most bucks that she had ever met were displeased of this venturing, fearless side of hers. They found it disturbing that a doe like her seemed more brave than them. It didn’t seem to put him off one bit though. Quite oppositely, he was purely impressed, seeing in her what he might have just lacked.
“People rarely think it’s funny,” Judy replied.

“People aren’t very clever, are they?” He replied and blushed abashed, probably worrying if he wasn’t too bold with this suggestion of his, but she only laughed.

“People? No. Persons? Yes. You’ve seen it for yourself back at the parade, didn’t you?” She pointed out.

“Felt it, even,” he agreed with relief and fell silent for a moment, as he parked the car. “It’s over here,” he said, as he left the car and opened the door for her. He shown her way toward a small restaurant “Albion” settled in a small, quiet street just north of Downtown, hardly noticeable if you didn’t know what to look for. August gave his name to the waiter and they were guided toward a table for two just by a window with lovely view on Rainforest District. They were handed their menus, but instead of browsing it, Judy took her time to look around the place; it was elegant, designed in modern fashion and a quartet playing a serenade somewhere in the background only concluded the feeling of expensiveness. Even though the place remained hard to find, it was full and yet, August somehow managed to find them probably one of the best tables with some lovely view on the Rainforest District in just a week and he never gave her a sensation of being particularly rich. And then, Judy realized that she had drifted away while August was watching her expectantly.

“Oh, sorry, you were saying something,” she apologized awkwardly, but he dismissed it with a chuckle.

“I hope you do like it,” he repeated himself.

“Wonderful first expression for sure. And the view is pretty amazing. I’ve been wondering how you found such a place so quickly,” she explained.

“Oh, well. There’s a will, there’s a way,” he smiled slyly and suddenly, he reminded her of Nick; he was as resourceful as the fox and he did enjoy the aura of mystery just was well.

“Indeed,” he agreed and glanced down at the menus they had been served. “We probably should choose something, not keep the waiter waiting.”

“True,” Judy agreed and looked down realizing that there were no prices by the dishes, but merely few seconds passed when she felt his sight at her. He thought she didn’t see, but he chose the dish in mere seconds and then, kept glancing at her in silence, simply enjoying the view. It was cute, really, how he thought she wasn’t noticing and how shy he seemed about such an innocent act. Soon, she put the card down and the waiter appeared by them out of nowhere ready to take their order. As the waiter asked about their choice of wine, August turned at Judy.

“We could come back by a taxi,” he suggested and she nodded, liking the idea. She watched August as, with waiter’s support, he was choosing the wine. He was speaking slowly, as if studying every single word of his, which implied that he hadn’t been in such a place many times before. Maybe it was even his first time. The thought brought out a smile out of her. He seemed so pure, so innocent.

“What is it?” August asked as he noticed the way she was watching him.

“Oh, I just….” She giggled. “I’ve just been wondering how one finds a place like this.”

“I took my time, searched around. You can find anything if you look for it hard enough,” he explained with a smile. “That’s what you do in your line of work, after all.”
“Our line of work, actually,” Judy corrected him. “Speaking of which… how did it happen that you ended up in ZPD?”

“I guess…” He paused, a bit embarrassed. “I guess you could say you inspired me,” he explained.

“Did I?” She seemed actually flattered, which he took with relief.

“I think so. It happened right after Mr. Reynolds was murdered. When you vanished and people started blaming Nick, I could hardly believe it could be him, so curious as I am, I started digging. Soon, I found leaked photos of the crime scene with someone’s comments on them and… Is it really a subject for such a lovely evening?” He doubted.

“Don’t you dare to interrupt now!” Judy protested.

“OK… So, in one of the photos was marked a place where Nick Wilde must have laid for a moment after fainting at the crime scene. It was marked with wounds of his torso, but it lacked any blood from paws or jaws, which didn’t quite add up. If he had torn Reynolds’ throat with jaws, he’d have blood in them. If he had painted a bloody writing, he’d have his paw stained, both of which that photo excluded.”

“What did you do about it?” Judy asked curiously. She had never heard of anyone bringing it up.

“I managed to contact Officer Hamilton and she promised to look into it, but then, on the next day whole the situation unwrapped. With Nick proved innocent, I saw no more need to bring the matter up, but I still felt like a fool. I had figured it out before them all. If I was anyhow associated with ZPD, I could make an actual difference. And then, I thought of you and how you gave your best to help Nick. And I thought… maybe I could help too? No bragging, but I’m rather clever. I easily notice patterns and consequences of causes and effects. I really could do more good in ZPD than sitting behind a desk in some corporation. So I searched… and found.”

“In the Precinct 1,” Judy concluded with a smile.

“The only chances we miss are the ones we don’t take,” he said with a confident smirk, which suddenly reminded her of Nick. And then, the waiter brought their food and wine, pouring each of them a glass. They raised a usual toast and proceeded onto delightful dinner, intertwining smoothly with further discussions, plenty of good jokes and generally good time. With no watch, Judy could not tell how much time they spent there, but she never gave it much thought as the evening was a pure pleasure. He was a wonderful speaker with talent for telling most interesting stories and ridiculous anecdotes. In his views, he mixed positive straight-forward attitude with a healthy dash of cynicism. And foremost, he was a wonderful listener, really attentive to the details and memorizing nearly everything.

“And then, I jumped toward Antiery and…” Judy tried to sip a bit of wine only to find her glass empty.

“Care for more wine?” Offered August, but she refused immediately.

“Oh, I think I’ve had just enough. I’m already a bit… jumpy,” she giggled. “Where did I…”

“Nick knocked out, you jumping at Antiery,” he said.

“Right. And then, he caught he in the midair smashed into the ground and then grabbed
again and tossed in the street, right under a car. I woke up in an ambulance with both Antiery and Rockfield having got away. That’s the time I probably screwed up the most, I think. Not counting the Nighthowlers, obviously,” she snickered.

“We’re not talking about the Nighthowlers,” he reminded her and watched Judy yawning.

“Tired, are we?”

“Mhm,” she nodded sleepily.

“Then I guess we should get you home. We still have work tomorrow,” he smiled.

“Oh, don’t even remind me. Nick will be so angry…”

“Because you had fun?”

“Because I’ll be hangover and sleepy. He won’t let me live,” she complained.

“He’s not this cruel, is he?”

“To me? Oh, you have no idea. What hour do we even have?”

“Um…” August checked time, but being tipsy just like her, it took him a bit longer than usual. “Oh, you don’t want to know.”

“Even if I ask really nicely?”

“Ten to midnight,” August told her.

“Oh gosh. Time passes quick in good company, huh?”

“Indeed,” Fares agreed and, with polite gesture, called their waiter, asking to bring the paycheck. He paid with a card, not giving Judy a chance to see how much he paid for their dinner and they walked outside. It was raining heavily.

“Good thing you brought an umbrella! What a deluge!” Judy admitted.

“Really?” He looked her in the eyes. “Where I’m standing, the sun is shining bright all over the place,” he said and then, she elbowed him playfully.

“Sweet cheese and crackers, you did watch that movie!” She said as he laughed opened his umbrella, jumped into the rain with a dancing step and began to sing.

“I’m singing in the rain! Just singing in the rain! What a glorious feeling! I’m happy again…” He sang and then, he offered a paw for her to join him and she nearly did, when they heard a terrified scream in the distance. Both of them froze, their ears perked up and heads turned towards the distress, all the joviality of the moment gone.

“Come on!” She rushed forward and August followed her immediately, barely keeping up with her. They turned into some narrow street to see two mammals struggling; a young sheep trying to keep her purse, as a massive badger was tearing it out of her paws.

“Help! Thief!” She yelled, as the thief tore it out of her paws and started running away.

“Call the police!” Judy yelled, throwing August her miniature purse and leaving him far behind. She could see the badger dashing into some alley and followed him there immediately only to see that he had been waiting for her just behind the corner. His punch only cut through the air as
she jumped away just on time, but then, she slipped on a puddle just perfectly for him to kick her in the chest tossing her against a wall. Judy huffed, as she fell on the ground completely breathless. The badger smirked and stepped toward her with bad intentions written all over her face. Judy tried to lift herself, but found no air in her lungs, no strength in her muscles. And then, she heard someone’s shout.

“Hey! Why don’t you pick someone your size?!” Yelled August from the entrance to the alley. He was holding his umbrella down like a cane, allowing the rain to soak him, his fist clenched and fury in his eyes. The badger watched him carefully.

“What, you?” He laughed.

“If you don’t mind!” He yelled back fiercely. As ridiculous as the thought must have been, Judy realized that such fury didn’t suit him one bit. The thief watched August carefully.

“Are there twenty more of you in there or are you this stupid, dandy?” The badger turned now at Fares, allowing Judy to take her time and breathe again.

“Oh, just me, but tell you what…” August threw his umbrella in the air and caught it at the other end, pointing it at the thief like a sword. “I will be just enough!” He declared. Judy watched him with disbelief. Was he really able to handle… And then, she saw it. She saw how his arms shook. She saw how he was smiling nervously and clenching his teeth. She saw the fear in his eyes. She recognized the façade of his, which meant to cover the horror in his heart. She was sure that he would snap and run away any second now, but he did not. Why, what was… And then, he glanced at her, trying to keep up the smile. Of course, her. To protect her, he could either scare the thief off or provoke him. Since the former seemed impossible…

“Oh, we’ll see!” The badger ran toward him and August clenched his umbrella a little stronger.

“Run, Judy!” The buck yelled, just before the thief reached him. August stepped away just in time. Badger’s blow knocked the hat off his head, but it did not hit him and the rabbit slammed him in the back with an umbrella. It only snapped in half, though, with the badger not really noticing it. Fares jumped back from the blind kick of his, blocked blindly the first punch. And then, another badger’s fist hit him straight in the eye, tossing against a wall. Before August even slipped to the ground, the thief held him by throat, choking.

“You’ll be just enough, dandy?!” Laughed the badger, as he was crushing rabbit’s throat. But Judy did not watch their fight helplessly. She was running toward them, cursing in her mind as she was slowly realizing that she’d never make it in time. If she only had any sort of a weapon, a tranquilizer, tazer or even a stone to throw… But she could only run, already knowing that she’d be too late.

“Stop!” She yelled, as the badger was rising his fist to hit August again. And then, he swayed, released his grip and fell into the mud with couple darts sticking out of his shoulder. Judy saw blue and red lights shining in the distance and two officers charging into the alley. August Fares fell on all fours with his heart hammering as he was trying to breath again. Judy fell to her knees just be him at this same moment that the police officers made it to them.

“August!” She held him be shoulders and watched him catching every single breath in shock. His shoulders and arms were shaking and not even the rain could cover his terrified cry. “August, it’s all right. Everything’s alright. You were very, very brave. Can you hear me?” She kept talking, but he seemed not to be noticing. She touched his chin and raised his head gently, so their eyes met. His eyes seemed terrifyingly blank, as if he was staring not at her, but the void
beyond her. He was terrified to the bone, only now realizing that he had nearly died. “August, it’s over. You’re safe now,” she promised with her voice trembling and then, he hugged her suddenly, nearly knocking her over. He was crying pitifully. “You were very brave, August. Very, very brave,” Judy continued to assure him, but she realized that even though he made it out alive, something had cracked in the buck she had just met and it was her fault.

1.27 am, Tuesday, May 19, 2022

They returned to the silence, both of them weary, wet, muddy and completely sober. August had spoken not a word for last hour as he just held onto his broken umbrella and Judy did not dare to interrupt the silence either. The police officers drove them back to Judy’s flat, since August lived just nearby. As they stopped, Judy tried to offer for that she’d walk him off to his place, but he just dismissed it with a weak, sad smile.

“Good night, Judy,” he mumbled only, as they stood by her door.

“Good night. Remember to put ice on the eye,” she said and he muttered something incoherently in reply. Judy watched him turning back, walking down the stairs and trying to swing his broken umbrella. He dropped it in the nearest trash bin and soon disappeared behind a corner, leaving in Judy’s heart an empty feeling.

Chapter End Notes

It’s your fault.
8.00 am, Tuesday, May 19, 2022

Nick picked Judy up from her house as usually. She took her seat, took her coffee without a word and sipped it slowly. The fox watched her with worries, as they rejoined the traffic. She looked weary, but not hungover. But foremost, she looked downcast.

“That bad?” He asked with worries and she just shuddered.

“I… He was such a wonderful guy. Charming, attentive… And then, I… I don’t want to talk about it for now,” she cut it shortly and the fox nodded with understanding.

“OK, tell me when you’re ready. But I assume he’s coming today?”

“I hope,” she only said, which made Nick even more curious. They arrived to the station around the usual time and for a short moment, they even saw August passing somewhere in the distance; he had a bandage all over his left eye, as if someone had punched him real hard. Nick raised his eyebrows curiously, but did not ask a thing, knowing that he wouldn’t receive an answer anyway. He even spared any snarky jokes, seeing how low she was.

After the roll call, Judy went for a talk with Chief in his office on the subject that was an open secret to everyone. In meanwhile, Nick came back to their box trying to rehearse everything they had learnt of their stolen ATM, when Kaylee appeared.

“Hey! Judy’s talking with Chief?” She guessed.

“Mhm, about the yesterday, most likely. Did August tell you what happened?” He asked.

“Judy said not a word, huh? Neither did August, I’m afraid… but he really didn’t have to, actually. It turns out whole the incident was described in some police report. I can send it over, if…”

“I’d rather hear it from her,” Nick assured.

“Oh, of course. Before you get angry with August, though, you should know that it wasn’t Judy that hit him,” Kaylee told him and fox raised his eyebrows curiously.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure so that everyone knows. The truth puts them both in much better light than conjectures,” the bunny declared and Nick smirked.

“To the job, Director of Gossip Section,” he ordered.

“Oh, I’m on it!” Kaylee saluted half-jokingly. “But before I go, I’ve found something. I’ve send you some ZooTube video on the messenger,” she said and Nick pushed his seat aside,
allowing her to search it for herself. She was much faster with PCs than him, anyways. “Oh, no, no. Your computer, your account, your job. If I don’t look to it, no one will. That’s how you get the security breaches,” she refused and Nick drove back to the desk, admitting his fault. He found the link from Kaylee in the description and played it. The video shown a demolished green Hanza pick-up with something on its back, covered with tarpaulin; just the car they were looking for. Somebody was recording it, laughing at car’s devastated front, as if it crashed into something. Due to reflects of light, the camera failed to catch any facial details of the driver. Nick checked the date; it had been published today in the night.

“That’s our car,” he said, rather impressed.

“I thought so. According to the signboards, the recording was taken at the Sousten Street, just by the coast, which gives us a general idea where the car had gone. I’ve also checked profile of the guy that uploaded it. It’s connected with his Zoobook, so it wasn’t that hard. Turns out he’s some white collar in the Downtown, you should have no problem getting him to talk,” she said and Nick viewed guy’s profile. There was even his phone number in there.

“We’ll get to it right away. Thanks, Kaylee, that was quick.”

“Oh, Internet has all the answers. You just need to ask the right questions,” she smirked and was on her way. Nick watched the video again and watched the signboards. He recognized the place and just like Kaylee said, it took place at the Sousten Street.

“Hey, what’s that? Is it our car?” Judy was standing right behind him, watching the paused video.

“Yeah, someone recorded it at Sousten Street. How did it go with Chief?” He asked, but she only shrugged.

“A minor reprimand, nothing unusual. Sousten Street? That’s rather far,” she changed the subject.

“And it doesn’t look like he was driving much farther. I’ll call the guy that recorded it and we’ll try to learn more,” Nick said and Judy agreed with a smile. It looked like they were on a good path.

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10.57 am, Tuesday, May 19, 2022

Michael Vitalis, a deer working as a white-collar in one of Downtown’s massive skyscrapers, agreed to meeting with Nick and Judy with quite an enthusiasm, to the point where he insisted that they’d drive him in the back of a police car to the place where he made his recording. Sitting behind the bars, he was making selfies while making silly faces. To Judy’s amusement, Nick joined him somewhere in the halfway to the sighting scene.
“Goofs,” she muttered rolling her eyes. They parked at the Sousten Street and Michael Vitalis took them to the crime scene.

“OK, so I was recording from here, I think,” the deer pointed stopped at the spot. It was just before half past three, when that pickup made its way toward us. I and my two buddies were coming back from a party when we saw the car approaching. It was driving slowly and looked ridiculously, so I grabbed my phone, but then the driver sped up and passed by us hurriedly.

“Did you see the driver?” Judy hoped and he nodded.

“I did, but I don’t remember his species. A canine, I think? Some coyote or a fox?” Guessed Michael. “Can’t you see it on the video?”

“Light reflexes,” explained Nick.

“Oh, right. Anyways, he passed by us quickly and turned in one of the streets. Um…” He hesitated, trying to recall exactly. “That one. He turned left. I’m sure because I never saw the passenger,” he explained. After that, they discussed for few minutes more, but the deer couldn’t tell them anything useful beyond what he already had. As a reward for help, Michael Vitalis took a selfie with them and they drove him back to his workplace in Downtown. Then, they returned to the last sightseeing of their car.

“It couldn’t have driven much farther. In a car demolished like theirs, they certainly wanted to be off streets as quickly as possible,” Nick said confidently.

“We should look for any workshops in nearby…” Judy suggested and paused, as they turned into the street their car was supposed to have turned into. Just two hundred feet farther, was a big car repair shop. Judy smiled. “Well, well, well.”

“We can’t not walk over. Say hello,” smirked the fox.

“Find a certain pickup,” Judy added slyly, as they walked over. She noticed two cameras in the front with the view on the street and the yard that she’d certainly love to ask about. As they came inside, one of the workers, a weasel, walked over.

“Can I help you, officers?”

“Detectives Hopps and Wilde. We’d like to speak with the owner,” Judy explained and a massive brown bear appeared right behind their backs.

“That’d be me. What is it?” He asked harshly.

“We’d simply like to ask couple questions, Mr. …”

“Miles. Leonard Miles,” the bear introduced himself. “What is it?” He asked, as he walked over to block their path inside the workshop.

“We are looking for a certain car, a Hanza pickup. Have you or any of your workers, by any chance, seen such a car in recent months?” Nick asked. Mr. Miles glanced at his workers and then, he answered.

“No.”

“Are you one hundred percent sure? You could check the register…”
“I’m sure,” the bear snarled with annoyance.

“Does the workshop ever work at the night hours?” Nick asked.

“Never.”

“And weekends?”

“Never.”

“Which workers have access to the workshop? I mean, is there anyone that could just open it without your knowledge and perform any works in here?” Wondered Judy.

“I’m not required to give information about my workers’ responsibilities,” replied Miles and it was the longest statement they had heard from him this far. At least they knew that he could build complex sentences.

“Sharing such information would be greatly convenient, though,” Nick assured, but saw no reaction. How to avoid a gentle suggestion? Stay blunt. Nick coughed off. “I’d like to ask about the cameras on the outside…”

“Mockups for thieves.”

“Sir, I can recognize a mockup and I am quite certain that these are not…” The fox disagreed.

“Not connected. Not recording.”

“Why would that be so?” Judy asked suspiciously.

“No need.”

“Then why to buy the cameras?” Nick doubted.

“For security,” replied Miles. The fox glanced at his partner. They both felt like they were talking to an unusually blunt statue rather than an actual bear and neither saw much of purpose in it anymore.

“Mr. Miles, we’d like to look around the place…” Judy tried to step forward, but the bear thumped standing in her way.

“No warrant, no looking around,” he stated firmly. Judy sighed and walked to the exit, but Nick stood still.

“Oh, I’m sure we can reach an agreement,” the fox brought his attention again. “We wouldn’t want to be forced to apply for a warrant when we could simply solve this politely…”

“Goodbye,” replied the bear firmly.

“Or we’ll do it by warrant, if you insist so badly. Please realize that it only gives you a day more…” Nick’s eyes sparked as he saw change in bear’s face. “Unless that’s what you need? Just a day more?” He wondered, but Miles said nothing, staring in him coldly.

“Goodbye…”

“Sir, could you tell me what is that?” Judy asked, waving at him with something from
side of the workshop. She certainly wasn’t anywhere near the exit, merely used Nick’s talk to look around.

“A banknote,” Miles said after a moment of hesitation.

“A twenty-dollar banknote which, according to our intel…” Judy checked something on the phone hurriedly. “…was stolen with a certain ATM just two days ago, using a car we’ve asked about. So, it’s not just a banknote, Mr. Miles. It’s a probable cause,” the bunny smiled. “We’ll have a look around, shall we?” She asked. The bear snarled as he stepped forward, but both Nick and Judy jumped back with their tranquilizers ready. Other workers were watching the scene full of tension.

“There really is no need, but we can also make it assaulting an officer if you insist,” Nick warned and then, proceeded to call backup. Mr. Miles stood back reluctantly in gesture of surrender. Soon, couple police cars arrived and six officers began to search whole the workshop carefully. Except for the banknote, they didn’t find anything promising though and questioning Miles’ employees gave them nothing as well. What brought their attention was a repair station in the back; unused, as Miles claimed, but cleaned very carefully very recently.

“It looks as if it was cleaned yesterday, Mr. Miles,” Judy said to the bear who was now watching every step of hers.

“We do nothing here. It’s clean,” he said. Judy wanted to look around, but she decided to call the forensics instead. She wouldn’t want to waltz in and destroy any evidence that could have remained. As the forensics team took care of it, Nick was sitting in Miles’ office.

“Found anything?” Judy asked, closing the door behind her. They were there alone, with no Miles or any of his workers overhearing. Nick was browsing the bear’s computer, searching through old files.

“Not really,” explained Nick. “I’m checking camera recordings. You wouldn’t imagine, it turns out those legitimate cameras happen to be plugged in for the most of time. Except they had been disconnected…”

“Let me guess. On Sunday night?”


“Not a sign of our car?” Judy’s ears dropped.

“Not a sign. And last time I checked we had no recent thefts of Hanza pickups…” Nick’s phone buzzed and he read a text. “And Flash says that according to DMV, neither Miles or any of his family have ever had any Hanzas.”

“Tough luck,” Judy muttered. “The forensics don’t seem too optimistic either. The place seems swept clean just recently,” she huffed with annoyance. “They were here. Just two days ago, that car was in there, there’s no way…”

“Well, try proving that,” Nick said, just as annoyed as her. “By the way, you don’t have the list of stolen banknotes on your phone, do you?” He watched her with amused suspicion.

“It was IA734 series. I couldn’t say that out loud in front of him, could I? They’d never use them then and they’re our best lead,” she pointed out with a smirk.
“Sly bunny,” he congratulated.

“Found anything more in there, sly fox?”

“Nope, Miles made sure that I wouldn’t,” Nick stood from the chair with surrender. “Let’s get back to the workshop and see if others found anything promising,” he suggested with not much hope.

Facts justified Nick’s skepticism eventually. Except for the banknote which Judy caught, they had found nothing. The most promising lead they were was some green paint dust and plastic secured by forensic team in the back. No careful search or discussion with workers had brought anything valuable to the spotlight, which was even more frustrating given that Nick and Judy were almost sure that it was where their car must have vanished.

“We need to search Miles’ house and check his call log. We have a decent basis to suspect him,” Judy said, as they were driving away from the yard. Miles was watching them in silence.

“Yeah, we have drunk deer’s confession supported by a video on ZooTube and a banknote,” Nick said with almost no sarcasm. “That’s more than we generally have at this stage anyway.”

“We also need to check nearby junkyards… All city junkyards, if there’s need, actually. And we should ask around Miles’ neighbors, check if he has any shady friends,” continued Judy.

“Ask the neighbors of the car repair park, maybe they heard something in the night,” added Nick. “And his workers. I might be able to get to one of them, see if he knows anything.”

“That’s quite a lot for one day. What time do we have?” Judy asked.

“Almost six. Let’s call it a day, Carrots. Warrant to search the house will take time and everything else can wait a day or two. I’d want to say hello to mother, she must be dying of boredom. And besides, you’re supposed to drop in and say how the date went,” Nick pointed out and Judy turned a little paler.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she muttered. She wished she could forget. Or for that at least August could forget that cursed night.

5.41 pm, Tuesday, May 19, 2022

Diane Inesi knocked on the door of a small convenience store despite the “Closed” plate hanging right in front of her face. One of the workers recognized her and opened the door for her.

“Hey, Diane, come inside,” a tall gazelle invited her in.

“Hey, Liz, is James still here?” Diane hoped.
“Still chasing that sorry tail? Girl, you should find yourself some decent guy finally,” the gazelle said only to see Diane’s theatric roll of eyes. “No, he’s not here. Actually, I think he quit the job.”

“What?!”

“He talked with boss today, packed his stuff and left in the morning. No idea what he’s doing, though…” But Diane was already running straight toward James’ flat. She knew what he was doing; he was being a freaking moron that needed someone to put him back together. And who was going to do it, if not Diane?

She stormed inside his flat, nearly kicking down the entrance door, only to see James and Ryuk sitting on the floor and doing something with some metal boxes.

“James, you idiot! What do you think you’re doing…” She paused in the middle of the sentence seeing that the boxes were, for the fact, full of banknotes, some of them brand new. “What the… What the hell is this?!” She yelled.


“I mean… what the! How?! When?! What did you…”

“Won a lottery,” James assured, not daring to look her in the eyes, though. Diane sat down on bed just above him, flabbergasted.

“More like you robbed a bank,” she muttered.

“Nah, won it fair and square,” sworn James, but she didn’t believe him at all. “Really, it was lying in the street.”

“Ryuk, where did you get it?” Diane asked.

“Oh, don’t tell her. I heard you took money from Reynolds. Are you working for her now?” James asked and then, Diane took from purse Reynolds’ reward and threw it in Greymane’s face.

“It’s yours. Go blow up another house now, could you?” She riposted angrily. “What in the world have you done?” She asked the hyena.

“Hey, this time we weren’t on the news,” snickered Ryuk. “Miles really was right, it was a good idea. Nice and quiet, no attention.”

“Miles?” Diane asked and then, she realized what they meant. “Oh no, please don’t tell me that you robbed that ATM… Of course it were you. Idiots,” she muttered, but then slipped down on the floor just next to James. “So what now? How much money are we sitting at?” With nothing else left to do, she asked casually.

“Two hundred thousand, maybe three. We’re still counting,” said James ignoring the easiness with which she switched from slandering them to offering help. He did so mostly because for the matter of speaking, they really needed her.

“What will you do about it now? Legalize it, divide it, grab Ryan and drive away?” Guessed Diane, but he shook his head.

“One hundred thousand won’t be enough for what I plan, even if we’ll be able to legalize
everything. Officially, I’ll have kidnapped the kid. Someone might connect me with ATM and bombing in time. We need new identities, documents and cash for a nice quiet start somewhere where no one will ask awkward questions.”

“Robbing another ATM is pointless. You can’t sink three hundred stolen grand in Zootopia unnoticed, leave alone any bigger money,” Diane pointed out.

“We don’t plan to. Actually, we’re preparing something bigger and we won’t need more than fifty thousand for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, stick around with us and find out. But tell you what, it carries spirit of Reynolds’ original idea,” smirked James and Ryuk giggled ominously. Diane sighed with frustration.

“I don’t even know what was… Alright, don’t tell me if you don’t want to,” she surrendered. “Now, about that ATM money. Where are you going to keep it?”

“I thought my house would be a good idea…”

“They’ll find it immediately if they search this place. You need some safe spot. Someplace from where you can take it whenever you want without bringing too much attention,” Diane suggested instead and for a moment, they all fell silent, wondering.

“Bury it somewhere?” Suggested Ryuk.

“And dig it out every time you need?” James doubted. “We need somewhere safe.”

“A bank,” said Diane.

“Now, that’s idiotic,” refused the wolf.

“I don’t mean bank account. I mean a safe-deposit box. You own one after your brother, right?” Diane pointed out.

“Yeah, grandpa put in there some family junk and no one bothered to take it out,” he agreed.

“But you’re covering for it?” Diane said.

“For last ten years,” he agreed.

“Then put the money in there. Pack them in packs of thousand dollars. Give couple to me, I’ll launder them. You keep the rest and draw one once in a while,” Diane suggested.

“I won’t fit all of it in there.”

“Just fifty thousand. You said you don’t need anymore,” she pointed out.

“What about the rest?”

“We’ll get rid of it,” Diane suggested. “Oh, one thing more. Get back to job. You can’t quit just like that. People will start wondering where you have your money from.”

“OK… But I won’t have time to…”
“You will, don’t you worry about it. And about laundering the money, give me couple days. I’ll figure out something relatively safe. For now, don’t you dare using it,” she suggested and none of them really argued. They discussed a little more while Diane helped them counting money and they separated it one-thousand-packs. As they were done, Ryuk slipped away without a word, probably going to drink himself to unconsciousness in order to celebrate, while Diane and James remained alone with over two hundred small packs of stolen money.

“Why are you helping us?” He asked finally.

“Because without me, you’d get caught in a week,” Diane explained and he smirked.

“Oh, it wouldn’t be that bad. And it’s not answering my question,” he said and she hesitated for a moment.

“You know the answer,” she noticed. It’s not that she was ashamed of her feelings. It was just that they had been ridiculed for so many times by him and everyone else that it hurt simply to spell them out. And so, she gave him only this little of an answer. James dwelled on it in silence.

“It’s ridiculous, you know? How you walk back into my life yet again after everything I’ve told you this far like nothing had happened,” he said finally.

“Like a rutting boomerang,” she reminded him with a bitter smile and he chuckled nervously.

“I’m sorry about it, I just…” And then, she placed her head on his shoulder. He cuddled her and they sat in silence for a short moment. “I’ve discussed things with Miles and Ryuk. We all agreed to keep you away from the thing and so… we don’t want you to have any contact with the stolen money. Nothing that they could really prove to you. We’ll go by your advices, but we’re doing all the dirty work. Me and Ryuk, actually. They have their eyes on Miles now, it seems.”

“It’s alright,” Diane assured. “James, James, what are you dragging yourself into?”

“Changing my life,” he replied. “The one way that I know,” he said bitterly and to that, she found no words. They sat in silence for long minutes until Diane began to drift away and James suggested she should be going home.

“Oh, there’s plenty of room for me in that bed of yours, isn’t there?” She pointed out teasingly, but stood up and headed to the door, aware that he’d rather kick her out than let anything happen. “I love you, James.”

“Me t…” He stuttered. “Sometimes I feel like I don’t deserve you, you know.”

“Have I ever cared?” She asked, leaving him with an answer just as obvious as it was frustrating.

8.25 pm, Tuesday, May 19, 2022
After a heartwarming visit to Nick’s mother in the hospital, Nick and Judy ended up in his house. Since neither of them had really eaten for last ten hours, they ordered some pizza and ate it with TV playing some movie in the background that neither of them really paid attention to. Nick went to wash the dishes and Judy accompanied him.

“What are you doing?” She asked finally.

“Huh?” Nick said, confounded as he put down the second plate. “Washing dishes?” He guessed, fearing that he was just about to learn that in fact, he was not.

“That’s not washing! You’re just sweeping them!” Judy stood by the sink. She had to use a stool to reach it, which looked rather ridiculous. “You should use dish soap, not just sweep them with a wet rubber!” She protested.

“Hey, I’ve been doing it for always and you haven’t…” Nick argued only to pause, realizing that he made it only worse. “They’re clean?”

“For always? Seriously?” Judy sighed deeply. “Come, let me show you how to wash dishes. You grab the soap dish…” she stole it before Nick could reach for it, just like the rubber. “Put some of it on the rubber and grab the wet dish…” Judy paused, watching him expectantly. With most theatric roll of eyes Nick could perform, he handed her the plate he had just washed.

“There you go.”

“And now, you wipe it clean. Carefully and from both sides. Leave it perfectly clean. Now, you rinse it…”

“I can handle that much…” Nick tried to take the plate from her, but it danced between her paws only to slip away from him.

“And then, you leave it to dry,” the bunny handed a clean plate to Nick and he put it at the drier slowly, as she nodded with approval. “Now another one. You…”

“I can handle it,” he took the plate from her. He washed it very, very slowly and very carefully and Judy watched the act with satisfaction. Nick put down a clean plate and dropped the rubber. “I think I’ve spent thrice the water. And million times the soap.”

“The cutlery,” Judy pointed out and fox reached for it with an annoyed sigh.

“Next time, I’m buying you plastic cutlery and cardboard plates,” he declared and she chuckled.

“Oh, you wouldn’t dare.”

“And plastic cups for children. With carrots painted on them,” he threatened.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Consider it done,” he replied ominously, as he finished washing the cutlery. With Nick’s education on washing dishes complete, they came back to the living room, where the TV was still playing, Nick feeling embarrassed and Judy most amused.

“So… how did the date go?” Nick asked finally and their moods momentarily switched
sides. Judy sighed deeply and reached for the pilot in order to mute the TV. She was collecting her thoughts for a long, silent moment, while Nick waited patiently.

“It was excellent from the start. He was so polite and so silly when he picked me up… like he had been reenacting some 30s movie and yet, enjoyed himself perfectly and so was I,” she started. “He took me to some nice restaurant just on the brink of Downtown and Rainforest District, had a table with the nicest view. The sort of restaurant where there are no prices and menu is full of some fancy names I had to Zoogle secretly just to know what I was ordering. But tell you what, it was wonderful, just like wine,” she explained and Nick chuckled.

“He never struck me as a rich type,” he pointed out.

“He’s not. I don’t even want to know what that evening did to his wallet,” Judy shivered at the very thought. “But anyways, the date was wonderful. It’s so pleasant with August, he’s so bright and witty… and he’s a wonderful listener too. And I didn’t scare him off!” She exclaimed proudly and he laughed. “Oh, you know what I mean! Whenever I tell someone about my work, how being kidnapped was fun in the end or something like that, most bucks are terrified. And August was the first guy that isn’t an adrenaline junkie or ZPD officer, but listens to my stories with admiration, not horror.”

“A gem, isn’t he?” Nick pointed out.

“Yeah…” Judy sighed deeply.

“So, what happened?”

“We walked out in excellent moods, slightly drunk. August was about to order a taxi when we heard some screams. We followed, saw a thief and then I went… you know.”

“Judy on Duty?” Joked the fox and she nodded without a hint of amusement.

“Judy on Duty. I threw my phone to August, told him to call police and I chased the guy on my own. I only didn’t expect he’d be waiting just behind another corner. He knocked me out, seemed really pissed off than a rabbit was trying to arrest him. And then, before he did anything to me, August came, mocking the guy.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah. He was standing there, terrified with his paws shaking. But he was standing right there, laughing at the thief and the moment he charged at him, August yelled at me to run. I did, of course, but straight at them, not away.”

“Don’t tell me August beat him,” Nick disbelieved.

“I wish he did. No, the thief kicked his tail and he kicked it hard. He would kill him if not for…” Judy trembled.

“You?” Nick hoped, but she only bridled in frustration.

“Oh, as if. Police that August called. They arrived just on time,” she muttered. “If it were just for me, he’d be long dead. We both probably would be,” she let her head down. “They checked on us and, seeing that we were bruised at best, drove us to Great Pangolin. August was still in shock when he walked me home and… and I think that I broke something in him. I almost had him killed and he was so terrified and he must hate me now and…” She hid her face in paws and her shoulders shuddered, but then, Nick embraced her, trying to find the right words. It’d be easy to
just suggest gently to give August some breathing space and for her to leave him alone. It’d be even too easy, but then, it would be just as wrong.

“You can’t be sure until you talk to him, you know,” the fox said finally and Judy looked up at him slowly.

“Do you really think there’s even a point?” She doubted. “Because of me…”

“We’re still friends only because you found me under that bridge, back at the Nighthowlers case,” he interrupted a bit impatiently. “Talk to him. Make it clear. Maybe he hates you or maybe he just needs you.”

“I… I suppose you’re right,” Judy admitted reluctantly, just dreading at the thought.

“Am I ever not?” Nick asked and, seeing her skeptical sight, rolled his eyes. “Oh, shut it, will you?”

“I never said a word,” she chuckled.

“Yeah, well…”

“I never said a word,” she repeated and he didn’t argue anymore. For a moment, they said nothing, but watched TV in silence. “Thanks,” Judy said finally.

“Oh, save it for after you talk with August,” he smirked and Judy shivered with dread, much to his amusement. How much she’d give to be through with it.

Chapter End Notes

10.57 am, Wednesday, May 20, 2022

August Fares followed his new friends’ advice and avoided the coffee machine in the main hall, suiting for the one by the boxes instead. He waited patiently for hot water to fill his cup, as he adjusted the bandage on his eye, simply to check if it still ached as he touched it. With result no different than expected and his cup full, he grabbed his coffee and turned to go back to the Rabbit Hole (also called Technical Officers’ office), but almost fell at someone instead. It turned out to be no one else than Judy Hopps.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Judy apologized, even if it was her uniform that he stained.

“I am sorry, I didn’t see you. You know, the… blind spot,” he pointed at his eye with embarrassment and they stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“So… um… how is it?” Judy asked finally.

“Oh, I can’t see a thing for the moment. Y’know, the bandage,” he said only.

“Right.”

“Yeah...” he nodded and again, there fell silence. Air conditioner was humming shyly in the background, as each of them was trying to find the right words to say.

“So, um...”

“I’ve got to go. See you later!” August forced a smile as he passed by her.

“August!” Judy called him and he stopped mid-step. “See you on Friday at Tom’s?”

“Um… yeah? Yeah,” he confirmed, not too convinced.

“OK,” she only said, before he disappeared at the staircase and rushed back to the Rabbit Hole. He stopped only just before the door, leaned against the wall and tried to calm his breath and paw shaking before he’d get back. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, only to shiver as he felt the cold paws clenching at his throat yet again, crushing them while he was trying to...

“Are you alright?” Asked someone and August startled, only to realize it was Kaylee.
“Oh, um, hi. Yes, I am quite...” He paused for a second under pressure of her sight. “...not.”

“Monday?” She guessed and August nodded.

“How do you...”

“The police report covers it... more or less,” Kaylee explained.

“Of course. Then you know what an idiot I was,” August said bitterly.

“Oh, a very brave one,” Kaylee replied and continued after he scoffed resentfully. “The kind of idiot that took some heavy beating in Judy’s name and might have saved her life.”

“I... I suppose,” he didn’t sound too proud of it. Or rather he was, but it wasn’t changing the trauma.

“You know...” Kaylee leaned against the wall and rolled up one of her sleeves showing an old, nasty scar. August gasped in horror and she chuckled. “When I was just starting, we had an incident in the Dungeon. Long story short, Max, my then-questionable friend and now husband, was induced with Nighthowlers, went berserk and smeared me all over the Dungeon, not killing me only thanks to Nick and Judy arriving on time.”

“Wow. I... I didn’t know...” August stuttered watching her arm with horror.

“Oh, you should see the bitemarks on my chest,” Kaylee giggled. “Anyways, after I woke up, I soon learnt that with some things, you simply cannot cope on your own. You need something to help you vent. To me, these were therapy, Judy, Nick and eventually, Max. Given what you were through, I figured you could need something like this... a way to vent,” she said, offering him some business card. August took it and read carefully.

“Self-defense course?” He asked, intrigued.

“We went there after Antiery left Max at medical leave for half a year. They have some great beginner courses too,” Kaylee explained with a smile. “And a rabbit in a big city needs to know how to defend himself.”

“I... Yeah, I guess he does,” August nodded. “Are they expensive?”

“Yeah, but I can talk to Chief about it. He gladly covers these courses to his subordinates, even civilian workers,” Kaylee assured.

“That’s... really nice. Thank you, Kaylee,” he said, putting the business card in the pocket.

“That’s what friends do,” she shrugged. “Oh, do you fancy some nerdy evening at our house today? Neither we or Mike have plans for the evening and we figured we’d order some pizza, settle in our living room and start a new Wastelands game. What do you say?”

“Gladly,” he assured. “I hope I won’t be a ball and chain, though...”

“Hardly. You should have seen Max when he was starting,” Kaylee dismissed it. “We’ll be going there straight from the station, so... Oh ho,” the rabbit paused and both of them turned to see Officer Alvarez coming at them. She was alone, the corridor was empty and she seemed to have business with Kaylee, as she was going straight for her.
“Alvarez,” Kaylee said so coldly that August could swear his coffee temperature dropped couple degrees just at the single word of hers.

“Technical Officer Trust-Issues,” replied Isabelle Alvarez mockingly. “You’re staring at me like I was stealing your husband at the very moment,” she giggled adorably and August was actually impressed at how natural and kind this laughter of her seemed.

“Attempting for sure…”

“And we just get on so well… Oh, you wouldn’t imagine!” Isabelle had waited patiently for her response only to interrupt her in the middle of it. Kaylee was now electrifying her with sight, which she didn’t seem to notice. “Anyways, Max asked me to give you this. Dunno what’s in there, he wouldn’t tell,” she handed Kaylee some pendrive. Kaylee watched it curiously and put it in a pocket.

“Anything else? Or could you be gone now?” Asked the rabbit.

“Nah, I guess that will be all. Boop,” she tapped Kaylee’s nose and giggled, as she walked away. Kaylee was staring at her in hateful silence and August was just standing, feeling the tension only dropping as the wolf left.

“You must hate her,” he muttered.

“Despise is the word,” Kaylee corrected him. “And soon, she’ll cross the line and she is going to regret it,” she said so ominously that August actually feared for Isabelle.

“Try not to hurt her?” He suggested.

“Only her pride,” promised Kaylee, but when he tried to learn anything more, she wouldn’t tell him a word more. Whatever it was she had planned, she wanted for it to be a surprise to her.

6.57 pm, Friday, May 22, 2022

Judy had arrived at Tom’s bar just on time. It was already full, mostly of Precinct 1 officers, but there were couple faces that she did not recognize. She searched for Nick and saw him waving at her from one of the bigger tables. She took the only remaining free seat, which Nick had been keeping just for her and said hello to everyone by the table; him, Max, Kaylee and Isabelle sitting at wolf’s both sides and Jason Wolford next to Alvarez. She hadn’t seen Max for a while, as he was always busy in recent days, but only now did she notice that he looked really weary, as if he hadn’t been sleeping for couple days.

“Hey, just on time,” Nick greeted her as the bunny kept looking around.

“August’s here, if you’re still looking for him,” Jason winked at her jokingly and laughed.
“No, I… where’s Barnes?” She only asked.

“He said it starts at 7 pm. There’s still a minute left.” Max explained him and in meanwhile, Nick ordered a beer for Judy. Everyone else already had theirs waiting. Just as it arrived to the table, the entrance door opened and Detective Barnes stepped in, dressed in official uniform. Everyone stood up and began to clap. Judy noticed even Chief Bogo, who usually did not attend such parties. Barnes stopped, looked at the crowd a bit awkwardly.

“Oh, God, you all came,” he said and everyone laughed. Max walked over to his partner and guided him to the seat they had made for him; an old leather chair made into a throne, with his wife on his right and his first partner, old Serena Harrington who came back to Zootopia just for this celebration., on the left. Everyone was still clapping and Barnes seemed a bit underwhelmed. Max came back to Kaylee and gave Barnes thumbs up. Slowly, the applause ceased.

“I didn’t knew there were that many of you,” Barnes said and heard some laughs. “Charlie, you’re still alive. I swear I saw your necrology.”

“I aim to disappoint,” replied some old pig.

“So… Ekhm…” Barnes coughed off. “Thank you all for coming. I really appreciate it…” He paused, looking for words. He glanced at his wife and she whispered something. “Thirty years. That’s hella lot of time. I’ve seen three generations of cops… the ones that taught me…” he glanced at Serena Harrington, his first partner. “…my equals, some toughest mammals I’ve ever got to know…” his sight turned at Chief Bogo sitting by his table. “And the young ones that came after us,” he turned at Max and the wolf waved cheerfully. “I’m still shocked at how many of you actually came, even if I know how many could not be here today. And each of you, present and gone, made me proud to wear this uniform. I know I claimed I’d rather die than retire and I put much effort into not making it to the retirement age… But mind’s willing, even when the body’s not capable anymore. So I shall move to the Zootopia Police Academy to train young officers to protect the citizens. So that the generation that comes next, is just as brave, just and vigilant as the ones I’ve had honor to meet. Thank you,” Barnes concluded and everyone clapped, several enthusiastic shouts abrupted. The old sheep was watching everyone with a weak, proud smile, still not believing how many would actually come. And then, Chief Bogo stood up.

“Victor, my old pal. I know how you hate cakes…” He started.

“And your wife didn’t agree for strip teasers,” added Serena Harrington with a giggle.

“…so we thought we’d celebrate with a toast. But then again, I know what you think of wine and champagne…”

“Fuzzy perfumes…” muttered Barnes to everyone’s amusement.

“And I wouldn’t be forcing the children to chug their beers all at once, which left us with only one toast possible. Tom, if you’d mind!” Bogo called the bartender and he appeared with a trolley carrying nearly hundred glasses of whiskey of different sizes and several bowls of ice. With help of several police officers, they spread drinks to everyone rather quickly. Bogo raised his glass in the air.

“To Victor Barnes!” He said.

“To Victor Barnes!” Everyone applauded and emptied their glasses at once. Some coughing abruptly, most dramatic from August Fares, who received a certainly-not-rabbit-sized glass and yet, bravely chugged it all at once. Someone mercifully gave him some coke to clear his
throat and several police veterans shook their heads with disapproval.

“Kids these days,” someone muttered causing another wave of laughter. With the toast raised, everyone sat down and the usual fun at Tom’s began. Mammals were walking over to Barnes from time to time, giving him their best wishes and exchanging pleasantries, but except for it, the evening differed no much from the usual, not counting thrice the crowd, that is. The discussion at Judy’s table was vivid as ever, now with Wolford complaining about his newest case and Fangmeyer walking over to cut in and clarify how badly her partner had screwed it up. Both rabbits remained rather silent, despite others’ best tries. When Tom turned on some country music and Barnes and his wife and couple other pairs began to dance, some time later, Judy stood from her table.

“I’ll go find August,” she said and Nick nodded with approval.

“Quickly, before he drinks himself unconscious!” Wolford laughed, more inebriated than anyone by their table. Judy just ignored it and found August sitting with couple other cops, struggling to find his place in their conversation.

“How about a breath of fresh air?” Judy suggested. He glanced at his nearly full mug, companions with whom he hardly exchanged a word, shrugged and put on his jacket.

“Sure thing,” he agreed. They walked outside and leaned against the wall where the roof still sheltered them; it was sipping.

“I should have brought an umbrella,” he managed to joke, but Judy could feel how uneasy he was.

“August, about that evening…” Judy clenched her fists. “I’m sorry. I screwed everything up. I shouldn’t have followed that thief and…”

“You did the right thing,” August disagreed.

“No, you did,” she refused. “We were both drunk. I should have called cops and waited. Never ever should I have chased after him, drunk, with no gun and no support. What was I going to do once I’d catch up? Ask him to give the purse back?”

“You…” August tried to protest, but found himself speechless.

“It was reckless of me. I risked both our lives just so I could sate my ego and for this, I apologize,” Judy said. “I hurt you and if I could make it up anyhow… Just say a word.” She let her head down and August stood in silence for a while.

“I guess I should be mad at you,” he said finally. “After you left me and charged forward, I wanted to be mad at you, but I couldn’t. I only worried. And when I found you, I was terrified, but not of that goon. Well… not only. He did scare me half to death,” he admitted reluctantly and with no pride. “But more than that, I was scared that he’d hurt you. And even though I realized what I dragged myself into only after he choked me… I’d do it again, you know. If it meant protecting you,” he declared and Judy smiled weakly.

“So you’re not…”

“I can’t really be mad at you,” he shrugged. “And about making up… you could pick a place now,” he suggested, forcing a weak smile.

“You mean… you want to…”
“Why not?” August shrugged. “I mean, if I was boring you to death…”

“No, no, absolutely not!” Judy protested suddenly. “Quite oppositely, I’d love to meet again! And this time, my treat!”

“Oh, that’s…”

“Hey, I’m supposed to be making up for the previous time, right? So, my treat!” Judy demanded enthusiastically. August wanted to protest, but then he realized there’d be no point in doing so.

“Alright, then. We’re settled,” he agreed just as enthusiastically and then, he shivered with cold. “Maybe we should go back inside?”

“Mhm, good idea,” she agreed and they came inside. Only then, did Judy realize that they’d have to sit by different tables and it saddened her. She waved him goodbye and promised they’d catch up again later, to which he agreed with excitement. Judy took her place by Nick.

“How did it go?” He asked.

“Better than expected. We’ll be going for a second date,” she said.

“Wow, a high-score,” he pointed out jokingly and she elbowed him. He laughed, but there was something bitter about it. Before she had a chance to ask him about it, though, a song finished Max stood up, bringing everyone’s attention. He was holding a half-empty mug in his paw.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he started officially, bringing everyone’s attention with his loud voice resonating across the room. “Victor Barnes was my first partner when I joined ZPD. When I saw him first, I thought, what an old goat. Sheep, actually, whatever. When Barnes saw me first, the first thing he did was going to Chief Bogo and requesting another partner. Anyone but me. So, there go our first expressions,” Max chuckled along with the crowd. “On this same day, I was almost killed, had Barnes knock me down with a sucker punch and then, give me a tour around the city graveyard, to meet his previous partners,” Max shivered, still remembering well his first day on duty. “Back then, Barnes made me promise… he made me promise that some year, at the day of his retirement, I’d be there, in uniform or civvies. And, Barnes… I declare proudly that I’ve kept my word. It would be not possible without you. Without your teachings or you saving my tail more times than I’d care to admit. Ladies and gentlemen…” Max raised his glass. “To Victor Barnes! The greatest officer I’ve had honor to serve with!”

“To Victor Barnes!” Everyone exclaimed joyfully and soon, the music and dances resumed. Kaylee who for whole the evening was sitting silently, barely touching her beer, excused herself and headed for the bathroom. A few moments later, Isabelle stood from the table just as well.

“How did it go?” Judy asked, recognizing that Max was a bit tense too.

“Um… yeah. I think so,” he assured, not too convinced.

“If there’s something…”

“It’s alright. We can handle it,” the wolf insisted and she argued no more, whatever he meant by “it”. Judy followed Isabelle Alvarez with sight as the bathroom door closed behind her and suddenly, she felt that something bad was stirring in that very moment.
When Isabelle closed the bathroom door behind herself, Kaylee was standing by one of the sinks, washing her paws and watching her reflection in the mirror. Her ears perked up and she glanced at Isabelle as she came inside, but the bunny paid her little attention overall. The wolf stood by the mirror and pretended to be checking her make-up, while she continued to watch the rabbit.

“Boop,” she tapped Kaylee on the nose suddenly and she frowned, pushing her paw away.

“Oh, get lost, will you?” Snarled Kaylee.

“You really are one lucky girl, you know? To have found a guy like him… to have him fall for you, despite how little and meaningless you are…”

“Listen, if you want to go after him, just ask him out, have him laugh in your face in front of everyone and just get over with it,” Kaylee snarled angrily.

“You know how silly you are, don’t you?” Isabelle ignored her completely. “I mean, nowadays you might pretend to be someone important. Mrs. Reynolds, Chief of Technical Officer Section. But overall, you’re just a victim. A blank, uninteresting victim, aren’t you?” Isabelle asked and this time, Kaylee replied nothing, staring in the mirror blankly.

“You don’t even know me.”

“Don’t I? Quite clever, quite snarky, quite cynical, quite skilled, quite helpful, quite funny. Quite quite. Average to the bone. If you were a spice, you’d be flour!” Laughed Isabelle. “But then again… you’re a marvelous victim. It’s one thing you excel at and I really mean it. Messed up family, some shady friends back in the old days, then whole that Nighthowler incident and your kidnapping… You’re a full-time lady in distress! You claim you want no pity and yet, you crave for it! And everything you get, you get out of it, it’s just… I’m not even mad, I’m actually impressed!” Were she not laughing in Kaylee’s face, she’d almost sound like she was praising her. “You got so far driven simply by self-pity. But you know… there’s an end to that. One can get only so far with a single trump card,” Alvarez warned her.

“I’m not…” Kaylee tried to protest, her paws trembling.

“Oh, hush! We both know you are! Even Max married you out of pity! And now…” Isabelle paused for a moment, enjoying bunny’s silence. “He does not pity you anymore, does he? Which leaves him with nothing to keep him by your side. Nothing beyond habit. Nothing that I wouldn’t be able to silence with couple drinks and my charm.”

“You’ll regret it,” Kaylee muttered silently, but she laughed.

“And who’s going to make me regret it, you? Let’s face it, bunny, in the end, you’re just a victim. And that’s…” Isabelle interrupted, as the door opened showing Judy Hopps. She watched
the two of them carefully.

“Everything alright?” She asked carefully, acknowledging Kaylee’s shaking paws.

“Boop,” Isabelle tapped Kaylee on her nose with a giggle and headed for the door. “Oh, I am quite alright, but Kaylee could use some of your pity. She craves for it in the end,” chuckled the wolf. Ignoring Hopps’ electrifying sight, she left the bathroom and danced through the dancing stage toward Max’s. She leaned against the table right next to him and muzzled his cheek, behaving as if she were much more drunk than she actually were.

“Max, darling, what would you say for some dance?” She invited him kittenishly, receiving indignant sights of Wilde and Fangmeyer.

“No, thanks, not in the mood really,” Max protested, even if not too firmly.

“Come on, don’t make me beg for it…” Isabelle insisted as she leaned over at him and Nick sighed with frustration.

“You know what, Alvarez, let’s…” He tried to offer.

“Don’t be a jerk, Max! She asks, so go and dance!” Wolford, who clearly had had one beer too many, snarled angrily, only under pressure of Fangmeyer and Wilde’s furious sights realizing his mistake. Max, who seemed not to notice whole this exchange, sighed.

“Why not? Let’s go,” he stood from his chair and Isabelle took him by arm and walked with the wolf toward the dancing stage. She glanced at the table with Wilde and Fangmeyer scolding Wolford and, as she winked at the fox, she received just what she had expected; his cold stare full of disgust. As the new song started, Isabelle and Max started dancing. Just from the first steps she recognized that he was just as skilled dancer as her and yet, he allowed her to lead and it was just what she needed.

Isabelle loved dancing. It was one of those rare moments, when no one speaks a word and lets their bodies speak instead and she knew well how to make one’s body do as she commands. At first, she led him subtly, passing from one simple figure to another. As he did not misstep even once, she continued onto more fancy steps, succeeding at each of her challenges. He was holding her firmer, feeling more confident and relaxed. Some mammals were watching the two of them and yet, he seemed not to notice at all. He looked her in the eyes, like he had not ever before. He smiled weakly and at that very moment, she allowed him to lead. Oh, how he enjoyed it, to have her at his command, enacting every whim or imagination of his, not quite realizing that it was him falling in her grasp in reality. And it really wasn’t his fault; it was so hard to resist Isabelle, this spark in her eye, the charm of her smile, the subtlety of her moves… everything that made her so much better than that silly bunny. And even if today’s victory would be shallow and meaningless eventually, depending strongly merely on her physical beauty and amount of alcohol he drank, it was a step in the right direction. He was hers.

“Belle?” Max spoke for the first time and Isabelle’s heart skipped a beat. So that was it, the moment of her triumph.

“Huh?” She asked.

“You know, from the first day we met, there was something I wanted to tell you,” Max said, as he spun her only to bring her back to his paws. “Something I could hardly find words for, my feelings tormented me so badly,” he continued, sounding much more sober that she thought him to be just a few minutes earlier, but even more passionate at this same.
“What is it?” She asked hopefully, ignoring the world around them. Normally, she’d never rush things. But now… Now there was only him.

“Isabelle, I must tell you…” Max leaned over with her, holding her above the floor with his face just inches away from her, as she anticipated his confession in excited silence. “How dearly I love my wife,” Max said dropping Isabelle all of sudden. As she fell on the floor hardly, he coughed off and walked back to his table leaving her on the floor without a word more. Alvarez was lying where she fell, staring at the ceiling in the blank silence that fell; even music and talks stopped. As echoes murmured through the bar, she was still acknowledging her defeat. When did she commit a mistake? Did she try to push it too early? No, she had him, she was quite sure she had him…

“You know…” Isabelle saw a brown rabbit's offering paw. “You can be lying on the floor till dawn or we can have the conversation you've been craving for since the day you came here,” Kaylee suggested with a slight triumphal smirk. Isabelle watched her, still not understanding a thing. There was not a hint of shock or anger at her face. The breakdown from few minutes earlier seemed to not have happened. There was not a sign that would imply that Kaylee hadn’t been expecting whole the thing to happen from the start… And for it to end up just the way it did.

“You knew.”

“Of course I knew. I’m not blind,” Kaylee replied with annoyance at the fact that it took her so long to realize it.

“I…” Isabelle stood up slowly, not accepting her paw. “G’night,” she muttered under her breath, heading toward the exit with her head hung. She nonchalantly reached for her jacket from the hanger and left the bar humiliated, defeated, scrutinized. As she closed the door, she did not dare to glance at the faces of all those mammals whose respect she had lost all at once. She came out to the rain and reached for her phone to call a taxi. And then, the door opened behind her.

“What, is it only cool as long as you win?” Kaylee called from behind and Alvarez snarled angrily.

“Oh, shut your mouth,” she turned at the rabbit. “I slipped. Don’t boast yourself too much, he’ll leave you for someone else before you…” Kaylee had to actually jump up to slap her, but the blow she delivered hurt burnt more than she’d expect.

“Now you’re being petty,” Kaylee interrupted her again and Isabelle stared at her in silence. She could grab her by throat and smash against the pavement. Two or three blows and the rabbit would be a goner and in Isabelle’s mindset, she temporarily didn’t care much about consequences…

“But to be fair, I was just as petty asking Max to allow you to try and seduce him,” Kaylee admitted. “He wanted to simply talk the thing through with you, but I claimed it wouldn’t have much effect. Would it?” She asked and Isabelle hesitated.

“Probably not? Why are we even talking about it? You won, can we…”

“No, we can’t,” Kaylee interrupted her. “You were a bitch. An exceptional bitch tonight, even, but overall, you’ve been some nasty bitch to me and I’m not going to let you go until we make some things clear,” she explained and for a moment, two of them stood in silence, rain slowly drenching them.

“Oh, just rut me,” muttered Alvarez.
“An offer I’m taking only from Max,” Kaylee replied with a smirk and Isabelle rolled her eyes.

“How did you know? No, how did you… why are you not crying in the bathroom? I hit you right in the spot!” She snarled. If they were going to be establishing things, then she wanted to understand the nature of her defeat.

“You did. For a second, I felt just as shitty as I should be.” Kaylee let her sight down and Isabelle understood that she did hit the mark there. “A victim… Heh. I guess you can paint me like that, but tell you what… I don’t give a damn about how you paint me.”

“Of course,” realized Alvarez. “And now that you won, you’ll make sure to have me fired, won’t you? Already planted incriminating materials in my computer or are you simply pulling the strings with the Chief?” She asked cynically.

“Getting you fired? What for?” Kaylee laughed at the idea. “I’ve just made my point, there’s no need to torment you anymore.”

“So that’s it? Really? No actual follow-up?” Isabelle watched the bunny suspiciously, but she just shrugged.

“Oh, you’ll have it. You’ll have the spiteful glances at ZPD. You’ll have the rumors. You’ll have your follow-up for the rest of your days in here. It might not seem much… But I’ve learnt to enjoy the little things,” Kaylee explained emotionlessly and then, something changed in her as she grew colder and more ominous by far. “And if that’s not enough, let me tell you this… If you ever try to step between me and Max again, if you ever try to seduce him or anyhow else ruin our marriage, then you will have your follow-up for real and you’ll regret ever begging for it.”

“And what if I say that I’m not afraid of being beaten up by a rabbit?” Alvarez tried to laugh it off.

“Then I’ll say that a bottle of acid from rabbit’s paw ruins one’s pretty face just as nastily as one from wolf’s. Proper gossip ruins one well enough no matter the source. Certain materials found on one’s computer result in loss of job or incarceration no matter who actually planted them. I have plenty of ways of getting rid of you and none involves fists, Isabelle,” the rabbit assured terrifyingly coldly. Alvarez stared her dead in the eye and she realized that she wasn’t joking. That if she tried to push her luck, Kaylee would have no problem with scrutinizing her beyond imagination or having her fired and prosecuted for things she had never done. That if things had gone too far, she’d have no problem with walking over to her with a bottle of acid and smashing it right in her face, destroying Isabelle’s beauty that she cared for the most. Alvarez suddenly acknowledged that the bunny, if pressed against the wall, wouldn’t hesitate for a second and the thought actually dreaded her.

“People often confuse it, don’t they? Being good and being on the right side?” Most disturbed, Isabelle asked and rabbit’s giggle only made it worse.

“I’m kind to friends, but I will have no mercy for ones who mess with my family.”

“So what am I? A friend or foe?” The wolf asked.

“For now, none. In future? Up to you, really.”

“It figures,” Isabelle shivered, suddenly realizing how badly she had drenched by now. “Good night, Kaylee.”
“Not coming back? Oh well, until Monday,” the rabbit replied. The wolf turned on her hill and walked away into the darkness, leaving the small, ominous rabbit in the rain. She caught a taxi and had it take her to her flat just on the brink of Tundratown, couple streets away from her family house. Having taken a quick shower and changed into pajamas, she lay in her bed and stared at the ceiling trying to sleep, but thinking of Max and Kaylee. She had not apologized, was the first thought, but then again, is there a point of apologizing for action, if all you regret are the consequences of your failure, not the act itself? She craved for Max from the very first moment they met. She didn’t care about social bounds, she never really had. And she’d always receive what she wanted, but this time, it really seemed like she had to let it go. It hurt, to have to let go as rarely…

The phone rang, interrupting the silence of the room and Isabelle reached for it, not even checking the number.

“Hello?”

“I honestly didn’t expect you to pick up so late, but I’m so glad that you did,” said familiar female voice.

“Miss Reynolds,” realized the wolf, most displeased. “I was quite sure I’ve blocked your number.”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t mean it. We have some history, Isabelle, you can’t just ignore that.”

“Oh, after how you stood up my family? I think I can and I will,” Alvarez replied, but she did not hang up.

“I’m not omnipotent, Isabelle,” reminded her the entrepreneur. “Your uncle placed himself in an impossible position and after Duchess caused whole Young Manifesto’s incident… Thunders and Blizzard had no right of surviving, just like my father’s reputation and along with them, their men had to go. I helped you stay afloat. And I could help you stay far more than simply afloat, if you allow me to help you,” she assured.

“What do you want?” Isabelle decided reluctantly to ask.

“For the starter, a simple test. I want intel on progress of your and Max’s investigation. It’s hardly my main priority these days, but it could appear helpful to have a look into what my little brother is doing. I’ll reward you with… let’s say… given the simplicity of task combined with low risk… twenty thousand dollars,” she offered and Isabelle hesitated, wondering why Miss Reynolds would even care about the thing. It could be just a test in the end, but…

“Haven’t I made myself clear before? No,” she refused firmly and heard Miss Reynolds’ disappointed sigh.

“Isabelle, Isabelle. Look around yourself and tell me, what do you see? A small, claustrophobic flat somewhere in the darkest alleys of Tundratown and a girl lying in a single bed. If you walk over to your little bathroom and look into the dirty mirror, you’ll see a girl whose life’s accomplishment is an ungrateful, underpaid job with threat of PTSD in ten, fifteen years. You could be so much more, girl. I took over my father’s small empire. I am looking for clever, resourceful mammals like you to be my nose and ears. Advisors. Guns, if necessary. I’m giving a chance to you, one of the first officers, out of sentiment. Don’t throw it away now,” Anastasia Reynolds tempted her and Isabelle had no doubts about her honesty, but there was something else bothering her. Something that she couldn’t let go.
“Miss Reynolds, you let my family down once. I will not be let down again. My answer is no.” Isabelle snarled hatefully.

“I’ll give you time to reconsider,” assured Miss Reynolds.

“Oh don’t bother. I’m blocking your number now.” Isabelle snarled, hanging up and tossing her phone angrily. She stared in the ceiling blankly and in the silence and darkness that fell momentarily, disrupted only by the wind howling outside, she felt alone. So very, very alone.

Chapter End Notes

August being August. Isabelle just being Isabelle.
Hopkins Private Clinic was a place Max always thought of with dread, quite unfairly and mostly because of the Hopkins Institute just next to it, the leading facility in research of unusual diseases such as FFI; Max’s reminder that everyone was going to die eventually. He stopped the car at the clinic’s parking and came inside. Despite Kaylee’s insisting, he came here alone; she had a lot of work in ZPD and he wanted to bring the news to her personally, whether they’d be good or bad.

Max greeted a familiar receptionist, who told him that his doctor was already waiting. Max knocked at the door and, upon invitation, came inside. By the desk, was sitting an old reindeer, studying the notes carefully.

“Ah, Mr. Reynolds, you’d better sit down,” the doctor suggested and Max took his seat hesitantly. It didn’t sound too encouraging, but on the other hand, he knew doctor Revee well enough to realize that it was hard to guess anything until he’d decide to share the diagnosis.

“How am I, doctor? Are the results in?” The wolf asked with anticipation.

“Yes, we worked hard over the weekend and the Friday’s test results are in. Mr. Reynolds, it seems that you’re in perfect health… as for you,” the doctor explained, handing Max test results and the wolf sighed with relief. He began to browse the test results. Even though to most they’d be just medical gibberish, the wolf had seen them often enough to understand meaning of the most of them.

“Woah, that’s relief,” he let out a sigh. “But what about my sleepless nights? It’s been two in last week and…”

“Stress, I would say,” revealed doctor Revee. “From what I understood, you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. You should relax some more and take it easy. Like you see, even in the recent tests, we noticed recent cumulation of stress.”

“Huh. Alright. Wow, I was quite sure I was…” Max chuckled nervously. It was sole
reason he insisted for Kaylee not to come; because he didn’t want to have her watch his reaction to the news. “So… I’m quite alright? Not a sign of FFI triggering?”

“Not a sign, we believe,” doctor Reve assured. “There’s another case that needs raising, though.”

“Doxycycline?” Max guessed and the reindeer nodded.

“It’s an antibiotic, a strong one to that. Proper diet helps, but it does not prevent the damage due to the amounts you consume. While your liver is doing quite fine, then your left kidney is starting to give some disturbing symptoms.”

“Is it serious?” Max worried.

“For now, not really. I give it ten, maybe fifteen years, until you need a transplantation, but I must order you to stick to your usual diet even more rigorously than before. And it would be for the best if you kept away from any alcohol… indefinitely, I am afraid,” suggested the doctor and the wolf nodded with understanding.

“Oh, it will be better that way,” Max assured. “About the transplantation…”

“I’m merely ringing a bell here, Mr. Reynolds. In five years, you should register for transplantation. I will remind you of it when the results turn significantly worse and lead you through the entire procedure then. There shouldn’t be much trouble finding you a donor over time.”

“Oh, alright,” Max nodded enthusiastically. “Is there anything more?” He asked.

“A receipt for new pack of doxycycline. You should be running out by now. Next visit as planned. That will be all from me, Mr. Reynolds,” assured the doctor. Max grabbed the receipt, shook his paw and rushed outside, howling excitedly. He reached for his phone and called Kaylee who picked up immediately.

“So? How did it go?” She asked fearfully.

“I’m clean! Perfectly clean!” He assured joyfully.

“Oh my God, that’s so good to hear! But what about your insomnia?”

“Turns out it was a stress reaction. Nothing fatal,” Max assured. “Doctor also mentioned that I will need a transplantation in a decade or two, but it’s a song of the future for now.”

“Phew, a stone off my heart. We need to celebrate it, don’t we? How about some restaurant tonight, a dinner by candles with wine and…”

“Oh, doctor forbid me to drink alcohol. He probably should have long time ago,” Max interrupted.

“Still, a dinner? Judy said Albion was a wonderful place…”

“Albion? That’s where August took her? Wow,” Max exclaimed, actually impressed.

“Is it that expensive?” Kaylee asked curiously, eager to learn more.

“My father fancied the place, so…” Max shivered. “Wow, a dinner for two in Albion. That rabbit must have spent his entire salary.”
“I could ask.”

“Do you think he’d admit it? And it’d be better if you didn’t tell Judy too. It might make things awkward… more awkward that is,” he suggested.

“I think they’re doing quite alright after Friday. Anyways, what about the fancy dinner? I feel like celebrating.”

“Oh, me too. You choose the place, though. Something affordable for two police officers, if you don’t mind,” he suggested half-jokingly.

“You know, if we spent whole our salary, we could try some miracle diet for next two weeks. A two-hundred calories a day…”

“And after a week, I’m eating you,” Max snickered. “I’m going back to the station. We’ll have plenty of work today, I bet.”

“Don’t forget to drop in. Mike should have the surveillance analysis you requested,” Kaylee reminded him.

“Of course. Love you, bun.”

“Love you too,” Kaylee replied joyfully and waited for him to hung up. The wolf got back into the car and headed for the station. Today was going to be a good day, that he knew for sure.

9.37 am, Monday, May 25, 2022

Despite all the signs in the earth and sky, Nick Wilde had an unclear feeling, that it was not going to be a good day. Judy seemed awfully cheerful though, humming as she was driving them through the Rainforest District. He actually felt bad about it, as he realized that it was August that had put her in such good mood. And then he felt bad about feeling bad about it. And then…Oh, the hopeless spiral of remorse. The fox watched the street, rainy as ever, in some unusual for him silence, which Judy seemed to be not noticing until they stopped at the traffic lights.

“Everything alright?” She asked curiously.

“Yeah, just… Tough times. Thinking a lot,” he explained and she nodded.

“We’ve been through worse. We’ll make it through this,” she assured with an encouraging smile.

“At least no one’s framing me now,” smirked Nick.

“Or kidnapping me,” Judy tagged along.

“Or trying to bribe our friends.”
“Or to plainly kill us.”

“Or stopping at the green light,” Nick said, as a car behind them honked, since the lights had switched a moment earlier.

“Oh, hush,” Judy said, as she took off suddenly. Nick turned to watch the driver of a car behind them, some young cheetah, showing them most inappropriate gesture.

“A brave one,” he said with a smirk.

“We have work to do,” Judy reminded her partner as she turned and they lost him from their sights. “Another car’s already waiting for us.”

“And I think it’s here,” Nick pointed at a police car at the nearby parking and they stopped by it. The police officers got outside and looked around; they were at some steep slope, cut in half by the street they arrived here by. Above them grew trees, covered in vines intensively, while below, continued a slope covered in long grass and eventually, green, muddy water of the swamp. By the coast was gathered a small crowd of mammals, as a roadside assistance car was pulling some devastated pickup from the muddy water. Some police officer stopped securing traces at the parking and walked over.

“Detectives Wilde and Hopps? Officer Reiner’s the name. You might want to go down, check the situation down there,” he suggested, shaking their paws.

“What do we have here?” Nick asked curiously.

“It seems someone pushed the car down from the parking. A green Hanza pick-up, heard you Downtown guys are looking for it? Some kid found it in the morning, don’t ask me how,” explained the officer, a middle-aged elm.

“It seems like ours,” Judy confirmed. “Do you think we can get it out anytime soon?” She hoped, as she looked down.

“The truck’s already down there, managed to get it out of the water, so the tough part’s behind. It will take a while, but they claimed they should have it out in couple hours,” he explained.

“Thank you. Let’s go down and see it for ourselves,” Nick suggested.

“There’s a path down, but carefully, it’s very slippery. My partner slid all the way down,” warned them officer Reiner. Detectives thanked for the warning and walked over to the path he pointed. Nick made a first step carefully.

“OK, it’s not so… Argh!” The fox slipped suddenly, fell on his back and slid hundred feet down to the very bottom, where a jaguar from road assistance caught him in time, saving from doubtful pleasure of bathing in the swamp. Judy just stood at the top of the slope laughing along with Reiner, as the fox huffed with frustration. The jaguar helped him to stand up, as his buddies from road assistance were trying not to snicker either.

“At least you’re not the first one, Detective,” he chuckled.

“Hopefully not the last,” he muttered looking up, but Judy was doing annoyingly well, getting down to them. “My name’s Detective Wilde, by the way, and that’s Detective Hopps.”

“Dennis Blackavar,” the jaguar introduced himself and then, Judy joined them.
“So, what do we have here?” Judy eyed Nick with mix of pity and amusement. The fox said not a word.

“A Hanza pick-up that someone pushed in the water very recently. Its front’s demolished as if someone crashed it. No car keys or windows, though. It looks like someone removed them,” the jaguar explained.

“Not even the windshield,” Nick pointed out surprised.

“And ignition removed too, it seems,” added Blackavar.

“Trying to cover the VIN?” Judy guessed. Lack of Vehicle Identification Number would make things much harder, but then again, it wasn’t written only on the windows.

“We’ll need to check the engine and everything,” Nick concluded. “How long will it take for you to take the car out?”

“Couple hours. We need to drive it a mile along the shore before we can get it out to the street level. Should we deliver it to the police parking or…”

“Downtown police parking. We’ll have a look on it there,” Judy assured.

“Alright then, we should have it out by…” Reiner checked his watch. “Noon, I’d say. If it’s everything…”

“We’ll just look around for a moment and you can get it out,” Judy assured and the police officers began to look around the scene. There wasn’t much to watch, though, except for the marks the car left in mud the slope as it had been pushed down. After a few minutes of not having found anything unusual, they let the roadside assistance guys work and climbed back to the parking. They consulted the situation with Reiner once again, who was giving his best not to watch muddy Nick and they headed back to the car; there wasn’t much more to be seen in there anyways.

“Take these off,” Judy suggested pointing at his jacket and trousers before Nick got inside and fox had to admit there was no much of choice here. He took down all the muddy clothes, leaving himself only in a shirt in boxers and put rest of clothes in a plastic bag.

“Should we drop by your house?” Judy suggested.

“Nah, I’ve got spare uniform at the station,” Nick shrugged it off and Judy nodded, as she started the car. She smirked.

“We’ll see about it. We still need to trace that car down to its owner. Lack of VIN might make things worse,” Nick reminded her.

“Miles?”

“I’ll very surprised if it’s not the case,” the fox agreed. The search of his workshop had given them no solid proof of any bear’s connection and by the time they’d get a warrant to search his house, they’d find there nothing as well, but it didn’t mean they were suspecting him any less.

They soon arrived at the station and Nick put on his trousers and went to the station, heading to his locker with fresh clothes awaiting. He passed by several of his coworkers exchanging some jokes about the mess he was and went straight for the showers, located
underground, just next to TO office and the Dungeon. Despite temptation, he didn’t take long, as Judy would probably blame him for slacking off. As he was leaving, refreshed and clean, he met August standing by one of the sink, washing his face and staring in the mirror.

“Everything alright?” Nick asked as he stood by his left couple feet away and the rabbit turned at him. He looked most distress and his eye was red, as if he had been rubbing it too much.

“Yes, yes it is,” he assured and turned back at the mirror. He continued to dry his face with a paper towel while Nick was watching him in silence.

“Have you seen doctor about the eye? It doesn’t look too good,” he worried.

“Yes, he said…” August paused and his paw trembled for a moment. “It should look fine in no time,” assured August not too confidently, but Nick seemed to be not noticing the doubt in his tone.

“OK, so how many fingers do I hold up?” He joked, as he raised his paw. “No kidding, close your right eye and tell me,” he added as the rabbit chuckled nervously. He covered his right eye with paw and then, started.

“One, two, zero, three, four, two, four, one…” he kept saying while fox was lifting and lowering his fingers. Nick continued the fun for merely couple seconds, but it was enough for him to notice that August was cheating, helping himself with a gap between fingers through which he could see everything. And while he didn’t make a mistake even once, the very fact that he needed to cheat raised some disturbing questions. Nick smirked and put his paw down.

“Alright, you passed. Take care!” Nick smirked and left the rabbit in bathroom a bit confounded, but certain of success of his masquerade. When he came back to their box, Judy greeted him with a smile, as she seemed not to notice the doubts he had.

“Washed clean?” she smirked.

“Washed, dried, ironed and ready for action,” he assured. “Got anything new?” He asked, as he noticed some papers on her desk.

“Initial analyses from the forensics. No match between what we found at the crime scene and at Miles’ workshop for now, but they’ve extracted chips of some green paint and taking closer look.”

“That’s fast of them,” Nick pointed out.

“We have priority, it seems. No big investigations going on and an outside laboratory’s handling Max’s leads… He has a manufacture of those, it seems… So we have our laboratory at our service.”

“Convenient. Would you mind?” He asked and Judy handed him some of the documents while she continued to read the other part. Nick began to read the report. They still had to wait for their car to be delivered anyway.
Police parking of Precinct 1 was a peculiar collection of cars of all sorts. Starting some usual middle-class cars, proceeding to couple fancy sports cars, concluding with some boldly modified street cars and a homemade miniature tank, it was a synonym of diversity. The wreckage of the car they had been delivered wasn’t even the first one taking a spot, but certainly was the stinkiest, still covered in swamp mud and weed. The pick-up was left in an unoccupied corner and Judy brought a hose.

“Swamp has covered all the evidence anyway,” she pointed out.

“Do the honors.”

“You know, you could have just stood there and spared yourself a shower…” Judy chuckled.

“Do the honors,” Nick insisted again and she opened the water. It took her a while and some of Nick’s help to clean the car enough not to get all dirty just trying to get inside. Still, as they were finished and most of the parking covered in dirt of watered down mud, the fox simply went for his dirty clothes, as there was no way to have a careful look at the car without getting all messy. Back in his muddy trousers, he sat by the driver’s car, while Judy stood in the passenger’s door and both of them started to look around.

“Like Blackavar said, ignition’s been removed,” Judy pointed out.

“Pedal height matches a mammal taller than me. Five, maybe six feet tall, I’d say. No talon marks on the driving wheel or the gear shift,” he as he checked behind the sun visor, but found nothing in there. Judy checked the glove box only to find it just as empty and then moved to the back. Judy didn’t find anything unusual in there. The trunk was far more promising, though; there were installed several U-bolts. Judy called Nick and they watched it curiously.

“What do you think?” She asked and the fox watched it carefully.

“I’d say they’re made just for our ATM.”

“They’ve been welded. Do you think forensics will tell us anything beyond that?” The bunny hoped.

“That it was welded with most basic tools, at best,” the fox shook his head. “No way to identify it anyhow and not even Miles’ welder will make a decent point in our case,” he shrugged.

“So… onto VIN?” The bunny proposed.

“Onto VIN,” agreed the fox.

“Check the engine, I’ll see the back,” Judy agreed and they both went to the opposite sides of the car. Nick opened the hood only to find VIN having been grinded off the engine and Judy reported just the same situation in the back. They checked a spot by driver’s door, the one under the wheel well and all the others, but to no avail.

“There should be one more behind the engine,” Nick suggested. “But we’d have to dismantle entire car…”
“We’ll never do it on our own. Let’s just take it to a mechanic,” Judy suggested.

“I’ll call Miles. He seemed trustworthy,” snickered the fox, as he reached for a phone. ZPD had couple trusted car mechanics and they called one of them. Since it was already four pm and they’d never make it in reasonable time, they agreed to have the car taken tomorrow in the morning and dismantled immediately. Nick and Judy had to be present during whole procedure, which meant they already had tomorrow planned. Before leaving, they checked in with Aveline Hawkes and dropped by to see Max in surprisingly cheerful mood for a reason he didn’t want to share. At five pm, Nick drove Judy back home, on the way to visit his mother in the hospital himself. Both of them were unusually silent, until Judy decided to speak.

“Nick… would you mind if I asked you…” She hesitated. “Do you know a place where you could take a guy out?” She asked a bit ashamed. “I have no idea myself.”

“Oh, I know couple places where I could take a guy out, but you wouldn’t…” Judy elbowed the snickering fox.

“You know what I mean,” she scuffed, trying not to look amused.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged helplessly. “There are couple neat restaurants by the Big Dune in the Sahara Square.”

“Mhm,” she nodded, a bit disappointed.

“Or are you looking for something else?” The fox asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“No, I just… I hoped you’d share with me some secret spot of yours. No one knows city like you,” she explained a bit embarrassingly and the fox chuckled.

“Oh, one has to find their own secret spot. Otherwise, there’s no much charm to it,” the fox smiled mysteriously.

“True at that,” Judy agreed, but something seemed to bother her.

“What’s wrong?” Nick asked.

“I’m… afraid, I think?” The bunny confessed. “I hurt him, I don’t even know how badly and yet… we’re pretending everything’s alright? It’s kind of… I don’t know,” Judy huffed with frustration and Nick watched her in silence. For a second, he considered telling her about what he had learnt earlier that day.

“You have to hope for the best,” he only said instead. Now was not the good time. Probably never would be, but he did not think of that.

“I… I guess,” Judy agreed, if not too confidently.

“And speaking of August, I’ve been invited to Duchess’s wedding on August. Twentieth August, to be precise. Would you like to accompany me?” He proposed.

“Oh… um… Sure! Gladly! Funny, I never thought she’d invite you! No offense.” Judy said, rather surprised.

“None taken, I’m just as surprised as you are,” the fox assured. “Better write it down. You wouldn’t want to forget it!”
“Don’t you worry, I’ll remember,” she assured with a giggle as they stopped by Judy’s house. The bunny pushed the doorknob, when she froze and turned at the fox. “Oh, Nick?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember to ask Miss Hawkes out for a coffee. She was so eager to meet you again,” she advised him politely.

“I did promise,” he agreed after a short moment and she giggled. “Until tomorrow, Carrots.”

“Until tomorrow!” She bided him and jumped out of the car, closing the door behind her. Nick rejoined the traffic, considering the rabbit’s words and as he stopped at the lights, he searched through his contact list and called a number almost at the top.

“Miss Hawkes? Detective Wilde, here.”

“Oh, what a pleasant surprise!” Exclaimed the vixen joyfully. “Can I help you anyhow?”

“Oh, I believe so,” Nick confirmed. “At first, I’d like to mention that given the circumstances and you being a witness in my case, it would be highly unprofessional of me to be having any sort of a date.”

“Oh, so… Not a chance for now?” She seemed really disappointed.

“I was rather thinking of asking you out for a coffee,” Nick corrected her with a smirk and heard her joyful squeak.

“Detective, you’re outrageous!” She laughed.

“I aim to misbehave, Miss Hawkes,” he assured.

“Just our fox thing, right?” Chuckled the vixen. “So, when would we meet? I’m really busy until Friday, so I’d prefer weekend, actually.”

“So would I, Miss Hawkes,” assured Nick. “How about… Saturday, at four pm, at Meridian Zero Café? It’s a lovely place, from what I remember,” he proposed.

“Oh, wonderfully! It’s that travel-themed café in Savannah Central?”

“Exactly,” confirmed the fox.

“I always wanted to travel around the world. Or you know, at least have a reason to go to that café,” she chuckled. “So, until Saturday?”

“Until Saturday, Miss Hawkes,” Nick hung up with a smile, kind of happy that Judy wasn’t sitting by his side right now. Oh, she would laugh to see that cool fox so excited.
Diane stopped her car in the middle of forest. James looked around the dark woods, wondering where he remembered this place from and then it struck him. It was here that their class had made a bonfire after they passed their final exams. It was here, couple dozen miles away from Zootopia, in a small forest nobody remembered about, that he had got together with Diane for the last time. The coyote got out of the car with a small suitcase and James followed her uncertainly.

“So… Well… It’s been years,” he pointed out uncertainly. “We could have done in your house’s chimney, though.”

“And have banknote embers flying everywhere?” Diane asked skeptically. “And besides… I like this place,” she explained quietly.

“I wonder why,” rolled his eyes James. “Alright, let’s get to work, he suggested as he opened the trunk of her car and took couple wood logs. Diane and James proceeded to set up a bonfire in a circle of long-forgotten stones. In the middle of it, she put nearly one-hundred and fifty thousand dollars, most in brand new banknotes. They were wrapped in metal net to prevent any embers from floating. Diane soaked them with gasoline and James put the last logs from the trunk. They stood in silence and James offered matches to her.

“Would you do the honors?” He asked hopefully.

“With pleasure,” she reassured, taking the matchbox from him. She set a single match and casted it straight into the banknotes. They exploded with a wave of blue fire, which quickly turned orange and gradually consumed all of them, lighting the smaller branches almost immediately. They watched it in silence, all the Franklins and Benjamins slowly being consumed by fire. James shivered.

“I’ve never seen this much money at once,” he said, as if regretting the act immediately. “And now it’s gone.”

“You still have plenty in the bank. And it is just a part of the plan. We couldn’t give it away; it’d go back to the bank anyway and we’d only give them a lead.” Diane cheered him up.

“I know, I know. I just…” He shivered. “Let’s sit down, shall we?” He suggested. Even though he really wished for it, they couldn’t just go; they needed to clean the place afterwards to leave nothing suspicious.

“Gladly,” Diane agreed and they seated themselves on an old tree trunk left just by the bonfire. They watched the fire for a moment; the money was almost completely gone by now, but they were going to stay there for quite a while. “I’ve got an idea on how to launder the money without involving any sort of mobs. It’s going to be lengthy though and police will see the money appearing here and there.

“We don’t have to do it next doors to my house, do we?” James worried.

“Oh, no, we’ll do it all around the city. We’ll need some time…”

“We?” James asked doubtfully.

“You can’t do it on your own and I have plenty of time. And it can’t be just one mammal doing it…” Diane argued.
“Two mammals. We have Ryuk,” reminded her the wolf.

“And he’s very characteristic. You can’t give him ten bucks to launder unless he drops the weird looks of his,” Diane argued firmly and Greymane sighed deeply.

“Ask him if he wants to be rich or arrested,” suggested Diane. “Anyways, you’ll need my help, especially if Miles is watched.”

“No. We’ve talked about it. You’re not getting involved.”

“Up to ten years of prison is what you get for destroying money in Zootopia,” told him Diane with a smirk. “And if I remember right, I was the one to set it on fire. So I am just as guilty as you.”

“What?! No! You’re not… Argh!” James snarled angrily. “Why do you always have to be so stubborn?! Can’t you let me do the damn thing alone?!”

“You need my…”

“No, I don’t!” He interrupted her harshly. “I can handle it, thank you!”

“Oh, do you now?” Diane asked skeptically. “Just like you handled hiding the money in safe place or getting rid of its extent or maybe just like you handled planning the laundering in a safe way? James, let’s be honest, you’d struggle to pour water out of boot with instructions on the heel!” She spoke mercilessly and they electrified each other with sights; his furious, hers ice-cold.

“See? That’s why we broke up,” he muttered.

“No, we broke up because you couldn’t handle…”

“I couldn’t handle you,” he interrupted her harshly and they stared at each other in stern silence.

“Clearly,” she spoke only and continued to stare in the fire. James clenched his fists. He was so angry with her. As always, she found herself so bright, so clever, so sly. She looked down at him… and she was right, because she always was smarter and more cunning than him. It was driving him crazy and yet, he loved it. He never knew what to do about her, even less did he know now and so, he watched the fire in silence.

“It’s alright,” Diane spoke suddenly. “I’ll let you handle the thing,” she promised.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I just…” She sighed deeply. “I don’t know what to do. I want to help you, but…”

“You shouldn’t,” James finished for her. “You have too much to lose, Diane. If it ever comes up in your files, your career will be over. You’ll be done for. You shouldn’t be connected to this thing anyhow… traceably,” he explained finally and she sighed deeply.

“I guess you’re right,” she admitted most reluctantly and for a moment, they fell silent.

“So… um… how’s work?” James asked reluctantly.

“Alright. Johnny has just retired, so I’m working with Will now. Do you remember Will? He was Edward’s brother,” she assured and he bobbed his head once. He still remembered his old best friend’s sudden death in a tragic crash car even if it had been ages ago.
“And how’s your father?” He said only.

“Better. He’s still scared that he’ll lose me too… But he’s come to terms with my choice of career, I think,” she explained rather proudly and they fell silent again. “Why did you lie to me?”

“About what?”

“About Miss Reynolds wanting to kill a criminal, when she targeted O’Dyna,” Diane said.

“Oh, um… that… Because you wouldn’t help me…” He let his head down shamefully.

“If I knew the truth?” Diane pressed angrily. “Just like you’re not telling me what’s your big plan this time?” She blamed him and James remained shamefully silent.

“It’ll be better this way,” he assured tensely.

“Of course,” she sighed, displeased, but said not a word more. “Just promise me…” She paused hesitantly. “Promise me that whatever it is, you’re not hurting anyone. Not even… Especially not Duchess."

“Duchess?! She killed my brother and you’re…”

“Spencer Young did and there’s no proof that Duchess helped him anyhow,” Diane cut his accusations immediately. “I’ve seen the reports, James. Downtown found nothing to connect her.”

“Except for the…” James tried to argue only to stop in the middle, realizing that this fight was leading to nowhere. He wasn’t going to beat her on her own ground. He sighed deeply.

“If not for her, my father would be ruined. Please, respect it,” she pleaded and he nodded weakly with reluctance.

“I swear we’re not hurting Duchess,” he promised. For a long moment, they were watching the bonfire. The flames were slowly dying down, having consumed all of the money and most of the wood. Thousands of dollars gone with the wind. Just the thought made him shiver.

“So… how’s Ryan?” Diane asked as the fire almost died down. James shrugged with a weak smile.

“Complains about the orphanage, looks after Thane and Mia… The usual. I should pay him a visit,” he said and sighed deeply.

“You really love that kid, don’t you? Doing this all for him,” Diane pointed out and he chuckled.

“Oh, he’s remarkable,” he assured.

“No less than his godfather,” she pointed out, smiling charmingly, looking at him with awe which he completely didn’t deserve. He laughed, but then, turned tense suddenly.

“Don’t… Don’t do this to yourself,” he insisted. “You’ll only get hurt like always.”

“And if I want to be hurt?” She put a paw at his and pulled herself closer to him, but he pushed her away firmly.

“You don’t,” he assured firmly as he stood from the trunk. He glanced at the bonfire.
“It’s almost down. Let’s clean it up,” he insisted. Diane sighed with frustration, but didn’t protest. She crouched by the fire and stared in it quietly.

“Let’s clean it up,” she agreed finally. With the bonfire dying out, the starless night was almost pitch black.

Chapter End Notes

The good news and the bad news...
Tainted

Chapter Summary

Some people, we look down at simply because they're tainted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9.30 am, Tuesday, May 26, 2022

Nick’s nose wrinkled, as he and Judy came inside the car workshop at Sousten Street, where their mutilated Hanza pickup waited, sealed like they had left it. The police officers greeted the owner of the facility and its chief mechanic, an energetic weasel called Fiver for a reason generally unknown. The police officers removed the seals along with procedure and let the mechanics work on the car. They dismantled it step by step, exchanging their observations frequently and allowing accompanying them forensic officer take all the pictures they needed.

“It seems as if most of the parts didn’t come from the original car,” concluded Fiver excitedly. “Engine and body seem to be of this same car, the rest…” He coughed meaningfully as he shook his head. “The gearbox looks as if it was being repaired a lot, with some crazy fantasy to that, if you ask me.”

“What car does it come from?” Judy asked, without a doubt that he’d know an answer.

“A Lance pick-up, Reaver or Conqueror, I’d say,” Fiver said with little hesitation. “They had this same gearbox, so it’s hard to tell. Year of production… ’95 or ’96. These gears are dead giveaway. Except for the fifth and fourth ones, they’re newer ones clearly. Lance was trying a new alloy, but it turned out awfully susceptible to vibrations, would shatter after couple years,” he explained with confidence of an expert and none of them doubted a word. When it came to cars, Fiver was a prodigy.

“No way of identifying where it came from?” Nick asked without much of hope and weasel only confirmed his fears.

“Too many Lances were scrapped in last ten years, leave alone the gearboxes. You can find couple dozen at any scrapyard,” he said with kind of amazement to such devotion. “Unless… Grab me the third gear cog, will you? No, the other one,” he corrected the fox impatiently. A thought that he could be surprised that anyone would grab a wrong one from a pile of cogs amused the fox for some reason.

“What is it?” Judy asked hopefully, as Fiver squinted his eyes, watching the cog. It was covered in couple shreds which were not intended as to cover its ID.

“It’s from a broken gearbox. One of gears must have cracked… the fifth one, most likely, scratching this one in result. Johnny, how was called that guy whose Lance Reaver we fixed on last
year’s February?! A tall deer, I think the car was black,” Fiver asked one of his workers suddenly. The worker froze, a bit confused, clearly not even remembering such a car ever appearing there.

“I… can check in the records?” He asked hesitantly.

“That you do,” Lance nodded with understanding tainted with impatience.

“Do you recognize it?” Judy guessed.

“We had a guy with Lance Reaver last year. One of his gear’s tooth broke off, laying waste in the gearbox. It completely destroyed the fourth gear, scratched the third and first… Handle me the first, could you?” He pleaded. Judy guessed correctly which one it was only because she noticed similar scratches.

“Could it be the one?” She hoped.

“It could, but it could not. It was a frequent issue with these cars. Quite nasty,” Fiver shook his head with disapproval. “We’ll know when Johnny brings… Where’s that darn record?!”

“Got it!” Assured the worker, running back with a tablet. “Albert Grenada, came here at 1st February last year and…” Fiver snatched the tablet from him and browsed the records for himself.

“Thanks. I should have old photos in here…” He kept swiping and Judy and Nick leaned over. It seemed like Fiver was maintaining quite detailed documentation with quite a lot of photographs. After a short moment, he found the pictures of gearbox and damaged cogs.

“It looks like ours?” Judy said uncertainly and Fiver nodded.

“That’s ours, clearly,” confirmed the chief mechanic.

“Owner was Albert Grenada. Do you have his phone number?” Nick asked and the weasel found it in his files and handed to the fox. In meanwhile, other mechanics extruded the draft shaft, but Fiver paid little attention to the part itself.

“Well, I don’t think you’ll have to bother with him anyway,” he grabbed a flashlight and screwdriver and crawled under the car. A few moments later, he came back with a small plate with engraved numbers. Nick and Judy watched it with astonishment as everything was there; VIN, body number, engine number, even paint number. Fiver chuckled seeing their surprised faces.

“Hanza manufacturers installed another additional plate in the bottom, hidden behind the draft shaft,” he explained. “Old company’s practice to make turning them anonymous even harder. Mafia used Hanzas a lot in 30’s, after all. I should have mentioned it first, shouldn’t I?” Fiver explained with amusement. They continued investigating the car, but didn’t find anything more useful than VIN itself; Fiver only ensured them that whoever rebuilt that car, was some experienced mechanic. With their car dismantled, Nick and Judy had all that they needed.

1.30 pm, Tuesday, May 26, 2022
An unusually quick visit to DMV and couple phone calls gave Nick and Judy a short of
the car; its first owner bought it in 1999 and after eighteen year of exploiting, left for scrapping at
Rust Scrapyard located twenty miles west from Zootopia and at least ten from any other city or
village. On their way there, Judy managed to contact owner of the gearbox’s original car, Albert
Grenada, who told them a short story of their ’95 Lancer Reaver, which he left at this same
scrapyard around that time after having crashed it in a nasty crash at a highway.

“All the leads guide us there,” Judy said excitedly, as she hung up.

“To another dead end?” Smirked Nick and she rolled her eyes.

“Don’t you jinx it now.”

“Jinx what? There’s hardly anything to be jinxed yet,” he pointed out.

“Well, with that attitude there won’t be much left for sure,” the bunny riposted half-
jokingly. Somewhere in the distant, they noticed high metal fence and a tall gate with sign Rust
Scrapyard above it. It was just as rusted as one would expect it to be.

“The junkyard at the End of the Universe,” joked Nick. “Not that End, though, luckily.”

“Luckily indeed. I wondered who figured it’d be a good idea to place it so far from the
city.”

“City itself, I think,” Nick guessed. “A junkyard doesn’t exactly add to the view and we
have some strict policy when it comes to spatial planning. There are couple small ones, I know, but
no room for… this,” he pointed out. Judy drove to the junkyard through an opened gate and
parked by what seemed to be junkyard’s office. As they got out of the car, Judy looked around and
had to agree with Nick; there wasn’t space in Zootopia for a scrapyard this big. She could hardly
see how big it even was, surrounded by piles of old flattened cars. The place looked like a giant
cemetery, nearly perfectly quiet to that. The sound of giant jaws devastating another poor vehicle
somewhere in distance only added to the dread. Nick called Judy and they went to the office. They
knocked on the door couple times and heard a muffled reply. In a few moments, the door opened,
showing a messy ram, dressed in some dirty trousers and tank top and smelling of grease, sweat
and a subtle stench of alcohol. The sheep watched police officers carefully.

“Wanna buy something? Look around,” he suggested.

“We’re from ZPD. This is Detective Wilde and I’m Detective Hopps,” Judy and Nick
shown their badges. “We’d want to ask a couple questions, Mr. …”

“Barry Hayes. I owe the place,” he introduced himself, a bit scornfully. Both officers
knew a bit about him as Nick had read his police files on their way there; he had owned the Rust
Junkyard for last twenty-five years and was associated in past with couple Zootopia gangs, never
found guilty of any illegal businesses, though. Not the best mammal to work with.

“We wanted to ask about a certain car that was scrapped here approximately three years
ago,” Judy explained and the ram eyed her carefully.

“Come inside, will ya?” He said and stepped back inside. The police officers followed
him to a messy room with a dirty coach, some TV playing in the background and mandatory
calendars from last five years with scantily-clad ladies in suggestive poses. Hayes walked over to
the cupboard and found a ring binder with ‘2015’ written on it. He dropped it on the desk and
turned at the officers.

“What is it?”

“A Hanza Striver pickup that was left here in March of 2015. It’s VIN is 1ZH2658492T00584,” Judy read and Hayes browsed through the papers. It took him a while, but he found it eventually the right page.

“Yeah, got it right here. 18th March, it says,” he read to them. Both Nick and Judy leaned over and studied it simultaneously. “It was dismantled to pieces, some were sold it seems,” continued Hayes.

“What about the body?” Nick asked and he shrugged.

“Sold, it seems, but not a clue to whom,” the sheep replied helplessly. “No duty to tell what happens to every part of every car that comes here.”

“Maybe you remember?” Judy suggested, immediately realizing how naively it sounded. How would a guy known for questionable legality of his actions bring himself to remember something that had happened three years ago?

“Sorry, not really,” refused Hayek firmly.

“We have another car that we’d like to ask about too,” Nick changed the subject. “Lance Reaver was left him around that time. It’s VIN’s…”

“That one?” Hayek leafed couple pages and shown them. The officers nodded confirming and saw that this one had his body scrapped and lying somewhere at the scrapyard, but there was no information on what had happened to any of its parts, especially the gearbox they had identified earlier that day. “Still should have it somewhere here. Wanna see it?”

“No need, really. We just hoped you’d remember who could have bought its gearbox,” Nick asked, but the scrapyard worker only shook his head.

“No idea, really. I don’t have good memory,” he apologized, his tone somewhere between sarcasm and genuine concern. Nick and Judy asked him couple more questions about recent or frequent clients or if he had ever met Miles or saw any characteristic hyenas, but learnt nothing useful. More for their moods than the case, they went to see what remained of their Lancer Reaver and then, headed back to Zootopia in some foul moods.

“Do you think he concealed anything?” Judy asked.

“Maybe. No way to make him tell anything if he did,” he pointed out what she already knew.

“A dead end, then?” She concluded.

“Like I said.”

“You didn’t say it; you jinxed it! You totally jinxed it!” She giggled, amused suddenly by her accusation.

“Yeah, completely. Miles pays me to cover him, so I jinx every single of our trails,” he joked back.
“Oh, you!” Judy laughed. “Some bad luck’s charm you are!”

“Clearly. We can’t solve a single case without causing ourselves trouble.”

“Or a life threat,” Judy chuckled.

“I think it’s your turn now?” Nick reminded her.

“Crap,” she only said.

“What do you choose?” Wondered the fox with amusement.

“I don’t know. Drowning sounds nice?” She guessed.

“It doesn’t. Trust me, it doesn’t,” Nick told her.

“Oh, right… So… hmm…” She wondered.

“A car crash isn’t so bad. Just swing the wheel to the left…” Nick suggested.

“Har, har,” Judy rolled her eyes and for a moment, they drove in silence.

“So, a dead end?” He guessed.

“We still have plenty things to do about Miles. We’ll monitor him and his account, we can ask around his workers…” Judy paused hesitantly under pressure of her partner’s sceptical sight. “Yup, seems like a dead end to me,” she admitted reluctantly. As much as she’d hate to admit it, the investigation wasn’t starting all that good.

12.32 pm, Tuesday, May 26, 2022

Isabelle Alvarez pushed the door of ZPD Precinct 1 Station and stepped inside with a huge file in her paws. She really liked this building, far more than Chief Blizzard’s station, but it felt different now. Tainted. Yes, that was the right word. It was tainted with distrust. She could feel it in others’ sights, the comments they whispered behind her back. Or was she simply getting paranoid? It’s been just two days. She glanced at Clawhauser for a split of second and he waved enthusiastically. Even that chubby cheetah, too soft to handle any serious police work, pitied her. She hated it even more. She could handle distrust. Against pity, she was helpless. She passed by his desk without a word, pretending to be so in hurry that she hadn’t noticed him. She rushed to her and Max’s box only to see the wolf already in civvies, putting on his coat.

“Are you leaving?” She asked, a bit confused.

“Yeah, took few hours off. Family matters,” he explained with enthusiastic smile and eyed the file she was holding. “What do you have there?”

“Oh, um… Couple reports from the lab about the explosion, didn’t read them yet. I also
talked with couple witnesses from the scene and it seems that someone has seen that hyena in question getting into some car. I’ve got a description somewhere…”

“I’ll check it later. You can try looking for the car at the nearby jam cams, I was just sitting to it,” Max suggested.

“OK, I will,” she nodded. “Will you be back later?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he shook his head and glanced at the watch. “Gotta be going. See you tomorrow!” He waved her and rushed to the exit. Isabelle opened her mouth trying to stop him, but froze in the middle. What was she going to say anyway? She just sighed deeply and dropped the files on her desk. She logged at her account and tried to access the jam cams, but it seemed like her computer had some connectivity problems. She snarled with frustration and reached for the phone, calling the TOs, but no one picked up. With roll of her eyes, she stood from her seat and walked down to their office. She knocked on the door and came in, only to see it quite empty. The only two mammals present were August Fares and Jason Wolford. The rabbit was explaining something to the wolf so excited that his tail was wagging.

“…And then, we verify it with what we got earlier and there he is. Right at the spot at just the time,” August concluded triumphantly.

“Oh, yeah, we’ve got him!” Wolford exclaimed. “You’re the freaking best! Send it over to my mail, won’t you? I’ve got a murderer to arrest!” He stormed out, barely acknowledging Isabelle. “Fang! We’ve got him…” He disappeared behind the closing door and Isabelle stood still, a bit confused.

“What… happened here?” She asked.

“Oh, um… I might have helped Jason find his murderer? Like I said, I’m a pattern seeker,” he explained shyly. “By the way, August. August Fares. I don’t think we’ve been introduced properly,” the rabbit jumped off his chair and offered a paw that she shook.

“Isabelle Alvarez,” she introduced herself. “Where is everyone?”

“Oh, they went for a lunch break some time ago. I guess I got caught up in action. Do you need anything?” He asked.

“I’ve got some trouble with my account. I should have access to city monitoring from my account already, but I don’t,” she explained.

“I can handle it. I’ve had similar issue just yesterday,” he assured. He leaned over to his computer to lock it and encouraged Isabelle to come with her. The wolf, a bit hesitantly, went with him back to her box. She unlocked her account and shown August what seemed to be a problem.

“Yeah… I had quite this same issue. Go to your mailbox. Somewhere in SPAM, there should be a message… yeah, that one. Mhm. You’ve got the verification key there… Enter it here… and it should be working now,” he guided her through the process. Isabelle checked the database; she had full access now.

“Wow, thanks. How come a verification key ends up in SPAM?” She wondered.

“Not a clue. I need to tell Kaylee about it, she might do something about it,” August shrugged helplessly and then, hesitated. “You don’t like her, do you?”

“It’s not that I don’t like her, I just…” She hesitated. “Never mind.”
“You gave her some hard time, you know,” August pointed out. “But… don’t be too hard on yourself either,” he suggested shyly.

“Given the rumors that have already spread, I’m certainly not the one being hard on me,” Isabelle said bitterly.

“I’m not sure if I’m reading moods right… but I don’t think so?” The rabbit said carefully. “I think that, given how Max handled it, everyone found it more funny than harmful, actually. Some even think he overdid it, humiliating you like that,” he said, but Isabelle watched him skeptically.

“It’s nice, but you don’t mean that.”

“I really do,” August assured with a smile. “Just… try not to steal anyone’s husband for a while,” he forced a joke and she chuckled nervously.

“I’m not that type of…” She tried to say, when she met August’s doubtful sight.

“Whatever. If a guy falls in my paws, what was point of that marriage anyways? It’s not my fault,” she shrugged it off, trying to seem careless.

“What’s the point of hitting on that guy, then?” August asked curiously.

“Because he won’t…” Isabelle paused. “For sense of accomplishment?” She explained and frowned, seeing his disapproval. “See? That’s exactly the kind of bullshit I have to put up with. When a guy goes from a girl to a girl to a girl, he’s a player. When I do it, I’m a…” She sighed with frustration.

“You know… to some mammals, neither of them are anyhow impressive,” August suggested politely, but firmly.

“You’ve never even had a girlfriend, have you?” She tried to laugh it off.

“I’ve had and I don’t think that’s a point,” he said absolutely seriously and suddenly, Isabelle felt bad, not even about mocking him, but about his disapproval. As if she cared about some rabbit’s opinion on her lifestyle.

“Whatever. I’ve got work to do.” She turned around back to her computer, ignoring the rabbit standing in her box. She could hear him still being there, standing still and trying to find words.

“You’re welcome. For the computer thing,” he said and left. Isabelle opened the database and found the jam cams she needed, but then she paused, staring at the screen blankly.

“Nonsense,” she muttered, as she reached for the phone to browse Zoobook events. There certainly was a party in the city tonight and she considered herself invited.

1.00 pm, Tuesday, May 26, 2022
“Excited?” Max Reynolds smirked at his wife.

“Oh, you can’t even imagine,” she assured, as they parked their car by the school, where they met with Mrs. Ubik from the orphanage. Today was the day when they’d get their first chance to pick the two kits they wanted to adopt, Mia and Thane, up from the school and have some fun time with them under Mrs. Ubik’s careful eye. The chubby honey badger shook their paws with a weak smile.

“Wonderful day, isn’t it?” She pointed with a weak smile. “What plans do you have for today?”

“Oh, we thought of some ice creams for the start and then go-karts? Both seemed really enthusiastic about it,” Kaylee explained.

“Aren’t they too young for that?” Mrs. Ubik doubted.

“No, it’s seven and up. I double checked,” Max assured with a wink.

“Oh, well then, sounds decent. Let’s pick the kids up, then,” suggested the badger and they waited by the gate along with couple other parents. Soon, the bells rang, the doors opened and kits poured out of the school in a joyful stream. Mia and Thane were one of the first ones to come out the gate, but they didn’t look as excited as at Max and Kaylee’s previous visit. On the opposite, they seemed quite terrified, especially Mia.

“What happened, kits?” Kaylee crouched by them.

“Ryan… He’s…” Mia tried to tell her, but her paws were shaking and she started to weep. Kaylee hugged her gently and little bunny hugged her back.

“He’s in trouble,” Thane finished for his sister. “He went with Gary Brouver and his friends. They’re going to fight,” he explained. Mrs. Ubik sighed with frustration.

“This again… Let’s go and see the cameras. We’ll find them in a moment,” she suggested.

“You go, I’ll look around too,” Max said and before any of them got to say a word, dashed off. The wolf hesitated. “Ryan. That wolf cub, right? The one that creeped Kaylee off? He did look like troublemaker,” he muttered as he ran around the school building. There were cameras here, so if it wasn’t the first time, kids were surely smarter than just doing it there. Where would they go in such case? And then, he saw the city park. The trees were dense one could not see far. He slipped through a hole in the fence and looked around only to hear some excited shouts. He followed them to see a bunch of kids in a circle. In its center, were struggling a young grey wolf and much bigger and bulkier lion. The lion lifted wolf in the air and slammed him against the ground earning everyone’s cheering. The wolf was at all fours, while lion kept boasting and mocking him. And then, wolf lunged toward him suddenly with his claws drawn and furious shriek. The lion snarled and tried to hit him straight in the face, but then, Max was already there. He caught both teenagers’ wrists and pulled them with him, knocking the two off their feet. For a second, all kids stared at Reynolds with horror, not believing that anyone could have crept on them like that. And then, someone yelled “Scatter!” and before five seconds passed, all who remained were Max and wolf and lion that he was still holding tightly.

“So… Ryan…” he eyed the young wolf. “…And Gary, I assume?” Guessed Reynolds, glancing at the lion.
“Drop me, you ass! Do you know who my father is?!” Yelled Gary.

“I’m afraid not,” Max replied, as he dropped lion’s paw only to catch his ear.

“Oh, ouch! Is he with you, Ryan?!” Gary asked, but then, Max did this same to the young wolf. He snarled and struggled, but gained nothing.

“I’m afraid not,” Max repeated. “Now, I can drag you through the park and school like this or we can walk to the principal like civilized mammals,” suggested the wolf. Both wolf and lion snarled, but Max pulled them a bit and they surrendered immediately. They led the way back to the school not turning back at the wolf following them.

“Who’s that guy?” Whispered Gary.

“Dunno, some cop,” muttered Ryan.

“Why is he…”

“Shut up,” snarled the other teenager and all three continued in silence. They went straight to the principal’s office. Max walked over to the secretary and introduced himself.

“These two were fighting in nearby park. They probably should have a talk with principal,” he explained. The secretary looked down at two kids, sighed with indication that it wasn’t the first time for either of them and went to principal’s office. A few moments later, a pig in glasses looked out the office apathetically. He huffed at Ryan who cowered down hiding behind Max.

“Ryan Thorn. A thorn in my side you are, you little…” The principal paused mid-sentence, as he met with stern glare of Max’s.

“Detective Max Reynolds is the name, Principal…” Max offered his paw, watching the guy coldly.

“Ekhem… Wilson,” the pig adjusted his glasses.

“Principal Wilson. These two were fighting in the park and I’d say both of them are equally guilty,” stated the wolf. Principal tried to withstand his cold stare, but then he coughed off and turned around.

“Of course. Gary, to my office, I’m calling your father. Marcy, tell Jake that his son was in a fight again. Thorn, you wait at the bench. Detective Reynolds, thank you. You can go now…”

“I’ll stay around,” assured Reynolds, baffling the principal.

“O…K…” The pig went back to his office, followed by young lion. Ryan Thorn sighed deeply and sat at nearby bench while secretary made a call. Max reached for his phone.

“Hey, Kaylee, I thought you’d be at principal’s,” he called her.

“Oh, Mrs. Ubik sent us to the school cafeteria for ice cream for the kids. She went to security office to ask about the cameras in meanwhile,” the bunny explained.

“No need, I found Ryan and that Gary kid, I’m waiting at Principal’s. Tell kids he’s alright. How are they?” Max asked.

“They’re alright. I’ll tell them.”
“And call Mrs. Ubik. I don’t think I have her number.”

“Will do. I love you.”

“I love you too, darling,” Max smiled to the phone and hung up. He sat at the bench by Ryan and watched the lion entering principal’s office; Mr. Brouver, apparently. The two wolves sat in complete silence, staring at the wall.

“They’re not really scolding him, are they?” Max noticed.

“He’s vice-principal’s son,” Ryan explained.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” muttered the young wolf and for a long moment, they remained silent. “So… you’re a cop, Max.” stated Ryan suddenly.

“Mr. Reynolds or Detective Reynolds for you, boy,” corrected him Max. “But yeah. I’m a cop.”

“You want to adopt Thane and Mia, don’t you?”

“Yup. That’s us,” he nodded.

“They said nice things about you and your wife, but I was sure you’d be some donut-muncher. But you’re an ass-kicker,” Ryan muttered and Max smiled.

“How did you tell?”

“You kicked our asses,” explained the young wolf causing hin to chuckle.

“It figures, I suppose. Ear doesn’t hurt?” Max asked and the teenager shook his head.

“No, it’s cool. Where did you learn that? Police Academy?”

“And private courses. I’ve had my ass kicked in the past too,” explained the wolf with a smirk.

“You? Yeah, right,” disbelieved him Ryan. “You could teach me couple moves, though.”

“What for? So that you could claw classmate’s eyes out more swiftly?” Max asked and Ryan hung his head shamefully.

“I… It’s not like that. I didn’t want to fight him,” he muttered only.

“Really? Then why did you?” Wondered Reynolds. He didn’t doubt his words and Ryan really seemed to appreciate it.

“Because Gary bullies us. I mean, he bullies Thane because he’s smaller and he called Mia names when she tried to stop him. He made her cry. They’re my only friends and it really pisses me off, when someone hurts them,” he explained.

“So you called him for a fight?” Max concluded.

“Well, I could have gone to principal,” Ryan replied with annoyance and Reynolds eyed
“Aren’t you too young to be sarcastic?” He doubted.

“Mrs. Ubik says sarcasm is the highest form of intelligence,” the teenager replied.

“…And lowest form of wit. She’s missing on half of the quote there,” Max smirked and Ryan managed to smile too. “There’s not much else that you could have done anyways, right?”

“Yeah. Dad always said that one thing I’m good with are the fists,” Ryan looked down at his dirty claws. “He wasn’t a good father, but he was right at that one. So I used them.”

“Not the first time?” Max guessed.

“Not the last,” Ryan assured. “So I could really use some advice,” he insisted and watched Reynolds with anticipation. The detective glanced at the kid, hesitating. He sighed deeply.

“Lesson one-oh-one. Next time, clench your fists like this. Carefully about thumb or it will hurt. Don’t use claws or teeth,” told him Reynolds and Ryan stared at him confused.

“But dad said… I’m a wolf. Claws are my trump card!” He protested.

“Well aimed fist does more job than a blind slash,” disagreed Max. “Hurts more, confuses the opponent worse. And foremost, is safer for both of you.”

“Meaning?” Ryan still didn’t understand.

“Fist leaves only bruises. Claws leave wounds. They don’t knock out. They enrage and force the opponent to use them too. And besides, if you use claws first in a street fight and hurt the guy, every court will consider you were going for a kill.”

“What?” Ryan asked with disbelief.

“Every officer will tell you that. Drawing opponent’s blood like that means to the court you’re going for the kill. Always. You would have clawed Gary’s eyes there, you know,” Max repeated himself firmly and Ryan let his head down.

“Huh.”

“Take your time,” Max said with a weak smile. “I know it’s confusing, but that’s the first lesson.”

“Got it… What’s the second?” Asked Ryan enthusiastically and Max smirked.

“We’ll get to it. Unless next time you fight Gary, you break the rule, that is,” Reynolds assured.

“You’re not telling me to stop fighting? Mrs. Ubik always tells me to stop fighting,” he asked with surprise.

“And how was it working for you?” Max doubted and both of them chuckled.

“Not at all,” Ryan chuckled and then, principal’s office door opened suddenly.

“Thorn, to my office,” ordered Principal tersely. Ryan sighed deeply.
“Thanks, Mr. Reynolds. It was cool knowing ya,” the teenager jumped off his seat and went to the office just as enthusiastically as if he was climbing up his guillotine. Max hesitated for only a second before following him, confusing the teenager just as much as he did rest of the room.

“Thank you, Detective, but we’ll take it from here,” Principal assured hesitantly.

“Given that young Mr. Brouver’s father is present and young Mr. Thorn’s legal guardian is not, I shall represent him as such,” Max declared instead.

“Mr. Brouver’s here as a vice-principal, not…” Principal tried to argue, but cut it in the middle under pressure of wolf’s stern sight. He coughed off and took his seat. “OK, you may stay,” he agreed reluctantly, much to vice-principal’s outrage. Ryan, confused at best, turned at Max and smirked as the police officer winked at him.

“Where were we?” Asked vice-principal Brouver, clearly displeased with development of the situation.

“Oh, yes. Gary said that you started the fight, Ryan,” principal accused the boy.

“Ye…”

“Don’t answer him,” Max cut in the middle of teenager’s word. “Just tell him what happened instead.” Ryan watched him dubiously, only after a moment realizing the difference he was making.

“Oh, um…” He slowly regained his confidence. “Gary was being mean to Thane, pushing him around all day. At the last break, he and his friend pushed him against the lockers at the third level and started mocking him. They tossed his books in the garbage can and when Mia tried to stop them, they started calling her names,” Ryan explained.

“What names?” Max asked.

“Um…” Ryan hesitated, and then clenched his fists angrily. “A bi… b-word. And a little piece of… s-word. And other names,” he snarled at Gary and the young lion shrugged.

“Did you call Mia names, Gary?” Asked the principal.

“Nope. I have, like, ten friends that’ll tell you I didn’t,” assured the young lion confidently.

“I know you do, but cameras will tell us something quite different, won’t they?” Max pointed out.

“There are no cameras at the top level. Budget cuts,” explained the principal.

“Of course,” muttered Reynolds with annoyance. “Go on, Ryan.”

“I saw them and I walked over to Gary. I said that if he has any trouble with them, he can resolve it with me in the park. Y’know, after school,” Ryan continued.

“So you did start the fight,” Mr. Brouver pointed out.

“Did Gary take up the challenge?” Max asked instead.

“Well, obviously,” confirmed Ryan. “After last class, we went to the park with his friends. We started fighting and then, Mr. Reynolds stormed in and brought us here,” he explained
looking up at the wolf and he smiled with a wink.

“So, you challenged Gary to a fight?” The principal asked.

“I… yes?” Ryan hesitated.

“He stood up for other kids,” Max added immediately. “And Gary did accept the challenge.”

“Well, he had not much of a choice, actually,” Mr. Brouver noticed. “You were a teenager too, Mr. Reynolds. You know you can’t turn down a challenge when your buddies are watching. It’s just… boys being boys,” Gary’s father explained.

“You can’t say that calling a little girl a b-word is just boys being boys!” Max snarled with outrage. “Or do schools teach that slurring classmates is normal now?!”

“He certainly didn’t mean it, did you, Gary?” The principal argued.

“Of course, I didn’t!” Protested the young lion.

“Oh, so you did say it,” Max smirked bitterly. “To me, you don’t even have to understand what these words mean, though. All I know is that half an hour ago, Mia Cloverine was crying because of you.”

“Little girls cry a lot, Mr. Reynolds, and we’re looking for the core of the problem. The provocateur here clearly is that good-for-nothing Thorn kid,” Mr. Brouver dismissed it angrily.

“That Thorn kid has a name and he’s in the room, so refer to him personally, Mr. Brouver,” admonished him Reynolds immediately. The lion snarled.

“Well, all he does is starting fights and it’s the fifth one in last two months. He was suspended twice this year and by the end of the year, he’ll be in juvy! He’s the troublemaker here, not my son!” He yelled.

“Jake, Jake… Let me take it,” pacified him Principal Wilson. “Mr. Reynolds. Like my colleague said, we’re trying to get to the core here. There is no doubt that Ryan did start the fight. Even he admits it. And we can’t punish anyone for simply fighting back.”

“I… I had to!” Ryan snapped. “He was bullying them! What was I supposed to do?! Wait and watch?!”

“That’s when you call teachers, young boy,” explained the principal calmly.

“So that you can say that boys are just being boys?!” The teenager snarled back.

“When such incident happened for the first time, did you call teachers?” Max asked.

“No… But Thane did!” He said uncertainly.

“What did they say?”

“That… that they’d talk with Gary.”

“Did anything change, though?” Max wondered.

“It got worse,” Ryan snarled at his classmate and Reynolds frowned at principals.
“Are you really surprised that he’s not trying to talk with teachers anymore? You failed him and he handles it to one mammal he can trust it to; himself,” Max concluded angrily.

“That’s isolationism, Mr. Reynolds, and we can’t glorify it. Children in this school are taught basic moral values of Zootopia, one of them being trust in their authorities. You surely understand it as a police officer,” Principal Wilson argued, tired with whole this discussion.

“Trust does not imply lack of criticism. Neither does it passivity,” riposted Reynolds firmly. Principal Wilson sighed with frustration.

“This discussion is leading us nowhere,” he said.

“For once, I do agree,” Max nodded and principal hesitated.

“Let’s just… Close the case,” he decided. “Thorn, Brouver, you have my reprimand. I do not want you two to ever fight again. You’re free to go.”

“It’s clearly Thorn’s fault…” vice-principal tried to protest.

“Enough, Jake! I’m either suspending both or letting the thing slide. Your call,” the pig put him back in line angrily. The lion muttered something under his breath, but did not protest. He left the room along with his son, eyeing Max Reynolds angrily and slamming the door.

“Thank you, principal. I’d be even more happier if my intervention weren’t necessary, though,” he said. The pig murmured something under his breath and the two wolves left the room. Ryan couldn’t help the wide, toothy grin.

“Wow. I’ve never seen Mr. Brouver so angry. Thanks, Mr. Reynolds,” he chuckled.

“It might not fix much in the long run… but you’re welcome,” Max smirked. “Are they always like that?” He asked.

“Always,” Ryan nodded.

“There you are!” Mrs. Ubik called them from the bench. She must have been waiting there for a while. “Ryan, you little rascal, bothering Mr. Reynolds like that…”

“I volunteered, really,” Max assured as Mrs. Ubik eyed the teenager.

“Ryan, go to cafeteria. Mrs. Reynolds is waiting there with Thane and Mia,” she ordered and pup nodded obediently and ran down the stairs, soon to disappear from their sight. “I’m sorry for him, he’s such a troublemaker…”

“It’s alright, really. I’m just glad that I could help,” Max shrugged it off. “Can you tell me more about him?” He asked. Mrs. Ubik hesitated.

“No other family?” Max wondered.

“Godfather and father’s brother, James. He wanted to take him home, but he barely keeps himself afloat. No court would ever give him a kid,” she explained. “We should go too. We need to drive him back to the orphanage and if you want to make for the go-karts…”
“We can take him with us, actually. If it’s alright with you,” he suggested.

“I… don’t see a reason not to,” Mrs. Ubik agreed, even if hesitantly.

3.47 pm, Tuesday, May 26, 2022

They drove to the go-karts by two car; Kaylee took kids in theirs, while Max drove with Mrs. Ubik, to continue their discussion on what had happened in the principal’s office. On their long way to Meadowlands, Ryan Thorn was trying to play cool about that day’s events, but couldn’t contain the excitement and kept telling his friends everything that had happened and Kaylee, as curious as always, listened to every single word of his. They arrived at the track a bit later than planned, but had no problem getting an additional go-kart for Ryan and soon they raced in three doubles: Kaylee with Mia, Max with Thane and Mrs. Ubik with Ryan. Soon, Mrs. Ubik went for a smoke and Kaylee and Max called for a break. They leaned against the barrier and watched the kids racing and chasing on their own. Max let out a deep, satisfying sigh.

“How was it?” Kaylee asked.

“I’m still angry that a school can have such shitty principals,” he said, displeased.

“You’ve never… right, private schooling,” Kaylee realized. “And you were one of the cool kids too, huh? Well… they’re not. And they’re in the public school. And that’s how it often looks then,” she explained. “But having fun beyond that?”

“Oh, absolutely. And I hope kids do too,” Max assured with a grin.

“I think so. Even Mia’s not afraid of charging straight into another go-kart,” Kaylee pointed out and they heard a powerful thud. “Or you know, a wall,” she leaned over. “Carefully, dear! Use brakes like I shown you!” She advised her. Little bunny raised a thumb up and returned to chasing the boys.

“Yeah. Thane will be a good driver,” he pointed out.

“Mia too,” Kaylee assured only to hear another thud. “In time,” she chuckled and they continued to watch them in blissful silence. Kaylee eyed between Ryan and her husband, who kept following the young wolf with sight.

“You know… Ryan really could use a father figure,” she pointed out carefully.

“True. He doesn’t have anyone like that,” Max nodded, but shown no signs of getting the allusion. Kaylee waited half a minute patiently to no avail.

“Sometimes, darling, I wonder how you even passed the police exams… leave alone with top scores,” she indicated further.

“Oh, I had a rich father,” he giggled and glanced at her only to see this sight of her meaning that he let something fly over his head again. It actually took him a moment for it to dawn
on him. “You mean… we could… him?” He asked with disbelief, as he followed Ryan with sight.

“If you think we can do it,” she confirmed.

“But I thought you said…”

“I know what I said and we can’t help everyone. But… just one kid more,” she said. “It’s not much.”

“And do you think you can handle it? I know he creeped you out at first…” Max worried.

“I think it’s about the time I stopped being afraid of children of certain fur and toothy grins,” Kaylee explained with a smile. “You should talk with him about it, first.”

“I… Yeah, I will. I will,” Max nodded and smiled at his wife. “Thank you,” he managed to say, as his eyes grew watery.

“Aww… Are you crying?” Kaylee realized. She took his paw and leaned against his side, as he wiped a single tear. “You’ll make a good father, you know.”

“Yeah, I… I hope,” was all that he said.

Chapter End Notes

The part that frustrated me most, writing whole conversation with the principal? How smoothly it came to write principals' arguments :/
Max Reynolds and Isabelle Alvarez were heading to the Savannah Central in some real good moods, each of them for quite a reason, though. As they stopped at the traffic lights, Max unlocked his phone to check something on web when his partner caught sight of his wallpaper; a photo of him, Kaylee and three kits.

“Are these the kids you’re adopting?” She guessed and he confirmed with a nod.

“Yeah. We took the picture yesterday,” he confirmed. “Mia, Thane and Ryan,” he shown her. Isabelle took the phone from him and watched it with a sad smile.

“Well… congrats. I thought there were only supposed to be two?” She asked, a bit confused, as she returned it to him.

“We thought so too, but yesterday…” Max drove off the crossroad just as the lights switched. “Yesterday was some crazy day. My first day dealing with public schooling system and do I hate it already,” he chuckled, still recalling the talk they had with Ryan last evening. His shock, disbelief, suspicion at their offer. His joy when he realized they meant it. And the thing he told him as they were leaving; “Waiting for lesson one-oh-two, Mr.!”.

“I’m sorry,” muttered Isabelle. “That… you know… I was trying to… meddle in,” she apologized awkwardly and Max eyed her carefully. He already knew how good of an actress she was, but he felt that she was genuine this time.

“I will remember it, but I forgive you. Just do something for me.”

“Just… like that?”

“Well, I’m asking you for a favor too,” Max reminded her.

“What is it?”

“Apologize to Kaylee for the things you told her in that bathroom,” he suggested. “Then, I can consider it behind us,” he told her and Isabelle sighed deeply.

“Sure, will do. Just… yeah, will do,” she confirmed hesitantly and for a moment, they drove in silence, just watching the road.

“So… what’s with the smile?” Max asked finally. “You’ve been grinning all the way from the station.”

“Oh, I just…” She giggled. “August pissed me off so much yesterday that I had to go to a
party in Downtown.”

“August? Do you mean Fares? What did he do?”

“Oh, he thinks he’s better than me, clearly,” she shrugged it off. “Anyway, guess whom I met at the party? Not counting the usual creeps and jerks, that is.”

“Not a clue.”

“Jason Wolford. Turns out he’s a really cool guy and we’ve had some good time together and… turns out we’re a thing now,” she explained with a smirk. “So… I’ve had some quality time too.”

“Good for you. Jason’s a decent guy. He used to date my sister, but things didn’t quite… work out. You know, after my father died and she inherited his small empire,” Max informed her.

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, old times,” Max smiled weakly. “So, it’s been a good day. Let’s hope this one’s just as good,” he pointed out, but Alvarez muttered something not too enthusiastic. In last couple days, they’d had nearly thirty questionings of inhabitants of the block of flats destroyed in the gas explosion, most of which led them basically nowhere. They’ve had not a single solid testimony about Lionel O’Dyna’s mysterious hyena, except for some kid’s vague claim of passing by the guy an hour or half before an explosion. The kid, obviously, remembered no useful details. Now, they were headed to meet with last couple inhabitants, who were temporarily offered an other empty block of flats two miles away; the city had just purchased it and was about to start renting the flats, when the incident happened.

“It looks not bad,” Isabelle eyed the modern, brand new block of flats.

“They have the Fund covering it, so they don’t complain,” Max pointed out.

“You mean your Fund,” Isabelle corrected it.

“Yeah…” Max agreed, not too enthusiastically. “To be honest, I’m glad I’m over with it. It was some crazy time,” he said, while looking around for a parking spot. He found one and stopped there.

“Oh, I can imagine,” Isabelle agreed. “But spending such cash must be fun nonetheless, huh?”

“It was,” giggled Max, as they left the car and walked over to the terminal. He called the number he had written in his notepad and introduced himself. The magnetic lock buzzed and they came inside. After a short ride in an elevator, they were standing by flat’s door. The wolf knocked and an old cheetah opened the door for them.

“Mr. Walker? Detective Reynolds and Officer Alvarez. We’re investigating the gas explosion and we wanted to ask couple questions,” he introduced himself and his partner.

“Please come inside,” the cheetah stepped aside letting both in. The flat smelled of fresh paint and new furniture. It was small, but held in modern style like the rest of the building.

“A really nice place,” Max said.

“Oh, I am surprised too,” Mr. Walker assured, as he invited them to the living room. A
small plate of shop cookies was already waiting for them. “Turns out the city can do nice things.”

“When they’re spending someone else’s money,” Isabelle added.

“Indeed, Officer,” the cheetah agreed and Alvarez smirked at her partner, who just rolled his eyes, as they took their seats on a comfy sofa opposite to the host.

“I am sorry for no drinks. These are some weird times, officers,” he apologized and both Max and Isabelle nodded with understanding.

“They certainly are, Mr. Walker,” Isabelle agreed. “We don’t want to bother you too much. Would you care to answer couple of our questions?”

“Of course,” the cheetah nodded. “What would you like to know?”

“You were in the building at the time of the explosion. Could you tell us what were you doing about hour before the incident?” Max asked.

“Of course. I went to the shop, did some groceries. I came back, unpacked everything and had Mr. Fischer drop in for a coffee. We were at my dining room at the time of the explosion. I remember that you helped us, Officer Alvarez,” the host smiled and she nodded, confirming.

“Yes, I recall. I might have yelled at you at the time,” she apologized and the cheetah chuckled, waving it off.

“Necessity of the moment, really.”

“Do you remember anything peculiar that happened before? Maybe someone suspicious?” Max asked and the old cheetah hesitated.

“I… actually, yes. There was this very impolite young man at the door,” he recalled.

“At the shop door or house door?” Max asked.

“The house door. I mean, before the block,” specified Mr. Walker. “It was a young hyena. He was standing by the door when I was coming back from the store, eating some apple,” he explained and caught the way officers eyed one another. “Is it… important?”

“What was he doing there?” Isabelle asked.

“I think he was waiting for someone to open the door for him, as he walked over as I was unlocking it. I figured he was carrying around some leaflets or something, so I asked him, if he was waiting for someone. He snarled that he was visiting someone, but when I was trying to inquire more, he told me in very rude words that it was none of my business,” he explained.

“Do you remember how he looked like?” Hoped Max.

“Oh, he was very tall and wore a black hoodie. I don’t really remember his face, it was covered by the hood mostly, I am afraid,” the old cheetah apologized and then, hesitated. “He had this earring, though. He seemed very abashed when I mentioned it and he took it off immediately.”

“What earring?” Max asked.

“Oh, it was a silver… chain, of sort? It was a long one and there was a small silver thing hanging from it. A heart, I think,” Mr. Walker described. Isabelle searched for something on her
“Something like this?” She asked, showing the old cheetah some photo.

“Yes, yes, something like that,” he confirmed. Mr. Walker tried to give them any more details, but couldn’t recall anything beyond that. They continued the conversation for ten minutes more, but didn’t learn anything new and Isabelle clearly wanted to end the conversation quickly. They thanked Mr. Walker for his help and left the flat.

“OK, what is it?” Max asked, as the door closed behind them.

“I know who that was. I mean… I think I know where to find him,” she explained.

“Really? There are… quite a lot of hyenas in this city, you know,” he noticed carefully.

“But not the ones wearing this earring,” she said.

“OK, what’s his name?”

“I… I don’t really know. But yesterday… remember how I mentioned the usual creeps in the club? Well, he was one of them. He was dressed in black, really tall and wearing this earring I shown Mr. Walker. He offered to buy me a drink, but I told him to get lost, since he was a creep like few, unfortunately,” she explained.

“Too bad. I mean, good for you, but… think you could find him?” Max hoped.

“He did mention that if I changed my mind…” Isabelle’s face was more than enough to express how far she was from doing so. “…then I could find him at the Purge tonight. You know, that club in Happytown. So… care for a drink tonight?” She offered half-jokingly.

“If that’s the case…” He smirked. “I’ll just call Kaylee.”

“Look at you, henpecked by a rabbit,” she joked and he just chuckled, reaching for a phone. It looked like they were going for a drink after all.

9.36 pm, Wednesday, May 27, 2022

Max stopped the car hundred away from the nightclub Purge and looked around. Happytown itself wasn’t a pretty place, but this really felt like a bad part of the town.

“OK, I’m dropping you off here. Meet you in the club,” he said, watching Isabelle dressed in a black, unrevealing dress, making her look even more alluring than usual. She smiled and left the car.

“Can you hear me?” She asked, as he drove away to a nearby parking.
“Loud and clear. So… what is this place exactly? Is it a Duchess thing?” Max wondered, as he looked for a spot at the nearby parking place.

“Quite oppositely,” rung in Max’s ear. “It’s one club she doesn’t own around here and actually, I’m not even surprised. Alcohol’s bad, music’s bad, company’s bad…”

“Anything’s good in there?” Wondered the wolf.

“I heard drugs are cheap. And they say fist fights are fun to watch.”

“Oh, this sort of place. And so, Duchess doesn’t want a place like this…”

“…and lets all the worst scum that has no place in her clubs end up here. Exactly. The district need such a place. She doesn’t,” confirmed Alvarez.

“Convenient,” Max admitted, as he left the car. He heard some music noises from Alvarez was coming inside. Surprisingly, it took her a while, even though was one of the places where ladies didn’t pay a cent for entrance.

“Certainly. I’m in.”

“ Took you a while?” Max noticed.

“Mandatory search,” she reminded him. It was the reason why under his fancy shirt, Max had no gun or badge. Not exactly a place where he or Isabelle could bring either in. “ I’ll look around for our hyena. You take a spot at the upper level, you’ll have a good view from there.”

“Noted,” he nodded. Max stood in the queue for a few minutes and was searched thoroughly before he actually got inside and the moment he stepped in, he noted in his mind not to ever party there out of his volition. The place seemed obscure, the weak lights only doing the place service. He climbed the stairs and went over to the top bar.

“Hey, some non-alcoholic drink? I’m the driver tonight,” he asked a cute cheetah bartender. She stared down at him.

“The kindergarten’s at the next street,” she told him condescendingly.

“Glass of water. Sparkling, no ice, if you don’t mind,” he said, dropping five dollars at the counter with polite smile. She eyed him carefully, grabbed the five, put it in her pocket and poured him some water with ice. He thanked with a smile and walked over to one of the seats just by the railing, from which he had view on dancing floor and lower bar. He looked around, but didn’t spot Isabelle.

“At the position. Where are you?” He asked.

“I see you. East-northern corner of the dancing floor. Leaning against a pillar,” she reported.

“Oh, I see you. Spotted our hyena?”

“At the bar, talking with some tigress. Can you see them?” Isabelle told him. Max leaned against the table with a compact monocular that disappeared in the darkness completely. It took him only the second to recognize the pair in question.

“Yup, got them,” he confirmed. “What’s the plan?”
“They’ll be done in like a second. Darn, he’s even creepier than I remembered,” Isabelle’s shiver caused a chuckle from her partner. “It’s not funny.”

“It was your idea.”

“And boy, do I regret it. Anyways, they should be done in a moment. I’ll walk over to him, have some drinks, sell him some compliments. In an hour, I’ll invite him to my apartment. You know, I take him to your car, you follow us to the parking and then, we handle him.”

“Just like that? You walk over, say ‘hey, handsome’ and he’s yours?” Max asked dubtingly. “And if he has a girlfriend?”

“I don’t think so. And even if… there’s not a single guy in this club that I could not seduce. Not counting you, obviously,” she promised. Max hesitated for only a secodn.

“I… yeah, I can imagine so,” he agreed and then, he noticed that the hyena was now sitting alone indeed. “Well then, he really did take just a second. He’s all yours now.”

“I am so excited,” she muttered and took a deep breath. “Alright, showtime,” she said and ran over to the bar, leaning on it just in front of the hyena. “Hello, handsome. Remember me?”

“You!” The hyena gasped, surprised.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking a lot about the last time and… why don’t you buy me a drink or two?” She leaned toward him, giggling drunkenly.

“How do I put it… I could use you a little now… and maybe I could let you use me some later?” Isabelle offered with sweet coquettish laughter and the hyena chuckled disturbingly even to Max. Suddenly, the wolf felt that he was going to owe her some really big favor for the things she was doing there.

“Ha! Mojito for me and the miss!” Hyena assured, giving her a toothy smile. The bartender handed them the two and they drank some.

“Really? You didn’t seem too convinced the last time,” he asked skeptically.

“How do I put it… I could use you a little now… and maybe I could let you use me some later?” Isabelle offered with sweet coquettish laughter and the hyena chuckled disturbingly even to Max. Suddenly, the wolf felt that he was going to owe her some really big favor for the things she was doing there.

“Ha! Mojito for me and the miss!” Hyena assured, giving her a toothy smile. The bartender handed them the two and they drank some.

“So, handsome… care to share the name?” Isabelle asked.

“Ryuk. Yagami-no Ryuk,” he introduced himself and she smiled, biting her lip seductively.

“Oh, an alias? That’s sexy. Are you an artist?” She asked and then, faked hesitance. “No, you’re a gangster, aren’t you? Some dangerous man…” Isabelle guessed, sounding genuinely impressed. “Call me the Beauty, handsome.”

“Oh, I can be your Beast!” He grinned and she laughed.

“You just might!” She agreed. “So, what is it that you do these days, Ryuk? Drugs? Kidnappings? Assassinations?” She asked, leaning over to him seductively. Ryuk stared into her cleavage shamelessly.

“I’d have to kill you, if I told you,” he joked and she laughed a bit too loudly. Isabelle reached for her drink almost falling off her chair and emptied it with a swing and Ryuk did the same, much to her amusement.
“Oh, you can’t tell me your past… so how about I tell you your future?” She offered. “My grandma was gypsy, so I know a little of the palm-thing… y’know…” She hiccupped. “The palmistry! Give me your right paw,” she pleased and Ryuk, most intrigued, gave it to her.

“So, what do you see?” He asked, intrigued.

“Oh, I see… Oh my. I see gold in your future,” she giggled. “Lots, and lots of gold. Great wealth awaits you. You will live long and you will be rich beyond thought. You won’t have to worry about anything. But before that, you will struggle, you will fight. You’re a fighter, aren’t you?” Isabelle looked him straight in the eyes. “You will shed blood. You will wreck the system. But even earlier, I see… You… buying me another drink,” she smiled slyly and he cackled.

“Oh, absolutely, Beauty,” he promised. “Another one for me and the Beauty!” He yelled at the bartender, who made them two more drinks without a word. Max watched Ryuk carefully, as his right paw wandered to his pocket for a short moment as he took something from it. Then, he caught both drinks by the top, set the left one in front of her and the right one just behind it. For a second, Max thought he saw a small splash and then, Ryuk moved the drinks around for a few moments smoothly, enjoying Isabelle’s giggle. Finally, he handed her the one in the right paw.

“For you,” he offered her, but Max had this awful feeling in his guts.

“Don’t drink it. Something’s off,” he warned and saw her leaning on her left arm against the table; their mute ‘Understood’ signal.

“I want yours,” she demanded playfully reaching for his one.

“Mine?” He pulled both drinks back and smiled devilishly. He leaned over to her, nearly touching her face with his. “Oh, you think mine’s better? You think I’m keeping the best for myself?” He laughed, holding both of them. He made some move with paws, but Max couldn’t tell what it was in the dark.

“Fortune doesn’t favor fools,” she replied with a smirk. The hyena laughed and then, pushed his drink to her, still amused. She caught it smirking triumphantly. Max sighed with relief. He must have been wrong after all.

“Indeed. To you, Beauty! To the bottom,” the hyena offered and then, a terrifying realization crossed wolf’s mind.

“He switched the glasses!” Max yelled in her earpiece, but it was already too late, as the two of them were already downing their drinks. Isabelle giggled and hiccupped again, only causing the hyena to laugh even louder. She accompanied him joyously and then, shook her head, as if trying to shake alcohol off.

“Oh my, I am so… whoa,” she said with a giggle. “I gotta powder my nose, handsome, be back in a second!” She promised poking him on the nose. She jumped off her chair and headed for the bathrooms, pretending to be swaying drunkenly.

“He switched the glasses,” Max repeated.

“I felt it. It had that bitter taste,” she said with panic.

“So he…”

“He roofied me. He rutting roofied me,” she sounded terrified.
“I’m coming down…” Max stood from his seat.

“No, stay down. I’ve got this,” Isabelle assured. Max heard the noise of the door slamming open, and then of it shutting and locking. For a minute or two, she switched her microphone off and Max waited in anticipation. And then he heard her reconnecting.

“Isabelle?”

“I’ve emptied my stomach. It should not kick in… I hope. God, not again…”

“Good. Wait, you mean you were…” Max paused and for a second, none of them said a word. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Old days. Nothing happened. And about that bastard…”

“I’m calling back up and we’re arresting him. Just the roofies are enough to have him in a cell and once we have him, we are not letting him go,” he decided.

“No,” Isabelle refused firmly. “No rutting way.”

“Isa, we’ve got him. We just wait for him to leave the bar and…”

“I said not.”

“You’re not the one making calls here,” he reprimanded her harshly and heard her deep, frustrated sigh.

“Listen, he thinks I’m drunk and roofied. It makes things even easier, so let’s just stick to the initial plan. In thirty minutes, drugs would kick in. I’ll pretend I’m feeling woozy and ask him to drive me back to my house. You follow us to the car and then, arrest him…”

“No,” Max snarled angrily. “Listen, he was ready to roofie your drink. You don’t know what he’ll do when things get hot.”

“I know, but…” Isabelle paused hesitantly. “It’s important to me that I do it on my own, OK? No backup, just you and me. It’s like… very, very important. And I know we haven’t had an exactly good start, but… I ask you to let me handle it. However it goes, I’m taking the responsibility,” she promised.

“Isabelle, I am not going to let you play cowboy just because he pissed you off…” Protested Max.

“I’m not playing a cowboy, OK?! She snapped back. “It’s not about him. I just… let me do it on my own like we planned. Nothing really changed,” she pleased. Max sighed deeply. He could feel how deeply she needed it and yet, he couldn’t put her at risk now that there was completely no need to do so. But then again…

“OK, we stick to the plan. He’s yours,” he decided reluctantly. For a moment, he heard no reply.

“Thanks,” she only stuttered.

“But you owe me the explanation afterwards. Can you still stick to the role?” He worried. For a short moment just after, she seemed really terrified.

“I’m going for my Oscar there,” she assured with new confidence. “Half an hour.
“I’ve got your back,” Max promised. A few moments later, he watched the bathroom door opening and Isabelle walking over to Ryuk’s table just as woozily as she had gone earlier. She was back in the role, smiling at him charmingly and laughing at his jokes. For the rest of time, they did not drink anymore, switching to the careless conversation instead. About half an hour later, Isabelle pretended to feel all woozy, blaming it on the drinks she had had. Ryuk offered to walk her home, at which she laughed saying that she needed someone to drive her home. The hyena, claiming to be as sober as a judge, offered himself, to which she thanked him with a kiss to the cheek. Ryuk helped her stand up from the chair like a real gentleman and offered an arm, which she leaned against. They walked to the exit disappearing from Max’s sight, with only Isabelle’s murmurs of directions indicating to him that they were going in the right direction. Max stood from his seat about to follow him, only to realize that four bar patrons were standing right behind him. All the four were grinning threateningly at him, dressed in dark, studded jackets.

“Yup, here. Honeycomb Street,” echoed Isabelle’s voice in his earpiece.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” Max asked, eyeing them curiously and looking for a way out.

“I heard you’re buying us drinks, dandy,” said the lion, apparently the leader of the group. His friends snickered.

“Am I?” Max asked surprised, as if taking time to understand the situation. “Oh, you mean…” He paused, realizing there was no talking himself out of it or slipping out otherwise non-violently.

“Yeah, straight ahead. See the parking lot?” Isabelle’s question in his ear only hurried the wolf.

“Oh well, if you insist…” He reached for his wallet and then, flinched as a panicked yelp erupted in his earphone. Without a second thought, Max dashed between the two of them. Someone tried to grab him by collar, but wolf twisted his arm, kicked him in the knee and before anyone caught him again, slid down the railing to the bottom level disappearing in the crowd. Reynolds sprung out of the club and followed Isabelle’s directions.

“Let me go, you… Argh!” Isabelle’s echo in speaker turned into a scream in the street. With heart at his throat and not a second to even consider calling backup or arming himself anyhow, he rushed into the dark alley, from which the shouts came. In the dark, he saw them; the hyena was struggling with Isabelle, pushing her against a wall. He was holding her by throat with left paw, crushing it violently, as his right paw was pressing her shoulder violently against a trash container. Isabelle was holding his choking arm with both paws, gasping for air and trying to kick him in guts to no avail.

“ZPD! Freeze!” Max yelled charging toward them and the hyena turned, his eyes full of panic. He did exactly what Max expected, though; dropped Isabelle and started running away, climbing onto some fence and jumping down on the other side. With not a chance nor will to chase him, Max stopped by Isabelle, now lying among the dirt, coughing heavily. He crouched by her and examined her throat carefully. It didn’t seem damaged.

“Isa, speak to me,” he pleaded in mix of anger and fear.

“I…” She coughed heavily. “It hurts…” She managed to stutter and then, he saw it; the crimson stain blossoming on her left shoulder and breast, staining his paw. Blood.
1.47 am, Thursday, May 27, 2022

“It’s not your fault, sweetheart,” Kaylee assured with full confidence, as Max was pressing phone’s speaker to his ear not to hear the sounds of the hospital he had been waiting at for the last hour. “You couldn’t know he’d hurt her.”

“I had a hunch. All night long, I had hunches. He roofied the drink. He switched the glasses. We could have had him with no risk, but I let her do it and…” Max sighed deeply. “I always wondered how Barnes felt, when he lost his partners. I guess I do now…”

“At least you didn’t lose her. You said it was just a scratch,” the bunny reminded him.

“Just a scratch…” He let out a nervous laughter. “You should have seen how she bled.”

“Max, bad things happen and I know you’re blaming yourself for it because you were making these calls, but remember that it was you that made it just in time to rescue her,” Kaylee told him. “And I know it must feel shitty now, but hindsight’s 20/20. You did what you found the best choice at the moment being,” she tried to cheer him up.

“I know, I just… I let her down,” he explained.

“She’s alive and not always you can say it at the end of the day. Barnes lost three partners. He had like two decades of experience and he lost three partners in five years. He almost lost you on your first day. These things happen to the best,” Kaylee reminded him.

“I… The doctor’s calling me,” Max said, a bit worried.

“See, they patched her up already! Go and talk to her. And don’t worry. Everything will be alright. I mean it,” the bunny promised. “I love you,” she told him and he smiled to the phone.

“Love you too, bun,” he assured and came over to the doctor’s room. Isabelle’s was sitting on one of her beds, wearing her black dress stained heavily in blood from the shoulder medics had patched up. She was leaning against the wall with a weak smile, extremely tired.

“Drive me home, would you?” She pleased.

“I…” Max stuttered, abashed. “Sure. My car’s waiting just outside,” he assured bringing out a weak smile. After the last picture he had of her bleeding out in that dark alley, it was good to see her safe and sound for a change. They walked to the car in silence and Max opened the door for her, which she accepted with a smile. Reynolds took driver’s seat and headed for Tundratown.

“I’m sorry that I let it happen,” Max started and she chuckled shaking her head.

“It’s not even your fault, you know,” Isabelle chuckled with actual amusement.
“I did agree to let you do it,” he pointed out, but she just kept shaking her head.

“And I pressed you into that, blowing the whole thing. So… sorry?” Alvarez shrugged and then, hissed painfully. Max eyed her with pitiful smile.

“Whoever did not blow a single action, cast the first stone,” he joked. “So… what happened there?” He asked and saw Isabelle shivering.

“I… I don’t know myself. We walked out just like planned and headed straight for the car. Everything seemed alright and then, for no apparent reason, as we were passing by that alley, he pushed me in there. He pressed me against some wall, tried to kiss and shred my dress off at the same, but I panicked and kicked him back with a yell,” Isabelle explained with dread. “I think he realized at that point that I wasn’t quite as drunk or drugged as he’d be assuming. He freaked out and drew the knife.”

“Did he mean to kill you or just threaten?” Max asked.

“He did not say a word, just charged forward. He caught me by throat, tried to stab. If I didn’t struggle, he’s hit me straight in the lung or heart. Now… it’s just a scratch,” she explained coldly, the bandage covering her shoulder. Max watched her with worries, but it seemed as if whole the situation didn’t really get to her as badly as he’d fear. “I was passing out when you came. It took you a while, by the way,” she tried to not sound too accusing, but failed miserably.

“I’m sorry, I… Couple punks figured I’d buy them a drink and seemed really persistent on it. I was trying to find a way out of situation when I heard your scream… and somehow, I found myself leaving them far behind,” he explained with a nervous chuckle.

“It’s alright. Doctor said I was really lucky,” Isabelle assured carelessly.

“So it’s not very serious, is it?” He asked.

“No, just a scratch. If everything goes smoothly, I should be back in action in ten days. A bit earlier, if I insist and I will insist. I won’t be just sitting at my house, you know,” she explained. “I’ll have to drop in at the station tomorrow anyway, won’t I? We’ll need to write the full report,” she noticed, displeased.

“And have the Chief yell at us. He won’t be pleased with what we did there.”

“Oh, I imagine. I certainly am not having a good start here, am I?” Alvarez chuckled. “The perspective of quick promotion seems less and less likely.”

“Unless we catch that Ryuk guy,” Max pointed out, forcing out a smile. “The guys at the scene didn’t seem too excited though; it’s hard to find anything in that mess of the alley.”

“Yeah…” Isabelle nodded, glancing down at her paws. She had slashed the hyena and forensics had separated some of the culprit’s blood from her claws, but it only meant anything if Ryuk’s DNA was in their database. They had no other evidences, clues or any idea where to look for the guy if the evidence led them nowhere.

For a long moment, they travelled through the mostly sleeping city in silence, only interrupted when Max asked Isabelle about her exact address, as they were nearing Tundratown. Alvarez was watching the road, lost in her reflections.

“Thank you,” she said suddenly. Max, who didn’t really feel like there was anything she should be thanking him for that night, watched her doubtfully. “When I was roofied...”
She quickly wiped one of the eyes that had grown watery, much to her frustration.

“I said that I’ll watch over you,” he reminded her.

“Yeah, I… I know,” she spoke with her tone implying that not always did claiming so imply any sort of protection. “I… Have you ever meet Jack McNamera? That big, chubby polar bear? He used to do those big parties at his father’s mansion at Flurry Street.”

“Like thousand feet away from my old house. I do remember them,” Max recalled with a smile. “I’ve been invited to most of these parties, even. These were some terrifying crowds there.”

“Yeah. The biggest I was at, he had like thousand mammals there,” Isabelle nodded. “When I was in high school, I really liked these parties. I’d always lie to my uncle, tell him that I was going for a sleepover to a friend and we’d go hit the party with couple friends of mine.”

“Uncle surely wasn’t proud?” Max noticed and she chuckled.

“Oh, he couldn’t know. I didn’t even drink much, so that he wouldn’t smell anything. Anyways, I was seventeen at the time and it wasn’t my first party at McNamera’s. In the heat of the moment, all my friends left me chasing the boys and I simply… went with the flow. Grabbed some beer, sang some karaoke, danced with some guys. You know, the usual party stuff,” she smiled carelessly.

“I imagine,” Max nodded.

“I had these couple admirers that hit on me at every party and this one was no different. This time they were even bolder, I think, given that I lost my friends in the crowd and I drank a bit too much and then I…” Isabelle’s paused.

“You blacked out?”

“I woke up two days later at ICU,” she explained. “Rohypnol overdosing causing brief respiratory arrest, according to the doctors.”

“Rohypnol? You mean you were roofied?”

“Well, I would never took any drugs on my own. Not after uncle’s work stories. And somebody… or some mammals… applied me a nearly lethal dose at that party. Probably not aware of proper dosage, but hoping they’d have some… fun with me,” her voice didn’t tremble; it seemed furious. “Both police and my uncle lead their investigations, but neither found a thing. I was at McNamera’s. After couple drinks in several hours, I passed out suddenly. They couldn’t wake me up and I struggled to breathe, so they freaked out. Someone dropped me off at the hospital and… that was it, end of the story,” Isabelle clenched her fists.

“You don’t know who did it?” Max asked and Isabelle shrugged.

“No. Certain rumors spread, but… nothing solid. I don’t even know if it was just one guy or more,” Isabelle sighed with frustration. “And I guess I had to verify my friends too, since some blamed me about McNamera having to put an end to his parties.”

“I’m sorry. I understand why it mattered to you so much to handle Ryuk on your own,” Max realized, even it was the least meaningful of his conclusions.

“I know it’s stupid, but…”
“No coping is stupid. I keep telling Kaylee that,” the wolf smiled at his partner and she returned it reluctantly. “Know that I’m really sorry about what happened,” he said, but she only laughed.

“And you keep apologizing for things that aren’t even your fault,” she chuckled, trying to cover the grief. “You’re… you’re an awesome guy, you know. I’m sorry I was hitting on you. I never should have tried to spoil what you have.”

“Bad things happen. Let’s put it all behind, alright?” Max encouraged her. Isabelle managed to smile.

“Sure,” she agreed with relief. It was funny how each time he said it, she seemed unsure if she could really believe him. Still, venting her frustration and sharing the tale of her old injustice seemed to have some cathartic effect on her. They both arrived at Isabelle’s place in silence.

“It’s that one,” Isabelle pointed at a block of flats in some most unfriendly part of Tundratown. Max watched it with worries. “I know it’s not the Flurry Street mansion…” She chuckled.

“Sorry, I just… Good night, Isabelle. See you tomorrow?” He asked and she nodded with a weak smile.

“See you tomorrow. And don’t you dare to arrest that creep until I’m back. He’s mine,” she threatened him with a finger as she left the car and Max laughed.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare,” he promised with a smirk.

Chapter End Notes

So, time for Isabelle-centered chapter with Alvarez trying to bite more than she could chew... and opening a little bit in result.
Chapter Summary

Just foxes doing their fox things, like foxes are meant to do.

7.15 pm, Friday, May 28, 2022

Richard O’Connery, the mechanic’s assistant in a workshop in Savannah Central, wasn’t having a good day. For the matter of speaking, he was having an exceptionally bad day. First, he dropped a very expensive rear window shattering it in million pieces. Then, his girlfriend broke up with him over text, giving him some crap about how unmanly he was, even for a pangolin. Now, when he had decided to drown his sorrows in his favorite bar, he found himself couple dollars short.

“It’ll be on me, Dick,” assured someone, dropping a ten on the counter.

“No one’s called me that for, like….” O’Connery paused, staring at the fox, whom now he had recognized. “Wilde. Sorry, I’m really…”


“Yeah, right. Let’s get some table…”

“Over there,” Nick pointed to the one in the corner. Some rabbit was sitting by it and O’Connery recognized her immediately from their visit to the workshop; Judy Hopps. Wilde seated himself by his partner, while Richard sat on the opposite side. He glanced down at his beer and realized that suddenly, he lost all the will to drink it.

“Listen, guys, I’d love to help you, but I really like my job. Miles might not be paying a lot, but it finds me well anyways,” started the pangolin.

“We just wanted to talk, Mr. O’Connery,” the bunny assured. “Judy Hopps, by the way,” she introduced herself and they shook paws.

“Listen, I’m not giving you any hooks on my boss…”

“It’s just couple questions. Whether you ask or not is your choice, really,” Nick assured friendly. O’Connery hesitated, but agreed.

“But if Miles learns…”

“We’re not telling anyone,” Nick promised.
“Alright then, what do you want to know?” Richard leaned over reluctantly.

“Do you know what was happening at the workshop last weekend?” Wondered the fox, but O’Connery just shrugged helplessly.

“We were closed on the weekend. Miles even gave us all leave on Friday and Monday,” he only said.

“Why would he?” Judy asked.

“Miles is having some financial troubles. We lost a lawsuit recently, an awful case that cost him lots of money. We don’t have many clients these days, so he’s trying to save on basically everything,” he explained, reaching for his beer. If Wilde was paying, then he could drink it just as well, in the end.


“Turns out we damaged the brakes during the usual overview and it caused some accident. Guy had couple bones broken, sued us, won. Some enormous money was on stake, from what I heard,” O’Connor explained vaguely.

“Have you been struggling for long now?” Wondered Nick.

“Couple months. The trial concluded on January or February, if I remember right. Miles has been trying hard to get us back on feet hard, including firing some of the staff and cutting everyone’s salaries. Some quit on their own.”

“You stayed around. Why?” Judy asked.

“Well… He pays. I like being paid,” he explained bluntly. “I’m working there for too long to be looking for another job now.”

“Do you know Miles well?” The bunny hoped, but he just shrugged again.

“He’s been my boss for last fifteen years, but… I can’t say that I know him well. Or that anyone really does. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he’s not very talkative,” explained O’Connery and Nick and Judy eyed each other.

“Oh, we’ve noticed,” Judy said only. “But you’ve got to know him a little bit. Could you tell us some more?

“Oh well, he’s a bear of few words. Barely ever do I hear him not giving any tasks or advices and he never really chit-chats. He’s divorced for couple years now. His wife took most of their fortune and both their children. I don’t know if he sees them, even; I only learnt of the divorce long after it was done,” he said.

“And you don’t know why they divorced?” Nick asked, reaching for his beer. He sipped some of it, watching the pangolin sympathetically.

“Umm… No, not really,” he hesitated. “People said she married some other guy quickly afterwards so I can imagine what happened, though,” he pointed out.

“Alright. And what about his friends? He surely has some,” Judy hoped.

“He keeps to himself, you know. And he’s not going out anywhere… certainly not with
his workers,” O’Connery shrugged helplessly.

“Was anyone visiting him recently in the workshop? Not concerning the business, I mean,” clarified the bunny.

“I don’t think… No, there was someone like… two weeks ago? Or a week ago? I’m not quite sure anymore,” the pangolin shrugged, drinking some of his beer.

“How do you remember how he looked like, though?” Hoped Judy.

“It was a wolf, if I remember right. He came over last week and talked with Miles in his office,” explained O’Connery and, seeing their intrigued sights, added: “I have not a clue what about though. I didn’t overhear a word, I’m afraid,” he insisted firmly and reached for his beer, chugging some of it with clear indication that he was not going to tell them a word. Judy and Nick eyed one another; the guy that had recorded their pickup mentioned a canine behind the wheel. A wolf perhaps?

“Come on, Dick, you must have heard something,” Nick sold him the most encouraging of his smiles, but pangolin only shook his head.

“I’m afraid not a word. They were talking in his office,” insisted O’Connery stubbornly and they decided to let it go for the time being.

“Of course. Could you tell us a bit about that empty garage in the back of the workshop?” Judy wondered. “You know, the one that was closed when we arrived and Miles seemed really displeased about us lurking around there.”

“Oh, that one. It’s Miles’ private garage,” the pangolin explained vaguely and, seeing their curious sights, continued without a word of their encouragement. “He has this hobby, where he restores old cars to their former glory. He does it only after working hours and doesn’t speak much of it. As… usual,” he added hesitantly.

“Have you ever been in there?” Judy asked.

“Oh, not ever,” he assured and felt the need to explain himself immediately. “Miles never lets anyone in. We know that he was working on something when it’s done and he takes the car out for test drive. And even then, not always.”

“What was he working on recently?” Nick sipped some of his beer.

“Oh, nothing really, as far as I’m concerned,” shrugged O’Connery. His shoulders must have been really sore from the number of things he didn’t know. “I haven’t seen him in there for, like, months.”

“You’ve said before you’ve never said the interior?” Judy recalled skeptically.

“Oh, um… I meant… you know what I meant.”

“Do tell us,” Nick insisted.

“Oh, I see him leaving the garage sometimes,” explained O’Connery.

“Even though Miles never goes there in his working hours?” Nick pointed out and
pangolin reached for his beer. He drank it very slowly.

“We… ekhm… we sometimes stay… used to stay after working hours too. You know, to… keep up.”

“Meet the deadlines?” Judy specified.

“Yeah.”

“So when you see him leaving the workshop… you also see him working on his stuff,” she continued. “And you surely do remember what was the last thing he worked on?”

“I… It’s been months…”

“What was it?” Nick asked. O’Connery eyed him fearfully. He knew, but he wasn’t going to tell. “Come on, don’t make me beg. Or have Duchess beg you instead. She’s very interested in the investigation’s results, you know,” the fox pressed him.

“I… Are you working for her?” O’Connery trembled, but Nick didn’t say a word, only smiled slyly. The pangolin gulped hardly. “A Pierre 730. A red Pierre 730, from late 80’s. He worked on it last few months, sold him like three months ago,” the pangolin spilled out finally, much to Nick and Judy’s disappointment. It wasn’t the car they were looking for. “Tell Duchess that I have nothing to do…”

“Duchess? Why should we be telling Duchess anything?” Judy asked, surprised.

“You’re… Aren’t you working for her?” O’Connery asked, completely confused.

“Did we ever say we do?” The bunny, smiling cordially. The pangolin slowly rehearsed the conversation in his mind and realized that for the matter of fact, they did not.

“I…” He reached for his beer and drank some more of it along with Nick. The cup was almost empty by now.

“OK, one thing more and we’re letting you go, Dick. Has Miles ever worked on this car?” Nick showed him two photos; of their Hanza pickup, both demolished and how it looked originally. O’Connery watched them carefully.

“No. I mean… I have not ever seen him working on this car,” he specified carefully. “Neither have I seen him ever bringing any Hanza parts for himself or…”

“Lance Striver gearbox?” Judy guessed. Again, a quick shrug of his assured them that he knew nothing.

“Sorry, never seen, never heard,” he looked down at his watch nervously. “I’ve got to go, my girlfriend’s waiting for me,” he excused himself, reaching for his beer and downing it. “It’s been fun and all, Wilde. And you, Miss Hopps,” he coughed nervously, as he stood from his chair. The officers said their goodbyes and watched him leaving hurriedly. Nick sighed with disappointment.

“I’ve had him, you know. He’d spill everything,” the fox said, displeased.

“Because he thinks you work for the Duchess? That’s not how we do it,” Judy huffed angrily.
“I’d tell him eventually, Miss Spoilsport,” Nick smirked.

“It’s not the point…” She tried to protest and then, sighed reluctantly. “Listen, I… this sort of gossips won’t do you any good. Enough mammals think you’ve been covering Duchess after Reynolds’ death… or that she was covering you. You really don’t need this sort of rumors running around the city,” she explained her intentions. Nick realized that she really had done it simply out of her kind heart and smiled a bit awkwardly.

“Oh, um… Thanks for care? But I really can handle these things, Carrots,” he assured confidently and she rolled her eyes.

“I know you do,” she confirmed with tone that indicated it wasn’t stopping her from worrying one bit. Nick wasn’t left to do much but chuckle.

“Of course, Carrots, of course,” he messed up the fur between her ears teasingly. “Signing up for a movie tonight?”

“We’ve got plenty of work tomorrow. We need to watch Miles’ CCTV recordings and find that wolf as fast as we can. And then, I have a date with August and I need to get ready…”

“I’m not asking for a Lord of the Rings marathon, just a single movie,” he reminded her with a smirk. Judy checked time at her phone. It wasn’t even nine pm.

“My place? You’re not driving me home anyways,” she tapped at Nick’s glass. The fox nodded.

“Remember what old Reynolds say? They never check the cops,” smirked the fox, only not outraging Judy because she knew that he was joking.

“Well, Mr. Responsible, if you want to watch that movie, then finish your beer and we’re going,” she hurried him instead. The fox downed what was left of his glass with couple chugs and stood from his chair.

“Well then, Mrs. Responsible, the chariot is waiting,” he bowed theatrically showing her the way. The bunny watched him skeptically.

“And am I not the driver?” She pointed out to which, Nick did the favorite gesture of Richard O’Connor; prolonged, ostentatious shrug. Judy just laughed.

3.12 pm, Saturday, May 29, 2022

As expected, it took Nick and Judy whole morning and a small chunk of afternoon to simply find the wolf O’Connery mentioned, leave alone the identification they left for Monday. With their business at ZPD mostly concluded and traditional couple hours of weekend overtime earned, Nick gladly slipped out of the station and dropped in to his house for a second only to change to some elegant civvies and headed to the hospital, where his mother still was. The visit
didn’t last long, but it brought some excellent news; Mrs. Wilde’s state was improving and doctors
would let her go by the end of next week. Nick left his mother’s room in some excellent mood and
checked the time. He still had almost fifty minutes to get to the Meridian Zero café. But then, he
saw a characteristic red tail of a vixen walking just in front of him; a vixen that walked the corridor
so alluringly, waving her long, puffy tail so gracefully, that he could not mistake her for anyone.

“Miss Hawkes, it should be illegal to be so wondrously charming. I might have to arrest
you,” Nick said with a smirk. The vixen stopped, turned around and, recognizing the detective,
giggled.

“Detective! Have I ever told you that you’re simply outrageous?” She eyed him carefully,
certainly enjoying the view.

“I certainly must have mentioned during our earlier conversations that I do aim to
misbehave,” he replied, spectating another of her giggles with satisfaction.

“Now I do see,” she agreed without a doubt. “May I ask, where are you headed now, Detective? Because I don’t have a car and you might just be heading in this same direction I do,” she asked.

“Why don’t you just see for yourself? You just might find yourself exactly where you
wanted to be,” he proposed and the vixen pretended to hesitate, clearly enjoying the little game of
theirs.

“I will take the risk,” she agreed after a short while. Nick led her to his car, opened the
passenger’s door for her and sat by the wheel himself. Slowly, he headed toward Meridian Zero
café in Savannah Central.

“It seems great minds think alike,” Aveline Hawkes noticed, as she recognized the
direction the fox was heading.

“So it would seem, Miss Hawkes.”

“It’s Aveline, Detective, really,” she assured. “At least now that I’m not in the bank and
you’re not in the uniform,” she smiled.

“It’s Nick, dear Aveline,” he returned the smile. “Have you been visiting your cousin?”

“Yes. He’s pretty much alright now, but doctors will let him go tomorrow. Lio said it’s
probably Duchess’s way of telling him to cool down a little bit. You know, he’d love to dive deep
in the case immediately, but he really has been overworking himself to death recently,” she
explained. “And how is your mother doing? I’ve heard she’s recovering rather well?” She
wondered.

“Surprisingly well, doctors say. She’ll be signed out by the end of next week it seems,”
Nick nodded. “And just like Lio, she’d love to know everything already,” he explained with
chuckle. His mother had this awful habit where she was trying to squeeze more information out of
him that he’d be willing to share and she was doing it incredibly subtly.

“Wouldn’t it be better for everyone if you led the investigation, Nick? We all would have
a reliable source of information, then,” joked Aveline and he giggled.

“Oh, I don’t think Chief would agree. He has enough troubles with me as it is, last thing
he needs is the fox with a badge lurking around the Happytown,” he explained half-jokingly.
“You wouldn’t be stirring any riots, just seeking the truth… But after that nasty thing with Spencer Young, it must be hard to tell one from the other,” she smiled slyly. “Chief must be terrified, realizing that people are now listening to some fox.”

“Oh, I am terrified myself, no wonder is he!” Nick assured and they laughed. Soon, they reached the Meridium Zero café. Nick parked at the nearby parking and they came inside. Nick had been to there long time ago, but the place hadn’t changed much. It still had this sensation of being a sort of just another station on thousands of worldwide travels of its guests. Aveline stopped at the great map on the wall with hundreds pins with names on it, scattered around the world.

“One day, when Lily grows up a bit, we’ll pin our own pin on there,” the vixen assured. “And then another and another and another.”

“Until whole the world is yours,” Nick finished for her. “There’s a table for two waiting just for us,” he suggested and they took their seats there. Two foxes browsed through their menus, each ordering a coffee and a cake, before sitting down for good. Aveline eyed her companion and then, she chuckled.

“Sorry, I’m just… I’m not very good at whole that ‘going out’ stuff. I have never really done it… for real,” she explained, abashed.

“There’s the first time for everything,” Nick smirked. “The trick is starting a conversation and then, it usually goes its own course,” he explained.

“Does it?” Aveline asked and glanced back at the map. “Well, I bet you’ve left there couple pins on your own,” she wondered, eyeing the map.

“Just like that,” he chuckled. “The farthest pin I could leave would by Bunny Burrows and I don’t think that counts,” he pointed out half-jokingly.

“Still farther than me,” the vixen pointed out, amused. “Don’t you ever have this urge to just drop everything and venture to the lands far away?” She said dreamily, just as the waiter brought their orders. Nick poured some sugar and stirred his coffee gently.

“It certainly sounds tempting, but it’s one of those things I’ve probably never given too much thought. And now, it’s kind of hard to just drop everything and go,” he explained he took a sip along with her and noted with satisfaction that it was way better than he’d expect.

“Too many duties?” Guessed Aveline.

“Nah, too many decent mammals to let go,” the fox specified. “But you’ve certainly considered it not once or twice.”

“A childhood dream,” she explained, a bit embarrassed. “But then my sister died and I got entangled in all the sorts of bad company and when I cut myself away from them, I already had Lily. A child roots you down firmly,” Aveline said without a hint of regret.

“For a decade or two,” Nick pointed out optimistically. “Before you’ll notice, she’ll be tearing these roots out and taking you with her all around the world.”

“Gosh, I hope. I’m saving all that money for something,” chuckled Aveline.

“College, perhaps?” Nick guessed.

“Not here. I am sending her abroad. It’s two birds with one stone, actually. I’ve done
some math and it turns out it’s actually cheaper to send her over the sea to the Old World. Or to the North. Or basically anywhere abroad. It’s ridiculous!” She laughed.

“Won’t you be afraid about her?”

“Oh, I’ll be worried sick, but tell you what: I did not need to live a single mile away from my parents to reach the bottom. The distance is no rule. The environment is. And what sits in here,” Aveline tapped herself on her temple.

“Point made,” Nick agreed without a doubt. He was one guy she didn’t need to convince. “It really is impressive, Aveline,” he noticed and, seeing her confusion, continued. “I mean, you were only on your own and yet, you’ve managed to put your life back together and raise your daughter. Not many would have this kind of strength,” he explained.

“Oh, I… I wasn’t really alone,” she laughed, abashed. “My parents helped me out a lot and Lio was there for me too. The hardest part was swallowing my pride and asking. You know, whole the ‘prodigal son’ thing? It’s not easy,” she explained awkwardly.

“Tell me about it,” Nick agreed, shaking his head. “So, you’re saying your job finds you well?” He changed the subject.

“Oh, wonderfully. Sometimes we lose a forty-million-dollar painting, another time someone grabs our ATM… life goes on,” she joked. “But to be quite honest, I really like it. It’s quiet and not very stressful. It pays decently and once in home, I don’t have to worry much about what I’ve left in the bank.”

“It surely has its ups. No downs whatsoever?” Nick wondered.

“After you cleared me of charges and got rid of Paddington, none whatsoever,” the vixen assured. “And how is police life working for you?” She wondered.

“Oh, it has its ups and downs. I can’t complain about boredom for sure. I mean, it’s not always car chases and explosions, but when it is… these are real car chases and real explosions,” Nick sipped his coffee, watching the vixen taking a bite of her cake. “And you meet a lot of mammals at ZPD. I thought I knew everyone back when I was starting. Now I know that I certainly don’t,” the fox explained and smile slowly vanished from his face. “But then again, sometimes thing get… nasty. Just two days ago, my friend’s partner got stabbed during an action. Nothing serious this time, but… this time.”

“To me, a bad day at work means I’ve spilled my coffee on my dress. To you, it means you’ve almost haven’t made it home,” Aveline said. “I might have not been through it myself, but I remember Lio, back when Duchess was struggling with the Wolf Pack. Right after my sister was killed and Duchess helped Lio prove his innocence, he started serving her loyally. The rumors go that it was Harry ‘Iron’ Lupe, Wolf Pack’s boss, that killed her. The same rumors say that Lionel himself offed him that night Duchess’ men wiped the Wolf Pack out.”

“Awful times,” Nick pointed out and she nodded.

“Most awful times,” she agreed gloomily. “But they’re gone now! And things have changed and they’re so much better now! Thanks to you too!” She noticed enthusiastically, shifting in her mood rapidly.

“It is the everchanging city,” Nick agreed out with a smile.

“I mean, we have a raccoon mayor! Could you imagine that twenty years ago?” The
vixen argued. “And rabbit and fox officers! Working together!”

“And vixen bank directors,” Nick continued. “The next thing, we’ll have a fox mayor!” He joked and both of them laughed at the very idea.

“Well, in another ten years… never thought of starting for the mayor? Last elections really were your chance. You know, with all that fuss Spencer Young caused,” Aveline suggested and Nick wasn’t sure, if she wasn’t saying it quite seriously.

“Actually, I’ve received some offers from some anti-establishment groups, but I think they’ve mistaken me for Spencer Young. I wasn’t the guy they were looking for,” he told her. The vixen squinted her eyes, most intrigued.

“And didn’t you regret missing your chance?”

“For a very short second, yes. But then I realized that at ZPD, when I face liars and criminals, I can just handcuff them and send them to jail. And if I’d be a mayor, I’d have to be shaking their paws and patting them on their backs while declaring publicly how I appreciate their support,” he explained and the two of them laughed. Nick thought suddenly of Anastasia Reynolds and her mayoral candidate Hevelyn. It had been a while since they had looked into that thing. It probably would be some time before they’d find anything new too.

“Well, no one’s been trying to kill our mayors, at least,” Aveline argued.

“There’s always the first time,” he riposted and vixen chuckled.

“Oh, Nick, with your wits, they’d have some hard time killing you.”

“The first dead fox mayor would certainly appreciate their efforts,” he nodded.

“You’re not telling me police work is safer than mayoral!” Aveline protested with amusement.

“It just could be?” Nick argued carefully. “And besides, except for ridiculously better pay, actual influence on the city, guaranteed security guys and frequent fancy parties and banquets, I don’t see actual benefits to changing my job,” he pointed out half-jokingly and all that was left for the vixen was to giggle.

“Nothing at all indeed,” she agreed sarcastically. “And Detective Hopps would be very displeased if you left her, wouldn’t she?”

“If I did it right now? Carrots would kill me!” Nick admitted and Aveline laughed even louder.

“That’s how you call her? It’s cute! And… a bit biased?”

“It’s affectionate, not mockery. And it’s still better than what we hear in the streets,” Nick pointed out. The two of them reached for their coffees and drank a bit. Nick took another bite of the delicious cake they were served.

“I can relate. I’ve worked as a cashier in our bank for couple years and some mammals are so entitled. Like guy has no legal job and fifteen cents on his account and argues that he should have received that loan he asked for. And I wasn’t even responsible for loans!”

“What was he doing there?”
“If I only knew! But he complained to me for, like, half an hour,” Aveline chuckled. “This type of work where you deal with lots of mammals? It teaches you to hate the mammals,” she complained half-jokingly and Nick chuckled.

“Ninety percent times I receive a complaint, I’m not sure whether to laugh or cry,” the fox agreed. “But someone has to do the job and I actually like it.”

“Oh, it must be lots of fun. I mean, when it’s no life-threat,” Aveline noticed.

“It is at times. Both fun and life-threat. The atmosphere is nice. I mean, we have the usual gossiping and animosities, but when things go bad, you can count even on that guy that hates you most,” Nick assured.

“Really? I thought that after how you were being framed, you wouldn’t say so,” she said carefully.

“I thought so at first too, but then I saw how many mammals backed me at that time, too,” Nick pointed out with a smile. “Overall, I think I can count on them.”

“It’s nice. Sometimes, I want to strangle couple guys at the bank, especially our new security officer,” Aveline confessed. It was funny that no matter how much she complained, it never sounded she was actually complaining; she was rather presenting her problem and seeking a solution.

“Worse than Paddington?” Nick wondered.

“Subtler and I don’t know anymore if that’s better or worse. He’d love to take my office, but I’ll be damned if I let that happen. Say, Nick, couldn’t you deal with him like you did with Paddington? I’d be so thankful.”

“Without a proof? That would be illegal,” he protested.

“I can deliver the proof,” she smirked ominously. The two continued to stare in each other’s eyes for a long moment and then, burst out with laughter simultaneously. “Just kidding, but I’d be really relieved if guy focused on really important things.”

“Like looking to it that all ATMs have modern security?” Nick guessed and she giggled, agreeing. Nick and Aveline spent in the Meridian Zero café whole afternoon, discussing various subjects and enjoying each other’s company. As it was getting dark already and the vixen excused herself due to her daughter, Nick offered to drive her back home, an offer she couldn’t deny. As they stopped by her block of flats, the vixen smiled beautifully.

“Thank you for this afternoon. I’ve really had nice time,” she assured and then, hesitated. “Say what, it’s quite late already… why wouldn’t you drop in and eat a dinner with me and Lily?”

“Gladly,” assured Nick. “What’s on today’s menu?”

“Whatever I have in the fridge. Gosh, I hope I have anything,” she chuckled nervously, as Nick found the parking spot. They went first to Aveline’s neighbors where Lily was playing with her friends and then, went to Aveline’s small, cozy flat. The vixen went to open her fridge and cussed angrily.

“I knew it!” She rolled her eyes and Nick glanced inside. It looked quite empty.

“So… shopping?” Nick guessed.
“I’ll do the shopping in the morning. Lily, it’s pizza tonight!” Aveline announced and her daughter, a slim nine-year-old vixen dashing between their legs, squeaked joyfully.

“Finally! With pineapple? Please, please, please!” She begged most adorably, as if aware that it wouldn’t move her mother anyway. Aveline sighed and eyed Nick.

“Depends if Mr. Wilde likes pineapples. He’ll be eating with us too,” the vixen said and her cub watched him beggingly. Nick chuckled.

“I think I can agree to this blasphemy this one time... for this little angel of yours,” Nick ruffed fur of Lily’s head playfully and she squeaked joyfully.

“Yay!” She stormed out of the kitchen.

“Little angel…” Aveline snorted with amusement. “More like a little spawn of hell. You won’t believe the things she does to me at times…” And then, Aveline Hawkes grabbed her daughter suddenly and started tickling her. “Come over here, you sly little fox!” She exclaimed joyfully, as her daughter struggled, laughing. Her mother dropped her finally and watched her vanishing behind the couch of the dining room. Aveline reached for a phone and ordered a pizza for the three of them. It came over quite fast, much to their surprise. They seated themselves in the dining room and ate with Lily telling them excitedly how she had spent afternoon with her friends. After the dinner, cub seated herself on the sofa for her daily hour of cartoons while Nick helped Aveline with the dishes.

“Lily seems to like it when you forget to buy a dinner,” Nick pointed out half-jokingly, as he handed her the last plate.

“What kid doesn’t like pizza? And it doesn’t happen too often,” the vixen explained and turned to watch her daughter, sitting and watching TV. And then, she giggled. “Oh, this little devil of mine. I hope she grows wiser than her mother.”

“She does have a really wise mother,” Nick pointed out carefully.


“So have I and I’d be more than happy, if it wasn’t the last one,” assured the fox. Aveline’s face lightened up.

“So would I, Nick. So... Next week, same time and place?” She suggested.

“I don’t think I’ll be in the hospital next week. My mother’s leaving any time now,” Nick shrugged helplessly and she patted his forehead with a spatula she was playing with.

“Oh, you know what I mean!” She chuckled.

“I could pick you up from your house, save you some trouble,” Nick offered, quite serious now. “So... this same time, but your place?”

“Sounds perfect to me,” Aveline nodded, agreeing.

“Wonderful. I probably should be going now, though,” he said and she nodded with understanding; it was quite late now and Aveline too had chores to do before she’d go to sleep. Nick said goodbye to Lily, who turned from the TV to bid him farewell with usual childish cheerfulness and Aveline walked him to the door.
“Until next week?” She said, quite excitedly.

“Or any job-related breakthrough,” Nick pointed out with a smirk.


“So do you, Aveline. Goodnight,” Wilde hugged her back and left with a content smile. As the door closed behind him, the fox slid down the staircase railing and walked out into the dark night. He hummed cheerfully walking to the car. For a second, a thought to call Judy crossed his mind. He had almost reached for his phone when he realized how ridiculous the thought was; especially since at this very moment, she was dating August. Not letting this thought to sink in and spoil his evening, the fox reached for his car keys and spun them in the air. It was a good day.
Dusting off

Chapter Summary

Just another day, just another story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

10.00 am, Sunday, May 30, 2022

Judy Hopps rang on her partner’s door thrice, as always. She heard some muffled steps and then, the door opened presenting her with a bit sleepy fox, dressed in some casual clothes.

“Good morning!” She greeted him cheerfully.

“Hey, Carrots,” the fox covered his yawn with a paw and checked the time. “Wow, right on time,” he actually seemed surprised.

“You didn’t think I was coming late?” She asked, passing by Nick and stepping inside.

“No, I’m just still getting used to the thought of you pinpointing meetings to the very minute,” he chuckled. Judy heard him closing the door with a kick and following her to the living room. “Some coffee?”

“One of your coffees? But of course,” Judy simply could not deny one of those delightful drinks he had learnt to brew. They headed for the kitchen and while Nick was preparing the coffee, she jumped up on the kitchen countertop.

“I haven’t seen Max and Kaylee’s car. Are they coming late?” She wondered.

“Yeah, Max called me in the morning. Turns out some pipe broke at their house in the middle of night and they had a small flood at the ground level,” he explained.

“Maybe it’s us that should be actually helping them, then?” She worried.

“That’s what I said, but Max claimed that they had almost dealt with it by then,” fox shrugged, as he grinded coffee for the two of them. “He said they’ll come as fast as they can. We could start in the meanwhile, though,” he suggested. They didn’t have any duties that day, but it’d be nice to get over the task as quickly as they could.

“Agreed. Are you… No way!” Only now did Judy notice that Nick brought two quite different cups; a normal one for himself and a big paper cup with carrots all over it for her. “I’m not drinking from that!”
“I warned you last time, you know, when you were helping me with the dishes. And you have no idea how much effort it took to find these specific cups, so you can’t just say no,” he smirked, as he poured coffee to her cup. Judy huffed, watching the smiling carrots covering it.

“That’s patronizing,” she muttered. Nick finished adding spices to the coffee and handed it to her.

“They have their charm, don’t they?” Smirked the fox. “Look how cute you look with it, you adorable little…” The sight she gave him stopped him in the middle of sentence, but only for him to laugh aloud.

“This one time,” she agreed, sipping some of her coffee. It was delightful, but she did not let him see that.

“I don’t know, they came in packs of one hundred, so…” Nick chuckled. “Just kidding.”

“Don’t push it, Nick,” she sipped her coffee, realizing that she must have smiled, since he was wearing that silly smile of his.

“Did you find anything yesterday?” He asked the bunny who had stayed a bit later than him.

“I saw the guy O’Connery mentioned. Monday before the ATM robbery,” Judy said. “Miles has some nice quality as for CCTV. A grey wolf. If not for the fact that Gerard Greymane is dead, I’d say it was him.”

“Greymane?” Nick asked and she nodded. “He has a brother, I think.”

“James. Yes, I checked,” Judy nodded. “Did you know that Gerard Greymane had a son too?” She told him and Nick squinted his eyes suspiciously.

“Did he? Wow, he must have been some father figure…” The fox noticed skeptically.

“He never claimed his parental rights, it seems. The kid’s name’s Ryan Thorn, he spent most of his life in an orphanage. Kaylee and Max plan to adopt him,” the bunny explained, surprising the fox even more. “Small world, huh?”

“Very small one. Do they know who his father was?” Nick asked.

“Well, Kaylee told me about it, so I think yes?” Judy replied with amusement. She waved her legs in the air, while blowing some air at the coffee to cool it down a bit.

“Right. So, what about James? Did you check him?” Nick asked and she confirmed with a nod.

“A petty criminal. Childhood in an orphanage, then couple years in juvy after several acts of vandalism and couple beatings. Later, he had two unproved robberies and probation for three years after he beat some guy senseless. Claimed it was self-defense. Exemplary citizen for last couple years,” Judy recalled from her memory.

“He doesn’t live in Happytown, does he?” Nick guessed and she shook her head.

“Tundratown, actually,” the bunny confirmed. “I’ve tried to find any connections to Miles and among the files in the workshop I found a CV Greymane sent him in 2012,” Judy explained and drank some of her coffee. She was starting to appreciate the paper cup actually; it warmed her
paws pleasantly very quickly.

“He didn’t hire him, though?” Nick guessed.

“O’Connery didn’t recognize him and he had been working there at the time, so I’d say he did not. It’s worth checking nonetheless,” Judy pointed out. “If Greymane knows Miles, he falls in the picture even better. And even if he’s not the guy we’re looking for…”

“He might give us something useful,” Nick agreed. They finished their coffees simultaneously and fox watched his cup, ostentatiously not using any dish soap, but wiping it clean, while Judy thrown her cup out pretending not to notice what he was doing.

“No good day can start without a coffee,” smirked Nick. “So, to the job?”

“You mean the job here or Greymane?” She joked.

“Carrots, it’s our day off. Unless hell breaks loose, I’m not doing any police work on our day off,” the fox stated firmly, but smiling. They both knew that ZPD had its ways of driving you crazy and draining you dead without really trying and they weren’t going to make it any easier. With that established, they went upstairs. The floor, which Judy realized she had almost never been to, was separated into two rooms of similar sizes, both equally clustered with all sorts of junk. Judy coughed at the cloud of dust they raised opening the door too rapidly.

“Dear goodness!” Judy covered her mouth. “Which one do we tidy up? Or do we both?” She wondered.

“We’ll look through stuff of both rooms, but leave one clustered. I have too much stuff here to just get rid of everything all at once,” he explained. The bunny walked between all the stuff clustering one of the rooms and opened the window, which had remained shut for a little too long.

“It’s bigger than your room,” she pointed out. “Why would you live in the smallest of rooms?” She wondered.

“It suffices,” shrugged Nick and then watched Judy suspiciously. She was staring at an old, dusty table and chairs with this sight of her that never meant anything good. “What are you thinking about?” He asked fearfully.

“I just wondered… I know a couch and coffee table find you well since you don’t invite lots of friends…”

“Touché,” muttered the fox and she giggled.

“Well, you’re not making any big parties in here,” Judy clarified. “But I bet your mother would love to eat by a normal dining table, wouldn’t she?” Judy suggested and, seeing no immediate protests, she continued. “We’re making here a room for her for these couple months before the city builds her flat back, so I thought… why wouldn’t we just bring the couch here and carry the table down? It’s a nice dining table, you have chairs from this same set and your mother could sleep on that couch. It’s really comfy,” Judy suggested, but Nick didn’t seem to like the idea.

“Why would I bring it…” He hesitated for a moment. “Actually… It’s… Hmm,” he was thinking intensively, planning everything in his head. “You mean we bring the couch here for mother. The second room remains clustered and at the ground floor, I make a dining room. I’ll miss watching TV on the couch…”

“You can move it upstairs too…”
“My mom doesn’t watch TV. Nah, I’ll just take it upstairs when she moves out. I’ll have a TV room,” he decided.

“So, sold on the idea?” She hoped.

“I think so. I’ll just need your help carrying the couch up,” Nick snickered, probably imagining the rabbit lifting the couch almost her height. “It’s a joke,” he added quickly seeing the spark in her eye.

“I can do that,” Judy crossed her arms, as she leaned against the wall.

“I know you do, but I’m not calling your parents explaining to them that you’ve sprained your back carrying my couch,” the fox argued.

“Fair enough. So, to the job!” Judy clapped her paws enthusiastically and the two began the work. Judy soon realized that the place was clustered with even more junk that she had anticipated before. The first thing they did was carrying six chairs downstairs. The table meant for the dining room along with them, after unscrewing its legs, followed it soon afterwards. With little space they gained this way, Nick and Judy browsed through the stuff, seeking things for the trash and while bunny was merciless, the fox was trying to save every single of his precious antiques.

“It’s falling apart,” Judy eyed the wardrobe skeptically.

“It needs some refreshing,” Nick admitted reluctantly. “I’m not dumping it! It’s been in here for…”

“Last time you used it?” She asked instead.

“About…” he hesitated for longer than five seconds.

“If you can’t remember, then you probably won’t need it too. Trash it,” Judy judged mercilessly.

“Huh. Fair enough. Care to carry it out?” He joked. Bunny eyed the wardrobe twice as tall as her and then, the smirking fox.

“How many times will you say it before it stops being funny?” She wondered.

“Not a clue,” he shrugged with amusement and they continued with their work. They browsed through some of Nick’s old stuff and among them found: a wardrobe of clothes that he hadn’t been using for years, most of which he decided to wash and give away, some furniture, plenty of archaic electronic devices, a box of cassettes of sentimental value, several weird things the fox did not care to explain but threw away without a word and couple board games in very good state that Kaylee would love to have. But foremost, they uncovered…

“Table soccer! No way!” Judy ran over to the table in the second room, as soon as they uncovered the thing. To her delight, it was practically untouched and yet, it seemed to be ancient.

“Where did you get it?”

“Hmm. It was a bet, I think,” Nick scratched his head.

“What was it about?”

“That we couldn’t carry a table soccer out of a pub with no one noticing,” the fox explained awkwardly.
“You stole it?” Judy asked, watching him disapprovingly.

“Stole it back, actually,” Nick defended himself. “Guy owned a pub in Happytown, offered us a discount if we could get him a decent table soccer for some ridiculous money. We brought it, he paid us little, but forgot about rest of our deal. So… we took it back. No one had room for it, so I ended up with it,” Nick explained.

“And it’s been in here collecting dust for… ten years? Fifteen?” Judy estimated by the layer of dust.

“Something about that,” Nick agreed. “There’s a ball. Care for a match?” He offered.

“Do you think you stand a chance?” The bunny doubted.

“Do you think you can reach the bars?” Nick riposted cockily.

“Oh, the game is on,” Judy smiled ominously. They dusted off the table a little bit to avoid choking on the grey layer covering it and played a quick match to ten goals. Nick won by skin of a tooth, scoring the last goal just before her and bunny asked for the rematch. The fox agreed confidently, unaware that his mercy would be his undoing. He lost next game seven to ten. To settle the matter for once and for all, they called for best of three, only for Nick to lose eight to ten. He then called for best of five. After a short and shameful match the fox would prefer to erase from his mind, he did not have courage or masochistic tendencies enough to call for best of seven.

“Boom! Triple champion of Bunny Burrows scores yet again!” Judy yelled triumphantly.

“Jeez, Carrots, it’s just a game,” Nick shook his head, but she only laughed.

“That’s some loser talk!” She leaned against the table. “So, when’s the rematch?”

“Probably never,” Nick shrugged. “Like you said, it’s been lying here for years, I probably should just sell it or give it up,” decided the fox regretfully.

“No, you can’t!” She protested, hugging the table. “It’s a treasure! You can’t just dump it!”

“It takes lots of room, Carrots.”

“You’ll have lots of room in here! And we could practice from time to time now that I know it’s here!” She argued, denying to part with this piece of furniture. And then, she saw this smirk of his and realized that the thought of getting rid of it hadn’t even crossed his mind. But oh, how did he enjoy baffling her!

“One year, Carrots. By that time, I expect to be at your level,” he demanded.

“Deal,” the bunny agreed without hesitation. They continued browsing through Nick’s stuff for some a bit longer, got rid of some more of it in process. Eventually, when room for Nick’s mom was practically prepared and everything to be trashed was either waiting downstairs for the execution or had it delayed only due to being too heavy just for the two of them, Nick and Judy dusted both rooms for the final touch. The fox made them another coffee and Judy sat on the glassed table soccer with paper cup in her paw, looking out the window. The view wasn’t so bad, especially for Happytown, which never stroke her as a pretty district. Nick was leaning against the window with his cup at the windowsill, enjoying the serenity.

“So… how was your yesterday’s date?” Judy asked curiously and he chuckled.
“I don’t think I should refer to it as a date,” he stated.

“Did it go bad?” Judy worried, but he laughed again.

“No, quite oppositely,” he assured. “It’s just…” the fox couldn’t help the smile. “I don’t
know.”

“You don’t like her?” The bunny asked with concern. Nick eyed her carefully, but he was
used to her almost unhealthy concern about everything involving him.

“I do. It’s…” He sighed deeply. “I don’t know how to think of her. I like her a lot. We’ve
had some fun time and I’ll gladly repeat it any time soon. It’s just… I have not a clue what to think
of her.”

“Huh,” Judy didn’t really know what to say to that.

“I’ll probably let the things just go by their own course, see how they wrap up. I guess
I’ll be glad with whatever the outcome, actually, as long as we don’t screw things up,” he
explained.

“Will you really?” Judy asked, but he nodded with a genuine smile.

“I’m happy as it is. I feel no pressure to just jump into a serious relationship with the first
vixen I meet because I’m getting old or something. Especially not when I could hurt her too,” he
explained, surprisingly openly for him. Judy considered his words carefully.

“That’s really mature, you know,” she admitted.

“That’s a nice way of saying old,” he riposted with a smirk. Judy rolled her eyes. Couldn’t he just take the compliment? No, he needed it rubbed in, that greedy fox. And she knew
well that she was too nice not to do it.

“Lots of mammals get old without ever getting mature, you know?” The bunny pointed
out and he smiled with satisfaction. She smiled back. Her greedy fox. And then, she felt a sting.
Did she have a right to call him that with all the things happening around them? With Aveline or…

“How’s your favorite month doing?” Nick asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Your favorite month,” the fox repeated, confusing her even more.

“Um… May? It’s alright?” She said carefully.

“May? Touché, I thought you’d say August,” the fox smirked and she chuckled,
embarrassed. “Who is May? Carrots, are you not telling me something?”

“Sweet cheese and crackers, Nick…” She tried to protest.

“Are you meeting mammals behind my back? Why would you lie to me like this?” He
asked with clearly faked mix of outrage and disappointment.

“There’s no May!” Judy claimed.

“Really?” The fox glanced at his watch. “I’d say there still is May, actually… at least for
next thirty-four hours,” he informed her and Judy sighed with frustration. “So, how’s your second
favorite month doing?” He asked instead. Judy gave him a prolonged annoyed stare, which he faced bravely, not even twitching. Then, she burst out with laughter, only to fall silent and let down her head a few moments later. Bunny let out a sigh.

“I guess it goes the Hawkes Avenue,” she joked. “I don’t really know myself,” she explained with a helpless shrug.

“Don’t you know how it went?” Nick guessed, but she shook her head.

“No, it went wonderfully. I didn’t kill either of us or put us in any sort of actual threat. The damage is done and August might be claiming he’s over it when he’s really not, but beyond that… it went just wonderfully,” Judy explained. Nick seated himself on the windowsill so that he could be all ears and so, she continued. “I guess this is the part where I should be saying million things about him, but I can’t even find one word that would reflect it well enough?” She shrugged helplessly.

“Give it a try,” Nick encouraged her.

“He’s…” Judy looked up and stared Nick in the eyes. And then, she found it. “Imagine yourself in a rabbit skin. You, with love for drama, old movies and…”

“Basically me,” smirked Nick and she chuckled.

“Yes. I mean, there’s not another guy like you, but he shares some features,” she agreed a bit embarrassed. “And he has this unbridled optimism and kind heart that would want to help everyone and…” Bunny hesitated. “He’s an amazing person overall and I think he’s head over heels in love with me.”

“Sounds like a perfect guy?” Nick said, but what must have been Judy’s troubled face mirrored in his own expression. “But?” He only asked her.

“I’m afraid…” Judy clenched her fists. “About us?” She said shyly. At first, she turned her sight away, but then, she looked him straight in the eyes. “I mean, I have August, you have Aveline, but in meanwhile… Aren’t we…” She paused awkwardly. “Aren’t we missing out on something… wonderful?” She asked finally, more afraid than she realized she was. Nick stared at her blankly, more perplexed or confused than she had seen him in very, very long time. For a second, his emerald green eyes ran away from her as he laughed nervously, only to lock straight on her.

“I…” And then, they both startled, jumping down from their windowsill and table soccer to the screech of brakes, shrieking car horns and violent thunder of a car crash vibrating through the room.

“God, damn it!” They heard a yell from below that belonged to no one else than Max. Nick looked out the window and cursed under his breath.

“It doesn’t look good. Come on, Carrots,” he called her, dashing to the door hurriedly. The bunny stood still, for a moment, leaning against bar handles of the table soccer. She closed her eyes, clenched her fists, shook her head with disbelief. She let out a sigh opening her eyes slowly and then, chased Nick downstairs. She found him outside. At the T-crossing of roads just by Nick’s house, a jeep had slammed in Max and Kaylee’s car’s passenger’s side with enough impact to push them to the other side of the road. Judy and Nick ran over to them.

“Are you alright?!” Judy called them with worries. They found them sitting on the
sidewalk, shaken up but looking quite alright. Max and Kaylee nodded.

“Untouched, it seems,” confirmed Max. Judy eyed the jeep that crushed in them and their car. Surprisingly, while jeep’s front was devastated, Kaylee’s door which took the main blow looked quite alright. Max caught Judy’s confused sight. “It’s a Virgo. Smokes like a chimney and roars like a dragon, but it’s a tank,” he explained. Nick, who had bought a small Virgo from Max after Shay Antiery and Charlie Rockfield drowned his previous car, nodded.

“I won’t complain about its gas consumption ever again,” he joked, but Kaylee was the only one to chuckle.

“Me neither,” she agreed and then, they saw some otter running over to them; the jeep’s driver.

“Are you alright?!” He asked and, before they even answered, yelled again. “Don’t call cops! We can handle it!” He demanded. Judy eyed Detective Reynolds, Technical Officer Reynolds and Detective Wilde. She felt the badge in her jacket’s pocket. Sure, no cops, she could see to that.

“I’m calling them right now,” Max reached for his phone.

“I can cover it!” The otter protested.

“You will,” confirmed the wolf, already calling the number.

“I’ll lose my license!”

“I hope you will,” snarled Max back.

“But…”

“Listen here, moron!” Yelled Kaylee now. “We had right of the way! You have a rutting stop sign in front of you and you slammed us with what, forty, fifty mph?!” She stood and walked over to him. “If not for the fact that this car is basically a tank, you’d have two dead bodies in there! If we were bikers, you’d be scrapping us off the street! So by all that is holy, I too hope that you lose that rutting license of yours before you kill somebody!” She huffed furiously. The otter stared at her astonished, muttered something under his breath and walked away reaching for a cigarette, apparently having lost all the hope. Kaylee sat down, mentally exhausted just as much as Max.

“A warm drink to calm your nerves?” Nick offered and both Reynolds bobbed their heads. The fox hurried back to his house, while Judy sat down with them. Police, road service and paramedics arrived rather quickly. With couple witnesses and clear signs at the scene, there was no doubt about otter’s guilt. Paramedics verified that no one suffered any significant harm and at the workshop, it turned out that even Max and Kaylee’s Virgo wasn’t very damaged. Whoever designed those cars, considered them mobile fortresses, just like Max claimed. At the late afternoon, all four of them ordered some take-out to Nick’s house and in the evening, Max helped carry up and down all the heavy furniture Nick and Judy couldn’t handle on their own. They left most of the junk Nick wouldn’t need anymore in an alley, leaving an announcement on the social media to all whom it may concern. Afterwards, they played couple games of soccer table. At first, Judy wanted to be teamed with Nick, but after what resembled an execution on Reynolds family more than actual match, Max and Kaylee pleaded for a change of teams. Couple next games, they played in changing teams with heavily varying results and the “ladies vs. gentlemen” option rising the most emotional showdowns. Kaylee was presented with some of Nick’s antique board games,
one of which bunny managed to persuade them to play with her. When Kaylee claimed her inevitable victory in a long, but uneven battle, the clock’s short arm had long passed by the ninth digit. Nick drove Max and Kaylee to their home at Trip Street and Judy back to Grand Pangolin Apartments, so that they could have some decent sleep before tomorrows work. All in all, it was just another, grey and mundane day in lives of ZPD officers of Precinct 1, Downtown.

Chapter End Notes

Funny thing, I intended this scene to be like a 500-1000 words long and being just an opening to case related things and then, I started writing and writign and writing and Nick and Judy deserved some serene moment. So, enjoy your lecture :)
11.18 am, Monday, May 31, 2022

August Fares watched himself in the bathroom mirror of the police station where he worked. He closed the left eye and then, opened it slowly and then again, and again. He grabbed a phone and took couple pictures of himself while glancing all around. He browsed through them with satisfaction. It looked perfectly normal. It simply… didn’t send any signal, as an IT guy would say. August chuckled nervously. Why was he so stressed now, when they had been on a date on Saturday and it had gone so well? Fares took a deep breath and left the bathroom. He walked among the boxes until he found one that belonged to Judy and Nick. August knocked on it, announcing himself and greeted them with a bit nervous wave of paw and a cheerful smile he gave Judy.

“Good morning!” He greeted her.

“Good morning!” Judy grinned.

“Hey, August,” Nick sent him a polite smile before resuming his work.

“I’ve got two tickets for the cinema on Wednesday evening. What would you say, Judy?” He offered. The way she lightened up even more was truly a balm to his heart.

“Sure thing! What’s the title?”

“Oh, it’s a surprise,” August tried to smile mysteriously.

“Surprise? Awful movie, wouldn’t recommend,” Nick muttered from his desk half-jokingly and Judy threw a pencil at him. “But whatever, your choice,” he shrugged.

“Dumb fox,” she muttered.

“Carrots, would you be so kind to pick up some files from the Dungeon?” The fox pleased, changing a subject.

“Sure!” She jumped off her chair and turned back to August. “So, Wednesday. What time exactly?”

“I’ll pick you up at seven?” He suggested.

“Perfect,” she smiled cheerfully and slipped out of the box just by him. “Sorry, gotta go!” Judy ran left hurrying to the archives. August followed her with sight, running along the corridor,
passing by other mammals nimbly, when he realized that Nick Wilde was watching him carefully. A smile had vanished from his face.

“You’re a liar,” the fox accused him suddenly.

“E… excuse me?” August eyed him carefully.

“You lied to her and knowing Judy, I know that she asked you about it more than once,” Nick clarified, leaving him just as confused as he had been before.

“About what?”

“About how you wouldn’t notice it, if Judy were to toss something at you right now. Certainly not with a corner of your left eye,” the fox explained and August felt creeps across his spine. How did that fox figure it out so quickly? When he performed that test at bathroom? But he got all the answers right! He couldn’t be bluffing, could he?

“I’ve got to go,” August excused himself, quite embarrassed. For a second, he could swear the fox was smiling, but then, he had already lost him from his sight, heading back to the Rabbit Hole. He was confused. What did Wilde plan with that knowledge? Was he going to tell Judy? No, if he wanted to scrutinize him in Judy’s eyes, he’d tell her immediately. Then what game was he playing? An idea to tell Judy truth crossed his mind, but he rejected it immediately. Not now. In time, when… when truth won’t hurt her. But if that fox tells her first… August stopped suddenly, tempted to just turn around and make him promise to keep the secret, but by the time he’d get there, Judy would probably be back too. The fox was watching him carefully, that he knew for sure. He came back to the Rabbit Hole and sat by his desk. He had some analyses for Andersen and he got down to them immediately. As much as he’d love to, he really didn’t have time to daydream about Judy or worry about her ever watchful partner.

Lost in his work, August lost the track of time. The next thing outside his computer that really brought his attention was Isabelle Alvarez coming to the TO office. He watched her quite surprised, especially now that he had heard that she wouldn’t be back until next week. The bandage covering her left shoulder could be seen from under her uniform, but what really worried him was her black eye. From the gossips he heard, it wasn’t anyhow justified. Alvarez passed by him paying him but a glance and went straight to Kaylee. August pretended to work, but watched them with corner of right eye, probably like rest of the room, which suddenly went suspiciously silent.

“Hi,” Isabelle greeted the rabbit, as she stood by her desk. Were she not herself, she’d probably be blushing embarrassed, given their past. Kaylee eyed the wolf carefully and smiled politely.

“Good afternoon. Do you need anything?” The bunny crossed her arms.

“I wanted to apologize for trying to step in between you and your husband,” explained Alvarez.

“Genuinely or because Max asked you to do so?” Kaylee doubted.

“Genuinely. I thought things through, acknowledged my mistake,” Isabelle assured firmly. Reynolds was watching her in silence for a while and then, she smiled.

“Apology accepted. It’s good to see you back, by the way. Max said you wouldn’t be back until next week,” the bunny changed the subjects. Isabelle cheered up as she let out the pent
“Oh, I’m quite alright already and boredom was killing me anyway,” explained Isabelle. “I’ll be going. Prosecutor Moore wanted to see us,” she excused herself.

“I’m not keeping you. Good luck,” Kaylee smiled politely. Alvarez nodded and headed back to the exit. She stopped by August who was staring at her and looked down at him.

“You want to say something, just say it,” she snarled.

“What happened to your eye?” He asked, only afterwards realizing how rude it sounded.

“We split up with Jason,” she explained casually and then, chuckled. “What? Time for another lecture of yours?”

“He hit you?” August asked, indignant.

“There goes another lecture,” Isabelle rolled her eyes. “Listen, darling, I don’t give a rat’s ass about your disappointment in me, your disapproval of my actions or your denial to how world works. You don’t know me. Stop judging me, OK?”

“I’m not judging you. I’m just don’t like that he hit you,” August argued. Alvarez watched him carefully, confused, and then she laughed. She patted him on the shoulder, most amused.

“Oh, you should have seen what I’ve done to him!” She chuckled and turned around. “It’s cute, really. Excuse me, are all rabbits this naïve when they come here?” She wondered loudly.

“I think Kaylee was an exception to the rule, actually,” someone told her and the wolf laughed even louder.

“I can imagine,” Alvarez shook her head, patted August on shoulder patronizingly and went her own way. As she was heading for the exit, she was still giggling, much to August’s annoyance. The rabbit huffed and was about to get back to work, when he realized that Kaylee was standing by his desk.

“A lunch break?” She proposed and only then did he realize that it was almost an hour after noon.

“Sure,” he nodded. He grabbed his lunch and went along with Kaylee to the canteen. It was rather crowded and they intended to grab some empty table, when Wolford called them. He was sitting by a couple of his friends and rabbits took last two seats. They started munching sandwiches and Wolford patted August on the back strongly.

“There’s my buddy! August helped us a lot finding our murderer,” Jason grinned to him and the rabbit noticed that he had his right paw bandaged and a short line of stitches above his left eyebrow.

“Yeah, I’m… glad I could help,” August smiled awkwardly, a bit uncomfortable with how he was suddenly in the spotlight. He’d really preferred to remain unnoticed and to his relief, wolf changed the subject.

“So, anyways, she then grabbed that knife…” Wolford paused, seeing rabbits’ confused faces. “Oh, you have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”
“Jason broke up with Isabelle,” Andersen clarified with a smirk.

“In some crazy way,” someone added.

“Oh, she’s crazy herself,” Wolford muttered and patted August on his back. “A piece of friendly advice; never date a crazy. You’re gonna have some good time, then some bad time, then maybe some good time… and then some very, very bad time.”

“Uh huh,” August muttered hesitantly. He eyed Kaylee, who seemed rather annoyed with the entire situation. He understood why as Wolford started his story with how he took Isabelle out on Saturday evening. He briefed them in quickly, but not sparing any of the spicier details and suddenly, August started feeling very uncomfortable. He wasn’t supposed to hear this stuff. None of them were, actually. Wolford got to the part with the knife and it was hardly the end; neither Wolford or Alvarez’s marks had been explained yet.

“And then, she dropped that freaking knife and started crying,” Wolford laughed. “I stood there with not a bloody clue what to do and, seeing that she was only going lower and lower, I crouched by her and let her tell me the sobby story of her life. Guys, I don’t even know where to start. Would you believe that in high school, she was…”

“OK, that’s it. I’ve lost my appetite,” August ostentatiously dropped his sandwich back in his lunch bag. Wolford watched him confused, as the rabbit was jumping off his chair.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” The wolf asked, confused.

“You shouldn’t be telling us the things she told you back then,” he pointed out indignantly.

“Hey, she’s crazy. It’s just a friendly warning…”

“No, it’s not, you asshole,” snapped Kaylee suddenly. Wolford completely didn’t know what to say to that. Everyone knew Kaylee Reynolds adored gossips, after all.

“You’re not with him on this, are you? You hate her too!” Jason protested.

“It’s not about whether I hate her or not! It’s about you being a dickhead, washing your dirty laundry in front of everyone like you had with Spice!” Kaylee yelled at him angrily. She looked down at her sandwich and muttered something under her breath, putting it back in a back. “Yup, I lost my appetite too. Come on, August,” she joined the rabbit and they left the canteen in silence.

“Thanks,” August managed to say.

“He had it coming after all that drama with Spice. His chattering annoyed her so much that she tried to take his parents’ house, you know. Don’t let him tell you any different,” Kaylee warned him. “And besides, you started it the thing,” she pointed out with a smirk.

“I kind of did? I mean… it’s irritating,” Fares tried to explain himself.

“I know,” she nodded. “By the way, you have a way of making enemies! Even better than Alvarez! It hasn’t been even a week and she’s already allergic to your stares…”

“I didn’t do anything…”

“…Now you called Wolford names…” continued Kaylee.
“Technically, you did…” August tried to protest.

“And Nick’s watching you carefully since day one,” she finished.

“Is he? I mean, does he hate me?” Fares asked, confused.

“He’s wary of you for sure. You’re hitting on Judy. Quite successfully, to that,” Kaylee said as if she was stating the obvious and it did not relieve August anyhow.

“Should I worry?”

“You’re a TO. People come to you for help, not the other way around, so… not really, for now? Unless you keep the pace, that is,” Kaylee joked, but he had a feeling it was only half-truth.

“And about Nick?” August asked. She hesitated and then, shrugged. Until that day, August Fares had not even realized that a single shrug could be so disturbing.

1.58 pm, Monday, May 31, 2022

James Greymane weighted the wallet in his jacket’s pocket, noticing with satisfaction how unusually heavy it was. His brand new wallet, it was worth mentioning, as the previous one couldn’t even contain the amount of banknotes he was holding at the moment. How much did he have, six thousands? Seven? He’d lost his count and it was just a single weekend of them getting started with laundering money. Diane was truly a genius, he had to give it to her. James parked his car just by his house and checking time with satisfaction; he still had plenty of time before his shift at the store. He walked last couple hundred feet to his flat when he realized that some goon was waiting by the entrance to his block of flats. Wolf’s paw wondered to the wallet in inner pocket of his jacket and he wanted to turn in an alley, when someone put a paw at his arm. He eyed a tiger grinning cockily.

“The Lady is waiting for you, boy,” the tiger told him and at this same moment, a limo stopped by them. “And you’d hate to keep her waiting.”

“I…” James hesitated. If he slipped away now, ran in the alley and tried to lose them on the slippery, icy roads of Tundratown, he could do it. But they’d track him down in couple days anyways. And tiger’s taser at belt wasn’t leaving plenty of options either. “Sure,” he agreed, walking to the limo. The tiger opened the door for him and wolf seated himself at one of very comfortable seats, while tiger took the other. The doors locked automatically and they headed for Happytown. James sighed deeply. So that’s how it was going to end. He was going to stand before Duchess. How she had learnt of his involvement in trying to kill O’Dyna, he had not known. He was quite sure he had left no traces and none of his friends would ever betray him. Was it Miss Reynolds, selling him out in some sort of scheme? Was she sacrificing her pawn for some sort of greater good? He did not really know. All that he did know was that Duchess was going to force the confession out of him and then, have him dead or incarcerated. James trembled, but not with fear; it was anger. He was so close! Everything was going so smoothly! For once in his life, he had a set course and was going to do it all on his own! And now, they were taking it away from him, right when…
“We’re here,” the tiger announced and James realized that indeed, they were standing before Duchess’s original club; The Diamond.

“Huh,” he stared at the neon, feeling hot under the collar.

“Leave that jacket here, it’s pretty hot outside,” advised the tiger and smirked, seeing wolf’s confused face. “Don’t you worry, you’ll have it back on your way back,” he promised confusing wolf even more, but Greymane left the jacket in limo. A jacket with wallet full of cash, he realized only after he had closed limo’s car behind himself, only to realize that it probably wasn’t changing anything. The tiger guided him inside the club. There, before meeting the Duchess, he was searched thoroughly and a young wolf instructed him to speak tersely, be polite and do not stare at what had remained of her left eye. He climbed then climbed the stairs that led to her balcony with view on all of the Diamond. She was sitting on her couch, writing something quickly on her laptop, when she saw her guest. The Duchess finished what she was doing, put the computer aside and seated herself comfortably. James stood couple feet in front of her, while her eye continued to pierce into his soul.

“James Greymane. It has been years,” she said and chuckled, seeing his confusion. “Did you think I don’t remember? We’ve met before.”

“Have we?” James stared at her arrogantly and then, reminded himself whom he was facing. “I’m sorry, I just…” He looked away awkwardly.

“It’s alright,” she disregarded it. “I didn’t call you all the way here just for sake of reminiscence.” “Then what for?” He asked with impertinence of a man about to be hanged, but again she chose to ignore it. James was understanding less and less of the situation

“A job offer,” she said. Greymane stared at her, most confused.

“E… excuse me?” He stuttered, trying to figure out how she was trying to outsmart him now.

“A friend of mine in Tundratown is looking for someone cunning and clever. Someone that can think quick and adapt to the situation. And I heard that you do meet the requirements,” Duchess explained, while James was still looking out for the hook. “I know you seek conflict with law no more. It’s fully legal,” she added, seeing his hesitance. And then, it dawned on him; there was no hook. Duchess was offering him a job. A well-paid job, satisfying job like she had to plenty of mammals before him. Still, it arose even more questions.

“I don’t understand. Why me? I’m not your friend or anything. You have no obligations of any sort toward me,” he pointed out. “And besides…”

“You have no sympathy for me either, probably because you subconsciously blame me for your brother’s death. I know,” Duchess nodded. She perfectly understood his confusion, which only fueled his frustration, as he was losing control of situation.

“So, why?”

“Because very often, a new friend is worth more than money and time one invests in him. And besides...” Duchess smiled enigmatically. “I don’t like having enemies that I have not earned.”

“Huh,” James said only, even more confused. He hesitated. Duchess’s offer could solve plenty of his troubles. Financial ones, for sure. He wouldn’t even need to bring his plan to the
end… He’d have to abandon it? After all the steps they’ve made? Those couple thousands he earned just today? Their perspectives for so much more? James felt a sting of conscience. For once, he was going to do something on his own. He meant not to beg for any money from Duchess or Reynolds like Diane had suggested… Of course.

“Diane,” snarled James angrily. “It was her idea, wasn’t it?” He demanded to know. Duchess seemed to remain unoffended, although very disappointed with his sudden change.

“Never did she ask me about it personally. She worries about you much, though and gossips reached me. I thought I’d help my fiancé’s friend and thus, you,” explained Duchess, but James only snarled angrily.

“Of course. Dumb girl, just chattering…”

“She’s worried sick about you,” Lady Tompkins interrupted him so firmly that even James had enough reason to shut up. “She knows that you’re a decent, if very confused, mammal.”

“I don’t need help,” James shook his head. “Not yours, not hers, not anyone’s,” he stared her straight in the eye arrogantly, but she just shook her head pitifully, as if he was just a pup throwing a tantrum. It was driving him crazy. “Do you hear me?! I’ll handle myself on my own! I’ll get rich, I’ll take Ryan from orphanage and leave with him far away not to have to ever watch your sorry face!” He yelled at Duchess. He was half expecting to get her angry at him, but she only kept looking down at him pitifully. And truly, did her pity hurt more than her contempt.

“So be it. Handle things on your own, James. Just remember; this offer of mine is a swim or sink. I won’t be repeating myself.”

“I said I don’t need it,” James snarled and turned around angrily, about to walk away.

“Of course. You’ll arrange your own downfall,” Duchess said sarcastically. “You don’t have to worry about Ryan, at least. I’ve heard he’s getting adopted,” she mentioned and the wolf stopped mid-step.

“What?! By whom?!” He snarled.

“If rumors do not deceive me, I believe the lucky couple are Max and Kaylee Reynolds. Two most decent Reynolds Zootopia’s ever had, if you asked me,” Duchess clarified with a smirk. James’s mind raced like crazy. Reynolds. These same Reynolds that left him on the ice. Cops to that, and involved in death of his brother. Why would they want Ryan? Why would Ryan even agree? He knew James was going to take him any moment now, he didn’t need anyone else. And certainly not Reynolds.

“I have to go,” he muttered, flabbergasted.

“You’ve already outstayed my welcome indeed,” Duchess stated so coldly that it made James shiver. Another enemy that he had made, he realized resentfully. First Reynolds, now her… He didn’t need her or anyone else. He had his plan and he was going to stick to it. James rushed downstairs. He got his phone back and went outside, where the limo already waited. It took him back to Tundratown. When he returned hom, James made a call. Someone had plenty of explaining to do.

“Hi, James. How are you?” Diane asked cheerfully.

“What did you tell Duchess?” He snarled at her. For a moment, there was only silence.

“Nothing, never mind,” he sighed with relief. He obviously wasn’t going to tell Diane about the job offer he had received. She’d skin him if she knew that she rejected it. “I need Reynolds’ address.”

“It’s 1456 Flurry Street. A huge mansion, you can’t really miss it. I thought you were done with her?” Diane worried.

“Not hers, Max and Kaylee Reynolds. The cops,” he clarified.

“Um… I could check? What do you need them for?” Diane asked, troubled.

“They’re going to adopt Ryan,” he explained and for a moment, he heard no reply. “Hello?”

“That’s… good?” Diane guessed and he snarled. Of course, she wouldn’t understand.

“No, it’s not! I’m going to take him! Why is anyone doing it now?!” He complained.

“No, listen, it’s actually good news,” Diane disagreed and continued before James would manage to interrupt her. “Max and Kaylee Reynolds are some really decent guys from what I know. They really could provide Ryan a decent house.”

“Diane you don’t…”

“Don’t compare them to Miss Reynolds,” she advised. “I understand that you’re frustrated, but they might be just what Ryan needs. Just what you need, actually.”

“What are you talking about?” He snapped.

“You’re Ryan’s godfather and that kid adores you. Nothing will really change between you and him when he gets adopted. I mean, not too much. You can still visit him as often as you like! But he’ll live in a normal house, not that sorry orphanage,” Diane pointed out.

“Everything I’ve done so far, I’ve done for him…”

“And he’ll appreciate it. There’s no need to push at an open door,” Diane argued. “Things are turning better than we’d anticipate. If they’re going right, maybe you can just let them be?” She suggested shyly. He knew what she meant; drop whatever he was doing right now. But he couldn’t. He had made his choice already. Ryuk and Miles were counting on him, too.

“Just give me their address,” he demanded. Diane sighed with disappointment.

“Don’t do anything rash. I’ll find the address and send it over when I’m back,” she assured.

“Thanks, until then,” he hung up not waiting for a reply. Wolf dropped his phone on the couch and sighed deeply. It was just another complication. Just another complication. Nothing he couldn’t really deal with. He reached for the wallet in his jacket and browsed through its content. Things were going quite alright. What was he supposed to worry about?

And then, he heard knocking on the door. James watched it, rather confused; he hadn’t been expecting anyone, really. He walked over to the door and opened it to see two police officers;
a rabbit and a fox. His heart skipped a beat. What could they want?

“My name’s Detective Hopps and this is Detective Wilde. Mind if we come in?” She asked.

“N… No. Please, please come in,” the wolf turned around and guided them inside. He had left wallet in his jacket and there was nothing in house that could indicate his connection with the ATM or gas explosion, so he was cool. Still, the very fact that they did come there disturbed him greatly. What could they want from him?

“There you go,” he offered them seats in his room. “How can I help, officers?” He asked politely, realizing how tired he sounded. Whole that issue with Duchess worn him out completely.

“We just have couple questions. Do you know Leonard Miles?” Wondered Detective Hopps politely, with a nice, encouraging smile.

“Miles? Um, doesn’t ring any bells, sorry,” he shrugged off, but then, saw the detectives eyeing one another and understood his mistake immediately.

“Really?” The bunny asked. The fox continued only to stare at him.

“Umm… I think he has that car repair shop in Savannah Central?” He guessed. He could tell them what they already knew, after all.

“Indeed. Have you ever been to there?” Detective Hopps wondered and he hesitated.

“Not that I recall,” he shrugged, as if he really wanted to help, but simply couldn’t.

“How do you know him, then?” She asked curiously. She certainly was too nice for a police officer. Not intimidating one bit.

“Oh, I think we met accidentally at some bar couple months ago?” James made up a story hurriedly. “We downed couple beers together, discussed life and everything. Cool guy, not very talkative.”

“Do you remember bar’s name?” She asked curiously.

“Um… I don’t think it had a name? I certainly missed the signboard. It was in Rainforest District,” he said.

“Funny thing, isn’t it? That a guy from Tundratown and a guy form Savannah Central first meet at a bar in Rainforest District?” She pointed out.

“Oh, our girlfriends stood both us up. That’s how we… got to drink our sorrows away together,” James explained. Hopps nodded with understanding, apparently buying another one of his lies.

“Your girlfriend? What was her name?” The bunny changed the subject.

“Lisa Thompson. A cheetah. Rather tall, a bit younger than me,” James lied confidently and she nodded. And then, the fox sighed impatiently.

“Judy…”

“I know, I know. But he’s such a smooth liar,” the bunny excused herself with a giggle.
“Smooth? You call that smooth?” Wilde chuckled and she shrugged, turning back to James.

“For the record, Mr. Greymane, we’re well aware that so far, you haven’t answered truthfully to a single question of ours,” Judy turned to him, clearly enjoying his confusion. “So, let’s start over, shall we?”

“Or what? Will you imprison me?” He joked, but Detective Hopps’s polite smile assured him that it was indeed what they were going to do. “Under what charges? I’ve told you nothing!”

“Quite oppositely, Mr. Greymane. You told us plenty of lies involving our suspect.”

“It’s called obstruction of justice, Mr. Greymane,” added Detective Wilde. “Providing fake alibi, giving false details on suspects and so on. People go to jail for that. According to files, you know what I’m talking about,” Wilde reminded him subtly, really grinding James’ gears. Oh, he had some nerve.

“But we could start yet again, couldn’t we? Truthfully, this time,” Detective Hopps suggested politely.

“I…”

“When did you meet Leonard Miles?” She asked, before he got to finish. He eyed Detective Hopps. That rabbit really was pissing him off. If not for that fox, he’d kick that small fluff out of his house. Hell, he probably could even handle that red moron…

“Mr. Greymane?” Detective Wilde hurried him.

“Um… couple months ago,” James assured and Detective Judy Hopps sighed with disappointment.

“Nick?” She pleased. The fox reached for some paper he was holding in his back pocket. He opened it and handed to the wolf.

“This, Mr. Greymane, is a CV you sent over to Leonard Miles’ back in 2012. A very solid CV, for a young car mechanic, I must admit. According to the documents in Miles’ archives, he didn’t hire you due to lack of vacant positions, but recommended you to another mechanic in Tundratown,” Detective Wilde explained.

“Which means, you’ve met him at least ten years ago. Correct?” Detective Hopps concluded and he nodded reluctantly.

“Why to ask me things you already know?” He asked instead.

“To verify your credibility,” enlightened him the bunny. “Now, do tell us about your friendship with Leonard Miles.”

“Friendship,” snorted James. “We’re not really friends, you know,” he protested, but saw both officers’ sceptical sights. “I mean, we’re drinking buddies, but I don’t see him too often.”

“How often?” Detective Hopps insisted.

“Um… Couple times a year? Different places, too. Miles likes to discover new spots around the town,” James explained genuinely. Diane gave him once this advice; give as much truth as you can, as long as they’re not incriminating.
“And do you visit him at work?” Detective Wilde decided to join the discussion. Greymane eyed him carefully, but fox remained an enigma to him. He also felt like an opened book to Wilde, as much as he hated to admit it.

“Couple times. It’s not a crime, is it?” He smirked to the fox.

“We’ll get to that,” the fox assured. “The last time you visited Leonard Miles?”

“Not this year, I’m certain,” the wolf stated and saw both officers sighing and eyeing one another.

“Are you absolutely certain? Or should we refresh your memories?” The bunny asked with disappointment.

“Excuse me?”

“Miles’ workshop’s CCTV caught you visiting him about two weeks ago. We could also provide witnesses, if you really need this, Mr. Greymane,” Wilde explained.

“Oh, that!” James laughed awkwardly. Neither of cops bought it for sure. “I forgot. I went to Miles to ask him about this little issue with my car. I couldn’t handle it myself and you know, car repair shops are real rip offs in general,” he explained himself awkwardly.

“What was the issue?”

“I didn’t know how to exchange a lamp in my car without removing the engine,” explained James confidently. “Little devil, that car,” he muttered.

“So… you went to Miles’ car repair shop, explained your problem and, instead of showing it on a car, he invited you straight to the office and explained it to you there?” Detective Wilde wondered. James hesitated, clueless how they figured he went straight to the office. Of course, witnesses and CCTV.

“I came inside and Miles invited me to his office. I explained the issue there and he said, it was very simple. He shown me some video on ZooTube, actually,” James explained with a nervous chuckle.

“Do you remember what else you were discussing?” Asked the rabbit officer.

“Usual stuff. Nothing that really stuck in my mind,” shrugged helplessly James.

“Has Miles ever discussed his financial problems?” The fox wondered.

“He mentioned he lost some trial and had to pay up plenty of money, but he claimed he had things under control. He mentioned it was a good year too,” James assured and realized he had overdone it; this year was terrible for Miles and police probably knew it too.

“At your not so frequent meetings, Miles surely has mentioned his hobby, hasn’t he?”

“It’s hard to get Miles to talk about himself. Even when I do, he only complains about his wife,” James explained. Wilde and Hopps dwelled on the subject a little more and tried to learn more of cars Miles was fixing on his own, but the wolf claimed to know nothing and they couldn’t prove him otherwise. The questioning lasted some time more and James was well aware that they were suspecting him, but remained quite sure that they couldn’t pinpoint anything to him just yet. With that knowledge, he soon finished the conversation in excellent mood. A few minutes after
detectives left, his phone rang; it was Diane.

“Hey, what do you have?”

“Reynolds’ address; Trip Street 12. A nice neighborhood they chose,” Diane told him.

“Ha! You’re the best!”

“There’s one thing more, though. Can we meet up tomorrow at your place? You me and Ryuk,” Diane insisted, troubled.

“What is it?” James asked.

“Ryuk’s wanted, as of recently. Attempted rape and murder. Of a police officer investigating the explosion, to that. Isabelle Alvarez. Her uncle and cousins worked for Thunders and old Reynolds,” she explained. James stood completely silent for quite a moment, trying to comprehend it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yagami no-Ryuk, a hyena. That’s all police has, since his DNA is not in any database,” Diane clarified. “We need to talk with him.”

“I’ll arrange it. Take care, Diane.”

“Love you,” she assured and hung up. James sighed deeply and dropped his phone on his bed. What a day.
10.52 am, Monday, June 7, 2022

Nick came to his and Judy’s box in some excellent mood. He put the phone back in the pocket of his trousers, leaned against a thin wall of his box and smirked at his partner, calling her.

“Riddle time, Carrots! Do you know why I love start of the month so much?” He grinned.

“Salary payout?” She shrugged.

“Precisely! For a week or so, the digits on my banking account won’t have a minus in front of them! But, while we receive payouts, do you know what shops, stores and markets do?” He continued.

“They… give their workers their salary?” Judy guessed, quite confused as to where he was getting at.

“That too. But what do they do with cash they earn?” He asked her again.

“They… Hmm… take it to the bank?” She could already see where this was going.

“And what does the bank do?” Fox proceeded with satisfaction. She considered spoiling it immediately, but let it last a bit longer.

“It transfers it to shops and stores’ respective accounts.”

“But before that…”

“It checks the banknote numbers. What do you have, Slick?” Judy asked finally and he smirked widely.

“SEALS store in Sahara Square. Someone had paid them over three thousand bucks in our stolen fifties and twenties. It’s not the only store which was reported, but it looks most promising.”

“Three thousand in twenties and fifties? Someone must have noticed it,” Judy pointed out.

“That depends,” Nick remained skeptical. “Let’s see at the place, shall we?”

“Dropping by the National Bank first?” Suggested Judy.
“Nah, Aveline has send me everything over mail already,” the fox assured. They went to their car and then, drove to the store in Sahara Square. SEALS was a huge shop offering a wide variety of all sorts of products, starting at clothes and jewelry and concluding with tools and house appliances. Nick and Judy came inside, introduced themselves to a security officer and requested the manager. They were guided to a small office that belonged to a middle-aged camel. He greeted them politely, if not too enthusiastically and offered them two chairs that were at the place.

“Jeremy Garth. I assume you’re here to discuss these banknotes, aren’t you?”

“Precisely, Mr. Garth,” Nick nodded. “According to the bank, among the cash that was delivered from this store yesterday, there were found three thousand and two hundred fifty dollars in stolen banknotes. These were one hundred ten twenty-dollar and forty-one fifty-dollar banknotes,” the fox pointed out. “Could you tell us more about them?”

“Of course. From what we know, most of these banknotes could be found in the self-service stations, which could explain why such transactions went unnoticed.”

“Was it a single transaction? Or were the banknotes found at the single station?” Judy hoped, but the manager shook his head.

“Multiple stations and couple traditional check-outs, too. There could be found only fifties, though,” he explained.

“Is it possible to estimate when the transactions were made?” Suggested the rabbit.

“I can’t pin it any closer than to last two weeks. That’s how often we take the cash to bank.”

“And be order of banknotes? Depending on their position, you could perhaps estimate time,” Judy suggested.

“Not too reliably. Money surely gets mixed up.”

“What about the history of trades? You hold these separately for every station, don’t you?” Nick suggested and the manager had to agree. “Would it be a problem to supply us with it? For last two week, every checkout where stolen banknotes were found.”

“I could do that,” Mr. Garth assured. “But be warned, these do not contain the values of banknotes that were used; only whether customer paid with cash or money and change he received, if any.”

“We can still work with it,” Judy assured. “Did workers perhaps notice anything suspicious? Any unorthodox purchases or returns?” She asked, but Mr. Garth chuckled.

“Officer, after fifteen years of work in this place, I can assure you that there is no such a thing as orthodox purchase. People buy literary everything in all sorts of weird combinations. You can go around and ask the workers, but I doubt if anyone of them would try remembering anything that’s not ridiculously outstanding,” he explained amusingly.

“And what is your return policy?” Judy wondered.

“Basically anything, if not damaged, within thirty days. Mammals abuse it, but what can you do?” He shrugged. Judy eyed Nick. Not a good sign at all.

“We will ask a few questions the workers, if that’s not a problem. Please send us the
CCTV recordings from entire facility and the history of stations concerned.”

“Will do. Good luck, officers,” Mr. Garth wished them. Nick and Judy went to question the workers, but just like the manager had warned, they didn’t really remember anything particularly useful; there were too many clients to keep record of everyone that behaved weirdly. With nothing new that could be anyhow helpful, they thanked the manager and continued to another store where these same banknotes were traced. In total, they visited six big supermarkets of different sorts that day. In each, they were received kindly and given data analogic to the one from SEALS, but nothing extraordinary. They returned to the station about half past three and with another hour and half left, they tried to brainstorm the idea for their next steps. The whiteboard was on the move.

“So, guys steal over two hundred thousand dollars in fifties and twenties. Instead of waiting for things to cool down, he walks into several stores and start to spend their money. What for?” Nick asked, standing by the board with a marker. Judy wondered, staring at her partner.

“When it comes to motivations, there are basically three: they had to spend that money for themselves, they wanted to spend that money for themselves or they intended to launder it,” the rabbit noticed and fox agreed. He separated the whiteboard into three sections, signing them correspondingly.

“About the ‘had to buy’ option, it’d most likely be food or medicines. Basics,” Nick suggested.

“So we can ignore SEARS and couple other stores and leave the food markets in this case,” Judy concluded and the fox kept noting.

“The ‘want to buy’ thing seems more… broad.”

“Basically any luxury products. Expensive phones, watches…”

“…TVs, wallets, jewelry… basically anything luxurious,” Judy agreed. The fox agreed. He wrote a big ‘LUXURIOUS’, all over the second column, bolded it and underlined. “So, to the third option. Launder it. How do you launder this money?” She wondered.

“My first thought would be, the returns. You buy something with dirty cash by a self-checkout station. Then you return it couple days later and receive clean money instead,” Nick suggested. “No money loss in progress.”

“But you need to leave your signature,” Judy pointed out. “So, we have to check for Leonard Miles and James Greymane among the returns, don’t we?”

“Good idea. I don’t think Miles would be this reckless, though,” the fox doubted.

“Well… they’re spending that money. We didn’t expect it too,” Judy noticed. “And besides, they could be also selling the stuff on their own. It’s two hundred thousands of stuff, but…”

“But they have to start somewhere,” Nick agreed. “When it comes to returns, you can buy basically anything. But when you resell…”

“You lose cash in progress. And you can only do it with specific things,” Judy agreed.

“So, what would you resell, Carrots?”

“Jewelry?” Guessed the rabbit. Nick smirked.
“Girls.”

“It’s light and expensive,” she argued. “We need to check what sort of jewelry you can buy at these shops. And if it’s really resellable.”

“Agreed. I’d say phones and watches, too. Light, easily sellable and expensive,” the fox pointed out and wrote it down as they spoke. Over time, they specified what exactly they were looking for and what sorts of patterns to seek. When SEALS sent their the detectives their data, they wanted to sit down to it and verify their conclusions, only to be brutally disillusioned. Each file came for a separate cash register and each contained thousands of positions.

“Last two weeks, after all. I’m scared to check the return office already,” Nick said bitterly. “I don’t think we can just browse through all this stuff,” he doubted.

“No, it too much. And it’s just a single store, too. But we know someone that could do it,” Judy remarked with a smile. “Chief hired a statistical analysis expert not without a reason, did he?”

“Right, August,” Nick almost forgot what that rabbit was doing at their station, to tell the truth. “I’ll call him here. We wrote all of this for a reason,” he remarked pointing at the white board. The fox reached for the stationary phone and called the TO office. The conversation lasted no longer than half a minute and Nick dropped the earphone with satisfaction. Suddenly, Judy felt a sting of remorse and she realized something.

“Um… Nick, I forgot to tell you something,” she said embarrassingly.

“Yeah?”

“August invited me for a concert this week and… it’s on Thursday. I know we’re watching movies on Thursdays usually, but… you won’t be angry if I go, will you?” She asked a bit awkwardly. The fox just shrugged and gave her one of these smiles she never could read.

“Carrots, it’s your life. I can’t tell you what to do with it all the time,” Nick reminded her. She thought at first that he meant it quite genuinely, but she quickly felt what stood behind his words; it was her life and slowly, Nick was being a smaller and smaller part of it. She felt it, she regretted it, but she didn’t know how to stop it.

“I’m not skipping it next week, I promise,” she tried to smile, but her attempt fell flat. The fox smiled enigmatically, his eye sparking something which wasn’t his usual amusement, but said not a word. And then, August knocked on the wall of the box and came inside.

“Hey, what do you have for me?” TO Fares watched the two of them curiously. He smiled to Judy and she, along with Nick’s short, sarcastic comments, introduced to him the case they were facing with all of its specifics and conclusions they had reached so far. August took notes on everything they said, took the picture of the whiteboard and asked them to send all the files over to him. He assured he’d sit down to the case on tomorrow’s morning, as it was almost the end of the day now and it required plenty of time. Oppositely to both detectives, he didn’t seem overwhelmed by the amount of data. Quite oppositely, he seemed very excited about the first really challenging task. As Fares headed back to his office, Nick checked time. It was five to five.

“I’d say it’s time to go,” he pointed out. “Need a ride or do you have other plans?”

“I certainly could use it,” Judy assured. They logged off their PCs, did the usual tidying up of their desks before leaving and fifteen minutes later, were already on their way to Judy’s flat.
“Any plans for the evening?” Wondered the fox.

“Um… no, not really. And you?”

“I’ll be picking up mom and do some clothing shopping. Her wardrobe is rather empty, as you can imagine,” the fox smirked. “Actually… we both know I’ll be a terrible advisor. Wouldn’t you like to tag along and help us with it?” He suggested.

“Oh, you’re suddenly trusting my fashion sense?” Judy asked with amusement.

“More than I do mine, for sure. And let’s be honest, mom adores you,” the fox smirked. “So, what do you say?”

“Gladly,” Judy assured. “We could also watch a movie tonight, if you have no other plans,” Judy suggested. “It’s no Thursday, but…”

“Sounds nice. Your place or mine?”

“Yours? Your mom must have been dying of boredom for last few weeks,” the bunny pointed with her usual empathetic approach.

“True at that,” Nick nodded. “So, I guess you’d like to change before we go…”

“It’ll take me five minutes,” the bunny assured.

“Oh, I know,” the fox nodded with a smirk. They stopped by Judy’s house, spending there no more than five minutes just like the rabbit had promised. Then, they went with Nick’s mother for some shopping and ate a late dinner at Nick’s place. Mrs. Wilde who preferred a good book over TV, excused herself out of the movie and left Wilde and Hopps to their show. Late in the night, Nick drove sleepy Judy back home. Haunting them things unspoken remained unspoken and thus, continued to haunt the fox and the rabbit.

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12.20 pm, Wednesday, June 9, 2022

Kaylee Reynolds looked around the police cafeteria; rather crowded as usually at the time, it was rather loud in there, but she couldn’t hear the one voice she was looking for; her husband’s. In the thicket of noises, she found Officer Alvarez, though. With not much of hesitation, she headed in her direction. She passed by Jason Wolford, who snarled at her with contempt, still holding a grudge for how she had treated her a week ago. Jokes on him, it was him requesting her help in here, not the other way around. She found Isabelle sitting by an empty table in the back, but couldn’t spot her husband. With no better thing to do, she seated herself by the wolf and listened to her vivid discussion on the phone.

„What should you do for me to forgive you? Honestly, Nigel… are you home?” Isabelle asked, really trying to be nice, but clearly overwhelmed with frustration. „Wonderful. Then go and grab that cactus of yours from the windowsill, could you?” Snarled Isabelle to the phone while
Kaylee took a sandwich from her bag. Oh, she had good feelings about it.

“Do you have it? Perfect,” continued Isabelle. “Now hold it firmly in your paw, undo your pants and shove it up your ass. To the very pot, darling. And once you’re done, don’t you dare to call me ever again!” She hung up furiously and only by last sting of reason didn’t toss it across the room straight in a wall. She huffed, dropping it on the table and covering her face with paws. She slowly raised her head and watched the concerned rabbit on her side.

“Hey. Max is calling someone. He’ll be back in a moment,” she told her.

“Was it serious?” Kaylee asked, half-worried, half-curious.

“For a second, I thought it was,” Isabelle sighed. “What a jerk. Why are all guys jerks?”

“Not all,” Kaylee stated carefully, annoying her even more.

“Almost all,” the wolf corrected herself reluctantly.

“Maybe some men simply care about one thing? And later, they simply take us for granted?” Kaylee guessed and Isabelle shrugged in what could be an agreement or lack of interest equally. “Wait, are we having this cute bonding moment right now?”

“More like I have this ranting moment and you’re the only one sitting next to me,” corrected her Isabelle.

“Oh.”

“No offence.”

“None taken,” Kaylee assured. “So… is that Nigel even worth mentioning?” She asked carefully.

“Apparently, not. Have you ever…” Isabelle eyed her carefully and hesitated. “Why is it always like that? The guys that I meet are either jerks, egomaniacs or off-market. Or judgmental assholes, like that rodent of yours.”

“Rodent of mine?” Kaylee jerked her head curiously.

“Aren’t rabbits…” The wolf paused mid-sentence.

“Lagomorphs,” she specified.

“Oh. No offence.”

“None taken,” Kaylee waved it off. “So, August?” She asked curiously and bit into her sandwich. Isabelle just huffed with utmost annoyance.

“A polite, quiet dandy that thinks he can look down at me just because he’s probably never been to the second base,” she muttered and Kaylee choked on her sandwich trying not to laugh. It took her a moment to pull herself back together. Isabelle watched it with amusement.

“Oh, you’re too strict, he just worries a lot! You should have seen how angry he was when Wolford was talking crap about you. He really shut that wolf down,” Kaylee disagreed.

“Oh, did he now?” Isabelle crossed her arms with disbelief.
“Ask Andersen or Rhinowitz. Or Wolford, if you can do it without clawing his eyes out,” smirked the rabbit. “August genuinely wants to do good and if he looks down at you, as you think, it’s only because he wants the best for you.”

“Yeah, right,” Isabelle muttered, not convinced at all.

“You could just sort it out with him, you know. Clear some air,” Kaylee suggested. “Actually… that’s not such a bad idea, you know. Ask him out.”


“Come on, he’s quite an alright guy. Certainly not a jerk, egomaniac and still not off-market.”

“What about Hopps?” Doubted Alvarez.

“Oh, crap,” in her delusions about Nick and Judy, Kaylee nearly forgot that August was involved there too. And then, rabbit’s ears perked up as she heard familiar steps. She turned to her husband who kissed her on the lips and took a seat next to her.

“What are you talking about?” Wondered Max, happy to see them talking casually.

“Oh, you know. Girl stuff,” Kaylee shrugged.

“Your wife’s trying to hook me up with August Fares,” clarified Isabelle and Max snorted with barely contained laughter.

“OK, for a second I forgot that he was currently hitting on Judy…” She tried to protest and then, they both actually laughed. Kaylee eyed her husband with annoyance.

“I swear, someone’s sleeping on the coach today,” she muttered.

“Kaylee, August wouldn’t last a day with Isa,” Max explained. “He’s all nice and polite. He’s… he’s water. Soothing, gentle spring water. Isa… Isa is a freaking forest fire. She’s the scorch,” he continued, while his partner kept nodding with agreement.

“Well… opposites attract?” Kaylee tried to defend her thesis. “Nick and Judy, for example. Water and fire.”

“Currently, it’s a rather poor example. And besides, Judy surely is water, but Nick’s not the fire,” Max protested.

“Then what?”

“Wind?” Isabelle suggested. “He’s subtle and everchanging, right? Half of the times, I don’t know if he’s joking or not. And I heard he can be merciless when needed.”

“And least expected. He’s wind with no doubt,” Max nodded turning at his wife. “Like you. Sometimes, quiet before the storm. And sometimes, the storm itself.”

“OK, but we definitely are opposites. If I am wind, subtlety and everything, then you’re earth,” Kaylee argued.

“Earth? Me?” Max asked, confused.

“Come on. Complete denial of any sort of subtlety. No tricks, deceptions or lies, as straightforward as it’s only possible. That’s you,” she stated.
“I can be subtle!” Max protested. “Remember how I tricked Hamilton that I believed in Nick’s fault?! He gave an example, but his wife only laughed.

“Oh, that is an awful example, actually!” She turned to Isabelle. “I don’t know if you’ve heard the story, but when Nick was framed, Hamilton was at one point driving them around Tundratown with intention of drowning them in her police car. Max was following her and had to bust them out. Do you know what she did?” Kaylee asked rhetorically and giggled. “Nick would try to talk himself out of the situation. Judy would speak to Hamilton’s heart. And Max slammed her with a car, had her roll over couple times and, as she was crawling out of it, struggling to tell up from down, shot her with a tranquilizer. Subtle Max,” she giggled and then, patted her husband’s paw, as she stared him deeply in the eyes. “Darling, you’re earth,” she concluded. Reynolds sighed deeply and shrugged, completely helpless.

“Alright, point taken,” he admitted.

“Still, I’m not dating a guy that I could toss with a single paw,” Isabelle returned to the original subject of their discussion and Reynolds chuckled.

“Tossing even Kaylee, left alone August, with a single paw is a challenge,” Max agreed firmly. “She might look all skin and bones, but even she’s…” The wolf paused, realizing what he was about to say. His wife was eyeing him carefully with her eyes squinted. Isabelle couldn’t be enjoying herself more.

“Sleeping on the couch today, darling?” Kaylee wondered.

“No, I meant, it’s hard to… hold you firmly with a single paw? You know, comfortably for both you and me,” Max explained himself carefully and, to break the tension, waved with his long, puffy tail, caressing her back. The bunny chuckled.

“Max, subtle as earth, master of unintended compliments,” she muttered and turned to Isabelle. “So, no chance for August?”

“I think you want it more than either of them,” Max pointed out carefully.

“Indeed,” Isabelle nodded. Kaylee still seemed unconvinced, but she gave up on persuading. They continued their lunch with some minor discussions and soon, returned to their respective jobs. Bunny’s day at work passed with no big events; at five pm, she met up with Max at station’s main hall and after quick shopping, headed straight home. As they arrived there, they changed into some casual clothes and sat down to preparing dinner. Max brought down their Bluetooth speaker, played some music, while Kaylee started cooking. The wolf was generally pretending to help her while messing around and singing rock ballads while Kaylee crafted another creative dinner for two. If it were only up to Max, he’d probably settle for take-outs and simple dishes, but his wife loved cooking. Whenever they had no big plans or long day at work, she’d make them something delicious.

“My turn,” Kaylee smiled to her husband and reached for his phone. She opened the music app and played her song. He recognized it from first chords and she giggled, seeing it. Before he managed to say a word, the words played and Kaylee sang along.

Nie dobijaj się                                                        <Don’t you hammer on the door>
Nie otworzę ci                                                        <I won’t open it to you>
Nie wyglądam dziś przesadnie ładnie   <I don’t look all that pretty today>
Późno przyszł sen                   <Late did dream come>
Przyszł i był zły                    <It came and it was bad>
Nie mam siły na zabawę w przyjaźń”  <I have no strength to play friends>

„Maybe something in my language?” Max asked half-jokingly when short instrumental came.

“Hush! You know the chorus!” She admonished him amusingly, but truthfully. Kaylee liked the song so much that he took effort to actually learn and understand the chorus. Not that it was very sophisticated. And so, the two of them sang together, half-singing, half-shouting.

Nie, nie, nie                     <No, no, no>
“Nie” to “nie”                  <”No” means „no”>
Mówię „nie” gdy myślę „nie”        <I say „no” when I think „no”>
Czemu więc czytasz „nie”          <Why then so you read „no”>
Jakby „nie” było „tak”?!         <As if „no” were „yes”>!

They finished practically yelling at each other with wide grins, only for Kaylee almost to burn slices of onion. She cursed under her breath in sailor-like manner and lowered the fire.

“Umm… Extra carbon? It’s good for digestion,” she managed to joke.

“Nah, I’m good,” he assured. Max reached for the phone, but hesitated and let it be. The texts and words he did not recognize were echoing throughout the kitchen. The wolf watched his wife chopping the vegetables.

“How are you doing this so quick?” He wondered. “It’s like… you grab a leek, put it down, grab a knife and poof, you have slices instead,” the wolf said. He could stare for hours at her doing this work, even if usually, it lasted for mere seconds.

“It’s pretty simple, actually. For a starter, you’ve got to pick the right knife. Pick Olivier,” she suggested and, seeing his confused face, specified. “The olive-colored one.”

“Uh-huh,” he got the biggest one from three green knifes and watched it’s blade carefully. “Are you naming knifes?”

“I also speak them affectionally when no one’s looking,” Kaylee joked. “Just this one. I cut myself with it so many times that it deserved name.”

“Why Oli… right,” wolf’s question was gone before it was even stated. “What now?”

“Grab that leek and cut it like this,” Kaylee began to cut it very slowly. “First comes
precision. Speed comes with time,” she advised him. The wolf followed her advice and started cutting the vegetable.

“Huh. So, if I speed up, it’ll look like what you’re doing?” He asked.

“Yup,” she nodded and watched Max make his way through the first one. She then handed him another leek and this time, wolf tried to do it much faster, but somewhere in the middle of it, Max yelped and cursed, dropping the knife and starting to suck his thumb. Blood stained the cutting board.

“Ah, curses!” He snarled.

“I told you. It’s Oliver. He craves for blood of infidels,” Kaylee smirked. Max muttered something and took his thumb out of his mouth, just to watch his white fur turning crimson in some disturbing pace. “I’ll bring a bandage,” the bunny promised and hurried out of the kitchen. She bandaged Max’s cut and they resumed cooking. Max was helping her, but gave up on knifes for the moment being. When the food was ready, they seated themselves on the couch, side by side, munching their dinners.

“You know, I’m quite proud of you,” Max said.

“Huh? Why’s that so?” The bunny wondered.

“You’re getting along with Isabelle,” he explained.

“Oh, that. I think so?” Kaylee shrugged. “I remember what she was trying to do, but still… she’s not as bad of a mammal as I thought at first. And she seems to have let go too,” she explained. Kaylee finished her meal and put the plate down and soon, so did Max. They were sitting in silence with music playing in the kitchen shyly.

“It’s so quiet. It’s almost annoying,” the bunny muttered.

“When we have all three kids in here, quiet will be the least of your concerns,” Max pointed out. “And besides, you’ve lived on your own for quite a while. Wasn’t that annoying?”

“You have no idea,” Kaylee chuckled. “And how was it at Flurry Street?”

“Oh, just as quiet. I hated it, to tell truth. After mom died, father was never there or he was closing himself in the office or the gallery. Spice was always out and I… I found myself only sleeping at the mansion. Sometimes, not even that,” the wolf explained.

“Where were you going?”

“Hanging out with buddies. We were a bunch of snobs, you know, with nearly unlimited funds. And at nights… mostly McNamera’s partied, while they lasted. Later, we switched places.”

“McNamera? This same that Isabelle…”

“Yeah, the same,” Max nodded. “You’re not spreading what I told you to anyone, are you?”

“Of course, not!” Kaylee shuddered. “I can keep secrets!”

“But you certainly know how to spread a gossip,” chuckled the wolf and she rolled her eyes, but couldn’t argue. “That thing about Isabelle and August… were you serious or just horsing
around?” Max wondered, but she shrugged.

“I don’t know. The idea seemed funny and Isabelle really could use someone… timid. You saw what happened when she had someone as vivid as Wolford,” Kaylee pointed out. “There’s not a chance for them though, now that I’m thinking of it.”

“Even if it were to solve your WildeHopps crisis,” joked Max.

“Oh, I’m not going to forgive Judy if she’s not picking Nick after all they’ve been through!” Protested Kaylee firmly.

“You know it’s not your choice. And if both of them are happy with the things…”

“I know, I know,” Kaylee surrendered with a smile, as she hugged her husband’s arm. “So, what do we have planned for tonight?”

“Some movie?”

“We could play something. That poor console’s only gathering dust,” she offered instead.

“But I’m player one.”

“I’m still kicking your ass,” the bunny threatened, but he only laughed.

“We’ll see about it,” he grinned confidently. Tragically, it didn’t save him from having his ass kicked.

Chapter End Notes

I guess I'm at the stage when Isabelle's my favorite character :D Oh, she's different from what I've written so far...
Kaylee reopened the cooking book to check the recipe for one last time. She studied it quickly and proceeded with the cake she was baking for her, Max and the kids that were soon to be at the place when she heard a doorbell. Rabbit’s ears perked up curiously, as she wondered who could that be. Certainly not Max; he had just left and it’d be some time before he would come back. As doorbell rang again, the bunny wiped her paws hurriedly.

“I’m coming!” She assured, assuming that it would be another peddler of sort that she’d dismiss hurriedly. She really was on a tight schedule there. The rabbit opened the door to see a tall, grey wolf somewhere in his thirties. He was dressed neatly, if not wealthily, but she hardly paid attention to it over his brown eyes and disturbing, if polite smile that resembled the ones of Ryan Thorn’s and earlier, Gerard Greymane’s. Kaylee’s heart skipped a beat as her inner fears awoke and her paw involuntarily went to the scar on her left arm which Max had left her in the Dungeon nearly four years earlier.

“Um… Mrs. Kaylee Reynolds?” Asked the wolf, a bit confounded. “I’m sorry, I probably should have called before or…”

“Mr. James Greymane, I believe?” Guessed the rabbit instead, confusing the wolf even more. “You… you resemble your godson greatly,” she explained.

“Oh, of course. May I… may I come in?” James asked.

“Please, make yourself at home,” the rabbit assured. The wolf stepped in carefully and she closed the door as the guest passed by her. James wiped his feet at the doormat neatly.

“Please come to the kitchen. I’m sorry, but I’m finishing the meal for the five of us and I really am in quite a hurry. You won’t mind if I cook while we talk?” Kaylee asked and, as James assured it would be alright with him, she guided him to the kitchen. “Actually, Ryan will be here too. Would you like to stay over too, Mr. Greymane?” The bunny suggested.

“No, no, there really is no need,” James said, as he glanced inside the oven. “It smells real good, though,” he assured.
“The offer remains,” Kaylee promised. She had managed to calm her heart back down and resumed preparing of the cake. Hopefully, he had not noticed her initial stress. “Mrs. Ubik mentioned that you’re really close with Ryan. I assume you wanted to talk about him?”

“Precisely. I was very surprised, having learnt the news from gossips,” Greymane pointed out, poorly covering with a weak smile frustration over the situation.

“It is not my or my husband’s responsibility, as I was informed,” Kaylee replied politely, but firmly. “Nonetheless, there’s no ill will of ours behind it. After all, we all just want what’s the best for Ryan,” Kaylee pointed out with a kind smile that he returned.

“Have you considered your options for long?” James asked plainly, but she only snorted with laughter.

“Well… a rabbit and a wolf don’t have that many options for children, as much as we’d try,” she pointed out amusingly. “We knew we would opt for adoption before we married. And since then, we’ve been participating in all sorts of courses to prepare us for the task,” the bunny said, only having concluded, realizing how defensive she sounded. There was something in that wolf that disturbed her although she couldn’t quite name it. Just like Kaylee used to when she was at her lowest, he was wearing a mask. But while hers was of being ‘normal’, his one seemed to be of sympathy and another one, much poorer, of politeness.

“Of course. It’s good to hear that you’re… that you’re treating it seriously,” James said a bit awkwardly, as if he didn’t know what to say. For a moment, they stood in silence. Kaylee was busy preparing the cake, and the wolf was leaning against the worktop, playing with his fingers.

“I could show you the room we have for Ryan and Thane. We’ll be furnishing it next month, but still…” Kaylee suggested.

“It would be nice,” assured the wolf, even if somehow, he didn’t sound all that eager. Kaylee paused her work for a moment and guided the wolf upstairs. They passed by ajar bedroom and bathroom doors and Kaylee invited her guest to an empty, spacious room at the end of the corridor.

“It’s empty for now. Here we thought of setting up a bunk bed. Ryan could share a room with Thane. They both seemed to like the idea a lot,” Kaylee explained enthusiastically and he just nodded. “There, we’d put two desks, some wardrobes, a bookshelf for Thane, since he reads a lot… We’ll figure most of the details on the fly, consult them with kids too.”

“Huh. It’s…” James walked over to the windowsill and looked outside. Whatever he saw in the quiet, peaceful neighborhood or the well-kept lawn, it made his paws tremble for a short moment. “It’s a really nice place,” he admitted reluctantly at last. “Let’s go back downstairs, shall we?”

“Of course,” Kaylee agreed, letting him out of the room. She’d surely lead the way, if her instinct wasn’t rising one red flag after another; she really didn’t want to have him behind her back. There was something most disturbing in that wolf, as if he was about to… snap. She considered calling Max, but she knew he wasn’t slacking off. He’d be back with kids as soon as possible. They came back to the kitchen, and Kaylee resumed baking, even if watching the wolf even more carefully.

“I believe you’ve talked it over with Ryan too, James? Can I call you that? We are soon to become a family, after all,” Kaylee tried to befriend him, but his smile was a nervous one.
“I… I’ve talked with Ryan, Mrs. Reynolds, but… I must say I don’t like it,” he confessed. Kaylee paused her barely resumed work and watched the wolf carefully.

“What do you mean?” She jerked her head curiously. The wolf only hesitated for a second before speaking. As he opened his mouth, the mask of politeness, along with the smile he had been forcing from the second he knocked at her door, were gone.

“I don’t approve the idea of you adopting my godson,” he admitted finally and it outraged Kaylee twofold; not only because he claimed she shouldn’t be looking after the boy she started to bond with, but also because it came from a mammal who, if he really cared so much about Ryan, should have taken care of him long time ago.

“Why?” She only asked though; she wanted to go to the core of the issue.

“Multiple reasons, actually,” he said, evadingly. Kaylee crossed her arms.

“Oh, I’m listening,” she said coldly.

“First off, you’re Reynolds. I’ve had really bad experience with your family and I can’t see why I should not expect from you this same treatment as my family had received from yours,” started the wolf with angry snarl. The show of his teeth caused Kaylee’s heart to skip a beat and he might have just noticed. “Second thing, you’re a rabbit. A small, meek creature. I don’t see how you could have authority over a wolf as rebellious as Ryan. I don’t believe you could handle him and your husband isn’t going to be always by your side”, he continued to accuse her. ”And then again, you’re still just a kid, Mrs. Reynolds. You have no idea about the real life. I’ve done some research about you. You just rush through your life, not considering your choices really and just hoping they’ll find you well. I don’t want someone like you to be a parent figure to my godson. And also, you’re…”

“Please get to the thing.” Kaylee suggested impatiently, flabbergasting the wolf.

“E… excuse me?”

“You’re just giving me a list of pretexts here. Get to the real point,” Kaylee pointed out. She had been in enough bullshit fights with her family to not see through such a simple façade.

“I said I won’t trust you with my godson,” James said, a bit confused.

“You keep scratching the surface, Mr. Greymane. Just tell me what this really is about,” the bunny remained persistent. “Why don’t you want us to adopt Ryan?” She asked. She saw in his eyes that he had a reason, a reason that he didn’t want to admit. And it only took her mere seconds to see what it was.

“Oh.”

“What?!” He snarled, but this time, it didn’t scare her one bit. She barely noticed it, for the matter of speaking.

“It’s not even about me or Max, is it?” She realized it and James’ awkward silence only confirmed it. “You don’t want Ryan to be adopted at all!” She accused him and he snorted angrily.

“You know nothing of how it’s like to have no parents! You don’t know Ryan at all! You think that you can what, buy him ice creams and take him for go-karts and he’ll be calling you a mommy, you dumb bitch?” He yelled at her. Her ears dropped, but eyes sparked with fury.
“And you’ve been there, so you can raise him all better?” Kaylee snorted, outrage mixed with amusement. “Should I remind you that you’ve had last ten years to take care of Ryan? Years that you spent, should I remind you, shoplifting, slacking off and dancing on verge of following your brother’s footsteps?!” She riposted, crossing her arms. “You’ve had your chance. Let someone actually take care of Ryan, when you clearly can’t.”

“You little trash!” Snarled James, scaring the rabbit a bit. If not for the worktop against her back, she’d surely step back fearfully. “Just because you married rich and don’t have to worry about anything, you can look down at me, you piece of shit?! You think that I can’t handle raising that kid?!” He yelled at her furiously and Kaylee snorted with disdain.

“You lice-ridden mongrel. You egocentric, ornery scoundrel! Do you think this all is about you?!” The rabbit asked, astonished. “Breaking news, it’s not, you lousy scumbag! Neither really about you, me or Max! It’s about that kid and providing him normal, healthy upbringing! And if you couldn’t have done it for yourself in last ten years, if you still can’t do it now, then I think it’s time to step aside and let someone else try. You only hurt him by not doing so, you know,” she said confidently.

“And I think it’s you that will only hurt him, rabbit. You can have a cluster of rabbit kits and you could maybe handle them. But Ryan is a wolf. A big, scary wolf that terrifies you, just like I terrify you now,” James smirked confidently and stepped forward. Deep down in her heart, Kaylee primal instincts were screaming in horror and he could sense it well. “And with your husband not around, Ryan will have no respect for you. He’ll do to you whatever he wants, just like I could grab you, gut you and smear you all over the kitchen and al you’d do would be screaming for your wolf husband to come and save you…” James stepped forward with ominous smirk and talons unsheathed. And then, as he tried to reach for her and grab her throat, the rabbit jumped on the worktop, grabbed the biggest knife, the one with olive-colored blade and pointed it right at his face.

“I have plenty other friends too, you know. Meet Olivier, the kitchen knife. You punk,” Kaylee smirked as point of knife touched his nose with his last word. For a moment, they stood in silence, eyeing one another. Kaylee’s heart was hammering, but her paws were not trembling. The pure hatred blazing in Greymane’s eyes kept her in ‘fight or flight’ mode, ready to react when he even twitches.

“You’d better let me take care of the boy,” James said slowly, as if believing he still was in any sort of position to negotiate the thing.

“Over my dead body,” Kaylee stated firmly and wolf smiled toothily.

“Oh, I could just arrange…” And then, she pressed forward with the knife, scratching him at nose before he managed to step back. He snarled painfully and eyed her with hatred.

“I will not file a report. This one time,” Kaylee spoke slowly and he snorted. “And I will blame your behavior on your awful temper and consider your death threats just empty words. This one time. But should you ever try to step between us and Ryan, should you ever try to deny your godson a right to normal household and decent childhood and I swear, I will make sure that you’ll be watching the world through the metal bars,” she threatened him. The wolf hesitated at first, but then he smirked.

“And this is the part when I leave your house with tail between my legs?”

“Wag your tail like a wiper, for all that I care. But it is the part when you leave my house or the part where I stab you. In self-defense, like a lady,” Kaylee stated deadly seriously. He
snorted resentfully and stepped back.

“You’ll regret it, rabbit. You will regret it!” He yelled, leaving the kitchen. Kaylee remained still and lowered the knife only when she heard the entrance door opening and then, it slamming powerfully. And then, she dropped the bloodstained knife on the floor shabbily and sat down on the worktable. She covered her face with now trembling paws. Mask. She had to put the mask on before Max and kids would be there. It had been a while since she had done it for the last time, but she still remembered how to do it. The bunny had done it for a thousand times before, after all. She closed her eyes and calmed her breath. She stopped the trembling of her paws. She gathered all the negative feelings, all the fear, sorrow and fury and pushed them away. Deep, deep into the heart’s darkest corner, where no one would dare to look. It took her longer than it had in past, but it was only expected of a skill she hadn’t been utilizing for quite a while.

Before five minutes passed the rabbit managed to recollect herself fully. She jumped down back on the floor and washed the olive knife whose point was covered in wolf’s blood. She checked on the food which was quite ready by now and turned the oven off. It’d be perfect by Max and kids arrive. She continued preparing the cake. She had just put it in the oven and set it at right temperature and time, when she heard a familiar car outside. Her ears perked up joyfully and, leaving a bit of mess in the kitchen and rushing to the front door. Just as she opened it, Mia and Thane fell in her arms, hugging her.

“Hey, aunt!” They both exclaimed joyfully and Kaylee’s heart swelled at their enthusiasm. She knew she and Max could never replace their parents; the parents these two kids remembered quite well and loved so much. They didn’t mind it at all. But to hear them just casually thinking of her and Max as a part of their family, truly was uplifting.

“Hey, kids! How was the school?” Kaylee asked joyfully.

“I scored an A at math!” Thane noticed enthusiastically. “And I think Gary left us alone for good!”

“I bet he’s scared of uncle Max!” Mia agreed with her brother surprisingly loudly for that little, shy girl. Kaylee giggled.

“Oh, he should be, that goon!” She chuckled and then, she saw Ryan walking over to them. The wolf was smiling revealing his teeth. A bit yellowish, sharp Greymane’s teeth, biting into her throat before lifting her in the air and…

“Hey, Mrs. Reynolds,” the pup was standing just next to her and he fist-bumped her with a smirk. “Mr. Reynolds said he’ll teach me how to fight, but he’s refusing to give me the second lesson,” he complained and Max chuckled from the back.

“The second lesson is patience, kiddo,” the wolf ruffled fur of Ryan’s head teasingly. “And the third one will be next week, I assure,” he promised.

“I have your word, Mr.” Ryan said.

“I’m keeping it, don’t you worry. Now, let’s get inside. I can already smell the dinner and it does smell delightful,” Max suggested, as he leaned over to Kaylee and kissed her on the cheek. The kids reacted with exaggerated, theatrical even, disgust and they all came inside. Max helped his wife set the table. He worried if they weren’t a bit too early, but she assured they were just on time. He smiled showing just a bit of his white, perfectly aligned teeth. The teeth that had hurt her once, but would not do it again. His soft paw wrapped around hers and they walked over to the table. They ate among vivid discussions, the four of them at least. Kaylee, as cheerful as she might
have seemed, remained rather quiet, eyeing Ryan carefully throughout the dinner, each time shivering gently. After the meal, kids asked to play a bit on the console, since they didn’t have one at the orphanage. Kaylee encouraged the idea, even, arguing that she could clean up the kitchen mess while the four of them would. Max didn’t eyed her carefully, but he didn’t say a word; he was probably too confused to know what this could be about.

With rest of her family playing, (Kaylee had this funny feeling in her chest as she thought of the kids as ‘her’ family), the bunny started washing the dishes. She was humming some song not too loudly, moving around the kitchen half-dancing, as she was trying to clear her mind and so, she didn’t notice Ryan coming in only until he tapped her on the shoulder.

“Mrs. Reynolds?” He asked and Kaylee squeaked at the sight of young wolf just behind her. A glass pot lid slipped out of her paws and crashed on the front and bunny jumped back involuntarily at the noise.


“I can help,” he said, crouching next to her and collecting pieces of glass along with her.

“No need, Ryan. I can handle it,” Kaylee assured, but he didn’t seem to listen.

“Mrs. Reynolds, are you afraid of me?” He asked suddenly. Kaylee could feel that the teenager could read the truth in her confused expression. She saw his disappointment, frustration, anger. And then, Max came.

“Everything alright?” He worried.

“Yes, we’ve got it,” Kaylee assured. For a second, her husband considered saying something more, but recognizing tension between the two, just nodded and stepped back. Kaylee and Ryan were in the kitchen alone again and silence continued.

“Mrs. Reynolds?” Ryan asked impatiently.

“Come, sit,” the bunny hopped on the worktable and the wolf walked among the debris carefully and joined her, most intrigued. Kaylee took off her blouse leaving only the undervest that she was wearing under, that wasn’t covering long claw marks covering her left arm and shoulder anymore. Young wolf watched them with his eyes wide open.

“Wow! What happened?” He asked.

“Pretty, ain’t they? I have them on my legs too. And there’s the bite mark on my chest, too,” the bunny chuckled a bit nervously. “When I was starting my work, I worked with a certain wolf in the archives. He had an accident, got drugged with Nighthowlers…” She eyed the boy and he nodded. He had heard of them, even if it had been couple years. “And that’s how I got these. Since then, I have this… phobia. Some predators, especially canines like wolves and coyotes, trigger my fears randomly. Sometimes it’s because of resemblance, other times it’s quite random. Detective Wilde and Officer Wolford never were my triggers and I see him almost every day, for example. I’ve learnt to keep these things in check, but I still… I still feel it quite vividly when they happen.”

“So… that’s what happened? Are you afraid of me?” Ryan asked, sounding both intrigued and concerned and she nodded. He huffed angrily. “Then why do you want to adopt me?! If you’re afraid of me…”
“It triggered for real only today,” Kaylee explained.

“What?! Why?!”

“I guess… It’s because your godfather was here. We’ve had an argument, quite a nasty one. And then you guys came and I guess…”

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Worried Ryan. “Uncle James is really short-tempered. He often gets in trouble because of it.”

“No, no, we just said mean things to one another. He seems really protective about you, you know,” assured the bunny. “It seems it was enough though, sadly.”

“Oh. But then… won’t you, like, cancel the adoption? If you’re going to be afraid of me…”

“Do you know what happened to that Nighthowlers wolf after the incident?” Kaylee asked instead.

“Not a clue. He got fired?”

“Oh, hardly. He’s sitting in the other room,” Kaylee explained with a smile. She could see how long the young wolf was processing that information, as if not believing it the first time he heard it.

“You mean… Mr. Reynolds? You married…” He paused. “But aren’t you afraid of him?”

“I used to be. For months, he was my worst trigger. But by my stubbornness, I managed to fight it and silence it eventually,” Kaylee explained and then, her paw wrapped around the boy. “What I’m trying to say is that some part of me might be afraid of you, but I know… But I know I should not be, because you’re a nice, kind-hearted kid that simply happens to have long teeth and sharp talons. These teeth and talons can be used for good. That’s why Mr. Reynolds is giving you lessons, you know. And if you give me enough time, I surely will get over this phobia of mine. Just… be my therapy,” she pleased, hugging him a bit stronger, but her heartbeat remained still even despite his smell filling her nostrils. Ryan hung his head down and then, he smiled.

“Are you sure about it, Mrs. Reynolds?”

“I married a guy that mauled me. I can do it,” she assured.

“I mean… my uncle scared you a lot and… And I’ve read a bit and I learnt that my father tried to kill you too,” Ryan explained and Kaylee shivered involuntarily, but she smiled. “Kids at school gave me some hard time when they learnt my father was the Mauler.”

“Kids are cruel, you know. More cruel than most of the adults,” Kaylee pointed out and Ryan agreed with a nod. “But you should remember to never judge a person based solely on their parents or families. Sometimes, the worst scum comes from so called ‘good houses’. And sometimes, the kindest mammals have the worst kind of trash for family. There’s no rule, really,” the bunny explained.

“I guess… What is your family like, Mrs. Reynolds?” He asked and she chuckled.

“My blood-related… not counting couple exceptions, bunch of trash. Abusive mother, neglecting father, bullying siblings. On Max’s side… his mother, the sweetest and kindest mammal
he knows, died when he was just five. His father was... complicated, but not a good mammal overall and his sister falls in this same basket. But I guess at least me and Max are quite alright,” she explained with a smile.

“Oh, you’re the best, Mrs. Reynolds,” Ryan assured. “You know, when kids at school complain about their parents, I’m always like ‘at least you have parents’. You know, someone to return to and, eventually, sort things out.”

“When I was at school, I used to envy Spencer, a kid from orphanage, because he didn’t have to get back home,” Kaylee explained.

“Oh.”

“There’s always someone that has it worse,” smirked Kaylee.

“What happened to that guy?”

“He was Spencer Young. You know, that Spencer Young, the revolutionary. People say he died, but they never found the body and they were trying really, really hard. I think he actually made it out alive, left Zootopia and lives somewhere peacefully,” Kaylee assured with a weak smile.

“You really think so? They say he’s dead.”

“The same guys that said Detective Wilde murdered Mr. Reynolds until he shoved truth in their faces?” Kaylee asked skeptically. “Don’t trust everything they say on TV,” she suggested.

“Right.” They sat in silence for quite a while and then, Ryan smiled. “So... you’re not leaving me at the orphanage?”

“No, we’re not. I’m adamant about it,” Kaylee promised.

“Umm... I...” The boy really wanted to say something, but he couldn’t find the right words. “Do you want to play with us?” He suggested instead.

“Just help me clean this mess, will you?”

“Sure thing!” Ryan jumped back on the floor, almost standing on some piece of broken glass and they tidied the place up together quickly. Afterwards, they joined Max, Thane and Mia by the console and played, switching players between four pads, till the evening. Around the designated time, Max drove the kids back to the orphanage and Kaylee cleaned the kitchen and living room completely. Her husband came back just as she was finished and joined her on the couch, wrapping a paw over the bunny.

“Did you sort things with Ryan out?” He asked and she nodded.

“So... what happened?”

“I explained to him what was causing it and that I was going to get over it in time. He was afraid that we’d just cancel the whole adoption thing,” she explained.

“It’s good that you’ve explained things to him now. Is he a trigger to you?” Max worried and she nodded.

“Turns out he is, but I’ll handle it. I’ve handled worse triggers and I was feeling much
better after we talked about it. We both did,” Kaylee assured with a smile and kissed her husband on a cheek.

“And what happened earlier, before I brought kids? You seemed uneasy.”

“Oh, that… We had a visitor. James Greymane,” Kaylee explained.

“Ryan’s godfather?”

“And uncle, yes,” she confirmed and proceeded to explain how whole the meeting went. She could see that the wolf was boiling inside, especially when she came to the part how Greymane threatened her. He was sitting with his fists clenched, listening to her wife finishing the story.

“Oh, he will regret it,” assured the wolf angrily. “He threatened you. We’re going to report it tomorrow…”

“No,” Kaylee refused firmly.

“No? Why not? He could have killed you there! If you didn’t grab that knife…” Max protested with frustration.

“Do you remember how Spencer sent me that mail? You know, after the whole Manifesto thing, when everyone assumed he was dead, he sent me this mail from a throwaway account, apologizing for everything and wishing us good life?”

“The one that vanished after thirty minutes?”

“Exactly. I remember that you were very angry then and no wonder; he killed your father and it seemed like he made it out alive and quite happily. And yet, I asked you not to report it to the police. Do you remember why?”

“Because it was untraceable anyways? And probably just a mean joke?” Max guessed.

“And?”

“And… because it was a chance to break the vicious cycle. Just… live and let live,” the wolf recalled. “Otherwise, if Spencer was actually arrested, someone like my sister could try and kill him and then, someone would try to avenge Spencer and so on and on and on. It’d cause more harm that it could ever do good,” the wolf said and his wife nodded happily.

“I know it wasn’t easy for you and I’m so very proud of you that you chose to do so. And now… it’s quite this same. Greymane threatened me, it’s true. But if we report it with the little we have, we will only hurt Ryan, whether Greymane is arrested or not. And it’s Ryan that is important here,” she argued.

“I’m not going to allow Greymane to hurt you,” Max said firmly.

“The next time I see him, I’m calling you,” the bunny promised.

“Immediately,” insisted the wolf. “What an arrogant asshole. To come into our house and threaten you…” He snarled and Kaylee caressed him, trying to calm her husband down. “I bet he will try something. Be very careful, Kaylee.”

“I will,” she promised. They were quite certain that James Greymane had a plan of sort.
They only didn’t know what it could really be.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so... Greymane solving things the way he usually does :D
10.18 am, Monday, June 14, 2022

The Technical Officers’ office was just as quiet as usually, with only the monotonous clicks of keyboards and air conditioning humming in the back. Judy Hopps wave to Kaylee who noticed her the moment she opened the door and walked over to August Fares, busy with the research.

“Hey, we’ve got new data from SEALS in Tundratown,” Judy said, handing him the pendrive.

“Cool, I’ll see what I can find,” August assured, as taking it from her. Hopps glanced at his monitor to see that was sitting at their data.

“Found anything yet?” She asked.

“Oh, not really, but see for yourself,” he suggested. “I’ve applied the basic filters, such as ignoring all the sales below twenty dollars. I also started excluding products that no one would buy if they intended to launder money. You know, mattresses, bed frames, toys…”

“Mhm. Found anything solid?” She hoped.

“Not really, for now. I still need to eliminate more sales to be able to say anything for sure,” he explained. “But ignoring the card payments helped out a lot.”

“Then we need to wait and see,” concluded Judy and he nodded.

“Precisely,” he nodded with a smile. “Can I help with something more?”

“No, I just came to give you the pendrive,” Judy explained. “But if you find anything more, call me immediately.”

“You’ll be first to know,” promised August and with this declaration, Judy headed back to her box. Nick was waiting for her impatiently.

“Let’s go, Carrots. We’ve got a new lead,” he stood from his chair the moment he saw her.

“Miles?” She asked, but the fox shook his head. They were now walking the corridor, heading toward the parking lot.

“The lab has nothing on Miles, it seems. Nothing arbitrary, at least,” he explained.

“We know it was him,” the bunny pointed out. He nodded, but not too enthusiastically.

“It hardly matters with the proof we have. We can’t exactly intimidate a guy like him into...
any sort of confession and no accusation of ours will survive five minutes of a trial.”

“I know,” Judy sighed with annoyance. “And what do we have?” She changed the subject.

“So, a coyote walks into a bank,” Nick started and then, he paused. “Yes, I know it sounds like a cheap joke. Anyways, she walks into a bank and tries to pay taxes, when cashier identifies one of the twenty-dollar banknotes as the one stolen from our ATM,” he overviewed the situation.

“It really is a cheap joke. And what’s the punchline?” Judy wondered.

“The coyote is Duchess’s cop. William Osbourne’s partner, even,” specified the fox. Judy stopped in the middle of the corridor.

“Do you think Duchess would…”

“Duchess really doesn’t need another hundred thousand dollars,” Nick pointed out.

“But her men could have done it on their own and she decided to cover it… it sounds stupid, doesn’t it?” Judy stopped in the middle of sentence, but fox just shook his head.

“No more stupid than a cop walking in with stolen money into a bank,” he said. “Duchess came out clean with law some years ago. If she’s involved, she’ll know about her officer anyway. And if not, should we ask nicely…”

“She just might know something,” Judy concluded for him. “But let’s check our officer first. Do you know her?”

“I’ve heard a bit about her, never met personally, though,” he explained, as they got into the car. “Got her files printed,” he added and on their way to the Zootopia National Bank, the fox read some of them aloud, giving Judy general overview of whom they were facing. He stopped only when they arrived at the place and were greeted by Aveline Hawkes, the vice-director of the bank. She guided the officers to the office room where the suspect was waiting. Judy eyed her carefully; she was a tall coyote of grey fur and brown eyes, dressed quite elegantly and looking around the room, rather bored. She sighed with relief at the sight of police officers.

“Finally, someone will explain to me what’s going on,” she walked over to them and offered her paw. “Officer Diane Inesi,” she introduced herself.

“Detective Hopps and my partner, Detective Wilde,” Judy introduced herself and Nick. “Let’s sit down, shall we?” They took the seats by a small table and Mrs. Hawkes closed the door, leaving the three on their own.

“I never expected to be sitting at this side of the table,” muttered Diane. “So, what is it all about? I parked on a disabled spot?” She wondered half-jokingly. Nick and Judy eyed one another.

“Officer Inesi, you mainly work in the patrol car in the Happytown, if I’m not mistaken?” The bunny asked.

“Yes, it’s been couple years now. I’ve applied for a Detective and hope to receive the title in near future,” she explained patiently. She had been sitting on the other side of the table a lot, probably realized that Wilde and Hopps would take their time before getting to the subject.

“Could you tell us about your connections with Duchess?” Nick said.
“Well… I kind of owe her,” Diane explained. “She helped my father a lot after mom was killed and he was struggling to handle the store on his own. She borrowed us some money on very favorable terms, helped us straighten things up. I guess this is part where you’d want to ask if I’ve ever worked for her, but you know how it works in Happytown, Detectives. We don’t bother Duchess, she doesn’t bother us, things go generally nicely. But I never was a significant cog in her machine.”

“Of course. And have you ever worked on any cases involving laundering money?” Wondered the fox.

“You can just check it in my files,” the coyote pointed out, but as they said nothing, she continued. “There was couple guys that we helped arrest three years ago, I think. They were trying to spend here the money they stole in a bank robbery in Lake City, but we found out. They were buying some expensive stuff, RTV and house appliances mostly,” she explained. “So… what is this all about?”

“Your today’s visit to the bank, obviously. You came here in order to…” The fox paused.

“I had to pay due water and electricity bills, preferred to do it personally. Just a habit of mine, I don’t like using card or Internet for money. I feel safer when I spend it with my own paws,” Diane explained.

“Do you remember where the money you’ve had there came? Did you take it from an ATM?” Judy asked. It was a trick question; there was no way someone would put a stolen banknote back into ATM without anyone noticing.

“I paid out couple fifties from an ATM couple streets away. I went to a drug store, bought there a new lipstick and some eyeshade, went straight to the bank then. I wanted to do taxes like a proper adult and then, security stopped me and refused to explain why, even when I waved a badge at their faces,” Diane explained with frustration.

“The reason is, Officer, that one of the twenties you paid with has been stolen along with a certain ATM a month ago. And you happen to be the first mammal we caught actually using that money,” Nick explained. Diane Inesi watched the two of them quite confused and then, she laughed nervously.

“Oh dear, it doesn’t sound good at all. I hope I get my Detective nonetheless,” chuckled the coyote. “I had only one twenty in my wallet and I got it at the drug store, I believe.”

“Do you have a receipt?” Hoped Judy and Diane nodded.

“I should have it right here… there it is,” she gave them a receipt and Wilde and Hopps read it carefully; Inesi had paid received for her shopping over thirty dollars of change, which explained the twenty dollars in her wallet otherwise than basically by that she was participating in the theft.

“You’ve heard about the theft, haven’t you?” Guessed Judy.

“Someone crashed into an ATM somewhere in Downtown. Yeah, I heard rumors, but nothing certain. You say it happened a month ago?” Inesi asked curiously.

“More or less,” confirmed Judy.

“So, Officer Inesi, if you happened to have hundred thousand dollars to launder, how would you do it?” Nick asked curiously and their witness laughed.
“Oh, this is the part where I tell you my idea and, if it appears these thieves are doing the same thing you arrest me because it was my doing?” She joked and hesitated. “I don’t really need this sort of money. Dad’s store is doing pretty well, especially nowadays. But if I did… I guess I’d go to Duchess. She’d figure something out or have me give it back,” she shrugged. “I have no idea how to get rid of this amount of cash, to tell the truth,” she said helplessly.

“Come on, no peculiar cases to inspire you?” Nick tried to tease her.

“There are no peculiar cases in Happytown. Only sad ones,” she replied, not amused.

“Do you know Leonard Miles?” Judy changed the subject. “He has a car workshop in Savannah Central.”

“Um… no. Nothing, I am afraid,” Diane shook her head.

“And James Greymane?” Judy took a wild guess and realized immediately that it was a hit. Inesi tilted her head and watched the two of them curiously.

“James? Is he anyhow involved?” She wondered and seeing their curious sights, decided to explain herself. “He’s my boyfriend… I mean, he was my ex… Ekhem… He’s my ex. It’s.. complicated,” she said a bit awkwardly.

“Would you care to elaborate?” Suggested the bunny.

“We were class mates in middle school and high school. I liked him a lot, we dated for a while. He dumped me ultimately just around the time school ended and moved out to Tundratown, so we kind of lost contact,” Diane explained.

“According to the files, you also helped him out when he was accused of an assault,” Judy recalled one of the things Nick read her in the car.

“I heard he’s in troubles, I helped him out. Guys from Tundratown were eager to just put him in jail, especially given that he was on probation at the time, but it was just a self-defense. James got smarter afterwards, stopped getting involved in this sort of shady business,” Diane clarified.

“Do you know what he’s doing nowadays?”

“I think he still works at that shop by his house. I haven’t talked with him for a while,” she said.

“How long?” Judy eyed her curiously.

“I visited him two or three weeks ago. I was in nearby, so I dropped in randomly. Earlier than that… couple months ago at least, I’d say. We haven’t been talking much after we finished the high school.”

“You say he’s staying away from troubles… how can you be sure of it, then?” Nick pointed out.

“I’m not, but Lord, do I hope,” Diane chuckled. “He claimed so last time we talked,” she said and opened her mouth, as if she wanted to say something more, but closed it immediately.

“Go on,” fox encouraged her.
“No, it’s nothing, really.”

“I insist,” Wilde smiled politely, but firmly.

“He wanted to adopt his godson, Ryan Thorn, but he’s had too much troubles with law to be allowed. Just that,” she explained reluctantly.

“Would he need money to do so?” Judy guessed.

“I doubt if there’s anything that could help him out,” Diane shrugged. “Adoption law is rather strict when it comes to criminals, after all,” she pointed out and they discussed for some time more, but didn’t learn anything useful beyond what Inesi had already told them. With no reason to keep her there, they let her go and got back to their car too.

“What do you say?” Nick wondered.

“She had the banknote from a drugstore, she claimed. We haven’t traced any to drug stores yet, but it’s not impossible. Someone could have got one as change in a market, go to a drug store… On the other hand, she knows Greymane and he was trying to cover up his friendship with Miles…”

“It’s a longshot,” Nick summed up.

“And not too probable one. We can check if what Diane’s telling is true, at least. You know, talk with Greymane’s neighbors and hers,” she suggested.

“Good idea. And besides, she gave us possible motive for Greymane: money,” the fox noticed. “Despite what Diane said, I think it could help him out adopting that kid.”

“And now that Max and Kaylee want to adopt him too, he’ll be in even more hurry. I mean, the ATM robbery happened before they decided so, but still…”

“It could push him to do something reckless,” concluded Nick. “So, we ask around his and Inesi’s neighborhoods and see if…” And then, both their phones buzzed simultaneously. They eyed each other carefully and reached for their phones to discover that they both received this same text: ‘Lady Tompkins would gladly receive you and your partner at her house as fast as it is possible. With all due respect, Lionel O’Dyina’.

“Huh. I wonder how she got our numbers,” Judy remarked.

“Or why would she need us. Actually… she should know both Inesi and Greymane. She might actually help us,” suggested Nick.

“Somehow, I have bad feelings about receiving help from the Duchess yet again,” Judy muttered.

“Me too, but you take what you get,” shrugged the fox. “So, to Duchess’s house, is it?”

“To the Duchess’s house, it is.”
Neither Nick or Judy have ever had a chance to be to Duchess’s house personally and thus, they could feel the gravity of the moment. If the Lady was calling them not to Diamond, like she dealt with most mammals, it certainly could not be belittled. They arrived to the brink of the Happytown and parked at the nearby parking, just a street away from their destination. Duchess’s house, surrounded by tall metal fence, didn’t stand out that much in quite wealthy part of the district where it was located and yet, it was different in a way they both failed to describe with simple words. Detectives stood by the gate and rang on the bell, watching the camera observing them.

“Detectives, come inside,” invited them Duchess’s voice and the gate opened with a characteristic buzz. They came inside onto a grey, stony path guiding them to the front door. They walked, looking around the well-kept, tidy lawn and a neat, wooden garden bower surrounded by flowers they could see for a moment. Two other cameras were watching them carefully, one following their movements even. What officers didn’t know, was that there also were four of Duchess’s men waiting in a van and monitoring everything around the clock, ready to intervene, should anything suspicious happen.

Judy pressed the doorbell and the reinforced door opened revealing Duchess; she was dressed rather casually, wearing jeans and a shirt and yet, this feeling of refinedness surrounding her remained. She greeted the two of them with a weak, polite smile.

Faster than I’d expect. Please come in, Detectives,” she invited them inside and they followed the host, looking around the place curiously. Again, it did not remind of a millionaire’s mansion, rather an upper middle class house and yet, it had this gentle touch to it, fancy coffee maker in the kitchen or two videogame consoles by TV; things that most mammals could afford, but wouldn’t decide to buy, considering them waste of money. Duchess didn’t seem to have this sort of worries.

She took them to a spacious, bright living room. She grabbed the documents that had been lying on the table, among which Judy spotted some wedding-related stuff, given the logos on top, and offered them some comfortable chairs.

“Coffee, perhaps? Water?” Offered the host politely and they both asked for coffee. Duchess disappeared in the kitchen and, surprisingly quickly, returned with three coffees. Sugar and cookies were already waiting on the table.

“Help yourselves,” insisted Lady Tompkins politely. Nick reached for a cookie, Judy sipped a coffee, noting in her mind that whatever was price of that coffee maker, it certainly was worth it.

“What do we owe this pleasure to, Mrs. Tompkins?” The bunny asked curiously.

“I realize it is uncommon, I myself rarely accept any guests here, but it is not business related for once. At least not explicitly,” Duchess explained without really explaining anything. “You are currently working on that ATM Hawkes’ bank lost, aren’t you?” She asked, but detectives weren’t even surprised that she knew; after issue with Spencer Young, she certainly was watching the two of them even more carefully.

“We are,” Nick confirmed. “Why would you be interested in it… not business-relatively?” He asked and Lady Tompkins chuckled.
“I am not. I’m more interested in when you’ll conclude it, actually,” she replied.

“The investigation is going well, but we can’t say that for sure,” Judy said carefully.

“If you need any help with it, information perhaps, feel free to ask. I’d be more than happy to help you close it quickly, no strings attached.”

“Why such hurry?” Nick asked, most intrigued.

“Something is stirring. Or perhaps I should say, Miss Anastasia Reynolds is stirring something and I don’t like my gamechangers wasting their time around for some missing ATMs,” announced the Duchess and Wilde and Hopps eyed one another carefully.

“What makes you say so? The gas explosion?” Guessed the fox.

“I’ve consulted matter with Prosecutor Moore and he explained to me his doubts according to nature of the explosion,” the wolf smiled grimly. “From your faces, I can see that you’re aware of them as well.”

“You believe it was intentional,” Judy concluded.

“I’m certain of it. I believe that Miss Reynolds was the one to orchestrate it, even,” Duchess insisted.

“These are… very serious accusations. Do you have any proof to them?” Asked the bunny.

“Unfortunately not enough to condemn her. I don’t even know the real identity of that Ryuk Yagami fellow you’re looking for and whom I do consider the man behind it. But I see the tendency and killing Lionel O’Dyna discreetly matches them,” Lady Tompkins explained.

“Discreetly?” Nick doubted.

“Without mammals considering it an actual murder. If not for Lionel’s confession, the suspicion could not even appear,” clarified Lady Tompkins. “It’s not her first action. She tried to rig the elections to get her man in the office…” She paused watching both detectives carefully. “Oh, you know about it?”

“That she secretly supported Heveryn while trying to backstab Mayor Ketchikan? Yes, we’ve found out,” Judy confirmed, glad to have an upper hand for once in discussion with Duchess.

“You found out? Everything, including Heveryn’s funding and…” Detectives nodded and she smiled. “My, oh my. Even with my resources I was simply lucky. With yours… I was right to invite you here, after all,” the Duchess said respectfully. “Anyways, what understandably might have missed your attention is that Miss Reynolds is now rebuilding her father’s illegal structures, which suffered greatly to Young’s brave actions,” explained Duchess noticing with visible satisfaction that they did not know of it.

“How does it work?” Judy asked, doubting if they’d get an answer, but Duchess continued.

“She is recommended certain men and groups, gives them simple tasks, leaving them up to minimal budget and basically no guidance, so that she could show their creativity. She gives them tasks at her terrain mostly, so she can cover them up later, but I am quite sure the gas
explosion was one of such actions. It is not her modus operandi that bothers me. It’s her target.”

“And what would it be?” Judy asked, even though she already knew the answer.

“My family and eventually, me,” Lady Tompkins said. “For what she believes I’ve done to her father, she wants me to suffer. She wants my clubs to burn down, my men to abandon me and my family to die in agony, so that eventually, she can mercifully finish me off,” she explained disturbingly calmly. “She will take her time. I know her well enough to be sure of it.”

“So… you invited us to…”

“Don’t get me wrong, the moment I gain certainty she really is going for it, I will kill her immediately and without a second thought. But before it comes to it, Detectives, I want to ask you to keep your eyes opened. Look out for her plots and actions. Be watchful. Miss Reynolds is plotting something dreadful. Might be just to me. Might be to the entire city,” Duchess warned them. Nick and Judy glanced at one another carefully.

“We will be wary,” Judy promised.

“I can assure,” Nick confirmed and Duchess nodded with satisfaction.

“I knew I could count on you. Oh, one thing more; don’t bother yourselves with that gas explosion. Police investigation is going nowhere and so is mine,” Duchess suggested. “I don’t mean that Reynolds or Alvarez are poor detectives, quite oppositely. But we all know that Ryuk fellow is all we have and I don’t think he is surfacing ever again. Not if it depends on Miss Reynolds.”

“We’ll keep it in mind,” Judy assured. She watched Duchess carefully, wondering if she was afraid about herself or her family. She had already lost everything once, she nearly had again and now, she was taking some extra steps for the situation to never repeat. But to involve them like this? And yet, she found no fear in Duchess’s eye; only determination.

“Good. Good. Now, I believe you mentioned I could help you with that lost ATM of yours?” Lady Tompkins changed the subject rapidly, confusing the two of them a bit.

“We could use your help indeed,” Judy assured. “We are investigating involvement of couple individuals in the theft, mainly Leonard Miles and James Greymane.”

“They sound just like the guys to do it, but I have no clue if they’re friends,” Duchess figured and, at their confirming nod, continued. “Miles has that workshop, perfect for preparing the car for the job and dismantling the ATM. He also has financial problems and no much respect for law. He could be the thinker, at least to the point of stealing the ATM. He’d probably have no clue what to do next.”

“And what about Greymane?” Nick asked.

“The boy with ‘jail me’ tattoo on his forehead?” Chuckled the Duchess. “Temper of a grenade, he has and just as much consideration of his actions. If he were behind the entirety of the plan, you’d have him arrested already. Nonetheless, he could be so-called muscle. He’s scrupulous, able to perform… simple, monotonous tasks. He’s very proud to that, especially doesn’t like accepting anyone’s help. He easily gets himself in troubles, too,” Lady Tompkins described him.

“So if he’s working with them, he’s doing it on his terms,” guessed Judy.

“Precisely.”
“Could you tell us about his relation with Diane Inesi?” Nick asked.

“Diane? She’s basically his guardian angel,” Duchess said without a doubt. “She pulled him out of criminal life, but I wouldn’t overestimate her influence on him. She loves him and he treats her like a trash, tolerating her mostly when he needs her help. I don’t think Diane could be actually helping him run the entire thing, but she could have inspired him accidentally, telling him about her work.”

“Are they meeting nowadays?” The fox wondered.

“They are in touch, I believe, although I’m not sure to what degree,” Lady Tompkins shrugged. “If you want to do me a favor, arrest Greymane and leave Diane alone. He’s only bringing that bright girl down,” suggested the Lady half-jokingly.

“Oh, we’d be glad to arrest just anyone,” Nick replied with a joke. “Thank you for your insight, Mrs. Tompkins.”

“And for the coffee. It was excellent,” Judy assured.

“And for the warning,” added the fox. “Especially the warning.”

“I am glad I could help,” Duchess replied with a smile, standing up along with them. “Hopefully, this meeting will be fruitful to all of us,” she said and guided them to the front door. Detectives bided Duchess goodbye cordially and returned to their police car. Judy fastened her seatbelt, but didn’t start the car, just sighed deeply.

“What do you say?” She wondered.

“Duchess had some pretty house,” smirked the fox.

“Oh, and any witty observations beyond that?” Judy smiled back.

“Her asking us to remain careful like that… it was very unlike her,” the fox summed up.

“She’s afraid,” Judy said, but suddenly she realized how poorly this word matched that proud, mighty wolf. “Concerned, I mean.”

“And very precautious. No wonder, after the Manifesto thing,” agreed the fox. “We really need to be careful. And even then… if she’s right, we might not stop them from killing one another.”

“Duchess won’t have stings of remorse, will she?” Judy noticed. “She sounded like just a step away from pulling the trigger to me.”

“She won’t,” Nick confirmed her fears. “Not with her children on the line. And if Reynolds really is intending to play with her, believing in Duchess’s creed of not killing, then she’s practically committing suicide there.”

“Unless we can prevent it,” Judy pointed out firmly. Nick opened his mouth, probably to protest, but he met her eyes and just nodded.

“Speaking of Duchess, remember about her wedding. Twentieth August. I consider you my partner in crime,” he reminded her.

“I remember,” she smiled. “I’m not forgetting it,” she assured and he nodded with
satisfaction. She felt that it seemed quite important to him.

“And about our ATM?”

“We will monitor Miles and Greymane. I don’t think there’s a point watching Inesi,” suggested Nick

“Four officers. Chief won’t like it,” she warned.

“Does he ever like any of our suggestions?” Nick reminded her and they chuckled.

“No. No, he does not,” she admitted, as they drove away. Something was hanging in the air. They just hoped they’d recognize it before it would be too late.

6.13 pm, Monday, June 14, 2022

Ryuk Yagami was no more. After the incident with that cop in a nightclub, he had to give up on all his fancy earrings, dark clothes and colored contact lenses and retake his original alter ego of Raymond Allen. Dressed in socially acceptable clothes and with his heart burning with fury, he knocked at James’ door. Greymane opened it to him and let the hyena inside without a word. Diane Inesi was waiting in James’ room and that’s where they settled themselves.

“Is Miles coming? I thought you said everyone,” pointed out the hyena.

“I’m here. Hey, Ryuk,” spoke the bear through the phone standing on the desk.

“Miles couldn’t join us. It’d be too risky,” explained Diane. She waited for James to sit next to her and Raymond to take a chair and then, resumed. “Things are getting nasty. Today, I was questioned by Wilde and Hopps, detectives responsible for ATM thing,” she announced and hyena snorted angrily.

“Why?”

“I somehow got one of stolen twenties in the wallet and tried to spend it at a bank. Bad luck,” she explained. “But it was very valuable, since now and with access to the database I got, I know more or less what do they know. So, gentlemen, let me explain the situation to you.”

“We’re listening,” James assured.

“Wilde and Hopps are pretty much certain that Miles is behind the ATM theft. They only didn’t arrest him because they lack evidence.”

“They won’t find any,” promised the bear.

“But still, they’re watching every step of yours. This same applies to you, James. They consider you involved and will watch you too. If they aren’t already, that is. This means neither of you can launder any money until they close the investigation. You won’t allow me to do it,
especially given that I don’t know for sure if they aren’t investigating me too. This leaves only with Raymond.”

“It’s Ryuk!” Protested the hyena.

“Not for the time being. After the thing you pulled off with Reynolds and Alvarez, you can’t use that name or those clothes for a long, long time. Are we clear?” Diane pressed. Raymond electrified her with sight, but he complied.

“Yeah, whatever. No Ryuk, for now.”

“Duchess might be interested in you too, so I’d suggest avoiding Happytown, too,” Diane pointed out.

“Understood.”

“I don’t know what you guys are planning to do with that money and you clearly aren’t going to tell me, but I hope you really get away with it. Oh, and the last thing. No personal contacts until ATM investigation is suspended. Only me and James have a credible reason,” she advised them and hyena snorted.

“How convenient.”

“She’s right. No personal contacts,” James confirmed. “Anything else?”

“That would be all from me, I believe. You can figure the details between yourselves. If you have any doubts, just call me.”

“Understood. Bye, everyone.” Miles said and hung up. Raymond stood from his chair.

“Yeah, bye, lovebirds. Until next time and in meanwhile, I’ll do all the dirty work,” complained the hyena.

“Thanks, Ryuk. Until next time,” James smiled and he and Diane watched the hyena leave.

“Do you think he’ll stick to the plan?” Diane doubted.

“He will. He has enough reason not to stick out now that things took all the wrong turn,” the wolf assured and sighed deeply. “So, what now?”

“I was thinking of a dinner. Some restaurant, perhaps?” She suggested and wolf watched her carefully.

“Do you really want to do it?” He doubted.

“Mhm.”

“We already split up thrice.”

“Fourth time’s the charm?” She suggested and he laughed.

“We could try.”
Miss Anastasia Reynolds was sitting in her office, her luxurious chair turned with its back to the desk and the wolf herself watching the city below her. She could see the lights of Diamond, Duchess’s prime night club, a capital to her little empire. Oh, how much she’d love to erase it from earth’s surface. To have it burn down, preferably with its owner inside! But she had time and she needed to act carefully. So-called Lady Jennifer Tompkins wasn’t to be belittled.

Gentle knocking announced a visitor. Without turning around, Anastasia invited him in.

“I have a report about Greymane,” announced deep, male voice.

“Go on.”

“We have certainty that It was him, together with Miles and Raymond Allen, that stole that ATM in Downtown. The one Wilde and Hopps are currently investigating,” explained the visitor. “It seems like they burnt or otherwise destroyed some of the money, while they’re trying to launder the rest. It’s actually quite clever, they spend it on…”

“What are they saving for?” Interrupted him Anastasia.

“Umm… we are not quite sure, but they are plotting something. Greymane rented a small hangar in Meadowlands and they’re doing something inside,” explained her man. “Should we stop them on our own or give them away to police?”

“Is Inesi helping them?” Miss Reynolds asked instead.

“With laundering, she guides them. We’re not sure about rest, though,” he explained and she hesitated. And then, an ominous grin danced across her lips.

“Then they have a chance of succeeding. Greymane hates Duchess, doesn’t he? He blames her for his brother’s death.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And Miles needs money.”

“Affirmative.”

“Leave them be. Find me Greymane and Miles’ private numbers, preferably the throwaway phones they use to call one another.”

“Ma’am? They’re…”

“I have good feelings. I believe they’re going to do our job for us,” smirked Anastasia Reynolds. “Pro bono publico at personale,” she chuckled, as if she had said an excellent joke.

“Understood. Anything else, ma’am?”

“No, that would be all,” she assured. The news-bringer bid her farewell and left the office.
quietly. Anastasia leaned forward with a smile. So was that it? Was all that she had to do just sit and watch for Duchess’s world to crumble? Did she need just a simple, well-timed phone call to take away from her what was most precious to her? Anastasia laughed. She loved when the things were this simple.

Chapter End Notes

I might have forgotten to mention Diane's proffession :D
Falling out, falling in

So, Kaylee said it’s a nice thing to do once in a while, just grab a paper and pen and write down your thoughts. Get to the bottom of what bothers you or just do it for fun. Bothers me? Phi! What could possibly bother a happy fox like me, right? Well, I’m here writing, so I guess there is something… Probably that cursed ATM we’ve lost completely. It’s been two months and we’ve been running in circles. Chief is losing his patience too. Yeah, that’s one thing to be bothered about, but somehow, writing it down didn’t make it any better... Stream of consciousness. It’s quite dumb, if you asked me. Absurdly trivial. Definitely silly. Ridiculously naive. Spectacularly disappointing. Alright, now it’s getting funny. But no more fun, let’s get to my ‘problems’. Kaylee would be severely disappointed, if I didn’t have any, wouldn’t she? So… Ekkh… Do I write when I cough off too? I mean, am I thinking it? Technically not, do I? Anyways, to the thing. Fall. No, no, not like this. More dramatically. Like… Falling out. Let’s bold it too. Falling out. No, I can’t just write it in the middle of a line. It deserves a new one. So…

Falling out. Cool. Dramatic. OK, now I blew it. Again, seriously for once. Focus. Five minutes of serious, non-sarcastic Nick Wilde. Ugh, it’s gonna be tough. Focus. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. When I stop writing these, should I stop breathing too? Crap. No sarcasm from… now!

Fall out. Again. Slowly. We have time.

A rabbit. Cute rabbit. With cut ears? OK, that’s not so cute anymore. But to the thing.

F

Falling out.

I hate that phrase. I’ve heard it for probably a thousand times in last two months and I hated it more every time I did. It has this… Ugh. Half of the time I heard it, they didn’t even dare to throw it in my face, just whispered it behind our backs. Mine and Carrots’, obviously. It’s kinda funny, how easily they judge while having not a slightest idea what is even going on. And yet, they keep talking. Anyways, last two months between me and Carrots… I wouldn’t call it falling out. The word “fall” carries that thought that it happened suddenly. Like there was a firestorm and earthquake which left nothing but debris and ashes. Wow, that was dramatic. Gotta remember the quote for later. Anyways, no such a thing ever happened. It’s not a “falling out”. It feels more like… pouring honey out of a jar. It might be slow and prolonged and nothing might seem to change at the time, but it really is going in only one direction. Down. And that’s where we’re headed for now. I don’t mean we’re crashing. We’re just… descending a bit. It’s quite natural given how the things are turning out recently. I mean, we talk a lot like usual. We’re friends. Good friends. No two months could possible cross out last six years. Best friends? I’d still say so and Carrots considers August her sort-of-a-boyfriend, even if they haven’t even really kissed, from what I know. Funny story, actually. But that’s not what I wanted to say. What I wanted to say is that...
Technically... I mean... I wanted to say that... Crap. The thing is... I... don’t... know...

OK, it’s stupid after all. I’m not writing THAT down.

It’s been fun. End of the show.

Nick crumpled the paper in his paws, stood from the table and paused just before throwing it to the trash. The fox unwrapped it, shredded to pieces and only then threw it out. He watched the full trash bin, listened to his mother’s footsteps upstairs. He sighed deeply.

“Well, the odds of that happening...” He smirked, as he muttered to himself. “Never tell me the odds,” he riposted back to himself and grabbed the garbage bag. He tied it and then, walked outside to throw it out into destined container at the street corner. As he came back inside, his mother was already in the kitchen, looking for something. Nick smiled. It was good to see her back in action just two months after that gas explosion in which she almost lost her life... and roof over her head, too. Mrs. Wilde never attached herself to earthly possessions, but it couldn’t be easy to her. And yet, she remained quite unbroken and as vigorous as ever.

“Looking for something?” He asked, as he stood by her and exchanged the garbage bag.

“Oh, just a tea.”

“Umm... second shelf? No, third. No, no, third over there. Yeah, there it is!” Nick smirked, as he managed to locate it at his own house after only third try.

“It’d be a lot simpler if you just put it away where you took it from,” his mother admonished him with amusement, as if he was living in her house, not the other way around.

“But the routine! And like this, every day is a new adventure!” Nick protested half-jokingly. “Speaking of adventures, any plans for today?”

“Oh, not really. And you? Coffee with Aveline liked planned?” The old vixen eyed her son carefully.

“Coffee with Aveline liked planned,” he confirmed and checked the time. “I’ll change and I’m going. I’ll be back in couple hours!” He promised, as he rushed to his room. The fox took ten minutes or so to get ready and picked her up. They had a coffee in some nice, quiet spot and then, went for a walk in a park. They sat down at a bench with ice creams in their paws and really good moods.

“I really like how green this city is,” Aveline said as she leaned back. “Colorful too, but green, mostly.”

“Oh, Happytown is very colorful. All the graffiti...” Nick remarked sarcastically and she chuckled.

“Greg rulz and look-alikes do add to the sensation of local folklore,” she agreed. “But quite seriously, city parks every once in a while... When I was little, mom had to travel to Lake City, handle some court matters. I haven’t seen a city as grey as that.”

“I’ve never been there, but Zootopia surely is colorful,” the fox agreed.

“No farther than Bunny Burrows, right?” She recalled. “Well, I guess I never was farther
than Lake City too,” she admitted. “But you know, one day.”

“One day.”

“And in meanwhile, the lawns here do look quite green,” Aveline smiled and paused. Nick could see that she was battling with thoughts; she had been all afternoon, actually. And yet, he waited patiently for her to express it when she’d feel like it.

“As green as any,” he nodded and then, chuckled. “There’s that small park just next to mom’s house with a fire hydrant practically in the middle. Not a clue who decided to put it there, actually, but one hot summer, I figured it’d be nice to just unscrew it and have some cool water. I grabbed key from father’s tools and went to the park. We struggled for whole fifteen minutes with it, but once it opened... I was a raining man,” giggled Nick.

“It must have been tough to unscrew it.”

“The toughest part was running away from cops,” smirked the fox back and she chuckled.

“Right. I remember the first time they were chasing me,” she smirked.

“What did you do?”

“Shoplifting. It was some a black bracelet with studs. Worth a dollar, but looked cool to a teenager. You know, I had this ‘eff the police’ phase, so I just had to do it in front of two officers.”

“They noticed?” Nick guessed.

“They had no chance of not noticing, I’d say. They chased me around whole mall. Four levels down, elevators, escalators, like I was carrying diamonds in there. In act of despair, I ran into a ladies’ toilet. Not a clue what I was thinking, but I saw there a small window, just enough for a vixen, not quite enough for rhinos or bears or whatever they were,” Aveline explained.

“So, you escaped?”

“Well, basically. But then, I came back home and when mom asked when I had a new bracelet from, I said I found it and well… she knew I did not.”

“What happened next?” Nick wondered.

“Oh, we had a fight, she made me spill where I took it from and she dragged me by an ear to the store so I could return it. One and the only time I stole something,” Aveline concluded.

“I can imagine,” fox watched her chuckle and then, the smile vanishing from her face slowly. She was staring somewhere far away, thinking of something intensively and Nick waited for her patiently.

“Nick?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you... Hmm... Do you like me? I mean, we’ve been meeting for quite a while now and...” She paused a bit awkwardly, as she glanced at him with apologetic smile.

“I certainly do. We’re having nice time. I mean, I find it so,” Nick assured. “What seems to trouble you?”
“I… I figured I should be honest with you. Like, you know, honesty is a basis of any healthy relationship. So…” She paused, as if speaking was actually harder than she expected it to be. “When I first saw you… I mean, back when whole that stolen painting thing was on, I kinda fell in love with you from first sight. I guess you could tell or just thought that I was trying to seduce you to get away,” she giggled and he nodded. “And after you let me go so easily despite all the proof that I could have been involved, I had all these stupid imaginations about you and you… you kind of broke my heart never calling, you know. I realize I sound like a teenage girl right now, but… still.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, it was kinda hopeless,” Aveline waved it off. “And when we met again due to that ATM, I repeated my offer and you actually called, I…” She paused nervously. “You have no idea how happy I was. And I had this moment when I was totally certain that I’m going to marry you eventually and my parents were already getting excited that I finally found some decent guy and…” She watched Nick and chuckled with embarrassment. Instead of saying a word, he just encouraged her to continue with a gesture.

“And while it lasted for the first month, the more I got to meet you and… and you know, you’re a pretty awesome guy, Nick. Honestly, a solid five out of five. Or at least four and half. Yeah, I’m cutting off half a point for leaving me hanging for so long,” she giggled. “Anyway, I’d recommend you to basically any good friend,” Aveline assured with a smile. “And ironically, the more I got to know you, the more I realized I… I don’t want to get involved in another relationship. I mean… it’s not like I thought you could hurt me or something… I just… I have Lily and I am happy with her. You’re an excellent friend, Nick, and I’d love for the thing we have here to last for lifetime, it’s just… that is all I could want as it is. I… I wanted to make it clear now, before you’d have any sort of expectations and…” She paused, unsure what to say.

“You know, I had not a clue what to do about you myself,” Nick confessed. “At first, I was very cautious, but you grew on me with every meeting. Really, you’re a wonderful vixen, Aveline, and I am very happy that we got to meet,” he assured confidently. “I find you a good friend and while I could imagine a romantic relationship between us working, I… I didn’t want to just jump into it when I could hurt you… or both of us… in progress. Especially when I wasn’t sure of either of ours feelings,” Nick explained. “So… I’m glad you told me now. I’d be more than happy if we could be simply friends too,” he promised and she smiled.

“Wow… I was sure I’d have scared you off by now. You know, let’s just stay friends. It often sounds like ‘the car is dead, but we can keep it’, doesn’t it?” Aveline chuckled nervously and he nodded, amused. “So… friends. It has worked so far, right?”

“I believe so,” he nodded. “Let’s just stop there, if it finds us both well.”

“Mhm,” she agreed and then, laughed. “It’s funny.”

“What?”

“I’ve always felt this sort of pressure. I’m a lonely mother and people sort of… stare at me. Like they’re expecting me to find someone while I’m still young and pity me when I’m still having failed so far and none of them ever asked; and maybe I’m just happy with the things the way they are?” Aveline explained. “They say Lily needs a father figure and I don’t blame them… but they really could mind their business,” she noticed. It was funny how, whenever she complained about something, she sounded more like describing the challenge she was facing and seeking ways to overcome it already.
“People talk more the less they know,” Nick pointed out and she nodded.

“Stupid people,” she muttered, more joking than actually complaining. “You’d think they stop doing that when they grow up.”

“Most of them get older, not necessarily more mature,” remarked the fox. Suddenly he realized he had heard it before. Who said it? Judy, perhaps?

“Tell me about it. Have people in your high school ever done any pacts? Like, you know, if we’re both single by thirty, we’re going to get married?” She changed the subject suddenly.

“We had a couple like that. I think they got married before they finished high school,” Nick recalled. “And you?”

“We had like ten couples like that at high school. I guess it was trendy back then. I heard that some worked out, even,” Aveline said. “It’s a funny idea, don’t you think? You like someone just enough to consider the idea of marrying them, but not enough to be serious about it now, so you just figure you’ll keep them for later.”

“I guess kids just find it being romantic without actual responsibility,” Nick suggested.

“Or just afraid of getting old on one’s own,” noticed Aveline.

“Are you afraid of it?” The fox worried.

“I don’t know. Maybe a bit?” She shrugged. “I think I’ve grown independent enough not to worry about it, but… it’s nice to have someone when you’re old, sitting in sofa, crocheting sweaters for your grandchildren.”

“Or when you’re staring in the TV blankly, reliving your glory days wishing for them to come back, but knowing they never will,” Nick agreed.

“Exactly. It’s subtle, but… it’s there,” Aveline explained and he nodded. He understood how she felt. They exchanged this sight of mutual agreement and Aveline laughed. “So… I’m not saying we should be making such a pact, but…”

“But you never know,” Nick concluded and she nodded, satisfied with the answer.

“Yeah,” the vixen agreed. After all, in next twenty years everything could happen and if anything was going to be certain, it was that it was going to be quite a different world.

10.36 pm, Sunday, August 7, 2022

Judy and August were sitting in their couch with two half-empty wine glasses and a bottle just beside them. The rabbits were staring blankly in the TV, as the end credits of the movie they had just concluded were passing by. Even though they expected no extra scenes afterwards or anything in particular, the two were just sitting in silence, letting the picture sink into their minds.
“Fargo. Certainly not a comedy,” August muttered.

“Certainly not,” Judy nodded, just a little less overwhelmed than him. “You didn’t want another rom-com, so I figured…”

“No, it was excellent. Technically, one of the best movies I’ve seen in long, long time,” he assured. “Just… disillusioned and based strictly on facts to that. No miracles happened, no happy endings… Say, have you ever had a case like that?” He wondered with concern.

“No. Not many have, I guess,” Judy assured. “I mean, there were murders and I faced couple sociopaths, but never had faced a streak of murders like that.”

“I’m kinda even more happy that I work behind a desk now,” August managed to smile. He reached for his glass and sipped some of the wine. Judy just chuckled.

“Streets have their ups and downs. Speaking of work, you mentioned you had something for me?” Judy tried to change the subject, even though the grim movie had overshadowed the decent moods of theirs.

“Oh, right,” August lightened up a bit and he stood to grab his laptop, turning the lights on while on the way. He opened it and waited for the operating system to load. “So, you know that I started working that Master’s Thesis, right?”

“Analyzing the trends on sales in one of the supermarkets, basing on the files Chief Bogo allowed you to use,” Judy nodded. “It’s funny though, I always assumed you have already finished our thesis.”

“Bachelor’s, I did. Master’s still on the way. I have actually completed all the courses already and all I have to do is write the thesis. I still have half a year for that. But anyways, I was working on the shopping trends and I found something… peculiar,” August opened the statistical application and then, resumed the latest session. “So, I was trying to separate the customers depending on what they buy and how much they’re willing to buy. And the thing is, I started noticing some interesting patterns. But before that… the first thing I tried was removing people that did any food shopping; after all, that’s not how you launder money. That filter turned out to be too strict, though.”

“You were erasing basically everyone,” Judy recalled and he nodded.

“Indeed. So, I went for another filter; more than two hundred dollars spent. I figured that if you want to launder this sort of a sum, you need to spend a lot at once.”

“Well, it was the one that seemed reasonable,” Hopps agreed. “What next?”

“The cash payment, obviously,” August assured. “The filter was rather silly to apply; it’s where change is not zero,” he explained.

“Obviously,” she nodded. “But that’s where we hit a dead end, am I right? No filter seemed to work right in any store,” Judy recalled and he agreed.

“I tried everything focusing mostly on the products they were buying. The thing is, we’re basically looking for a single, couple purchases at each store at best, so I had to apply filters that’d be very strict, but wouldn’t eliminate our target. By analysis of sales and excluding certain patterns, I managed to reduce a number of sales to approximately a thousand purchases per store,” August shown her the list that resulted in the filters. Judy read those first and then eyed through what they were left with.
“Electric appliances, mostly,” she noticed and he nodded.

“My first thought was, let’s say a guy paid only with sum that can be made of twenties and fifties and apply the filter. It turned out that it deleted literally ten results. I cancelled it then, since it was clearly changing nothing, but then…”

“Wait, wait, wait, can you show me these ten results?” Judy asked suddenly, when a realization dawned on her, but August just smirked.

“Don’t tell me you noticed it just now!” He protested, quite amazed, but she only giggled.

“The way you told it, it was quite simple! You go to the store and buy a phone or a TV four couple hundreds. If paying by cash, why would you ever use anything below a twenty, if not to trick guys like us?” Judy pointed out enthusiastically. “So, show me what you’ve got!”

“Sure thing, spoilsport,” he muttered half-jokingly and she chuckled. August applied proper filters and they received a short list of results. “Turns out, some people just wanted to get rid of loose change, so they dropped all the coins. But in one case… we have this,” the rabbit pointed at the last position on the list; someone had paid seven hundreds and one dollar and received about twelve dollars of change. August double-clicked it and opened the list; it started with some usual, generic groceries; pasta, flour, oil, some canned vegetables, worth in total no more than twenty bucks. The rest were different kinds of vouchers and gift cards; to the store itself, phone charges, webstores, Internet TV platforms and so on and on and on.

“Sweet cheese and crackers, that’s it,” Judy whispered. “He’s going to resell them on Internet at minimally lower price and get his clean money. He bought some groceries to throw us off, dropped a single dollar just to fool simple filters… Tell me you’ve found more purchases like this,” she begged.

“One for each store you gave me data for,” August shown her the list figuring for several thousand dollars when Judy hugged him and kissed on the cheek.

“That’s wonderful! Now, we just have to check the dates, cameras and we’ve got him! You’re amazing, August!” She exclaimed, while her friend was just sitting on the couch blushing, quite surprised with her sudden outburst.

“I give my best,” he muttered and she hugged him yet again.

“Yes, you do. Oh, we’re finally going to get Miles and his buddies,” Hopps assured enthusiastically. “At long last! Oh, it’ll be so good to close that case finally!”

“Chief’s getting pretty impatient about it, isn’t he?” August noticed.

“You have no idea,” Judy nodded. “He’s waiting to just suspend the thing and get us involved with a serious case,” she rolled her eyes, just a little annoyed. “Well, not until we’re done with this one.”

“Well, just about to be,” August noticed and she nodded with satisfaction, but then she yawned deeply.

“I’m so sorry, I’m just…” She tried to apologize, but he waved it off with a chuckle.

“Don’t be, it is really late,” he pointed out. “I could walk you home, if you like,” he suggested after a short pause.
“It’d be nice,” she agreed. “But before that…” She reached for a glass. “How about a last toast? To the case closed.”

“To the case closed,” he repeated, reaching for his one hurriedly. The glasses clanked and they finished their wines cheerfully. The rabbits stood from the coach and dressed up. Outside, it was quite cold and it was raining, but August had an umbrella.

“I probably should sing something, but I remember how it ended the last time,” he joked, much to her amusement. Judy had to admit that since that dreadful accident two months earlier he had changed a lot and certainly for good. He remained this same, cheerful and optimistic rabbit and yet, he built more much needed confidence and seemed far more wary of the surroundings; his ears seemed to be scanning the surroundings continuously, involuntarily to that. Judy had this silly, unexplained feeling as if August was an inch or two taller than the first time they met.

“The eye’s alright?” Judy asked like she always would. That thing was haunting her, no matter how much August would sugarcoat it. As always, he just shrugged it off.

“No issue,” he lied, as they stepped into the rain protected by his umbrella. “We’ll be finishing the self-defense course quite soon.”

“You learnt quite a lot in there, didn’t you?”

“Yes, although the closer to the end we are, the more I feel like these were just the basics. I might sign up for another one once I’m done.”

“Good idea,” Judy nodded enthusiastically. “Another one certainly won’t hurt. I mean, beyond being tossed around in the progress,” she smiled to which, he chuckled.

“After couple first times, it doesn’t hurt that much,” he assured. “Say, Judy, do you have any plans for Saturday two weeks from now?”


“Oh, I happen to have two tickets for a musical and I figured, you’d want to go,” he explained.

“Sure thing! What is it?”

“Dear Evan Hansen, a modern thing about a socially awkward kid. I heard it’s really good, too,” August assured, as if Judy needed any more encouraging. “It plays in Roma, that music theater.”

“I know it, always wanted to see the place from inside!” She grinned.

“Or hear it, one could say,” remarked August.

“Exactly,” Judy nodded. They walked up the stairs to Judy’s block of flats, August holding his umbrella carefully so that not even a drop of rain would wet Judy. They stopped by the door and looked at each other carefully.

“So… until tomorrow?” August said, a bit embarrassed. He never ceased to be embarrassed or shy and Judy loved it.

“Good night, August,” she hugged him and, in fit of excitement, kissed him on the cheek. He watched her, abashed, as she giggled.
“G... good night,” he nodded. She smiled one last time and disappeared behind the door. She could see August through the window, at first aghast and then, smiling from ear to ear. He jumped down the stairs in half-dancing, half-running and, having folded an umbrella, proceeded heading back home cheerfully, just... singing in the rain.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10.26 am, Monday, August 8, 2022

The hardest part of each of Isabelle’s disappointments was the mornings. Her head was buzzing like a beehive, her stomach felt as if it was about to explode, her exposed back was as cold as ice. Isabelle turned around in the bed slowly; there was no one on the other side of her queen-sized bed, just a mess of a duvet and an empty spot where he was last night. The old plushie unicorn covered in patches was staring at her condescendingly, but she ignored it as always.

“ Irving?” Isabelle called hopelessly, but heard not a sound. She stood up and wrapped herself in a dressing-gown she found laying next to the bed. All his things were already gone, she didn’t hear anyone beyond her in the flat. And then, she found a sticky note on the kitchen tabletop with couple words scribbled on it.

It’s been a crazy night!

Next week same place?

679-2

Irving

Her head hurt so much Isabelle struggled reading the letters, but once she recognized them, she shivered with disgust and surrender. But then, what else was she expecting from a married guy with two sweet children? That he’d stay? Serve her a breakfast to the bed? Alvarez snorted resentfully and went to the bathroom. She took a long, cold shower that’d help her sober up, clear her mind. She loved to feel freezing, it was somehow… cleansing.

When she was done and she found herself reaching the point only when she was freezing, she dried up and went back to the kitchen. She grabbed the breathalyzer and checked the result; 0.92 per mile alcohol in blood; no way she was going to work today. Isabelle called in sick and found the rest of wine she still had. She drank it straight from the bottle, hoping it’d help the hangover a little bit as she was recalling last night. What a disaster. Truly, a capstone of one awful week; she had broken up with a boyfriend of month, a guy she really had high hopes for, had a fight with Jason Wolford who kept talking crap about her behind her back and then, that party last night; a glorified train wreck. Why did she even do it? What’s the point of seducing a married guy that will run away before the sunrise? Well, it felt real nice while it lasted. And that realization with how little effort she could have him even when he kept claiming how loyal he was to his wife… Isabelle sighed deeply and emptied the wine bottle. No more cures for aching head and broken heart, it seemed. She found her phone and browsed through the contacts pointlessly, stopping over at Kaylee Reynolds for a second. Funny rabbit, she was; she still remembered the whole thing with
Max, quite reasonably, and yet, she seemed to have gotten over it quite smoothly. As if the two of them simply pretended to hate another, too stubborn to admit that they could have been getting along really well, were it not for their start. She chuckled, imagining the two of them being friends and continued swiping through the list only to drop the phone with surrender and stare in the ceiling blankly.

Silence. Oh, how she despised this silence of this dead flat of hers. How she despised lack of any noises beyond the soulless hum of the refrigerator and muffled, barely detectable murmurs of the street. She despised it from the bottom of her heart.

2.39 pm, Monday, August 8, 2022

The cashier of the small shop net to Isabelle’s flat knew her even too well; he glared at Alvarez condescendingly every time she’d come there and buy traditional two bottles of some cheaper wine. These were the only thing she bought there considering the prices of rest of the products and the cashier never missed his chance to mutter some witty comment about condition of ZPD that she was representing. Isabelle ignored it as always, put the two bottles in her wide purse and headed back home only to see a familiar car just next to it; it was Max Reynolds. He stood out of the car and greeted her cheerfully.

“Hey, did something happen?” She asked, concerned.

“Prosecutor Moore called to see us about the gas explosion. He said it was very important and I was in the neighborhood and I figured I’d see if you can come. I mean, depending on how bad you’re feeling,” he explained.

“Oh… Whatever, I can go,” Isabelle shrugged it off. She technically wasn’t doing her work this way, was she? And the silence of her flat was killing her anyway.

“Do you need to change or…”

“No,” she refused and went to the police car. Isabelle was one of the girls that would never leave her house dressed anything worse than ready for an audition with a mayor; constant confrontations of likes of Frederick Thunders with her uncle in least expected situations taught her that much.

“Cool,” Max stepped back inside the car and headed for Downtown, where prosecutor had his office. “Is it something serious? I mean, I don’t want to carry you around if you’re feeling poorly or just…”

“I’m drunk,” she confessed.

“Oh,” Reynolds paused awkwardly. “What’s… the occasion?”

“Celebrating being single yet again, I suppose,” shrugged Isabelle.
“I’m sorry,” he said and she chuckled.

“You keep doing that. It’s not your fault, silly,” she remarked amusingly.

“I know, I just…” he paused awkwardly. He probably knew she found it funny at best. “That is shame, but I bet he wasn’t worth it.”

“Yeah, another one off the list,” she muttered bitterly. Maybe even a bit too bitterly, since even Max noticed it.

“Well… Fortune’s a fickle horse. It might turn around any moment,” he tried to cheer her up. It was quite cute, how there was no right thing to say and yet, he was trying. His naivety almost made her feel better.

“Isn’t it called a gambler’s fallacy?” She muttered.

“I’d say optimism?”

“Yes, wishful thinking, it is,” she concluded and he didn’t argue again, but she could still feel this pity of his. Isabelle liked Max a lot; working together was pleasure. Still, she hated this pity she felt from him at times. And yet, was it even surprising? The more they talked, the more she deserved it, probably. Max was simply being a decent person there and she was rude, not being able to suck it up.

“Maybe. Wolford’s been complaining whole morning about how you slapped him on Friday, you know. He can’t get over how you talked him down,” Max snickered, which brought out a smile of hers.

“I thought he was your friend?”

“He is. He was my groomsman, too.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking his side there?” She noticed skeptically.

“Am I now? He kind of had it coming this time,” he noticed. “He’s an alright guy overall, but… he has these moments where he really doesn’t know when to shut up.”

“I’ve noticed,” Isabelle muttered only. They continued to drive in silence until they reached the prosecutor’s office.

Mr. Moore accepted them in their office, cluttered as usual. The weasel seemed really tired; he didn’t even notice officers stepping in at first.

“Oh. Officers. Please, please sit down,” he pointed at the two chairs with a gesture of paw. They took their seats and eyed one another carefully. Somehow, they had bad feelings.

“Any news, prosecutor?” Max asked finally.

“Plenty, actually. Like you know, we’ve almost reached the conclusion of that terrible gas explosion in Happytown. Long story short, we are quite certain it was a gas explosion, ignited in the hall of Lionel O’Dyna’s flat. The gas supposedly came from damaged gas pipe; considering the time between explosion and O’Dyna’s departure from house,
gas concentration would be too high to cause such an impactful explosion,” he said and the two officers nodded.

“We still do not know what caused the spark,” Isabelle remarked.

“We rarely do for sure. The explosion doesn’t leave much of evidence,” the prosecutor replied, a bit impatiently. Suddenly, he did not remind them that vigorous weasel they had started working with two months earlier.

“Well then?” Alvarez asked, quite annoyed.

“The most possible reason, the one we tend toward, was a static shock during opening of the door,” prosecutor Moore sounded like he hardly believed his own words. Max and Isabelle eyed each other carefully.

“But… What about that hyena? What about the break-in?” Max protested. “We spent last two months chasing that guy around and you’re telling us…”

“Quite unnecessarily, apparently,” Moore confirmed his fears.

“That’s bullshit! We wasted two months for this case! Just a week ago, you were still encouraging us to chase him, quite sure he was our guy and now you’re what, telling us to just drop the thing?!” Isabelle snorted, quite enraged. The prosecutor sighed deeply.

“If it depended on me, we’d still be…” he paused, eyeing the two of them. He massaged his forehead, as if struggling with migraine. “Officers, I find you both experienced and reasonable, so I guess you should deserve to know… there’s been a lot of pressure on this investigation from the very start, not just from media. A certain party… really wanted it concluded as quickly as possible. Concluded as an accident. And they are losing their patience,” prosecutor Moore confessed and both Max and Isabelle considered his words in silence.

“So we’re just… shutting it down?” Max asked with disbelief.

“If you found that Ryuk and got him to confess, we could still fight for it. Otherwise, I have no choice, I am afraid,” the prosecutor explained.

“How much time do we have left?” Isabelle asked.

“Well… basically none,” Max muttered. “Chief seems like he’s lost his patience already.”

“At the request of prosecutor’s office, the investigation will be concluded tomorrow. By then, I expect your final reports,” Moore added. “But when it comes to looking for him on your own… I can delay signing of the official report till end of the month… maybe second decade of September. If that helps anyhow,” Moore explained.

“It really does, prosecutor. Thank you,” Max assured with the smile and the weasel bobbed his head. He bided them farewell and Max and Isabelle left his office in silence that lasted till they came back to the car.

“So… someone pressured Moore into closing the investigation. He did seem quite shaken up,” Reynolds noticed.

“He does have family, a decent position… he could fall really low, if someone wanted it hard enough,” remarked Isabelle.
“Any idea who?” Max asked her.

“I hate to be crying wolf, no pun intended, but if I were to name one mammal... it’d be your sister, Anastasia,” Isabelle suggested rather confidently and the per miles in her blood were only helping. “Do you remember how she tried to recruit me? Well... she seemed quite interested in our investigation. She tried to disregard it as just a test of my loyalty, but it could be not the case. And besides, everyone knows she hates Duchess and her O'Dyna and she is quite a... bitch to that,” Alvarez explained. Max snickered.

“Basically. Oh, cute, silly Spice, blackmailing people left and right...” He muttered. “It really could be her. The question is, what do we do about it?” Reynolds wondered.

“I say, we find Ryuk. Until tomorrow, at best.”

“I say, we do, even though it doesn’t look good,” he nodded with satisfaction. “We have only twelve hours.”

“You go to the laboratory. I’ll stay at the station, read through the files, check the archives. We might have missed something,” Isabelle suggested.

“Working under influence?” Max doubted half-jokingly.

“You can let that slip or you can work alone,” riposted Alvarez.

“Fair enough. I’ll drop you at the Downtown first,” conceded Reynolds. He hurried back to the station, a bit over the road limits. Time was not their ally, after all.

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7.15 pm, Monday, August 8, 2022

To be fair, claiming that situation wasn’t good, was even too optimistic, as it implied they actually had a chance when in fact, things were pretty hopeless. Max Reynolds kept calling Isabelle every hour that day, each time both of them having less and less to report.

“And that’d be the last thing I could have checked. I’m out of ideas now,” he confessed grimly.

“So am I,” Isabelle admitted, leaning over the desk. Head and stomach still ached, but she had sobered up completely by now. “It was kinda naïve thinking we’d solve it just because we have deadline on our heads, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so. Go home, Isabelle, have some rest. I’m sorry I dragged you into wasting your day.”

“Don’t be.”

“Should I pick you up or...”
“I’ll finish it here and grab a taxi, don’t worry about me,” Isabelle assured. “Go to Kaylee and see you tomorrow,” she said only afterwards realizing that it sounded more pathetic than she intended for it to do and Reynolds’ pause expressed it even too well.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, bye,” Isabelle hung up and sighed deeply, staring in the screen. What a day. What a week, actually. It made you want to grab a bottle of wine and chug it all down. Isabelle glanced at her purse lying just next to her; the two bottles she had bought earlier were still there. She stood up and looked around the place; not a living soul at the level. Everyone from Investigations were home already, eating dinners with their families like reasonable mammals they were. Isabelle reached for the bottle and uncorked it. What a day.

8.11 pm, Monday, August 8, 2022

Sometimes, the only mammal you can blame for your own misery, is yourself, August thought, as he left the Technical Officer’s bureau over three hours later than he usually would. Well, he had been helping Wilde and Hopps whole afternoon to find and identify their ATM thief, which would hopefully soothe the Chief Bogo for a while. And then, there was that report that Andersen needed very badly for tomorrow and so, Fares just sat down by his desk and, with help of couple coffees and music, completed it all. He went upstairs to the Investigations section to leave Andersen a pendrive with report, when he heard a hiccup in the distance. He froze with his ears perked up and then, he heard it again, accompanied by pitiful wailing this time. After short moment of hesitation, he followed it to one of the boxes. There, he saw Isabelle Alvarez. She was laying under the desk and sobbing pitifully with a big, empty bottle of red wine just next to her.

“Isabelle?” August called her uncertainly and she stopped to turn her head at him, wiping a tear discretely.

“Oh, it’s you,” she noticed grimly and hiccupped. “Hey, August.”

“Um… Hi,” he sat down on the floor right in front of her. He felt a buzzing phone in his pocket, but he ignored it. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“Alright, alright, alright! Nothing’s alright!” Cried the wolf. “Everything’s bad and my life sucks and nothing’s alright and I can’t even find the right word for it!” She complained with a drunken hiccup in the middle of it.

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“Alright, alright, alright! Nothing’s alright!” Cried the wolf. “Everything’s bad and my life sucks and nothing’s alright and I can’t even find the right word for it!” She complained with a drunken hiccup in the middle of it.

“All-left! Why is my life going all-left!” She cried again, covering her face. “Why am I even like that?” She asked in vain.
“Maybe… that empty wine bottle is an indication?” August suggested shyly.

“What?! No! I never am sad-drunk! Happy-drunk or sexy-drunk, sure!” She smiled funnily, as if clumsily trying to seduce him. August took for an innocent joke and chuckled. “But never, ever sad-drunk!” She protested and groaned with frustration. “August, could you just grab my gun and put me out of my misery?” She begged.

“It’s a tranquilizer,” he reminded her.

“Damn it. I guess I’ll just drink myself dead. Hand me the bottle, will you?”

“It’s empty,” he noticed with mixed feelings. On one hand it meant she couldn’t drink more. On the other, it implied she had downed whole bottle already.

“No, no, the other one. In my purse,” Isabelle pointed at the purse just next to him.

“You carry two bottles…”

“Stop judging my lifestyle, you prude,” she scolded him. August sighed deeply and reached for the bottle in order to hand it to Isabelle. She uncorked it with dexterity of someone who had been doing it drunk probably even more times than she had done it sober. The wolf drank some and offered it to the rabbit, but he shook his head.

“No, I… probably shouldn’t.”

“Hah, chicken,” she muttered and took another gulp and then, continued to stare in the void blankly.

“So… what happened?” August asked and she eyed him suspiciously.

“You’re just being nice, aren’t you? You don’t really care.”

“No, I do care,” he promised truthfully. Despite how impolite she was toward him, August liked Isabelle. She was independent, firm, if overly confident and she had that specific charm to her.

“Yeah, right,” she muttered disbelievingly.

“If I didn’t, I’d just politely excuse myself to the bathroom and never come back,” the rabbit remarked. Isabelle was calculating it in her head, watching him carefully.

“It’s a long story, you know.”

“I don’t have plans for the evening, really,” he promised.

“Other than me?” She smirked, causing him to blush and turn his sight away. That only amused her more. “Well then, have a drink and we can start. It’s not a story to be taken soberly, you know.” She offered him the bottle. August sighed deeply and drank some of it reluctantly.

“So… what happened?”

“You weren’t the popular kid back in school, were you?” Isabelle asked instead.

“I was considered a dork or a nerd, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I bet. Well, I… I was a popular kid. You can imagine,” she bragged with
melancholy and he nodded. “I was some party animal, never missed fun. I mean… until the certain
evening,” she paused for a moment and then, continued to tell August the same story she had
revealed to Max before; how she was drugged during a party to the point of poisoning and nearly
died due to it. How they never found the mammal responsible. August listened to her carefully, not
quite sure why she was sharing it with him. Did she even like him? Or was it just because he
happened to be there and she needed someone to vent?

“And do you know what was the worst part?” Isabelle asked rhetorically and, hearing no
reply, continued. “That when McNamera had to cancel his parties over that situation, they all
blamed me. Because, you know, I couldn’t have just been drugged and abused like a good girl
should!” She snarled angrily.

“Wow. That’s…”

“Bullshit, right?” Isabelle agreed as she reached for the bottle. She was done with half of
it already. “Suddenly, I was not the popular girl. I was the girl that screwed up the best teenage
parties in Tundratown. Basically dead in the high school with no friend suicidal enough to stand up
for me.”

“Did you move to another school?” August asked.

“Yeah, didn’t help much. Everyone knew the Party Crasher,” she muttered with despise.
“But there was one place where I could have fun without any teens spoiling it. The clubs.”

“The clubs? Like normal nightclubs?” The rabbit doubted.

“Yes, I looked pretty mature for my age and there are plenty of clubs letting ladies in for
free. And you wouldn’t imagine how many guys there are, willing to buy a beautiful stranger a
drink or two, even if all they get in the end is a pretty smile,” smirked Isabelle. “At first, all I gave
them were smiles, but one night… I changed the rules of the game.”

“So you mean…” He paused, most disturbed. He knew where the story was going from
the start, but he really hated to hear this part.

“I saw a guy fighting with his girlfriend; I remembered them from McNamera’s party.
Awful mammals, the two of them, disgustinglly vain. When they went their ways, I hit on the guy.
They hadn’t broken up yet, was one of the first things he told me,” Isabelle laughed. “It didn’t stop
me from seducing him and having him dump his girlfriend of eight years for me so violently there
was no turning back for him. I wrapped him around my finger, took from him what I wanted and
before the dawn came, I broke his heart. Oh, you should have seen him, begging for me to stay!”
Isabelle laughed aloud. “And then I realized… They hurt me, but I can hurt them too. I have all I
need to hurt people, to ruin their relationships, to… conquer their hearts and then, maul them to
pieces. And so, I did,” the wolf explained while August listened to her in silence. “Some of them
are quite decent guys… and some of them, this type do I prefer, are pieces of shit, having wives
and kids and all and yet, looking for one-night adventures. Some of these even dare to pretend they
aren’t there for this sort of thing…” she chuckled. “But do you know what I like about the clubs
the most?”

“Huh?” August asked.

“How easy it is. I just walk in, pick a guy, married or not and… I can have him if I only
want. Sometimes I turn them down just for fun. You know, because I love watching their dreams
and hopes shattering. Or sometimes, when married guys take me to their place, I leave lipstick
stains on their shirts and drop them in the dirty laundry, so their wives find them and see what trash
they are. It’s petty, but damn, I do love it,” Isabelle stared up blankly, reflecting on her own words. She must have felt the vanity of these actions.

“Does it make you happy?” August asked finally and she snorted.

“I… guess? For these short moments when I’m with someone? Before I dump them or they dump me or we both realize this is going nowhere… I guess, I am,” Alvarez said quite hesitantly. “I mean I have some stable relationships too. But you know, they don’t last long. Usually.” August thought for a second that her eyes grew watery, but then she blinked several times and it was gone. “We’re not making it out alive, so possessions have no value. Only experiences do,” she said after a long moment of silence.

“Well, technically, but…”

“Even the bad ones! Ray, my boyfriend, just dumped me yesterday. And at the club where he did it, I found some married guy whom I enchanted like that and then, he just left before the sunrise. You know, like I was some…” She paused and eyed the rabbit carefully. “You despise me, don’t you?” Isabelle accused him. She walked up to him on all fours, with bottle in one paw. “Because I’m a bitch, you think, you little prude.”

“No, I don’t,” August refused. “I’m just worried about you,” he assured and Isabelle laughed, most amused.

“Worried! How can you just sit there worried, you cute little thing?” She asked, leaning over to the rabbit. “Cute crossed legs, cute little paws, cute long ears, cute big eyes. Sweet like a candy. It’s dangerous! Someone could want to… snack on you!” She snickered, showing all of her teeth. August shivered with them being just inches from him, but before he realized, her jaws were already enclosing on his neck.

“Isabelle…” He tried to protest, but then he felt her teeth against his skin.

“Just like that. Om, nom, nom” she pretended to be crushing his throat with couple quick snaps of her jaws and with each time she touched him, his heart skipped a beat. And then, she pulled back with a chuckle that died immediately when she met his sight. “Oh Lord. I made it awkward, didn’t I?” She realized with horror.

“Oh, why am I like tha… Yeep!” She squeaked as she leaned back too much and fell on her back. The bottle of wine shattered as it hit the edge of the desk covering her in glass debris and remains of wine. The wolf was just lying, weeping as August jumped down to her panicked.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“No, all-left,” she replied and they eyed one another in silence. August snickered and they burst out with uncontrolled laughter. Isabelle tried to drink some of the wine, but all she had was a bottleneck in her paw. They laughed for a solid minute until they managed to control it. August watched her with concern.

“Isabelle, let’s put you back together, alright? You’re tired and drunk and you need to go home.”

“I can clean it up…”

“You go to the showers. I’ll clean this mess,” he disagreed firmly and she succumbed to it reluctantly. He guided her to the showers and then, swept the floor, gathered the glass remains and washed the wine stains from floor and desk. It took him a while, but no longer than it did Isabelle
to clean the mess she was. When she came back half an hour later, August called her a taxi. They
waited for it outside, not talking much, but smiling to one another. When cab arrived, the rabbit
wanted to bid her goodnight, but she insisted he’d come with him; she was way too drunk to open
her door anyway and she needed someone to make sure she made it safely. August agreed a bit
hesitantly and they drove to Tundratown. He paid for the ride, walked with her to her block of flats
and helped open the front door. He pushed it open and let her in, but she only leaned against the
doorframe and smiled flirtatiously at him. Even with the amount of alcohol she had consumed, the
effect was quite astounding.

“My flat’s door will need your help too, cutie,” she remarked with rather obvious intent. August
shivered, most disturbed at realizing how tempting it sounded from Isabelle so drunk she
could barely stand. He could see now how easily she must have been seducing all those guys at the
parties. Well, not him. August just watched her with pitiful disapproval.

“Why are you doing this to yourself?” He asked only.

“Come in and you’ll see,” she giggled drunkenly.

“We both know you’re not interested in me and I am certainly not interested in a b…
someone like you,” he pointed out enraged even more than he’d anticipate himself to be. “So why
are you trying to do it?!” He asked and smile disappeared from her lips slowly. She let her sight
down and sighed deeply.

“All that counts are experiences, right?”

“There’s more to life than these experiences,” August replied with disgust and she snorted
resentfully.

“And for a second, I thought you were alright,” she muttered bitterly.

“Sorry, just an all-left nerd,” he said coldly.

“Huh. I almost forgot,” she bounced from the frame smoothly and slammed the door right
in his face. The rabbit stood in front of it in silence, cursing himself in his head. What an idiot he
was, to lead this all to such a conclusion. He should have never entered that taxi. And then, he felt
buzzing in his pocket. He reached for the phone; it was Judy.

“Hey,” he said, realizing how tired he sounded.

“August, I’ve been trying to call you for like…” She seemed really worried.

“Sorry, I got… caught up in something,” he explained himself awkwardly.

“What happened?”

“Isabelle got herself drunk at the station… Like really, really drunk. She downed almost
two bottles of wine on her own and someone really had to get her home,” he explained.

“Oh, dear. Is she alright?”

“All-left, rather,” August muttered. “I tried to talk some sense with her, we had a fight
and… well… I basically called her a… b-word. Normally she probably wouldn’t even care, but I
think I really hurt her this time. You know, because she opened to me and I treated her like this,”
August confessed. Judy was taking her time, trying to comprehend how such a nice and polite
rabbit like him could be using such words.
“What was it about?” She asked finally.

“A long story. Really long story, not for a phone. And anyway… I don’t really know what to do now,” he confessed quite helplessly.

“Can you make it any better if you talk to her now?” Judy asked and he shivered at the thought.

“I hope? If she doesn’t maul me to bits first, that is?” He said carefully.

“Then you could try,” she noticed like he knew she would. August clenched his fist and took a deep breath, considering his options.

“You’re right. OK, I’m going in. If I don’t call or text in half an hour, call police. I’m not joking.”

“OK? Take care?” Judy said hesitantly, probably only now acknowledging the actual threat.

“I will,” he assured and hung up. Thanks to someone leaving the building he got inside without using intercom and climbed the stairs. He found Isabelle’s name at the mailbox and went to her flat. Rabbit pressed the knob carefully; the door was unlocked. He stepped inside the dark flat carefully. It felt rather small, even for him, and quite messy to that. He passed by claustrophobic kitchen and followed the quiet weeping noises to what appeared to be Alvarez’s bedroom. Isabelle was lying there, wrapped up in a plushy duvet, sobbing. August stepped inside the room carefully and then, her cries stopped at once and her eyes, two flashy points in the dark, focused straight at him.

“Get lost,” she snarled.

“I wanted to apologize.”

“Get the hell out of my flat!” She yelled at him, showing her snow-white teeth and he stood back, but stopped at the doorframe. She growled with frustration. “Why are you… Stop staring at me like that!” She yelled, but he said nothing at first, as he continued to eye her.

“I… I am sorry for…”

“Don’t you dare to look down at me!” She snarled in furious despair. “Do you think I’m proud of myself?! Of how I am?! You think I have any sort of glory in… in being me?!” She cried pitifully. “I don’t! I rutting don’t, OK?! I’m a piece of shit and you’re right and you’re so much than me! That’s what you wanted to hear?! Now get lost!” She yelled choking on her tears.

“Why are you hurting yourself like this?” August asked pitifully instead. “You don’t have to do this. You could be…”

“Well, maybe I rutting have to!” She yelled back. “Maybe for once in my life, I want to not feel alone?! Maybe I want to wake up in the morning and see by my side someone? Anyone?!” She begged hopelessly. “Maybe at these short moments when I’m with someone, I feel happy?! But what would you know?! You just judge me like everyone!” She stared him deeply in the eyes, tears flowing down her cheeks.

“You know they’re fake, though?” August sat at the edge of bed and put paw on her shoulder carefully. For a second he thought she’d bite his paw off and the thought seemed to cross her mind as she snarled, but none of them moved. “They’re not… real. And certainly not lasting.”
“Fakes are enough,” she muttered unconvinced.

“Are they? Is what you have enough?” The rabbit doubted and she turned her sight away.

“It’s so easy for you to be saying that. You have Judy,” she muttered jealously.

“And she’s the best thing that has happened to me. But I was single for long. I know it feels shitty at times, but… You’ve got to keep hoping that someday you’ll find someone… someone. You know. The one.”

“Wow, so cliché,” she muttered.

“I know,” he shrugged awkwardly. “But I guess that’s me. Cliché.”

“All-left.”

“All-left,” he confirmed and they both chuckled and then, fell silent, staring at each other in silence. August could feel that she was battling with thoughts and he waited for the result patiently.

“August… Do something for me,” Isabelle pleaded, as she lowered her sight.

“Huh?”

“Stay here for night,” she pleaded.

“What?”

“I don’t mean it that way. Just… Stay here, in this room. I can sleep in the chair or anything. I just… I don’t want to wake up alone,” she explained awkwardly and watched him in silence. And then, she shook her head remorsefully. “Sorry. It was stupid. You have a girlfriend and I…”

“I can take the chair,” August assured. “If it makes you feel better.”

“I… really?”

“Yeah,” August nodded. “Don’t worry about Judy. She’ll understand.”

“God, I forgot what cutie-pies you two are,” Isabelle sighed and then, yawned. “Be here in the morning,” she pleaded, as she cuddled up covering herself with her duvet and closed her eyes. It wasn’t fixing any of her problems and yet, August felt that it really felt important to her. This feeling… illusion of defying loneliness.

“I will.” He promised. Before a minute passed, she was already sleeping. August smiled, covered her with the duvet gently and took his seat in her big rocking chair. He soon felt that he was feeling just as ridiculously tired as she was, but before he’d go to sleep, he needed to notify Judy. He took out his phone and turned on the messenger.

August: Hey, I’m alive. What a wild ride...

Judy <3: Oh, she didn’t eat you? :D

August: Apparently wasn’t that hungry. But she did scare me for a moment
Judy <3: So, what happened? Are you on your way?

I mean, it’s too late for a movie, if you’re still in Tundratown, but you really should be going home. We have plenty of work tomorrow, you know.

August: About that… Well…

Judy <3: Oh, what happened?

August: Long story short, we talked and…

Don’t even know where to start ^^;

Judy <3: Well, I don’t know for sure :P

August: OK, so you know how Isabelle changes her boyfriends like… you know, weekly?

It happened again today. Had just broken up with a boyfriend she had high hopes for, met some guy at a party yesterday, took him home…

And he was gone before she woke up in the morning

Judy <3: Ouch :( 

August: And I think she took it harder than usual

She brought this wine to station and when everyone went home downed it

I found her when she was starting the second one

Judy <3: You weren’t helping her, were you? :D

August: Not even encouraging, I swear

Just tasted it since she demanded

Anyways, I cleaned the mess she caused

Called her a taxi to get her back home

I went with her just in case. You know, given her state

When we were at the door she kinda….

Invited me in

Judy <3: You mean…

No, you don’t mean…

August: To kinda… bed me?

Judy <3: What a… I don’t even have words for that!

August: I know? And I basically called her names and told her how disgusted I was with her and she was really pissed off
Judy <3: Well, I am too, now! -.-

August: I know, right?! I was mad too! But then you called

Judy <3: And you didn’t tell me?!

August: I’m telling you now?

Judy <3: Tell me that you’re in her house and you’re so dead!

August: Can I finish the story, first?

Judy <3: Sorry, I just can’t believe… Urgh! What a…

August: I know. So, I came in. She was crying in her bed and was really pissed to see me

Like expected

She started yelling at me. For a moment I was sure she’d jump to my throat

And then she started crying…

You know… she’s not doing it because she ‘wants’ me. Or probably any of these guys

She’s doing it because otherwise, she feels shitty about herself

Like… she’s alone? Really alone?

Like there was this one time when someone hurt her real bad and then everyone turned their backs on her, because they thought it was her fault?

And she never really had anyone really close?

Like, she then found out that wrapping guys around her finger only to hurt them before they would hurt her was one way of coping, or just her not feeling alone for a moment?

And even when she finds someone worth keeping, they usually don’t last a week and she feels even shitter because they’re gone just like that?

Like she wasn’t worth some random guy once he sobers up?

So she does it again to try and feel better?

I know it sounds stupid, but…

I think she’s a really sad, sad person, actually

Like… she’s stuck in some weird vicious cycle?

And she knows everything she has is… fake?

But doesn’t know how to find something authentic, so she’s stuck?

Does it make any sense? I hope I’m not babbling or something
Judy?

Judy <3: It does. Sweet cheese and crackers, it does.

So... What happened next?

August: She asked me to stay for a night. Like, sleep in the chair or anything, because for once, she didn’t want to feel alone. She needed someone to be there. Someone who wouldn’t just run away once he’d get what he wanted

I know how it sounds...

I’m sorry, but I just... I just couldn’t leave her like that

I’ve never ever seen anyone so low. So I’m sitting in the chair, texting you.

She’s already sleeping

I’ll just turn the light on...

Here goes the photo

You sent a photo

Judy <3: God, she looks pitiful.

August: I know, right?

Are you mad at me?

Judy <3: No, of course not! I mean, I was for a second. :D

Now I’m just... sad about this all?

I want to be mad at her, but then again, I think she’s had enough of it. :( 

August: I felt kinda awkward about everything, because, you know...

I’m sorta spending night in her flat? :/

And you must have all those weird thoughts...

Judy <3: It’s cool, really. :) You’re just too good, August. :D

August: Hey, you didn’t dump me where I stand!

You’re clearly too good for me too :D


August: Not every doe would be as understanding!

Judy <3: I guess you’re right :P

So, see you tomorrow?
August: *If she doesn’t figure out to actually eat me in the morning*

Judy <3: *I really can’t tell if you’re joking or not.*

August: *Me neither*

*That’s the fun part*

Judy <3: *You’re too good to be eaten.*

*Good night and see you tomorrow :)*

August: *Right*

*Judy?*

Judy <3: *?

August: *I love you*

Judy <3: *<3*

August: *Goodnight :)*

August glanced at Isabelle as she was muttering something to herself in her sleep and he giggled watching Judy’s last response and he felt this fuzzy feeling in his chest. Oh, how much he’d give to actually hear it from her.

Chapter End Notes

I don't need to be reminded that this is how it was.
I moved on, I passed a billboard down my block
That asks if I've had enough, and aloud I say "I've had too much,"
When the truth is, I'm just getting started.

"Barlights" by .fun

I must say, whenever I hear that album of theirs (Aim and Ignite), I can't help but think of Isabelle. The band is... specific, but I consider it worth checking out, if you like this type of music :)
Nick and Judy have very different definitions of a perfect start of a day, which is only natural given how much the two of them differ. The one thing they certainly share is that when Chief Bogo calls them to discuss their investigation, they both already know that is not going to be a good start at all. The water buffalo greeted them in his office, his face as expressive as ever, but they didn’t need any clues to figure out why they were there.

“You know why you’re here, don’t you?” He asked.

“To discuss the progress of our investigation,” Nick confirmed.

“We’re basically at the end…” Judy tried to assure, but stopped in the middle of sentence as Chief Bogo stared at her.

“Are you?”

“We found the pattern. We only need to identify the hyena that we saw buying these things and we have it,” Judy assured. With August’s help, they had finally found the pattern and from the CCTV recordings they had checked so far, it seemed like it was actually just a single mammal doing these suspicious purchases; the yet unidentified hyena.

“True. The thing is, though, I received this report today,” Chief pushed over to them some paper. The Detectives grabbed it and started studying carefully. “Some scouts found an old bonfire with remains of banknotes in it. They were taken to laboratory where some of them were identified as the ones from your stolen ATM. Considering the amount found, we can freely assume entire sum stolen has been burnt. This puts your case in quite a different light.”

“It still doesn’t put us anywhere near finding the culprits, though,” Nick pointed out carefully.

“No, but guys from Meadowlands, some young detective of theirs called Ferris, to be specific, is very eager about the case. Once he figured out that we and them are investigating this same incident, he called me asking, if can he take over the investigation or should we proceed on our own,” explained the water buffalo.

“I’d prefer to finish it now that we’re at the very end,” Judy expressed her opinion confidently.

“And I would prefer not to waste two of my best detectives chasing around money that has already been burnt to cinders when Meadowlands seem so eager to do it instead,” the Chief noticed and Judy and Nick eyed one another. It was a bad time to waste their time like this indeed; at summer, police force always struggled with too much work, since plenty of officers would go for their holiday, especially the ones with families. The crime in Downtown had a nasty tendency
of spiking significantly at the time, too, which only left them with more and more work. Judy and Nick had been solving the other cases in meanwhile already, but they still could see Chief’s reasoning.

“But the choice is ours?” Nick asked with gentle note of sarcasm.

“The choice is yours,” Chief promised. Whatever they’d do, he’d approve it, but keep it in his mind and they realized it even too well. The fox sighed and glanced at Judy. She nodded, if not too eagerly.

“We will hand it over to the Detective Ferris, then,” declared Wilde and Bogo nodded with approval.

“Perfectly. Organize the paperwork and introduce Ferris to what you have found so far. I will tell him to come here immediately. In meanwhile, I expect you to finish the paperwork for that robbery you’ve just closed today and tomorrow, you’ll have a new case assigned. Something will pop up, I’m sure.”

“It would be ironic, if it didn’t,” Nick smirked.

“I could handle that kind of irony. You’re dismissed,” the Chief concluded the meeting and Nick and Judy left his office. Hopps sighed as they headed back to their box.

“That went well,” she muttered.

“I was tired of whole that case anyway,” Nick smirked, but didn’t sound too convincing. “Duchess will be pleased, too. Now we can have our eyes open.”

“It’s not like we were doing it around the clock. Some weeks, we didn’t even glance at it. Until August found that thing with the suspicious purchases…”

“We had made no progress whatsoever,” Nick said.

“That’s… not how I was going to put it,” Judy disagreed and he chuckled. “Maybe it’s actually for the better?” She wondered. “Like Chief said, we have plenty of work here at the Downtown anyway,” she said, but didn’t sound all that convincing.

“Are you asking me, Carrots, or stating things?” Nick wondered amusingly.

“I don’t know myself,” confessed the bunny with a helpless shrug. “I’ll go and tell August. He should know too,” she suggested.

“Sure thing. I’ll be in our box. We still have other paperwork too,” the fox suggested.

“Huh, I almost forgot,” Judy smiled ironically and they took opposite turns; while Judy hopped down the stairs, he walked among the boxes. As he passed by the Reynolds and Alvarez’s one, he noticed that Max was alone, rocking in his chair, staring at the ceiling in silence. He seemed quite upset.

“Why the long face, Max?” Smirked the fox and he chuckled.

“It’s genetic, I’m afraid,” the wolf joked. “Some troubles with HR and then, we lost our case. It’s a long story. Actually… Having any plans for the evening?” He asked.

“Not really, why?”
“It’s been a while since we’ve done anything together. And I don’t remember the last time we went to a bar together, too,” Max pointed out.

“Barnes’ farewell party, I suppose,” guessed Nick. “I thought you’re not supposed to drink? Kaylee won’t be happy.”

“Kaylee’s going shopping with Judy. And besides, did I say anything about alcohol?” The wolf remarked.

“So what, we’re just walking into a bar and ordering two cokes?” Nick snickered.

“Technically… why not?”

“Technically… So, Fox’s Den?” The fox picked the most pub that he could think of. “If we’re making it weird, let’s just make it weird,” he said and Max giggled.

“Sure thing,” the wolf agreed amusingly.

“I still owe you a fist to the face, don’t I? for the sake of the last time we were there.”

“We can get to that part, if you insist. Eight pm?” Fox suggested.

“Let it be. So, try not to get killed before that!”

“I can’t promise things like that,” Nick replied seriously, even though all that awaited him today was plenty of paperwork. “Take care,” he wished him and went back to his box. He sat down to fill in all the documents they had for today when Judy joined him, in quite decent mood. She never could sulk for long in the end.

“So, to the work,” Judy said enthusiastically. Even after so many years, this bunny could be enthusiastic about basically any aspect of the job. Or at least any that didn’t involved getting shot, yelled at or otherwise putting at harm. Not that she wasn’t a troublemaker in the degree at least comparable to him, that is. And she obviously claimed she took no pleasure in getting all the mess they usually did, even if both of them knew she liked it overall.

“What?” Judy asked the fox and then, he realized that he was staring at her. He turned his head away, trying not to look awkward and chuckled nervously.

“Nothing, just… thinking about something,” he only said. The bunny opened her mouth as she wanted to add something, but then she stopped, closed it slowly and resumed her work. Nick watched her in silence for a little longer, sighed gently and then, resumed his work. Before the end of the day, they managed to finish the paperwork for their recent case and introduce Detective Ferris from Meadowlands into the progress of the case they had been investigating.

7.38 pm, Wednesday, August 10, 2022

Judy and Kaylee had this silly struggle about shopping, where they basically had to do it
together. Judy never could decide on what to buy on her own; she had a strict amount of money that she was willing to spend on clothes, but she found so many nice things so quickly, she hardly could fit into it and when she was alone, she often would just buy nothing and try another time, usually with no different result. Kaylee had another problem; she liked all the clothes she found only until she’d try them on. With no one’s encouragement, hardly ever would she be ever able to decide for anything. And thus, the two rabbits went for any serious shopping together; only then, could the two of them walk out satisfied. Today was no different. Judy and Kaylee had been to just couple shops, but both of them were really happy with what they’ve found. Now, they were sitting by a table with chips and soft drinks that they took for the dinner.

“I love that dress of yours. Nick will be stunned,” Kaylee assured and then, coughed off awkwardly. “I mean, August will be stunned.”

“Uh-huh,” Judy muttered, a bit annoyed with the slip of her tongue.

“Well, it’s not like only one of them can be stunned, when…”

“Kaylee?”

“Huh?”

“Seriously?” Judy asked and her friend laughed nervously.

“I’m sorry, just… never mind me. The closer we are to the adoption date, the more scatterbrained I am,” she explained awkwardly.

“Right, it’s just behind the corner. Everything ready?” Judy asked curiously, glad to change the subject.

“Yup, we just need to buy couple things more this weekend and we’re ready. I mean, as ready as we could possibly be,” she corrected herself.

“Nervous?” Judy wondered.

“Less than Max, I bet,” laughed Kaylee. “A bit. But I’m not scared, if that’s what you’re asking about. It’s just another day, just another challenge.”

“Indeed,” nodded Hopps.

“So, when do we get to see you in that pretty dress of yours?” Wondered Kaylee curiously.

“We’re going out with August on next Saturday. He’s taking me for a musical and I’m pretty excited,” she explained. “I’ve already checked couple songs, even though I really shouldn’t be and I loved them, too,” Judy said and her friend nodded, clearly wondering about something.

“Say, Judy… I don’t want to impose, but…”

“The activity never bothered you, did it?” Judy noticed half-jokingly and they giggled.

“I suppose,” Kaylee shrugged. There was no point denying, after all. “Anyways, I wondered if… Hmm… Are you thinking of August… long term?” She asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, do you have any plans for him?”
“We’ve just met!” Judy protested and the skeptical sight her friend gave him explained everything to her. That, she could have been saying two months ago. Especially to Kaylee. “That’s… not so simple.”

“Why is that so?” Kaylee wondered. “I mean, if you’d like to share, otherwise…”

“No, no, actually… I think I need your advice,” Judy confessed.

“What’s the matter?” Reynolds asked, more than happy to be of help.

“So, first off, August is an awesome guy. I can’t say a single bad word about him,” Judy started carefully. “And in any other universe, I’d be most happy to just get closer with him, but…”

“But Nick,” guessed Kaylee and Judy sighed deeply, like someone very, very tired or at least equally troubled.

“We’re falling apart!” She confessed with frustration. “The closer I’m getting with August, the further and further away I fall from Nick! I used to feel that we were always on this same page. Nowadays… Sometimes I’m not even sure if we’re in this same book,” she confessed helplessly. “And when I try to talk with Nick about it, we never… get to the point. Not really.”

“I can imagine,” Kaylee nodded with understanding.

“And two days ago, we had this conversation with August, where… just let me find it…” Judy reached for her phone and browsed through the messages until she viewed the ones she intended.

Me:  I guess you’re right :P

So, see you tomorrow?

August: If she doesn’t figure out to actually eat me in the morning

Me: I really can’t tell if you’re joking or not.

August: Me neither

Me: You’re too good to be eaten.

Good night and see you tomorrow :)

August: Right

Judy?

Me: ?

August: I love you

“There it is. So, August was going through some hardship and, at the end of the day, he wrote me this,” Judy shown her and Kaylee smiled.
“That’s cute. Who was going to eat him?” She wondered.

“Oh, a long story. Anyway, he caught me by surprise with that confession and you know, the first thought was just to write it back, but then I…” Judy paused awkwardly.

“Yeah?”

“I thought of Nick,” muttered Judy. “And I suddenly felt bad about him, but it’s ridiculous, because what does he have to do with it, right?!” Judy protested, not noticing that Kaylee’s face expressed even too well what she thought of it. “And I wanted to just write him back, but all I did was… this,” Judy slid down a little bit and shown her the next message.

Me:  <3

“I don’t know what to do anymore, Kaylee,” Judy explained. “It’s psychotic. However I choose to act, I’m going to hurt someone and I just can’t…” She paused. Kaylee was watching Judy’s phone in silence. She had this expression of someone having found the confirmation to her old thesis that everyone had ignored this far. She sighed deeply and eyed her friend carefully.

“Tell me, Judy…” She paused dramatically. “Do you even love August or is it just his resemblance of Nick that finds you so well?”

“What?” Judy asked, confused.

“Exactly what I said. Do you even treat August seriously? Because I think answering this question is where you should start dealing with this mess.” Kaylee repeated the question and Judy hung her head down. She opened her mouth several times only to shut it down yet again, as she couldn’t decide what to say. And then, they heard some screams in the burglar; a cheetah ran out of a store with something in his paws, while shop owner followed him yelling “Thief! Catch the thief!” The market security were already on the move, but they had no chance of catching a guy so quick. Judy eyed her friend and she just smirked.

“Go,” said Kaylee and she was already gone. Judy was passing through the crowd swiftly perpendicularly to the thief, so that she could cross his path. Just as he was about to pass by her, she dashed right at his feet, tripping the cheetah. The thief fell, surprised, and when he tried to stand up, some passersby stopped him till the guards arrived. Judy, not wanting any attention, just slipped away and just let the guys holding him have the awe. She returned to Kaylee’s desk with a smirk and Kaylee couldn’t help to giggle.

“But, back to the subject…” she suggested.

“And for a second, I hoped…” Judy chuckled.

“Like I said, answer yourself if you’re even treating August seriously or are you two at the stage you are simply because things with Nick failed to kick off so far. I realize that you want to make everyone happy, but you know it doesn’t work this way,” Kaylee reminded her. Judy let her head down and then, she giggled.

“I guess I was kind of half-expecting you to give me some subtle, easy way out,” she chuckled, realizing how naïve she was.

“Go for Nick,” advised her Kaylee and then, she laughed. “Like that?”

“That’s what you get for being nice to everyone.”

“And absurdly indecisive,” added Judy.

“Yup. You dumb bunny,” smirked Kaylee and Hopps felt chills at the sound of these words. When was the last time she heard these words from him? Long. Probably too long. She missed him and this thought amused her. She had seen Nick three hours ago and she already missed him. Or did she miss the old him? The one from two months ago? And then, she thought of August. And eventually, she didn’t know what to think at all.

“Come on, I’ll drive you home,” suggested Kaylee and she complied quietly. They drove back home in silence and Kaylee said only one more thing, right when they and stopped by Judy’s place and she was about to leave.

“No matter what you choose to do, there will be hearts broken. Make sure it’s just one, not three,” warned Kaylee. Judy nodded, muttered thanks and closed the car’s door and watched her friend drive away. She’d love to say she knew what to do, but to tell the truth, having understood her situation better, she only was even more confused.

8.09 pm, Wednesday, August 10, 2022

Fox’s Den was one of the places that Nick knew well and thus, usually chose not to appear there. The shady pub in the shadier part of Happytown (this is probably the point where some mammals would question if there are non-shady spots in Happytown) was a rather unwelcome place to police officers, especially the two known as well as Nick Wilde and Max Reynolds. Still, it didn’t stop them from coming to the place and, much to bartender’s confusion, ordering two small bottles of coke. They took a table in the corner, still amused with the situation.

“Young Reynolds in the middle of Happytown. You really are asking for trouble,” Nick pointed out half-jokingly.

“You know that I consider a week without troubles and crazy adventures a week wasted,” Max smirked. “Not that adopting children isn’t an adventure crazy enough,” he laughed.

“I can only imagine,” Nick nodded. “It’s any moment now, isn’t it?”

“Next Saturday and so, paperwork, paperwork and a thousand things to buy. It feels like moving in all over again and this time, I’m even more excited,” Max explained.

“Throwing a party?” Wondered the fox and his friend chuckled as he shook his head.

“Nah, just spending a day with kids. We thought of a week by the sea to celebrate it, but I learnt today that I need to verify my plans,” Max explained.
“That’s what had you so upset today? What happened?” Nick asked.

“I had two weeks off assigned for the end of the August, so that we could spend more time with kids, but today I was informed that, due to the high demand on Detectives this summer, they had moved it to September without caring to inform me. Of course, they claimed that I had agreed.”

“Kaylee too?” Nick guessed.

“That’s the fun part; they forgot about her. It took us a while to move her time off to cover mine, since it was apparently impossible to do it other way around and since kids’ school starts at September, we had to cancel the trip plans,” the wolf explained bitterly. “On the brighter side, I guess we’re just postponing the plans until winter holidays.”

“Unless…”

“Don’t get me started,” Max stopped him right there and fox snickered.

“And how’s your case?” Nick asked.

“Closed; lack of evidence.”

“Oh,” was all that the fox said.

“And yours?”

“Meadowlands took over.”

“Oh,” Max replied only and the two of them were sitting in silence. It looked like both of them had lost the cases they had worked on for long time quite suddenly and both seemed pretty dissatisfied about it. “Meadowlands? What does Meadowlands have to do with it?” The wolf asked suddenly, confused.

“Funny story, actually,” Nick said with his tone indicating that there was not much funny to it. He then explained to Max how the things had turned around with the investigation of burnt money that Meadowlands had been in charge of.

“And Chief gave you the choice?” Max asked skeptically.

“Nice of him, wasn’t it?” Smirked Nick.

“Yeah. It’s quite curious, actually. Why would they burn all that money, if they made so much effort to steal it in the first place?” The wolf wondered.

“We guess they freaked out, but this only suggests we were really close… Ugh, let’s not talk about it, it’s tiring enough to pretend to Carrots I don’t mind throwing away two months of work,” Nick suggested. “Anyways, what happened about your investigation? I thought you had even too much evidence?”

“Too much and not enough at the same time, it seems,” Max shrugged. “Prosecutor Moore called us on Monday, saying that they were closing the investigation. The official report will claim it was a gas explosion caused most likely incidentally due to a leak in old pipes.”

“Don’t you have all the proof you need that someone was tempering with it? You were chasing that hyena,” Nick noticed.
“That’s what I assumed too, so we were quite surprised. And then, prosecutor Moore told us that they had some...” Max paused, unsure if he should be telling him. But if not Nick, then whom? He and Judy were two mammals beyond his wife that he’d share such a secret with. “Some external party that was pressing on them to label it as an accident. Prosecutor seemed rather powerless when it came to denying it to them. Unless we find the hyena and the confession, that is.”

“Some external party?” Nick asked suspiciously. “Any idea whom?” He wondered and the wolf hesitated. Just like Isabelle had said, Anastasia was an obvious pick, but... “Your sister, perhaps?” Guessed the fox. “I might be crying wolf, no pun intended, but if we’re looking for a conspiracy, she fits the picture just perfectly,” he pointed out and Max laughed. “What?”

“Sorry, just... Isabelle even used this same pun to bring it down to me,” chuckled the wolf even though it was no laughing matter. “If it really is a case, then I might put a kink in Spice’s plans,” he declared with firmness that upset the fox.

“Be careful.”

“Nicky, I’ve got it...”

“No, I mean it,” the fox interrupted him firmly. “I know she’s just your sister to you, but if you happen to threaten her or her plans... she won’t hesitate to pull the trigger.”

“Hey, she’s my...”

“Max,” Nick stopped him. “Do you remember what your father has done to mammals that opposed him? Remember Okami and Rockfield? The Wolf Pack? Tundratown ZPD? We still don’t know for sure how many inconvenient guys they buried. Hey, my father was just an accident, but they handled it easily too,” he argued and Max let his head down. “And I don’t want to accuse your sister of anything, but if she’s plotting her schemes and you try to stop her... if you try to stop her clumsily that is... she might hurt you, Kaylee and the children you will soon adopt,” Nick warned him deadly seriously. He could see the chills he gave the wolf, as he was considering Wilde’s words in silence.

“You’re right,” Max admitted finally. “I’ll be careful. I mean, I probably won’t have much time to look for that Ryuk anymore anyways...” he admitted reluctantly. “But if anything pops up, I’ll be very careful,” Max promised, suddenly recalling how Kaylee had been kidnapped. It was about him that time too. He can’t let a thing like this happen ever again.

“Glad to hear it,” nodded the fox.

“And what do you think about Isabelle?” Asked Max suddenly, but he only shrugged.

“I don’t know her all that well. She certainly is... extraordinary. Why do you ask?”

“Because she told me my sister was giving her a job offer of sort. I mean, a bribe,” Max corrected himself awkwardly. “She rejected it, since Spice didn’t stand for her family when things went bad, but now that we’re talking of these things...”

“Go with your heart, Max. It hasn’t failed you so far,” encouraged him Nick and he hesitated only for a short moment.

“I trust her. I guess it might sound strange after all she put me through...”

“Honestly? I think you might be the one person at the station that really knows her,” Nick
“She’s kinda like you, isn’t she?” Realized the wolf. “I mean, I’d trust you with my life, Nicky, but the longer I know you, the more I realize how little I know about you. Like, what’s with that red handkerchief of yours that you always have? Where do you have it from?” Wondered the wolf and Wilde chuckled.

“A long story,” he dismissed the question.

“Does at least Judy know or is it sacred knowledge?” Joked Max.

“Does one exclude the other?” Replied the fox half-jokingly. “I think she knows. It’s just a… souvenir, after all.”

“Souvenir of…”

“A long story,” Nick dismissed it yet again. Max had no subtlety of his mother when it came to extracting information and thus, he hardly stood a chance learning anything against fox’s will.

“But anyways, Isabelle’s like this too. The more I get to know her, the more I don’t know,” explained Max and the two of them drank their cokes, pondering in silence. “Nick, can I ask you something personal?” Reynolds wondered and fox had bad feelings about it.

“Shoot,” he encouraged him, sipping coke slowly.

“Do you love Judy?” Max asked deadly seriously. Nick almost choked on his drink and then, he chuckled. Well, he did not see that coming.

“No offense… but if you know I’m not telling you about some old handkerchief, why do you assume I’d answer that question?” He asked, seemingly amused.

“Because this one is important,” replied the wolf. “And not even Judy knows an answer to this one… Not from you, at least,” he explained seriously. Nick dwelled on this reply, as he turned his head away.

“That’s touching, but…”

“You know, I found it really ironic when you suggested this place. The first time we met here, I was heartbroken, quite sure that I had lost Kaylee… that I had killed her, even. And you found me and talked sense into me, even if I really didn’t want it. And I think that we’re sitting at the opposite sides of the same table now,” the wolf explained. Nick listened to him in silence, paw wrapped around a glass bottle of coke firmly and his talons scratched its surface gently. He was not going to like it. “Now, it’s you that is scared and confused. Of course, you will never show it, Nicky. But still, I can bet that deep inside your heart, you’re terrified, because you are losing Judy. For the first time, she has someone good enough for her. Things between them seem to be working out to the point where you no longer can count on them to just fall apart on their own like you always did. You’re not the sort of the guy to sabotage it… not when she seems happy with things, right? Because you’d be ruining her happiness for your own gain and I believe you’d never do it to a girl you love. So instead, you’re just sitting quietly, sulking and brooding, like a terrified idiot and a coward you are deep in your heart, you only so sly fox…” Nick didn’t even realize when he stood from the table and smashed Max right in the face. Wolf’s head swayed back, as he yelped, holding his muzzle. And then Max wiped it off, leaving a bloody mark on his paw and smirked triumphantly.
“I guess I deserved it,” he pointed out. For a short moment, the two of them were staring at each other, acknowledging the moment; it was the first time since they’ve met when Nick actually lost his temper. And it’s not that because Max offended him particularly, but because he left him so vulnerable by what he had said.

“Shut up,” the fox muttered finally. “You don’t understand.”

“I think I do. And I think that’s exactly your problem. You hate when people understand you without your allowance,” riposted the wolf, not minding the blood dripping from his nose on the table. “So, do you love Judy?” He asked again. Fox huffed with frustration. It’s not that he was ashamed of this particular feeling of his; he simply struggled revealing his heart to anyone, even a good friend like Max.

“I love her,” Nick admitted.

“Then go and tell her,” the wolf suggested.

“It’s not that simple…”

“Why?” Reynolds laughed. “You told me! It can’t be that embarrassing to tell it to her!”

“Because…” The fox paused, lacking the right words. “I…”

“Whatever she says, will only make things easier for the two of you, Nicky,” Max argued. “And if you wait a year more, there might be nothing worth saying in the end. I realize you must be scared; you have no idea how terrified I was when I was about to confess my feelings to Kaylee.”

“I’m not afraid!” Nick protested.

“Then go and tell her!” Max encouraged him and then, he saw this invisible force paralyzing the fox. No matter how he’d like to put it, the idea was terribly discouraging in the end. “You’re the best friends for six years now, right? The sort of friends that finish each other’s sentences, stare holes in each other’s tails and spend together every single day. The kind of friends that people take for a couple and honestly, the thing you two have is amazing! Anyone will tell you that and you know it too! And yet, you must know well that you’re still hanging somewhere between best friends and lovers. Whole five years of ‘We don’t even know where we are!’ And I understand that you liked the things how they were before August, but when you’re this close with a girl… you either step up or you step down,” Max gesticulated vividly. “I’m sure Judy loves you, but she needs to be loved too. So you either love her back… or you let it go and let someone that can take your place. No in-betweens, no grey zones anymore. Just do or die,” the wolf concluded and the two of them were sitting in silence. Nick was processing Reynolds’ words in silence, only sipping his drink. Even though he seemed to be staring at the wall, his mind was aimed somewhere far, far away.

“I guess I’ll need to buy some flowers,” concluded Nick, much to his friend’s enthusiasm. “And get some paper towels for your nose. You really are bleeding,” he noticed, a bit troubled.

“Oh, right,” Max looked down at the small puddle at the table. “I deserved it, though,” he said while Nick hurried to bathroom. He came back quickly with some tables and Max wiped the table and then, cleaned his muzzle.

“So, we’re square!” Nick snickered cheerfully. “When I promised I’d punch you, I never thought I’d actually do it.”
“Yeah, me neither,” confirmed the wolf. “Did I really rub you that bad?”

“You can put it in your CV,” Nick only joked. Like expected, he wasn’t really eager to speak of it more than he already had. Max knew well he’d be more than happy for whole that conversation to remain just between the two of them.

“I will,” the wolf agreed, sipping his drink. What more was there to say?

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7.31 pm, Friday, August 12, 2022

The doorbell surprised Judy when she was laying in her bed, staring in the ceiling and listening to music, wondering. She certainly wasn’t expecting anyone at such time. Even more than that, she knew that August had no way to be visiting her tonight. Let alone the fact that he always announced his visits, he was busy today, helping his brothers launching a boat one of them owned. With this option eliminated, it left only one mammal possible to be standing at her door; no one else than her favorite fox, Nick Wilde. She hopped off the bed, turned the lights on, blinding herself for a short moment and opened it. As expected, right in front of her stood Nick. He seemed dressed casually and yet, there was something more to it; his shirt seemed freshly ironed, the fur just trimmed and she felt a gentle, pleasant scent of that cologne she had bought him for last birthday.

“Wakey, wakey, Carrots,” smirked the fox, properly guessing that she had been drowsing off just a moment earlier. She smiled with amusement and he revealed a small, beautiful bouquet that he had been holding behind his back this far. He offered it to her and she took it gently and breathed in pleasant flowery scent.

“Hey, Nick,” she greeted him enthusiastically. “Please, come in,” she invited him inside and he stepped into the small flat she still occupied. The fox sat down at her bed like he usually did while Judy put his flowers in the vase that she bought recently for all the floral gifts she had been receiving lately.

“Lazy Friday?” Nick noticed and she shrugged, as she sat down next to him.

“Well, I’m no party animal like Max or Isabelle,” she noticed half-jokingly. “And I needed to chill down a little bit. Today was one intense day.”

“True, this new case is no joking matter. But I bet we’ll have it closed by the end of next week,” assured the fox confidently and she watched him skeptically.

“Is that so? That’s really cocky of you,” she pointed out with amusement.

“Maybe it is… or maybe it’s just how much faith I have in the two of us,” he smiled back charmingly and Judy’s heart skipped a beat. Was he… Was he really…

“I guess,” she said, a bit embarrassed. She was blushing and she knew that he loved the way she did. His smile only confirmed it.
“I can even say, Carrots, that my faith in us goes to the point, where I would like to reinvite you to celebrate our inevitably nigh triumph with a doubtlessly greatest party Zootopia will be upholding this year,” he smiled confidently. “I know that you’ve agreed before to come with me and it will be no surprise to you, but nonetheless, the last time I’ve done it was awfully shabby, much below what you’d deserve,” he explained. Judy thought at first that he actually practiced the speech and then, she realized that it was just him just being him, with this love of drama rooted deeply within him. She smiled, a bit confused.

“Well, you’ve wrapped the thing up so neatly that I have no idea what you’re talking about anymore,” she admitted with amusement.

“The Duchess, or should I say Lady Jennifer Tompkins, invited us to her wedding, which will take place on next Saturday,” he explained. “And while it will be her celebration, I’d love to make it about us too. There are things I should have told you long time…” And then, the fox paused, watching Judy carefully. He saw her initial joy turning into sudden realization, confusion and then, pure horror mixed with complete embarrassment.

“Judy?” He asked carefully, his smile disappearing in the very instant.

“I can’t,” she muttered shamefully.

“You can’t?” He repeated bluntly. “Do you mean…”

“I’m sorry, I can’t go to the wedding,” she apologized most awkwardly. “I completely forgot, but August has just invited me for that musical, he had already bought the tickets for Saturday and I’ve already said yes and…” She watched him awkwardly and saw this great disappointment in his eyes. She had seen it so serious only once before; when she had unintentionally said all those awful things during the Nighthowler investigation. He took a deep breath, stood from the bed and stepped toward the door, processing what she had just said.

“Nick, I didn’t mean…” She hopped off the bed and followed him.

“When did he invite you?” He only asked. She hated this tone of his, this… disillusionment. Like all of his world was falling apart and he could only stare blankly.

“Um… week ago? Two, I think?” She admitted awkwardly, staring at his back, with the tail so low, it was sweeping the floor.

“You promised. You even said that you certainly were not forgetting it! That’s exactly what you said: I’m not forgetting it,” he accused her, as he turned around. His fury was visible, although perfectly contained.

“Nick, I’m sorry, I… it was two months ago and…”

“And what, is that an excuse?!” He snarled with frustration. “Not even two months, Carrots. I thought expiration date for civil case is three years,” he tried to turned into a joke, but it certainly didn’t sound like one.

“Nick, if I could turn it around…”

“You could have,” Nick reminded her. “You just should have told August that on that certain Saturday, you’re occupied. If you remembered, that is,” he told her bitterly an they sat in awkward silence for a long moment. Judy was thinking desperately of what to say now, but nothing was coming to her mind. And then, she took a deep breath.
“Can I… can I make this up to you anyhow?” She asked.

“Theoretically, you could apologize to August and go with me. But we both know you won’t do it,” the fox said, brutally honest.

“Well… I promised August and he already bought the tickets…”

“Oh-huh. You promised August,” he repeated slowly. “I guess you can’t let him down, can you?” He snarled and Judy clenched her fists. She couldn’t let August down. She couldn’t let Nick down either. Well… she already had.

“I’m sorry! I just…” Judy sighed ashamed. She really didn’t know what to say. “What happened to us?” She asked desperately. “We were getting along so well, until August appeared! And then, you just… we… we fell out,” she protested and he flinched. He hated that expression.

“And what was I supposed to say? That’s it’s not OK with me that you spend so much time together?! That you should stop hanging out with the rabbit you like so much because it bothers me?! Because I’m jealous about you?!”

“Maybe you should have told me how you feel!” Judy yelled back. “How can I know, if you keep claiming everything’s alright?!” She asked desperately and huffed with frustration, as the fox found no answer. “I have to keep guessing what’s going on in your head and that’s not how it’s supposed to work, Nick!” She complained and sighed with frustration. “I’m tired of guessing! I’m tired of having to keep figuring out what’s going on in this head of yours! I…” She sighed, as she shook her head with resignation. “I never have to guess what August thinks.”

“Oh, because he’s telling you everything,” laughed the fox.

“Maybe he is?!” Judy protested. “Maybe not everyone just sits quiet in the corner and…”

“You half-blinded him,” Nick interrupted her coldly and she stopped in the middle of sentence.

“I… What?” She stuttered bluntly.

“That night, when he took you out and you chased the criminal. He lost sight in one of his eyes after he was hit,” Nick explained. “What, did he forget to mention?” He mocked her cruelly and yet, she seemed not to be noticing it. Judy was just staring at Nick blankly, slowly comprehending his words. Could August have been lying to her for whole this time?

“I… I didn’t think…”

“I know you didn’t,” he interrupted her emotionlessly. “But it’s a good time to start. Good night, Carrots,” he walked to the door.

“Nick?” She called him and he stopped, just about as he was to leave. “I’m sorry,” she said and he nodded, acknowledging it, but not even forcing a smile. He closed the door behind him.
and Judy sighed deeply leaning against the wall. Her eyes grew watery, but she held her tears. It certainly was a disaster. It could have been a catastrophe, but still… it was quite a disaster.

Chapter End Notes

One of tougher chapters to write, I hope it turned out alright.
6.12 pm, Saturday, August 20, 2022

There were no fanfares, no applauds or reporters. The moment could have slipped basically unnoticed to the unaware and yet, today was the day that would change Reynolds family greatly. For today, the family has received two of its new members; Mia and Thane Reynolds. They left the orphanage most joyful, with Ryan Thorn just as excited as them, promising his friends that he’d live with them before they’d even notice. Indeed, the day of his adoption would soon come just as well and he looked forward to it with excitement, only a little disappointed that he couldn’t go with them already. The four mammals of Reynolds family returned to their house for the delightful dinner Max and Kaylee had been working on whole afternoon. After they ate, they went to unpack Mia and Thane’s stuff in their rooms. Kaylee helped Mia arrange the plushies she had and arranged her drawing tools, while Max and Thane put his brick-made robots at one shelf and several books he had on the other. They discussed passionately boy’s favorite fantasy saga that Max, heavily inspired by that boy to start reading again, had just finished. Later, they came back downstairs to spend some time together. They ate a surprise dessert that was waiting in the fridge at first and then, turned on the console and played an all-ages-friendly platformers with cute sack toys struggling with most creative obstacles. And then, they heard the doorbell ringing. Kaylee eyed Max carefully, but he just shrugged.

“I’ll see who that is. Go on without me, I’ll join you in a moment,” he pleased. He stood from his seat and opened the door to see someone he certainly wasn’t expecting; his own sister. Anastasia seemed dressed quite elegantly, in her paws she had two gift bags. Max watched her carefully, quite confused.

“Spice? What…”

“Good evening, Max,” she smiled politely.

“Hi. I wasn’t expecting you,” the wolf explained himself.

“I know, but how could I have missed the day when our small family grows so much wider?” She asked with amusement. “May I?”

“Oh, of course,” Max stepped aside and invited her in. He followed his sister to the living room where his family were playing. When Kaylee saw the guests, she paused the game and called kids attention.

“Children, we have a guest,” Max announced. “This is my sister, aunt Anastasia. Say hi.”

“Good evening, aunt,” both bunnies said simultaneously.

“Good evening, children,” Anastasia smiled cheerfully, as she crouched by them. “Your aunt and uncle told me so much about you, you cutie pies. You have no idea how happy they are for you,” she assured and then, showed them the gift bags.
“This one’s for you, Thane. I heard you loved building robots, so I got you one,” she handed bag to Thane, who gasped with excitement, as he unpacked the set. Max recognized it as one of the most expensive sets in the store. No wonder the boy was so excited.

“And I heard you’re a little artist, aren’t you, Mia?” Spice asked and, as the girl nodded shyly, she giggled most charmingly. “I asked my friends and found you some very nice drawing tools and this beautiful notebook. It is yours,” she offered it to her and the bunny took it gently.

“Thank you,” Mia said cheerfully, a bit abashed.

“Yes, thank you,” Thane agreed, barely stopping himself from opening the box immediately. Spice chuckled cheerfully.

“Give your aunt a hug, won’t you?” She pleased and the kids hugged her enthusiastically. Anastasia laughed with amusement. “Oh, what cute little buns you have!” She assured.

“Spice, can I talk with you?” Max called his sister; he seemed rather uneasy. While Kaylee encouraged Thane and Mia to open their gifts, the two wolves went to the kitchen. Before leaving, Max managed to catch his wife’s troubled sight; she too didn’t like Spice’s sudden appearing. The wolf turned on the kettle while his sister leaned against the oven.

“Tea?” He offered.

“You know I never fancied these boiled leaves,” she noticed.

“Yeah, I’m still trying to convince Kaylee about them too,” smirked the wolf, but his smile didn’t last long. “What do I owe this visit to?” He asked.

“Why, the children! Little Reynolds! I feel responsible for them,” assured Anastasia with a gentle note of sarcasm.

“For last six months you haven’t even called me and now, you decided to play a wealthy aunt?” Max asked doubtingly. “What’s the deal?” He demanded to know. Anastasia stared at him in silence and then, sighed deeply.

“I know we’ve never been getting along, but you’re my brother, Max, and these cute little buns over there… their my nephew and niece now. I need to look after you,” she explained quite seriously.

“We can handle ourselves,” Max assured coldly.

“I don’t doubt. The thing is… both you and Kaylee are equally pesky and that might turn out rather… inconvenient to all of us.”

“Just like with that gas explosion?” Wondered Max. “I heard you were dying to know anything about the progress of investigation.”

“Were I? I didn’t notice,” Anastasia chuckled. “I hoped to make Alvarez my mole at your station, a petty case like that would be a perfect start. Too bad that she was too stupid to see her opportunity,” she said, while Max eyed her carefully. Somehow, he was willing to believe Nick and Isabelle’s gut feelings this time.

“Uh huh. So what are you planning this time?” He wondered.

“Ah, nothing really,” she shrugged carelessly. “Just a friendly warning; try not to poke
around too much the way you love to, will you? I know Duchess is trying passionately to involve your friends in her business, but stay away from her, because I’ve already started to like these cute little bunnies of yours,” she warned him. Max snarled angrily, stepped over to her and caught his sister by the collar.

“Alright, listen now,” he pulled her face just inches away from his. “If you ever do anything to my family…”

“They’re my family too,” Anastasia interrupted him coldly. “It’s not me that you should be afraid of, Max, but her. Tough times are coming on Duchess. The farther you keep away from her, the safer you are.”

“What are you plotting?” Max asked with disbelief.

“Me? Nothing, this time. I just happen to know things,” she smiled mysteriously and then, glanced at her watch. “I probably should be going, now. Goodnight, Max,” she said coldly and he snarled dropping her.

“What are you doing this for?” He asked suddenly and she stopped from leaving the kitchen.

“Doing what?”

“What’s the point of this struggle for power? Can’t you just lay back and enjoy what you have?” He asked and Anastasia laughed in his face.

“Max, Max, Max… You could be satisfied with what you have; a quiet life, normal family and an average job, but I… I am meant for greatness,” she explained, amused.

“I guess I take after mom,” he said only and she chuckled.

“Each chose their role model parent,” she agreed. “Goodnight, brother.”

“Goodnight,” he nodded. Anastasia stepped into the living room to say goodbye to the bunnies and then, he followed her to the exit. Max came back to his family smiling, even if Kaylee could see how troubled he was.

“What do you have there?” He called enthusiastically as he crouched by his children. He caught Kaylee’s worried sight; they’d have plenty of things to discuss once Thane and Mia would go to bed.

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8.47 pm, Saturday, August 20, 2022

Today was the special day, at least so did seem the city to claim. Isabelle could sense the mood, but it never struck her in a proper degree to impress her. Duchess was getting married, what a big deal. Lady Tompkins was changing her surname, marrying a cop from Happytown. The gossip magazines were going crazy over the subject. Duchess’s dress, the list of guests, the party
itself, how did she meet her new husband, how did the previous one die… They dug out everything there was to be dug out, including the most dramatic events of life stories of the lovebirds. Isabelle found it a little annoying, how they all were glorifying the day. As if it was just the beginning, not the capstone of Duchess’s changes throughout the years. Like these two had just met. Isabelle found it outright stupid, but there was one good thing about it; Duchess’s clubs celebrated along with the Lady herself. This implied half-priced drinks, no entry fees and plenty of new faces in the Diamond.

Isabelle wasn’t quite sure when exactly she made a choice that she’d spend the Saturday here. Probably sometime around the point when she realized everyone around her had some far-going, serious plans for the weekend that included families, boyfriends and all that sugar-coated crap.

And now, Isabelle was sitting by the bar, listening to some absurdly loaded and equally boring guy from mayoral office that was telling her passionately the work stories so mundane that they made her crave to just slit her veins and bleed out slowly, carried off to the void by his monotonous voice. But not before he buys her another drink. He’d get her the most expensive stuff without batting an eye, clearly hoping for something in return. Oh, he was going to be disappointed. Isabelle stared in her glass with reflection; did she have problem with alcohol? Recently, she had been clearly abusing it, but these weren’t easy times for her. Then again, raising the question is a decent indication itself… She had been drinking on sort of regular basis since she was fifteen, but she only did so when she was partying. The breakdowns like the one that August witnessed had almost never happened before. No, alcohol wasn’t the problem for now… it wasn’t the source of the problem at least, just a… side effect. A rather harmful one, admittedly. It was the sort of thing that could ruin both her life and career, especially in ZPD. But it wasn’t the cause per se.

Isabelle sipped her drink, pretending to listen to the guy that bought it for her. She still hated herself for having opened up to August. She was honest. Too honest. She left herself vulnerable. But maybe… there’d come something good out of it? Maybe August won’t use it against her? And what if he was right? What she was having here was sating only in very, very short time. All these people around her were fake. But then again, what was she supposed to do? Just cut it off? Walk out and stop hurting herself over and over again? Because that’s what she was doing; she was hurting herself. She should just stop, right? Yeah, sure, August. It sounded so simple coming from your lips.

“Excuse me, are you even listening?” Asked the loaded guy as he concluded his boring story and Isabelle stared at him blankly as the realization struck her with a power of lightning. You were right, August. It was this simple.

“No. No, I am not,” she admitted as she stood from her seat. “Sorry, I have to go,” she explained herself and, as he stated at her confused, she laughed aloud. Ignoring the guy that was still trying to stop her, she walked out of the club. Isabelle felt the gusts of wind running through her fur and waving her dress. She took a deep breath, let cold air fill her lungs. She suddenly felt… light.

“Just stop hurting yourself. It’s that simple,” she said to herself, parodiying August’s tone. “And what now?” She asked herself, quite clueless. Where to go? What to do? She suddenly felt cold. There was no one that she could go to, no one that could be with her. For a short moment, she glanced at the club, but rejected the thought. August was right. She tried all these years and all she gained was developing depression and possible alcoholic problems. No, that had to be the end of her club adventures. When there still was anything of her old self worth preserving.
“Taxi!” She waved at a characteristic yellow car that was just passing by. It stopped right next to her and she stepped inside.

“Good evening. Where to, ma’am?” Asked the driver and she froze for a moment. Where to? That was an excellent question. She wished she knew.

“Home. I mean, Tundratown, Crevasse Street 12,” she explained and let the driver take her back home while she was staring outside, enjoying the views of the city in the night. She never gave these bewitching lights shrouded in darkness much attention.

Isabelle returned to her empty, soulless flat, turned on the lights and switched on the computer and logged in. She stared blankly in the monitor. So far so good. Now what? For a second, she wished she were a nerd like August. She could spend whole day in front of this monitor without complaint. But since she was only herself… She went to her personal mailbox and browsed through the unread messages of last two days. Most of them were junk, but there was a message from August among them. She opened it, most intrigued and read it aloud.

“Hey, sorry for being… blah, blah, blah, to the point. I found something when I was browsing through the Web. Forgive my… yeah, yeah, got it, you’re intrusive. Anyway, where does he… Here. I was wondering, is it really you, or was it just a name coincidence?” She read quite confused and clicked the link below. She was expecting some article about her uncle and cousin’s arrestment or some story from Tundratown ZPD, but then, the headline hit her like a truck: ‘South Airlines crash: girl survives as jet carrying 142 plunges in the ocean.’

Isabelle stared at it in morbid silence for a very long minute.

“H… how did he… I’ll rutting kill that rodent,” she muttered angrily, as she went down to see the article, even though she knew the content all too well. July of 2010. A plane from Zootopia to a small tropical country somewhere near equator falls into the water soon after take-off for no apparent reason. The rescue boats arrive to the place of catastrophe within couple hours, start looking for survivors.

“… crew searched for hours in violent winds and waves up to 16ft high for survivors before spotting Isabelle Alvarez clinging to a piece of debris,” she read quietly and then, she found the sentence she was looking for. “Both Isabelle’s parents are among 141 passengers presumed dead.” She closed the webpage immediately and turned away, shivering as she recalled the crash. Twelve hours in cold, salty water and high waves, holding to that piece of the chair that for some reason remained afloat and the plushy unicorn that survived the crash along with her. Just sticking to it, waiting for a miracle to happen. Alone. Isabelle cursed under her breath. She thought she had erased it from her mind.

It was long time ago. Very, very long time ago. Her uncle took her in, protected the ‘miracle child’ from all the media attention. He explained to her that it was not her fault and that she shouldn’t be blaming herself for being the only one that lived. She glanced back to her bedroom and saw the old unicorn just by the bed; he even patched up that poor plushie for her. And then, he and his two sons fell in troubles for all that Thunders-related shady business and before she noticed, all family that she was left with were box of dad’s pictures and the old unicorn.

She didn’t even notice when she was sitting in her bed with the plushie on her knees and the box opened, browsing through their photos. There, they went to Natural Museum when she was
six. Here was her first day at school, just year later. Isabelle’s eighth birthday; she was hugging her
new favorite plushy unicorn that she was just given. Here, dad’s smoking his pipe, as he posed
somewhere in the mountains and here, mom sleeping in chair with her book. Over there, she’s
tossing a snowball at her mom somewhere at the outskirts of Tundratown.

Suddenly, Isabelle felt itching in her heart. Why her? Why was she the miracle child?
Why from all the mammals at that plane, was it her that lived? She liked to boost her ego with that,
to claim that it was because she was so special, so smart, so pretty, but in the end, she knew that it
should have been her mom or dad. Both of them were so much better than her. They could have
achieved so much more than she ever was going to and now, all they could do was watching from
above the failure that their daughter was. Isabelle had no doubts; her parents were ashamed of what
she had become. She remembered how her father kept saying that she was meant for greatness; that
whatever dream she’d chose to chase, an actress, a model, a police officer or whatever she had in
her mind, she would soar high above anyone. That she’d have the world at her feet. Dad and mom
surely had to be disappointed with how she turned out to be.

“Then make them proud,” she parodied August’s voice in her head half-jokingly.

“I will make them proud,” she declared aloud and then, she felt chills, as her voice
seemed to have echoed throughout the empty, soulless flat. How? How to not stray away like
thousand times before when she had made such declarations? How could she do it alone? Why
should this time be any different? And then, she thought of the one that had inspired her this time.
August Fares. She said the name slowly and felt some weird, fuzzy feeling in her chest, a feeling
that she’d never suspect herself to experience, certainly not toward him. She remembered how he
talked with her when she got herself drunk at the station, how he took her back home. How he
rejected her affection. And then, a thought sparked in her mind, equally exciting as it was
terrifying. What if… what if she were to not be alone?

11.58 pm, Saturday, August 20, 2022

August Fares was, from lack of a better word, troubled. Isabelle Alvarez who hadn’t
exchanged a word with him since their incident nearly two weeks earlier, was one of the reasons
and that reckless mail he had sent her earlier that day only made it worse in his head. He never
meant to dig in her past like that, he just wanted to know a bit about her uncle that was kicked out
from ZPD in the storm after Young’s Manifesto and then, that plane just popped up… Still, the
way how he handled it and how she probably was going to eat him on Monday was only one of her
problems. Quite a different matter to worry about, much more serious to it, was Judy. Something
had happened between her and Nick on previous weekend. Things had turned subtly for the worse
between the two of them, but then again, August couldn’t get rid of a feeling that things weren’t
quite alright between them either. He tried to figure out what was going on in her head, but he
lacked courage to just ask her openly, afraid of confrontation.

One positive thing that he had to admit was that the musical they had gone to was really
funny and Judy seemed very engaged in the story. August tried to focus on it as much as she did,
but he couldn’t clear his mind to the degree that would allow him that. He couldn’t tell if his
companion saw his struggles, but she never commented on them and she wasn’t the kind of person to keep her feelings to herself. Soon, the play ended and the two of them continued to chatter, as August drove them back home.

“August, how about you drive to your place and walk me to my house instead?” Judy suggested suddenly. “I wanted to talk with you and…”

“Sure,” he nodded. “Something seems to have bothered you for a while now,” he pointed out slowing down a bit. Since he had lost sight in one of the eyes, he was driving a bit slower, given that he didn’t feel too confident with limited vision. Beyond that, this accident wasn’t much beyond a minor inconvenience to him and yet, he couldn’t bring himself to tell her about it. He wondered if that was what troubled her, but rejected the idea quickly. Whatever happened, was strictly related with Nick.

August parked the car next to his house and they took a walk to Judy’s flat that was just couple minutes away. He carried his new umbrella with him, kind of expecting rain, but all the dark clouds did, was covering the starlight. They enjoyed the walk quietly, each lost in their own thoughts, their silence rarely interrupted by hums of cars passing by. They both were so occupied that they didn’t notice when they tried to cross a street with red light on until a car honked at them. Two rabbits jumped back simultaneously, glanced at each other and then, laughed awkwardly.

“Say, Judy, I wanted to ask…”

“August, why…” They both tried to speak, but paused, realizing that they were interrupting one another. “You go first,” encouraged him Judy.

“No, no, you…”

“I insist,” Judy pressed and he sighed with surrender.

“What’s going on between you and Nick? I know you’ve been friends…” he wondered.

“I don’t understand why the past tense,” Judy protested subtly.

“Technically, it’s present tense?” He smirked and she chuckled. And then, slowly, smile vanished from her face.

“I don’t know anymore myself. Things are… turning worse and worse. And I let him down very recently, too,” she explained. August wanted to ask if it was because of him, but he knew an answer to that one and certainly didn’t want to hear it from her. He was kind of scared of that fox.

“I understand. What did you want to ask me about?”

“Why…” Judy paused. “Why didn’t you tell me about your eye?” She wished to know and Fares stopped suddenly, aghast.

“You… you know?” He asked with disbelief, as his ears dropped.

“I do now. And I was a fool to have not noticed it much earlier,” she explained.

“Did he tell you?” August guessed.

“Does it change anything?” Judy demanded to know and he hung his head down morbidly, but said nothing. “What happened, August? I thought you trusted me. You assured that
you wouldn’t hide it from me, if any complications appeared and you just… did the opposite!”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” he explained. “I know how you blamed yourself about everything and… I wanted to spare you the pain.”

“Well, you hurt me even more by concealing truth,” she replied with frustration. “If I can’t trust you in matters like this, how can I trust you with anything?” She asked and, for the matter of the fact, August had not a clue what to say to that.

“Because… I’ll learn from this mistake of mine,” he declared firmly. “I wanted to tell you, but I kept waiting for the right time and there never seemed to be one,” he excused himself awkwardly. “But I won’t make this mistake again, I… I promise,” he assured with confidence, even though he knew that how much this word was worth anymore, was up to her. “I’m sorry that I hurt you and I promise, I won’t do it ever again. I’ve learnt my lesson,” he claimed and Judy watched him with a gentle, yet sad smile.

“I don’t know. Sorry, I just… I don’t know anymore,” she confessed and turned away from him, rejecting the paw with which he tried to hold hers. The two rabbits stopped right in front of Judy’s block of flats. “Thanks for the walk and until Monday, I suppose?”

“Yeah. Good night, Judy,” he said morbidly, only now realizing how badly he must have screwed up. Judy began to walk up the stairs to the door, when he called her again. She stopped and turned around.

“Judy, I… I probably should have told you this earlier. “I’m sorry I’m doing it so unexpectedly, but…” August took a deep breath. “I love you,” he confessed and watched her reaction. Judy Hopps was… aghast. She let his words sink into the silence of the dark street and then, she turned her head away slightly, as if with regret. She opened her mouth to say something when they heard Judy’s phone ringing. August recognized the melody; it was announcing someone from ZPD or otherwise job related. Judy eyed him apologetically and he just shrugged with surrender. It happens, in the end.

“I’m sorry, I probably should…” Judy found her phone and, without checking the name, picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hey, Carrots,” greeted her the voice August recognized immediately.

“Nick, this really isn’t a right moment,” she muttered, a bit annoyed. Or was she relieved, but simply tired? August could hardly tell.

“I imagine, but hey, crime never sleeps and we’ve got a new case. You’ll love it, it’s a big one,” explained the fox. Judy sighed deeply.

“I thought you were at the wedding?” She pointed out, not really counting on an answer of a sort. “Where are you?”

“Residence of Lady Jennifer Osbourne – Tompkins. See you at the place.”

“Bye,” Judy hung up and sighed deeply. “Sorry, I… We’ll talk this through later, alright?” She pleaded and August nodded with understanding. He felt that Judy was having on her head a bit more than she could carry and suddenly, he felt bad about adding to the burden.

“Do you need a ride?” He offered and she nodded with a smile.

“It would be nice.” She chuckled. “Oh, I can’t even imagine what Nick dragged himself
into this time.”

Chapter End Notes

The final act begins...
3.43 pm, Saturday, August 20, 2022

To say that wedding of Officer William Osbourne and Lady Jennifer Tompkins was spectacular, would be to say nothing. The Duchess did not spare a single penny when it came to this day. Just to the ceremony, arranged inside the beautiful, antique cathedral in the very heart of Zootopia, came so many mammals, that not even this giant building could contain them all. Among the crowd, Nick could see probably half of Happytown, including plenty of cops from Will’s ZPD station, as well as most of Duchess’s subordinates; the only ones that were missing probably were the ones needed to serve at the stations or in the clubs, respectively. Lady Tompkins had also invited most of Zootopia’s upper crust, including millionaires like Mr. Rouge and even the mayor Ketchikan himself. And then, there were the common folk, each somehow connected with the newlyweds or simply curious of probably the biggest party that Zootopia had coming this decade. Nick and his mother, both of whom were invited, met up with Aveline Hawkes just outside the cathedral. The vixen was dressed in a simple azure dress, a simple silver necklace and matching bracelet and earrings. She greeted both Wildes very enthusiastically, hugging Nick warmly.

“I was hoping to see you in a uniform,” she confessed with amusement. “But you look just as good in a suit, I must say,” she assured.

“And this dress of yours matches your eyes just perfectly, Aveline. You look dashing,” Nick returned the compliment.

“Oh, thank you, my friend!” Aveline emphasized the last words. Since some passerby week earlier called them a ‘couple of dirty foxes’ to which Nick replied that ‘they were only friends’, it became their running joke.

“You’re welcome, my friend,” Nick bowed theatrically and his mother rolled his eyes.

“Preventing gossips, boy?” Mrs. Wilde asked amusingly, quite aware of how things worked between the two of them.

“Actually, it’s one gossip about myself that I wouldn’t mind,” Aveline claimed. “Especially that since I have no wish for a boyfriend whatsoever and you temporarily lack your girl friend, we’re doomed for each other tonight,” the vixen separated ‘girl’ and ‘friend’ very carefully. She knew Judy was a matter Nick really didn’t like discussing and so she didn’t mention her. Well, maybe beyond teasing him subtly once in a while.

“Trust me, this boy struggles with any kind of friends,” Mrs. Wilde pointed out with a chuckle and now it was her son rolling his eyes.

“Alright, I see where this is going. Let’s come inside, you won’t be able to roast me on the sacred ground,” he suggested and then, hesitated. “At least not openly,” he added carefully.

“Boy, I never roast you, it’s such a bad thing to say. I’m just overly descriptive with the facts about you and your childhood that you’d prefer to keep in your skeleton closet forever,” she corrected her son and the fox sighed deeply.
“See? That’s why I can never go out with mom,” he turned to Aveline.

“Oh, it just her way of assuring that she loves you and that she’ll miss you when she moves out any moment now!” The vixen protested. “How was it to live with your son again, Mrs. Wilde? You surely must have missed it?” She pointed out.

“If we forget all the nasty circumstances that brought us there, I’ve had really a nice time,” she assured just when they stepped inside. A young coyote with the list standing just inside recognized them instantly and gave them the directions to their seat; with the number of guests Duchess had been expecting, it really was no wonder that she decided for named reservation for half of the seats in the cathedral.

The three of them had been seated somewhere in the first third of the building, side by side. Even though they had wisely arrived earlier, the cathedral was quite full already, especially the back section with no name reservations. The building filled up gradually, first the corridors, then the standing spots, all beyond the main hall that obviously had to remain clear. They saw Olivia and Alex Tompkins, Duchess’s teenage kids, walking there and back, making sure for every detail of the ceremony to be polished. The cathedral was rustling with excited whispers and quiet, heated discussions. And then, the church organ roared powerfully, silencing everyone and announcing that the ceremony had indeed began.

The wedding was pompous. It was wonderful, spectacular, carried the feeling of every second having been carefully planned and every inch of the cathedral prepared to announce to the world how magnificent that day was. The preacher was some most charismatic man, whom Nick, usually skeptical to the sort, listened very carefully, only pretending to be not too engaged. William Osbourne left most amazing impression and Lady Tompkins looked simply gorgeous in the most beautiful wedding dress Nick had probably seen in his entire life, not that he saw that plenty. There was something magical and unspeakingly majestic in Jennifer Tompkins, her blind eye and the scars covering her body along with the newest one, cutting through her lip. Nick remembered her well, walking among hundreds of the mammals, escorted by the two of her children, watching the crowd and stopping at each of her guests for a millisecond only to pass onto another one, appreciating every single one that came. When she and William were standing in front of the altar, when he put a ring on her paw gently and then, embraced her and kissed her passionately, everyone in the cathedral stood up suddenly and began to clap enthusiastically, Nick among them. The roar of thousand mammals clapping drowned any other voice, noise or music and even the fox couldn’t help the feeling that he was taking part in something marvelous, life-changing at least.

From lack of any building to contain the number of guests invited, the wedding reception took place in Meadowlands; the police had actually ordered the traffic around three different paths not to cause the jams throughout entire city, there were also a dozen or two of buses waiting for the guests. The foxes took one such bus, well aware that Duchess had already hired whole taxi corporation just to have the guests taken back homes on her own cost.

The place of reception, the huge meadow that usually would cover ten weddings, was prepared just as well as the cathedral; even despite the crowds, Alex and Olivia Tompkins with help of their mother’s men controlled the situation rather smoothly, even at the time of handing traditional gifts for the newlyweds that would be donated to charities throughout the town. There seemed to have been several minor incidents, but nothing that hadn’t been handled almost immediately. Nick and Aveline were really impressed. As Mrs. Wilde separated from them and went to talk with some of her old friends, Nick and Aveline danced for almost an hour and then, they mingled in the crowd; by the midnight, it had dispersed a little bit, leaving no more than three hundred guests at the field, including the two young foxes.
Diane Inesi was having an excellent time at her ZPD partner’s wedding; most of the guests were her good friends and the party itself was simply delightful. She got to dance with the groom and even talked a bit with Lady Tompkins when she caught the bouquet she had traditionally tossed high in the air. It was her that informed Diane that she had seen the love of her life at the reception.


“You will have to ask him personally,” she suggested and Inesi followed the advice without a second thought. It took her a while to find James, who was mingling in the crowd, accompanying a bunch of quite drunk mammals. Greymane himself seemed quite sober.

“James? What are you doing here?” She asked, confused. James stopped his panicked sight at her and then, cursed under his breath.

“Diane?” He stood up and walked over to her, dragging her away from his new buddies. “What are you doing here?”

“I should be the one asking that,” Inesi noticed and he chuckled nervously.

“Oh, just having fun,” he shrugged.

“How did you get inside?” She wanted to know.

“I’m accompanying you, have you forgotten? I was just a little late,” James smirked and she sighed with frustration. It’s true she had declared she’d come with James, but he excused himself just two days earlier. Did he really do it to avoid her?

“What’s your business here?” Diane asked suspiciously. “Because it clearly isn’t me.”

“Oh, just… meeting new friends,” he assured clumsily, but revealed nothing more, not even under pressure of her investigative stare.

“You’re not up to anything bad, are you?” She hoped.

“Nope. Not at all,” he claimed. When Diane would reminisce this night, she’d realize that this was exactly the moment when she could have stopped the avalanche, save both herself and James. But despite her gut feelings and with no gift of foresight, she decided to trust him.

“Cause no troubles,” she only said and left him with his new friends. What was the worst thing that could happen?
Around the midnight, quite accidentally, Nick and Aveline bumped at no one else than Duchess’s right hand; Lionel O’Dyna. He was watching the bride carefully, as if with nostalgia, holding a barely touched drink in his paw.

“Lio! There you are!” Aveline hugged her cousin enthusiastically and he and Nick shook paws. “I couldn’t find you anywhere!”

“Oh, I was rather busy. Kids couldn’t take care of everything on their own,” he explained.

“It was them that organized the whole thing, as I’ve heard?” Nick pointed out and Lionel nodded.

“With my instructions and consultations with Mr. and Lady,” confirmed O’Dyna. “But overall, it’s mostly their work. They really wanted to do something for her.”

“It certainly is spectacular,” Wilde admitted and O’Dyna nodded.

“Lady deserves it. This day… is a start of new era. If not for the city, then for her without a doubt,” Lionel assured.

“I don’t want to sound impolite, but…” Nick paused wondering how to put it only to realize that there was no way to not be impolite, now that he had started. “I always thought that if Duchess was to marry anyone, it would be you,” he concluded and Lionel chuckled while Aveline smiled politely.

“Many get this feeling,” O’Dyna admitted, as he toyed with his wedding ring. Nick realized that he wore it rather rarely as he watched ti and the fox caught his sight. “I wear it when I’m not at work. It’s one thing I have after Hanna and I wouldn’t bear losing it,” he explained. Nick had to admit that it certainly explained the thing; he rarely ever met O’Dyna not working, even if they used to be neighbors.

“Plenty think Lio loves Duchess romantically, when the truth is he wouldn’t keep his job long if he did,” Aveline added and her cousin nodded confirming.

“Mr. is the best thing that had happened to the Lady,” Lionel assured. “Since they have first dated, Lady glows like never before. And also, he reassures Lady will remain on path of law, which will be better for her children,” he added and then, cursed as he noticed some commotion in the distance. “Oh, damn it. I’ve got to go.”

“Until later, Lio.”

“It was nice to talk with you,” Nick assured. The fox nodded and vanished in the crowd. Aveline nodded, a bit tired.

“Why don’t we sit down in some quiet place?” She suggested and Nick agreed. They went to the brink of the field and sat down on the grass, quite tired. “She glows indeed,” Aveline noticed.

“Huh?” Nick asked, a bit confused.
“Lady Tompkins. Since she met Will, she really glows. It’s funny, how we notice these things only after they happen,” she smiled and Nick nodded.

“I don’t meet her so often to actually tell the difference. Especially when the last time we met, she was in rather morbid mood. Work related stuff,” Nick explained. Somehow he had a feeling he knew where this was going and he’d rather even talk about the job.

“You used to glow too, you know?” Aveline noticed suddenly.

“Huh?” Was all that he had to say, second time in a row. That was rather unusual for him, as he noted in his head. It really seemed like he was getting sloppy and he had only raised a single toast.

“You used to glow. When we first met and talked about that stolen picture and later, when this missing ATM crossed our paths again… you used to glow. I really liked that about you,” she explained.

“And I really don’t like the ‘used to’ part, though,” Nick muttered and she chuckled, even though there was nothing happy about this laughter of hers.

“Me neither, but I couldn’t help to notice it. And since we’re friends…” she smirked, pausing for long enough to let the joke sink in and then, continued. “…it had me worried. I tried to figure out if I can help it, but now I know I can’t… because it’s about Judy, isn’t it?” She guessed. Nick sighed deeply and laid down. Aveline followed him, nesting herself in the grass.

“I suppose,” was all that he said as he watched the stars. The vixen waited in silence patiently, only to realize that he wasn’t going to say anything more. She was quite surprised at first when she realized that this cocky fox could be so withdrawn when it came to his feelings, but she could see where it was coming from and respected it. She didn’t like speaking of herself to everyone around either. Anyway, if she wanted to do something for him, it was her that should say something.

“You know, when I…” She chuckled nervously, not believing that she was going to actually say it and he watched her most intrigued. “When I was pregnant with Lily, I was terrified like never in my life. I had not a clue what to do. Bah, I didn’t even know who the father was! I decided at first that I’d give her up to the state immediately after birth, but then, when I had her in my paws… I just couldn’t let that ginger ball of fur go. Because she was mine ginger ball of fur, you know,” the vixen smiled blissfully as she paused. “Later, when I left the hospital and had to move back to parents’ house… I remember how I went to do all sorts of shopping for Lily. I spent all my savings and bought the essentials I needed. I carried those heavy bags out of market alone when suddenly, something cracked in me. I just sat in the middle of sidewalk and starting crying. I suddenly realized I have probably just wasted my life. I had turned my back on everyone I called friends, I had no job and decent criminal record, I absolutely could not afford a daughter and I had not a clue if I could even raise her to turn out better than her sorry mother. And while everyone just gave that crazed vixen a wide berth, a random stranger, an old lady, crouched by me suddenly, hugged me and guess what she said?” Aveline turned at Nick.

“What did she say?” The fox asked.

“Hey, it gets better eventually! And then, she just went on,” the vixen said and then laughed amusingly. “It was so silly. She could see how low I was and yet she was so certain that things would turn out right that somehow I decided to cling to that thought too,” she chuckled. “At first nothing changed, not one bit. Well, certainly not for the better. But then I met Mr. Spencer, he gave me a job at the bank and before I noticed, I was where I’m now, with a stable job, healthy
relationships and a wonderful daughter,” Aveline smiled beautifully and Nick nodded enjoying vixen’s happiness.

“What I wanted to say is that I can see that you’re going through a lot right now, Nick. I probably can’t help you anyhow, so I at least want to be that random stranger that tells you…” The vixen paused for a short moment, as they watched a star fall. “Hey, it gets better! Eventually,” she promised. There was something confident in her voice, something firm to the point of undeniability and Nick couldn’t help, but believe her. She laughed melodically seeing his smile and he chuckled along with her.

“I bet it does,” he agreed confidently. “Thank you, Aveline.”

“You’re welcome. You kinda saved my life, you know, so I still owe you,” the vixen pointed out with a chuckle and he nodded. He never thought of the time they met in these terms, but he could see her point.

They were lying in the grass silently for a while, just enjoying the evening aura, when they heard some steps behind them and a heated discussion of two teenage girls.

“Then go and tell her!”

“It’s her wedding, I’m not ruining it because that moron…”

“You can’t find him! He’s not picking up his phone and he should have been back long time ago!”

“Jessica…” The first one caught her paw and tried to stop her.

“If you’re not going, then I will, Olivia!” The one called Jessica release herself from her grip. Nick and Aveline eyed each other and they stood up, walking over to the arguing wolves.

“Olivia?” Aveline called and the teenager noticed foxes.

“Oh, Mrs. Hawkes, Detective Wilde,” noticed Olivia, surprised.

“Olivia Tompkins, right?” Nick recognized her in weak moonlight. “And you’d be…”

“Jessica Hayden, her brother’s girlfriend,” she introduced herself and they eyed her friend. “If you’re not telling your mother, then I’m telling them,” she warned. Olivia rolled her eyes, but didn’t protest.

“What’s going on?” Nick asked.

“My brother, Alex. We can’t find her anywhere,” Olivia admitted reluctantly.

“We had a fight over an hour ago and he went off to somewhere. I wanted to call him, but I can’t find my phone and he’s not picking up from Olivia. We can’t find him anywhere,” explained Jessica. “I’m worried and we wanted to call Mrs. Tompkins…”

“But I’m not ruining mom’s night over that moron,” concluded Olivia, expressing typical sibling affection of the teenagers.

“Do you have any surveillance in here?” Nick asked.

“I saw the cameras,” Aveline noticed.
“Yes, around the borders of the field, to monitor who’s going in and out. We have guards keeping order,” Olivia explained. “Do you want to see them?”

“It’d be for the best,” agreed Nick.

“Should I get Lio?” Aveline suggested.

“No, mom will notice,” Olivia protested. “Come on, this way,” she guided the foxes beyond the field, to a small truck that was waiting at the nearby parking. She knocked at the door and it opened slowly, revealing two weasels and bountiful of supervision equipment.

“Olivia! Need any help?” Asked one of them.

“I’m looking for Alex. Mind if we check the records?” She explained.

“Sure, hop in,” he invited them in, but since there wasn’t much room, only Nick and Olivia came inside. Knowing the approximate time Alex left and given possible directions from Jessica, they found young Tompkins rather quickly; he had left on the eastern side.

“He headed for the High Road. We should check it, he could have been mugged,” suggested Nick and Olivia nodded.

“Let’s not waste time,” she agreed as she jumped out of the truck. “We’re going to High Road,” she announced to the two waiting outside and they all went there together hurriedly. Jessica was worrying about what could have happened to her boyfriend while the three assured he could handle himself just fine; they’d probably find him back at the wedding reception when they’d come back.

The High Road was just an usual road, cutting through Meadowlands in half. They reached it somewhere around the place where Alex must have crossed it and looked around curiously, looking for any signs.

“Hey, I found something,” Aveline reached for some object lying in the grass and raised in the air a wallet. Olivia and Jessica’s eyes grew wide as they recognized it.

“It’s his,” Tompkins girl muttered and Aveline returned it to her.

“Is money in there?” Nick wondered and Olivia opened it.

“Yes. So he wasn’t mugged,” she concluded. “Was he running away or…”

“Or he just lost it. None of these explain why he’s not picking up a phone unless something has happened to him,” Nick noticed ominously. Olivia sighed deeply, still not accepting this sort of thought,

“Let’s look around some more, look for any signs of…”

“Of what?” Asked no one else than Lionel O’Dyna, who had appeared from nowhere right behind them, startling the teenagers. “Where have you been and where’s Alex? Your mother’s troubled,” he admonished Olivia.

“I’m afraid we’re not quite sure either, Lio,” Aveline explained. The fox glanced at her, noticed Alex’s wallet in his sister’s paw and added the facts quickly. He reached for the phone and called some number.
“Secure the High Road next to the reception field,” he ordered and then called Alex, but as expected, there was no reply. “We’re going to the Lady. Now,” he demanded. Olivia seemed to feel like protesting, but even she had acknowledged that whatever happened to her brother, was no joking matter anymore.

0.33 am, Sunday, August 20, 2022

Lionel O’Dyna had the four of them meet Lady Jennifer Osbourne – Tompkins and her newlywed husband at the brink of the field, where they could count for as much of privacy as it could be possible. They were accompanied by only one additional mammal; William Osbourne – Tompkins’s partner from ZPD, young coyote Diane Inesi. Olivia Tompkins explained the situation to her mother on whom everyone’s attention unintentionally focused; Lady’s paws were clenching slowly and her eyes grew cold, but she did not let her voice betray her, even in face of her son’s mysterious disappearance.

“Well, then, we shall…” She tried to say something, when her, Olivia’s, William’s and Lionel’s phones buzzed simultaneously. All four reached for them immediately and read their messages.

“Someone caused the alarm at house. Automatic notification,” Will noticed, while Duchess was already making a call. She left it on the loudspeaker as rarely.

“What’s going on at the house?” She asked her subordinates that were monitoring her place.

“Someone broke a window with a brick, I think. Should we check it or…”

“Chase whoever did it, but leave someone to monitor the place. I’ll send Olivia over,” Duchess ordered.

“Understood,” her subordinate confirmed and she hung up, sighing with utmost frustration.

“Sounds like a kidnapping to me. What do we do now?” Will asked, perfectly cool. Nick noticed with quite inopportune amusement that young Jessica was finding everyone’s calmness about the situation rather disturbing.

“Will, have some of your sober friends from ZPD secure the High Road, especially the spot where kids found the wallet. Wilde, take Olivia and go to my mansion to see about that break-in. It looks like you have a new case,” Duchess ordered and Nick nodded. Technically she was in no position to order him around, but Nick had enough reason not to say a word. “Lio, if someone really kidnapped Alex, he must have been at the wedding. Check who has left recently.”

“What about you, Lady?” Lionel asked.

“Whoever did it, would be most delighted to spoil us this night. We’ll prove his effort
“futile,” Will declared firmly and Duchess nodded.

“Oh, indeed,” she confirmed.

“How can I help?” Aveline asked and Jessica nodded, willing to act. Duchess hesitated for a short moment.

“Take Jessica and spread a gossip that Alex got drunk and Olivia had to take him home. Make it sound funny,” she suggested and the two girls nodded, ready to help. “Inesi, you’ll go and secure… Oh.” Lady turned to Diane Inesi standing in the back, only to see the girl fainting and falling on the grass with a thud. Will crouched by her and tried to rouse her gently.

“Sorry, I just…” Diane muttered incoherently.

“Were you drinking with Alex?” Aveline turned it into a joke and couple smiles danced among them, but no one really laughed.

“You know your duties. Notify us when anything happens,” Duchess ordered and she and Will headed back to the reception. Aveline helped Diane stand up and Nick offered to assist in walking her back to the place.

“I’ll get the car and meet you at the southern gate,” Olivia declared and he nodded. Jessica hurried back to the wedding before them while Lionel went back to the surveillance while Nick and Aveline walked in Diane’s pace, as the coyote still seemed dizzy.

“Oh, dear. For a moment I hoped that we’d get to enjoy the evening some more,” Aveline noticed, a bit disappointed.

“It certainly was fun while it lasted,” Nick agreed.

“Are you sure it’s a kidnapping?” The vixen wondered.

“Simplest explanation to all the events at once. The stone they tossed at Duchess’s window probably contains demands. If not, Happytown guys will look around the High Road for signs,” he explained.

“Then why did Duchess hand the case to you, not Happytown?” Aveline noticed, probably noticing how funnily it sounded; as if Lady Osbourne – Tompkins could decide about police work in Zootopia. It wasn’t completely untrue, but not fully loyal to the facts either.

“Because Happytown Chief is made plenty of problems when he’s trying to keep a case evidently not from his region and it happened in Meadowlands. Incident on her home could justify it, but still, I’m a neutral party of sort and Duchess trusts me a lot, too.”

“You and Judy have effects, right? The ATM was just an exception confirming the rule,” the vixen added with a smirk.

“Hey, we didn’t close the case, we just gave it up to Meadowlands. Not too willingly, if I am to be honest. It’s only fair I’m taking their case right now,” Nick smiled back.

“They’re probably relieved too, since it’s not them solving the case involving Duchess. Not everyone could handle the pressure,” Aveline noticed and he agreed. Not everyone would want to take up such a case. They walked Diane Inesi, who was feeling better now, to a nearest seat and Aveline and Nick would go to do each their tasks, when they stopped.
“Well… I’ve had really nice night while it lasted, my friend,” Aveline assured with a smile.

“So did I,” Nick chuckled. “So… goodnight and until next time?” He guessed and she nodded enthusiastically.

“I’m looking toward it already,” she promised. The vixen gave him a friendly hug and they were to go each their way, when she called him again. “Nick?”

“Yes?”

“It gets better. Eventually,” she promised and the fox chuckled. He nodded, smiled for the last time and then, went to the southern gate. Olivia was already waiting for him at the southern gate. She tossed the fox keys; she still was too young to drive after all.

“You know the address, Detective,” she noticed and Nick confirmed. They got into the car and Nick grabbed his phone. There was someone that he needed to call before he’d get there. He waited for a moment before she picked up.

“Hey, Carrots,” he greeted her, wondering if he had woken her up.

“Nick, this really isn’t a right moment,” she muttered, mildly annoyed.

“I imagine, but hey, crime never sleeps and we’ve got a new case. You’ll love it, it’s a big one,” the fox promised and listened to her prolonged sigh. She probably still thought it’s a joke, it seemed so unlike him.

“I thought you were at the wedding?” She remarked.

“Where are you?”

“Residence of Lady Jennifer Osbourne – Tompkins. See you at the place.”

“Bye,” she replied and the bunny hung up. Nick put the phone back in the pocket and started the car. For whole the time of their travel, Olivia did not say a word, just watched the road before them in complete silence that Nick did not dare to interrupt. As they arrived at Duchess’s house, Nick noticed yet another car waiting with Judy and August standing next to it; they must have been coming back from the musical, as the fox realized. There also was just some coyote discussing with them with a cigarette in his paw.

“Hey, Carrots, August,” Nick greeted his friends with a wave of paw.

“Hey, what’s going on? We saw the broken window, but nothing beyond it,” Judy explained, but Olivia eyed her companion.

“We’ll fill you in inside, Detective. Thank you for bringing her here, sir, but now…”

“I probably should be going,” August recognized girl’s intentions. Olivia nodded with satisfaction.

“Goodnight, everyone and until Monday?” Fares smiled bitterly at Judy and glanced at Nick shortly before going back to the car. The sight he gave the fox left him no doubt; something had happened between these two and August was blaming him for it. Oh, he could just imagine what.

“Alfred? Anything new?” Olivia asked the coyote; he must have been responsible for the surveillance of the place.
“They got away, no one else came. What now, Miss?” He asked.

“Go back to your car. We’ll take it from here,” decided Olivia. The coyote nodded and walked away to where the surveillance team was stationed. Olivia, Wilde and Hopps went to residence’s gate.

“Well then? What do we have here?” Judy asked, as Olivia unlocked it with magnetic key.

“Alex Tompkins vanished from the wedding. We found his wallet, but he’s not replying to phone calls and no one knows for sure where he went to,” explained Nick.

“So, a kidnapping?” Judy guessed.

“Most likely. Since someone tossed a rock just moments after he vanished, we assume these are somehow connected,” clarified the fox.

“Hopefully his phone just died,” Olivia muttered, unconvinced. She opened the gate and let the Detectives in. They followed the pathway to the front door and waited patiently while Olivia unlocked the reinforced door and switched off the alarm. Only then, did she let them in.

“Kitchen, over there,” she pointed and Wilde and Hopps saw the broken window almost immediately; a red brick had left a hole in window size of a wolf’s head and fell on the floor, not before damaging the cupboard and cracking one of the tiles. Something was tied to it; some small blood-stained package and a piece of paper. Judy took out a phone and took pictures, while Nick crouched by it.

“Olivia, do you have any fox-sized gloves? We shouldn’t wait for the forensics, but I don’t want to temper with the evidence too much,” Nick asked.

“I should have something,” she assured. Teenage wolf disappeared for a moment and returned with a pair of one-use gloves that were only a bit too big for Nick. He put them on and took the package and piece of paper slowly. The note was printed and very short. Nick read it aloud.

“The price is ten million. We will contact you,” he said and saw Olivia shivering.

“What’s in that package?” She only asked. Nick unwrapped it carefully and revealed a something white and small, covered in fur stained in blood dripping from one of its sides. Nick cursed under his breath.

“A little finger, around wolf’s size. Left, I think,” Judy noticed and the fox nodded.

“They’re not joking around,” Wilde muttered as he and Hopps turned at Olivia. She was pale, the paw holding a phone shaking a little bit.

And so, suddenly the wedding was over. Lionel O’Dyna remained at place to look over the party, but it hardly mattered anymore, for the newlyweds had returned to their home. Duchess, along with her husband William, daughter Olivia and Detectives Wilde and Hopps, was sitting in the kitchen of their house, reading the message for a thousandth time that night. The silence was interrupted only by the two forensics officers working in the kitchen, securing the evidence. Suddenly, the Lady snorted resentfully.

“Ten millions. They really think he’s worth that little to me?” She laughed bitterly, as her paw held Will’s firmly.

“They probably simply have no guts to demand more,” Will remarked with contempt.

“Not only stupid enough to mess with me, they’re too scared to go all in. Fools like them mean only more threat to Alex,” Duchess noticed bitterly and then, she turned at Wilde and Hopps. “Well then, Detectives, what’s your standard procedure? Shame to admit, but I’ve never handled a kidnapping,” she asked them. Judy glanced at Nick. She could feel his urge to crack a most inappropriate joke, something like “Well, at least not from this side”, but then he seemingly reprimanded himself at the last second. As rarely, Duchess really didn’t seem in mood for jokes.

“It depends on circumstances, but usually, the safest way to secure the hostage is to follow kidnappers’ instructions and make the trade. Once Alex is safe, we will arrest whoever tries to pick up the money.” Judy explained, deciding not to mention that usually, Duchess would have her money back quickly. It was the least she cared about now.

“It’s hard to established criminals’ identities beforehand, as they’re usually not related to the victims anyhow. This time, we have the advantage considering circumstances. We can safely assume that at least one of the kidnappers was at the wedding,” added Nick.

“Couple cops from Happytown along with Lionel O’Dyna and Jen’s men are already working on it,” Will noticed. “What about contacting the kidnappers?”

“It’s up to them, I’m afraid,” Nick noticed. “They should call you or leave you another message on paper. Whenever they contact you, inform us immediately.”

“We will,” Duchess assured.

“The criminals might want to do the trade without anyone’s involvement, no police, nor your men, but considering the situation it is… unrealistic,” Judy eyed Will and Duchess. “If they do not realize it, it’d be best not to ruin their delusions.”

“If we scare them off, Alex might be killed,” Nick added, deadly seriously and the newlyweds confirmed with a nod.
“I’ll try not to be intimidating,” Duchess promised sarcastically. “For the time being, I assume all we have to do is wait for them to contact us, then?”

“Precisely,” Nick confirmed. “And in meanwhile, we will lead an investigation too, as subtly as it’s possible. You’ll be notified of any progress,” he promised.

“Alright then. We’ll call each other whenever something pops up and now…” Duchess yawned, covering her mouth with paw like a lady she was. “I’d suggest we all go to sleep. We won’t achieve much sitting here and worrying. Thank you for coming here so late, Detectives.”

“Not a problem, I assure,” Judy claimed, even if she seemed dead tired.

“You can take the car Nick came with. Someone will pick it up in the morning,” the Lady assured, as all of them were standing from the table.

“I’ll walk the Detectives to the car. I need to smoke,” Will declared and his wife watched him disappointedly.

“You said you’d quit after we get married,” she reminded him.

“Not the best day to do so, don’t you think? Consider it my last one,” Will assured with a smirk. Nick and Judy bided everyone goodnight and they left along with him. The wolf found a cigarette and lit it, inhaling the smoke. He let out a small cloud of grey.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m a cop and I know how these things work,” he said to Nick and Judy. “And if everything goes right, I’ll make sure that those kidnappers are delivered to ZPD right after Alex is safe. But if they hurt that kid… if they kill him… I’ll do all can so that Duchess has her way with them before we give ‘em op to you, guys.”

“None of this will happen,” Judy promised.

“We both know you can’t say that for sure. It doesn’t really depend on you, but them,” Will noticed bitterly. “Unless you screw up things pretty badly, which I would never expect from the two of you, honestly.” The wolf opened the gate for them and followed them outside. “Well then, until tomorrow. I suppose we’ll have plenty to discuss very soon.”

“Goodnight,” Nick and Judy said simultaneously. They went to the car Nick had borrowed from Duchess to arrive there and he headed for Judy’s house.

“See? I told you that you’d love it,” the fox assured with a smirk that she found quite inappropriate.

“Kidnapping Duchess’s son. Someone must be very stupid,” Judy pointed out.

“Or very greedy. Or both. These two often go together,” Nick remarked.

“True. So, you’ve had quite a busy evening, haven’t you? I thought you don’t work on the weekends,” the bunny smiled.

“The Lady asked so nicely, I couldn’t help but make an exception.”

“A pretty smile and you’re already on the leash,” she joked.

“Oh, there’s very few smiles that I fall for,” the fox smiled pertly at her Judy couldn’t help but giggle, even if she realized it could mean nothing. He could hate her for how she stood
him up, and he wouldn’t even twitch. “But since I did, we probably should report everything to the
Chief and do the paperwork as soon as possible.”

“I think we can leave it for the Monday. We’ll see the guest list in the meanwhile,” Judy
suggested.

“And check on the forensics once they’re done,” he agreed, relieved. It came with quite a
hardship to Nick to propose working on weekends. “So, how was your musical?” The fox asked
and Judy suddenly felt awkwardly. He seemed to have forgotten their quarrel over this evening, but
it didn’t mean he actually did.

“Oh, um… fine?” She stuttered and suddenly felt a sting of remorse. If the evening was
only ‘fine’, why would she go for it despite promising Nick to go with him? But then again, if she
started praising it, it’d sound like she was having so much more fun without him and it felt even
worse. Judy groaned internally. Whatever she was going to do, it was going to turn out wrong.
Well, she could only blame herself.

“Fine? Probably the shortest review I’ve heard before. But if Carrots claims so, I
certainly must check that musical out,” the fox joked and she blushed.

“I really liked the musical. It was… funny, although predictable. You know, the type of
story where thing start bad, turn out gradually better only to dive for the bottom suddenly, but turn
out alright in the end. It was a bitter-sweet experience,” the bunny reflected herself and gave a full
answer. “I really liked the songs too,” she assured and he nodded. She realized that as she was
describing it, August had not even crossed her mind. The moment he confessed his feeling on that
stairs just couple of hours ago… something had changed in Judy. A realization came.

“We might go for it together, if you like,” Nick offered.

“No, it was predictable the first time, I wouldn’t bear the other. I’d gladly go with you to
another play, though,” she promised and then, she decided to ask. “Nick, are you still angry with
me?” She asked helplessly and he shrugged. “I shouldn’t have stood you up like this. It was unfair and I
apologize. And… thank you that you’re honest. You know… about how you feel about this all.
It’s really important to me,” she told him and he smiled weakly.

“It’s good to feel like you care… again,” the fox replied and Judy felt a fuzzy feeling in
her chest.

“I’m sorry. When you reminded me about the wedding, I just found myself so
dumbfounded, I… There really is no good way to explain what happened there, is there?” She
asked helplessly and he shrugged. “I shouldn’t have stood you up like this. It was unfair and I
apologize. And… thank you that you’re honest. You know… about how you feel about this all.
It’s really important to me,” she told him and he smiled weakly.

“It’s good to feel like you care… again,” the fox replied and Judy felt a fuzzy feeling in
her chest.

“I’m sorry. I’ll not let you think any different,” she promised solemnly. The harm had
been done… but there always was room for fixing it, right?

“Don’t make promises that you can’t keep.”

“Do you really think I can’t…” She wanted to scold him only to realize that he was
smirking. “Are you messing with me right now?”

“And after all these years, you keep falling for it so easily,” he replied with a smirk, just
as he parked just by her house. “There we are. So, I’ll call O’Dyna around noon, grab you and see what we have, right?”

“And I’ll report to the Chief that we’ve got a new case,” she agreed.

“Cool,” he nodded and she left the car. The bunny, barely awake, climbed the stairs when Nick called her again. She turned around slowly, fearing that he was about to tell her this same thing August had just two hours earlier. It’s not that she was afraid of the words themselves (or maybe just a little), she was simply too exhausted, both physically and emotionally, to react to this sort of words accordingly and this time, with no one sane calling her in the middle of night, she’d probably have to pretend fainting to be saved.

“Huh?” She asked only.

“Goodnight, Carrots.”

“Oh. Good… night,” she nodded and he laughed, as if he could read her mind. As he drove away, Judy followed the car with her sight, realizing that Nick had changed somehow from the last time; he seemed so… at ease. Judy suddenly regretted that she missed her opportunity to ask how he spent his evening.

The bunny came back to her flat, took a quick shower and changed into pajamas before lying down in her bed. Both her body and mind, especially the mind, were exhausted beyond the point where she should just drift away into sleep in mere seconds and yet, she was just staring in the ceiling blankly. She recalled the conversation she shared with Nick in his car, how good it felt to go back what used to be just three months earlier… And then, she thought of August’s confession. It felt like it had been months ago and it hadn’t been even six hours. But what was going on in Judy’s mind, was not any sort of an internal struggle or a battle of thoughts. Having heard these words of his, knowing her heart’s reaction to them and all their implications, she had gained the last bits of certainty that she had ever needed. She knew what resolved she wished for. Now, it really was only a question of how to make it happen.

10.56 am, Sunday, August 20, 2022

Alex Tompkins woke up to a massive headache. He tried to groan only to realize that he had been gagged with duct tape and his feet and paws tied with a zip-tie. And then, he realized his paw burnt unnaturally and watched it, stained with blood. All that remained after his little finger was a tight bandage.

“Oh,” he muttered and then, he smirked. Whoever did it, he was going to be in massive trouble once his mother would find out. It would look really cool too, when he gets back to school. Some gangsters cut off his finger to send his mother a message. Yeah, it seemed pretty cool. He could already imagine what mother and Olivia would say. Oh, they were going to be pissed off.

Alex stood from the chair he was sitting on and looked around. He had been locked in some dim basement, with no windows and a single lightbulb delivering the only light. He hopped
toward the hard, metal door and tried to push it, but it was locked, obviously. The teenager looked around the room trying to find anything useful in there, but it seemed completely empty. He also tried to feel the pockets of his messed up, dirty suit, but the kidnappers had emptied them all, it seemed. It was bad. Very, very bad and yet, Alex was far from panicking, which he realized with relief. He took a deep breath and reconsidered his position. Zip-ties and duct tape never were a problem; he knew how to free himself of these easily; he had not forgotten mother’s teachings. But even then, he had to leave this basement and get through kidnappers. He knew the martial arts a little bit, but it was not solving the problem against the bear that had knocked him out. He only saw him for a second, but that guy was huge and packed quite a punch, just like... Suddenly, Alex heard the steps he hopped back to the chair and sat down, waiting. Now was not the time. The mammal on the other side unlocked the door and pushed it and Alex lifted his head pretending to just having woken up. He was a grey wolf, wearing a mask. Alex watched him carefully. He was going to remember those brown, vivid eyes and slim body.

“Rise and shine, little prince,” smirked the kidnapper.

“Sorry, sir, but the bed feels so comfortable,” Alex replied sarcastically and the wolf snickered.

“Oh, I bet,” he chuckled and then, tossed at his lap a piece of paper and a pen. “Write down your mother’s number,” he ordered. Young Tompkins grabbed the pen reluctantly.

“That was a really bold move, you know. Kidnapping her son,” Alex noticed as he started writing the number down slowly. He probably couldn’t have counted on them to be so dull as to keep his phone.

“I’ve handled Duchess before,” assured the kidnapper.

“Clearly not. You wouldn’t have cut my finger then,” Alex disagreed. “You might think that you gave your message power, but to tell the truth... you only pissed mom off and she’s not going to let that go.”

“She’s not in the position to negotiate,” muttered the wolf, annoyed that he even let the teenager drag himself in the discussion.

“She’s not in the position to hurt you, at least as long, as you’re holding me here,” Alex clarified. “But the moment you release me, is the moment when hell breaks loose. For a finger, she’ll probably break your arm. And if you panic and decide to kill me...” He laughed ominously. “Not even ZPD will protect you from fury of Duchess,” he warned with most disturbing confidence and as the kidnapper was swallowing hardly, an idea came to his head.

“Hey, I’ve got a proposition.”

“Do you?” The kidnapper crossed his arms.

“Yeah, release me now and leave Zootopia. I’ll tell mother you realized your mistake and apologize sincerely. She won’t even chase you, if I ask hard enough,” he offered. The kidnapper watched him carefully and then, cackled, revealing his yellowish teeth.

“Sorry, kid, I can’t quit now. The number,” he demanded and Alex handed him the paper.

“Consider it. I might be saving your life here,” young Tompkins warned, but the wolf laughed.

“Ah, Alex Tompkins pleading for his life. Music to my ears,” he mocked him.
“Tompkins does not plead. Tompkins negotiates,” replied the teenager confidently. “And trust me, you don’t want to see what happens when mother is done negotiating.”

“You won’t see that part,” snarled the kidnapper angrily as he studied the number. He left the basement with a slam of the door and loud thud of a lock. This time, he switched the light off too, simply to annoy the youngster.

James Greymane left Alex Tompkins’ basement less annoyed than he’d expect; the brat wasn’t as annoying as he had heard and had given him the number without much of protesting; just like Miles had expected, he also wanted to get over whole ordeal rather quickly. James smirked to Miles and Ryuk, sitting in the main room of the rented warehouse and waved at them with the piece of paper.

“Got the number?” Ryuk asked.

“Yup. Just a few days more and we’re gonna be rich, boys,” he assured with unbroken confidence. For once, everything was going according to his plan and he didn’t need Diane, Reynolds or anyone else ordering him around.

11.11 am, Sunday, August 20, 2022

Nick and Judy expected first call from Duchess no sooner than around the late afternoon, which left them even more surprised when she dialed them just before eleven, claiming that they had some lead. Wilde took the borrowed car, picked his partner up and hurried to Lady Osbourne – Tompkins’ residence. The three wolves greeted them kindly, along with Lionel O'Dyna; the fox looked like he hadn’t been sleeping for entire night. They settled in the dining room and Olivia went to make them all coffees.

“Good morning, Detectives. I’m probably too rush asking about any progress on your side?” Lady wondered jokingly. It was quite disturbing, how quickly she regained her usual, relaxed composure.

“The incident has been officially reported and we’re waiting for the forensics for any results and the kidnappers contacting you,” Nick explained, just as she’d expect.

“You’ve called us. Does it mean we have something? Have the kidnappers called you?” Wondered Judy hopefully, but Duchess shook her head.

“Not yet. Lio?” she glanced at Lionel, who covered his jaw as he yawned.

“I’ve spent night analyzing the CCTV videos along with the crew,” Lionel confirmed Nick and Judy’s guesses. He opened the laptop and turned it toward the detectives. “First important thing is that we followed Alex’s before his leaving the party,” the fox shown them a video and pointed at where Alex was. Nick and Judy checked the time; it was half an hour before Olivia and Jessica came to Nick and Aveline. They could see Alex checking his phone and then, excusing himself out of a conversation. He then went straight beyond the border of wedding reception and to the High Road, from where he was kidnapped, beyond the range of the cameras.

“Do we know who texted him there?” Judy wondered.
“Not until we find his phone or receive his log, but that takes time,” Will refused and at this same moment, Olivia came back from the kitchen with coffees for everyone.

“Olivia, didn’t Jessica mention she couldn’t find her phone?” Nick noticed and the girl nodded.

“She thinks someone pickpocketed her,” she admitted.

“Did she have any PIN on the phone?” Asked the fox.

“I don’t know… actually, no, she didn’t have any. I remember telling her she should set it up,” Olivia recalled.

“So, someone pickpocketed Jessica, used her phone to lure Alex out and kidnap him?” Will hesitated. “That’s reasonable.”

“It’s bold,” Judy noticed. “He must have been at the wedding then. He also must have counted on fact that Alex and Jessica wouldn’t be together when he’d text him and that he wouldn’t know about her missing phone,” the bunny reminded them. “Unless he went for Jessica’s phone only after they argued,” she watched Olivia carefully.

“They had a fight around ten, if I remember right, didn’t really talk since then. Jessica doesn’t use her phone much, so she could have not noticed it was missing for a while,” the teenager recalled.

“So the kidnapper had about two hours. If our theory’s true, then it means he was improvising a lot, though,” Nick noticed and Duchess smiled at her husband with satisfaction. That’s why she wanted these two to work on it.

“Lio? Go on,” she suggested. Her right hand coughed off and continued.

“We checked the borders of the wedding grounds, but there’s no one that has left it by any other path than the gates. Beyond Alex, that is,” explained Lionel. “In the case, I analyzed all the suspicious guests leaving the grounds, focusing on the ones that weren’t invited by names. Mammals accompanying or the ones hat came for a free party,” he explained.

“Were there many?” Wondered Nick.

“Unfortunately so,” Lionel confirmed. “We focused on the time around Alex’s disappearance though and most mammals left before nine. If we analyze the two-hour window you’re suggesting, we have…” Lionel glanced at some folder at his laptop “…twelve suspects. Eight out of them we identified, though,” the fox shown them pictures of twelve mammals leaving the gates at the time between ten and midnight. Just as expected, Nick and Judy didn’t recognize any of them.

“Do any of them stand out anyhow?” Wilde hoped, but O’Dyna shrugged.

“All left on their own, didn’t take the taxis, we can’t identify them as any of the guests invited. We tried to follow their path throughout the party, but it’s sort of impossible,” Lionel explained, as he shown them the pictures: a cheetah, bear, two lions, a grey wolf, hippo… Nick cursed. That still left them with quite a range of unidentified suspects.

“That’s no good,” he noticed bitterly.

“We’ll try to look into it in the detail, but whatever we come up with, will be rather far-
fetched,” Judy warned. “We’ll question the gatekeepers, but the simplest way to resolve the situation will be to wait for the kidnappers to call…” she was saying, when Duchess’s phone started ringing; she checked the number, but didn’t have it in the phone book. The Duchess snarled.

“It seems like you’ve called it,” she accepted the call, turned on the loudspeaker and put it on the table. Nick wrote down the number quickly and left to call ZPD; they could try and track it down while Duchess would negotiate with them. Judy started recording the conversation with her phone.

“Lady Osbourne – Tompkins on the phone,” the Duchess introduced herself, while the rest remained completely silent; it’d be best if kidnappers believed they were talking only with her.

“Hey, Jenny. Can I call you that?” wondered a rather young male voice on the speaker; one that most mammals in the room found familiar, but couldn’t quite identify.

“I’d prefer ‘Duchess’ or ‘Mrs. Osbourne’. And I’d also want to hear a name of yours,” she replied coldly.

“I’ll set for Jenny, then,” the kidnapper snickered. “You can call me Spades.”

“Well then, Spades…” She eyed Lionel O’Dyna and the fox joined Wilde. He was going to look into that nickname, hoping that someone knew a guy like him. “…Before we discuss the exchange, I want to hear my son’s voice,” she demanded. Spades huffed, but agreed.

“Make this short,” he agreed.

“Hello?” It sounded somewhat distorted, but it was with no doubt Alex’s voice.

“Hey, kiddo, a control question. Name couple chemical elements for me,” she demanded.

“Hydrogen, Tungsten, Bohrium... It’s me, mom. I’m doing fine,” Alex assured, clearly amused with her games.

“Hey, what was that?” Snarled Spades characteristically. So he was a canine, after all.

“Me making sure that it really is my son, not just a random recording,” Duchess explained. “I know your sort and what tricks you’re capable of,” she explained. Spades muttered something, but accepted the explanation.

“Fine, whatever. Now, to the business. We want ten million dollars,” Spades got to the point.

“How do I deliver them to you?” Duchess asked.

“You’ll pack them in a suitcase. I want twenties and fifties, untraceable ones. I’ll call you again, give you the address. You come alone, hand me the money. It has to be you personally, I will accept cash from no one else. If I am hurt, someone tries to arrest me or follow me, the kid will die. A day after you give me the money, we’ll release the kid. Are we clear?” Spades demanded. Duchess wanted to confirm, when she saw Judy shaking her head and drawing with a finger a line over her throat. What did she mean? Oh, of course.

“I will come earlier and leave the money in designed spot. No need for a confrontation that could be awkward for both of us,” Duchess suggested instead.

“I will not negotiate the terms with you, Jenny,” the kidnapper snarled, confirming Judy
and Duchess’s fears. The Lady sighed with utter disappointment.

“Then you’ve forgotten to tell me something,” Duchess noticed.

“Huh?”

“You should have mentioned the part when you were going to kill me,” Lady Tompkins snarled. It was so simple, how could she have missed it? These guys weren’t afraid of police; they were afraid only of her. So to get rid of the most threatening person, they’d just lure her in and kill her on spot, stirring enough chaos in her small empire to allow them go unnoticed. The Duchess was so focused on her son and the money that she had nearly missed it.

“I… What?” Spades tried to sound surprised, but he was hardly convincing.

“Wow, I thought you can at least bluff,” chuckled the Duchess.

“Hey, listen now, Jenny…”

“No, you listen, Spades,” Lady interrupted him with a snarl. “You ruined my wedding. You kidnapped my son and cut off his finger. And now, you tried to straight up murder me. My patience’s running out.”

“Jenny…”

“Shut your mouth and listen, mongrel. I am talking now,” snarled Duchess suddenly. “I will tolerate this bullshit of yours no longer. You want the money, I want my son back. We shall perform a trade on sensible conditions and part our ways peacefully, whether you like it or not. I’m giving you twenty-four hours to reconsider the new terms of exchange. And if you don’t call by the time, I will assume you have murdered my son and I will chase you down. And once I get you, you filthy piece of shit, I will break every single bone in your body. I will skin you, I will feed you with your own kidney. I will torment you and your friends for months in every single way imaginable and then, as you’ll be dancing on the brink of sanity, falling toward the void inevitably, only then will I gut you mercifully and finish this pitiful existence of yours,” Duchess threatened him.

“Don’t you dare…”

“Twenty-four hours, Spades. If you don’t want to have me fill my words, then call me back within twenty-four hours,” the Lady hung up, dropping the phone. She sighed, realizing how everyone stared at her. “I shouldn’t have done it, have I?” She noticed.

“Normally, I’d say no, but actually… You put him on the clock there,” Judy pointed out. “The kidnappers have no other way out than to make the trade and if they fear you so much they wanted you dead… they’ll believe the threat,” the bunny assured confidently.

“You do have reputation, mom. They won’t belittle it, not if they really were ready to kill you,” Olivia pointed out and Will agreed with her. The Duchess sighed and smiled weakly.

“Thank you, Hopps, for warning me. I was so focused on carrying out the trade, I didn’t even consider them trying to set up murdering me,” Lady Osbourne – Tompkins explained herself.

“It was rather unusual… but so was their behavior. It’s very hard to consider everything under such a pressure, Mrs. Osbourne,” Judy noticed and then, Nick and Lio came back.

“The guy was calling from the phone booth,” explained Wilde. “We already sent both
police and Lady’s thugs behind them.”

“If he was calling from a booth, how did we hear Alex?” Olivia protested.


“We’ll be looking into it. If that guy ever used it, he’s ours,” the fox promised.

“We’ll get that mongrel,” the Lady assured. “And now we know that there are three of them.”

“Yup, a wolf, bear and hyena. Spades must be a wolf,” agreed Olivia and everyone watched the two ladies completely confused.

“How do you…” Judy asked and then, the realization struck her. “The elements. Alex only called three.”

“If there were more of them, Alex would suggest he could name more. It’s one of the codes I have with the children,” confirmed Duchess.

“You have to teach me some,” Will smirked.

“So, Hydrogen for a hyena, Bohrium for a bear... how does Tungsten give us a wolf?” Wondered Judy.

“It’s wolfram. Tungsten used to be called Wolfram, hence the wolf,” Nick noticed, suddenly regretting to have missed most of Duchess’s conversation. “Obviously, Alex didn’t necessarily have to see all the kidnappers,” he noticed.

“No, but from now on, we’re looking for these three,” Duchess noticed.

“And waiting for the phone call,” Will noticed carefully.

“Don’t worry. If these guys are anyhow sensible, they will call,” Nick promised firmly. Knowing Duchess and her reputation, no one in the room really doubted that they would.

12.03 pm, Sunday, August 20, 2022

James Greymane had barely fled from the phone booth before the police or Duchess’s men arrived. To say that he was pissed off, would be to say nothing. His first thought was to simply kill Alex Tompkins and run away when he still could, but he still needed the money. He needed it to take care of Ryan once they’d both be far, far away from Zootopia.

“Well, killing her is no option... She’ll understand if I ask for some more money,” he decided. Duchess had set them on the clock. The blackmailed Lady managed to actually threaten them. It surely seemed ridiculous... at least until James realized that what really concerned him was not kid’s fate; it was what Duchess could do to them in retaliation.
Chapter End Notes

A bit delayed, but it's a mess around here right now ^^;
When she had no other plans on weekends, Isabelle Alvarez would take a bus to Downtown and go shopping. Given her very limited funds it’d rather be merely browsing through the pretty stuff, hoping to find something really nice really cheap, but she enjoyed it nonetheless, especially considering that she sometimes got discounts just for the sake of her charming smile. She wasn’t very lucky today, but she had her head in her clouds too, thinking of the choices she had made on Saturday night. To abandon her toxic lifestyle, the endless spiral of elevated hopes and disappointments… it wasn’t going to work. It had no right of working. It never had before. Unless… unless. That was the hard part. As much as she hated it, Isabelle needed an advise from someone trusted. Maybe not Max, since it was a girl-stuff, but perhaps…”

“Isabelle?” The wolf heard someone calling her from behind just as she was going to walk into another store. Isabelle turned around to see the Kaylee Reynolds popping up among the crowd.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” Isabelle asked.

“Oh, just buying a surprise for Thane and Mia, while Max is shopping with them. We want to make up to them that we couldn’t have gone for the trip we promised,” explained Kaylee. “And you? Clothes shopping?”

“Yeah, it’s best mall in the city,” the wolf nodded and realized that the rabbit was staring at her curiously. “What is it?”

“You look… different.”

“Sober, perhaps,” smirked Isabelle and they chuckled.

“Is everything alright?” Kaylee asked.

“Yeah, just… actually, do you have a moment? I guess I need to talk to someone,” the wolf offered.

“Max and kids will take their time, so… sure! Some café?” The bunny suggested.

“There’s one over there and it’s reasonably priced. You know, for a café in a mall,” suggested Isabelle and they went over to the place. Two girls made their order and sat down by the table in a corner; Isabelle with her back against the wall; for a reason she couldn’t really explain she felt more comfortable this way.

“So, what bothers you?” Kaylee asked. “You know, when someone invites me over like this it’s usually about that guy they like that they don’t know what to do about, but that’s not a problem with you, is it?” The bunny joked and Isabelle raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, are you often invited like that?”

“It happened twice or thrice,” the bunny shrugged. “So, what’s the buzz?”
“Well… long story short, there’s a guy I like and I don’t know what to do about him,” Isabelle explained confidently and watched Reynolds’ expression changing from curiosity into mix of amazement and pure shock. Kaylee burst out with a nervous laughter and Alvarez rolled her eyes.

“Sorry, I just…” The bunny pulled herself back together almost immediately. The quickness of emotions vanishing from her face, resembling putting on a mask, rather than usual recollection, raised some questions in Isabelle’s head.

“This conversation is not leaving this place,” she demanded.

“That’s been established since we sat by the table,” promised the bunny. “So, who’s the lucky guy?” She asked outright. Isabelle opened her jaws, but then froze, only to sigh with frustration. She literally asked for it, didn’t she?

“First off, I know I’m an arrogant, overconfident bitch with little regard for others,” Isabelle stated, hoping for any significant reaction from Kaylee, but she just nodded. “I wasn’t always like this, but certain events shaped me so and it works for me… well,” she confessed, choosing the words carefully.

“Protective shell?” The bunny guessed and she shrugged.

“I see my flaws. I’m not saying I’m going to fix them all, but there are certain… self-destructive behaviors that I need to eradicate and… I can’t do it alone. I’ve tried before, never kept it up long. I need someone… for whom I could do it”

“And you believe he could be the one?” Kaylee wondered and she nodded.

“He seems to understand me. When we talked recently, seriously for the first time in our lives, I realized that he might be nothing like me, but he actually cares and… he could be just what I’ve been looking for,” Isabelle admitted.

“But if it were that simple, we wouldn’t be discussing it. Who is he?” Kaylee asked.

“August Fares,” Isabelle gave the name finally and watched the rabbit carefully. She was taking her time, processing the name and all the implications that it carried, but her face remained a perfect mask, revealing only deep thought processes behind it.

“That… is a problem,” she said finally. “And since we’re talking, you’re not just going to try and waltz between him and Judy like you attempted with Max.”

“Drama was fun, but it never did me any good in the end,” Isabelle noticed.

“Or anyone else,” reminded her gently Kaylee and wolf rolled her eyes, even if she deserved it.

“Anyway, one of the behaviors I mentioned. Long story short, I don’t know what to do. When we got to talk, just the two of us, I’m not sure why, but I think it’s the first time I actually care about someone. You know, beyond ‘I don’t want to be alone again’ thing.”

“I understand,” Kaylee nodded. “Still, things between him and Judy are only making it even more complicated…”

“I know,” Isabelle confirmed. “And I just have no good way out of it. Without somebody like him, I’ll lose motivation like I always do and go back to where I was. If I try to steal him from
Judy aga…um… not that it’s even possible, I think, then I’m already doomed. Whatever I do, I’m screwed,” the wolf summed up and Kaylee wondered.

“Seemingly,” she admitted, choosing not to wonder on why a wolf that claimed could seduce basically everyone, considered herself chanceless against that certain rabbit. “But maybe not so really?”

“Why not?” Isa doubted.

“Because it’s not about a guy that’s taken, not really. It’s about fixing you,” the bunny noticed.

“Are you even listening?! I just said I can’t fix myself alone. I’ve tried,” Isabelle protested.

“You’ve failed so far. Make this time different,” Kaylee suggested, but she just snorted.

“Wow, that’s helping.”

“No, seriously. Dealing with my own issues, I learnt that the only person that can fix you, is you. Others help or impede, but in here…” The bunny tapped on her head. “You’re the one doing the work. Because you’re the only one in there. So… make this time different. It’s only up to you,” Kaylee concluded, leaving Isabelle quiet, as she was processing it.

“Does it really work?”

“Do you know why I fixed my self-esteem when I met Max?” I mean, it’s no perfect, but…

“Why?”

“Because I met someone that believed in me. Max, Judy, Nick… they believed in me and finally, so did I,” Kaylee explained. “August believes in you and if he does so, then screw it, I’m going to trust him and believe in you as well. Max will be there for you too. Whatever demons haunt you, you can defeat them. You just have to believe and then, try real hard,” the bunny encouraged her and Isabelle shook her head. She was smiling, though.

“You’re sounding like some coach, you know? Just do it!” Alvarez tried to mock her, but it didn’t seem honest and her laugh died rather quickly. “And you think I can do it alone?”

“You have to do it on your own… but you’re not alone. And when you’re feeling alone, just go and talk with someone. Call me or Max. Thank August for the motivation he gave you. I know it might seem like nothing at time, but it’s these little things that make us feel belong and keep us going.”

“It’s hard, you know?” Muttered Isabelle.

“I know,” Kaylee replied with full conviction and a wolf felt a sting. That rabbit managed to free herself from bonds of loneliness. She mostly fixed herself and found her happiness. Well, if she did, then Isabelle certainly could too. She was no worse than her. The wolf smiled. Yeah, she could fix herself. If not her, then who would?

“Oh, and about August and Judy…”

“Try to mess with their relationship and I’ll murder you with a spoon,” Kaylee threatened
her disturbingly specifically while still bearing the most charming smile and two girls eyed one another only to laugh several seconds later.

“It never was my intention,” Isabelle chuckled.

“I hope so, but you know… I never can be sure,” Kaylee sipped some of her coffee.

“I promise. Oh, Kaylee?”

“Huh?”

“Thank you,” Isabelle said, realizing how strange it sounded in her mouth. She didn’t use that word all that often.

11.12 am, Monday, August 21, 2022

James Greymane was sitting with his partners in their most recent crime, Raymond Allen and Leonard Miles were sitting in a rather empty room of a small house the wolf had rented just for the sake of the kidnapping. They had been discussing the terms of exchange with Duchess for whole morning and slowly, they were coming to a satisfying conclusion.

“So that’s how we’re doing it?” James asked and both Ryuk and Miles agreed. “Perfect. So, I’m calling her now. It’s been almost twenty-four hours,” decided the wolf, reaching for the phone.

“I still can’t believe that she threatened you. If it were me, I’d kill the kid just to teach her some respect,” smirked Ryuk.

“And be gutted by her henchmen,” muttered Miles.

“And with not a cent from the ransom. But I suppose that wouldn’t be a problem, in face of death,” agreed James. “We gotta be careful, you moron,” he snarled at the hyena.

“No one’s gonna threaten…”

“Yeah, yeah, shut up,” wolf silenced him, grabbed the notes and left their hideout. He took a bus to Sahara Square, from where he was going to make the call. James found his phone booth, looked around to make sure there were no cameras in proximity and stepped inside. He dialed the number and waited for the Duchess to pick up. Firs signal, second, fifth… for a short terrifying moment he thought she wouldn’t pick up and then, she did.

“Hey, Jenny,” he greeted her condescendingly.

“Spades. Just on time,” Duchess greeted him coldly. James forced a smile. He could not afford to fall in her paws, that much he knew.

“I’d never miss the money,” he shrugged carelessly and she snorted.
“Obviously. Give me my son,” she demanded.

“Sorry, not today. We can send you another finger, if you want,” replied Greymane arrogantly. Duchess started a sentence only to cut it short, causing a smirk over his face. He won that round.

“Terms of the exchange, then,” she wanted to know instead.

“Straight to the business, huh?”

“Let’s not pretend that either of us enjoy this conversation,” Duchess suggested firmly and he coughed off awkwardly.

“Right, first thing would be that for the inconvenience you caused me with yesterday’s argument, we decided to raise the ransom to fifteen million dollars,” he started with what he considered the most important thing.

“Acknowledged,” Duchess confirmed so nonchalantly, the wolf regretted he hadn’t doubled the sum. But he couldn’t change his mind now, could he?

“Good,” he only muttered, a bit discouraged.

“How do you see the trade?” Asked the Duchess.

“Rather simply. You put all the money in hundreds. I want them to be small-sized banknotes that rodents use, all need to fit in no more than two suitcases,” started the wolf.

“That will take a bit longer,” warned the Lady.

“You have time until 3pm on Thursday,” decided James and gave Duchess time to consider her words.

“Manageable,” she decided. “How do we make the transaction?”

“When you have all the money in the suitcases with numeric locks, the code will be 6445, you get in the car with the money. You go to Tundratown, drive around the district until you receive two calls. The first one will be from your son, so that you know he’s alright. The other one will be from me; I’ll give you an exact location where you’re to drop off the suitcases,” James explained.

“And then you pick them up?” Guessed Duchess.

“Precisely. If I see anyone following me, though, I will abandon money, have your son killed and you’ll not hear from us ever again. Clear?” Demanded James.

“Crystal clear,” assured the Lady slowly.

“Cool, then I need one thing more from you. I checked the old photos. Turns out Mikey used to carry a cane with him didn’t he? You know, Michael? Your husband, the one Reynolds offed?” Greymane asked arrogantly. He couldn’t kill Duchess… which didn’t mean he couldn’t hurt her some more.

“What of it?” Asked Duchess only.

“You’re just the sentimental kind of bitch to keep it, right? And we do need something to mark the spot, so… leave it at the spot. I’ll give you the details,” he decided, but all that replied
“When do I get my son back?” She asked one question that truly mattered to her.

“I’ll treat it as a yes. On the next morning, when we see that money’s alright. We’ll drop him off in a random public place in the city. If anyone tries to chase us down before that, though, we’ll have the kid killed though, so be patient. You’ll get to see your son in proper time,” he promised.

“Wonderful. Thursday, 6pm, fifteen million dollars in two suitcases,” summed up the Duchess.

“Precisely. Until next time, Jenny.”

“The last one,” the Duchess replied coldly and the wolf hung up with a smirk. Now, he should be going before someone tries to track him down like previously. As the wolf slipped into the crowd of mammals going for the subway, he felt his phone buzzing; it was the throw-away, one for which only Ryuk, Miles and Diane had numbers. And yet, it was an unlisted number. Confused, he picked it up.

“Who’s this?”

11.34 am, Monday, August 21, 2022

Like any other day, Anastasia Reynolds could be found in her office at the top of Reynolds Industries building. Instead of handling usual CEO duties, she was leaning against her desk, watching the surrealistic painting on the wall: Number 3. It had been painted by her mother under alias of Jason Haddock and remained one of the last few of her mother’s artworks that father had trouble retrieving. He got it only after it was stolen by Donovan Jacobs crew and retrieved by Wilde and Hopps from ZPD. Later, when Thomas Reynolds was murdered, Spencer Young burnt most of the paintings, sparing only Moonlight and Number 3, but desecrating the latter by writing ‘MURDERER!’ all over it with Anastasia’s father’s blood. She had been offered to bring it back to the original state, but young Miss Reynolds refused. Her father was murdered by the fox that clearly worked on behalf of Duchess herself. If anyone thought she was going to simply let it go, they were gravely mistaken.

The phone on the desk buzzed shyly and Anastasia checked it. The text was short; “J. finished the call.” Anastasia smiled with satisfaction and dialed the number from her mind. Now was the time to pay Duchess back.

“Who is this?” Asked James Greymane, clearly surprised that anyone had this number.

“I thought you’d know. You wanted to work for me so badly, after all,” Anastasia noticed and heard his snort.

“I wanted, but now I’m working for myself. Finds me even better, you know,” he replied
coldly.

“No wonder, I watched carefully what you did there. The way you spoiled her wedding night! Ah, wonderful, just wonderful,” congratulated him Anastasia. “So, how much you’re getting out of it? Ten million? Fifteen?” She guessed.

“Why would you care?” Asked James suspiciously.

“Because I could make it double,” offered Reynolds instead and waited through the long moment of silence that fell on the other side. She had no doubts that she had his full attention, even despite their rough start.

“I’m listening? What do you want me to do?” He decided, probably assuming that hearing the offer wouldn’t hurt.

“Not that much. After you get money from Duchess, you kill Alex Tompkins and vanish from Zootopia. I will transfer you money to some banana republic bank accounts, split between the three of you,” explained Anastasia and gave James to let the concept sink in.

“After we get the money?” Doubted James. Anastasia liked how he didn’t hesitate about the murder itself; he was only bothered by the reward.

“I want her to believe her son would be safe. Play the show, let her talk with him and think everything is alright. After you get the money… no one needs him any longer.”

“Why do you want her son dead like that?” Wondered Greymane. The answer was quite simple; to have Duchess’s world start falling apart with no clear indication that Anastasia was the one behind it; James was simply going to be the first piece of this domino of pain and suffering. Obviously, she found no reason to share it with him.

“It really shouldn’t be your concern,” she noticed firmly.

“Understood. About the money...”

“You get from me just as much as Duchess offered to you. Which would be... ten millions, I guess?”

“Twenty five,” claimed Greymane.

“You’d have no guts do demand more than fifteen. But for this boldness of yours, I’ll give you twenty,” decided Anastasia after short hesitation.

“Alright,” he agreed, more than content and Anastasia nodded with satisfaction.

“Well then, consult it with your team and we’ll discuss the details in the evening. Are we clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he declared eagerly and Anastasia hung up with a smirk. There was no way Greymane’s team would let an offer like this slip, which meant she was going to hurt Duchess for real this time with no way to trace it back to her. Next time, she’d find a way to kill Olivia, then have Will Osbourne offed in line of duty, burn down Diamond and eventually, deal with Duchess for once and for all. Oh, it seemed so simple! You just had to pull the right strings and watch these fools do your work for you.

The funniest thing was that Anastasia wasn’t going to spend a cent there. After all, she
couldn’t allow someone as unreliable as that Ryuk to walk around, knowing about the entire deal. And she had unfinished business with Greymane family too. Gerard Greymane was the one that personally murdered her father, in the end. Anastasia was going to let slip his son, Ryan Thorn, since he was just a kid and for Max’s sake too, but James… James who clearly despised Duchess simply because of his brother’s fate… that’s where Miss Reynolds was going to combine business with pleasure.

6.24 pm, Monday, August 21, 2022

James returned straight to their hideout. Not asking the inconvenient questions such as how Miss Reynolds had his number, knew that it was him that kidnapped Alex Tompkins or whether she was following him or not, he went straight to his friends in order to discuss the offer they had received. Miles accepted it with a shrug; he really didn’t care about what would happen to the boy and with his workshop going bankrupt, he was going to leave Zootopia anyway. Ryuk was much more eager than that; he was glad to be able to kill son of Duchess; symbol to Zootopia’s establishment. They decided to act just like Reynolds suggested and kill young wolf after they’d get the money. To James, it’d serve as a form of revenge for her brother too, so he could hardly complain.

He left the hideout at the late afternoon, quite excited with the events of that day and managed to call Ryan and give him instructions, which boy agreed to with some doze of hesitance, when his throw-away phone buzzed once again, this time announcing a text message. He checked it, quite surprised. It was from Diane and contained only three words: “My house. 8pm.”

8.12 pm, Monday, August 21, 2022

Diane Inesi lived with her father in a small house just outside the downtown. They had just eaten dinner and her father had drowsed off in the sofa, so she muted the TV and went to wash the dishes. She was just finishing the task, when she heard the doorbell. The coyote dropped her rubber, wiped the paws and went to the door to find exactly whom she had expected; James Greymane.

“No flowers?” She tried to smile, but did not manage so. He felt the hostility in her voice and it clearly confused him; just a few days earlier they were getting along pretty well, after all.
“I came on rather short notice,” he muttered, embarrassed. “May I?”

“Of course, come inside,” she stepped aside and let the wolf in. Diane glanced at his feet and noticed that they were muddy. Rainforest District? That’s where Miles lived, wasn’t it?

“Your dad’s home?” Asked James, as they headed for the kitchen. Diane opened the fridge, and took out a beer and a cider. She opened the bottles and handed him the former.

“Yeah, sleeping in the sofa. He’s had the long day,” Diane explained, as she sipped her drink.

“Maybe for the better that I don’t get to say hello. He still hates me, doesn’t he?” Noticed James bitterly. “I remember how he kept saying that I would be death of yours one day,” he recalled and she smiled.

“Oh, he’s just… overprotective about me,” Diane shrugged it off. “He knows that deep inside, you’re a good guy,” she assured and James turned his sight away awkwardly, as if struggling with conscience.

“If he does, he hides it well,” he muttered and chugged his beer. “So, what do I owe the invitation to? It seemed rather urgent,” he wanted to know. Diane sighed deeply.

“It’s about Alex Tompkins. You kidnapped him, didn’t you? That’s what for you came to the wedding,” she noticed and James awkward silence told her more than a thousand words. Inesi snorted resentfully. “Why did you do that?!” She yelled at him.

“For money. I need it for Ryan,” James just shrugged.

“You promised you wouldn’t cause Duchess any harm!” She shouted back, infuriated with his carelessness. Did that wolf lose last bits of reason?

“It’s just a spoiled wedding, Diane, no big deal,” he noticed carelessly.

“Just a spoiled wedding?! And what if things go wrong?! What if you hurt that kid?! What are you going to do, grab Ryan and flee from Zootopia with tail between your legs?!” She snarled.

“I’m leaving with him anyway. Doesn’t matter if Duchess hates me once I’m gone,” wolf argued, but she only laughed, as she crossed her arms.

“You’re not thinking leaving Zootopia will protect you anyhow, do you?” She doubted. “And besides… is there still any point doing it?”

“What do you mean, is there any point?” Greymane snarled in protest. He stepped up to her in most threatening demeanor.

“I mean Ryan,” Diane explained calmly. She really didn’t want the discussion to turn into a regular fight and she realized that if she wished so, she had to be the cool one.

“What’s with him?” James asked, slightly pacified by sudden change in her tone.

“You see him as usually, right? Once a week?” She pointed out.

“Yeah, so what?”

“Do you talk about Max and Kaylee Reynolds and how they’re going to adopt him?” She
asked, but he snarled resentfully.

““We do, so what?””

““Does he complain about it at all? Does Ryan seem to have anything against them adopting him?” Diane asked. James opened his mouth in order to protest, but then he froze and let his head down, unable to find the words.

“I… He doesn’t understand what’s good for him,” he muttered.

“And what part exactly he doesn’t understand?! That he’s happy?! That someone can finally give him a loving house?!” Diane protested.

“You don’t know these Reynolds!” Shouted wolf.

“Oh, and do you?!” Diane snarled back. “It happens that I work in ZPD. I asked about them a lot since I learnt about Ryan and tell you what, I’ve heard not a bad word of these two,” she informed him, but he just snorted.

“Tch.”

“Don’t you ‘Tch’ me!” Inesi admonished him. “Can’t you see that you’re making this all about yourself now?! You do it because you want Ryan! Because you can’t bear that you’ve failed him! He could be happy, if only you considered him for one second and stepped back!” She was poking at his chest with every ‘you’ that she snarled at him. James listened to her in helpless fury, as he was failing to find the arguments, angry that as always, she had the last word.

“Why do you never stand by me?!” James snarled. “Whatever I come up with, you never help me, just keep telling me to give up!”

“I never stand by you?! I protected your tail when you murdered a random civilian! I did not give you away to Duchess even though you tried to kill her right hand! I helped you liquify the ATM money, only for you to break the promise and attack Duchess again! Why do you keep doing it?!” Diane cried desperately with her eyes watery.

“Because I want the best for Ryan! Because I want to avenge his father and my brother!” James yelled. “And if I can’t kill O’Dyna or her, then at least I’ll kill that brat of her, so that she knows how it feels to lose someone close!” He snapped and, only watching her terrified expression, he realized that he had said too much. “I… I didn’t mean…”

“You’re going to kill Alex,” Diane whispered, terrified. “From the very start, you were going to kill him…” she realized with horror, as she put her bottle away.

“I did not!” He protested, quite unconvincing and she snorted with nervous laughter, as she shook his head with disgust.

“James, what happened to you?” She asked and he just stared at her coldly, with no words of apology even crossing his mind. “When did you change?”

“I’m just the way I am. Looking after myself,” he shrugged.

“You can still stop this madness, you know,” Diane noticed. She found his paw and held it gently. It felt disturbingly cold. “Let Alex go. I’ll talk to Will, he’ll persuade Duchess to not go after you,” she begged. “We can still unwrap it all before someone gets hurt.”
“And if I say no?” James hesitated.

“Then you will give me no choice,” she said with grim implication. “I can’t let you hurt yet another innocent mammal. I can’t let you get in war with Duchess and... be killed,” she confessed, still holding his paw, warming it up gradually. “So I beg you, let it go. You don’t have to do it. Everything will be alright. Just... stop,” Diane promised. She watched the wolf weighing her words in his conscience. He certainly realized that this was the point of no-return. Or rather, was it a chance to fix it? Diane did not doubt that he’d realize that one option for him to live happily and for Ryan to have a godfather, would be letting this madness go.

She saw Greymane sighing with resignation, closing his watery eyes to hold the tears. He let his paw remain in her grasp and smiled forcibly, gazing in her irises with his teary eyes.

“You’re right. It’s time to let it go,” he admitted reluctantly and Diane smiled beautifully. She knew it was hard for him, to let go something he worked so hard on, but she never doubted that he would.

And then, she felt dull pain at her temple. Only when she yelped, slipping and falling among spill of golden liquid and debris of glass, did she notice neck of the bottle he had crushed against her head. Wolf released his paw from her grasp and watched her fall on the kitchen floor with pity. And then, he howled furiously and lunged toward her, pinning to the ground and bombarding with consecutive furious blows. Diane cried, trying to protect her face, but then, he hit her straight in the forehead. His tears, beastly snarl, his weight against her chest and burning pain, they all seemed a burden no mammal could carry. And suddenly, something snapped and Diane Inesi found herself unnaturally light.
Broken bonds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

6.19 pm, Wednesday, August 23, 2022

For a change, August could not pick Judy up with a car; his one had broken to the point where not even his brothers, mechanics, could fix it. Still, he didn’t let that inconvenience put a kink in their plans. Instead of traveling by a bus or taxi, he rented two bikes and took her for a ride across the city. He had planned it carefully too, so that most of their time they spent in among greenery of parks or on newly made bike lanes. They were enjoying themselves for half an hour already, when they heard some characteristic noises in the distance. The ears of the two perked up simultaneously, as they located its source.

“Is that…” August doubted.

“A funfair!” Judy noticed enthusiastically, as they saw a Ferris wheel in the distance. “Wanna check it out?”

“Why not?” He agreed and they turned toward the noises and lights. Rabbits drove through the park and left their bikes locked at its verge, just a hundred feet away from the entrance. August paid the symbolic fee for the entrance and they walked a bit, taking in the aura of the funfair. Fares breathed in deeply, as they went through the biggest crowd and stood a bit aside.

“Suddenly, I’m back at the Carrot Days,” he noticed and she agreed with a nod.

“So, what do we check out first?” Judy wondered.

“Darts and BB guns are frauds, obviously, so maybe something where we don’t need to pretend that we have a chance to win something?” Suggested August.

“Good idea,” she agreed and they went for the bumper cars first. They were trying to hit one another from the side as hard as possible and while both had their moments, it was hard to determine who had an upper hand overall; both were skilled drivers in the end. After the bumper cars, they went for some ring toss, where they were unlucky enough to win nothing and then, had some fun in the hay labyrinth. When they had separated accidentally and Judy managed to find her way out, August was already waiting with two pink cotton candies. He handed her one and munched the other.

“So, what’s the plan now?” August asked, glancing at the Ferris wheel. He had been looking over it since they came there.

“Just say that you want to go there,” smiled Judy and he blushed embarrassed. “So, to the Ferris wheel. But I want to check out the darts later, alright?”

“You know they’re rigged? My cousin used to run these games,” he warned.

“Hey, I’m feeling lucky,” she smiled and they went for the Ferris wheel. The queue
wasn’t too long and the two waited only a couple minutes before being lifted in the air by the small gondola; actually they were so lucky that they got one just for the two of them. Judy and August were sitting on the bench, looking out as they were being lifted high in the air. They finished their cotton candies and August offered himself to keep the sticks until they’d get down. The two rabbits were watching the city below them in silence.

“I don’t remember the last time I was watching the city from so high,” confessed August, as they watched the park through which they had ridden there. Only now could they really appreciate how big an area it covered.

“If not for the skyscrapers, you could see whole Zootopia from here,” Judy agreed.

“It gives you the perspective, right?” smiled August, watching the city below them, basked in the sunset glow.

“True,” she nodded, glancing at him discretely and then, she sighed deeply. There was no point in delaying it. “August, I… I’ve been thinking a lot. You know… about what you told me the other night,” the bunny said shyly and he turned at her, most intrigued.

“Yes?” He encouraged her to continue.

“I have never once stopped thinking of it since when you told me and…” she laughed nervously. “I’m sorry, it was just so sudden and…”

“I love you. I needed to gather courage to admit it, but I’ve found it now. I love you, Judy,” August declared firmly and she looked him deeply in the eyes.

“But I do not love you,” she replied quietly, almost whispering. He turned his sight away and let out a quiet, painful sigh as his ears dropped. Her eyes turned watery just at that sight. “I’m sorry that I’ve made you think otherwise, I wanted to do good, but I only hurt you and…” And then he snorted, shaking his head and Judy watched him carefully, unsure whether he was laughing, or crying. August blinked several times and she saw how his eyes grew watery, but then, he chuckled bitterly.

“Because you love Nick, don’t you?” He guessed and she nodded gently.

“And it took me nearly losing him to realize what an idiot I was, waiting all these years. I’m sorry, I never should have…”

“No, it’s kinda my…” Fares chuckled, confusing her, as if there was something funny to whole this situation. “I’ve been warned that I shouldn’t be stepping in between the two of you, because you might not be a thing officially… but you are a thing in the end,” he smiled politely. “Do you know what I mean?”

“I think I do,” Judy nodded.

“I thought I could be better than him. I mean, if you weren’t even dating, there must have been something wrong with him, right? Something that kept you away,” August noticed. “But the closer we were getting the more… unhappy you were, as if I was depriving you of something I could not give you, no matter how much I’d try to. I hoped that at some point you’d just crack and cut away from him, but… that would break your heart, wouldn’t it?” He asked and Judy let her eyes down shamefully.

“I’m afraid so,” she admitted. “I didn’t realize it until I got so far away from him that we might have missed the point of no return… I’m sorry, August. I never meant to hurt you and I only
turn out to be playing with you all along.”

“It’s all right,” he leaned against the railing of the gondola and watched the city below them. “There is nothing wrong in striving for your own happiness,” he said carefully.

“There is when I’m hurting my friends in progress,” Judy refused as she leaned against the railing just next to him and August smiled.

“We all stray, Judy. Even I was trying to keep you for myself. I could claim I was sure I could make you happy… or did I just want to be happy myself?” He wondered and Judy shook her head with disbelief.

“You wanted to do best. That’s how you work, August. You’re just… too good to hurt anyone. I’m trying to be like you, but I keep…”

“You are, Judy. I just gave my best to confuse you. I knew I could get burnt and well… I did,” Fares reassured her, grinning most encouragingly. “But now that you’re on the right track, you’re going to fix the mess you stirred, right?” He demanded to know. Judy nodded, suddenly feeling a huge weight dropping from her chest. He wasn’t saying it just to cheer her up; she knew August well enough to realize he hardly ever spoke the things that he didn’t really mean and now, he sounded even more confident in his words than usual. If he couldn’t have her, then he really wanted Judy to at least fix what she had broken between her and Nick and this blessing of his only encouraged her in doing so.

“I will fix this mess,” Judy promised to both him and herself. “And while I think I know what to do about Nick…”

“I’ll be alright. Hearts break, but time mends them. That’s how it works,” he noticed. “And we’re both sensible adults so I’m not causing you scenes or anything,” August added and Judy watched him carefully. His sad smile reassured her that he was hurt, but he was going to be alright eventually. It really lifted her spirit to see that at least some of the damage she caused wasn’t permanent.

“You’re just too good,” Judy muttered, as she shook her head and he watched her weirdly, as if not understanding what she meant and yet, wanting to reply with exactly this same. It was funny, how both of them saw one another this way and yet, none could take the compliment.

When they got down from the Ferris wheel, Judy was ready to go home, as the date must have been done, but August insisted that they’d go for the darts that he had promised to her. While August walked away with nothing, Judy scored a lucky shot and won a plushy five-armed star. They rode back to return the bikes and walked last few hundred feet in silence. August and Judy stopped at the stairs of her block of flats.

“So… this is the end,” Judy noticed and there was something dramatically final to this announcement, but she could not put it any different. This was the end for them.

“Yeah. It’s… it’s been a pleasure,” he agreed, trying not to break down. “Sorry, I’m just a bunny, all… emotional,” he wiped his eye gently and Judy giggled nervously as her eyes grew watery. She was a bunny too, in the end.

“We’re terrible that way, aren’t we?” She hugged him suddenly. “I’m sorry.”
“It’s alright. I’m just gonna cry this once,” he apologized, sniffling, but trying to smile. He hugged her a bit stronger and then, let her go. He watched Judy with a deep sigh. “Well then… until tomorrow?” He asked and she nodded.

“Until tomorrow,” she agreed, even if it was going to be quite a different tomorrow. She walked upstairs and he opened the door for her. As she disappeared behind it and he hopped down the stairs onto the pavement, Judy followed him with sight as always. August Fares was walking away singing quietly. There was nothing cheerful in his song, neither did he have an umbrella that he’d swing enthusiastically, but she knew that he was walking forward with his chin up and a weak smile on his lips, even if his eyes were watery. Judy smiled weakly, thinking of the star plushie she had forgotten to take from his backpack. For a second, she considered getting it back on the next day, but… it was time to let some things it go.

10.29 am, Thursday, August 24, 2022

Max and Isabelle were driving in silence, as they headed toward the crime scene of their newest case, just at the brink of Downtown. Max stopped the car at the sidewalk, already crowded with police car. They watched an ambulance drive away hastily with sirens roaring.

“Another day, another murder,” Isabelle said grimly. “Let’s see what we have here,” she suggested and Reynolds nodded. They got out of the car and passed under the police tape that had been wrapped around the small house.

“Coroner’s inside,” said one of the officers, they passed by. Max thanked him and he and Isabelle went to the house. The wolf stopped at the entrance, watched the door.

“No break-in signs,” he noticed and Isabelle noticed. They both smelled blood mixed with bleach clearly and so, followed the stench to the living room. There, in the passage between kitchen and the room, the coroner was crouching over the victim, studying him. He stood up, seeing the detectives and took off a glove to shake their paws.

“Detectives, coroner Holly,” the gazelle technician introduced himself.

“Detective Reynolds and Officer Alvarez,” Max introduced them. “What do we have here?” He asked and the coroner stepped away so they could see the victim clearly. It was a male coyote in his fifties, maybe sixties, with torn apart throat and shredded shoulders. He was dressed rather casually; checked shirt and jeans. The bloodstain of formidable size blossoming around his neck had been poured over with some white liquid, but both managed to dry out already.

“His name is Eugene Inesi, a local business man, aged fifty-four, widower, never remarried. He lived here with his only daughter, Diane,” identified him coroner. “The case of death is the extensive damage of throat, obviously.”

“The murderer basically torn it apart,” Isabelle noticed.

“The slash wounds on the shoulders imply that the murderer knocked him over, pinned
him to the floor and then killed with a single bite,” Max noticed and the coroner nodded with satisfaction. He couldn’t expect less from the wolves as experienced with police work.

“Murder of passion?” Alvarez suggested.

“Most likely. The type wound indicates a canine, most likely a wolf, given the size. It happened at least two days ago, considering how dried is blood. If I were to guess, I’d say Monday evening,” coroner Holly confirmed. “The white liquid is, as you can probably smell, bleach. The murderer tried to wipe traces. There are some clear signs of bleach in the kitchen too, that’s where he took it from.”

“Did you secure any fur?” Wondered Reynolds.

“Couple grey strands on Inesi’s clothes. Again, a wolf or coyote, laboratory will clarify it for us. Look at his paws, please,” he suggested and Max and Isabelle glanced at Inesi’s talons; they were covered in blood.

“Murderer’s?” Isabelle hoped. “Inesi tried to fight him off, but managed only to scratch him.”

“Most likely. It’s dried out, but we should be able to extract DNA,” Holly promised. The paws were unstained by the bleach, so there was a chance to do it.

“What about the daughter?” Asked Max, as they stood up from the victim. There was no much more to be found here.

“We found her in the kitchen. Step carefully, glass is everywhere,” suggested the coroner and they came to the kitchen. There was no body, only debris of green glass, dried stains of some drink, and small blood stain on the floor.

“You found her alive?” Max noticed, recalling the ambulance suddenly.

“She was unconscious when we found her, probably in coma. Girl had signs of serious head trauma, doctors are unsure if she will wake up. There, photos,” he handed them pictures and Max and Isabelle studied them carefully. Diane was lying on the kitchen floor, her head where the small blood stain was now. She was dressed rather elegantly and forearms were spread in defensive pose, but not cut, while her whole face was swollen like after taking a serious beating. “Diane Inesi, aged twenty-six, police officer in Happytown ZPD, unmarried and, as much as we know, single.”

“He was punching her without using talons,” noticed Max. “If we’re talking about this same mammal, that is.”

“We’ve found similar fur on her shirt,” confirmed the coroner.

“And he didn’t tear her throat,” Isabelle added and then, she noticed something. “What’s that bottle?” She pointed at the kitchen countertop. A glass bottle half-filled with golden liquid was standing there, opened.

“Cider, AppleBaum. The green bottle that has been broken is from an Eagle beer. We found the neck and the sticker in the trash bin. There are more of such bottles in the fridge, both beer and cider,” explained Mr. Holly.

“We have no signs of entry, do we?” Max noticed and was satisfied with a single nod from the coroner. “He was a friend, or acquaintance. Maybe a family member. She gave him a
beer, had a cider herself, which means he came on foot or didn’t care to drive under influence. They were talking casually. She put away her bottle on the countertop and then, he smacked her with his. He knocked her out, pinned her down and kept hitting her with fists. Do we have any doubts whether he tried to kill her?” Wondered the wolf.

“The brain damage is severe. He was beating to kill, only let her go when she was unresponsive,” coroner confirmed wolf’s guess.

“Then why not with talons or jaws? Why fists?” Max wondered.

“He wanted to leave no signs… or already preparing his own defense. He could claim he only meant to hit her, not kill,” Isabelle noticed. “Normal canine would instinctively use talons.”

“So, someone with criminal history?” Suggested Max.

“Or a police officer. She’s from ZPD and she let him in, after all,” Isabelle noticed cynically. “The question is, if he was so careful to not cut the girl, why would he tear her father’s throat apart?”

“He lost it. The father heard noises, came to the living room and saw his daughter being pummeled. He called him and the murderer panicked. He lunged toward him, locked his jaws on Inesi’s throat… crack and done,” suggested Max.

“Or something like that. Can we tell where Mr. Inesi was when the fight ensued?” Isabelle asked the coroner.

“There were some breadcrumbs by the living room sofa and the TV remote lied on it too. It might be that he was sleeping in the sofa when it happened,” suggested Mr. Holly.

“That’d also explain why they talked in the kitchen,” Reynolds agreed.

“Indeed. So, the bleach. He found it in the kitchen, wiped the signs and left. Did he wash himself too? Everyone would remember a wolf with bloodstains on his jaws,” noticed Max.

“He most likely did in the sink over here. Like you can see, it’s bleached too,” the coroner confirmed.

“Do we have any Inesis’ belongings missing? Because we still lack the motive, right?” Isabelle noticed. The coroner agreed and suggested that they’d leave the small kitchen. He guided them upstairs to her room and pointed at the jewelry box of significant size was lying on the ground, some of the jewelry lying on the ground.

“He emptied the box. We can’t find her phone or wallet anywhere, either. Couple things seem to be missing from Mr. Inesi’s room as well. The box for his Rolex is empty, just like the camera bag. That would be everything we know about, though,” explained the coroner.

“Still, worth a bit. So, a robbery by someone Diane knew?” Max noticed uncertainly.

“Well, given the house, father’s Rolex and everything, she can’t be poor. She works in Happytown, too, so she has not so rich friends,” Isabelle noticed. “The murderer could come over to down a beer or two, they started talking. Maybe he wanted to borrow some money and she refused… or maybe he planned to rob her from the start. Either way, Diane didn’t notice when he hit her with the bottle and then, things went out of control,” she suggested.

“Or he wanted to murder her from the start and tried to fake a robbery,” Max noticed.
“Or lost his temper during the conversation, hit her too hard and then faked the robbery,”
Isabelle agreed and her partner nodded with satisfaction. That probably covered all the most
plausible turns of events.

“ Plenty of options,” Max hesitated. “Do we have any witnesses? Who called us?”

“The neighbor, Mr. Randers. He should be still waiting outside,” coroner told them and
Max and Isabelle decided to talk to him now to not keep him at the scene for any longer. They
walked outside and went to the police car, by which stood an elderly elk smoking a cigarette in
silence.

“Mr. Randers? My name is Detective Reynolds and this is Officer Alvarez. Would you
mind if we ask you couple questions?” Asked the wolf and the elk breathed out a cloud of grey
smoke.

“Will the girl be alright? I know that Eugene is dead, but his girl…” worried the witness.

“She’s been transported to the hospital and remains under professional care. All we can
do for her now, is finding the ones who did it,” Max assured and the elk agreed reluctantly. “Mr.
Randers, could you tell us how you found the scene?” He asked.

“Eugene had a knee surgery last week, so he couldn’t walk around too much. I was busy
lately, but I’ve been trying to call him whole yesterday and when he wasn’t picking up, I decided to
come over. The door was cracked opened, which was rather unusual and then, I smelled blood, so I
came inside and… found them. I called the ambulance immediately,” the elk explained.

“Did you see anyone visiting them on Monday or later?” Isabelle asked, but he shook his
head.

“No, I haven’t. It must have been some burglars. Eugene had no enemies, really, he was
such an easy-going fella,” judged Mr. Randers confidently, even if most likely wrongly.

“And Diane? She works in Happytown ZPD. It’s not the job that gets you plenty of
friends,” noticed Max.

“I don’t know her or her friends well. You probably will need to ask her ZPD friends for
that,” suggested the witness. They discussed with him some more, but learnt nothing useful and,
feeling that he couldn’t tell them anything more, decided to let them go. It was then, when one of
the officers on the scene called them.

“Detectives, we found something,” said a Downtown newbie, young tiger named Clawer.
“Please, follow me,” he pleased and Max and Isabelle went with him to the side alley just behind
the house. A forensic officer was standing by the trash bin taking photos and wolves walked over
and glanced inside. Among the trash laid jewelry, a golden watch, two wallets and a camera bag;
just what seemed to have been missing from the house.

“Not a robbery after all,” Isabelle noticed. “Hopefully, murderer left some leads in there,”
she watched the bloodied content of the container carefully.

“We should ask around the neighbors. Maybe they know something,” Max noticed.

“And call her ZPD partner. I have a feeling he’ll tell us something very interesting,” she
noticed and her partner watched her carefully; he knew that smile of hers, when she was suspecting
someone instinctively.
“That’s not very nice of you.”

“I’m not a nice person and ninety percent of murders are committed by family or close friends. Given small family, the guy feels like a way to start,” she riposted.

“Find the name, call him, let’s meet as quickly as possible. I’ll ask around neighbors,” suggested Max and she confirmed with a nod. They left the alley with their tasks defined and determination to arrest whoever had committed that atrocious crime.

Chapter End Notes

I guess I made couple WildeHopps fans happy with this chapter, have I not? :D
Eventually, the neighbors gave Max and Isabelle no useful information at all; Diane Inesi hardly had any friends among them and while some mentioned she used to have a boyfriend that her father didn’t really trust, none could give them any detail. With that small disappointment behind, Max and Isabelle contacted Diane’s partner from Happytown ZPD; William Osbourne – Tompkins. While he wasn’t too eager to talk at the time initially, once he heard that the matter concerned Diane, he changed his mind and arrived to the Precinct 1 police station. Max greeted their witness in the main hall and took him to the questioning room where Isabelle was already waiting, sipping her coffee. While the case was deadly serious, the conversation started in quite friendly and informal atmosphere; William Osbourne – Tompkins was sitting on the table, while Max and Isabelle were leaning against the door.

“You didn’t seem too eager to come over, Will,” Alvarez noticed, calling him by name. It was the first they agreed for as they met, as they all were cops in the end. Isabelle did not bother to mention that she considered him the main suspect for the time being.

“Alec has been kidnapped and the exchange is about to be made in just couple hours. Wilde and Hopps are sitting in our house for whole day and I must admit, tension is driving me crazy. If you didn’t sound so serious about Diane, I’d politely advise you to go to hell,” explained the wolf and Isabelle nodded, glancing at her partner; he too seemed like he had forgotten about that, but who were they to track all their friends from the station?

“Do you remember what happened to her?” Will asked instead and then, smiled apologetically, realizing that the conversation would go way smoother if he just answered the questions and he’d learn everything in time. “It was on Saturday evening, on my wedding. Diane fainted when she heard that Alex was kidnapped and Nick Wilde with his companion walked her to some seat. That’s the last time,” Will explained.

“And do you know why she hasn’t come to work this week?” Asked Max.

“Her father has just had an operation and he couldn’t move around much. Diane took a week off to look after him,” Osbourne replied, quite disturbed. He knew what this sort of questions usually lead to.

“Do you remember what you were doing on Monday evening and Tuesday morning?” Wondered Isabelle.

“On evening, I was with my wife. I went back house right after I finished the service, as we had to arrange things with the releasing of Alex. On Tuesday, I was on service and later, went straight back to the house again. My wife can confirm,” he explained and Isabelle glanced at Max shortly. The alibi was as solid as they come. His weak smile told Alvarez what she already knew; he was not their killer.

“What is it about?” William asked again, eyeing the two officers.
“On Monday evening, someone assaulted Diane and her father in their house. Mr. Eugene has been brutally murdered, Diane’s fighting for her life,” Max explained and Will’s eyes grew wide with horror.

“What?” He stuttered.

“We have no signs of break-in and all the indication that Diane knew the murderer. He clumsily tried to fake a robbery, but we’re considering the personal motive now. We have identified him as a grey – furred wolf, probably her friend or…” added Isabelle, as she watched Osbourne’s fist clenching slowly.

“Greymane,” he whispered hatefully.

“Excuse me?” Max jerked his head curiously.

“Her boyfriend, James Greymane,” clarified William. “They had just got back together. Diane always loved him deeply, but James… he’s a piece of shit that’s been using her all along.”

“Do you know him well?” Reynolds asked. He recalled the crime scene and thought of Kaylee and how she had faced the wolf. Suddenly, he felt creeps across his body, trying not to think of how close to setting him off Kaylee must have been back then.

“I know her only through Diane. He’s a minor criminal, awfully compulsive, never thinks things through. He’s had some unpleasant face-off with my wife not so long ago. She tried to offer him a job, but he was too proud to take it, considered it an unnecessary act of mercy,” snorted Will resentfully and then, he noticed Max’s concerned sight. “You know him too, don’t you?”

“Yes, my wife… had a displeasure of meeting him,” Max admitted with the tone that left no doubt about ominous character of the said meeting. Awkward silence filled the room, only to be interrupted by knocking on the door.

“Come in,” Isabelle said and it opened slowly revealing August Fares. Alvarez watched the rabbit carefully, as he stepped in with some file in his paw. He seemed as quiet and shy as ever, but there was change to him that Isabelle was failing to grasp.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the rabbit apologized, aware of sight of three wolves focused on him. “You asked for the city monitoring around Inesi’s house and guys found something promising,” he put the file on the table and Max opened it. Max read the name of CCTV camera and recognized the location just couple hundred feet away from Inesi’s house. On the picture, was a grey wolf walking toward the house on the Monday evening, another picture shown this same mammal running in the opposite direction over an hour later. Both Max and Will recognized him immediately.

“Greymane,” they said simultaneously.

“Isabelle, get his address, we’re locking the guy up. We have all the proof we need,” Max decided. “Will, thank you for your help. We’ll take it from here.”

“Take care of that piece of shit,” nodded Will with spark in his eyes. “I’ll be going back to my house, if you excuse me. I have other things to look into as well.”

“We’re not keeping you any longer,” Max assured. All the four left and while Max walked Will Osbourne to the main hall, Isabelle and August stopped in the corridor, as if unsure where to go now.
“Hey, Lefty. How’s the day?” She asked casually and he eyed her weirdly.

“Lefty?” He asked doubtfully. He knew she came up with that one after their ‘All-left’ incident, but it didn’t mean he was going to like it.

“I need to find something better to call you than prude or a rodent, right?” She noticed.

“Rodent?”

“I never called you a rodent to your face? Huh. Actually, I might have not…” She hesitated, completely ignoring rabbit’s presence for a moment.

“Does this conversation have any point or will you be just making fun at me?” He asked and Isabelle enjoyed this genuine, non-sarcastic wondering of his, barely containing amusement. It’d be simply rude to laugh, even for her standards. Isabelle hesitated. What was she going to ask him about? Right, that idiotic plane crash news he found on her. She opened her mouth to scold the insolent, pesky rodent that dared to dig in her past like this, but then, she froze in the middle of a word, staring at those cute big eyes of his. She just couldn’t bring herself to hurt him the way she had meant to.

“No, it had a point, but… Huh. Nope, it’s gone now,” she faked, wondering where the change came from. Normally, she wouldn’t hesitate.

“Shame,” August replied. If she didn’t know him better, she’d consider it sarcastic.

“Isa!” Max called her suddenly from behind.

“Yeah, gotta go. Until later, Lefty,” she saluted him nonchalantly and August smiled politely before heading back to the TO offices. Isabelle caught up with Max, waiting by the corner.

“We’ve got a murderer to arrest,” Reynolds reminded her.

“My favorite part,” Isabelle assured, a smile disappearing from her face at once. Jokes were over.

3.12 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

The flat in which James Greymane lived, was merely two blocks away from Isabelle’s place. The wolves parked the car behind the corner and walked toward the block, casually. They got into the building thanks to some bear that was just leaving it and climbed the stairs to the third floor, where Greymane lived. Max and Isabelle stood by the door with their guns ready. Max pressed the doorbell, but there was no response. He tried slamming at the door, but again, no reaction. Isabelle, who was pressing an ear against the door, shook her head.

“No a sound,” she reported.

“Excuse me?” Called them some young elk, who just appeared at the corridor. “Are you
looking for James, officers?” He asked, quite concerned.

“Yes, would you happen to know where to find him?” Hoped Max.

“Well, no, but I saw him leaving couple days ago with a bag. It looked like he wasn’t coming back any time soon,” the elk explained.

“Couple days ago? When?”

“On the weekend, I think? It was… Saturday? I was going to visit my parents when I saw him. He claimed he was going on vacation,” he recalled.

“Thank you, Mr.,” Reynolds replied. The elk nodded and went to his door. As he disappeared in his flat, Max eyed his partner. “Well, we should at least search the flat. Should I or…”

“Let me. I always wanted to kick down a door,” Isabelle pleased and he stepped back. The door looked pretty solid so he doubted if she could do it with a foot… and then, the door opened wide open under power of her kick. Max whistled, impressed, and he drew his gun.

“Ladies first,” he insisted and she stepped in carefully. The flat was small, just about size of hers, a bit messy, but not too much. Some dust, unwashed dishes, a pile of unsorted clothes on a chair… But not a living soul. Max closed the broken door behind them.

“Let’s look around. We might find some clues to where to find him,” he suggested.

“It doesn’t look like he left in hurry, but he hasn’t been here for a couple of days indeed,” Isabelle noticed while looking around the kitchen. Max joined her there and checked the sink. Indeed, the mess wasn’t anything unusual. He noticed the calendar hanging on the wall; the last page was the one from three weeks earlier, which spoke a lot about the wolf.

“Then maybe he plans to return here. We need to watch the house,” suggested Reynolds and he snarled. “It makes no sense,” he put the gun on the table with frustration.

“What?”

“Elk claims he left on Saturday and it might be the case,” he eyed at the calendar with annoyance. “Where has he been for Sunday and Monday then? Why to leave your own flat two days before murdering Diane Inesi?”

“Because he planned it?” Isabelle guessed and he hesitated.

“Did that looked like a planned murder to you? With his compulsive washing in the sink and biting?” Doubted Max. Isabelle opened her jaws, but then, she hesitated.

“No. He has criminal record, he’d know better. He didn’t plan it. At least not on Saturday. Anyway, he left. Where to? Some family?” She guessed, but Max shook his head.

“The only family he has is his godson and he’s in the orphanage,” disagreed Max.

“How would you know?”

“Because we’re going to adopt the kid. It’s Ryan.”

“Oh, OK. So, no family. Still, he left his flat on Saturday. On Monday he murdered Mr. Inesi and attempted to kill his daughter. Since then, not a trace. That really isn’t an order you’d
“We’re looking at it from the wrong side. This murder could be coincidental. For whatever reason he left on Saturday… it was bigger than the murder.”

“I’d say it was worth murdering his own girlfriend, even,” agreed Isabelle. “Let’s look around the place, we might find something. We have to locate his friends and trace him down. Once we have Greymane, the rest doesn’t…” she paused suddenly, staring at Max’s gun on the table.

“What?” Max asked as she chuckled.

“Is that gun even loaded?” She asked.

“What?! Of course it is…” Reynolds reached for it and checked it only to realize it was empty. He chuckled embarrassingly. “I must have forgotten to reload it after the training. I’ll do it back in the car.”

“You were covering my back with an empty gun,” Isabelle noticed. “Detective Reynolds, pride of ZPD.”

“It happens to the best,” he tried to shrug it off.

“Has it ever crossed your mind that you’re probably going to die young?” She asked, amused.

“I’m trying not to think of it every day,” he replied half-jokingly, but she sensed that she accidentally touched a topic he’d prefer to left unmentioned. “Let’s search the flat. We might find something that will lead us to our guy,” Max broke the silence.

“Agreed,” Isabelle nodded and headed to Greymane’s bedroom; that was where she was going to start the search, but Max didn’t join her immediately. Greymane was up to something and it wasn’t just the murder; whatever it was, it was worth the murder of his girlfriend and while Max didn’t know their suspect well, he knew there was one mammal he was more than willing to murder for; Ryan Thorn. Suddenly, he felt creeps across his spine and he reached for the phone. He called Kaylee.

“Hey, darling. Aren’t you at work?” The bunny asked, rather surprised.

“I am. To tell the truth, I think I might be late for the dinner today,” he apologized.

“Oh, dear. What’s going on?”

“New case, a murder,” he explained. “Are you home with kids?” He asked, trying not to sound worried. He did not succeed.

“No, they’re at the playground at the moment, but they’re under surveillance. I can see them through the kitchen window,” Kaylee assured.

“Ryan’s coming over today, isn’t he?”

“Mhm, he’s already here. Why?”

“James Greymane is up to something. He’s wanted under a charge of murdering his girlfriend and his father and I think… I think it has something to do with Ryan,” Max explained.
On the other side of the phone, there fell dead silence.

“O...K...”

“I’ll be home as fast as I can. Hopefully, we’ll catch him today, but if not... promise me that you’ll be extra careful. If you see Greymane...”

“I’m calling police, then I’m calling you. He’s wanted for murder, after all,” Kaylee promised and Max smiled with relief.

“Thank you. I love you darling.”

“I love you too. Try to make it for the dinner,” she pleaded and Max smiled.

“I’ll try. Say hello to kids for me,” he asked her and as she promised she would, he hung up. And then, Isabelle called him to Greymane’s bedroom. She was sitting among some papers, browsing through them with passion and Max jerked his head curiously, but before he managed to ask, Isabelle handed him some document.

“Greymane’s not a rich guy, is he?” She wondered and he shook his head confidently.

“I guess no. Why do you ask?” He wondered, as he checked the lease agreement she handed him. It wasn’t for the flat they were in.

“Because I’m dying to know how he afforded to rent a house in Canal District then. Or what he needs it for,” explained Alvarez while he studied the documents. Max smiled bitterly. There was a chance he’d make it for a dinner, after all.

2.30 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

To an uncareful eye, Lady Jeniffer Osbourne – Tompkins could seem to have remained quite unfazed by the events of last few days, mainly the kidnapping of her son in the middle of the happiest day of last decade; her wedding. Judy Hopps, though, who got couple chances to meet the Lady and was gifted with an excellent intuition when it came to mammals’ hearts and souls, knew better than to believe the deceit her appearances were spreading. Lady Tompkins was afraid and no wonder; life of her son was on the line. Still, she never let it get to her. Quite oppositely, fear seemed to motivate this snow-white wolf. Her actions were firm, her judgement of situation solid, her temper contained to a reasonable degree. If situation were to go wrong, no one had doubts that it would certainly not be a one of Duchess.

The money she had prepared was lying in two briefcases on the dining table of Tompkins – Osbourne residence. Nick and Judy, who had been at the place from the morning, where glancing at their phones nervously every now and then. They had tried everything to identify the kidnappers, but seemed to be walking in circles. Judy wondered, if there wasn’t something that she missed. Maybe if she worked harder... nonsense. One time she took an actual break from work in last four day was to go out with August and break up with him. She was dead tired and there was no way
she could have found out anything more than she already had. Which was… well, nothing important. The bunny followed her partner’s sight, who was staring at the briefcases funnily.

“What is it?” She asked.

“Fifteen million dollars. I’m trying to think of a time when I saw so much money lying in one spot so casually,” he noticed.

“And a way to switch the suitcases with the fraud one you have waiting in the trunk?” Smirked Judy, as she elbowed him playfully.

“That’d be funny, don’t you think?” He noticed with a smirk. “One such stunt would settle us for life… although I can’t see us doing it without having our kneecaps broken,” he admitted reluctantly.

“You’ll figure something out,” she encouraged him playfully.

“No, I think I already accepted the idea that I will die poor and underappreciated when I chose to join ZPD,” he noticed sarcastically and Judy rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry for dragging you in?” She apologized hesitantly.

“Oh, well, life goes on. Speaking of which, I’ve heard you’ve split up with August,” noticed the fox seemingly carelessly, although he shifted in his chair, so that he could watch her more carefully, while still trying to keep casual appearance.

“Yeah, it… it wouldn’t work out in the long run,” Judy explained herself a bit awkwardly. Why did he bring it out at time like this?

“Was it my fault?” Nick asked, unusually straight-forwardly.

“It’s not about what you told me about the eye,” she assured and, seeing his most intrigued expression encouraging her to elaborate, she continued. “We… I finally understood that I can’t make everyone happy and in my tries, I should not neglect the one, I care about at the most,” Judy smiled gently Nick returned it.

“Were you now?”

“Yeah, and speaking of whom…” Judy’s ears perked up as she paused to turn her head at the entrance and Nick’s sight followed hers. Will and Jennifer Osbourne – Tompkins came back to the living room. Both seemed awfully, if understandably, grim.

“It is time,” the Lady stated. “Will shall stay in the house with Wilde. Detective Hopps, you’ll drive with me as discussed,” she said and the bunny nodded, trying not to show that she seemed a bit discontent with this interruption. Duchess didn’t seem to have noticed and it really didn’t surprise her; Lady had enough on her head as it was.

“Let us go, then,” she agreed. Nick and Will carried the briefcases for them and put them at the back seat of Duchess’s black sports car. The Lady kissed her husband and took a driver’s seat, while Judy sat down next to her. She smiled at the fox who replied with a polite nod and they drove away, headed for the Tundratown. Judy eyed the Duchess carefully. She seemed tense, but the bunny didn’t really know what to say or how to start a conversation.

“I’m alright, thank you. A little nervous,” Duchess assured with a smile. “I can see the way you’re looking at me, Hopps,” she added with grim amusement.
“I’m concerned about you, but I probably shouldn’t be worrying much, should I?” Judy noticed.

“A cop like you should be rather worrying what I’ll do to these guys if I get them before you,” joked Duchess.

“That would be both illegal and immoral, Mrs. Tompkins,” Hopps reminded her, but the wolf laughed.

“I think we’ve had this conversation before,” she noticed. “Young’s house, Wolfpack guys… I am certain I’ve made myself clear back then.”

“You did let ZPD take them.”

“You bargained well and I keep my word. That really is the only reason they’re in prison, not ten feet underground,” Duchess assured. “And if you’re worrying what I’ll do to kidnappers to my son, just make sure he’s alright and I’ll cause you no problems.”

“You know that your son is our main concern,” Judy assured and Duchess nodded. She did not doubt that, that much the bunny could be sure. Lady and her might have not agreed on some of their worldviews, but both acknowledged and respected one another. They both were professionals, even if of quite different, if not antagonistic, professions. Judy especially appreciated Duchess’s altruistic approach to her fortune and wealth; although bunny wasn’t so certain of it at first, she saw that Lady really considered herself a guardian of Happytown, not its tyrant. It was surprisingly healthy approach for someone of her position, one that not many would opt for.

Duchess’s phone attached to car’s dashboard rang suddenly, revealing another unknown number. Judy noted it quickly and texted to Nick, while the Lady picked it up and switched to the loudspeaker.

“Spades, I presume?” She guessed.

“Correct. You’ve got the money?” The wolf asked.

“Yes. Where should I leave it?” The Lady wanted to know.

“Do you know the entrance tunnel to the Tundratown that intersects with the Flurry Street?” He asked and, not waiting for an answer, continued. “Go as if you were leaving the district. Just before the tunnel, turn right into a small along the wall. Drive a thousand yards and dig the suitcases in the snow. Mark them with that cane I told you to grab. I’ll pick them up when you’re gone,” informed her the kidnapper.

“You’re forgetting something,” Duchess reminded him.

“Oh, right,” Spades reflected himself and they heard some thud.

“Mom?” Called Alex Tompkins.

“Hey, kid. Everything alright?”

“Yeah, I’m just kinda pissed off that they didn’t let me go after my generous offer,” joked Alex. “So… see you tomorrow, I guess?” He seemed as laid off as ever and his mother couldn’t help, but smile.

“See you tomorrow,” she agreed with a smile and they heard another thud.
“Well then, Jenny, I’m waiting. Don’t make me lose my patience,” the kidnapper replied and hung up abruptly. Duchess huffed with frustration.

“I swear I know that mongrel. He can’t be so spiteful for no reason,” she claimed.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Judy reminded her and this thought soothed the wolf a little. They travelled to the assigned point and stopped the car. They were just under the wall of Tundratown and there was not a soul around. With all the shade it gave, it wasn’t the best place to live. Judy and Lady stepped out of the car and took the suitcases from it. They buried them in snow with shovels and then, Duchess put her deceased husband’s cane on the pile. It was his actual cane, as it was quite fancy and four days would be not enough to produce a perfect replica. Lady put it in the snow carefully and with visible pain, but Judy saw clearly the spark in her eye; she was going to get it back soon and if not, then Heavens should have mercy on those kidnappers.

“Let’s go,” Duchess stood up and they got back in the car. Judy called her partner.

“Nick, can you see the trackers?” She asked with a weak smile. The kidnappers made a huge mistake giving them four days. It was just enough time for Duchess to not only gather the money, but also install in the cane a GPS tracker, about the size of a rabbit’s claw. It was well hidden in the handle, so kidnappers would have to chop it to pieces to notice and no one had doubts if they’d decide to do it. And even if they left the cane behind, there were two more in suitcases.

“Signals perfectly clear so far, all three of them,” Nick assured.

“Well then, now we just wait and see where it takes us,” Duchess smiled with satisfaction.

“To release Alex and arrest those kidnappers,” Judy agreed confidently. If these guys thought they were getting away with it, they’d be gravely mistaken.

3.57 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

Chief Bogo was sitting in his office and filing his usual paperwork, when the stationary phone rang. At any other time, he could be expecting it to be million other mammals, but this time, he had no doubts who it was pending this time. He picked clicked the button and accepted the call.

“Chief, Detective Hopps reporting,” the bunny introduced herself, not surprising her Chief one bit.

“What do you have?”

“The kidnappers took both suitcase to a small house at Fog Street 58, in Canal District. We’ve seen through one of the windows three mammals; a wolf, a hyena and a bear, who are all the kidnappers we know of. We’re requesting permission to secure the building and everyone inside,” Judy explained the situation and Chief Bogo nodded with satisfaction.
“All the exits secured?”

“Affirmative. There seems to be only two, as there are not even the windows. The back one is being watched by Wilde,” confirmed the rabbit. Bogo hesitated. He had been monitoring that particular case very carefully; he knew that the kidnappers in question were dangerous and ruthless. They seemed to hold a grudge against the Duchess and there was no guarantee they would return her son alive. Besides, all their knowledge seemed to imply that everyone involved and the blackmail money were sitting in the one and the same building, which only made the intervention too tempting. But then again, if police intervention were to force the thugs to kill their hostage, Duchess would skin Chief alive. The buffalo wasn’t scared of her, obviously, as he had faced plenty of her sort and worse, but she was one of those mammals one did not want to get on bad side of. Bogo was about to reply, when his phone started ringing again; another line.

“Wait a minute, Hopps,” he suspended her call and picked another one. “Yes?”

“Detectives Reynolds and Alvarez reporting. We’ve identified our assumed murderer to be James Greymane. It seems he has rented a spot at 58 Fog Street, Canal District, and we’re requesting for reinforcements to make an arrestment,” reported Max Reynolds. Chief hesitated for a second. Was it really… He switched between the calls.

“Hopps, repeat the address,” he ordered.

“Fog Street 58, Canal District, sir,” she replied immediately and he scoffed. So the murderer and kidnapper were one and this same mammal. Now, that left no room for hesitation.

“Hopps, you have a permission. I’m sending you some back up from nearby and Reynolds with Alvarez. As soon as back-up arrives, secure the facility, no earlier,” he ordered.

“Understood, sir. Isn’t Reynolds solving another case, though?”

“He’ll clarify it on his way to you. Report afterwards,” Bogo replied.

“Yes, sir,” she confirmed and hung up. Chief switched to Reynolds’ call.

“Reynolds, meet up with Hopps and Wilde at the place. You have a permission, but they’re in charge,” he informed them.

“Wilde and Hopps? What are they doing there?” Reynolds asked, confused.

“Chasing your criminal, coincidentally. Call them, brief them each other in. Arrest Greymane and his accomplices,” Chief ordered.

“Accomplices? Oh well, I’ll just ask Nicky and Judy. We’re on our way,” Max declared firmly and hung up. Chief smirked. Two cases solved at this same time. He really couldn’t complain.
Kaylee Reynolds sighed with relief; it felt so good to have a vacation once in a while. Since HR messed up her and Max’s free days and they failed to turn it around in time, she was left free, while her husband continued working as usual. And while Kaylee would not appear at work, she could hardly complain that she was bored or alone; the newest additions to their family kept making sure neither were the issue. The two little rabbits, Thane and Mia, were just as occupying and troublesome as Kaylee had expected and she couldn’t be happier about it. The kids were playing now at the playground just outside, getting to meet their newest neighbors on these last days of summer vacations. Kaylee had come to pick them up for the meal, but they were having so much fun that she just sat down at the bench and was watching them blissfully. Thane was chasing the ball around with Ryan Thorn, who got to visit them today, two deer, a coyote and a horse, while Mia was chit-chatting with a bit younger red vixen on the swings. Kaylee was enjoying the view, while the vixen mother next to her was reading a book, sniffling and coughing quietly. At first, the bunny was sure she wasn’t even looking, but then, she reprimanded her daughter immediately, when she tossed some sand at a deer that showed her his tongue. Kaylee eyed the vixen. There was something lax about her and the little effort she put into watching her daughter and probably rest of the background too, for the matter of speaking. Kaylee smiled. No wonder, she had plenty of years of experience, something that the bunny yet needed to acquire.

“You’re from around here, aren’t you?” The vixen noticed, as she put her book away.

“Yes, I live over there,” Kaylee pointed at her house across the street. She knew the vixen from somewhere, she just couldn’t put a name on it. Was it at work or maybe she was a neighbor? “I’m Kaylee, by the way.”

“Aveline, pleased to meet you,” the vixen introduced herself as well. “How come that I’ve never seen your children around? Your girl seems to be getting along quite well with Lily,” she remarked curiously.

“Oh, we’ve just adopted them,” Kaylee explained.

“Have you? I could never tell! I mean, doe might be grey, but boy’s fur is just as brown as yours! Well, I guess it is no indication in case of rabbits?” Aveline guessed.

“It really isn’t,” confirmed Kaylee.

“I see. And there are just two of them?” The vixen guessed. As ignorant as she could be about lagomorphs, she certainly knew they came in litters much bigger than a pair.

“Yes,” Kaylee only nodded, not elaborating on the car accident when they lost parents and rest of siblings.

“I see,” Aveline did not inquire more. “And the young wolf? Is he with you too?” She guessed.

“Yes, he’s Thane and Mia’s close friend and we want to adopt him too. We only need to
complete the formalities.”

“I see,” Aveline seemed rather impressed. “How old are they?”

“Twelve, all three of them. Ryan’s born on 2\textsuperscript{nd} November, the twins on 10\textsuperscript{th} March.”

“Just like my Lily! I mean, she’s nine, but the day matches. If girls get along, we could throw parties together,” suggested Aveline half-jokingly and then, she sniffed and wiped her nose with a tissue. “Sorry.”

“Why not? If they want a party together, that is,” Kaylee shrugged amusingly and they sat in silence for a moment, watching the children play.

“So, are they with you long?” Aveline wondered.

“It’ll be a week on Saturday,” Kaylee explained.

“A week? You meant…”

“A week.”

“Oh,” Aveline acknowledged it with quite a surprise. “So, how do you feel about parenthood?” She wondered.

“I think I’m sort of ready,” Kaylee assured. “I mean, we went through some very educative course, spent a lot of time with the kits before and I think I know what I’m doing… most of the time. Max is very supportive too and he’s giving his best, so… I think I’m not even scared?” She said not so certainly and Aveline chuckled. She had some most melodic laughter, the bunny had to admit.

“No fear is quite a lot, actually,” she admitted. “Max is your husband, I guess?” She wondered and the bunny nodded. “He’s not a rabbit, is he? I mean, there probably is a reason you’re adopting,” she remarked, but then, hesitated. “Sorry, that was nosy.”

“He’s a wolf,” Kaylee disregarded it.

“You must get a lot of weird looks,” Aveline noticed, not mean one bit, but actually concerned. Kaylee smiled as she glanced down at vixen’s paw.

“No less than does a single mother?” She guessed and the vixen chuckled.

“Hit and sunk,” admitted Aveline, quite surprised. “How did you know? You’re not some sort of a detective, are you?”

“I work at ZPD, but it was just a lucky guess. You have no ring on your paw,” Kaylee explained.

“Clever of you. ZPD, you say? Rather unusual for a rabbit, isn’t it?” Aveline noticed.

“I’m a Technical Officer, to tell the truth, but yeah, it is an usual place. Hopps never seemed bothered by the fact, though, but she seems an exception to every rule.”

“Hopps? You mean Judy Hopps?”

“Do you know her?”
“A little bit. I’m a friend with her partner, Nick Wilde. And you?” Aveline asked curiously.

“I work with them. Judy was the best maid at my wedding and…” And then Kaylee’s ears perked up as she remembered who the vixen was. “You’re Hawkes, aren’t you?! That director from the National Bank that Donovan tried to frame in theft of that painting!” She recalled and Aveline nodded, a bit surprised.

“You know that case?”

“It was my first one, actually. I assisted Nick and Judy in technical matters,” she explained.

“I remember now. Nick mentioned you couple times, I think.”

“Not even near the number he mentioned Judy, I hope?” Kaylee noticed half-jokingly.

“He said you were nosy, though,” the vixen remarked and they both chuckled.

“I guess I am,” Kaylee admitted and the two girls continued their enjoyable conversation. They talked a bit about ZPD and later, Aveline went to give her some advices about the children, for which the bunny couldn’t be more thankful. They both continued to glance at their children once in a while. Mia was sitting at the swing with Aveline’s Lily and Thane’s long ears chasing around the ball indicated the boys were around too.

“Would like to drop in for a coffee, Aveline? About the time I met my neighbors.” Kaylee invited her finally.

“Gladly, but not today. We’ve gotta go to the city, do some shopping. The cold might have given me a day off, but it does not mean I have less duties than usual. Saturday perhaps?”

“Sure,” Kaylee confirmed with excitement. She liked making friends, especially since she wasn’t that good at it.

“Wonderful,” Aveline stood from the bench. “It was nice to meet you,” she assured and Kaylee assured so as well, smiling. The vixen called her daughter and the two were to leave the playground, but then she froze, watching the playground with concern. Kaylee noticed it immediately.

“Is something off?” The bunny asked.

“I don’t see your wolf anywhere,” Aveline noticed and the bunny scanned the playground quickly only to realize with horror that the vixen was right; Ryan was nowhere to be seen.

“Thane, where’s Ryan?!” Kaylee asked. Her adopted nephew stopped in the middle of the game and looked around, confused.

“He was right…” He stopped along with the rest of kids and they looked around dumbfounded, only to shrug helplessly. “Here?” He muttered and Kaylee’s heart skipped a beat. She had no idea what was going on, but she didn’t like it at all.

“I think he went there some time ago,” Aveline’s little Lily pointed at some narrow street just by the playground.

“Do you remember when? Was he alone?” Kaylee asked the young vixen, but she just
“Some time ago? I think he went alone,” she said precisely, as the nine-year-old could afford to. Kaylee managed to smile weakly.

“Thank you, Lily,” she said and ran into the mentioned street, only to realize how futile her action was. What was she supposed to find there? Some sort of trace that Ryan would left just for her? Let’s not be naïve.

“Wolf’s scent is weak. I don’t think I could follow it far,” Aveline stated, as she sniffed, gently suggesting that her cold wasn’t helping either. Kaylee watched her surprised; she didn’t even realize that the vixen followed her.

“He must be somewhere nearby,” Kaylee insisted. “Ryan!” She called in void.

“What do we do?” Aveline asked and the bunny hesitated.

“Well, there’s one thing I certainly can do,” she said, reaching for a phone. Ryan had his own cell; his godfather had bought him one and young wolf carried it everywhere with him. Kaylee called the number hopefully, but it was rejected almost immediately. The bunny stared at her phone’s screen in horror. He didn’t just not pic it up, he rejected it! It meant he could have been kidnapped or mugged or was running away…

“Do diabła,” she muttered under her breath with tone clearly indicating that whatever the word meant, it certainly was a curse. “I need to track that phone down. It’s one thing we can do.”

“Can you do it…”

“Look after Thane and Mia for a minute!” Kaylee pleaded and she ran back to her house. She had an idea. She cold track down a phone, she just needed her laptop. She grabbed it from the bedroom and then, her sight stopped at the holster with the dart gun. After short hesitation, she attached it to the belt and ran down to the garage. She took her car and drove to the playground.

“Mia, Thane, come on! We’re going to pick up Ryan!” The bunny called her kids. “Aveline, can you drive?” She asked the vixen.

“Yes, why?”

“Because I need a driver while I’m making the calls. Come on,” she hurried the vixen. Aveline took driver’s seat and adjusted it to her height, while Kaylee sat next to her and Mia, Thane and Lily say in the back seats.

“Where to?”

“Drive south,” Kaylee ordered while turning her laptop on. She settled the hotspot so she’d have an access to the Web and started the app she needed. The bunny browsed her list contact for Ryan’s number, inserted it in the right field and waited a minute. And then, a small red dot appeared at Zootopian map, right in the middle of Central Railway Station. The bunny felt creeps across her body.

“To the Central Station. He’s there,” Kaylee informed her new friend.

“How do you know?” Aveline asked, as she turned in the right street.

“With the right tools, you can locate everyone’s phone, all you need is a number,” Kaylee
explained. “They don’t even need to have GPS on, just have phone on and be in reach.”

“And you can track anyone? Is this legal?” Aveline doubted.

“Morally questionable…but legal,” assured the bunny. “Hold on a second. I’ll inform ZPD,” she said, if a bit reluctantly. “In the end, there is a child missing and they might find him faster than we do.”

“Good thinking,” Aveline approved. Kaylee reported the situation to the police quickly and received a promise of her Precinct’s officers investigating the case immediately and then, she called one number more; Max’s. No one picked up.

“He’s probably busy,” muttered Kaylee, a bit disappointed, but Aveline smirked.

“Ears up, Kaylee. We’re going to find the kid in no time,” the vixen promised confidently, as they were nearing the train station. The bunny sighed and prayed in her mind that she’d be right. She didn’t even want to think of consequences. Once the child support was going to hear of it, they could even lost Mia and Thane… It was not the time to think of it just yet.

4.21 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

Ryan Thorn was experiencing the weirdest kind of déjà vu. He had been sitting in such a bench before, with a phone in his paw, waiting for it to buzz and view the familiar name. Although this time, it was no Lake City, but Zootopia and he wasn’t waiting for his father, but his brother and Ryan’s godfather. The young wolf had no belongings with him and he had fled even more cleverly, if without Thane and Mia’s blessing. He couldn’t tell them this time, obviously. They wouldn’t understand why he could want to escape from mammals as wonderful as Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds. He regretted the act, but it was the right thing in the end.

Ryan sighed as he checked his phone. He was dying to have his uncle call him. And then, out of nowhere, Mia and Thane appeared right next to him. The two rabbits hugged the confused wolf joyfully, yelling something, as he was trying to vocalize his question.

“W… what are you doing here?” He asked and then, he saw the answer right in front of him. Mrs. Kaylee Reynolds was standing just in front of his bench with her arms crossed, her left foot thumping repeatedly in pace most disturbing. To be honest, Ryan had believed this meek rabbit wasn’t even capable of such negative emotions and yet, there she was, with fury blazing in her eyes. The wolf suddenly felt an urge to run, but was completely paralyzed by this stare of hers. Even Mia and Thane stepped back quietly, even though it was not them that she was enraged with.

“Oh, um… hi, mom,” Ryan stuttered, trying to soothe the atmosphere. Mrs. Reynolds’ foot was thumping even faster. “I… I’m sorry, mom…” Loud, final thump cut in the middle of his sentence as Mrs. Reynolds snorted angrily.

“Of all times, you’d better not ‘mom’ me right now. What you should rather do, is explain yourself, son,” she demanded through clenched teeth and he gulped, but then he snorted
resentfully. He was not to be threatened like this.

“Make me, mom,” he challenged her, spitting the last word as an ultimate offence. He was laughing in her face, making her acknowledge that he was never going to consider her as his mother. She had no power over him, she couldn’t force him to do anything. She could yell all she wanted and he’d not tell her a word, just like he wouldn’t tell Mrs. Ubik from the orphanage. She was going to scold him, but he was going to stand his ground like he always had. Except, she did not. Mrs. Reynolds’ crossed arms loosened, flames in her eyes died out, as they gently turned watery, fury replaced with disappointed bitterness. Suddenly, Ryan realized that he had never angered Mrs. Reynolds, not truly. He managed to hurt her, though. Her, the bunny that was going to continue fighting her trauma just to give him a loving house. Suddenly, he felt like a trash. Mrs. Reynolds sighed deeply.

“I can’t. I ‘m not someone that you’d care enough anyway, am I?” She asked and the question loomed in the air dreadfully. Ryan just hung his head shamefully and she turned away, disillusioned. “Come on, kid, I’ll drive you back to the…”

“You are,” Ryan protested firmly and Mrs. Reynolds froze and turned back toward him, eyeing the young wolf carefully. “You are, Mrs. I just… just…” The young wolf stuttered as he clenched his fists and let his eyes down, wiping them hurriedly. His chest suddenly felt heavy, as he realized what he was going to do. And then it trembled and before he could control it, Ryan felt a tear flowing down his cheek. He covered his face with paws and started sobbing uncontrollably. He was sitting in his bench and crying and then, he felt someone’s warm arm embracing her. He opened his eyes to realize it was Mrs. Reynolds; she was sitting just next to him, hugging him passionately. The bunny put her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her chest to his side. Gradually, he felt all warm and fuzzy in his chest, while his breath eased and heartbeat slowed down. Mrs. Reynolds was rocking gently from side to the side with a gentle smile. It was terrifying, how little could a simple hug change.

“Ryan, oh, Ryan… Do you have any idea how scared we were?” She asked, as she raised her head from his shoulder.

“Yeah!” Thane remarked and Mia nodded eagerly. Ryan chuckled with embarrassment as the siblings sat on the bench right next to him.

“I’m sorry. I… I didn’t want to run away,” Ryan claimed.

“What happened, then?” Mrs. Reynolds asked. He did not sense a note or anger or disappointment, just concern. It felt so much easier to open up, now that she was approaching him so with such care.

“I promised uncle James that I’d go with him,” Ryan explained. “He said… he said he’d make a lot of money quick and I could finally leave the orphanage and…” Ryan paused, unsure what to say.

“Did you want to go with him?” Mrs. Reynolds asked and he hesitated only for a second.

“…” he bit his lip wondering. “I used to. My dad, he… he wasn’t a good dad, but he promised he’d take me from the orphanage one day. After he died, uncle James wanted to live up to his promises, but he kept getting in troubles. For last couple months, he kept promising me that he’d get rich soon and take me from there, but I…” He paused, watching Mrs. Reynolds. “I don’t want to go anymore. I told my uncle, but he didn’t listen! I like it here, with you. Are you… are you angry with me?” He worried and she chuckled encouragingly.
“No, of course not,” she promised. “I was just so very scared about you.”

“I’m sorry,” he smiled, but it vanished from his face rather quickly. “I’m worried about uncle. He was supposed to be here long time ago. I wonder if something hasn’t happened to him,” he said and then, caught Mrs. Reynolds’ changing expression. “Do you know anything?”

“I don’t know any details, but from what Max said, he might be in serious troubles. When he comes back from work, he’ll tell you more,” the bunny promised and Ryan nodded barely noticeably. It was at that moment, that two police officers, a wolf and a polar bear, approached them.

“Hi, Kaylee. That’s the missing boy?” Anderson asked and she nodded.


“We should go to the station and write a report, then,” Anderson suggested.

“I’ll go straight home if I can, though. I’ve visited enough police stations as it is,” the vixen joked and the police officers approved.

“You can take my car, no need for you to bother with buses,” Kaylee tossed her the car key. “Once again, thank you,” she repeated herself and smiled to her children. “So, who wants to see where your aunt and uncle work?”

They drove in silence, Kaylee and three teenagers packed in the back of the car. The grating in front of her amused Kaylee; she hadn’t been sitting at this side of a police car before. She glanced at the kids; while bunnies seemed equally excited, Ryan was understandably down. She patted him on the shoulder gently.

“It’s alright,” she assured, but he sighed and let his head down.

“Could you not tell Mr. about this? Please,” young wolf asked.

“Why do you want not to tell him?” She wondered.

“Because we were getting along so well and Mr. is really cool, but he’d be angry if he knew.”

“Just like me?”

“Yes! I mean, no, he’d be… more angry?” Ryan hesitated and Kaylee chuckled.

“Don’t you think it’d be a little unfair not to tell him?” The bunny pointed out and he let his head down shamefully. “He trusts you. It doesn’t mean he knows you’re going to make no mistakes; nobody’s perfect. But it means that when something happened, you’ll go and tell him. He might seem a bit discontent first, but trust me, it’ll be better in the long run for both of you. You can’t get along if you’re not honest toward one another,” Kaylee told him. The young wolf considered her words in silence.
“Don’t tell him, Mrs. I’ll do it,” he declared firmly.

“That’s my boy,” she smiled, as she ruffled the fur of his forehead, ignoring teenager’s protests.

3.24 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

Ever since the dramatic events in Diane’s house, James Greymane felt like quite a different wolf. The death of his girlfriend and her father hardly bothered either of his accomplices; Miles didn’t even know them all that well and Ryuk even congratulated him on ‘breaking the bonds of modern society’, as he put it. James was confused at first as this lack of pity or care, but he slowly grew to understand that he did not need either. The moment he left Diane’s house with blood on his paws and jaws, something changed in the wolf. He was truly on his own now, there was no one left to guide or assist him. Ryuk and Miles were simply accomplices. Diane was gone. He was beyond influence of big players like Duchess or Reynolds. He was on his own, but the feeling did not succumb him; on the contrary, the independence elevated his spirit. He could do anything now and all he needed to do, was get away with Ryan and the money he needed.

James kicked the door to their hideout open, dropping the two suitcases inside. Ryuk and Miles watched him carefully from above the table, by which they were playing cards, when the wolf closed the door and swung the Duchess’s husband’s cane triumphantly.

“Gentlemen, we’re gonna be rich!” He announced proudly and cackled joyfully. Ryuk laughed along with him and simply bobbed his head with acknowledgement.

“We gotta split the cash!” The hyena went to pick up the suitcases.

“You handle it, I’ll go and talk to the kid,” the wolf ordered and, before anyone complained, headed downstairs. The house they had rented wasn’t a big place, but it had an underground level. James stopped in the entrance of one of the rooms, watching the wall Ryuk had torn down for fun when he was bored; it left an opening toward the old canals of the district that the hyena claimed to investigate in his free time, but James didn’t really bother with it. No, he had another room with much more interesting content awaiting.

“Hello, boy,” he said, opening firm, metal door. Alex Tompkins was sitting on a chair in the middle of the empty room, his paws and feet tied. The teenager watched his kidnapper and snarled at the sight of the cane he was holding. James chuckled.

“Ah, so you do recognize it,” he smirked.

“You’ll return my father’s cane,” Alex demanded, but Greymane only laughed.

“Will I?” He spun it in his paw. “I don’t know, I quite like it,” he leaned against it right in front of him. “Wanna hear a story?” He asked casually. Alex snorted, as he watched the grey wolf dreadfully.
“The cane.”

“Alright, alright, you’ll have it back when I release you. We’ve got the money so it’s time for our part of the bargain, after all,” James assured. “But a story first, OK?” He asked patronizingly. Alex rolled his eyes, but he nodded. Not that he had much of a choice, in the end.

“I’m listening,” he muttered.

“So, there was once a fox from Happytown, Spencer. Spencer’s mom died in childbirth, his dad was offed by some gang. He grew up in the orphanage, another abandoned kid with no future,” James started.

“Like you,” pointed out Alex. Greymane really didn’t like this investigative stare of that youngster. He did not reply.

“The fox was ambitious, though, and quite smart to that. He got a scholarship and was accepted to a university. He got his degree, even had a girlfriend… but the boring life like this does not suit a Happytown fox, does it? So he started digging around his papa’s death and guess what he found? It was Thomas Reynolds that offed him! A biggest piece of shit in the city, a freaking master of puppets of the criminal world! Spencer wanted him dead, but he couldn’t just kill a guy like him, right? So he got back with his old good friend and my brother, Gerard, and together they went to the biggest bitch in the city; your mother,” James smirked at Alex’s snarl. “It’s funny how it’s utter pieces of shit that rule the city, right? There’s no saints on the top,” he noticed, but the teenager said nothing. “Anyways, your mother gave him tools to do so, not really believing in his success. He did succeed, though and, to make things even funnier, they stole one of the paintings and framed Wilde in the whole thing. Spencer had a simple plan; to get his revenge, earn plenty of money and get away with it and I hate to admit it, but I respect the guy. Do you know why?” He asked, but Alex only shrugged.

“Why?”

“Because he did it all on his own. Duchess offered him an opening in form of these blackouts, but that clever fox pushed it far beyond what she’d expect. You know, he had whole this Manifesto thing going on, private revenge… He and his buddy Greymane had a wonderful plan going on. But then, that bitch of your mother started stirring. She wanted a piece of that cake for herself. She wrapped Spencer around her finger, offering him wealth and safety and he went for it,” James clenched his fist angrily. “He could have stayed loyal to Gerard, but in the time of trial, when he was finally given a chance to off another one of those Reynolds, he… he did this!” He yelled. Alex did not even see the first blow of the cane that hit him right in the face, knocking him off the chair. The young wolf yelped painfully, covering his head, but James leaped toward him and continued to pummel with cane.

“And he was punching and punching and punching!” Greymane yelled, as he continued hitting Alex Tompkins. When he covered his head, James crushed his ribs. When he tried to cover his chest, James broke his nose and jaw. When he was yelping with pain, James laughed. When the cane broke, James continued to pummel him with fists. When his arms grew tired, James continued to kick furiously. When the boy had not tried to cover his face or chest for a moment already, James stopped finally, inhaling deeply. He could feel the blood rushing in his head, the endorphins and adrenaline flowing through his veins. He stared down at the young snow-white wolf beside him. He was laying on the floor limply, his perfect white fur stained with blood and dirt, his perfect nose and jaws broken, his blue eyes closed, his chest falling and raising no more. James cackled with ominous joy.

“I’ve done it, brother. I could not kill Duchess, but I took her son. I hurt her. I took my
revenge,” he whispered to himself and then, left the room with a piece of broken cane still in his paw. He climbed back to the ground level, where Ryuk and Miles were still separating the money and went to the fridge. He grabbed a beer and opened it.

“Anyone?” He offered, to which Ryuk complied gladly. The wolf handed him another bottle and sat in his chair taking a long, triumphant sip. He laughed; the revenge was done. All he needed now, was to get his money, pick up Ryan and leave this cursed city.
4.17 pm, Thursday, August 24, 2022

It took no more than twenty minutes for the police officers arrive in the proximity of a small house at Fog Street 58, where James Greymane was hiding with his accomplices. Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde could count on some considerable back-up. Not counting Reynolds and Alvarez, who were apparently chasing the very same criminals, there were also Fangmayer with Wolford and Delgato with Grizzoli from their Precinct. Judy and Max filled everyone in on what they knew and what crimes their culprits were pursued for and now, they were establishing the plan.

“There are two entrances, one in the front and a small one in the back, not counting windows, obviously,” Judy explained. “The basic plan is to separate in two groups of three that will charge in simultaneously and take them by surprise. Remaining two officers will cover the building from the outside, should the preps try to escape through windows or somehow manage to break through.”

“How do we split?” Asked Max.

“I and Fangmeyer will join Wilde at the back. Reynolds, Alvarez and Wolford will strike from the front and Delgato and Grizzoli cover us from the outside,” Judy ordered. “Everything clear?” She asked and others confirmed. Judy nodded with satisfaction and reached for her radio. “Nick, are they moving anyhow?”

“Nope, just sitting and splitting the money like when we saw them first. I think Greymane’s drinking a beer, even,” reported Wilde. “But let’s not waste time.”

“Alright then, let’s go!” Judy called them. The three wolves headed toward the front exit, approaching the building carefully from where they couldn’t be seen. When they were almost there, Jason Wolford coughed awkwardly, realizing that he had quite unfriendly Alvarez right behind his back.

“Isa, I…” He clenched his teeth. “I’m sorry that I was a jackass. You know, badmouthing you in front of everyone,” he apologized, but she just shrugged.

“Apology accepted,” she replied. “I probably shouldn’t have stabbed you either,” she added reluctantly.

“So… are we friends again?” He asked.

“I don’t like you, but I have your back,” she assured and he smiled with a nod.

“I have your back too,” Wolford promised.

“Actually, lovebirds…” Max enjoyed Isabelle's gritting teeth as he called them so. “…It’ll
be only Wolford that will have our backs. You want to kick the door down, don’t you?” He
remarked at his partner and Isabelle smirked.

“Sure. I love kicking things,” she assured and it was Wolford’s turn to wince.

“I remember,” he muttered. Max chuckled and reached for the walkie-talkie.

“We’re in the position,” he informed the rest.

“We’re in position,” assured Delgato.

“We’re in position,” confirmed Hopps. “The three has been sitting in the big room in the
middle of the ground floor for a while now. We’re going to take them by surprise.”

“Well then, we’re coming in…” Wilde spoke. “Three, two, one… Go!” The fox counted
down and the moment he yelled, Isabelle and Fangmeyer kicked down the front and back door and
charged inside. They did not know the arrangement of the rooms inside, but both entrances led
them straight to the big room where the culprits were sitting. There were three of them; a bear, wolf
whom he recognized as Gerard Greymane almost immediately and a hyena, at whose sight
Isabelle’s eyes flashed disturbingly; no one else than Ryuk, who had tried to roofie her back in the
Purge nightclub. The three clearly expected no company; the hyena and bear were splitting the
money, while the wolf was drinking a beer casually. The moment when the police arrived, all three
freaked out. The bear smartly knocked the table in front of them, saving them from volley of
Wolford’s darts, but then, he made a mistake of charging toward the back exit where others were
waiting. He was shot with couple tranquilizing needles and Fangmeyer tackled him down brutally,
although thus blocking both Wilde and Hopps from following the other two. Greymane and Ryuk
were smarter than taking the police officers straight on, unfortunately. Instead, they ran straight
toward the cellar stairs, the former with bottle still in his paw and the latter yelling something
about the canals. The first one to follow the preps was no one else than Alvarez. She jumped over
the fallen table smoothly and blocked Max and Wolford’s line of fire. Reynolds snarled angrily, as
he refrained from shooting.

“Delgato, Wolford, secure the level! The rest, we follow Alvarez!” Judy ordered. She,
Nick and Max ran downstairs, catching a glimpse of Alvarez’s tail disappearing at the end of the
stairs.

Isabelle was right behind them, but never close enough for a clear shot. She saw
Greymane running down the stairs and then lunging toward a room on the side. She followed him
there, charging into what appeared to be no room, but an underground passage into the old canals.
She could see the hyena in distance, but wolf was nowhere to be seen. It was exactly when she
passed through the doorstep that she realized that Greymane must have stayed behind. He had and
he was waiting for her right there. The wolf smacked the officer in face with a bottle, breaking it
against her head. Isabelle groaned and fell on the ground, dumbfounded. She heard culprit’s
triumphant snort.

“See you later, loser!” He smirked and ran toward the canals. She tried to massage her
forehead, but she felt pieces of glass sticking out of numerous, burning cuts. Her paw was red with
blood just from touching it.

“Isa!” She heard Max’s scared voice just behind her and saw her partner crouching just
next to her. Just his expression could tell her that her face really didn’t look good.

“I’m alright. They went into canals. Go,” she snarled. Max seemed to consider protesting, but he only nodded.

“Go back upstairs, have someone check you,” he pleased.

“Let’s go!” Nick encouraged them and the three left Alvarez behind. Isabelle lifted herself and sat down, leaning against the wall; she was still a little dizzy. The wolf grabbed her phone and turned on the front camera, only to snort angrily and lock it immediately, before the sight would sink in her mind.

“It’ll heal,” she muttered, as she lifted herself slowly.

A sporty rabbit like Judy would give anyone a hard time at short distance runs, even equally sporty predators like Nick or Max. The bunny was a little ahead, tracing the culprits down with her ears, as their noses could hardly prove useful among the intensive stench of the old, abandoned canals. “They separated!” Judy warned at the crossroads and Max snarled.

“I’m going right, you take left!” He decided.

“Good luck!” Nick wished him, as he and Judy took the other turn. The wolf was running alone now, splashes of his feet echoing in the tunnels of the old canals. He could hear the hurried steps far before him, but it were no ears showing the directions, as good hearing as he considered himself, it really could be of no use in this labyrinth. Instead, he trusted his nose and instinct. Despite the characteristic, musty stench of the abandoned undergrounds the trail of mixed sweat, dirty wolf fur and hops left no room for doubt as to which way Greymane was trying to flee. Max chased him down mercilessly through the endless tunnels. Even all the head start James had couldn’t save him from the officer catching up to him inevitably. Reynolds saw the panic in James eyes when for the first time, they were running this same corridor for a few seconds. Greymane tried to push his body beyond his limits and it even worked at first. But then, fatigue hit James like a truck. Max continued to reduce the distance between the two of them consistently and inevitably. What forced James Greymane to stop, though, were no Reynolds’ shouts and calls; it was a dead end of the tunnel. The culprit stopped sliding across the mud and water of the canal, slipping and falling eventually with a loud curse. Max stopped at safe distance of about thirty feet away from him with his gun aimed at the wolf.

“Freeze!” He ordered. Max had every right to shoot, but he wanted to give him a chance to surrender willingly. It’d look a bit better in the trial, if anything could still help him. Greymane snarled as he stood at all fours. He eyed the cop that has cornered him so effectively. And then, he recognized him. Greymane’s eyes blazed with hatred, as he thought of Reynolds family and everything that all his previous encounters with them. He recalled Anastasia Reynolds, who refused to give them another task after the small miscalculation in his attempt to kill Lionel O’Dyna and how she pressed a taser against his throat. He thought of Kaylee Reynolds, who refused him any rights to his godson and how she aimed a knife at him. He thought of Max Reynolds standing right in front of him, the embodiment of everything that had went wrong in wolf’s live. Greymane howled furiously.

“I’m not making this same mistake thrice!” He yelled, as he charged toward Max. Reynolds snored resentfully, as he aimed for culprit’s chest. He had time. In the short moment
between aiming and pressing trigger, the recollections of his two big cases crossed Max’s head. Never before did he really have a chance to tranquilize someone dangerous properly. When he faced Olivier Antiery, his gun got damaged in the heat of the fight and the gazelle nearly slaughtered him with a knife. Against Gerard Greymane, the guns with old sedatives were useless anyway, so he had to face him with bare fists; he stood his ground until both of them were knocked down by an avalanche of metal pipes. This time, though, for probably the first time in his career, all he had to do was press the trigger. And as he did so, he heard the characteristic, almost noiseless clank and a most disturbing hiss of pressured air blowing through an empty firing chamber. Suddenly, Max remembered how he charged in Greymane’s house and Isabelle mocked him for bringing an empty gun. He promised he’d load it in the car, but then Chief sent them to Nicky and Judy immediately and he must have forgotten. He certainly must have forgotten to load his own goddamn gun.

“Oh, for love of the…” Max managed to mutter when James Greymane crushed at him with full momentum. Reynolds fell on his back and kicked the attacker over himself, letting him fly over, back into the muddy water. Max stood up immediately and stepped back, but Greymane was already back on his feet, charging toward him with claws drawn and jaws wide open, just begging to snap at Max’s throat; pretty much everything Max taught Greymane’s godson not to do in a fight.

The blind charge had little chance of success. Instead of letting Greymane bite or slash him, Max simply stepped aside, reaching for darts. He was not given enough time to reload the gun, though, as James was already lunging back toward him. Max tried hitting him in face with right hook. His issue was not that he did not deliver the blow. Oh no, he did it wonderfully. The issue was that Greymane chose to ignore the sort of blow that would have knocked out an average tiger. James turned Max over, yet again attacking him plainly with blind momentum of his body. They fell in the muddy, stinky water and rolled over couple times, each of the wolves trying to gain an upper hand. And then, quite confused Greymane was sitting on Max, smirking triumphantly. He opened his jaws, revealing the rows of yellowish teeth, and dove toward Reynolds’ neck. Max held his muzzle with bare paws, letting the fangs cut his fingers. James, actually surprised that he hadn’t finished cop’s life right there raised his paws to slash him up, but Max kicked him off quite powerfully. Greymane was pushed back, he stood on his feet and made a few steps backwards to counter the momentum. Reynolds bought himself only couple seconds, but these couple seconds were just enough for him to get his darts, load them and aim the gun at Greymane. Despite all the common sense, he did not press the trigger, though, as it also was at that moment that they both heard hurried steps from behind. James stopped and glanced back, but he was not given to see the blow from behind that smacked him right in the head or the mammal that delivered it. Max smiled. It was Isabelle, quite unbandaged, with blood from glass cuts covering most of her face and fury blazing in her eyes. She punched swaying Greymane with another powerful hook and, as he spun toward her, she elbowed him in the stomach, knocked brutally into dirty water, kicked the laying wolf twice and only then did she aim her drawn dart gun and packed two shots into groaning criminal’s abdomen. She spat blood scornfully and then, turned toward Max. She sighed with relief and offered a paw.

“You really are going to die young, Max,” she noticed, half bitter, half amused. He wanted to say that he’d manage without her help, but he already knew that sight of hers.

“I told you to stay. You’ve got cuts all over your face.”

“And I told you to load your gun, so I guess we both suck at listening,” she remarked and Max chuckled. There was no denying that. He watched the beaten up Greymane carefully.

“That wasn’t very nice,” he noticed, unsure if he meant how she handled the criminal or
how she greeted her partner.

“I’m not a nice mammal. Let’s go back,” she suggested a bit hurriedly. Only now did Max notice that she seemed a little uneasy underground.

“Good idea. What’s the situation up?” He asked, but she only shrugged.

“I lost signal the moment I got down here.”

“Let’s hurry, then. Somebody could need our help,” Max noticed and Isabelle agreed. Things were not over just yet.
“I wonder what purpose it served,” Judy noticed.

“We’ll figure it out later,” Nick suggested and turned toward the side of the tunnel. There was a sort of a ramp down, although it looked very steep and slippery; there could be no turning back, once they’d go down there and obviously, Judy was the first one to slide down gracefully. She saw Nick following her immediately, somehow managing to remain at both feet and landing in the mud covering the floor without a fall. The two rushed toward the door, but then, Ryuk slammed it right in front of their faces; Judy amortized the crash with arms, Nick slammed at it with full speed and stepped back, dazed a little. The hyena cackled through the grated window, as they heard a key turning.

“Locked and trapped! You should see your faces!” Ryuk laughed triumphantly, as he watched the cops. “I’d gladly handle the two of you, but I’m short on time…” And then, he squeaked, as he saw two police guns aimed at him. Nick and Judy pressed the triggers simultaneously and sent two darts straight at his neck, but the hyena managed to lung to the side just in time and slammed the window shut. Wilde and Hopps heard him falling in the mud, snarling and cursing and then, running deeper into the canals hastily. Nick tried to turn the doorknob, while Judy kicked the door just below his paw.

“It won’t give in,” she worried and checked for the hinges, but they were on the other side. “He took the key out. I’ll try to pick the lock,” Nick decided. After short hesitation, he crouched in the mud for comfortable position, took out from his pocket a bobby pin and started meddling with the lock. Judy stepped aside and checked her radio; they had no signal.

“I’ll go back find a signal. We need to report that he’s running away,” Judy said and Nick cussed angrily, as he already broke a pin. He hadn’t been doing it in a while, after all.

“It might be harder than I thought,” he muttered as Judy passed by him and stopped by the steep ramp. She tried to walk up it, but almost slipped and fell; there was no way she’d climb it just like that. She stepped back, rushed toward the ramp and tried to run up it, but she the ramp was just too slippery and she couldn’t gain any momentum once on it; instead, she just sled down slowly and sighed with frustration. She watched Nick throwing away another broken pin, as he continued struggling with the rusty lock. Judy continued trying, but she’d always slide down. She took a deep breath and charged toward it again, this time taking a huge leap forward just before the ramp. She realized it was a bad idea the moment she landed her feet on the ramp, as she slipped, fell on her back and slid helplessly in the middle of the muddy floor. Nick was watching her with a corner of an eye, smirking.

“Not your lucky day, Carro…” He tried to say, but then, another pin of his broke, the fox lost balance and, as he tried to stand up, he fell on his back, his head right next to hers. He snarled at the broken bobby pin and casted it away. Judy couldn’t help, but chuckle.

“So... we’re stuck here? There’s no way I’m climbing up that ramp,” she said.

“Yup, it was my last pin too. We’re stuck here,” Nick agreed. Judy shouted for help and sighed with resignation at no respond. She should be angry about it; they were stuck and they didn’t even have a way to report back on the culprit that was running away. It was going to take time for anyone to find them. And first of all, they both were lying in thin layer of cold mud. Judy should be frustrated with how this all turned out and yet... she just couldn’t bring herself to be. She glanced at Nick, staring at the ceiling quietly, like the fact that one of their kidnappers was running away didn’t even faze him. Did it? Would it really? What could they do except waiting for backup? After all, Nick never was the one to trouble himself over the inevitable and she always liked it about him. He wasn’t serene though and she knew why; there still was this elephant in their
room, waiting to be named and dealt with. Judy giggled, realizing how helpful an actual elephant would be; he could ram the door or try throwing Judy back up or…

“What’s so funny?” The fox asked curiously and she let her eyes down and sighed deeply. She felt her heart skipping a beat. There was no point delaying it any longer.

“Do you remember that old tiger that taught at Police Academy? You know, the one that looked like he had a hundred years.”

“Yeah, he didn’t like me. He thought I was a smartass,” Nick smirked.

“I don’t think he liked anyone,” Judy agreed with a giggle. “And his lectures were really boring too, even for me. But I remember the first thing he asked us.”

“What was it?”

“Do you know what kills most police officers?” The bunny asked and her partner snorted amusingly.

“Oh, you’re going for some dark humor, I see? What is it, Carrots?”

“Routine,” Judy said and then, she fell silent, gave the time for the word and its meaning sink in. “I shrugged it off at first. I mean, come on, once I’m in ZPD, it’ll never feel like routine to me! Each day’s a new adventure, a new challenge, a new chance to fix the world!” She protested and then, laughed, as she rolled her eyes. “And it is, just like I thought it would be. The routine will not kill me.”

“But?” Nick asked, even if she had a feeling he knew where this was going.

“But it might have killed us,” Judy confessed and for a moment, between the two of them fell dead silence. “I mean… Are we happy? Not even now, but… look six months back. Can we say that we were happy even then? Fully happy, with nothing… lacking?” She wondered, but Nick remained silent, waiting for her to answer her own question. “I think… I was not. I mean, I was… content? I have a job of my dreams, a wonderful partner, a bunch of friends and… I was content with it and the things between us. We were excellent friends. You know, the kind that…” She hesitated.

“…finish each other’s sentences?” Nick guessed and she chuckled.

“Exactly! And I often thought of you as something more, but… that’s when the routine sneaked in. I liked how it was. I liked fantasizing about us, thinking that one day I’d certainly tell you, one day I’d confess, one day…” She gulped. “One day. And in meanwhile, I was content with our small routine. It changed, but not too much and I felt safe with how it was. I wanted more, but I was content with what I had and too afraid to try and change,” she confessed.

“And then August appeared…”

“…and I threw my brain through the window,” Judy admitted. “He’s a decent guy and I like him, but I… I mistook what he wanted to give me with what I longed from you. I wanted to have both a boyfriend and this we’re-just-friends that I’ve had in you for so many years and I didn’t want to admit that by chasing him, I was neglecting you. I took you for granted and, with my conscience calm, gently casted you away until we ended up… here. Stuck in a pit of despair,” she concluded, the cold empty room only adding to the dramatism of her confession. “And when I understood my mistake, it was already too late. I hurt you. I hurt August. I hurt myself. I hurt us,” Judy felt a tear flowing down her cheek. She sniffled quietly. “I don’t know if it even means
anything anymore, but I… I love you, Nick,”’ she said, watching the fox as he continued to stare into the ceiling. “I love you,” she repeated and let the confession echo throughout the room. She listened to Nick’s slow, deep breaths, as he was letting the words sink into his heart and then, he chuckled quietly.

“Remember that one time we almost kissed?” He recalled. “When Donovan kidnapped you and we managed to arrest him and free you. We were in that locked hangar with unconscious Jacobs and his goons and I was hugging you…”

“And he had hit you so hard in stomach with that pipe that you could barely stand.”

“And we were going to kiss, but then Snarlov and Andersen barged in and Kaylee reported that Max was grievously wounded and… the moment was gone,” Nick said regretfully.

“Of course, I remember,” Judy assured.

“It kept me up for many nights,” the fox confessed. “I kept wondering, was it really us? Or was it just a heat of the moment? I did not doubt my feelings, but I could never know yours. I always thought I can read your mind, but when it came to your feelings, I never knew. And as the time passed, I never asked. I was content and didn’t want to lose what we already had,” he shook his head with disbelief at how foolish he had been. “And even after August appeared and I had a million of chances to cut him off before he cuts me off, but I… never did. Because it’s about you and who makes you happy. And if a guy from nowhere comes and just steals your heart after all these years, then I probably should just… step back?” He asked vainly and then, he snarled. “I was an idiot. I should have just told you how I feel,” he continued to stare in the ceiling, but Judy saw that he was blushing. “How you drive me crazy whenever you enter the room, how my heart spikes whenever your scent fills my nose, how I can’t help but miss you when it happens that we don’t see each other over the weekend…” He slowly turned toward her and gazed deeply into her eyes. She could see this mix of embarrassment and excitement written over his face and she couldn’t help but adore this pure, innocent genuineness.

“How dearly I love you, Judy. If it’s still worth anything from this dumb fox of yours, that is,” he added, trying to cover his unusually bashful feeling. The bunny couldn’t help but giggle, as she lifted herself and leaned toward the fox, but then, her ears perked up suddenly as she heard some ruckus in the distance. Nick’s sight followed hers and then, they saw a white wolf appearing at the brink of the ledge.

“There you are, guys!” Max called enthusiastically and then, he yelped shyly as he acknowledged the stares the two were giving him. He stopped Alvarez as she was running over to join her partner and tried to step back. “Umm… don’t mind us?” He tried to smiled apologetically.

“Oh, it’s alright, Max,” Nick muttered through his teeth, his green eyes burning holes in poor wolf. Judy sighed with frustration.

“What’s the situation?” She asked, her voice as full of despair, as Judy Hopps could only afford to be.

“Umm…” Max didn’t really know to say.

“We have Miles, Greymane and all the money. We rushed into the canals right after we delivered Greymane, so we really don’t know much more,” Alvarez saved her crimson-red with embarrassment partner from further awkwardness. “Where’s the hyena?” She asked.

“Locked the door in front of us and we couldn’t get back up the ramp,” Nick explained.
“We should lock up all the exits from the old canals in the proximity,” Judy added.

“Already done, guys up worried if they don’t get away,” Isabelle replied.

“You’ll need a rope to get out of there, won’t you? I’ll go and get some,” Max suggested and, having found an excuse, left immediately. Alvarez followed him with sight and sighed deeply. Her blood-covered face didn’t look as threatening as it could have, rather just… tired.

“I’m sorry about my stupid partner,” she said only. Nick chuckled and tried to say something, but he just stood there with his jaws opened until he shrugged it off. Judy bit her lip nervously. Not even Nick could find the words; that about described the situation, did it not?

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for Max :P
They came too late. Judy didn’t have to listen to the reports on her walkie-talkie or ask other police officers; all she needed was Reynold’s expression as he tossed them the rope and helped them climb back. She did not ask, though and they returned to the surface in silence. Back in Greymane’s hideout, officers were already finishing their job; Greymane and Miles had been taken away, police was searching for the hyena identified as Raymond Allen throughout the city. Judy and Nick watched the mess in the living room, where the three were sitting, when the police arrived. The question of Alex Tompkins’ fate hung in the air, but remained unspoken.

“This is too late,” the two heard a voice calling them from the cellar. They eyed each other and glanced at Max, but he just shrugged helplessly.

“We’ll be outside,” he said and he and Isabelle left. Wilde and Hopps went down to the room at the end of the cellar, from which the voice came. It was small, cold and bare; all that could be found there was a wooden chair, a small bloodstain and a broken wooden cane that used to belong to Michael Tompkins, Alex’s father. Judy felt a chill, as she figured out whose the blood was.

Lady Tompkins was leaning against the wall, her arms crossed on her chest, her cheeks wet with tears she must have shed before they came. She eyed the two of them with her azure eye coldly. Judy felt how Lady’s iris drilled into her soul.

“We were wrong,” Lady Osbourne-Tompkins said only.

“Is he…”

“Alive, but not thanks to us,” she informed them coldly. Although Duchess certainly would love to blame the police, Judy could not get rid of the feeling that the one mammal she found guilty was herself. “James Greymane… It’s so obvious now that we know. His appearing at the wedding for no good reason, Diane’s fainting as she heard Alex was kidnapped, that voice I recognize clearly now… If I knew it was him, I’d know that he meant to kill Alex too, we could have snatched him before…” Duchess clenched her fists, as her eyes grew watery again.

“Hindsight is 20/20, ma’am,” Judy interrupted politely. Duchess fell silent for a moment and then opened her mouth in manner of someone about to shout, but Nick cut right in the middle of it.

“When did it happen? The time gap wasn’t very big,” Nick wondered.

“Right after he came back with the money, but before we arrived and watched the house. It must have been the first thing he did when he came here; grab the cane, walk down and try to kill him. That stupid wolf, he must still think Spencer worked for me when he killed his brother. Too stupid to even pummel someone to death properly, apparently,” Duchess snorted resentfully.
“How bad is it?” Judy asked.

“He’ll live. That’s all the doctors could promise. The kid was smart enough to play dead and Greymane was stupid enough to buy it without really checking,” the Lady replied and again, in the small, cold room, fell awkward silence. Nick and Judy eyed each other, not sure how to speak.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said only.

“I appreciate it,” she replied and pushed herself away from the wall. “I should go to hospital. He’ll need me more with him than sitting here and crying,” Duchess decided. She passed between Nick and Judy and then, as she was to leave the room, she stopped suddenly. “Try not to catch the hyena before my men, could you? I’d love to have at least one of the three for myself.” She asked and the police officers couldn’t quite tell if she was joking or not.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to try,” Judy reminded her gently and Lady Osbourne-Tompkins laughed bitterly.

“Martinets,” she muttered with amusement and left the two in the small room. Judy and Nick eyed each other in the silence that fell.

“Not… a complete disaster?” Nick noticed shyly.

“We should frame it and hang it over our bed. Not a complete disaster,” Judy shook her head. “One out of three kidnappers is still on the loose, Alex Tompkins is barely alive and in need of immediate medical intervention… Not a complete disaster indeed,” she admitted reluctantly and then realized that Nick was smirking stupidly. “What?”

“I just like how you said ‘our bed’,,” he explained and she elbowed him with an embarrassed roll of her eyes.

“Not the right moment. Come on, we still have a hyena to arrest,” she suggested and Nick followed her back outside eagerly. He really didn’t want to think of what would happen to Raymond Allen, if they didn’t find him first.

4.12 pm, Friday, August 26, 2022

The cold metal handcuffs that kept his paws to the table and the muzzle that kept his jaw from opening further than necessary to speak, were just minor inconveniences to James Greymane. What truly frustrated him, was how long he was waiting in the questioning room for anyone to come. He glanced at the two-side mirror covering most of the wall at his right and then, he focused back on the clock in front of him, slowly ticking the seconds away, as he was considering his mistakes. It couldn’t just end like this, could it? There certainly was something he could still do, some way to buy his freedom… He could blackmail Anastasia Reynolds… or he could just hang himself in his cell, the result would be all this same. Ryan. He had to use Ryan. If he was going to play this right, he still could…
And then, the door opened slowly, revealing the two officers that arrested him a day earlier; Isabelle Alvarez and Max Reynolds, at whose sight Greymane barely contained a snarl. Alvarez stared at him coldly and he wasn’t even surprised; her pretty, perfect face, resembling rather a girl from magazine cover than a police officer, was tainted with a bandage covering her cheek. Reynolds didn’t even give him that, he just sat along her at the other side of the table, files in his paws and a recorder that he turned on and put on the table in front of him.

“Mr. James Greymane,” Max started as emotionlessly as the wolf only could. “I’m Detective Reynolds and this is Officer Alvarez. This is more of a formality than an actual questioning, as I will be only presenting you the list of the charges we stopped you under, but I will ask you nonetheless; you’re absolutely sure that you do not want a lawyer?” Detective Reynolds asked, but Greymane just snorted, as he stared at the recorder.

“And do you think any lawyer would pick my case, Max?” He noticed, but Reynolds’ face remained unchanged. James hated this cold uncaring gaze of his and his ignorant attitude.

“There’s always someone,” he only shrugged. “Anyways, I’ll try to enumerate your crimes in chronological sequence. Thanks to the search of your house, we connected you with recent theft of an ATM and actions of a hyena identified as Raymond Allen in liquefying the money. Hence, you will be accused of grand theft, destruction of property and destruction of currency. We’ll add money laundering to it due to the nature of your recent businesses,” Max continued to read.

“You can’t pin that on me,” snarled Greymane.

“I like the confidence with which you’re not even trying to deny it,” remarked Alvarez.

“Furthermore, we have a kidnapping…” Reynolds tried to proceed.

“Of Duchess’s son. You’ll add couple years just on that account, won’t you?” Snarled James.

“That won’t be necessary, since afterwards we have grievous body harm of Alex Tompkins, that is, his finger being cut off. Afterwards, we have murder of Eugene Inesi and attempted murder of Diane Inesi…”

“She lives?!!” James stood from the table violently and stared into Detective Reynolds’ cold eyes.

“As of now,” confirmed the wolf. “Are you disappointed?” He asked, but James just snarled.

“You wouldn’t understand, rich boy. Perhaps I should have gutted your wife to open your eyes a little,” he smirked threateningly, as if he had any power over them. Max just stared at him coldly, but Alvarez snorted with frustration.

“I apologize, we never understood psychopaths or murderers,” she remarked sarcastically.

“And then, we have an attempted murder of Alex Tompkins…”

“Attempted?! I murdered him! I slaughtered that brat like a pig! He’s dead!” Greymane protested.

“He staged it and you fell for it,” Reynolds corrected him. The Detective let this information sink into convict’s brain and he really seemed to enjoy the time he took to do so. When
his shock was wearing out, he continued with the list. “And finally, we have assault on police officers, resisting arrest and another attempted murder, this time of police officers on duty,” Max concluded finally.

“Meaning you,” smirked James.

“And that would be all,” Reynolds ignored his comment. “Do you confess to having committed these crimes?” He asked for the sake of formality. They had all the evidence they needed, after all even without any sort of confessions.

“What, you think I’m ashamed of them?” Greymane chuckled as he leaned over. “I’ve done it all for Ryan, so that we could live happily,” he claimed.

“You tried to murder or actually murdered four mammals. If we count only the explicit incidents, that is,” Reynolds reminded him.

“Well, they clearly were in my way. What should I do, repent things I do not regret?” He shrugged casually. “I don’t care about them or you; I wanted to earn my happiness. You stood in my way, so I had to remove you,” Greymane explained and the two officers eyed each other. Reynolds sighed deeply; he almost seemed disappointed.

“I was afraid you’d say so. That would be about all from me, then,” he stood from his seat. “Someone wants to ralt with you, though.”

“What, you don’t want to know where Ryuk is?” Smirked James.

“No,” Reynolds replied only; he didn’t even count on his cooperation. James watched the officer walk back to the door and inviting someone in. And then, he saw Ryan Thorn walking in. The teenager watched his godfather in silence that assured Greymane of what he feared most; he’d listened to the questioning and he knew of everything James had done so far.

“Uncle…” Ryan paused, unsure what to say, watching his godfather subdued like that. Max offered him a chair and both he and his partner stood back and leaned against the wall.

“Leave us alone,” Greymane demanded from the officers standing in the corners, but Reynolds shook his head.

“Considering the circumstances of your arrest and your criminal history, I’m forbidden by police procedures from doing so, I’m afraid,” Max refused. Greymane snarled and tried to protest, but then, Ryan spoke.

“Uncle, I… I couldn’t believe them at first, you know. About what you’ve done,” Ryan hesitated and looked back at Detective Reynolds, who nodded encouragingly. “And you know I didn’t want you to do this all.”

“I was doing it for you,” Greymane protested, but Ryan snorted resentfully.

“I never wanted this!” The young wolf protested. “I never wanted Mrs. Diane to get hurt or you to cause troubles again or… end up like this!” Ryan scolded his godfather and he let his head down resentfully.

“I failed you. If I were just a little smarter, we could have got away with all of this and… I’ll make it to you, Ryan. I promise I’ll…”

“No,” Ryan cut him off. “Stop it. You think you’re doing good, but you’re only hurting
“Then… what do you want me to do now?” He asked.

“Face the consequences,” Ryan replied coldly. “And stop claiming you were doing it for me.”

“But I was!” James stood from his chair.

“No, you weren’t,” the teenager snorted. “Until next time, uncle,” he jumped off his chair and walked to the door, not bothering to look back. Max Reynolds opened it for the boy and watched Greymane quietly. If he didn’t know better, he’d think that cursed Reynolds actually regretted how the things went. James snorted resentfully, but he couldn’t say a word. How to make this boy understand it was all for him? How to turn this hopeless situation around? He kept asking himself these questions, but all he could really do is watch them all leave and the door shut dead.

James stood in the empty room in silence, the rhythmic tick-tock of the clock hanging in front of him echoing in his head with might of giant brass bells.

Ryan Thorn managed to upkeep the appearances only till the door shut. The moment his godfather disappeared from his sight, the teenager fell into arms of Kaylee Reynolds and began to weep. Max hugged both and they lasted like this for a long moment, encouraging Ryan that he was very brave. The boy didn’t feel so, though. He’d run away from the orphanage or fight bullies; that was bravery. But turning back on own godfather and the only family he had, as much as twisted and wrong he was, felt depressing, not relieving.

“Can we go home?” Ryan asked. He knew the orphanage was formally his home for a few weeks more, but the place he found home was the small Reynolds house at Trip Streets with bunch of mammals that did care for him.

“Yeah, let’s go home,” Max agreed. He glanced at Isabelle who was pretending not to see the whole scene. “Could you take Greymane back, Isa?” He pleased and she nodded.

“I’m on it,” she promised. Reynolds thanked her and left with his wife and soon-to-be adopted son and Alvarez walked back to the questioning room. Small key shown in her paw and she unlocked the handcuffs from the table.

“Let’s go,” she ordered. Greymane stood up reluctantly, crushed with the meeting with his godson, but his sight stopped at her name plate. He made a face like he was slowly connecting the dots of some tough puzzle, but then, she hurried him up and lead to the cells located in the underground. It was slightly colder in there, just what one would expect from a cellar of an old building like this. Isabelle guided him toward one of the cells at the end, while Greymane continued to look around stealthily. She watched him carefully. Trying anything funny would be pretty stupid, but she didn’t want to have it written on her grave when that lunatic takes his chance and tries to escape.

“I’m sorry about hitting you in the face,” apologized Greymane suddenly, but she only snorted resentfully. The word ‘sorry’ fit him about as well as it fit her; poorly.
“What do you want from me?” She asked cynically. She was not going to apologize for how she arrested him, even if it’d be a basic courtesy.

“You’re Alvarez, aren’t you? From Tundratown Alvarezes?”

“What if I am?” Isabelle wondered, the tone of her voice leaving no doubts to the answer.

“Still running… the family business? I could tell by how you protected Miss’s brother,” Greymane whispered curiously and her heart skipped a beat. Miss Anastasia Reynolds? What did that lunatic have to do with all of this? Why would Greymane ask about her? Even though a thousand of questions crossed her mind simultaneously, she did not even stutter.

“You could say so,” she replied just as quietly.

“I need a message delivered to the Miss.”

“Yes?” She asked, her voice as gentle and trustworthy as only Isabelle’s could be. Oh, how she wished she had a recorder or something like that on her right now. There were cameras in here, but the voice reception was a mess, especially if he was going to whisper…

“I want to apologize for going rouge and screwing up the demolition work and for my further behavior. And for screwing up the thing with Tompkins in the end. I’m in great need of her help now and, should she deliver it, I’ll be loyal to her to the end,” he promised. “Repeat her these words exactly.”


“Don’t worry, I can recognize my allies,” he assured confidently and Alvarez barely kept a straight face. She led him into a cell and locked the door behind him. “Until next time,” James bided her and she replied with a polite nod and left the cells. She locked the door behind her and leaned against the wall of the empty corridor.

“Anastasia Reynolds. What are you doing here?” She asked herself, quite terrified. She rehearsed Greymane’s message in her head, trying to bring out of it as much as possible. If he actually meant it… Let’s be honest, a simpleton like Greymane was probably incapable of deceiving Isabelle. He actually meant what he said there about the message. So what did he really mean? Screwing up thing with Tompkins in the end couldn’t just mean Greymane’s arrestment; Miss Reynolds wouldn’t give a damn about pawn’s fate as long as they’d stay shut. No, it was about Alex Tompkins; he was still alive. Isabelle remembered Greymane’s face after he learnt the fact even too well. So Reynolds wanted Duchess’s son dead. What for? Revenge, obviously. She still blamed Duchess for Spencer Young’s actions despite lack of any solid proof. And the demolition work must have been that building collapsing in the Happytown that she and Max investigated. Why was it a failure too, it dropped…

“Because O’Dyna lived,” Isabelle clenched her fists slowly, as the pieces were falling in their places. Reynolds hired Greymane, Miles and that cursed, elusive hyena with weird jewelry, Raymond Allen, to kill O’Dyna and make it look like an accident. They downed a building, but purely by bad luck, failed to kill the fox. Then, Reynolds gave them another chance and tasked the trio to kill Alex Tompkins, again, make it seem unconnected with Reynolds. Hence the kidnapping, ransom, finally the attempted murder. Isabelle didn’t know what the ‘going rouge’ part meant, but it was a meaningless detail now, just like the role that Diane Inesi, Greymane’s girlfriend and a Happytown cop close to Duchess, played in this all. What was important, was that this cursed lunatic, Miss Anastasia Reynolds, was trying to go for a full-scale war against Duchess. In other
circumstances, Isabelle wouldn’t give a damn, but if Reynolds continued to act like she had, it wouldn’t be a quiet face-off like how Duchess wiped out the Wolf Pack. It could quickly become a messy, unforgiving and prolonging war of gangs.

“And guess what, we’ll be dragged in the middle of it,” Isabelle muttered. Who else solves these cases, if not Precinct 1? And then again, Max was Anastasia’s brother, Wilde and Hopps were generally associated with Duchess ever since Spencer Young thing, Isabelle herself was tied to both sides in subtle ways… Somebody was going to get killed. Probably somebody that she liked. Might be even her. Unless she could prevent it, that is. But how? Arguing to Anastasia’s reason would be pointless; she was too fixed on her goal to listen to someone like her. ZPD was helpless against Reynolds; they had nothing beyond Isabelle’s vague idea of what was going on and no one reasonable was going to confess against Miss Reynolds openly. If they had any trustworthy witnesses in the first place, that is. That left just one option. Isabelle grabbed her phone and found the number she thought she’d never use. She hesitated, thinking that Max would probably hate her for this, but then the call was picked up.

“Lady Osbourne-Tompkins here. How can I help you, Officer Alvarez?” Asked Duchess. Isabelle gulped. She hoped she wasn’t actually starting this war right now.

“To tell the truth… I think I will actually be the one helping you out.”

“Is that so? Do speak,” the Lady insisted, most intrigued and so, Alvarez repeated to her Greymane’s message along with what she figured out of it. Duchess listened to her carefully, agreeing with Isabelle at most of the times. Even though they were just talking on the phone, she could feel the deep thought process going on in the Lady’s head at the moment.

“I just wonder, why are you telling me this? You don’t owe me anything, do you?” The Duchess asked finally.

“I don’t, but ZPD is helpless here and if we let Miss Reynolds act freely, she’ll wage a bloody war on you. I want this mess resolved swiftly and without unnecessary bloodshed…”

“And dragging the police force in the middle of it. I agree, I’ve left the issue of young Miss Reynolds unaddressed for too long. I will correct this oversight of mine swiftly,” she promised.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, it is me that thanks you. And while it is hard to evaluate the value of your intel, please remember, Officer Alvarez; I always pay my debts. Should you need anything… you have the number.”

“I will remember. Good luck,” Isabelle wished her and hung up with a relieved sigh. She was amazed and terrified at this same time. That’s what it meant to change the fate of the city with a single phone call. If she were someone more idealistic like Judy Hopps, she’d perhaps have stings of remorse, considering that she gave up on vital information police could make use of. But being the cynical realist well accustomed with how the real world worked, she knew ZPD couldn’t utilize Greymane or his knowledge in any way that would make an actual change. Mammals like Miss Anastasia Reynolds are beyond the system. Who could handle them better than another mammal to whom rules did not apply?

Isabelle sighed deeply. She still had something important to do today, something that she had almost forgotten about because of Greymane and his shady schemes. Alvarez took her time to let her heart return to the usual pace and then, she headed to Technical Officers’ office. Someone in
there was waiting for her, even if he didn’t know it yet.

4.42 pm, Friday, August 26, 2022

August Fares was staring in the monitor and clicking the buttons of the keyboard not too hurriedly. The Technical Officers’ office in the basement was quite empty now; most went to some additional course, couple took a day off to have some fun out town while the summer lasts and Kaylee was on her vacation too. August stopped his work for a moment, leaned his head against his arm and sighed deeply. Maybe he should ask for couple days off too? He could go back to Bunny Burrows and visit the family, have a breath of fresh, rural air. He didn’t have that much job at the moment and he could really use a break.

The rabbit opened a calendar on his screen. He could take next Thursday and Friday off. He’d grab a train on Wednesday evening, spend couple days with family, slow down a little bit and clear his mind. He liked the idea. August minimalized his current work and found the template for vacation request. He started filling it in, when he heard the door opening. He expected to some TO, but instead of her, there was Isabelle standing in the door. She saw August, smiled at him and walked over.

“Hey, Lefty! It’s pretty empty in here, isn’t it?” She noticed as she walked over to his desk. The wolf seemed as cheerful as ever.

“Hey, everyone went to some additional course. I’ve already had it at the studies, so I just stayed here,” he explained.

“Awful choice, really. Courses are a great opportunity to just do nothing and still get your money,” Isabelle smirked. “What are you doing there? Going on vacation?” She watched his monitor.

“I need a few days off, I figured,” August explained.

“I heard Hopps dumped you,” Isabelle noticed and it seemed like she almost enjoyed the view of his ears dropping.

“We agreed that it would be…” He tried to protest. “Yes, she did,” he only muttered and Isabelle sat down on his desk, shaking her head.

“And you told me so much about my chanceless fakes of relationships,” she said amusingly.

“If you came here simply to mock me, then I’d really appreciate…”

“How are you holding up?” Isabelle cut in the middle of his sentence and August watched her carefully. She wasn’t smiling suddenly and it felt like… she actually cared about it.

“All… left?” August managed to crack their old joke and she actually chuckled.
“So, no plans for this Friday night?”

“So it seems,” confirmed the rabbit casually.

“Well then… how about I make some plans for you?” Proposed Isabelle.

“What do you have in mind?” August watched her intrigued.

“Oh, nothing unusual. I just thought… we could hit some lousy club, drink some drinks, your treat obviously, till we get drunk to semi-consciousness. I’d be telling you stories of how handsome and brave you are and you’d be complimenting my unquestionable beauty and charm. Eventually, you’d take me to your place where I’d give you the best night of your life, which would be the beginning of yet another fiery romance that won’t last a week before we both realize how hopeless it is,” she offered with a smile that rabbit couldn’t decipher. He chuckled and let his head down; what else to expect from her?

“Seems tempting… But how about, instead, we find some quiet drink bar and have there one or two drinks, my treat obviously? I’d compliment your charm and spirit, while you’d be laughing at my lack of taste when it comes to both alcohol and suits. Eventually, I’d take you home, we’d lay down in a couch and, pretending to be watching some 80’s B-movie on TV, talk of our lives, fortunes and misfortunes, until weariness carries us away? I mean, it probably won’t be the best night of our lives, but it could be the beginning of something that would last a bit longer than a week,” August proposed instead. Isabelle laughed with amusement.

“You should be writing poetry, not statistical analyses.”

“If you want to say no, just say no,” August suggested.

“Oh, I can’t just say no to that… Not when I really want to say yes,” she smiled and watched him in silence. And then, she turned away… embarrassed? “I’ll be ready at eight. You know where I live,” she decided.

“Until evening, then,” August smiled.

“Until evening,” she agreed. The rabbit watched her walk away with a gentle smile. There was something in that girl… something he couldn’t quite put a name on.

4.51 pm, Friday, August 26, 2022

The inevitable conclusion of Judy and Nick’s shift a day after the arrestment of James Greymane and his accomplice, was the heated discussion with Chief Bogo. Or rather, a heated monologue, as their boss was being very illustrative in depicting their failure at the seemingly obvious case. The news that Alex Tompkins was alive might have been relieving to them, but Chief hardly minded them.

“And for once I wish that you solved a case nice and quiet! No disappearing thieves,
murderers delivered to us on silver plate by their accomplices, serial killers on the run, big politics or main suspects jumping off the height to their death!” He muttered, must frustrated.

“Actually, Spencer Young wasn’t even our case,” Nick protested gently. “Just random citizens… doing their duty,” he hesitated under pressure of his cold gaze.

“Spencer Young is a case for which you both should have lost your badges, Wilde,” Chief reminded him angrily and then, sighed deeply, like someone very, very tired with his life. “There won’t pass a week until there appears another tough case that I’ll need to assign detectives to. And tell me, why should I hand it to the pair of troublemakers like you?” He wanted to know.

“Because in the end, you trust us, Chief,” Judy reminded him. “We’re genuine and hard-working cops that always take the toughest cases without a word of complaint. And sometimes things go wrong even when we’ve made no mistake. That’s no failure, it’s just… life,” the bunny explained. Chief watched her and her partner in silence and then, sighed deeply.

“Don’t stay overtime today. You two have plenty of it and I’m lawfully obliged to pay you for it,” Bogo said, leaving no doubt that he considered the discussion over. Nick smiled; their boss had a funny way of asking them to rest a bit after a tough week.

“Until Monday, sir,” they said simultaneously and left his office. Wilde smirked to his partner.

“Not a complete disaster. We really should hang it over our bed.”

“I guess,” Judy agreed with a smile. “So… going home now?”

“I think so. I’ll just ask Wolford about something and I can drop you off at your place. Or we can just crash at my place, watch some old movies like in the old times,” he offered. Judy remembered the ‘old times’ when it went without saying.

“I’ll wait before the station,” she said and they went each their way. Judy stopped by their box to make sure everything was left in the order, said bye to Clawhauser on her way out and sat down at the stairs just in front of the police station. It was still quite early and the summer sun shone bright. The kids were playing in the park in front of the station. It was still quite early and the sun shone bright. The kids were playing in the park in front of the station, the adults were passing by hurriedly, each with their own errands on their minds and Judy was just sitting here. Theoretically, she had plenty of work ahead both at ZPD and home; the paperwork considering kidnapping and attempted murder of Alex Tompkins was still ahead of them and in meanwhile, she needed to tidy up the mess her flat became last week, when she hardly slept, ate or tided her room while solving the said case. And yet, usually vigorous Judy Hopps, was just sitting at the stairs.

“Sulking doesn’t suit you, Carrots,” Nick came from behind suddenly and sat next to her. “I’m not sulking!” She protested, a bit surprised that she did not even hear him coming.

“Neither does lying,” concluded the fox with his usual, sly grin. Judy rolled her eyes with annoyance. “What are you thinking about?” He wondered. She huffed annoyingly, but the mean face quickly dispersed with the fox by her side.

“I was wondering what are we going to do about it,” Judy confessed.

“You mean the Chief? He’ll complain for a week or two until he forgets and gives us another tough case,” Nick shrugged casually and she elbowed him gently.

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about. I meant… us,” she paused for a moment,
but he only waited patiently for her. Judy lowered her head shamefully. “The last few months… I really screwed up,” she admitted.

“Yes, you did,” Nick nodded.

“And I wasn’t fair toward you,” she continued.

“No, you weren’t,” he agreed.

“And I’ve hurt you.”

“Yes, you have.”

“And…” Judy paused watching him carefully. “You really aren’t helping, you know?”

“No, I’m not,” he concluded, giggling with amusement. The two fell silent for a moment, watching the people pass by them uncaringly, everyone in hurry.

“The things I told you yesterday… I really meant them,” Judy assured. “I know where my heart really lies. With you,” she spoke with full confidence, not tainted with even shade of doubt. “And even though I’m far from perfect and I hurt you and people around me, I’d want to… give us a chance,” she said, gazing deep into his emerald eyes. Nick only smiled gently.

“And I want to take this chance more than anything,” the fox leaned toward her.

“I love you,” Judy confessed.

“I know,” Nick smiled and Judy barely managed not to laugh at this cocky reply of his, but then he embraced her and pressed his lips against her. They kissed blissfully, their arms wrapping around one another, unaware and uncaring of the time and mammals passing by the two of them. After wonderfully long moment, Judy pulled back gently and continued to gaze into his eyes. The fox was blushing gently, a view most unseen, if not unexpected.

“I love you too,” he assured. “I mean… I think that’s… obvious, but I guess I should say it out loud so that…” Nick stuttered. Judy wasn’t even sure if she ever saw him abashed.

“Shh…” Judy put a finger on his lip, silencing him at once. “Try not to ruin the moment.”

“I’ll try,” the fox smirked and Judy smiled as it echoed in her mind. I’ll try. Another thing that they should hang over their bed, considering how many times the two of them kept stumbling and falling and yet… they never backed down. Just as the thought crossed her head, Nick stole another gentle kiss from her. The bunny eyed his joyous expression with her heart skipping a bit. She found the fox’s paw end held it, let it’s heat warm up hers. They’ll try. They will certainly try and give their best. And quite honestly, with that marvelous fox by her side, Judy Hopps couldn’t see how they could possibly fail.

Chapter End Notes

Just two chapters more left! :D
End of the watch

6.17 pm, Friday, August 26, 2022

Raymond Allen, also known as Yagami Ryuk, was a hyena that twenty four hours earlier was dreaming of fleeing to small island country and stirring a revolution there with the money they’d steal. Now, he was slowly realizing it’d be a miracle if he managed to leave Zootopia alive. There was no one he could really turn to with his only friends arrested and all the big names of the city on his personal enemy list; Duchess, Anastasia Reynolds, even Mr. Big due to an incident from the past he’d love to forget… The night under the bridge, when he was almost caught by Duchess’s men and then, nearly fell straight in ZPD’s paws ensured him that he was not making it out. With this acknowledgement, Yagami Ryuk could focus on things bigger than his fate; sending the message. He wished he had time and means like Spencer Young had before him. He could show this city so much, if he only had a little more time! But he had to work with what he had and he did not have nothing, in the end. He had his freedom, a phone with Internet and a knife. Less could stir a revolution.

Ryuk snickered, as he watched Anastasia Reynolds leave the HQ of her company. Reynolds Industries, the symbol of everything that was wrong with the modern civilization; a huge corporation spreading its greedy paws all over the city, meddling in grand politics and lives of average citizens. Truly, a hydra of the modern society, but today, he was going to cut its head clean off. Ryuk stood from the bench and walked casually in her direction. Yagami based the success of this move on fact that he had changed his looks greatly in last weeks, under James’ pressure starting to dress ‘normally’ again, and the fact that they had never met in person. When Anastasia Reynolds was heading toward her car busy with her phone, she did not even notice some hyena passing by her, until he bumped at her violently.

“Hey, watch it!” She snarled and then, she saw the smirk of his sharp teeth and the flash in his eyes. She instinctively reached for the taser, but then, she felt a sting in her abdomen and pressed paw against it; the red stain was blossoming slowly nonetheless and she bent in half, groaning painfully.

“And you’re done for, Reynolds,” Ryuk snickered as he passed by her, putting the knife back in his pocket. He did not pay the young multimillionaire even a glance, as she was falling on the pavement. She wasn’t worth it.

Somebody screamed and started running, probably to help Reynolds, but he was already walking away hurriedly, considering his next steps. Duchess, Mr. Big, mayor Ketchikan, some important police figures… he was going to show as many of them as he could, those arrogant buffoons of the establishment, enslaving the common folk like him or…

And then, Ryuk heard someone running. He looked back, saw a snarling grey wolf charging toward him. Yagami Ryuk drew a knife as he tried to run down the stairs and then… he slipped.
The regular, electronic beeping of the medical equipment was the first thing that pierced through the cloud of her dreamy confusion into her mind. This first anchor of the real world was soon followed by the others; pain in her side, cold light shining above her head, some gentle material covering her body, dressed in nightclothes that she did not recognize. Anastasia Reynolds lifted herself carefully and looked around the room and the expensive medical equipment that belonged to the Hopkins Private Clinic and thus, to her. She smiled weakly.

“It’s good to be rich,” she muttered reaching for the pilot to her bed and adjusting its back so that she could sit rather than lie. On the small nightstand lied her book, phone and two vases with bouquets of fresh flowers. She checked the cards with wishes to see who they came from; one was from Reynolds Industries, the other one, much humbler, from Seymour Pines, Anastasia’s right hand when it came to the “dirty work”. She wondered if Max knew about what happened. Probably not; she had explicitly order to not inform her brother, should she have an accident like this. Besides, he’d be there with her without a doubt, should he have known.

Anastasia reached for the phone and dialed the number without referring to the contact list; she preferred to memorize most of the important contacts.

“Pines reporting. I’m happy to know you’re awake, Miss,” Seymour Pines picked up almost immediately. In the back, Anastasia could hear two of his kids shouting joyfully and their mother trying to silence them. One snarl from the father and they were back in order. “Apology, Miss,” he said tersely and Anastasia knew he didn’t mean just the kids.

“It’s alright,” she assured. He should not blame himself for the incident with Ryuk; it’d only impede his performance. “Report the situation, Pines.”

“Alex Tompkins is alive and relatively well, apparently,” he started with bad news. Anastasia couldn’t help but snarl angrily.

“Relatively?”

“Severe, although non-lethal damage of torso, seriously damaged left kneecap. He’ll be limping, but beyond that, nothing unhealable,” Seymour explained, his voice consistently emotionless, just like his boss liked it the most.

“So we take it slow for now,” Anastasia decided resentfully.

“Duchess is very attentive, both her children and husband are protected carefully. Should we try and act, she’ll know it’s us and then, the game will be over quickly. We are currently at the disadvantage too, as...”

“I know,” Reynolds cut it politely, but firmly. They were at disadvantage as her father had neglected importance of Seymour’s men and let them fall apart, leaving the Reynolds family weak in terms of the street gangs. Anastasia had influence over some of the ZPD and prosecutors, but it wasn’t enough to harm Duchess, fortified mightily in her Happytown.

“We lost this round. Let us pull back quietly while we still can,” she decided.
“I’m cleaning it up,” Seymour assured and Anastasia expected from him no less.

“How is it?”

“Ryuk is dead. Funny thing, after he stabbed you and tried to run away, he fell down the stairs and broke his neck,” Pines informed her with amusement, but she only snorted.

“Fell down the stairs? Couldn’t you have arranged…”

“He really did,” insisted her subordinate, but Anastasia was taking her time to acknowledge the information. And then, she burst out with the most amused laughter.

“And they say it’s good ones that die young,” she chuckled. “What about the rest?”

“Greymane will remain quiet. He’s certain that should he say a word, both him and godson are dead.”

“Do not do a thing to Ryan Thorn. He’ll be a part of my family soon,” Anastasia reminded him.

“Of course, Miss. We will let Greymane believe otherwise, though.”

“Obviously. What about Miles?”

“He cooperates. He’ll blame everything on Greymane and Ryuk, receive lower sentence, keep quiet about us for a symbolic bribe. He doesn’t know that much, besides,” Seymour assured.

“And Diane Inesi?” Reynolds wondered, but for a long moment, there was only silence. If she didn’t know Seymour better, she’d think he didn’t know what to say.

“She woke up… but she’s not going to be an issue. The corporate issues are being taken care of as well, so I believe everything is quite under control,” Seymour assured.

“Perfect. That would be all, then. Wish all the best to Amy and kids,” Anastasia said.

“I will. Get well soon, Miss,” replied Seymour Pines before hanging up. Spice put the phone aside and stared in the opposite wall. The plan to attack Duchess was good. Fancy and a bit over the top, but good overall. She just put too much faith in a lowly criminal like Greymane. Then again, his incompetence was almost impressive. She could have just tricked Duchess into hiring him and watch her small empire fall apart. Reynolds chuckled at the thought. How could she have not thought of it from the start? Oh, well, hindsight was 20/20, but not everything was lost…

And then, the door opened slowly, revealing her; Lady Jennifer Osbourne – Tompkins, The Duchess. Anastasia never considered her pretty, the old scar covering her left eye and the fresh one across her lip denied the Lady a right to this compliment. Miss Reynolds couldn’t help but find her enchanting though, just like an ancient, feral rabbit would find enchanting the fox gazing at her from between the bushes, about to pounce on her and rip her apart. Anastasia held her breath and pulled back in her bed instinctively, although she had nowhere to go. Lady Tompkins closed the door behind her and stood in front of her bed, staring her down carefully with cold eye that revealed nothing. The silence of her guest gave Miss Reynolds just enough time to compose herself and have her heart slow back down. She felt naked. She was helpless and exposed. She could be killed on a whim of her greatest enemy. She should not let her see that she was acknowledging the fact, though.

“I hoped to see you awake,” Duchess spoke finally, her voice just as enigmatic as her
gaze. Did she know of Anastasia’s involvement with Greymane and the kidnapping or did she just came to humiliate her rival of old?

“We both know you’d rather have me not wake up at all,” Anastasia snorted.

“It would be a convenient, but annoyingly simple conclusion. Shanked by your own thug… the irony treats you well,” Duchess smirked devilishly.

“My thug? I don’t think I quite understand,” Reynolds watched her carefully. It’s not that she hoped to change Duchess’s mind; she needed to hear how much she really knew and assess the situation.

“Oh, you know, the gas explosion, the kidnapping and attempted murder of my son… You did hire them couple times, from what I heard,” Duchess shrugged and Anastasia cursed in her mind. Everything. She knew everything. It was really, really bad.

“You think I’d keep them hired after they downed a building? I just wanted O’Dyna dead,” Anastasia shrugged with annoyance, as she crafted her lie. That’s the trick; put in it just as much truth as you can afford to, just conceal the key parts.

“They did act awfully conveniently to you nonetheless,” Duchess noticed skeptically, as she crossed her arms. She seemed tired of these games and Reynolds gained certainty that she didn’t even have room to craft the subtlest of lies.

“I might have…”

“Mentioned to them that you’d pay for my son’s dead body his weight in gold?” Duchess snorted with disdain. “You must have fired them after they failed to kill Lionel. You’re not that reckless to keep these morons with you. It doesn’t mean that once you heard what they came up with, you wouldn’t try to go along with them double the price to kill my boy. It was a clever plan. Technically, nothing connected you with this all. Technically,” the Lady dispersed any of Anastasia’s doubts or hopes.

“Who told you? Greymane? Miles?” She gave up finally.

“I have many sources, but… it was Ryuk’s stabbing and a certain concerned phone call that deprived me of all my doubts,” Duchess explained and Anastasia hung her head down hopelessly. So that’s how she was going to be taken down. By a poorly aimed stab of some half-wit’s knife.

“If you came here to kill me, just do it already,” Miss Reynolds suggested and Duchess walked to the side of her bed carefully. Anastasia had nothing to defend herself, her phone was lying exposed on the nightstand, her body too weak to defend herself… she could scream. Duchess could just maul her, jump out of the window and be gone. Or send someone in the night. Or blow up her car, hire a sniper or do it in a thousand ways more. Anastasia had the sort of hand that you can only win with a solid bluff and they were playing open cards now.

“It would seem like a convenient solution to me, wouldn’t it?” The Lady contemplated, as she stepped toward the lying wolf. “And don’t get me wrong, should Alex have died, you wouldn’t have even made it alive to this hospital.”

“But?” Reynolds asked indifferently.

“But it is a chance to break this vicious cycle that your father started.”
“My father has not…” Anastasia protested passionately, but was interrupted just as she started.

“Your father caused death of the old Wilde, sent Happytown in a recession to excuse himself and left the Wolf Pack to look over it. Me and my first husband challenged them, so they killed him and mutilated me. I wiped out the Wolf Pack and believed that I drew the line. And then, Spencer Young murdered Thomas Reynolds, exposed Tundratown corruption and shook the entire city yet again. For a moment, I thought Reynolds were done with their dirty dealings, but then again…” Duchess raised her paw in the air meaningfully. “This.”

“Don’t you dare talking like you’re not at fault,” snarled Anastasia.

“I am at fault, more than you, too. I was there when it started. You just followed your father’s footsteps. What I’m saying there is…” Duchess hesitated. “Whenever you think that you won because you’ve erased the one guy that you considered your nemesis, there suddenly appears someone else to stab you in the back. Their family, friends… or just a random fox with a solid grudge against you and an elaborate plan to exact his revenge. I kept wondering, who it would be once I kill you. Your brother? Some friend or lover that you kept secret? Seymour Pines? Or someone that I don’t even know about yet, like Ryuk or Greymane? To tell the truth, I don’t want to know,” the Lady concluded, but Reynolds snorted resentfully.

“So what, you’re gonna let me live and give me another chance to kill you?” Anastasia doubted.

“No. We’re going to call it a truce,”

“I’m not calling the truce with the one that murdered my father,” Miss Reynolds declared with all the confidence she had, even if it was going to cost her life.

“You’re looking at the wrong person, then,” Lady Tompkins replied calmly.

“Right, you hired Spencer Young to murder my father. My bad,” Anastasia muttered sarcastically.

“I have not,” Duchess denied firmly, but Reynolds just eyed her skeptically.

“And somehow, you never had the guts to say it to my face.”

“Somehow, you never bothered to ask me in my face,” Lady riposted and as Anastasia stared at her in silence, a thought sparked in her head. Could it be that she was wrong for all of this time? That Duchess wasn’t at guilt of her father’s death and whole this little war was just pointless? The idea was outrageous. Her father was better than to be killed by some random, meaningless fox. She couldn’t have wasted so much time and resources trying to avenge him in vain! But what if… she was wrong?

“Can you…” Anastasia felt the lump in the throat, but she coughed it off decisively. “Can you say it to my face now?” She demanded, as if it wasn’t her on Duchess’s mercy, but quite oppositely. The Lady respected it.

“I have not participated in any degree in Thomas Reynolds’ murder. Never have I financed, encouraged, instructed or even contacted Spencer Young or any of his accomplices, neither have I ever plotted to retrieve the documents that burdened your father and Mr. Thunders, simply because I was not aware of their existence until they fell into my paws,” the Duchess claimed.
“How did they fall in your paws, then?” Anastasia inquired.

“I learnt about Greymane and Young from Detective Wilde. While Greymane seemed uninteresting, I had my men watching Young’s house. And then Hopps arrived, next the Wolf Pack and then, I. Hopps gave me the documents, as a price for saving the Wolf Pack mongrels,” Duchess clarified.

“It never made sense that you kept them alive… And what happened with Spencer Young?” Anastasia asked.

“From what I know, he’s long gone,” Duchess said. Reynolds considered these words in silence, with her eyes hung down. Duchess had no point in lying. For the matter of speaking, she had no point of keeping her alive and she was giving her best. Why? What for? Could she be true in her intention of ending the vicious cycle? With no other explanation, Anastasia had to accept this one. And with that acknowledged, there could be only one answer to her dilemma, one most infuriating; Duchess was not to be blamed. The murderer of her father was Spencer Young, just some long gone fox. Anastasia clenched her fists, but she released them finally, as she embraced the truth.

“I believe you,” she spoke finally and Duchess nodded with acknowledgement. She offered her a paw and Anastasia shook it. The Miss and the Lady. The two of them could rule the city, if only they had an ambition and will to work together.

“A truce, then. You will not ever meddle in my businesses or family matters,” Duchess demanded.

“And you’ll stay away from Tundratown, my brother and his family,” Reynolds replied.

“Deal.”

“Deal,” Anastasia nodded with satisfaction and then, the door opened slowly, revealing no one else than Max Reynolds. He was panting heavily as he clearly had been running, but he froze in the doorframe, eyeing the Lady suspiciously.

“Duchess,” he said carefully.

“Detective Reynolds. Congratulations on solving the case, along with my favorite Wilde and Hopps,” Duchess smiled kindly.

“Thank you. Am I interrupting something?” He wondered, eyeing from one wolf to the other.

“No, of course not. Actually, I think we’ve just come to a long-sought agreement with your sister,” Duchess assured. “I should perhaps be going now. I’d hate to interrupt a family reunion,” the Lady excused herself and then, she was already gone. Max watched the closed door intensely, as if expecting the worst. Not often did Duchess and Reynolds meet, after all.


“Quite oppositely. We really came to a… hopefully lasting truce,” Anastasia replied casually. Her brother was a bit scatter-brained and usually, the subtle and far-going implications of such claim could go unnoticed to him. Somehow, she felt that this time, it wasn’t a case. “And yes, it’s good to see you… Oof!” She huffed, as Max lunged toward his sister and hugged her passionately.
“You’re alive!” Her brother hugged her passionately. “Why did you forbid anyone to tell me! What if you wouldn’t…”

“I’m alive,” Anastasia replied. “I didn’t want to bother you,” she only said, even if there was far more beyond that. She had forbidden anyone from informing Max about her harm preemptively because she didn’t want to have him watch her die in her bed, just like he had with mom. The previous experience was soul-crashing to him and it would not repeat. Normally, Max wouldn’t see the hidden meaning. This time, his eyes gave her no room of doubt.

“And you’re trying to pretend like you don’t care,” smirked the wolf.

“We’re a family.”

“I’d love you to express that thought in times other than deadly peril,” noticed Max, causing his sister to giggle. As much as she’d hate to admit it, he had a point.

“Oh, you know me,” she just shrugged it off and Max continued to ask her about her state. Later, he told her about the investigations and how they were going. If he knew that Anastasia was involved with all of this and he had to know it, he didn’t give it away at all. When they concluded the grim subject of the recent events, Max didn’t leave like she’d expect, but sat with her and talked like they haven’t in a while. Anastasia glanced out of the window and watched the city outside. From the low building of Hopkins Private Clinic, Zootopia felt like a much bigger city; too big for just one mammal to embrace all of it. There was some disturbing feeling in Reynolds’ heart; lack of purpose. The war against Duchess had no meaning anymore and the usual business matters never were a challenge to a giant like Reynolds Industries.

“So, what now?” Echoed in Anastasia’s mind and she watched her brother, talking passionately about Kaylee and their newly adopted children. Spice smiled gently. She was going to figure something out.

1.12 pm, Friday, September 9, 2022

Alex Tompkins was coming back to health quickly. Within just two weeks, his broken nose and jaws continued to heal smoothly and never concerned him, just like his heavily beaten stomach, but there remained a simple issue; his left leg. James Greymane managed to break it and in his fury, he managed to do so quite unorthodoxly; he shattered teenager’s kneecap, leaving the doctors most confused.

The time spent in the hospital, made a bit more pleasant by multiple visits from his family, girlfriend, school friends and even Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, passed slowly and Alex was glad when he could go. It was whole family that picked him up, obviously; mom, step-dad and his sister. Alex helped himself with a crutch, as his left leg still hurt and doctors left no room of doubt; even with prolonged rehabilitation, some limping could remain for the rest of his life. The thought annoyed him, but then he figured that he’d have his father’s cane fixed and he’d use it. That was going to be totally badass; a cane that he had been almost killed with, was going to serve him. His mother really liked the idea too, she already retrieved the said cane from ZPD and sent it
to be repaired.

Alex stood before the hospital, inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the city air; a dreadful mix of exhaust fumes, fried oil from a nearby burger stall and a gentle, struggling for survival scent of flowers somewhere in the distant. What a change after the neutral, soulless hospital air! Alex enjoyed it for a few short moments, as he continued to watch the city. These were just two weeks, but they did put a lot of things into perspective. He used to think that Zootopia was a fine place to live in. But now he knew that fine was not enough. There still were too many bitter, sad mammals. Too much injustice tainting the lives of entire families such as Inesis, Greymanes, Youngs, Wildes, or even Reynolds and Tompkins. He was going to change it, though. He was going to make it better, just like his mother was. Alex Tompkins was well aware that even a wolf as influential as he was going to be, could not fix the whole metropolis and its every single mammal. But it did not mean that he wasn’t going to try.

The wolf limped toward the car, with his family greeting him enthusiastically. Zootopia was a wonderful place. But one should never forget that there always was room for improvement.

1.12 pm, Friday, December 16, 2022

James Greymane was a simple wolf who believed in simple values, such as honor and family. If he were to choose a single word to describe himself, he already knew what he’d pick; consistency. James was an essence of consistent choices. From the very start, he fought for Ryan. Everything he had done, was for him. Even after the boy rejected him, he simply decided that he was just too young and immature to appreciate his godfather’s sacrifice to the fullest. James Greymane committed plenty of crimes, but if there was anything he was ashamed of, it’d be rather that he failed to reach the goal.

With this confident mindset, James Greymane came to the court not for the trial, but to confess his acts. He had no defense prepared, despite his state lawyer’s best will; he did not need to deny or excuse things that he’d do again, if given the chance. Ryuk was dead and Miles sold both his friends trying to receive shorter sentence. Greymane laughed at that foolish, cowardly bear and the hyena that claimed to be the spark to ignite a revolution, but couldn’t live up to his promises. James accepted the life sentence with a smile, as he continued to watch the juries and remembering their faces carefully. They disdained him, misunderstood his consistence. They envied him, wishing for just a bit of his devotion so that they could try and change their sad, mundane lives. They protected themselves from his ruthless determination under cloak of vain morality. How is it, that it’s the weak that judge the strong? Is it simply because there are more of them? Or was he not strong enough in his convictions? He knew he’d find no answer at the courtroom.

The prison was a nice change overall. James couldn’t claim that all mammals locked with him were worth his attention, but there were many strong ones, both in mind and body. Some of them, mostly the ones from Happytown, hated him for messing with the Lady. Still, James knew better than to challenge them all and he found himself a group of companions that stood for him too. In the end, the life in prison, as mundane as it was, could have been far worse. Just a few days in, a thought was growing in the wolf’s mind, that he could get used to it, even if he was betrayed.
by everyone; Diane, Miles, Ryan… Even Ryan, that ungrateful brat! Greymane clenched his paws as he walked the prison corridor when, the door opened suddenly and someone dragged him in. The guards either didn’t see a thing or chose not to notice it.

James fell on the floor of the disturbingly quiet laundry room; no one worked here at the lunch time, after all. He looked around carefully; he was surrounded by the members of his newest pack; couple lions, two wolves, a cheetah and two badgers. Their leader, a young, charismatic raccoon called Scythe was sitting on a laundry machine just in front of him, playing with a toothpick in his teeth. Greymane kept wondering where he got these from, but hadn’t dared to ask so far.

“Hey, Scythe. What’s going on?” Greymane asked as he lifted himself up and dusted shoulders off casually.

“It’s been a while since you joined us, Grey. It’s time,” Scythe explained.

“Time for what?” He asked, but, then, a blow to the stomach knocked him down to his knees. James yelped and then, someone smacked him right in the face. Two convicts held him from the back, while the other two muzzled him with some cloth; it was loose just enough for him to mutter, not enough to bite. Scythe watched him scornfully, as he spat the toothpick on the floor.

“The clarifications time,” the raccoon specified. He jumped down the washing machine and stood before the wolf. James struggled, but they held him firmly. “Well then, which kneecap?” Scythe asked.

“What?”

“Which kneecap do you need?” Scythe repeated, deadly seriously. He sighed with annoyance, as James just stared at him blankly, trying to comprehend the question.

“I… what?” He mumbled.

“Which kneecap do you need, Grey?” He repeated for the third time. “You broke young Tompkins’ kneecap when you kidnapped him, so it’s only fair that we break yours. I figured I’d be polite and give you a choice which one,” the raccoon explained. James snarled hatefully.

“So you’re just bitch’s another pawn. No wonder, a moron as meek as you has to work for someone to survive…” The punch to the lungs left him breathless. Wolf bent in half and took his time coughing erratically. When he lifted his head finally, he saw Scythe staring at him continuously with these same, cold as always eyes.

“You could have gone places, Grey. You’re stubborn, resourceful… if not too smart, then at least foolhardy. You have one simple issue, though. You’re simply too damn good in making yourself enemies. ZPD’s glad to see you rot in prison. Reynolds must want you dead for your hyena buddy’s stunt. Duchess thinks quite oppositely; she’d rather you suffered slowly instead. And you achieved this all in what, two months? I mean, I’m almost impressed,” Scythe claimed amusingly.

“If you want to kill me, just do it,” muttered James as he lowered his head, but the raccoon just laughed.

“And you never listen too! Duchess does not kill! She’s past these days,” Scythe shook his head.

“Yeah, if you forget Reynolds or my brother,” spat James, only amusing the raccoon even
“The Lady wants you alive and our job is to ensure it,” Scythe assured and walked over to James. The prison gang boss raised wolf’s head with his ice cold paw, so that their eyes met. “Do you know why?” The raccoon smiled, but there was nothing sympathetic in the expression. “Because sometimes, life miserable enough is a fate far worse than the most gruesome death. Now, which kneecap?” Scythe repeated the question again, slowly losing his patience. James stared him in the terrifyingly cold eyes, but he did not withstand it for long; he glanced down as he turned his head right. Scythe took it for an answer. He dove down toward Greymane’s knee. The wolf would scream, but then, the cloth wrapped tighter around his muzzle. All he left out before he passed out was a pitiful, muffled yelp.

3.12 pm, Friday, December 23, 2022

The bouquet of yellow roses that his wife had suggested, was taking quite an effort in its attempts to stab him, as for an inanimate object. William Osbourne – Tompkins tried to find a comfortable grip, but all he got was another thorn in his finger. The wolf settled for the position in which only dull ones were jabbing him and pressed the doorbell. The door opened after a while, revealing the host slowly. Diane Inesi was dressed in a casual, greyish T-shirt and your average blue jeans. Her eyes analyzed the flowers in his paws and then, William’s face. Osbourne nearly gulped, as he stared in her distant, uncaring eyes. He remembered how he saw her in the hospital for the first time after she woke up. She had already been told everything and when Will asked her how she was doing, she just stared at him blankly, as if all that had remained of her was an empty shell. William hoped she’d shake it off in time, but he couldn’t tell if she really did.

“I… um… Happy birthday,” he managed to stutter, offering the flowers, but then, she fell toward him, hugged her former police partner and burst into tears. Will wrapped his arms around her gently and let her weep into his shoulder. He barely contained his tears. He hated to see her like that. Her, the amazing Diane Inesi, the shining bright star of Happytown ZPD. The girl that saved his life more times than he’d bother to count in just a year and now, she was crying pitifully, as she pressed against his chest. And all of this because of that cursed Greymane. The only comfort he could have was awareness what greeting his wife had prepared for that mongrel.

“I’m sorry,” was all that he managed to say. She pressed herself against him a little harder and then, released him, stepping back. Will handed her the roses and she accepted them with a weak smile.

“Come in,” she invited him inside and the wolf followed her inside. The wolf wiped his feet and watched Diane walk to the kitchen. He suddenly remembered how she used to dance through the police station halls randomly on the good days or how she loved to balance on tall curbs. Now, she could hardly keep balance on a single leg and each of her steps were calculated with utmost precision. Even if he didn’t have ways in through his wife, he’d know that through the head injury, Diane suffered from cerebellar ataxia. It impeded her balance and, barely noticeably, speech.
“Black coffee, no sugar, right?” Diane called from the kitchen.

“Black like my soul,” Will replied half-jokingly and followed her there, while she was filling a vase for flowers with water. The room had been completely refurnished since the murder, so that nothing would remind her of Greymane or her father’s death and Will liked the change too. It meant she didn’t give up.

“Need some help?” He offered, as she brewed the coffees.

“You can take the cookies,” she suggested, took the cups and headed toward the living room. Will followed her, watching carefully as she struggled with two cups in her paws, trying not to pour anything out as she was making a turn. He was ready to catch her, should she slip, but he was not going to offer himself to take the cups from her. He wasn’t going to take it away from her.

They sat down in a couch next to a small wooden table. Diane put Will’s coffee in front of him and took a sip of hers.

“How are the guys?” She asked.

“Quite good, but they’re complaining it’s boring without you. Speaking of which, I was supposed to show you something…” He reached for a phone and played a video he had prepared. These were compiled recordings of all Happytown cops wishing Diane all the best. Inesi took the phone in her paws and watched the film in silence with her eyes watery. As she finished it and returned the phone to Will, he put something in her paw.

“I heard you were collecting them,” he said and she watched the small figurine in her paw. It was a young lynx in grey robes, dashing swiftly through an imagined battle with a blue lightsaber in his paw. Diane giggled at the sight.

“I’ve been looking for him for weeks,” she said.

“We too. Happy birthday, Diane,” he smiled, but she let her sight down.

“Guys know I’m not coming back?” She asked.

“They do.”

“Do they know why?”

“Half of the reason,” Will explained and she nodded. They all knew she couldn’t fill her duties any longer due to the cerebral damage. Only the few chosen ones, including Hopps, Wilde and Duchess and Happytown police chief realized she was also involved in Greymane schemes. The situation was… ambiguous, at least. On one hand, she should be judged for her involvement. On the other hand, it was nearly impossible to prove it, as she had left no physical trace. Greymane took all the blame for himself. Miles blamed James along, not risking him doing something stupid if he mentioned Diane. And even if there appeared any clues, the media had already painted a picture of Diane, victim of misguided affection. Somehow, after the incident with Spencer Young, no one seemed eager to accuse cops without unquestionable proof on the desk.

“And how did Duchess take this all?” Diane asked. She had not seen her since she had woken up.

“She accepted your apology. Alex is doing well so she is as fine too,” Will assured. “And how are you?” He wondered, but the girl fell silent for a long moment that he did not dare to interrupt.
“I believed in James,” she spoke finally. “I knew he was going astray, but I never once doubted that he’d realize it in time… but he didn’t. And I don’t think he ever will,” she clenched her fists.

“People kept saying I should keep away from him, because he was a bad guy and he’ll only get me in troubles and I’d always tell them to wait and see. But now I see,” she confessed and Will didn’t really know what to say, so he just let her go on.

“People don’t really change, do they?” She asked finally. “I’ve seen it so many times, back when I worked with you. This same story over and over and… and I just let it happen to me too. People don’t change.”

“It’s easy to say at that you should learn from others’ mistakes,” Will agreed.

“So we’re doomed to repeat these same mistakes?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s more like taking an… educated guess, I suppose.”

“And I’ve guessed poorly,” Diane concluded.

“You have,” he did not dare to deny her misery. They sat on the couch in the silence and Will proceeded to drink the coffee.

“People don’t really change, do they?” she repeated, but Will replied nothing. “I’m leaving the town,” Diane announced suddenly and her friend choked on his drink.

“What?”

“I’m moving out. I’ll sell the house and father’s company, rent something in Lake City and eventually, buy a house there. I have just enough to live decently and… I need to leave,” she confessed. “After everything that happened I can’t just pretend it’s alright. It’s not and I… I can’t stay here.”

“I’ll miss you,” was all that he said. There was no point arguing with her logic. Nothing kept her there any longer.

“Me too, but… it’ll be for the best,” she decided.

“Whom will you sell father’s company?”

“I thought of Duchess, actually.”

“She’ll buy it,” agreed Will. “When do you plan to leave?”

“Soon. In couple weeks,” she explained and reached for the coffee. They drank them simultaneously; Will took his time, letting the delightful aroma fill his nostrils, while Diane simply gulped it hurriedly. They enjoyed this silence, aware that it could be their last moment together.

“They do,” Will said suddenly. Diane turned and wanted to ask what he meant, but then she understood.

“I hope.”
Isabelle found the kitchen among the labyrinth of pathways, grabbed the biggest cup, put some tea in it and turned a kettle on. She leaned against a cupboard and involuntarily raised her finger to touch the small scar on side of her head, just below the left ear, that remained after Greymane crashed a bottle against her head. She used to spend hours brushing her fur trying to cover it, until August said that he actually liked it the way it was and she dropped the silly act. Still, she’d often touch it when she thought no one was looking, just to check if it wasn’t any smaller.

Suddenly, her paw went down quickly, as she heard some steps in the distance. It wasn’t
August; the mammal approaching carried quite a different smell. Isabelle watched the door carefully; the bunny that came in was just about August’s age and seemed quite alike August; she must have been one of his sisters or cousins. She was wearing some messy, a bit sweaty T-shirt, stained trousers and small, square glasses. She yawned ostentatiously, not covering mouth with her paw, as she stepped inside with a big cup in her paw. She eyed Isabelle carefully.

“Midnight hunt?” She wondered half-jokingly.

“Just a tea,” Isabelle shrugged to sleepy for any of her usual snarky responds. The rabbit walked over and checked the kettle.

“Enough for me too? Yeah, perfect,” she said with satisfaction, as she threw out an old teabag, found an instant noodle in one of cupboards and started pouring it into this same cup. Isabelle watched it with sort of amusement.

“Not too late for dinner?” She wondered.

“The day’s just starting and I still have got seventy four bugs left to go,” the rabbit explained, as she leaned against a cupboard just next to Alvarez, waiting for water along with her.

“Bugs?”

“I’m a game designer,” the rabbit explained. “The name’s Vi, by the way.”

“Isabelle,” Alvarez introduced herself too, but Vi laughed.

“Hello, I guessed? There aren’t too many wolves around here, you know?” She noticed amusingly, but Alvarez just shrugged uncaringly. The rabbit stared at her carefully for a long, silent moment.

“So…” She tried to resume the conversation. “You’re rutting a rabbit. You really must be desperate,” Vi noticed casually.

“At least I’m not a fruit of four generations of passionate inbreeding,” Isabelle did not even stutter, as she riposted, her voice just as casual. Two girls looked into each other’s eyes.

“I like you already,” Vi decided with a smirk.

“Shame it doesn’t go both ways,” Isabelle replied, but she only laughed. The rabbit went to the fridge and searched through it intensively.

“Some orangeade, maybe?” The rabbit proposed finally, taking out two bottles of red bubbly liquid, covered by a label designed sometime around seventies. Taste of s Isabelle even remembered the brand; it was one of those cheap drinks she used to steal from their local grocery.

“That sugary paint? I heard that one weekly screws your liver more than ten years of chugging cheap wines,” protested Isabelle. The rabbit smirked and opened two bottles and handing one to her.

“Exactly. And you know that’s the best part? They don’t do liver transplantations. And so, with each bottle, you’re a step closer to sweet release of death…” Vi said, watching the orangeade blissfully.

“I can just maul you, if you crave for it so badly,” the wolf suggested.
“I’ll consider it,” Vi giggled and again, watched her carefully. “You’re not like August.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Isabelle shrugged, but her companion laughed aloud. She wanted to comment on it, but wolf’s revealed white teeth were enough to discourage her from that.

“So how is it like?” Vi wondered instead.

“What, rutting a rabbit?” Isabelle eyed carefully Vi. She wasn’t too pretty, just… average. Five, maybe six out of ten. “Yeah you probably wouldn’t know,” Alvarez judged and cut in rabbit’s sentence as she tried to riposte. “No, big brothers don’t count.”

“I bet you’re pretty experienced in this field, but then again I’m quite sure August’s the first guy not to pay you for your services,” crossed her arms Vi with a playful smirk. “And that’s not what I asked about. How is it like… being with him?” She asked. For the first time, she sounded like she actually cared for the answer.

“I can’t complain,” Isabelle answered tersely.

“Oh, I can only imagine. Good old August, nothing but balm on your heart,” smirked Vi.

“Yeah,” Isabelle simply nodded and then, the kettle turned off as the water boiled. The bunny grabbed it first and filled her bowl.

“Well, gotta go! Good hunt!” She joked, as she left the kitchen all of sudden. Isabelle grabbed her cup and filled it too. She left it on the countertop to cool down a little bit and in meanwhile, stared into the darkness of the corridor ahead of her blankly. And then, August came in dressed in his long night shirt. He stopped at the doorframe and watched her with concern.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh, I just… met a family of yours. The name’s Vi, I believe.”

“Oh, her. Vi’s… unusual, you know,” August noticed and she nodded.

“I noticed,” Isabelle agreed and for a long moment, she remained silent. And then she turned at her boyfriend and gazed into his eyes. “I’m afraid,” she admitted shamefully.

“About us?” He guessed with a smile. All he needed to do was to wait.

“About us,” nodded the wolf. “I’m just… counting days.”

“Till we fight and fall apart, thus fitting your pattern so far,” August concluded for her. He hesitated and Isabelle let him take his time and gather his thoughts. “I’m scared too, at the times. It’s so easy to misstep… but it’s a good feeling in the end. Fear.”

“How?” Isabelle doubted.

“It shows that you care,” he explained and Isabelle snorted and then, chuckled. She put her arm on her boyfriend’s shoulder and pressed him against her side.

“Always looking at the bright side! It’s so…”
“Adorable?”

“Frustratingly adorable,” corrected him Isabelle and kissed him on the cheek. Slowly, a smile vanished from her face. “I care. I want it to last, but I can’t lose the feeling that one day, I’ll do something wrong and… let you go.”

“Hey, I’m not a balloon! I won’t just float away the moment you slip and drop me!” August protested and she giggled most charmingly.

“Not a helium balloon, at least. But an air-filled one… you’re not too heavy and you’re nice to have around, so… a balloon. Balloon,” she said the word slowly, tasting the sound of it carefully as she accented each vowel carefully. August gave her a weird look.

“Should I consider it an offence or a compliment?” The rabbit doubted.

“Why not both?” Isabelle smiled enigmatically and he rolled his eyes. His blind eye seemed slightly paler than the other. It was a hardly noticeable, but quite unusual asymmetry of her boyfriend that she really liked.

“It’s confusing,” August noticed.

“Life is confusing, Lefty,” she smirked.

“Even more so with you,” he admitted and kissed her. And then, he sighed nostalgically.

“Thanks for coming to the Bunny Burrows. I know you didn’t like the idea initially…”

“…To put it mildly…”

“… but it was really important to me. And they’re not so bad, are they? For a big rural family with firm belief in tradition, that is,” August added.

“It’s quite alright. Even though we’re never going to have children, as I’ve been made aware quite explicitly,” she assured.

“And the size difference will be killing us,” August nodded.

“And we’ll never agree on what to eat,” continued Isabelle.

“And people will be staring and saying things.”

“And you won’t be able to stand it and lose any passion for me in couple months.”

“And even if we get married, you’ll be cheating on me with some random wolves regularly.”

“And you’ll find yourself some bunny mistress too,” concluded Isabelle. They looked each other in the eyes and then, laughed amusingly, disturbing the serene silence of the bunny house at the night.

“They do talk a lot,” the rabbit admitted. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. You’re you and they are them. If some can’t live with two of us together and happy… Well, that’s their problem,” Isabelle disregarded it scornfully.

“I don’t want them to make it yours too, though.”
“It takes more to get to me,” Isabelle assured confidently.

“I know,” August confirmed and she kissed him, only to yawn immediately afterwards. Two rows of her sharp, snow-white teeth from this distance could be quite a terrifying view for someone unaccustomed with. August put a finger inside though and poked her on a tooth. “But sometimes a single rabbit is enough,” he smiled.

“Oh, he needs to be a very special rabbit.”

“I think you can find a couple here.”

“I noticed just one, I’m afraid,” she nibbled his ear.

“Will I get to meet him? Or have you eaten him too?” wondered the rabbit, as she continued to play with his ear.

“You have… and I just might tonight,” she bit his ear a little harder.

“And what could he do to avoid the lingering threat of demise?”

“A kiss could do it,” Isabelle decided and then, August kissed her neck, nuzzling her under the chin just the way she loved it.

“Are you sated now?” He asked playfully and she licked her lips slowly.

“Not quite,” she decided and kissed him back. “Now I am,” Isabelle smiled, gazing her boyfriend in the eyes. August was… something she never looked for and yet, something she had longed for many, many years. He was the quiet in her storm, her save heaven. When she was down or in doubt, he’d always be there. And when he had tough days, she’d stand for him just as loyally, even if it meant challenging the world and everyone in it. His calm and her fury, his reason and her passion… they could feel most unfitting at the times. But this relationship wasn’t about matching one another. It was about compelling each other, lifting each other up where they were lacking. And as for that, Isabelle had nothing to fear for.

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4.29 pm, Friday, March 17, 2023

“Bye, everyone!” Kaylee waved at the other Technical Officers, as she passed by them and headed toward the door. She winked at August who had just returned from his leave with Isabelle. She was more than curious about it, but she didn’t manage to get to discuss it with him as Wilde and Hopps had just dragged her into another peculiar case including a bold hacking into local bank’s system. She left the TO’s office and found Max, just leaving his box. She hopped up to him to give him a kiss on the cheek and they left the station hand in hand.

“How’s the Davon case?” She asked.

“I think we have him. We’re just for the reports from the lab and he’s ours. He’s under surveillance too, so he’s not slipping away,” Max assured firmly.
“And how was Isabelle’s holiday?” She wondered.

“Alright,” shrugged her husband helplessly. “You know she’s not too talkative… and I, for a change, have no conscience to press for the gossips mercilessly,” he remarked.

“Knowledge is power, dear husband,” riposted Kaylee half-jokingly.

“And you know a lot,” Max concluded, as they stood before her car. “Now, for the kids,” he opened the door for Kaylee and she jumped in. She did drive a lot, but she felt a lot more confident when Max was behind the wheel.

“There we go,” she agreed, checking the time. Exactly half past four. If they slip through the usual traffic jams, they should be at the school in ten minutes, pick the kids up and make it home around five, which still gave them plenty of time for their plans for today. Combining the working schedule with looking after the kids was really tough, but they managed it. Couple days a week kids would stay at school for additional courses; soccer for Ryan, robotics courses for Thane and art classes for Mia and Lily; they’d stay till around five, just so that Max and Kaylee would manage in time to pick them up. Sometimes, Aveline would pick up the four, as she had more flexible working hours and sometimes, someone had to take a parental leave and Bogo’s open-minded attitude was most helpful. Today, it was Monday; Reynolds time. They drove by the school and saw all the four kids running toward them; they sat down in the back seats and headed for the Trip Street.

“How was the school, kids?” Kaylee turned around at them.

“Oh, the usual,” Ryan shrugged. “I won all the three practice matches though,” he said casually, like it was no big thing.

“Good job! You had a strong team, didn’t you?”

“We switched teams each time,” denied young wolf. “The coach says I should consider a sports career… but I want to be a cop like mom and dad,” he grinned and his forest parents smiled proudly.

“All the doors stand open for you, Ryan. Choose whatever will make you happy,” Kaylee advised him and turned to Mia and Lily. “And you, girls?”

“We still need to finish our drawings,” Aveline’s Lily explained and Mia confirmed with a confident nod.

“Mrs. White likes my sketches a lot,” she confirmed. These two girls really stuck together and Kaylee liked it a lot. While her bunny still was rather shy, she was gaining some confidence with that quicksilver-like vixen by her side. What worried her, though, was that Thane remained awfully quiet.

“And how was your day, bun?” Asked Max carefully. Even though he was driving, the back mirror was pointed and the kids and he followed the conversation very carefully. Were Kaylee not aware of his driving skills and smooth reflexes, she’d admonish him like she used to.

“Fine,” shrugged Thane and Max sent his wife a worried sight.

“What happened, bun?” She asked.

“Nothing.”
“Thane kicked Milo’s ass…” Ryan tried to brag.

“Shut it,” hissed Thane angrily, but then, he caught his aunt’s concerned sight.

“What happened, Thane?” She asked carefully. The youngster knew that his aunt was some kindest and gentlest creature, but when she asked you with that tone, you had to answer genuinely.

“Milo was picking up at me. He tried to push me over, so I pushed him away too. He was going to punch me, so I knocked him over like uncle has shown us. The teacher saw the commotion, but he didn’t send us to the principal,” Thane explained, quite upset at the memory.

“You defended yourself. You had every right to do so,” Max assured encouragingly. “And I’m impressed too! To knock a boar smoothly like that! He must have been shocked!” He noticed and Thane giggled.

“He didn’t know what hit him,” he assured proudly.

“Do you know why he was picking on you?” Kaylee asked and saw her foster nephew’s ears drop. She didn’t like the question, but they had to get to the bottom of it. It wasn’t the first time.

“Umm… he called me a sissy, because I like playing with Mia and Lily at breaks. They think a boy shouldn’t be playing with girls,” he explained. Kaylee sighed and shook her head with disapproval.

“Classic bully. Tell you what, Thane. Boys this age often are…”

“Dull?” Suggested Max.

“…simple-minded. They like to attack mammals that are different than them. Mammals that have different hobbies or passions, that dress different, that are smarter than them or they simply find them easy to pick on. But you should never let these bullies get to you. You know why? Because they’re just a bunch of cowards; they attack the ones they consider weaker and they always do it in groups. They’ll say a lot of mean things and some of them might seem accurate… but even they don’t see them in you. They just want to hurt you for the fun of doing so,” Kaylee explained to him.

“And remember that you certainly are not a sissy,” Max encouraged him. “You showed that boar that he should not mess with you. And you did stand up for Ryan and girls when they needed you,” the wolf assured with most inspiring confidence.

“So if anyone ever calls you names, don’t forget to tell us or Ryan or girls. We know better that these awful bullies and we know that you’re a smart and brave young man,” Kaylee concluded.

“Yeah!” Ryan exclaimed and the girls nodded, bringing out a smile out of Thane.

“I will. Thanks,” the young rabbit said and then, he hesitated. “Aunts… were you bullied too?” He wondered. Ryan snorted.

“Mom? Come on, who would pick on her?!?” He protested.

“I was,” Kaylee replied shortly and there fell dead silence in the car.
“How did you get through it?” Thane inquired. His foster aunt hesitated, but not for too long.

“I was alone. I couldn’t count on my family or friends so… I just cried and kept hiding away. It doesn’t work,” the bunny managed to laugh. “So don’t try to handle it like I have. Hiding away does awful things to you.”

“And what happened to the bullies?” The young rabbit asked.

“Nothing, really. They finished their schools, went their own ways,” shrugged Kaylee.

“That’s unfair,” muttered Mia.

“Life’s not always fair,” Max reminded them. Someone could claim it sounded funny from mouth of a son of multi-millionaire, but Kaylee knew enough of his history to know that he had suffered just as much as her. “We try to make it so, but life isn’t always fair. It’s a very important lesson, so keep it in your minds, kids,” he advised them.

“Awful thing, these bullies,” muttered Lily.

“Yeah,” agreed Mia.

“Mhm. Banda zjebów, every single one of them,” agreed Ryan and then, he felt admonishing sight of his foster mother at him. The car fell silent yet again.

“You shouldn’t be using the words, if you don’t know what they mean,” Kaylee lectured him.

“I know what it means!” Ryan protested, missing the point entirely.

“Oh, is that so? And who told you?” His foster mother wondered.

“Zoogle! It struggled a bit, but it’s something like a bunch of fu…”

“I know what it means, don’t say it!” Kaylee cut him in the middle and sighed. “And where did you hear it? In the school?”

“From you? When the TV crew accidentally cut us off from electricity for a week and we had to do homework by candlelight,” Ryan explained and then, Max laughed amusingly. His wife electrified him with sight and she was going to have him choke on this laughter in time, but it was worth it now.

“Kids, like you know, sometimes when your mother gets really angry, she curses a lot, often in her family’s language,” Max explained her.

“The Old World?” Lily asked excitedly.

“Indeed,” He confirmed.

“It’s an awful habit of mine and I’m trying to limit it as much as I can,” Kaylee continued. Her husband’s eyes clearly reflected his desire something in the lines ‘at least in front of you’, but he had enough reason to keep it for himself. “So please, do not use such nasty words in school, house or anywhere else, even if you happen to hear them from me,” Mrs. Reynolds pleaded.

“Or me,” Max added.
“You don’t curse, honey,” Kaylee disregarded it.

“That much,” muttered Ryan and he regretted it immediately under pressure of cold sights of his both parents. And then, they laughed cheerfully.

“Ależ panie kapitanie, celnie wymierzona kurwa nadaje oficerowi chyżości ruchów i bystrości umysłu,” muttered Kaylee cheerfully.

“What was that, aunt?” Mia asked.

“Oh, an… awful proverb of sort. I’ll tell you when you’re big,” she smiled apologizing.

The kids accepted it, if not too content. It was about that time that Max parked his car at the driveway of their house.

“End of the trip, family!” Max Reynolds exclaimed joyfully and the kids sprang our of the car immediately. The wolf turned at his wife. “So, am I big enough to know the secret?” He asked and she giggled.

“But captain, sir, well-aimed ‘cunt’ gifts the officer with swiftness of movements and brightness of mind,” explained Kaylee, causing his laughter.

“Not for children indeed,” he agreed. “Alright, let’s go. We still have plenty to do,” he reminded her and they left the car. Lily had already gone to her house just a hundred feet away, but she’d be soon back with her mother, so they needed to hurry. They opened the door for the kids, made sure that they’d place their bags in reasonable places and change from school clothes into more casual, more comfortable ones, leaving the former neatly folded and they proceeded to making a dinner for their family and their guests. The kids wanted to help a lot and while some things took them longer than it would on their own, they didn’t get discouraged nonetheless; the learning is an important part of the progress, after all.

They were going to make it for the dinner at the designed 7 pm, but their first guests, Nick and Judy, arrived a bit earlier just like one could expect. They helped the Reynolds family with finishing the dinner and just then, did arrive the remaining guests: Aveline Hawkes along with little Lily and August and Isabelle. The festive dinner was loud as ever with the four youngsters running around and seven adults sitting by the table, discussing passionately.

“So, the Old World it is?” Nick asked hesitantly. “I mean, two weeks aren’t much time…”

“But just enough for a trip to Adria Peninsula, isn’t it Kaylee?” Aveline remarked.

“Don’t ask me! My family might be from there, but I’ve never been to there!” The bunny protested.

“You do know some of the language,” Judy noticed.

“ Mostly curses,” corrected her Max and he laughed at his wife’s expression.

“Oh, someone’s sleeping on the couch tonight,” she muttered.

“You know he can toss you there from the bedroom?” Isabelle joked.

“I believe we’re digressing?” August joined the conversation shyly.

“We are, indeed!” Aveline agreed. “So, a two week trip to Adria Penninsula! Time: the
middle of August! It should be warm and sunny! We can…”

“Your second-favorite month, Carrots,” Nick whispered to his girlfriend and she giggled, elbowing him at the same time.

“… travel by three cars, just enough for eleven mammals and their luggage. We’d stop at five cities, spend two days at each, have two additional days for slacking off… Hot beaches, beautiful sights, azure sea, warm water and delightful ice cream! What do you say?” Aveline asked.

“I hate to be the one to say it, but… how much?” August asked carefully.

“Let’s say Reynolds Industries sponsors all the organization costs?” Max suggested.

“Max, it’s really nice, but…” Judy tried to protest.

“I’m not taking a no for the answer!” Refused the wolf confidently.

“No, Max, really…” Nick tried to protest too.

“We really aren’t taking a no for an answer, Nick,” Kaylee refused firmly.

“You’re not going to pay for our trip from your own wallet…” Hopps argued.

“Not ours. Reynolds Industries,” Max argued. “My sister sold the mansion, but then it turned out that I’m a formally still an owner to a part of it, so…”

“You got some money,” concluded Nick

“A lot of money,” corrected him Max. “Most went to the Reynolds Reparation Fund or rather, Reynolds Foundation, to sponsor education for children from orphanages. Some we left at the bank account, waiting for the kids to grow up, so they have an easier start in the future. And the small chunk of it, will sponsor the trip. It’s a way to say thank you to you, everyone,” explained the wolf.

“Because you’re all amazing and you’ve been there for us in need. You never let us down,” concluded Kaylee.

“Don’t worry, I’ll always look over your husband, Kaylee,” promised Isabelle with a studied, most luscious smile and everyone at the table laughed aloud. August and Isa clanked their wine glasses and raised them along with others to take a sip.

“So, we’ve agreed on the funding on the project? Perfect,” Aveline nodded with satisfaction. “Now, onto the…”

“Wait, is your sister moving out?” Isabelle asked Max, confused, but he waved it off.

“No, just changing the mansion to a one with less grim memories,” he explained.

“Oh.”

“Anyways…” The vixen focused their attention patiently yet again. “We need to take holidays at work early. I mean, it won’t be a problem to me, but you guys have quite flexible hours, from what I know,” Aveline noticed.

“Chief should give it to us,” Judy assured confidently.
“If only to get rid of us for a moment,” Nick added.

“And we could book a flight early too,” August suggested. “And rent the cars there.”

“We’ll handle it, right, Lefty?” Isabelle offered and he nodded.

“We can handle it,” the rabbit agreed.

“Perfect!” Aveline clapped joyously and she proceeded to the other details of the trip. While it was Max and Kaylee’s idea, the bank vice-director quickly took the initiative and presented the issue clearly, logically and like not a big deal, as if she wasn’t squeaking with excitement just at a thought of two week adventure in the Old World.

The subject even as exciting as this couldn’t keep the bunch occupied for the entire evening, though and so, the discussion quickly trailed off from the trip, switching between the subjects smoothly. Around ten pm Kaylee went to put her children down to sleep and Aveline excused herself, having to look after her little Lily. The vixen returned rather soon and the adults partied till two in the morning when they’ve ran out of their humble wine resources and weariness started catching up with them. The guests helped Reynolds clean up, Nick with Judy and August with Isabelle ordered taxis while Aveline walked her hundred feet to home. Suddenly, Reynolds remained on their own in the empty living room, with guests gone and the children sleeping in their beds. Kaylee sighed and laid down on the couch, but Max watched her carefully.

“You’re aware we have a bed, though?” He reminded her.

“But I’d have to walk upstairs… and I hate stairs…” Kaylee complained and then, hiccupped drunkenly.

“Oh ho, someone had too much wine!” Max chuckled.

“I call it a perfect amount. I’m positively buzzed, but kept my dignity,” protested the bunny and then, she saw that her husband was preparing to make a jump. “Oh no, you don’t!” She tried to protest but then, he sprung in the air and fell on the coach right next to her, casting the small rabbit in the air and nearly on the floor, were he not to hold her just in time. They laughed, amusement built up by wine flowing through their veins.

“Remember the first time we met?” Max recalled, gazing at her small head.

“I try not to.”

“Come on, it wasn’t so bad! And you and Judy were so cute together, making friends and everything!” Protested Max, surprised with her reaction.

“Yes, I was having a nice chit-chat with a new friend when you walked over. I thought that I’m going to make a new friend, but then you actually spoke up,” Kaylee explained and the wolf giggled.

“I was a jerk, wasn’t I?”

“I had to waste my coffee on you.”

“You spilt it all over me on purpose, let me remind you,” Max noticed and she giggled.

“But you didn’t seem like it turned you down at all. You did invite me to the opera just a few days later, after all,” the bunny recalled dreamily and she wondered on something.
“You were trying really hard to discourage me.”

“I wasn’t…” Kaylee hesitated. “You were so… insistent in befriending me that I thought at first that you’re just trying to mock me. I couldn’t believe that someone like you would be interested in someone like me.”

“You know that I hate when you talk like this,” Max reminded her.

“I don’t think like that anymore… Not too often, at least,” Kaylee nuzzled his chin lovingly. “I still think often of how lucky I was that we met,” she bit her lip hesitantly. “It’s not even about this wonderful, sweet house or the wonderful wedding, but… with you, I learnt to love myself too.”

“You can’t love others, if you don’t love yourself,” Max said sententiously.

“You can still give yourself fully away to others. It’s even easier if you hate yourself, but…” She hesitated. “It’s through you, Judy, Nick and all the others that I learnt to believe in myself. It’s through you, Max, that I learnt to… love myself too,” she confessed.

“And you helped me find my purpose,” Max thanked her with a kiss on her cheek. “When I joined ZPD, I was lost and confused. I didn’t know what I really wanted, maybe except for having some fun and cheap excitement. With Autumn gone, even more so…”

“Do you miss her?” Kaylee wondered. They didn’t talk too much of Max’s tragically deceased first love.

“I… it’s a tough question, actually,” Max chuckled awkwardly. “I didn’t really know her beyond that one party when we kissed once and I made a promise that I’d follow her to ZPD and… I don’t regret it, but Autumn was just a dream that I was chasing and I… I can’t miss something I’ve never had, can I? I hate it that she was killed in action, but I don’t miss her. In a way, I’m thankful to her, considering that it’s because of her that I had a chance to meet you and… the longer I speak the weirder it comes off, doesn’t it?” The wolf stopped suddenly.

“Maybe… But I like that you remember her. She was an important part of your life at the time, even if only as a dream that you were chasing, but… it’s nice that with all the things that have happened, you still remember her,” Kaylee confessed.

“Just like you remember Shay?” Guessed Max.

“Mhm.”

“I mean, I kissed Autumn, but…” The wolf paused as Kaylee stared at him with a sight he knew rather well.

“Go on, rub it in. If you want to sleep on the couch, that is,” she suggested almost threateningly and then, the two of them laughed aloud. Kaylee pressed her cheek against his chin passionately. “My Max, tactful as always.”

“Like you said, I am the earth, you’re the wind,” he said proudly what he tried to deny at first and then, Kaylee hiccupped loudly. “A drunk wind, I suppose.”

“I’m not drunk, I’m just inebra… inbrie…” Kaylee twisted her tongue, trying to say it.

“Inebriated?” Guessed Max.
“Yes, thank you,” the bunny nodded and then she giggled. Her husband watched her carefully, slightly confused. “You don’t remember? Come on, it was… oh, right.”

“What?” The wolf asked.

“We’ve had this conversation before.”

“When?”

“When we were dismantling Donovan’s group and you went to bar with Nick. You parted, but you partied still…” She giggled at the phrase and hiccupped yet again. “And when you called me drunkenly asking to pick you up, it was exactly what you said.”

“Oh. In my defense, I do not remember it.”

“You don’t remember a lot of things that happened that night,” Kaylee reminded him.

“You mean… Oh. Oh, that,” he blushed embarrassed.

“When we were in front of your mansion and you kissed me for the first time and you were drunk like a lord,” she confirmed with a nod. Max couldn’t read her expression.

“That was… some crazy time, wasn’t it?” Max noticed.

“It was. You kissed me, said goodbye and walked back to the mansion, leaving me standing in the snow, completely dumbfounded. It took me like five minutes just to comprehend what had just happened. And then, you didn’t remember a thing. If you had said it to my face, I’d have choked you there and then,” Kaylee confessed.

“And I wouldn’t be even mad,” Max kissed her on cheek. “It was a crazy time… but if I were to choose again, I would not change a thing. I mean, except for couple missteps like, you know, that restaurant date or Dungeon…”

“No,” Kaylee refused suddenly. “They were all precious, even the Dungeon. Especially the Dungeon,” she insisted, but Max stared at her with disbelief. The scar on her left arm that he had left her back at the time itched suddenly.

“How is it precious?” He doubted.

“It was terrifying and hurtful and left us both scarred, but… it pulled us together stronger than anything else possibly could,” Kaylee argued. Her husband noticed that she was trying to scratch her arm, so he caressed it soothingly.

“You think we wouldn’t be together if not for the Dungeon?” Max wondered.

“Maybe. Maybe if life didn’t drive us both to the edge, I’d never try to make a first step and you’d never really notice me?” The bunny noticed. “I know it sounds like a coping mechanism, but we tend to think that bad experiences carry nothing good in them. We shake them off and try to not look back. But when we do, it turns out they often teach us a lot more than many good things could have,” Kaylee explained.

“Such as?”

“When I woke up and I saw you and how you despised yourself for everything that happened… I realized that the only chance to be closer with you, is to fight for you. Not just step
back and wait like I always had; you’d just walk away shamefully, if I let you. So for the first time in my life, I actually fought for someone,” the bunny explained.

“And I learnt that I loved you. I realized you were the one person I couldn’t afford to lose… I might have just lost you…” he confessed, enjoying her warm presence by his side. Max always thought that love would be constant butterflies in his stomach accompanied by everlasting euphoria pushing you further and further, like in the movies. Now he knew it wasn’t the case. Love is… a peace of mind found in the one that completes you. It’s this feeling of security, when you’re laying by her side. It’s a promise that when things turn bad, you can come back to her, hug her and cry without a shame, letting her gently take and cast away the burdens crashing you. It’s a declaration that you’ll move an earth and sky just for her, when she needs it. And even if five years ago he’d say it sounds awfully boring, now he wouldn’t exchange it for anything. And then, Kaylee chuckled.

“What?"

“I like it when you’re thinking hard like this. You always make such a funny face,” she smirked. “And I’d love to know what you’re thinking about.”

“Oh, I just…” Max chuckled with embarrassment. “I just thought that we’ve went a long way to get here, haven’t we? I mean, it’s crazy when you think who we were just six years ago. And… it’s just a beginning.”

“Oh, you don’t think that the rest of our lives will be just a mundane routine?” Kaylee teased him.

“With you and the three kids upstairs? Life is going to be a lot of things, but mundane is not one of them,” Max assured. “And even after our little birds leave the parental nest, we have a midlife crisis ahead and second youth called the retirement. Life is but an adventure, Kaylee,” Max assured confidently. “Maybe not always is it car chases and explosions like in your games or books, but it’s a wonderful adventure nonetheless.”

“That’s… a pretty smart answer to what I meant to be simply a me caviling,” the bunny noticed, quite impressed. “So, we’re not just going to stare in the ceiling and say ‘And they lived happily ever after’, are we?”

“It’s such a boring phrase, isn’t it? It sounds like the rest of our life is not even worth mentioning,” Max remarked. “Like we died before our thirties but weren’t buried till we were eighty,” he said and Kaylee shivered.

“Oh, that gave me creeps,” she muttered and then, she paused. “Dear Lord, we still have fifty years ahead of ourselves?” Kaylee realized suddenly.

“Is the concept so terrifying?” Max smirked.

“No, quite oppositely,” she assured, kissing her husband on his cheek. “So, what are we going to say, if not ‘And they lived happily ever after’? There aren’t too many cliché sayings like this left, you know,” the bunny worried, trying not to smile.

“How about… See you in the next season?”

“Season? That’s kinda… Oh, that’s clever! We’ll have the equinox in a few days!” Kaylee realized. “Well, then… to the next season!” She exclaimed enthusiastically and then, hiccupped drunkenly. Max couldn’t help, but laugh.
“To the next season indeed, my drunk little bunny,” he nuzzled her caringly.

“But before this one ends, you still need to do something, darling,” Kaylee reminded him.

“Hmm?”

“Carry me to the bed, please,” she suggested.

“Oh, but of course,” Max assured cordially. He stood from the bed and took her in his arms gently. The wolf climbed the stairs slowly with his love pressed against his chest. They passed by their children’s rooms and stepped into their bedroom. Max stopped, watching the full moon outside shining bright. Kaylee opened her eyes and followed his sight with a smile.

“It’s going to be a good season,” she muttered dreamily. Max nodded confidently. It was going to be a wonderful season. And then another and another and another… There was one wonderful life ahead of them and it was just starting.

10.22 pm, Saturday, May 14, 2023

Mrs. Wilde stopped at the mirror in the hallway of her new flat and judged her new dress carefully. She turned around to watch herself from the other side and bit her lip, dissatisfied.

“This dress really suits you, Mrs.,” Judy Hopps assured from the kitchen with a dirty plate in her paw. The vixen hesitated.

“Do you think so? I’m not quite sure, to tell the truth,” she sighed and returned to the kitchen. The vixen grabbed a piece of cloth and proceeded to drying the plates the bunny had already washed. “I’m not quite sure. It’s so… modern,” she chuckled at the word. “This is the day I can officially say I am old,” she joked.

“I guess it’s just too much of a change at once,” Judy noticed. “A new flat, new clothes, plenty of new neighbors… I wouldn’t be comfortable with everything shifting suddenly like this either.”

“I suppose. I really liked the old curtains,” the vixen giggled. “And everything feels so empty since my old block collapsed.”

“We saved your family photo album and you and Nick put a lot of effort into restoring the soul this flat used to have, so I suppose it’s… quite full, by now? Half full, I guess?”

“Or is it half-empty?”

“That depends on the mindset, I’m afraid,” Judy remarked.

“Oh, I know. I’m not complaining, I’m just… nostalgic. It’s usual at my age, you know,”
the vixen excused herself.

“You certainly aren’t usual for your age, Mrs.,” the bunny reminded her.

“Nick says that a lot too,” the vixen noticed and then, they heard a loud snore from the living room. “Speaking of whom… Oh dear, how do you even bear it?” She wondered.

“He’s not that loud usually,” Judy glanced at her boyfriend sleeping in a sofa and then, he snorted even louder, as if trying to undermine her statement. “Sometimes I think he’s doing it on purpose,” Judy muttered.

“I wouldn’t be too surprised,” Mrs. Wilde dried another plate and put a pile of them back into a drawer. “He’s always been my little trickster,” she said and Judy giggled. She could already imagine Nick’s face if he’d hear that.

“He’s changed a lot from the first time we met,” Judy noticed.

“Oh, he didn’t really. Nick has always been this sarcastic, sassy fox he was as a kid. He just… let the better side of his surface finally. With your help, obviously,” added the vixen thankfully.

“I… I guess I can’t imagine not-sassy Nick,” the bunny admitted.

“Exactly,” the vixen sighed with nostalgia and then, she turned at Judy, her emerald green eyes piercing the bunny inquisitively. “And you?”

“I’m not that sassy.”

“But you’re learning… and you know what I meant,” Mrs. Sylvia Wilde noticed amusingly and Judy paused washing the dishes, as she wondered.

“I… learnt a lot. I understood that the real world is messy and that we all make mistakes. I understood that everyone deserves a second chance. I saw how merciless media and the crowd can be in pursuit of ‘truth’ that turns out to be a cheap sensation in the end. I learnt how corrupted our ‘idols’ can be… so you could call me disillusioned…” Judy hesitated for a short moment enough to gather her thoughts. “But I also saw selfless millionaires, philanthropist gangsters and honest politicians. I met people that devoted their lives to making this city a wonderful place. I saw people going to the lengths unimaginable for the sake of the ones they loved… and so have I on many occasions, if I may add humbly. And all in all… I know mammals can be terrible at the times. They can be cruel, unforgiving and disgustingly selfish. But… they can be just wonderful as that, too. And while I’m not deluded anymore… I still believe in the people,” Judy fell silent for a moment and she looked out the window, following the few shades passing the nightly streets of the Happytown. “We are wonderful creatures. We can be the worst at the times, but… we can be the best, if we just try hard enough,” she concluded firmly and then, she realized that Mrs. Wilde was watching her with actual admiration, even if her eyes seemed to spark with amusement.

“These are very bold words for a police officer,” Mrs. Wilde noticed.

“Maybe, but after all these years, I’m still saying them with full confidence,” Judy declared and then, Nick snored loudly, as if in need of accenting his presence in such a serious dispute. Both girls watched him sleeping on the sofa.

“He’s doing it on purpose,” muttered Mrs. Wilde.

“Totally.”
“Toss something at him,” suggested the vixen and glanced at a plate in Judy’s paw. “Something soft, perhaps?” She suggested and Judy laughed erratically and Nick moved in his seat.

“You don’t think I would…”

“I mean, if he didn’t duck from it we’d at least have a certainty that he is sleeping, but this plate really grew on me in last few months,” the vixen explained.

“Now, that’s heartless,” Judy noticed amusingly. “So… What about you, Mrs.? It’s been some very interesting years for you too,” she wondered. Considering that Nick did take after his mother his reluctance in sharing his feelings, she expected some evasive or very short answer, but the vixen surprised her this time.

“There weren’t too many earth-shaking, no pun intended, events to me personally, but I saw a lot through Nick and you,” Mrs. Wilde explained. “Nick’s ceremony when you gave him his badge was the first time in a really long time when I cried. And whole case with Spencer Young had me… reconsider a lot of things. It’s been a wild… no pun intended yet again, time, these last few years,” concluded Mrs. Wilde. She dried the last plate that Judy handed her over and put it back at its spot in the drawer. The vixen covered her mouth as she yawned.

“We probably should be concluding the party, then?” Judy noticed regretfully.

“We still do have some wine left and you certainly hate leaving unfinished cases open,” noticed Mrs. Wilde. Judy couldn’t really argue with this sort of logic, so they returned to the living room. Judy sat in the sofa right next to sleeping Nick and Mrs. Wilde seated herself in the sofa. They discussed for some time more, but they didn’t even finish their glasses before the bunny drowsed away, lying on her boyfriend’s chest. Mrs. Wilde covered them both with a warm duvet and walked out to the balcony. She watched the Happytown, as lousy as usual, with a soft smile.

“Not sleeping yet, Mrs.?” Asked the voice from the side; against a railing of the balcony just next to her, was leaning her neighbor, Lionel O’Dyna. He tossed a finished cigarette away and took out a pack, but then he hesitated and put it back.

“Lionel. I thought you’d be at work,” noticed the vixen.

“I’m having a day off. It’s our anniversary,” the fox explained, playing with his ring.

“I understand,” Sylvia nodded respectfully, as she turned her sight away. A not so old widow and a not so young widower. What a weird pair of neighbors they were, weren’t they?

“Were you listening?” She wondered.

“These still are rather thin walls,” the fox admitted.

“So what do you think? Last seven years… has the city changed to you?” She wondered.

“It’s the same… but different,” he decided. “Duchess smiles a lot more these days. The streets feel like before… but not quite. Things are headed in a good direction,” concluded the fox.

“They’re headed in a good direction indeed,” nodded the vixen and watched Lionel light another cigarette. “They’re going to be your death, you know?” She warned him half-jokingly. She had been teasing him like this for years, always with this same result.

“I’d be actually surprised if they were the one…” he wanted to say as always, but then he
hesitated and took it out of his snout. “Or maybe, considering the times…” He extinguished it against the railing and dropped on the empty pavement below them.

“You’d better pick it up in the morning,” suggested Mrs. Wilde, but her neighbor only laughed, as he shook his head.

“One thing at a time,” he decided. The vixen rolled her eyes but then, she smiled.

“Sounds good enough.”

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8.43 am, Saturday, May 21, 2023

Judy Hopps entered Nick Wilde’s life with a momentum of a small thunderstorm. Or an earthquake. Or another natural disaster that leaves no stone unturned. When the fox looked back at their first meeting, he always thought she had turned his life upside down back then. Now that he thought of the last six months, he understood that his life had been tilted so far. It was only when she moved into his house that it was turned all over. Or rather, he probably should say that his life had been upside down for whole this time before he met her; at their first meeting she pushed it in the right direction and now, it finally fell in the niche it should have been in for all this time.

Obviously, this wasn’t an easy transition and even their shared excitement and rekindled passion sometimes weren’t just enough to push two such different mammals through their new stage of life with no frictions or fights, but these dark clouds never hung long over their heads. They had no time to be angry at each other or fight. Not when there was so much to do, so much to see, feel and experience. So much to catch up.

Catch up… That would be the right word. They could have been best friends and partners in not-crime for years now and yet, with the first kiss they discovered all the things they were missing on, being too afraid to take another step. And what was there to say, the list was long. Surprisingly long.

“What’s with the smile?” Judy asked Nick, as she tilted her head like she always did, when something intrigued her. The fox watched her carefully, leaving the shower with a towel in her paw, dressed in a long, black shirt that was reaching down to her knees, with a “BORN TO BE WILD” painted all over it originally and an “E” at the end of the last word that Nick added to it personally. It used to be Nick’s before Judy acquired it. He liked it even more on her, actually, he concluded watching that marvelous bunny stop.

“Oh, it’s my usual expression,” he assured, trying not to burn their breakfast while paying it minimal attention.

“Is it? Because I don’t remember wagging the tail included in the usual pack,” she giggled and stepped forward.

“Oh, it’s my tails usual morning practice. You know, it needs to stretch up in the morning, with the long, tough day ahead,” he made up an explanation easily, not even trying to stop
the wagging.

“And the ear to ear smile is just as usual, I suppose?”

“And the smile is my usual, unconstrained socially reaction to the most beautiful rabbit just ten feet away… OK, just a feet away… from me,” Nick assured, watching Judy who had reduced the distance between them gracefully in a blink of an eye. He smelled something was about to burn and stirred the vegetables not turning his sight away. “And you’re grinning too, Carrots.”

“I suppose it’s only natural,” she stood on her toes and kissed him.

“I always liked the natural,” Nick assured, his tail still wagging like a car wiper.

“I’ve noticed,” she giggled. “I’ll change and go down for the breakfast.”

“It’s ready,” Nick assured without even blinking. His nose seemed to claim so, after all.

“OK, then,” Judy couldn’t have missed his real intention of staying in the said T-shirt, carrying the most pleasant scent of freshly washed fur, but she said not a word. She opened the cupboard and took out two bowls, and put them on the tabletop, letting Nick divide the food in two obviously unequal portions. Judy sat on the table top and he leaned right next to her, they grabbed their bowls and started eating. They liked to eat their breakfast in the kitchen like this, especially when they weren’t hurrying anywhere.

“So, do we have any plans today?” Judy wondered between the bites.

“Mom invited us for a dinner,” Nick reminded her. “We had to cancel the Thursday and she really likes when we visit her regularly.”

“We can’t let her down, can we?” Judy noticed enthusiastically. “I really like her new place, you know. I’m glad she’s satisfied with it too.

“She kinda misses the falling apart staircase and broken intercom, but hey, what can you do?” Joked Nick.

“Of all the things, you had to mention the falling apart staircase? You know, we almost got buried there,” Hopps reminded him.

“These were her exact words, so… no pun intended?”

“How is it that the first time you forgot to say it, I actually believe you?”

“You didn’t believe me all these times, Carrots? Touché…” Nick placed his paw on his heart, acting wounded with such remark. She’d seen it a thousand times and it never ceased to surprise her how much heart he put in each single of these theatrics. Judy giggled at his performance.

“Alright, what is it?”

“What?”

“You’re up to something.”

“I’m always up to something,” Nick assured with utter confidence. “You know, it’s a fox thing.”
“And I like knowing what you’re up to. It’s a bunny thing,” Hopps replied.

“And you always know… in time.”

“Which you choose,” Judy noticed.

“Which will find us both best,” corrected her the fox with a smirk. Judy nuzzled his neck.

“I know,” she admitted. The bunny finished her bowl and put it in the sink just behind his back and she hopped off the tabletop gently.

“And do we have any plans for before the evening?” Nick wondered watching her carefully.

“Not me, really. We’re not expecting any guests either, are we?”

“No. How about I take you somewhere, then?” The fox suggested.

“Where to?” Her ears perked up.

“Let that be a surprise,” he suggested; her ears remained high and the bunny nodded with a smile.

“Sure. Let me dress up, then,” she suggested.

“You can keep the T-shirt,” pleased the fox. She giggled and kissed him gently.

“I will.” And then, she was gone upstairs. The fox took the last bite of his breakfast and washed the bowls unhurriedly. When Judy returned, dressed in jeans and this same shirt that looked more like a dress on her, the fox smiled and took her by hand.

“Let’s go, then!”

“Now?” Judy asked, confused, but he just nodded. The bunny noticed that his tail was wagging, but didn’t give it much of a thought. The fox took her to the car, opening the door for her and they drove off to the Rainforest District. Nick took out an umbrella and held it above the two of them as the climbed the path leading them to the unknown. And they climbed to a wooden platform with a bamboo railing and a couple of lanterns standing at its sides that Judy recognized immediately; it was a sky train station where the two of them were chased to by Manchas, the savage jaguar, during their first case of the Nighthowlers. Judy watched Nick carefully.

“It’s… Why…” She stuttered.

“It’s a beautiful place, isn’t it?” Smiled the fox.

“I mean… I never got the time to appreciate it,” Judy hesitated. “It certainly as its atmosphere, though,” she admitted after a short pause. She watched the railing she and Nick once fell through. It was fixed obviously after almost six years, even if for some reason she’d expect some visible damage to remain. She felt kind of weird, realizing how it all felt like it had happened just yesterday.

“We certainly didn’t on the first time,” Nick agreed. He took the umbrella down and folded it and Judy realized it had stopped raining. The leaves continued to rustle pushed by the winds and here and there could be still heard the drops of water falling at asphalt and wooden platforms.
“It was quite nervous here with Chief Bogo,” Judy managed to smile. “So… why did you want to bring me here?”

“Oh, you know me. I sometimes get nostalgic and all,” Nick explained as he passed by a puddle of water, gently pulling her paw, so she’d follow her. “And I really like recalling our first case.”

“It was quite… colorful,” Judy admitted with a sting of nostalgia.

“And had you the most unlikely partner,” smirked the fox. “You were a lot of fun back then, you know?” He said, but he wasn’t smiling. “I’ve had a lot of fun with you, too. You were stubborn and everything even though whole this case seemed silly and you almost got us killed over the whole thing, but here…” the fox paused hesitantly. He looked down in Judy’s big, lavender eyes and only then, did he continued. “I guess here was the first time I actually cared about you or… anything else in quite a long time,” he confessed bringing out Judy’s smile.

“You talked Chief Bogo quite mercilessly. You have no idea how surprised I was when you actually spoke up,” Judy recalled.

“Oh, I could see it all over your face,” smirked Wilde amusingly, but his voice cracked subtly, as he tried to play his usually confident self. They walked the platform slowly, as the sky train was nearing the station. “How about we take a ride? You know, before your boyfriend gets all sappy and everything?” Nick suggested.

“If he wishes so,” Judy assured. The fox opened the door for her.

“Officer Hopps,” he invited her in and followed her as she jumped into the wagon. The door shut and the wagon carried them above the trees, trembling a bit. The two of them leaned against a handrail and drove in silence for a while.

“When I first met you… I mean, after you hustled me and you laughed in my face and left me I the wet concrete… I thought it was the worst day of my life. When it later turned out that I needed your help and you were doing just everything to make me fail, I was mad with you.”


“When the parking lot had been closed because we lost so much time at the DMV and you were throwing it my face. Indeed,” she agreed. “But when you stood for me… and when you told me why you were like this, something changed. And even though you just cracked a joke at my attempts to say something important, I still…”

“Oh, a penny!” Nick exclaimed and leaned down to the floor. Judy rolled her eyes and sighed with utmost annoyance.

“Nick, could you not do that when I’m trying to say something?” She pleaded. “I mean, I appreciate the good mood and everything, but…” And then she paused watching the fox kneeling on one knee right in front of her with a sly smirk on his face. Judy’s heart skipped a beat as his pose gave her no room for doubts. He was going to… and then, she mocked herself in her mind for falling for such a simple façade; he was just going to take her by surprise and have fun at the stupid face she must have been making right now, while he’d pick up the penny from the floor. He’d crack some dry joke that she’d groan with agony at.

Judy opened her mouth to scold him for the silliness of his behavior and then, she saw a small box in his paw. It was scarlet and had a small cushion in it with the most beautiful golden
ring Judy has ever seen. It had a small lavender gem enclosed within its gentle ornaments and it shined wonderfully bright. Nick smiled gently; it wasn’t one of those sly foxy smiles that he wore every other day; it was one of those gentle, honest smile that he’d offer her when they were only on their own, when their seclusion allowed the fox to open up to her fully.

“Judith Laverne Hopps. Carrots,” he said her name solemnly and her mouth closed slowly. She could bet she looked so stupid right now that he wasn’t laughing only due to his impossible self-control.

“Yes?” She mumbled, regaining some of her composure slowly.

“Will you…” He paused with his eyes wet, but then he took a deep breath and continued. “Will you marry me and have our fates intertwine for the remaining of our lives? Through the hardships and times of peace, through sorrow and happiness, will you…” He was asking her, his emerald eyes staring straight into her with deep passion of the one that truly loved her and never doubted these words, even if it took him so long to find courage and speak them aloud.

“Yes!” Judy jumped to him and hugged the fox, almost knocking him over as she kissed him on the cheek and then, again on the lips. His paws embraced her passionately as he put the ring on her finger gently. And then, they gazed into each other’s eyes and the fox smirked trickily.

“I was kinda in the middle of something there, Carrots. You can’t just jump in the middle of someone’s confession,” he noticed half-jokingly.

“I decided to go with the flow before you’d tell me you’re practicing for Aveline,” she replied amusingly and he seemed almost offended.

“I’d never joke at a matter like this!” He protested, if a bit theatrically. The truth is, he never would. He was well aware that Judy would kick him in guts so hard that he wouldn’t be able to stand still for a week. “Not ever,” Nick reassured her truthfully and she giggled.


“I love you too,” he replied, with a goofy smile spread all over his lips. Judy laughed wonderfully and kissed him once again, trying to think of anything more that she could need in her life. With this wonderful fox in the reach of her paws, with his tender eyes, loving arms embraced around her and kind words echoing in her ears, she really could not think of a single such thing.

“Dumb fox,” she whispered to his ear.

“Sly bunny,” he replied.
And after a short delay... it's over. I planned to conclude it by the middle of September, but here we are with my lazy ass slacking off :D

It's over. Give me a moment to let this moment to sink in, because I don't think I've acknowledged it fully yet... OK, let's do it :)

So, for the one last time... this is the end. At least for us. Nick and Judy, Max, Kaylee, August or Isabelle, Mrs. Wilde, Duchess, Miss Reynolds, Mrs. Wilde, Jack Savage, Gwyneth Skye... for them, this epilogue is merely a prologue for dozens of wonderful stories, each their own. We part with all these folks here, let their tales remain unwritten. I hope you like the point where I decided to conclude the story.

Before I start, I'd like to thank you all, friends; all of you that were here to read the tale I spent so much time to write. Without you, it wouldn't be possible, because whom is a writer with no audience? And you've been some wonderful folks and I've enjoyed every single of your comments, favorable or sceptical equally.

When I look back at the trilogy I've managed to write down in two years or so, I guess this book was different from the other two. I loved the "No Second Chances", this jump back into deep waters of Zootopia metropoly with a bit of more adult take on it and a rather unusual crime to be solved. "The Moonlight", this classic framing story with a twist and multiple parties struggling against each other, was a wild ride to me and Spencer Young remains my favorite antagonist of all that I've created so far. "The City of Change"... I was quite afraid. I didn't want to write it at first, quite sure that I'd fail miserably. It wasn't like the other two, driven by the crime stories delivering our characters opportunities to develop. Here, it were the characters that were driving the story and the plot. But I've done it anyways and thinking of it now, I'm quite proud of it.

It certainly had most emotional responses from the three, especially the moments involving Judy :D No wonder, considering that I've finally concluded the love story most have been waiting for for three books or so :D Isabelle was lots of fun too, whether these were her interactions with August or the ones with Kaylee and Max... And our favorite Reynolds got couple decent scenes too! The more I think of our main duo and the other four, the more I feel like writing another book :D

But it's time to let go. It's been fun and all, but one needs to know when to step back and now is mine time.

For the folks that hope for any more fanfictions, I'll have some sad news; this is my probasbly last appearance at sites like AO3. I'm moving on to writing my own book, which I've had in my head for like five years. If you ever find a fantasy book by Aleksander Nowak, you can think "hey I was reading his stories before he got famous" :D I mean, I hope I will get there one day. It'd be neat.

Anyways, not to prolong already lengthy goodbye, these two and half years were a wonderful time to me and I'd like to thank you all for it. These fanfics caught me in the time when lots of crazy things were going on in my life and not once did they help me carry on. I hope they will be an inspiration or simply something of a nice memory to you one day too.
Running out of characters now, so I should be going, I suppose :D

Thank you all once again, for being here. Like always, it means a lot to me.

Peace!

Aleksander Nowak

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