The sequel to *The Door*! Humans have started integrating into the greater mammalian society, but this doesn't come without its own set of issues.

Hello there dear readers! I am super excited to be bringing to you the next story in *The Door's* saga, *The Keyhole*! I certainly do hope that you enjoy this next installment! And I would also like to say, thank you, to everyone for their kind words and enthusiasm. I never expected to write any story that people would enjoy, at least not as much as this! Now, on to chapter 1 of *The Keyhole*, the sequel to *The Door*!
"And, of course, the lunches that are provided are varied based on the many different species," explained a lynx in a professional-looking pantsuit at a podium to the different parents and guardians present for the PTA meeting. In the auditorium, near the middle-most row of seats sat a little grey bunny, paying rapt attention, while sitting next to her was a red fox who was very clearly bored out of his mind.

"Why again are we here, Carrots?" Nick mumbled under his breath, knowing full well that the rabbit could hear him just fine.

"Because it's important for a child's parents to be more active in their education." Judy whispered back her reply.

"Okay, fine then, but why'd you have to drag me along? We're not married after all."

"Need I remind you about a certain video still getting views on FurTube? Besides, you care just as much about Eli as I do." Nick rolled his eyes, but still sat up straighter, a smile at the corners of his muzzle. He rested his paw on Judy's much smaller one, and she looked up, smiling brightly. The fox and bunny couple drew a few looks of surprise from some nearby mammals, but for the most part interspecies couples were not an uncommon sight. Granted, a fox and a rabbit was perhaps the least common, though. The principal continued on with a few more points and issues before it was time for the parents to begin meeting with the teachers. As Nick and Judy waited near the exit of the auditorium, they heard an excited voice.

"Hello, Judy! Is that you? Oh, indeed it is!" a small white mouse in a yellow sundress called out. Judy watched as she dragged a middle-aged male mouse, his fur grey, towards their location. Judy immediately recognized her as the mother of Eli's friend, Big Mike.

"Hi there, Isabella!" Judy said, nodding to the grey mouse whom she assumed was Isabella's husband, having yet to actually meet him before. Her suspicion was confirmed when he strode forward and offered his tiny paw to shake, which Judy complied with.

"Isabella's told me quite a bit about you, Mrs. Hopps. I'm Bryson Musculus." Judy introduced herself and Nick as well. "And I take it that you must be Mr. Hopps?" the mouse asked the fox. Nick took his outstretched paw.
This is going to be a long PTA meeting... he thought to himself.

Elsewhere...

"Alright now, everyone, just clear off. Eli may be bigger than the rest of us, but that still doesn't mean that he's a jungle gym to climb all over." Thomas, a teenaged bunny, said to all of the kits currently clambering over Eli as he sat stark still on the couch, afraid to move for fear of accidentally hurting someone. There was a collective groan of disappointment as all of the young rabbits slid off of the human boy and to the floor, dispersing to explore their aunt Judy's house, with some of the older ones keeping an eye out to keep their younger siblings out of trouble. Thomas, the oldest kit, smiled up at his younger cousin.

"You okay there, Squirt?" he asked, using the term of endearment he used for Eli and all those younger than him. Thomas' parents, Judy's sister Olivia and her husband Charlie, had finally decided to up and move to the big city a month earlier. They both had to return to Bunnyburrow, however, to sort out a mixup with the moving company, leaving all of the kits under Thomas' supervision, on the same night that Nick and Judy were both attending the PTA meeting.

"Uhm, yes," Eli said. Thomas smirked and hopped up to sit down next to his new cousin.

"Y'know, if you're ever uncomfortable with them climbing you like that, all you have to do is speak up."

"...I just don't want to hurt anyone's feelings..." Eli replied.

"Your feelings are important too, Squirt," Thomas said gently. "Put it back." His tone was flat and brooked no argument. Eli looked up to see that Thomas had not been addressing him with that last part, but instead three of his little brothers who had been trying to sneak by with a hammer, which they were all carrying together as it would have been too heavy for the tiny kits to lift individually. They groaned again and went to put it back.

"So, how's about you stick by me and together we keep everybody from destroying your and aunt Judy's house before she and Nick get back, okay?" Eli smiled a little and nodded. He followed his cousin's lead, having to catch a kit who had somehow gotten on top of the ceiling fan. The little bunny girl in her purple dress squealed in delight from Eli's hands.
"Again, again!" she called out.

"No, Penny," Thomas said.

Later that evening...

All throughout each meet and greet with the different members of the faculty, Nick had surprised Judy with his sudden enthusiasm in keeping up with how well Eli had been doing in some areas, and where he could use improvement in others. The fox had even made some suggestions that several of the other mammals around them had seemed to agree with, including several teachers and the principal herself.

Judy let out a little giggle as she watched him speaking with a few fathers, with Bryson on his shoulder, before turning back to her previous conversation with Isabella.

"I never actually expected for there to be so much to get involved in," Judy said as she looked down briefly at the pamphlet of all the different PTA projects being organized this month.

"Oh yeah, most of the parents of this district definitely don't need a lot of convincing to get more involved with their children's schooling," the little mouse woman chirped excitedly, sharing Judy's enthusiasm. "Of course with Mikey it's not just school, he's also got his Ranger Scouts meetings."

"The Junior Ranger Scouts?" Judy said, having a vague memory of the name. Isabella shook her head.

"Oh no, the Junior Ranger Scouts were disbanded about a decade ago, not that I would ever let Mikey join them."

"Really?"
"Oh yes. There were allegations of rampant specism directed towards predators, and then several scoutmasters were caught on camera saying some really specist things themselves. After that, parents stopped letting their kids join, followed by some lawsuits, and in the end they simply disbanded."

It clicked in Judy's mind where she had heard of the Junior Ranger Scouts before, and she looked over to Nick, who was wagging his tail as he discussed something with an opossum teacher.

"I see. So then these Ranger Scouts, there's been none of that?"

"Nope, and Mikey would have told me himself if he had heard anything like that," Isabella stated simply before she seemed to think of something. "Say, Eli wouldn't happen to be interested in joining the Ranger Scouts, would he?"

"Oh, uh," Judy said, being brought out of her thoughts of the time Nick had told her what had happened to him as a kit, "he hasn't ever really mentioned anything about it himself, but then again, I don't think he's ever heard of them."

"Oh, well I only ask because Mikey's troop, number 608, had some of their members move away, and they could really use some new kids joining up," Isabella explained.

"Hmm, well, after researching them a bit first, I'll ask him if maybe he would be interested in joining then," Judy said. Isabella smiled back up at her.

"I just know my Mikey would be thrilled to have one of his friends join his troop. He is the troop leader after all."

The meeting finally coming to a close not long afterwards, Nick and Judy said goodbye to the Musculuses in the parking lot of the school, making their way to Judy's pickup.

"Okay Carrots, I'm big enough to admit when I'm wrong." Nick said, startling Judy from her thoughts.

"What?"
"I was wrong about how boring that was going to be." He said, offering to drive and opening Judy's door for her.

"Such the gentlemammal." She said as she climbed up. "So you had fun then?" She asked after buckling her seatbelt as he climbed in on the driver's side.

"Well I wouldn't call it fun exactly, those games I got for Eli are fun. To simply put it, that just wasn't as boring as I was expecting it to be."

"Uh-huh. So hey, Nick." Judy asked, looking out the window at the night sky, the moon shining brilliantly.

"Yes Fluff?" Nick said as he pulled them onto the street.

"Isabella floated an idea by me, and I want to know your opinion about it."

"Shoot."

Judy hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Well, as it turns out, Mikey, Eli's friend," Nick nodded, having met the mouse a few times, "it turns out that he's in the Ranger Scouts..."

"Oh?" Nick asked, frowning a little as the name brought up a certain painful memory.

"Yeah, it turns out the the Junior Ranger Scouts have been disbanded for about ten years now." Judy explained about the problems brought on by the specism. Nick nodded, a smirk appearing on his muzzle at the thought of their group having to shut down.

"And, after doing some research to ensure that no similar thing has been happening in the Ranger Scouts, I was thinking of asking Eli if he would be interested in joining." There was silence for a moment.

"So... what do you think?" Judy asked, her ears drooping as she now became worried that Nick would be upset. Nick picked up on her ears and flashed her a reassuring smile without taking his eyes off the road.
"Judy, I think that if it turns out that Eli wants to be a Ranger Scout, then that's going to be great."

"Really?" Judy's ears perked right back up, and Nick had to stop himself from telling her how cute she looked at the moment, having already received a punch in the arm for doing so previously.

"And if he doesn't, then I have no problem in helping him get better at gaming."

"And in so doing, turn my kit into a couch potato." Judy said.

"Oh, so now he's your kit then?" Nick asked with his usual smirk as they pulled into the driveway.

"He always was. It just took a while for us to find each other." Judy said, making Nick's smile become more genuine as he walked with her up to the front door, which he unlocked with his own key. The door swung inward to reveal Eli on the couch, covered in a bunch of sleeping kits, looking unsure of what to do, while Thomas was in the process of gently peeling two off of him at a time to carry up to the guest bedroom that they were staying in for the night, stopping to quietly shush his aunt and Nick. Before she could stop herself, Judy let out a little coo at the cute sight, which was all it took to slightly wake up one of the smaller kit boys.

"Huh?" He asked from his spot on Eli's head as he looked around sleepily, and then spotted a certain red fox. "UNCLE NICK!"

This was immediately followed by a chorus, and a panic stricken Nick attempting to turn to run, before being quickly overwhelmed and swarmed by the happy and laughing kits. This was followed up by Judy snapping a few pictures of the sight for later.

Meanwhile...

Baily flipped the Open sign to Closed, after doing a once over with a broom and a spray bottle of glass cleaner, checking each display as he passed by, smiling as he wiped away the last smudge he could find, before he started to count out the register. A large elephant woman stepped out from behind a beaded curtain, patting a lion in a fine business suit on the shoulder.
"There there Leodore," Phyllis comforted the dejected looking lion as she led him over to the coat rack, "the cards may not be in your favor tonight, but that doesn't mean that they always shall be. The future is not a set path after all, but a winding and ever changing journey." She said to the former mayor, who seemed to perk up a little.

"Y'know what Phyllis, you're absolutely right. Nothing's set in stone. Besides, all this means is that I've got another four years to prepare for getting re-elected." Leodore Lionheart said, nodding to Baily behind the counter, who politely nodded back. Leodore soon left, the door jingling as he opened it and stepped out into Tundratown. Phyllis looked around the shop at Baily's handiwork and enjoyed what she saw. She had been impressed with his attention to detail when it came to cleaning on day one, and he has yet to disappoint her on that front.

"Baily, I must say that I am so grateful to the cosmic powers that be that led to you becoming my employee." The elephant woman said. The human man smiled.

"Thank you Phyllis. I really do like working here." Baily said, grateful to Phyllis for hiring him, and grateful to her nephew, and now one of his friends, Arnie.

"So, have you any plans tonight with your little lioness friend?" Phyllis teased as she walked to the back of the shop and began to turn off each light, one by one.

"Uh, well actually I was going to be seeing Sophia on my day off tomorrow." Baily said, blushing a little. Phyllis chuckled, not actually seeing his blush, but certainly knowing him well enough by now to know that it was there alright.

Elsewhere...

Bogo, in his street clothes, was driving along in Sahara Square, enjoying a brief moment of respite, listening to Gazelle, in between all of the usual headaches that came with being the police chief. He stopped at a red light and waited, watching as a human man walked along, tapping away at his phone. More and more of the mammals had shown up over the months, their appearances quickly becoming old news, with them just being accepted as another species of mammal by most. Of course, it was those few who saw them as something much more sinister that had a tendency to cause problems. He snorted as he thought to the earful he had to listen to because a human had joined the police academy.
He smiled, remembering a similar series of calls he had received when a fox had joined the academy ranks, who over the years, had proved himself time and time again, just as much as his bunny partner had as well. The light turned green, and Bogo continued along. While not wanting to show it, especially after he had learned that the human in question was indeed going to be joining the police academy, he found that he actually like Walter Cruz, former sergeant of the Los Angeles Police Department. He had high hopes for him, as he did for all of the officers beneath him, even Clawhauser... not that he could ever let any of them know it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Life goes on for the humans as they continue to move forward. But is trouble brewing for the newly discovered mammals?

Chapter Notes

Hello there, dear readers! I'm so happy and excited to bring to you chapter 2 of *The Keyhole*. In this chapter, I introduce someone that I think others are going to enjoy knowing exists in my Zootopia universe as much as I do! I truly hope that you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I just don't understand it. If the video shows that the Nighthowler Serum doesn't affect the human creatures like it does mammals, then why hasn't the general public become much more suspicious of them?" a certain armadillo asked no one as he paced back and forth in his padded cell. Dr. Edwin Shellison racked his brain for possible answers, eventually letting out a sigh.

"I suppose that this really was all my own fault. I had not fully grasped the glaring ignorance of the masses. Well, then, fine. I'll just have to perform my own examinations without any public support, or knowledge. Once I can get ahold of one of the humans...I can open them up and see how they work. Once I outline their blatant differences from mammals, the public will surely then become much more compliant with reason. Of course, I still need to find a manner in which to escape my current confines."

*At the Hopps Residence...*

"Thomas, you are such a big help!" Judy praised her nephew as the teen rabbit assisted in placing plates of fruits and veggies down on the kitchen table for his younger siblings.

"It's nothing I can't handle, Aunt Judy," Thomas said with a smile, his perked ears angling towards the upstairs. Shortly after, Eli descended the steps. "Morning, Squirt!" Thomas said to the human in a
"Good morning," Eli said quietly before letting out a yawn.

"How'd you sleep, sweetie?" Judy asked, noticing Eli's brown headfur all mussed up. Her violet eyes met his tired deep blue ones.

"Uhm...a-all right, J-Mom," Eli said, his mouth lifting in a slight smile at saying that word once again, Judy's mouth doing the same.

"It was a little hard to sleep because...uhm..."

"Because the other kits decided to sleep in a big 'ol pile on top of Eli, again," Nick chimed in as he strolled past Eli on the stairs, followed by two rabbits, much older than the trickle of sleepy-eyed kits of varying ages and sizes, making their way down the stairs as well.

"Oh, honey," the auburn-colored female said as she looked up at Eli, "if you were uncomfortable, you should have said something. I'll give the little ones a talkin' to," Eli's aunt Jasmine said. As she spoke, several small eyes turned to look up at Eli, who looked down guiltily.

"I'm just worried that... I'll turn over and hurt someone... because I'm so much bigger..." Eli explained.

"Hmmm, that's true, there is a bit of a size difference." Jasmine's brown eyes looked Eli over. "But I think that you'll find that us Hopps are not as fragile as we look!" she said with a smile. "Still though, today is when we'll be moving in to our new house, so you won't be needing to worry about that again tonight!" Jasmine's enthusiasm was not shared by the kits walking by and listening in.

"Awww," was the collective moan.

"But Eli's so warm!" came one voice of protest.

"And cuddly!" came another, which made Nick chuckle.
"He keeps us safe from the monsters under the bed!" called out an especially small kit, with a large pink bow on her head, resting right between her ears.

"Oh, Sweetpea," came the deep voice of the male rabbit who had deep brown fur coloration, and whose eyes were a similar shade of blue as Eli's. Eli's uncle Charlie knelt down on the steps nearest the little kit. "There's no monsters under the beds. And I promise, if after we're all moved in to our new home, if you still feel scared, then I'll personally check under the bed for you at bedtime, okay?"

"...Okay, Daddy..." the little brown-furred kit said, seemingly only partially mollified, while the others seemed a little more satisfied, and all started to resume walking. Judy smiled a thanks to her brother while Thomas snickered to himself.

Meanwhile...

"You're dead, Clawson!" Major Friedkin called out to the tiger who had fallen into the mud in the rainforest district training course, having fallen from the monkey bars. Up above him there was a human, wearing the cadet uniform, who, despite the spraying water, was managing to hold on as he crossed. He was around six foot eight, had light brown skin, and deep brown eyes. Walter, former Sergeant of the Los Angeles Police Department, still couldn't believe the course his life had taken.

He could still remember the pain in his legs after several of his fellow officers had broken them. When it had become apparent that Sargeant Cruz had every intention of reporting every single thing he had uncovered, which involved more than a few members of his own precinct, they had taken it upon themselves to silence him. After his abduction, and after he had been bound to a chair in an empty warehouse, that's when they had started in on him. No questions, no taunts, no threats. They just kicked the chair over and started smashing baseball bats against his legs. When they had finished, that's when his own partner started to pour the gasoline.

"THIS IS NO TIME TO DAWDLE, CRUZ! NOW MOVE IT!" The polar bear's voice snapped Walter back to the present, and he continued on the bars, making his way to the platform.

The academy back home was nothing like this, he thought. Walter looked on, running a hand through his closely cropped brown hair, and looked on at what was going to be the next challenge of the day, the Ice Wall...and felt a twinge of excitement.
Walter's first month at the academy had been rough, as was every cadet's. His experience was a little rougher, as he was the first ever human to join the academy, and a number of his fellow cadets hadn't known what to make of the strange new mammal in their midst. While not outright hostile, several cadets seemed a little nervous around him. Thankfully, that was not the case with all of them.

"Someone decided to take their sweet time," a little grey hare, with a few black stripes on the tips of his ears said, his arms folded in front of him.

"Well, we can't all be as fast as little rabbits, Jack," Walter said, taking a moment to catch his breath.

"How many times do I have to tell you, I'm a hare," Jack said in mock frustration. Walter opened his mouth to reply when Major Friedkin bellowed up to them.

"CRUZ! SAVAGE! YOU'VE BOTH RESTED LONG ENOUGH! HURRY UP AND GET TO THE ICE WALL, PRONTO!" The two mammals smiled at one another before heading towards the ladder. Friedkin's muzzle turned up slightly into a small smirk as she watched the two, until she noticed another cadet fall to the mud.

"YOU'RE DEAD, FROST!"

Elsewhere...

"C'mon Sarah honey, you can do it!" A female otter gently encouraged a small human who was wading her way through a tiny pool. Mrs. Otterton was currently wearing a light blue one-piece bathing suit while little Sarah was wearing a pink one, with two matching water wings. They were both at a public pool, with many different mammals of many different ages and sizes enjoying the sunshine. Currently, Sarah was dog paddling in the water, giggling as she headed towards the otter.

"Am I doin it, mommy?" she called back, slowly getting closer.
"That's right, baby, you're swimming like a pro!"

"Notta baby!" Sarah pouted as she paddled.

"Sorry, honey, I meant to say that you are doing so wonderfully, just like a big girl!" Mrs. Otterton smiled. While Emmett had taken the boys to the dentist, Mrs. Otterton had decided to take their new daughter out to practice swimming again. Sarah was excited as she got closer and closer to her new mother, squealing in delight as she was pulled into a hug and nuzzled after having made her way from all the way across the pool.

"You did it, honey! I'm so proud of you!" Mrs. Otterton said as she reached up to kiss Sarah on her forehead. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a few mammals looking at them, confused, but ignored it. Sarah was happy, and that's all that mattered.

At that same time...

"Renato, you are just so sweet," Lily said through a very stuffy nose. Lily had been feeling under the weather for the past few days, and when Renato called her, upon learning that she had a cold, he had arrived at her place within fifteen minutes of hanging up, much to the human female's surprise, with two grocery bags in his arms. One was filled with cold medicine, and the other with ingredients to make a stew that the jaguar said his mother made for him when he was sick.

"You really didn't have to go out of your way like this," Lily said, internally grateful and happy to be around him some more.

"My Lily," Renato began, his mildly accented voice sending a light shiver up Lily Blackthorne's spine, "I have not gone out of my way. Today is one of my usual days off." Renato reached behind Lily to fluff one of the pillows she was resting on as she lay back on her couch, a blanket draped over her legs. "Besides, I get to use your cold as an excuse to watch some more movies with you."

Lily smiled. "Cheesy horror movies?" she asked, her nose a reddish color.
"Some of the cheesiest. But first, let me just go check on the stew." Renato smiled back.

*Over in Tundra Town...*

"So these quartz crystals will help with anxiety, and this onyx will rid my home of negative energy?" a squirrel wearing a, for him, heavy red coat asked while standing on the counter of *Eyevory Tusks*, looking at several displays of various crystals and minerals beneath himself.

"Yes sir, Mr. Brushstone," Baily answered, smiling. The squirrel looked up at the red-headed human, and let out a sigh.

"Alright, I'll take five of each. And a pack of that lavender incense." Baily nodded and complied by putting the customer's selections into a single brown paper bag, quickly ringing it up. As he swiped the credit card through the reader, he heard a jingle, and looked up to see a familiar face enter.

"Welcome back to Eyevory Tusks, Mr. Lionheart." Baily addressed the former mayor, who gave a smile and a nod to Mr. Brushstone. The lion was dressed in a pinstripe suit, and took off a dark brown long coat to hang on a nearby rack.

"Well hello there, Benji! How're things with you today?" Each time he had come in, he had yet to remember Baily's name, something Baily found more amusing than annoying.

"I'm doing fine, sir, and it's Baily," Baily said as he closed the back of the display case and locked it, snapping the keychain back to his belt loop. "How can I help you today?"

"I was wondering if I could get in a quick card reading."

"Oh, sure thing Mr. Lionheart. Phyllis should be back any minute."

"Well actually, I was hoping to get--" The door chimed again to admit an elephant woman with several runes drawn on her tusks, and more than a few earrings dangling from her large ears.
"Leodore!" Phyllis said with a smile upon noticing him standing before Baily. "I had a feeling that you would be arriving today. Care for another reading?"

"Well, actually yes, but this time, I was hoping that, uh," he turned to face the human, "it was Baily that you said?" to which Baily nodded. "Right, I was hoping that this time it could be Baily who reads my fortune."

Phyllis and her employee looked to one another for a brief moment. "Well...of course, Leodore...but may I ask...why?"

"Your sessions are always amazing and so insightful Phyllis, seriously, there are no complaints here. But today, I kinda felt like trying something new, and what's newer than a human?"

"I...I see, well alright. Baily, please show Leodore to the reading room."

Baily nodded and reached under the counter to grab his deck, feeling a little nervous. He had given a number of mammals readings during his employment so far, but Phyllis had always gone out of her way to ensure that she was the one to give Mr. Lionheart his. When he asked her why this was, she had explained that the former mayor of Zootopia, a mammal with quite a few friends, had a reputation for not taking bad news well. He felt a little nervous as he and the lion entered the back room. It was dimly lit by a bulb up above. Beneath that, there was a table with a white cloth draped over it that rested in between two large oak chairs with crimson cushions. Baily took a seat in the larger of the chairs, the one that was usually sat in by Phyllis, and was subsequently made for a full grown elephant, and Leodore took the seat across from him, his face expressionless.

"Alright, sir," Baily began, shuffling his cards as he spoke, "there are a number of different methods that we could use for your reading today. I personally prefer the cards, but I have no problem using rune stones or--" Baily fell silent when the lion raised a paw.

"I'll take whatever way you prefer using," Leodore said seriously. Baily nodded, and looked down at his deck.

"Okay, then, as the querent, I would like for you to focus on your question as I shuffle the deck." Baily saw Leodore give a nod before the lion closed his eyes. As Baily shuffled, he started to recite the poem once more, setting the deck down on the table the moment he had finished. "Now you may ask your question." Baily said, pushing down his nervousness, and keeping a poker face.
"I want to know how I can win the mammals of Zootopia back," Leodore said as Baily looked on.

"Okay, uh, sir. We're going to use my preferred card spread, the Celtic Cross." Leodore nodded again as Baily started to lay out the ten cards face down. As Baily began to flip up each card, one by one, and explaining what they meant and how they affected Leodore, Baily started to relax. There was nothing majorly bad so far. In fact quite the opposite. The Ten of Cups, The Ace of Wands, Death, The Sun and Temperance all made appearances, which together suggested very fortunate things...aside from the appearance of the Three of Swords. And then he flipped over the tenth card that represented the former Mayor's Future.

"And lastly we have," Baily drew in a breath, "The Tower..."

"Oooh, The Tower? Sounds to me like something good, am I right?"

Baily remembered what Phyllis told him in regards to giving people readings.

*When the signs point to...difficult times ahead, it is always best to try and put a positive spin on things.*

While not itself a sign of anything evil, The Tower is not a card that those who take tarot readings seriously would ever take lightly. It is a card that represents major change in someone's life, the kind that is sudden and often times completely life changing. And almost always the kind of change that one is truly unprepared for.

"The Tower...is a card that represents change...in someone's life..." Baily explained. "It represents a big change, uh, sir," Baily tried to think of how to better put what he was trying to say when suddenly, the lion loudly clapped his paws together.

"That's wonderful! Obviously the big change is going to be me getting successfully re-elected! Thank you very much, Barney!" Leodore said as he stood up. Baily didn't know what to say as he quickly gathered up his cards and followed Leodore out into the shop proper. Phyllis was standing behind the counter and raised an eyebrow at Baily, who silently shrugged.

"Phyllis, you got yourself a real keeper of an employee here," Leodore said as he reached into a pocket and withdrew a few bills, laying them all down on the counter. "There's an extra tip in there," Leodore said while flashing Baily a wink before grabbing his coat. "Alright, I have got some calls"
that I know now that I need to make. And I'll take our usual time next week, Phyllis," Leodore said as he quickly made his way out the door.

The elephant looked at the door as it swung closed before turning her attention to Baily.

"Well, now, it would seem as though you handled Leodore quite well yourself," Phyllis said happily as she rang up the cost of the reading, making sure to set aside Baily's tip.

"Yeah...it would seem so..."

At that exact moment...

Edwin sat on the lumpy mattress of his cell, staring at the blank white padded wall directly across from himself, pondering just how he would go about leaving this facility. As his eyes started to travel across his room, he noticed something out of the ordinary at his door. There was a folded piece of paper sticking out from the bottom. Edwin hopped down from his bed and shuffled over to the paper, snatching it up in his hands. He unfolded it to see that there was writing on one side. As he read it, a smile formed on his face.

Dr. Shellison, I believe you. These things, we know next to nothing about them or their motives. I want to help any way that I can.
-A Friend

Chapter End Notes

WHOO! Yay! I'm so happy to have finished yet another chapter! I hope that you all enjoyed it! And as per usual, I once again would like to thank my very good friend, Trismegistus Shandy, for being the most awesome proofreader ever!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It would seem that Edwin is not alone in thinking that his research into the human mammals should be allowed to continue.

Chapter Notes

Hello there, dear readers! I find myself once again feeling excited to bring to you another new chapter of *The Keyhole*! And wow... did I kinda really need that feeling. It's true that, for a lot of people, around this time of year, feelings of depression can really settle in. But writing my stories really becomes quite the "pick-me-up" I need sometimes. And I've got several stories that I'm still working on simultaneously, in addition to this one. I have another Zootopia fanfiction story that I've been working on titled *Welcome to Sunset Valley*. And I also have some original stories to take care of. Those of course being *The Thaumaturgist*, *The Fox's Path*, and my newest one, *Hairball*! Please be sure to check them out as well! Now, please enjoy an especially heartwarming chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Nadine, we've circled this block five times already, don't you think that if we were going to find another one of those humans, we would have done so already?" the wolf in the ZPD uniform whined to his partner, the tigress sitting in the passenger seat. Her eyes were scanning the dark alleyways as they passed. It was almost midnight as they circled the area where the power surge had been detected.

"Ralph," she chided the wolf, "every single time one of these surges has been detected, a human was found in the immediate area."

"But then why haven't we found one yet?"

"...They could be hurt." Nadine answered. As they rounded a corner in their cruiser through the section of the Nocturnal District, Nadine just about to suggest that they pull over and start searching the area on foot, the tigress' ear perked up as she heard a sound come from one of the alleys.

"Stop the car," she said flatly, with Wolford complying. After being partnered with Fangmeyer for
over six years, he knew not to question why. They sat there, with the windows rolled down, listening. And then, they both heard what sounded like a faint cry, coming from the alley they had pulled up in front of. Nadine got out while Ralph got on the radio and called it in, before exiting and following close behind her. As they moved through the gloom, both seeing just fine as wolves and tigers had excellent night vision, they followed now what was the sad and lonely wailing of what could only be a baby.

They still proceeded with caution until they saw, laying in a fraying and dirty pink bundle of cloth near a cardboard box, was what was unmistakably a human infant. Wolford immediately called in an update on the situation on his walkie while Nadine, who was transfixed on the squirming and crying bundle, bent down and gently scooped up the baby mammal. As soon as the baby was picked up the crying stopped, and a pair of deep brown eyes looked up at Nadine in simple confusion. Nadine looked down into those eyes, and smiled.

"Hello there, little one," she cooed to the child in her arms, "welcome to Zootopia."

Ralph smiled as he looked on, his big bushy tail slowly wagging. Nadine had always been one of the toughest officers on the force. He had seen her take down grown elephants barepawed, and even sparred with her at the gym. However he had always gotten quite the kick out of how, almost in complete contrast to her stalwart side, Nadine always had a soft spot for children, especially babies. He chuckled to himself as he recalled an awkward moment a few weeks ago when Nadine came across what she had thought was a lost little fox kit, but was startled to hear a surprisingly deep, and particularly indignant, voice come from what turned out to be an adult fennec fox.

"Something amusing, Wolford?" Fangmeyer asked, still in a cooing voice, addressing him while focusing on the now smiling baby in her arms.

"Oh, uh, n-nuthin'," Ralph said, past experience having taught him that, baby in her arms or not, agitating the tigress was not a very wise thing to do. "But, uh, shouldn't we get going?"

"Hm?" Nadine finally looked down at the wolf in mild confusion.

"Well, the hospital isn't too far away, and I think a certain little someone," he said, smiling at the mammal that seemed so small in his partner's arms, "needs to be examined."

"...O-Oh, right."
Ralph noted the dejected look that was written all over Nadine’s face, but said nothing as they went back to the car.

*Elsewhere...*

Eli tossed and turned in his sleep, in the throes of a nightmare. He had only started turning and whimpering in his sleep a few minutes ago, but already Judy was slowly opening his door, and looking in with her ears drooped behind her back. She was wearing her blue nightgown, having been asleep herself.

"Judy?" Nick's sleepy voice made the grey bunny jump a little, her attention having been entirely focused on her adopted human kit. She turned to see a sleepy-eyed Nick come walking out of their bedroom, having suddenly noticed the missing rabbit almost instantaneously as she had noticed Eli's distressed whimpers. He was dressed in a white t-shirt and green pajama bottoms.

"I think Eli's having a nightmare," Judy said, looking unsure of what to do. Nick's own ears perked up as he listened, before poking his head through the door himself, a frown appearing on his muzzle.

"Poor guy." He took a few steps into Eli's room.

"Nick!" Judy called in a whisper, making the red fox turn to look at her. "What are you doing?"

"Going to wake him up," Nick answered, matter-of-factly.

"Wait, what?" Judy said, wincing as her voice rose just a little too loudly. At that very moment, Eli sat straight up, wide awake. He looked around, his eyes wild and unfocused, breathing heavily. After a moment, he started to settle down, only then noticing the fox and rabbit standing before him.

"Hey there buddy," Nick said gently, taking a seat on the side of Eli's bed, looking up at him. "Have a bad dream?"

Eli looked away, a guilty look on his face. "...K-Kinda... was I loud?"
"Well no, but your mom's got those adorable large ears though, so of course she would come running." Nick did not turn, knowing full well that Judy was giving him a stern look. Eli smiled.

"Sorry for waking you guys up..."

"Eli, that's alright," Judy said as she stepped up to the bed and hopped up, to give her kit a hug. "Would you like to talk about your dream, sweetie?"

"Uhm... n-no..." Eli looked away. Judy frowned as she released her hug. Before she could speak, Nick already started.

"Hey now, buddy," he reached up to rest a paw on the human boy's shoulder, "you can tell your mother and I anything. You know that, right?"

Eli looked between Nick and Judy, a small smile forming. He nodded.

"I know... it's just..."

"Just what, buddy?"

"It's just... every time I start talking about my life... you know, before coming here... j-mom and you... you both start to get a little worried."

"And did this dream have something to do with another bad memory?" Nick asked perceptively.

"...Y-Yes."

"Well, that's a parent's job," the red fox explained. Eli shifted uncomfortably.

"...Okay..."
Meanwhile...

"It's rather difficult to gauge the passage of time in this padded cell I find myself still stuck within," Edwin mumbled to himself as though he were speaking into his tape recorder.

"So far, I have yet to have any further correspondence with my unknown ally. I cannot explain enough how much I detest being at the mercy of others. Still, I must be patient. My time shall come, of this I am quite certain, and then I can resume my research into the human creatures," the armadillo said quietly, his left eye beginning to twitch. His ears twitched a little as, at that moment, he heard a very audible click come from the door to his room. He watched with bated breath as the door swung open into a dark hall.

"Doctor Shellison," a voice whispered huskily from the gloom, "we have to go now." Without his glasses, Edwin could only make out a rough shape of the mammal who was freeing him. And the voice was too hoarse for him to determine anything either. But still, he smiled, and scurried after them, right past a grizzly bear orderly, in his white scrubs, clearly passed out on the floor.

Wonderful! Truly wonderful! I knew that there would be those who would see the truth! Edwin thought to himself, biting back the hysterical laughter that wanted so desperately to escape his lips.

Back at St. Marten's...

"Uhm, Officer Fangmeyer?" a chipmunk nurse in pink scrubs called out to the waiting room as she entered, quickly noticing the tigress nearby. Nadine had been waiting by the doors ever since she had to hand over the baby human to a pediatrician earlier. The alpaca doctor had to practically pry Nadine's arms apart to get at the little mammal, whom the tigress seemed so reluctant to let go. From how much the baby had squirmed and reached out for her, it was apparent that the feeling was quite mutual.

"Is something wrong?" Nadine asked, her voice filled with worry. Ralph picked that moment to return from the vending machines.
"The doctor is just finishing up his examination, and so far she seems to be completely healthy. You can go in now to see her, if you'd like." the tigress was already heading down the hall, her ears following the sound of baby babble. The first door she looked into, she spotted the baby and smiled. She was no longer bundled up in the grungy blanket, and instead was just laying on a padded table in nothing but a diaper. The moment her deep brown eyes spotted Nadine, she smiled and started reaching for her.

"It would seem that she's already gotten quite attached to you, Officer," the doctor joked, noticing that it seemed that the baby wasn't the only one, as the tigress was quick to scoop her back up into her arms.

"So how is she, doc?" Nadine asked just as Ralph stepped through the door, that knowing smile on his muzzle as he watched his partner cradle the human infant, who started pawing at her shiny badge.

"Well, for the most part, she seems to be perfectly healthy, at least based on what information about humans I have to go on. I would say that she's around sixteen months old."

"Wait... what do you mean by for the most part?" Nadine asked, her ears laying flat atop her head.

"It would seem that she's a little malnourished... also, there's some bruising on her legs, but those appear to be fading."

"Are you telling me that a sixteen-month-old was starved and beaten?!" Nadine's voice had a hard edge to it. Upon hearing that, the baby began to whimper and fuss. This made the tigress turn her attention back to the little one, and resume her soft cooing.

"It's okay, it's all going to be okay," she said, starting to rock arms. The baby started to settle down, her thumb finding its way into her mouth.

Oh boy, Wolford thought to himself, this is going to make dealing with the Child Protective Services mammals a lot more difficult.

He looked on at the tigress, who was clearly smitten by the tiny sleeping figure she was still cradling and rocking. Despite this thought, his smile remained and his tail started to wag.
Nick watched from the bed as Judy entered the bedroom, letting out a great tired yawn.

"Eli back asleep?" he asked, to which the bunny nodded, slipping back under the covers and snuggling up close against him. He smiled, and curled a little, protectively, around her.

"...It really just isn't fair..." His eyes had started to droop until he heard her dejected voice.

"What isn't fair, Carrots?"

"...It's not fair that, although he's now living in a stable and loving home, Eli's still clearly affected by those past emotional scars," Judy said.

"...I know what you mean. To think that anyone would just leave a little kit all alone by the side of the road is just... unforgivable. And something like that's bound to stick in their psyche."

"I'm just so worried about him, Nick," Judy said, curling up even more.

"Like I said earlier, that's part of the job of a parent."

"I know... I think..."

"What is it?"

"I think that maybe Eli should see a psychologist..."

"...You do?" Nick asked, feeling Judy nod her head, before she uncurled herself and turned to look into his eyes.
"He just carries so much inside, and you heard him say how reluctant he is to tell us. Maybe seeing a therapist could really help him."

"...I think that you're absolutely right, Carrots," the red fox said, his smile sincere as he hugged her close.

"You don't think that he would... hate me... for sending him to one?"

"There is no way that Eli could ever hate you. You can see it in his eyes that, as far as moms go, he hit the jackpot." That brought a smile to Judy's muzzle.

"You're not too bad yourself in the parental arts, Slick," Judy said, reaching up to plant a kiss on Nick's cheek.

"Well of course I'm a true natural to it, I have had quite a long time as a practice father after all."

"Do you mean when you were pretending to be a father for your cute little scam?" Judy asked with a smirk.

"The one that you completely fell for? Hook-line-and sinker? Oh definitely," Nick said with a light chuckle while Judy rolled her eyes.

"So, how about this," Nick said, adjusting himself while Judy adjusted herself so that they were facing each other.

"I'm listening," she said, the smile still playing at her lips.

"Tomorrow, we both have a little sit down with Eli, and then gently suggest that we find someone that he'd be more comfortable talking to about his feelings and all of that. Sound like a plan to you?"

"Hmmm," Judy pretended to think it over. "I think that you might be onto something there, Slick," she said before reaching over to give him another kiss on the cheek, then letting out another yawn.
"Well, of course I do," Nick said, his eyes closing just as Judy's were.

"Besides," he continued, "I got a friend who's an excellent discount child psychologist."

Judy's eyes shot wide open at that.

"Just kidding, Carrots," he said with a smirk, not once opening his eyes, just as she opened her mouth to complain. Judy instead rolled her eyes and snuggled in closer to him.

"Dumb fox," she said in a sleepy voice.

"Sly bunny," came his reply, as he wrapped his arms around her once more.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, folks! I do hope that you enjoyed the new chapter, and will leave a review! Also, be sure to check out my short story, A Little Crush, over on Fictionpress . com. I go by the name Elite Shade there. And of course, I have to thank my good friend, Trismegistus Shandy, for proofreading my story! Be sure to go read their stories on TGStorytime.com!
Hey there, dear readers! I am super excited to bring you the new chapter of *The Keyhole*! So much has been going on in life lately, that I’ve found that I haven’t had quite the time that I prefer to work on all of my stories. So I decided to make some time to write. If you've made it this far and still don't know, I am also working on another Zootopia FanFiction, *Welcome to Sunset Valley*. If you enjoy the show *Welcome to Night Vale*, then I think you'll enjoy my Zootopia-themed tribute to it! And of course there are my non-fanfiction works *The Thaumaturgist*, *The Fox's Path*, and *Hairball*! Those three can be found on Fictionpress . com, so be sure to give them a read! And of course, I have to give a big thanks once again to my good friend, Trismegistus Shandy, for proofreading! They are a very talented author, and I strongly recommend looking up their works over on TGStorytime! And now, without any further delay, here is chapter four of *The Keyhole*! Enjoy!

Edwin was muttering to himself under his breath as he trudged through the near pitch-black darkness, following the quick-paced gait of his rescuer, whose identity was still a mystery to the armadillo.

"How much further are we to go?" he asked softly.

"Not very far now," the voice rose above a whisper, and it sounded decidedly female, "soon we'll be somewhere safe, and we can work out a further course of action from there."

"Do you not already have a plan? If not, then you should have simply waited to help me escape once you were better prepared to move forward," Edwin lectured. The figure right in front of him and stopped and let out a deep-pitched and coarse growl that made Edwin stop in his tracks, and curl up a little defensively.

"Dr. Shellison," said the female voice, which was laced with annoyance, "you were in a heavily guarded mental institute, therefore opportunities like the one I exploited don't come along very often."

"I-I-I see," Edwin said, after letting out a gulp. But before he could add a hasty apology, the voice
"Furthermore, you had only just started your medication, and while it does take a while for certain medications to kick in, I couldn't very well leave you there to allow yourself to be brainwashed. I know what it's like to be viewed as being extreme, and even mentally unstable. Society dictates that because the majority of people that make up society function a certain way, that those who deviate in any way must have something wrong with them!" Edwin could barely make out a pair of eyes in the gloom, and just barely make out the right one twitching as the unknown female before him continued to speak.

"The general public just wants to go on believing that humans are just another species of harmless mammal, and those in positions of authority will act based upon the public's opinion. Uncovering the truth about these alien creatures is my top priority, and I am prepared to go to any lengths to do so. My rash action was working towards that very end," the voice said.

"Wh-Who a-are y-you?" Edwin asked, still frightened. There was a pause.

"Someone who has worked very closely studying the effects of the Nighthowler Serum," the female voice said; "now come along, I don't like using these service tunnels anymore than you do, and our base of operations is just up ahead."

Edwin quickly followed after her, his mind trying to puzzle out her identity.

_Could it be? ... No... that little ewe is serving hard time for what she did, and rightly so. But still... she would be an expert on how the serum functions..._

_Zootopia Police Academy..._

"Rise and shine, cadets!" Major Friedkin called out through the bunkhouse. There were a few groans from some of the assorted mammalian cadets, while the majority had become used to the early morning routines at the academy. Cadet Walter Cruz was part of the majority who were up and ready. The first human cadet looked over at the small lump of tangled sheets that had fallen out of the bed next to his. Walter held back a laugh at the sight of the grey hare untangling himself while grumbling, clearly still in the minority of cadets who were late risers.
"Don't go getting cocky just because I would prefer to sleep in," Cadet Jack Savage grumbled at the human whom he had befriended early on in the course of their training.

"Alright cadets!" the female polar bear called out, effectively silencing Walter's retort before he could address the disheveled hare once more, "today, we're gunna wake up with a brisk jog. Then, once that's done, you'll all be taking a crack at the ice wall again, then simulation through a sandstorm, and, before we break for lunch, you'll be further familiarizing yourselves with the reeds." Major Friedkin ignored the small chorus of groans. "After lunch, and a short rest, you'll then be taking a written test before showing me how well you can handle a cruiser. Now, get ready in five!" With that, she stormed out, and the cadets all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Sometimes I genuinely think that she might be a bit sadistic," Jack said after stretching and joining the other mammals in changing into running gear.

"I think the major is trying to keep us on our toes. According to her, there's twelve distinct ecosystems that divide the city," Walter said as he laced up his sneakers. He smirked again when he noticed Jack rolling his eyes.

"I know, you keep reminding us." A nearby elephant let out a rumbling chuckle at that.

"I'm just saying that it's better to be ready for anything than to go in completely unprepared."

"Ah, you mean when I dropped you with a single kick." Jack shook his head with a smirk of his own plastered on his face. "You humans, always so bumbling. Even Trunksly here thinks so." The hare motioned to the nearby elephant cadet who was clearly trying to hold back a laugh at their banter, as well at the memory Jack had brought up.

Walter watched as Jack finished with his footwraps before hopping down off the mattress, still amazed that a mammal so small would join the police academy. He had unthinkingly said as much on the first day of their meeting, and the hare had been all too prepared to swipe the human's legs out from under him, before Walter could even blink. He had looked at the hare, standing with one foot planted triumphantly on the his chest, as it was explained to him that a difference in size meant very little. Walter had looked at the smaller mammal with newfound amazement and respect, and, of course, apologized for his careless words as he was let up. After that, the two seemed to have formed an instant friendship. They filed out along with the rest of the cadets, ready for another day of hard training.

Later at West Mammalia Middle School...
"Alright, class," started the giraffe teacher in the lab coat, "for this next project, you shall all be working in pairs, so everyone, find a partner." Eli, Mike, and Isaac had been sitting at the same table in the classroom, wondering who would be partnered with who, when a familiar zebra girl approached Eli.

"Oh... h-hi, Lyla," Eli said, his blush returning. He heard the coyote snicker a little then let out a slight yelp as Mike, who was currently sitting on his head, yanked on some of his headfur to quiet him.

"Hey, Eli, wanna be partners?" Lyla asked, smiling. Eli looked to Mike and Isaac, the latter of the two winking at him, receiving another tug on his headfur from the little mouse on his head.

"Okay, okay, geeze! I'll stop," Isaac said, waking himself and Mike off to another, empty table. Lyla set her notebook and pencils down and took a seat next to Eli at the large black table, identical to the other tables in the classroom.

"Alright, now that it appears that everyone's settled down, today, we're going to be learning about soil composition. This is going to take around six days, and I will expect you all to take notes." The students then all began to scribble down the list of materials that they were going to need for the project.

*Meanwhile...*

"Carrots, I thought we'd already discussed this?" Nick frowned as he put the pawcuffs on the tranquilized panther lying facedown on the pavement, snoring away.

"I know, but I started thinking that maybe Eli would react badly about the whole idea. Like, maybe he would think that we thought that there was something wrong with him. And then maybe he would think that we would abandon him," Judy said as she wrestled a struggling warthog to the ground, getting her set of hoofcuffs out.

"Judy, I think you might be overthinking this. Eli's on the shy side, yes," Nick said, pulling his tranq gun from his holster and taking aim at a bull who was wearing a leather jacket with a biker gang
insignia on the back that matched the panther's and the warthog's jackets, "but I think that he's stronger than a lot of folks give him credit for. And I still think that you're right about having Eli speak to a therapist. He does have some things that he needs to talk about."

The bull looked from his two partners, who had been subdued, to the fox and bunny cops who had been the ones to interrupt their attempted armed robbery, the bank only being two blocks away. Their bikes had all been tipped over at this point. "Uh, are you two seriously discussing this while you're arresting us?" he asked, bewildered.

"You, sir, have the right to remain silent, and I very much recommend that you begin doing so, as this conversation does not concern you," Nick said, still with his tranq gun trained on the bull, who smartly closed his mouth at that point and nodded. Judy smiled at Nick as she walked by him, reaching up to give him a kiss on his muzzle, before continuing to read the bull his rights, grabbing another set of hoof-cuffs from Nick's belt.

*Elsewhere...*

"So, Russell, are you excited at the idea of starting high school next month?" Barry asked as he looked at the teen human sitting across from him on the couch.

"Yeah... for the most part, I actually am," Russell said, seeming much happier to Barry than he had when they had first started the therapy sessions.

"That's great; according to Mr. Spitz, you've been doing very well with your homeschooling," Barry said, a smile on the polar bear's face. Today he was wearing his usual charcoal grey suit and favorite navy tie as they sat in his office.

"Yeah..." Russell said, trailing off a bit, which Barry instantly took notice of.

"Is something the matter? You know that you can tell me anything."

The human teen was silent for a moment, before he let out a breath. "I guess I'm just a little... worried... about how Ethan's going to take it..."
"Ah, your little foster brother. He does seem to have taken quite the liking to you," Barry said with a chuckle as he thought of how much the little fox kit seemed to admire the human before him.

"Yeah. Every time I have to go somewhere without him, he almost throws a fit. Also, now it's every night that he sneaks out of his crib and into my room to sleep in my bed with me..." Russell said, trying to sound annoyed, but the slight smile on his face showing his true feelings on the matter.

"And you don't think he's going to enjoy you going to school in the middle of the day." It was a statement, not a question.

"Granted, he does have preschool, and he's already kinda used to leaving my side to go there each day... but still..."

Barry nodded, understanding perfectly. "He more than likely will not be too happy with your new schedule, initially, but eventually, I'm sure that he'll come around."

Russell nodded. "I kinda figured the same thing, Barry. Still though... I just feel kinda guilty... like I'm actually doing something wrong..." Russell said, leaning forward in the leather armchair a bit.

"That's also understandable, Russell. Just know that you are not doing anything wrong, and that little Ethan will learn to cope in time." They were both silent for a moment after that.

"Is there anything else about starting high school that may also be making you feel, perhaps, a little nervous?" Barry said in a gentle voice. Russell looked away for a moment.

"...Maybe... I'm a little worried that high school here on this world will be just as bad as it was for me back on my old world..."

In the Rainforest District...

"Are you comfortable, Renato?" Lily asked as she busied herself around his tree apartment, straightening up a few things, and laying out several issues of Cat Fancy on the coffee table in front of the jaguar, within easy reach.
"Lily," Renato said, now being the one with the stuffy nose, "I do not wish to get you sick again after you just got better."

Lily turned to place her hands on her hips and regard Renato with a smile. "You took care of me when I was sick, Renato, so naturally, I'm going to help take care of you while you are sick. Also, I'm fairly certain that I gave you this cold in the first place, so I think I'll be just fine."

As she headed towards the kitchen where her own recreation of the stew that he had made for her recently was bubbling away on the stove, she called back into the living room. "Besides, this gives us the chance to binge watch some more cheesy horror movies. I found some myself that I think you're really going to like."

Renato let out a sneeze, and then smiled. Part of him felt guilty at the attention he was receiving, but he knew better than to argue this issue with her. In the time that he had come to know Lily, he recognized when she had made up her mind.

At that very moment...

"I'm starting to think that you have no idea where we are," Edwin said. They had continued walking for hours, with his feet sore and feeling exhausted from walking nonstop since last night, with only the occasional break.

"We're almost there, it's just around the corner," the feminine voice said, patiently.

"That's what you said hours ago," Edwin whined just as he heard a loud squeak, and saw a beam of light illuminate the darkened service tunnel that they were in. He turned a corner to see shadowed figure finish scrambling up a ladder through a hatch. He followed, his eyes stinging after getting used to the near pitch-black hours ago. As soon as he was clear of the hole, the hatch was closed, and from the sound of an audible click, locked as well.

He looked around in the brightly lit room, seeing a wall with photographs of various humans taped to it, recognizing a photo of the very first human, the one called Eli, with a red circle around his head. He looked to the left and saw what looked to be several x-rays showing what Edwin guessed was a human skeleton. To the right, he saw several pots with a very familiar-looking purple flower growing
in them, behind which were pictures with data on the animals that had gone savage during the Nighthowler Incident.

"Who are you?" Edwin asked, with a note of wonder in his voice.

"Someone who knows a lot more about how the Nighthowler Serum works than the average mammal," the voice said behind him. Edwin turned to regard his rescuer properly, hearing her breathing heavily in excitement. He looked upon what appeared to be a dark-furred badger, with a shock of white fur done into a fauxhawk atop her head.

"The name's Honey. Dr. Honey Badger." She held out a clawed paw, which Edwin took, smiling maniacally.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello there, dear readers! Here I am with another new chapter of *The Keyhole*! I'm just so excited for you all to be able to read it! And the kind words and reviews after uploading the last chapter we just so wonderful! Thank you all for giving my stories a read and for just being lovely in general! I hope that you enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The piercing and insistent beeping of an alarm clock rang out through the darkened bedroom. Ralph Wolford rolled over and fumbled with the offending electronic device on the bedside table for a few moments, cursing lightly under his breath before he finally was able to switch it off. The timber wolf rolled back over and reached out with his paws, searching for his mate. After a few minutes of only feeling more of the empty bed, Ralph blearily opened his eyes to confirm that she was not laying beside him. He looked about the room and confirmed that she wasn't there. His ears perked at a sound coming from the open bedroom door and down the hall.

He got up, stretching a little, and padded lightly out the door. He followed the sound, as well as the strong sweet scent of her, right to the kitchen. A smile crept over his muzzle as he looked upon Nadine, the tigress wearing her simple red silk night gown, as she stood at the stove, making scrambled eggs in a skillet. He leaned against the doorframe, taking in the sight of her in the early morning sunlight streaming in beams through the blinds over the kitchen sink. They had been married for almost seven years, and yet every now and again, Ralph was struck by Nadine's beauty once more.

Her nostrils flared in a way that he had, even back when they had first been partnered at the precinct, found to be incredibly adorable, what with the extra little twitch; and she turned to face him. She saw him standing there, smiling in the goofy fashion that made her in equal parts want to roll her eyes and pull him close, and instead chose to play it off with a smirk, which Ralph immediately saw right through.

"Well now, if this isn't a pleasant surprise," Ralph said casually. "You're cooking. Perhaps there's a blue moon out tonight?"

"I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep," the tigress said with a shrug, "so I decided to do something constructive."
The timber wolf's tail, which had been slowly picking up speed with its wagging, suddenly started to droop as he began to suspect the reasoning for this.

"Bad dream?" he asked, stepping closer to Nadine and gently wrapping an arm around her waist. More than a few of Ralph's friends enjoyed poking fun at the size difference between him and his tigress, what with her practically dwarfing him, along with her very apparent muscular build. But as with everything else about her, Ralph found it simply to be another detail of her that he had long since become infatuated with.

Nadine looked down at the scrambled eggs, using the spatula to help them to evenly cook, her smile disappearing.

"Yes," she said simply, taking a deep breath as turned to look down into her husband's eyes.

"And may I hazard a guess that the dream was in some way connected to the adorable baby mammal that you were completely smitten with yesterday?" Ralph asked as he squeezed her close.

"Yes," Nadine said again as she turned off the burner, and started to transfer the large batch of eggs to two awaiting plates that both already had fried slices of turkey bacon awaiting.

Ralph took the plates and set them on the kitchen table while Nadine pulled two glasses from an overhead cupboard, before heading to the fridge and grabbing the carton of cran-raspberry juice that she and Ralph both enjoyed. She set the glasses down on the table, next to their plates, and filled them with the bright red juice. Ralph patiently took a seat as Nadine put the carton back into the fridge, and sat down opposite him. They stared at each other, smiling, in the companionable silence that they enjoyed with one another from time to time. They both simultaneously reached across the table with a paw, to interlace them together. Despite being married for as long as they had been, Nadine and Ralph were still acting the part of happy newlyweds... making sure to keep things professional when on the job. Finally, Nadine took a breath, and exhaled.

"So... you know how I get whenever I see a little one, especially a baby," she started, her heart fluttering at the sight of Ralph's fangy grin.

"Oh yes, as well as how you get around small, full-grown mammals that you mistake for lost kits and cubs." Ralph distinctly remembered thinking that the full grown fennec fox she had started to mollycoddle would have come at them both with the baseball bat he had spied in the back of the fox's van, had they not been wearing their police uniforms. Nadine had been rendered speechless with embarrassment over her mistake, as was still quite apparent with the blush that was barely concealed beneath her fur.
"Anyway," she huffed, a little defensively, "yesterday... when I held her in my arms... it felt... different..." Nadine said, looking to be trying to find the right words. Ralph immediately knew what the tigress whose paw he was holding was trying to say. His nose was one of the best in the entire precinct, and the scent he had picked up off of his mate yesterday was a very special, almost fruity scent, that he had only ever sniffed out a few times before.

"You didn't want to let her go," Ralph said, remembering how the tigress had frightened the coyote social worker who had come to take the human baby to a foster home with her intimidating presence and narrowed eyes.

"No... I didn't," Nadine said, feeling a fresh pang of guilt that had originally stemmed from the sounds of the human baby crying her eyes out the further away from the tigress she was carried. Ralph had to almost talk Nadine down from running after them and pouncing on the coyote.

"And last night I... I dreamt that she was taken to a foster home, and because they didn't know how to care for a human baby, she ended up hurt, and was just passed over again and again and again, from one unfit home to the next."

Ralph squeezed her paw gently, reassuring her that he was there for her. "There was nothing more that you could do, Nadine," he said in a soothing voice. "You didn't have a choice in the matter." While Ralph hadn't gotten as much time with the little mammal himself, he too had fawned over her a bit himself, as well as feeling a pang in his own heart when the time to hand her off to Child Services had come all too soon.

"I know, but..." Nadine said, a small smile playing on her lips. Ralph's ears started to lay flat against his head, having seem that specific look on his wife's face several times over the years.

"Nadine, what are you planning?" he asked, with a slight tremor of nervousness in his voice.

"Well... you know how Judy was given custody of the very first human cub to appear all those months ago?" she asked, Ralph's suspicions steadily growing.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Okay so... I found out that the chief was able to pull some strings to help fast track that."
"And you were thinking about us asking the chief to help us do something similar with a human pup you and I found yesterday and only spent a few hours with?" Ralph asked, his throat dry. He grabbed his glass of juice with his free paw and started to take a drink.

"Sort of..." Nadine said as she let go of Ralph's other paw and looked down at her plate with a slight guilty expression on her face. "I already called him a little while ago before you woke up, and I was able to convince him to do something similar for us."

Ralph had of course seen spit takes on TV shows and in movies before, but never before that very moment had he believed that they were something that ever happened in real life. He turned away just a fraction of a second before it happened, managing to avoid spewing a muzzleful of juice over his mate's face. He coughed for a few moments and tried to catch his breath.

"WHAT?!" This morning was not at all going how the timber wolf had expected. "Nadine, how could you do something like that without even waiting to talk to me about it?" Ralph asked, hurt at being left out of the discussion.

"I'm sorry, Ralph," Nadine said, meaning it. "I just sorta got the thought in my head, and the next thing I knew I was talking with Bogo on the phone, making our case as potential foster parents."

"I... uh..." Ralph just couldn't find it in himself to be too angry with the downcast-looking tigress before him. He also wasn't too surprised at her desire to take in the human infant, what with the rare and strong fruity scent he had been smelling all around her ever since yesterday. It was actually even stronger today. Nadine, big strong, tough-as-nails Fangmeyer, wanted to become a mother. The last time he had smelled this particular aroma was just before they had been informed that they would never be able to have children of their own. He remembered how, despite the mask of calm and confidence his mate had worn, Ralph had seen how much the knowledge had deeply hurt her. And the pain of disappointment he had felt at the time was crushing for him as well. Not getting to be a daddy, not getting to hold a pup of his very own in his arms; that knowledge felt as though someone had sucker-punched him right in the gut. But he'd put on a brave face, much like Nadine had, in order to comfort her.

"I guess... I can't be too mad, what with how much you were doting on her..." Ralph said, his earlier smile returning. Nadine's face lit up as her eyes found his.

"I just can't believe that the chief would be so willing to help us with this," Ralph said, taking another sip.
"Well, he said that he wasn't particularly surprised at my call, after... uhm... catching a certain scent while we gave out report to him in his office yesterday..." Ralph did another spit take, once again coughing as he had also inhaled some of his drink.

"So... uh," Raph said after he had gotten his coughing under control, again, attempting to change the subject, "so, did he say how much paperwork is going to be involved?"

"A bit... also..." Nadine said, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Also, what?" Ralph asked.

"A representative is going to be coming here in a few days for an inspection, to make sure that we're prepared to take in a baby," Nadine said, her smile cracking through her attempted mask of calm.

"Oh... what does that mean?" Ralph asked, his mind instantly going to ideas of baby-proofing their home, stopping to realize that his tail was wagging with his building excitement at the possibility of it all.

*Are Nadine and I really gonna become a mommy and daddy?!* he wondered to himself. This morning was proving to be quite full of surprises for Ralph Wolford. He looked across at his mate, his paw once more holding hers. He slid his thumb over her wedding ring, which was a slightly larger match to his own, before he leaned across and kissed her passionately, almost knocking their plates off the table.

*Meanwhile...*

Baily yawned as he waited on his coffee-maker to finish filling the pot. He smiled as he spied his reflection in the mirror from his bedroom, having left the door open after shuffling out into the kitchen. He looked at his copper-red hair that was now tickling the back of his neck, and came to the conclusion that he was going to be needing a haircut soon, before he set about making himself some toast. Once more he was getting an early start before catching the bus that would take him into Tundra Town.

He yawned again as the gurgling from the coffee pot finished, and he switched it off, before
grabbing himself one of the mugs Sophia had bought him. He smiled as he held it in his hand, with an intricate design on it that she had told him symbolized her favorite fake radio show podcast, *Welcome to Sunset Valley*, that she frequently watched on FurTube and was always telling the human man that it was a show he would definitely enjoy.

*Maybe I should just break down and buy a computer... or at least a laptop*, he thought to himself as he looked around his apartment. Thanks to the program that Arnie had helped him get into, Baily now had a small, but comfortable, place to live. And in the months that he had been working for the rhino officer's elephant aunt, Phyllis, he had already earned quite a bit that he was mostly using to now pay bills and put up for savings. After so many years of being homeless, Baily was setting aside a proper slush fund, as a potential safety net. However, one look at his mostly Spartan home made Baily consider spending a little on certain creature comforts.

*Okay, fine... I'll call up Sophia when she's on her break and ask her to go computer shopping with me*, Baily thought, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he thought of the lioness. A part of him briefly wondered if he wasn't just thinking of an excuse for the two of them to spend some more time with one another, but then dismissed the idea.

*She's just a friend... besides, she's probably only interested in other lions... or at least other felines...* Baily thought with a shrug, right before his phone started to buzz on the counter where he had set it to charge. He looked at the screen, and smiled at the picture the two of them had taken together when Sophia had insisted they go out to eat at a restaurant called *Misty's On the Vine*, in the Rainforest District. The picture showed the two smiling at the camera, with her paw around his waist, her tail a slight blur since it had been in mid-swish when the capybara waitress had taken the picture for them.

"Hey, Sophia," he said as he answered.

"Hi, Baily!" The lioness' voice was chipper, as usual. "I totally got up today, forgetting that today was my day off, so I decided to call you and see if you were gonna be free this afternoon."

"Oh, uh, well," Baily said, thinking about what today's itinerary at the shop was supposed to be, "I have a few paw and rune stone readings, but those are all before noon. Also I do have to give the shop a once over, y'know to make sure all the displays are neat and presentable and all that. But," then Baily remembered, "oh yeah! Phyllis is totally gonna be hosting a seance after lunch, and since she hasn't trained me for it yet, I get to go home early!" As much as Baily loved working at *Eyevory Tusks*, even he enjoyed his days off.

"Awesome," the lioness's smile could he heard in her voice, "so what time will you get off?"
"Around one-ish," Baily said, having long since gotten used to his boss being a little lax when it came to exact deadlines, not that that stopped him from coming in on time or even a little early.

"Oh great! Wanna go catch a movie then?" Sophia asked.

"Sure! Any ideas as to what's playing?" Baily asked, it now occurring to him that he and Sophia had been seeing each other and spending a lot of time in each other's company quite a bit lately, but then pushed that thought away.

"OH! There's the remake of Justice Dis Quiet, and it's supposed to be good and gory!" Sophia's excitement made Baily chuckle. He would have never guessed that the chipper nurse would have been a fan of horror and violent movies, but she had long since showed him otherwise, including showing him her extensive collection at her apartment.

"Sounds fun to me. Should I take a bus to your place?" Baily asked, trying to remember the different buses he would need to take to make it to Sophie's apartment.

"I can always just meet you at the shop and we can go from there," Sophie offered, making Baily blush. Phyllis had been hinting, quite a bit actually, that the two were spending a lot of time with one another.

"Sure, sounds great," he said, suddenly wondering why he felt nervous all of a sudden.

"Awesome! See you at one-ish!" And with that, the lioness ended the call.

Baily poured a mug and looked himself over in the mirror again.

*Maybe I should shave today,* he thought as he felt the ginger stubble on his face.

*Would wearing that blazer that Sophia picked out for me be too much?* he wondered, sipping his coffee, preferring it black. His stomach rumbled as he looked at the clock on the microwave, prompting him to set about his normal morning routine, going about it a little faster than usual. Of course, that didn't do anything to diminish the wide grin he now had.
At the Zootopia Police Academy...

"UP AND AT 'EM, CADETS!" Major Friedkin yelled as she stood in the doorway, looking at the cadets, the majority of whom were already up and dressed for the next day of training. The polar bear instructor smirked as she looked at how this batch of recruits had all more or less shaped up. On more than one occasion, she had to actively keep from letting out a snort of laughter at some of their banter and antics, especially when the human or the hare cadets were involved. She nodded in approval before informing them that today they were going to be tested on what they had learned about taking down mammals bigger than themselves, and she looked forward to seeing how Cadet Cruz would be faring against the rhino in the ring. The human had greatly surprised her with his determination, his prior police experience obviously being of great help to him in training. She was also curious to see how Cadet Savage would fare against Craigson, whose pride was still wounded after being taken down by that bunny cadet a few years back, and was especially itching to go toe-to-toe with the hare.

"So, how do you think you're going to do, Jack?" Major Friedkin heard over the din of conversation from the recruits as she turned to go, easily picking out the human's voice.

"Well, a little bunny had to take down the rhino in order to pass, so I think I'm going to do just fine," came the casual banter of Cadet Savage.

"...But you're also a rabbit," Cadet Cruz pointed out.

"No, I'm a hare. Big difference," Jack said, rolling his eyes.

"...Okay then..." Walter said, deciding not to ask for further explanation as they followed the other cadets in filing out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! Also, in case any of you might have missed the teeny tiny little subtle hint that I dropped in this chapter, I am all aboard for the WolfMeyer train! WOO-WOO!!! (Train Noise)
Hey there, dear readers! I have returned with the next chapter of *The Keyhole!* I've gone ahead and decided to pick up the pace a little with my Zootopia fanfictions, so next I'll be working on my story, *Welcome to Sunset Valley!* If you haven't had the chance to give it a read yet, I recommend that you do just that! And before we begin this new chapter, I would also like to take this moment to thank all of you for being supportive and for generally being wonderful and kind! Now, please enjoy chapter 6, and feel free to let me know what you think!

"MOMMY!!! DADDY!!!" Emmitt and his wife, who lay curled up together beneath their blankets in the morning hours, both shot straight up at the sound of their youngest pup, who at age three was already towering over them, practically bouncing in excitement, waving a dollar in her hand. They both smiled and visibly calmed down. Emmitt saw his two boys, Randall and Orwell, rubbing their eyes in the doorway, having clearly been awoken by their much larger baby sister. Emmitt was about to lead Sarah and her brothers back to their rooms, when his mate gave his paw a gentle squeeze, and leaned in to kiss him lightly on the cheek.

"I'll take care of the boys," she said before hopping down in her nightgown. She signaled Sarah to lean down, which the dark skinned human toddler obediently did with a giggle as her mother gave her a kiss on the cheek as well, before she led the boys back to their rooms. Emmitt smiled as he watched his mate start herding the sleepy pups back out into the hall, and then turned his attention back to the little one standing, still very much excited, before him. He already had a feeling that he knew what this was about.

"Well, princess," he addressed his little girl who was standing there in her pink and white unicorn jammies, "what seems to be the matter?"

"Daddy! The toof fairy came! She came last night!" Sarah said, proudly showing Emmitt the dollar he had slipped underneath her pillow in exchange for the tooth of hers that had fallen out the previous day. She had been so excited, as apparently it was her first baby tooth to have fallen out. After he had done a quick search on the newly updated human section of NetDr, to make sure that a tooth falling out wasn't a sign of something serious in a young human, Emmitt had then reminded Sarah to place said tooth under her pillow for the magical tooth fairy to come and exchange it for a dollar. The very idea had made Sarah almost too excited to go to sleep, until a certain lullaby had been hummed.

"Well, that's wonderful, princess!" he said, opening his arms for a hug. Sarah, despite he bouncing
excitement, gently leaned in and hugged her new daddy, before she felt the arms of her new mommy wrapping around her waist. Sarah looked down and smiled, a gap in her teeth on the left side of her mouth. Emmitt let out a chuckle as he checked the clock on the nightstand, noting he had another six and a half hours before his appointment with Mr. Big over in Tundra Town. He reached up and patted Sarah on the head.

"That's just so amazing, princess, but now I think it's time for you to go back to bed," Emmitt said, just as his wife gently took Sarah's free hand in her paw. A gently tug and the now suddenly yawning Sarah, her energy having come and fled in a matter of minutes apparently, once more obeyed her new mommy. She briefly thought of her old mommy, back in Nawwins, as Sarah pronounced it. She remembered, when she was really, really little, how her mommy had been so happy all the time. But then she started drinking and getting angry, and then seeing all of those strange men. Sarah let out a big yawn, which caught her newer, smaller, and much nicer mommy's attention.

"Here we are, baby," she said as she looked at her, from her perspective, much larger bundle of joy as she led Sarah in to the bright pink princess-themed bedroom that they had made just for her, which the tyke had been so ecstatic to see when they had finally managed to bring her home with them. When Sarah had described her old room, completely unaware of the horrid conditions she had initially been raised in, Emmitt had noticed his wife tearing up at the time. She smiled now as she tucked Sarah beneath her pink blankets, setting the dollar on the bedside table.

"Notta baby," Sarah said, a yawn replacing her usual pout whenever she claimed to not be a baby.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, but you are my little pup," was the reply Sarah got, which seemed sufficient to her.

"Mommy?" asked a sleepy Sarah.

"Yes?"

"Will you stay?" Sarah asked, her eyes drooping. She blinked once to see her mommy smiling warmly, which always made her feel special and set her young mind at ease, without fail.

"Of course, princess." Sarah watched as her mommy took a seat in a chair near her bed with tall legs, and started humming what was quickly becoming Sarah's routine lullaby. She waited a few minutes after watching the lightly snoring, bundled form of Sarah, leaning in for a gentle kiss on her forehead, and then hopped down off the chair, making her way back to her and Emmitt's room. He smiled at his wife as she entered and crawled back under the blankets with him, snuggling up close
as he wrapped his tail around her.

"I take it that she went right out?" Emmitt asked, quietly, his wife nodding as she nuzzled into his neck.

"Yup, our little princess is now down for the count," was the reply he heard before Emmitt heard a slightly stifled yawn escape his wife's muzzle.

"Hopefully for another few hours at least," Emmitt only half-joked, a smile still plastered on his own muzzle. There was a sudden flash of memory of when the boys had been Sarah's age, and of how very little sleep he and his mate had gotten then... and how, despite being tired, they had loved every minute of it. He drifted off to sleep, hugging his wife close, his chin resting on the top of her head.

Meanwhile...

Nick practically stumbled down the steps as he made his way to the kitchen, smiling at the sight of the little grey whirlwind of activity that was his bunny, who had apparently already jogged, showered, and made both breakfast and lunch for Eli.

"You could have nudged me awake, Carrots, and I would have been more than happy to help out," Nick said as he leaned against the door frame, casual-looking despite his bedfur. Judy turned and rolled her eyes at the sight of her fox, jogging over and reaching up to kiss the side of his russet-colored muzzle.

"I did, three times," she said as she hopped back onto the stool she had been standing on at the counter, packing up the bag lunch for Eli. Nick looked at her, already in her ZPD uniform, even though their shift didn't start until, thankfully, an hour after they saw Eli off to school. While the chief could be strict, and made it clear, in absolutely no uncertain terms, that he preferred his precinct to run like clockwork, he did offer up certain shift options to those of his officers with children. Unfortunately, after learning this, Nick had made the comment that Bogo was actually a big softie underneath his hard projected image where the cape buffalo could hear him in the atrium, landing the fox, and unfortunately his bunny partner, extra shifts on parking duty for almost a full month.

"Oh?" Nick said, rubbing the back of his head, "Sorry about that, Fluff. Anything I can help with now?"
"...Will you really be right there with me when I ask Eli, today, how he would feel about talking to a child psychologist?" Judy asked quietly as she set the last of the dishes she had washed onto the special dish-rack to dry, turning to look at Nick with her bright lavender eyes, worry written all over her face and evidenced by her suddenly drooping ears. Nick's piercing emerald eyes searched his bunny's face, detecting that something was wrong, and strode right over to her. He picked her up off the stool and spun around once with her in his arms, nuzzling her as he held her close. She let out a light giggle that lifted the fox's heart, and her smile returned as she drew comfort from her fox.

"Of course I'll be there with you Judy," Nick said, opting out of using one of his pet names for her to further show his sincerity. "Did something happen with Eli?"

Judy looked away for a moment before looking back up, leaning her head against his chest. "You know how I like to check in on Eli from time to time when he sleeps?" Nick nodded, having joked about her going to give the kit nightmares about a grey-faced ghost popping up out of the darkness.

"Well," Judy continued, "I've noticed, underneath his bed, a few candy bars, some bags of chips, and some bottles of water."

"Oh?" Nick said, already an idea forming in his mind.

"Yeah, and every time I check... I don't know... I just think that it's going to be gone... but the pile's still there... and... I don't know why.... but it just makes me worried..." The bunny's ears drooped again, and Nick smiled down reassuringly at her.

"I think I may know what that is, actually," he said as his big bushy tail curled around Judy's legs, protectively.

"You do?" Judy asked, her ears perking right back up and swiveling to face Nick as her curiosity was piqued. Nick nodded in response.

"Yeah. See, I have this buddy, who works with the child services as a counselor for the kids," Nick explained to the bunny in his arms, resisting an urge to nuzzle her some more before continuing, "and anyways, he once explained to me the subject of food hoarding."

"Food hoarding?" Judy asked, having never heard the term before, but of course trusting her fox's nod implicitly.
"Yes. See, when kids are shifted from one home to another, sometimes they develop a sort of instinct to find and hide a stash of food. And it stems from a, usually subconscious, worry about food and its availability for them in the future. Sometimes... for a good reason..." Nick explained. Judy reached out and hugged him tightly.

"That's not something a child should ever have to worry about!" Judy said, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Nick looked down at his bunny, and nuzzled her cheek, just as she let out a quiet "especially not my kit," as Nick held her as she held him. After a few moments, they pulled away, with Judy letting out a slight sniffle.

"So, would I be correct in assuming just telling Eli that he's never going to have to worry about his future meals ever again won't be enough?" Judy asked. Nick shook his head a little.

"Afraid not, Fluff, not by itself. But, according to my friend, it's something that, when a child is in a stable home for a long enough period of time, they'll eventually grow out of it." Nick then reached out a paw, and gently lifted Judy's downcast face to where he could once more look into her beautiful eyes, leaning down to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"Hey now, c'mon Carrots," he said, making his tone shift into a more playful one, "considering how stable of a home you've gone and made for him, Eli'll probably stop with the stash of food soon enough."

That brought a smile to Judy's face as she took one of his paws into both of hers. "How stable of a home we've made for him," she said, bringing a slow and genuine smile to her fox's muzzle once more. "You've done so much for Eli as well, Slick, so don't go selling yourself short on that." They both leaned in for a kiss, and were both startled to hear Judy's phone start buzzing. She picked it up and saw a MuzzleTime request from her mom's phone. She looked up at Nick, who smiled before planting another quick kiss on her forehead and heading over to the coffee pot to make himself a mug. She faintly heard him mumble something about bunnies being so emotional, which of course made her eyes roll, before she accepted the call, and was looking at the face of her mother and father, Bonnie and Stu Hopps.

"Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" Judy said cheerfully, not wanting to let on her anxiety for the upcoming talk with their grandkit today.

"Hey there, Jude the Dude!" Stu said excitedly to his daughter.
"How are you and Eli doing, sweetie?" Bonnie asked.

"Oh, well... we're doing alright. Just got done getting Eli's lunch ready for school today."

"That's great," Stu said, looking back over his shoulder, concern creeping onto his face that Judy immediately picked up on.

"Is something wrong?" the grey bunny asked, making the fox turn to look at her with a quirked eyebrow as he sipped his coffee. Stu and Bonnie shared a look before the matronly rabbit answered.

"Well... we were kind of hoping to ask for some advice..." Bonnie said, wringing her paws together, nervously.

"About?" Judy let the question hung in the air.

"Uhm... well..." Bonnie looked to her husband, and he nodded.

"Some humans have been found all the way out here in Bunnyburrow," Stu said, being straightforward.

"Oh, really? Wow!" Judy said, amazed that her sleepy hometown, so far away from Zootopia, had some humans turn up. "How many?"

"Seven," Bonnie answered, her daughter's enthusiasm always being infectious and thus bringing a smile to her own muzzle, "four females and three males. One of the males and two of the females are adults, one boy and two little girls, and a little baby boy."

"A baby? All by himself?" Judy's ears drooped a little.

"He was by himself until Gideon found him under his porch. He had heard the crying and gone to investigate," Bonnie said, smiling at the memory of the sight of the fox carrying around the giggling little mammal, just a little while ago.
"Wait, seriously? Gid found him?" Judy let out a giggle at the idea of the fox suddenly finding a small human. "I'll bet he was pretty surprised."

"That's putting it mildly," Bonnie said, chuckling a little, "he was shaking like a leaf when he saw the baby, unsure of what to do. But thankfully, Sharla was there and kept a level head."

"That sounds like Shar-- ... uh, Mom? How long ago was it that the baby was found?" Judy asked, her ears sticking straight up.

"A little over an hour ago. We would have called you sooner, but we thought that you might be asleep," Stu interjected.

"But... you said the baby was found underneath Gid's porch, right?" Judy pressed.

"Well, yeah. According to Sharla, she and Gideon suddenly heard a baby crying, and spent the better part of a half-an-hour searching for the source, finally figuring out where it was coming from." Bonnie explained, suddenly realizing what Judy seemed to be so confused about, hiding her smile behind her paw.

"But... what was Sharla doing over at Gideon's place so early in the morning?" Judy asked, trying to figure out what her black sheep friend could have possibly been up to. She had gotten back in touch with her friend after she had gone on to pursue her dream of one day becoming an astronaut and joined the airforce. The little ewe had toughened up quite a bit in the military, advancing despite some initial raised eyebrows at a sheep joining any branch of the military. Then a thought popped into her head.

"Oh no, please don't tell me that she went over to Gid's place to get back at him for being a bully to us all those years ago!" Judy asked, suddenly worried for Gideon's safety, as the little ewe's training had included paw-to-paw combat, and also for her childhood friend's career. Assaulting an old childhood bully could not possibly help with advancing in rank.

*Or in this case it would be hoof to paw,* Judy thought before she noticed the chuckle coming from her father, as well as Nick who smiled at her smugly as though he had caught something she had missed. Judy's mother smiled at her daughter before explaining.

"Not quite, sweetie. I would have thought that Sharla had told you, but I guess she wanted to keep things a secret," Bonnie said.
"Keep what a secret?" Judy asked, suspicion filling her voice.

"Well, the fact that for the last three years, she and Gideon Grey have been dating," Bonnie said, while Stu tried to reign in his uncontrollable chuckling.

"WHAT?!" Judy asked, her ears rigidly pointing straight up in shock.

*Sharla and Gid?! How?!* Then Judy looked up at her smirking fox, and rolled her eyes.

"Did she say why she felt that she couldn't tell me about it?" Judy asked, now feeling a little hurt that her friend had left her out of the loop.

"Well, apparently they were trying to keep their relationship a secret, not that it wasn't perfectly obvious to everyone in town, what with how they acted around one another," Bonnie explained, smiling at the memory of how whenever Sharla would get leave from the base, she would always spend quite a bit of time in the fox's company, who would always stutter on his words every time the black-wooled ewe was near. That and the way he would stare after her like a love-sick puppy, be it when she was dressed regularly or in her uniform.

"There was actually a betting pool going of when they would finally come right out and admit it," Stu said, having finally gotten himself under control.

"It's just... wow!" Judy said, her confusion being replaced with excitement. "That's great!"

"It really is quite a sweet little story," Bonnie said, "and their engagement just makes it all the sweeter." The older rabbit's paws shot over her mouth as she just realized the verbal bombshell she had just dropped onto her daughter.

"They're... engaged?!" Judy ask, having to take a seat at the kitchen table, her head swimming with this new information.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm sure that Sharla had wanted to tell you, but was probably worried that we would somehow drag the information out of you." Bonnie soothed.
"...Still though..." Once more, Judy felt a little hurt that her friend had kept something so big from her.

"I think that we're getting a little off topic here," Stu chimed in.

"Oh, right, you two called for advice about something," Judy said, putting her mildly hurt feelings aside for the time being. If her parents had called for advice, then Judy was prepared to go to any lengths and use all of the skills of her Police Academy training and her current amount of experience from the force to help her family. "Is it a string of robberies? Because if Travis' cousin's been causing trouble again, me and Nick will both personally come out there and cuff him to the Bunnyburrow sign."

"Hmm? Oh no dear, it's nothing like that," Bonnie said, looking over her shoulder once more, "we were just wondering if you knew how to go about ordering custom-tailored pants."

"Huh?" Judy responded, caught completely off guard, much to Nick's amusement as he continued to look on.

"Oh, well, one of the humans ripped the leg of a fancy-looking tux," Stu explained, "and he doesn't have any other clothes to wear. We just figured that since you got Eli, that you found a tailor who can make pants in... uh... human size, with no tail holes in 'em. And if you know of how we could go about helping the humans who arrived here, the adult ones at least, place some orders... well, orders that some of the townsfolk putting the humans up until they can find more permanent housing will be placing, and working out a way for them to repay us later."

Judy looked at her phone, her mouth wide open, before handing it to Nick, who winked at her before taking it in his paw.

"Well hello there, Mr. Hopps," Nick said, his smooth smile on his muzzle. Stu smiled back at the fox who had been looking out for his little girl out there in the big city.

"Nick, I've told you before to call me Stu," the older male rabbit said. Nick smiled kindly in return.

"And I keep forgetting, Stu. And hello there, Bonnie," he said.

"Hello there Nick, how are you?" she asked.
"We're all doing pretty great, Bonnie. And as it so happens, I have just the friend who can help with your little human clothing dilemma," Nick said, giving Judy another casual wink, before he continued to give her parents further details. Judy continued to sit on, processing the information she had just been given, but stopping to roll her eyes when Nick said that he had a friend, a smile playing on her lips as she watched her fox get along with her parents, a sight that always warmed her heart.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! And once more, I would like to thank my friend, Trismegistus Shandy, for proofreading the chapter!
Chapter 7

Judy and Nick sat across the kitchen table from Eli, holding each other's paw. They said nothing as they waited for their kit's reaction to what had been proposed just moments ago.

"You really think I need to see a therapist?" the human asked, confused.

"Your mother and I," Nick spoke, giving the rabbit's paw a reassuring squeeze, "both feel that it would be best for you to think about seeing a professional who can help you work through any confusing feelings or...issues that you might have," Nick said, attempting to use the word "issues" delicately.

"...Did I do something wrong?" Eli asked, his face a mask of worry. The look of fear she saw in her adopted kit's eyes was nearly enough to break her heart.

"Absolutely not, sweetie!" the bunny said. "You haven't done anything wrong! We just want to help you, and we both agree that seeing someone would be the best way to do that."

Eli processed what he was told. Outwardly he was trying to convey a sense of calm, while inwardly he felt a familiar sense of dread begin to return. The same feeling he would get just before he was about to be sent somewhere else. But looking into Judy's lavender eyes brought back the memory of her promise to never let him go. Part of him, a part that he had buried since that moment, was skeptical that she would keep that promise. But a newer, more hopeful part of himself wanted to believe her. Eli swallowed and nodded.
If... mom thinks that this might help... then it's worth a try, Eli thought to himself, brushing a stray lock of his brown hair out of his eyes.

Judy smiled before she let go of Nick's paw and hopped down. She walked around the table and hopped up into Eli's lap, wrapping her arms as far as they would go around his torso. Eli gently hugged her back, discreetly wiping away a single tear that had welled in his deep blue eyes. Nick smiled as he was about to get up and join in on the hug, when his phone started to go off. He would have normally just sent whoever was calling to voicemail, but he recognized the ringtone. It was his mother's.

"Oh, hey Mom, look I and Judy are in the midd-" Nick started before a female voice cut him off.

"Don't you Oh, hey Mom me, young mammal!" the voice lectured, making Nick cringe back reflexively. "Would you care to explain how it is that you and Judy suddenly have a kit, and your father and I don't find out that we're grandparents until we hear about it on FURTUBE?!"

Beneath his russet fur, Nick's face paled. He had taken his time in telling his parents that his long-term girlfriend of almost five years had adopted a human kit and that he had become... well he wasn't certain just what he was legally to Eli, but still thought of Eli as his own, because he wasn't sure about how they would take the news. Granted, when he had first introduced Judy to them, they had pretty much immediately adored her.

"W-W-Well, Mom, see, the thing of it is-" Nick started again, only to be cut off mid-sentence...again.

"Oho, no you don't! You are not going to try and wheel and deal me, Nicholas Piberius Wilde!" Nick winced again, convinced now more than ever that the real reason parents gave their children middle names was solely for the purpose of letting them know when they were in trouble.

"M-Mom, I'm not trying to wheel and deal you, I'm just trying to explain that I was going to tell you all about it and introduce you to Eli, I swear. But things sort of happened and-"

"And you had absolutely no problem letting Bonnie and Stu know about him!" Marian said, and Nick's tail curled up a little as he started to hear some of the hurt in his mom's voice.

"Mom... I'm sorry," Nick said while looking down, feeling guilty.
"... Oh Nicky..." the voice of Nick's mother let out an audible sigh, "it's alright. You can make it up to us this weekend."

Nick suddenly froze where he sat, looking like a realistic-looking fox statue.

"Wh-What's that about this weekend?" he asked, already knowing the answer in his heart.

"Why, your father and I are going to be staying with you and Judy and our new grandkit this weekend, of course," his mother said simply.

"Wait, don't you think that that's a little soon?" Nick asked.

"Nicky," his mother's voice turned stern, "we're coming and that's final. We both love you and Judy and Eli very much. See you in three days!" And with that the call ended. Nick just stared dumbly at the phone in his paws, before suddenly looking up to see Judy and Eli watching him, both trying to hold back giggles.

"What about any of that is even remotely funny?" he asked, trying to make his own voice sound stern, but failing.

"Oh, Slick," Judy said, "it's just too funny to see you act so afraid of your mother. I mean, she's just the sweetest mammal I've ever met."

"Yeah, because she adores you. According to her, you helped to make a better mammal out of me," Nick said, almost petulantly.

"Well, she's right," Judy said just before she reached up and kissed Eli on the cheek. She then hopped down and walked back over to her seat by Nick and climbed back into it, taking his paw into hers, "just as you helped to make me into a better mammal."

Nick smiled, then noticing Eli looking embarrassed at their display. "What's the matter, bud? Can't stand when your folks get a little lovey-dovey?" He snickered, before Judy used her free paw to punch him in his arm. The fox winced and rubbed the spot. "I was going to say that I know exactly how that feels, Carrots."
"Uhm... Nick?" Eli asked, suddenly realizing something.

"Yeah, bud?" Nick answered.

"Does this mean that you're my dad now?" Eli asked. Almost immediately after him asking it, one without Judy's sense of hearing could have heard a pin drop.

*Meanwhile...*

"Robert." Marian called up the stairs, the older russet-colored vixen tucking her phone into her purse which was sitting on on the nearby coffee table, "did you find it yet?"

"Not yet, honey." a deeper voice called back down, followed almost immediately by a loud thunk and some choice curse words.

"Now don't you go using that kind of language in front of our new grandkit!" Marian admonished, looking into a mirror on the wall as she adjusted the cream colored cardigan she was wearing, her green eyes shining with excitement. "According to Bonnie, humans seem to be very skittish." After their initial introduction, Nick and Judy's parents had become fast friends, and kept in regular contact with each other.

"That's a laugh, a bunny calling a much larger animal skittish," Marian heard Robert say, followed by a chuckle, followed by another loud thunk and some more cursing, indicating that Robert had once again bumped his head against something, again.

"Robert," Marian used a warning tone in her voice.

"Honey, I promise I'll be gentle around him." There was an even louder thud followed by an audible crashing sound, along with a shattering. "Uh-oh..."

"Robert, please tell me that that wasn't the ceramic goat I was repairing for Teresa," Marian groaned.
"Okay, it wasn't the ceramic goat you were repairing for your friend who never stops talking, Teresa," Robert's voice called back, just before there was some sort of shuffling sound.

"Then what was it?" Marian asked, her left foot tapping.

An answer was not forthcoming.

"It was the ceramic goat, wasn't it?" She asked.

"Of course it was the ceramic goat. Why would anyone just leave it perched on some boxes in a dark room?" Robert called back.

"What kind of a fox doesn't have night vision?" Marian shot back.

"It's darker than normal in this room!" Robert shot back, his footsteps indicating that he was walking towards the stairs.

"You need to get your eyes checked," Marian chided, not for the first time.

"My eyes are just fine!" Robert said as he descended the stairs, an old cigar box in his paws.

"Robby," Marian said to the large, arctic fox with the piercing blue eyes, "you really need to see an optometrist."

Robert sighed, "I can see just fine, honey."

"I'm over here, Robert," Marian said as she watched her husband turn away from the orange and red colored rain coat hanging near the front door.

"... I knew that..." he said, his perked ears picking up the sound of his mate's sigh of exasperation, followed by the sound of her taking in another breath, surely to begin lecturing him about going to an
eye doctor.

"I found it!" he said, hoping to forestall the conversation yet again.

"We'll see about that," Marian grumbled as she took the cigar box from his outstretched paws and opened it. Despite her annoyance at the stubbornness of Robert, her muzzle broke out into a smile as she looked at the contents of the box. In it were a few pictures of the three of them together when Nick had been a little kit, along with some small trinkets that he had collected... before the ugliness at the Junior Ranger Scout meeting. Marian moved a few things around before she found it. She smiled, Robert having been correct in his assumption that he had found what they were looking for. It was a little worn, but she could fix that easily enough.

"There it is, good job, Robby," Marian said, leaning up a little to kiss her mate on his muzzle. His tail started to quickly wag back and forth as he leaned in to kiss her back. After their muzzles parted, Marian playfully thumped his chest.

"And I'm making you an appointment to get your eyes examined," she said as she started to walk away, her tail swishing in satisfaction.

"My eyes are just fine!" Robert insisted, staring at the fuzzy form of his wife's tail swishing playfully. He looked up and, after some squinting, made out the look she was giving him, and his own tail curled up as he lowered his head.

"Yes dear," he said after a few moments of her staring at him.

_Elsewhile..._

"Alright, Russell, how are things?" the large polar bear in the grey suit and red tie asked the human teen who was sitting in the big leather chair across from him. The human had short sandy-blonde fur atop his head, and deep brown eyes.

"Okay... better than they used to be, actually..." Russell said.
"That's always wonderful to hear," Barry said, smiling. "Now I know that I've asked you this before, buddy, but how are you feeling about tomorrow? It will be your first day of school here in Zootopia."

"Uhm... kinda nervous, I guess," Russell said, thinking back to what his old high school had been like and now adding other species like rhinos and tigers to the mix. The thought had him a little worried.

"That's perfectly normal, Russell," Barry said reassuringly.

"I-I know," Russell began, "uhm... but still... part of me is really scared that I'm gunna get trampled or gored or something like that..."

"Well, you certainly wouldn't be the first student to have such worries. But it's also important to know that the mammals of this world have evolved past what you've described to me of your world," Barry said, having been fascinated to learn that humans were the only intelligent species back where Russell originated.

"I get that, I really do," Russell said, holding up a hand, "it's just that we humans are evolved and yet... we can be kinda... cruel..." Russell briefly flashed back to several instances of when he was bullied.

Barry nodded his head understandingly. "It is something that, unfortunately, does happen. However, it's important to remember that cruel mammals are only a small part of the population. It's been my experience that the majority of mammals out there are willing to give others a chance."

Russell looked at his hands, and fidgeted a little. "No one ever believed me when I tried to talk to anyone. The teachers didn't do anything to make the bullying stop. It just got to the point where it became easier to stop trying to talk to anyone at all."

"Which makes it all the more amazing how much you've come out of your shell, Russell. You are stronger than you realize," Barry said, happy to see a smile form on Russell's face. "Besides, I'd be willing to bet that a stable home like the Spitz' helped a lot in that area... not to mention a certain little fox kit."

Russell frowned. "I just don't get it though," he said, looking up into Barry's steel grey eyes.
"What is that, Russell?" Barry wondered.

"Why Ethan likes me so much. It's not bad... I just don't get it..." Russell said, thinking about how the little grey fox continued to follow him around and say his name at every available opportunity.

"Well," Barry thought it over for a moment, "I can't really say. However, what I can say is that, for whatever reason, that little guy seems to view you as a big brother."

That brought another smile to Russell's face, which always made Barry glad. He remembered the scared and sad boy he had first encountered all those months ago. While Russell still needed to work through some issues, Barry was happy to see how far he had progressed since then.

"And the other children?" Barry's voice cut through the comfortable silence that had started.

"Oh, uh... well, they kinda like to hang around me as well, mostly. Not like Ethan does, but still," Russell said.

At that moment...

"Okay, so we know where the first human to appear lives," Honey Badger said to Edwin, as he watched her circle a photo of the boy known as Eli with a red marker, "we just have to figure out a way to get a hold of him. Any thoughts on that, doctor?"

In the days since his escape, Edwin had been enthusiastically discussing the situation regarding the human creatures with his new compatriot. Although the armadillo had begun to notice that Doctor Honey seemed to be more frantic about getting ahold of one of the humans, particularly Eli, than he himself was.

"Well," Edwin began, "we have to bear in mind that the one known as Eli is still currently under the protection of officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, who still seem to view it as a surrogate child, or something to that effect. So that kinda makes it a high risk one to capture, what with the entire ZPD
most likely putting all of their resources and mammal power in relocating the creature and apprehending those that absconded with it."

The fidgety badger let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine... I see your point, Doctor... Well then, how about the little one? The one that the otter family took in?"

Edwin thought it over for a moment. "It might be our best bet."

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, folks! I certainly hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! Be sure to let me know what you think!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

And I have returned once more with the next chapter of *The Keyhole!* I cannot even begin to tell you all how much fun it is to work on this story, or how much knowing that people enjoy it means to me. I promise to try and pick up how often I update it. I hope that you like the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"N-Nick?" Eli asked in a quiet voice, looking rather nervous. He looked on at the russet fox before him, who sat perfectly still as though frozen in time, and wondered if he had done something wrong.

Nick, for his part, was trying to both understand the full gravity of the question that had been asked of him by the human kit, as well as how to answer it. In his head, the word 'Dad' was echoing, having left an impact. He knew that he cared for Eli, just as much as his adopted bunny mother did. He knew how much he loved Judy, and after a moment of thinking, knew that he felt something more than just caring for Eli. But was that enough to give Eli a satisfactory answer? Was it enough to make him Eli's father? He and Judy were not yet married, even though they had moved in with one another, and he had already been thinking of asking her to marry him before Eli fell into their lives.

"Nick?" Judy's voice broke him out of his stupor.

"Oh, uh, w-well, buddy," he said, turning to Eli who was looking as nervous as he himself felt, "I'm not really sure if I count just yet..." he trailed off, seeing the crestfallen look on Eli's face, his eyes looking downward.

"But," he said, "I-I-I," Nick stammered a little, trying to find the words, "I'd like to be." The last bit almost came out a whisper, but the fox managed to steady his voice. Eli looked back up, and then down into Nick's eyes, his expression brightening.

"R-Really?" Eli asked.

"Really, Bud," Nick said, able to feel the warm smile on his mate's muzzle without even having to turn to look at her, "if you don't mind the idea of a former con-mammal being your D-Dad."
Tears began to form in the corners of Eli's eyes, making him look away as he tried to discreetly wipe them. Nick hopped down from his seat and walked over to Eli, gesturing for the kit to lean down, gently wrapping his arms around Eli's neck. Judy looked on, discreetly filming the moment between the two. The look on Nick's face was identical to the one he'd had when she had first given him his badge.

**Maybe now he'll quit dragging his feet on the proposal,** Judy thought to herself, feeling not only barely contained joy but also relief. She had imagined the conversation with Eli about seeing a child psychologist going a number of ways, but this was by far a better outcome than she could have ever imagined. She frowned a little when her phone started to buzz. She looked down to see the picture Nick had taken of the chief when the cape buffalo had thought he wasn't being watched, attempting to practice some moves from Gazelle's backup dancers. Despite the comedic scene of Bogo about to fall over frozen in time, Judy frowned. The chief only ever called for serious business. She hit the answer button.

**ZPD Precinct 1...**

"Hopps," Chief Bogo said into the phone once his rabbit officer answered.

"Chief? Is something wrong?" came Judy's voice, laced with concern.

"We have a problem," Bogo said. "Edwin Shellison was reported missing."

Bogo listened to the silence on the other end, letting the news sink in.

"He escaped? How?!" Judy asked.

"That's still being looked into, but so far the evidence is suggesting that he may have had some help," Bogo said, his deep voice like thunder.

"Who in their right mind would help that lunatic escape? Oh sweet cheese and crackers, if he so much as shows his face anywhere near my kit," Judy trailed off. Bogo's ears twitched as he heard a very familiar voice, minus the usual amounts of sarcasm or snark.
"Hopps, calm down," Bogo ordered, "everyone's already been alerted about what's happened, and I'm increasing a police presence in the areas of your home and West Mammalia Middle School. If he does try for your son, we'll net him."

"Hopefully we'll find him soon," Judy said, her voice showing her worry. Bogo felt a twinge that he snuffed down, knowing full well that keeping strong was the best path forward for situations like this.

"We will, Hopps. Now, based on Wilde's more-than-likely sarcastic murmuring, you've got some explanations of the situation to make," Bogo said, unable to stop the small smile that formed on his muzzle.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," Judy said before their call was ended. Bogo's smile didn't last long as he looked down at the open file on his desk.

According to the report, several orderlies had been drugged, one even shot with a tranquilizer. What's more, a number of the more dangerous and openly hostile patients had been released that same night, no doubt to sow enough confusion for Edwin to escape. Thankfully, first responders had been able to round up and detain all of the other patients.

*He definitely had help... someone who had access to a tranq gun and knew the facility and patients well enough to pull this off...* Bogo thought to himself as he sipped from his steaming mug.

Meanwhile...

"Emmitt," the voice of Mrs. Otterton called out in the morning stillness of the rainforest district, "I know how to take care of flowers. You and the kids go have a good time today."

Emmitt looked from where he was buckling little Sarah into her carseat, the little human girl letting out a yawn as she sat still for her daddy. She looked to her two big brothers who were sitting next to her and smiled, now missing a couple more teeth. Emmitt looked a little chastened after he had been giving his wife some last minute advice on some of the more delicate flowers in the shop.
"Sorry, honey," he said, looking up to see her smile and roll her eyes, "it's just that the orchids have been acting strangely lately. I think that maybe we should have the potting soil tested."

"Dear," the motherly otter said, pulling her violet cardigan closer around her shoulders as she stepped closer to her husband, giving him a peck on the cheek, "all of which we can handle later. Every checkup is important."

"Yes, dearest," Emmitt said, casually removing his glasses and kissing his wife.

"Besides," Mrs. Otteron said as she turned to head back inside, her tail flicking a little tauntingly, "you're better at keeping them calm, which, as we both know, is important when taking children to the doctor."

Emmitt silently agreed with his wife's wisdom. Their boys were older than Sarah, and so not necessarily as terrified as they used to be. But Sarah was still a bit skittish around strangers, and the family doctor that they usually went to was on vacation. Emmitt smiled at his new big little girl reassuringly, and then climbed into the new SUV they had gotten, which was much bigger than what he was used to, but thankfully the driver's seat had been reformatted with otters in mind. They had gotten it when it became apparent that Sarah was too big for their last one. Unbeknownst to Emmitt, someone was watching the entire exchange. As the otter backed out of the driveway, a brown car with tinted windows started up, and slowly began to follow them. Inside the car was a badger, who was driving, and an armadillo, who was scribbling notes furiously down onto a clipboard.

"Alright, after observing the family unit, we have ascertained that they are taking it along with their pups to a scheduled check-up," Honey Badger said.

"Yes," Edwin said as he checked some of his notes, "the creature has also apparently lost a few more teeth, at least based on what you've told me. I suppose that the otters are treating it like an actual small child losing their milk teeth, at least as some species do."

"Ridiculous, I know, but correct," the badger said as she tailed the SUV.

"I think that an attempted capturing of it would most likely end in failure today, as so far it seems like they are taking the subject to a frequented doctor's office. They might go to a park, but that will also have too many potential witnesses and good samaritans." Edwin let out a sigh as he removed his glasses and rubbed in between his eyes.
"Patience, Doctor Shellison," Honey reminded the armadillo, a coy smile on her muzzle. "Our window of opportunity shall reveal itself in time. For now, we must be patient."

Elsewhere...

Renato looked around the icy streets of Tundratown, pulling his thick green coat closer around himself. He smiled a little as he pulled the light blue scarf that Lily had knitted for him tighter around his neck, enjoying both its warmth and her scent. He was both tugged out of his thoughts and along the sidewalk, where the black jaguar had to side-step several smaller mammals. He looked at the delicate pale hand in his much larger paw, and was glad that his dark fur concealed his blush. Lily Blackthorne smiled as she looked about in wonder, making it her mission to explore every inch of the district. Renato had volunteered to be her guide, having spent quite a bit of time in the district working for Mr. Big, and thus knowing the area better than most. He was also worried about the petite human woman wandering around by herself. Not that Lily seemed to mind Renato's company, quite the opposite actually.

"Renato, this city is absolutely amazing!" Lily exclaimed as they walked through a street lined with many colorful stalls selling different things.

"That is what I thought when I first came here," Renato said as he quickened his pace to walk next to Lily, happily still holding her hand, "and what I still think to this day."

As the stalls gave way to shops, Lily stopped them in front of a store that had apparently caught her eye.

"Eyevory Tusks?" Lily read the name of the shop aloud.

"I think a friend of mine mentioned something about this shop being a New Age shop," Renato said, searching his memory, "one that also does fortune tellings of some kind."

Lily loved the accent in Renato's voice, giving it the exotic lilt that she found so charming. "A fortune teller? Oh, can we see if they'll tell us our fortune?" She turned to look up at the jaguar, her blue and green eyes sparkling in delight. Renato chuckled to himself.
"Well, of course, Lily," Renato said, politely opening the door for her. She smiled and, still holding his paw, led him inside. Lily's eyes had to take a moment to adjust to the darker interior of the store after coming in out of the brightness, but Renato's eyes adjusted very quickly. He stopped for a bit when he saw, polishing the glass counter, another human, this one just as pale skinned as Lily, but with short-cropped red fur atop his head, as opposed to Lily's long, midnight-black locks. The human looked up and smiled at the pair.

"Welcome to our little corner of the physical plane known as Eyevory Tusks. My name is Baily, and how can we help you today?" Baily said.

"We were hoping to have our fortune read," Lily said while Renato looked at some of the displays, having to hold back a snort of laughter at the high prices being charged for different colored quartz crystals.

"I've seen a few other humans out and about, but you're the first one I've actually gotten to speak to," Lily said. Baily looked a little surprised, but gave Lily a genuine smile.

"I've met a few myself, but yeah, I'm mostly in the company of other mammals," Baily explained.

"As for having your fortune read, you've come to the right place," Baily said, remembering what Phyllis instructed him to say to newcomers. "Please follow me into the back." Renato noticed how inquisitive Lily seemed to be about the other human, but said nothing.

The pair followed the skinny and pale human, who was wearing a bright green sweater that Renato, with her practiced eye, could tell had been hand knitted. They were led into a back room behind a red velvet curtain, to a table with three chairs around it. Two simpler looking chairs were placed next to each other, across from a much larger padded faux leather chair. They took a seat, only then realizing that they were still holding each others' paw, and let go.

"Now, is there a preferred method that you would like me to use for your reading?" Baily asked.

"Oh, uhm," Lily said, looking up at Renato, "I don't know much about fortune-telling."

"Neither do I, actually," Renato said, grinning sheepishly.

"That's okay," Baily said, pulling out a worn-looking cigar box and taking out a deck of Tarot cards,
these all featuring humans on them, "maybe for your first time I could start you off with a Tarot reading?"

The two readily agreed. As the human shuffled the deck and started to recite a little poem, Renato sniffed, catching a faint trace of a smell that had him confused. It was coming from Baily, or more accurately, his green sweater. Renato wasn't sure why, but it smelled very much like a lioness.

"The first card," Baily said pointing to a face up card in the center of the red clothed table, "is the Querent card. It represents you. Think of your question as I shuffle my deck again."

They both agreed, Lily closing her eyes as she thought of her question, and Renato looking over at her, partially wishing that she would resume holding his paw.

"Now, you don't have to ask your question aloud if you do not want to," Baily said after he had shuffled the deck again.

"I, uhm, I'd prefer to not ask mind out loud," Lily said, suddenly looking nervous. Renato reached over and cupped her hand in his paw, smiling reassuringly.

"That's okay," Renato said, "I too shall keep my question to myself." He himself had not thought of one, not really believing in fortune-telling in general, but instead watched Lily.

"Alright then. Let's see, oh, the first card out is The Lovers card," Baily said, laying a card down. Renato saw Lily's cheeks turn red, and when she met his eyes, how much redder they got. He felt his own face heating up, once again glad that his fur was black.

At the ZPD Police Academy...

"How?!” Cadet Jack Savage asked as he jogged next to the human cadet, Cadet Walter Cruz.

"How what, Jack?" Walter asked while expertly dodging upturned roots that seemed to be intentionally designed to trip up the joggers on the track.
"How in the hell is it that you, you, got picked to be valedictorian over me?" the little grey hare with the black stripes on his face asked indignantly.

"Maybe because I spent most of my free time studying, instead of hitting on the cute little arctic vixen," Walter joked, seeing his new friend's ears droop.

"I'm simply networking with her," Jack insisted, not that Walter bought the lame excuse.

"If that's what you want to call being shot down by her, repeatedly," he said, having much improved over the months in their sparring to know that Jack wouldn't be able to drop him again as he did their first time.

"I was just fooling around then, next time, I'm gunna turn up the charm and have that white fluff-ball melt in the palm of my paw," Jack said, puffing his chest out a bit.

"Do hares even have palms?" Walter asked just before the two heard a snicker, they both quickly looked behind, not wanting to risk getting tripped again, to see they very arctic fox cadet, Skye, jogging right behind them. She smirked and then casually picked up the pace, jogging quickly between the two of them and soon making her way much further ahead.

"I would hazard a guess," Walter said, "that you've got your work cut out for you there, Jack."

"Oh, I'll get her," the hare grumbled, furrowing his brow, "just you wait and see. And to answer your earlier question, yes, we do have palms!"

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! This chapter was proofread by my very good friend, Trismegistus Shandy. Thank you Shandy!
Hey there, dear readers! I am super psyched to bring to you the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! I must warn you, though, that this is going to be a cute one, what with more than one couple apparently having gone human baby-crazy! Also, I would like to once again thank my friend, Trismegistus Shandy for proofreading this chapter. And please, enjoy!

Ralph Wolford was standing in what used to be his study but was presently being converted into a nursery, going over the set of instructions for the bright pink crib that he and Nadine had shopped around for, finding one that was the top of the line in safety and had also been said to be easy to assemble. The timber wolf had spent the last hour and a half assembling the crib, getting frustrated several times. While he had been doing that, Nadine had been going around baby-proofing the house.

"Finally," Ralph said, fitting the last piece of the mobile into the corresponding slot. He took a step back and admired his handiwork. The plush moon and stars of the mobile dangled above the light pink bars. Inside the crib, the bars were lined with a frilly white cushion as around the interior, just above the mattress. There was a folded quilt depicting a silhouette of a wolf howling at the full moon draped over one of the sides. The mattress was currently bare but had soft pink sheets, with a little blanket that was a pink and white tiger stripe pattern. Already the crib fit the room.

Ralph thought back to how, a few days ago, this was his study. His desk with his computer by the far wall, shelves lined with numerous fantasy and horror books from his favorite authors. His desk and computer had been relocated to the living room for the time being, along with all but one of the bookshelves, which already had a smattering of pop-up books and books designed to teach very small children how to spell and the like. The walls which had been a deep green had been painted stark white, with a pattern of pink bunnies and duckies.

"Worth it," he said aloud, feeling the butterflies in his stomach again. *Yes, I no longer have an office... but now our future daughter has a nursery,* Ralph thought to himself. He turned, almost tripping on the pirate-themed toy chest, which had been filled with large plastic blocks and plush toys. He chuckled before scooting it over to the wall. He exited out into the hall and watched Nadine walk by, wearing a pair of paint-stained jeans and an equally paint-stained grey T-shirt. The tigress was looking satisfied as she carried a box of plastic covers for corners of furniture.

"I think we're just about done, Ralph." Nadine said, her voice brimming with exhilaration.
"Wait, did you get all of the drawers?" Ralph asked.

"Yup," Nadine said, smirking.

"The electrical sockets?"

"Taken care of." Nadine said as her smirk grew.

"Install the baby gates?" Ralph said, trying to think of what they could have missed.

"In every doorway to every room... so watch your step." Nadine leaned over to give her mate a kiss on his muzzle, then continued on her way with the box.

"Oh, the cupboards?" Ralph called out.

"Top to bottom," her voice called back over her shoulder. The wolf's tail wagged before he followed his wife.

Meanwhile...

Eli and his friends, Isaac and Mike, were currently playing *Road Combatant Five* at Isaac's house. They had spent the afternoon working on a science project for school and had finished up early. Eli had found that his coyote friend was very good at the fighting game.

"Hedaokin!" Isaac said as he defeated Mike's character with a final flame ball.

"Lucky shot," the mouse said, initially about to offer the controller he was using to Eli, before remembering the mouse to human size difference. Eli smiled, and grabbed the larger third controller. They were each taking turns. As they were going through the various character selections, Mike
looked up at Eli.

"Hey, Eli?" Mike started as the human boy selected on the giraffe fighter whose limbs stretched out in when he would strike.

"Yeah?" Eli said as he waited for Isaac to pick a new character.

"I've been meaning to ask you something," Mike said.

"What?" Eli looked down at Mike.

"Uhm... that video of you being found by your mom and dad," Mike said, a little awkwardly, "in it, you were covered in blood."

Eli winced a little at the memory. "Oh yeah... th-that was m-my blood... I k-kinda got st-stabbed right before I came here..." Eli trailed off. Mike and Isaac shared a look.

"What do you mean?" the coyote boy asked, remembering to ask gently.

"...Th-There was a bully at this place I was staying... he got away with a lot of things... and he h-had a knife... h-he and his gang had already cut me and were chasing me when I tried to hide. I fumbled around and somehow ended up h-here..." Eli said, remembering how scared he was when he first arrived in Zootopia. He thought back to then, and how he never would have guessed that the bunny and fox cops who had found him would eventually become his parents. That brought a smile back to his face.

"Woah... that sounds... just awful..." Mike said, Isaac nodding, not sure of what to say.

"It was... " Eli agreed. None of the three knew what to do or say after that, and so they resumed their game, with Isaac picking a tiger in a karate gi. As the match started, Mike spoke up again.

"Oh yeah, hey, Eli?" the mouse asked as he picked up his mouse-sized bag of potato chips.
"Y-Yeah?" Eli was currently trying to use a move combo to make his character breathe fire.

"Wanna join my Ranger Scout Troop?" Mike asked.

"What's that?" Eli asked, barely avoiding a big blue ball of energy.

"We do things like camping and learning about tying knots and learning survival skills, that kinda stuff," Mike explained, trying to hide his nervousness. His troop needed a new member badly.

"Oh," Eli said, suddenly remembering a scout club back on the human world he had tried to join when he was younger, only to be rejected. "Sure! I mean, I'll have to ask my m-mom and d-dad first, but I think that they'll say yes," Eli said, excited both at the prospect of joining his friend's troop and at unleashing a combo against Isaac's character, knocking him out.

"How'd you do that?" Isaac asked, surprised at having been defeated.

"I-I don't really know..." Eli admitted.

"Well... then I guess it's a good thing that it's two out of three per match," the coyote said deviously as round two started.

*Back in Bunnyburrow...*

The pace in Bunnyburrow's main street was slow and comfortable. The buzz from the few mammals out and about, mostly rabbits, was of the newest mammals to appear in their midst recently. One such mammal, the youngest, was presently at a shop named *Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff*.

"Almost quittin' time, Snickerdoodle," Gideon Grey said as he wiped down the counter, looking back over his shoulder and smiling at the baby carrier with the little mammal gurgling happily away. In lieu of a proper name, Gideon had started affectionately calling the baby that as a nickname. Just then, Gideon's attention was brought to the ringing bell just above the door to the shop, and he smiled warmly at the black ewe who entered. Sharla kept her wool shorn very short, originally due to
her uniform, but it became a style that she liked. Today she was wearing her jeans and a red flannel shirt.

"Well hey there, Darlin'," Gideon drawled.

"Hiya, Gid!" she said excitedly as she walked behind the counter, making a beeline for the human. "And how's my favorite little mammal today?"

The baby started to babble and he reached up with a small pudgy hand towards Sharla's face. She giggled and unbuckled him, cradling the baby in her arms.

"You are just the sweetest little critter," she said as the baby started to paw at her nose, looking around curiously with wide brown eyes. He was wearing a blue footed sleeper that had been knitted for him by Bonnie Hopps. The wispy blonde hair atop his head wafted a little as Sharla turned with him in her arms to face Gideon.

"Hence why I call him Snickerdoodle," Gideon said, smiling at his own joke.

"A nickname is nice and all, Gid," Sharla said as she shifted the baby in her arms so that he was peering over her shoulder, "but I really think that he needs a proper name."

"Well, I agree with ya there, Darlin'," Gideon said as he made his way over to the door and flipped the Open sign to Closed, taking off his apron, "but are ya sure it would be our place to give him one? I mean, he's probably got a family that's lookin' fer him."

"Maybe..." Sharla said, her smile faltering, "but I know that you've heard the stories from the other humans, like Louise and Ryan, about what their lives were like. And all those stories about the other humans who appeared in Zootopia and all over."

"You mean... the hard lives?" Gideon said, knowing that he was oversimplifying. That seemed to be the one common trait among all of the humans that had been reported to have appeared so far. Some had even appeared with physical injuries or signs of past abuse. The girl that the Catmuls had found crying out behind their house was walking with a permanent limp.

"Yeah... and you remember how cold this little guy was," Sharla emphasized by holding up the cooing baby, "cold to the touch even in this nice and sunny weather, wearing next to nothing, clearly
"I don't..." Sharla said, not wanting to say what she was thinking out loud, "I don't think that even if his family could get here, that they're looking very hard for him..."

Gideon didn't know what to say. He felt that what Sharla had said was undeniably true, and started rubbing the baby's back when he started to fuss.

"Thought the Sheriff said the Child Services mammals would be out here by now," Gideon said, his frown deepening.

"Well, he said that after he was going to put in a call to them and... well, you know how he forgets things sometimes," Sharla said. She put her hooves behind her back, preparing to throw out there the idea she had been thinking about ever since they had found the strange little mammal.

"Gid?" the ewe asked innocently.

"Yes, Darlin'?" Gideon had to shift the baby again, as he was trying to pull on the fox's ears.

"I was thinking that... since Mrs. Hornley already gave us her kids' old crib and since we've already got all the other pieces of baby furniture at home and installed," Sharla said as casually as possible.

"Woah... wait a minute, Darlin'," Gideon's eyes went wide as he suddenly figured out what his fiance' was getting at. "We've been doin' a great job babysittin' the little fella, sure, and I'll admit that I really do like the idea, but we're about to get married. We don't know if we're ready to take on this kinda responsibility!" As he said it, he walked over to the table where the red carrier was, reaching into a side pocket when he heard the baby's stomach start to growl. He pulled out a bottle of formula and started to feed the little one.

"A lot of couples out there have kids before they get married," Sharla defended, unable to hide her smile at how the fox who used to bully her as a child was looking so fatherly.
"Yeah, but a lot of those times it was an accident," Gideon said, smiling down at the baby.

"But we already discussed and agreed that we wanna have kids!" Sharla insisted.

"Well, yeah, but that was down the road, when we are ready for a kit. I mean, taking care of a baby isn't cheap, Darlin'," Gideon reasoned; however, he started to feel his resolve falter when a pudgy little hand grabbed one of his clawed fingers, and held on tight. Seeing her opportunity, Sharla went on the attack.

"Gideon, between the shop and my salary, we absolutely can take care of a baby," she said.

"Well... maybe... but we still don't know a lot about humans to know how to take care of a baby one," Gideon said, looking into the big brown eyes of the kit in his arms.

"True, but we know several humans in town now, I'm sure some of them have a pretty good idea about taking care of a human baby," Sharla said before using what she hoped would be the finishing move. "Besides, putting him in foster care could be dangerous. You said it yourself that there's still a lot that we don't know about humans. Imagine them putting this fragile little guy in with some much larger babies."

"W-Well I... I'm sure that... I mean, they gotta at least separate by size, right?" Gideon was floundering as he started to picture a baby rhino about to squish the very young human in his arms.

"You know that there are plenty of foster homes out there that are unfit for any children, let alone a baby from a newly discovered species," Sharla said, watching as Gideon seemed to pull the baby closer and curled a little protectively around him.

"I... I'm not sayin' yes, Darlin'," Gideon explained, "b-but maybe... we should come up with a name fer him at least..." Sharla smiled and walked closer to her fox, hugging him from the side while looking down at the baby, who was playfully kicking his little feet as he drank.

"I did have an idea about that, if you'd like to hear it," Sharla offered.

"Well, sure, Darlin'," Gideon said, noticing the kit's eyes starting to droop and deciding to start
rocking his russet-colored arms.

"How about Jeremiah?" the black ewe asked. Gideon looked up at her.

"Like my grandpappy?" the country fox asked, surprised. Sharla nodded, knowing how much he had loved and admired his grandfather, and how deeply he had been hurt by his passing. Gideon looked down and smiled.

"I-I guess that maybe he does kinda l-look like a," Gideon swallowed, "Jeremiah."

Elsewhere...

Arnie and Chaz were currently driving along Baobab Avenue. Arnie was sitting in the passenger seat, his massive hands massaging his temples.

"Chaz," the rhino started, "would you please stop humming that song."

"You don't like Guns N' Rodents?" the wolf asked.

"They're just fine, for an oldies band, but we're supposed to be on patrol. And it's a little hard for me to concentrate on keeping an eye out for anything suspicious when you're humming," Arnie explained.

"Uh, excuse me, but they are not just some oldies band," Chaz started, making Arnie groan and roll his eyes.

"Chaz, can we please not get into another heated debate about music?" Arnie asked.

"Fine," Chaz said, his voice implying that he was going to be having that debate with his partner at a later time, "so how's Baily doing at your aunt's witch shop?"
"It's not a witch shop," Arnie explained, "it's a New Age shop. And he's actually doing really well. Aunt Phyllis says that he really seems to be in his element, and that he's very professional and a hard worker. She also mentioned that there's a lioness that he seems to have a crush on who also seems to share his feelings that's constantly hanging around the shop."

"You mean that cute nurse? Dang," Chaz said. "I was planning on looking her up." Before Arnie could respond, a billygoat in a black tank-top and jeans came bursting out of a nearby cafe with a duffel-bag that he was quickly stuffing a wad of money into, the tiger owner running out just after he started to tear off down the nearest alley.

"Call it in, Chaz," Arnie said, checking his tranq gun just as the wolf hit the lights and siren.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, folks! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! Be sure to let me know what you think!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hello there, dear readers! I am so happy to bring to you the tenth chapter of *The Keyhole*! Once more, this chapter was proofread by my very good friend, *Trismegistus Shandy*! Thank you very much, Shandy! And thank you, all the readers who have stuck with me and my story since my very first chapter of *The Door*! I’m so happy and excited to continue to bring new chapter after new chapter. So please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eli leaned back in the leather armchair, listening to the tick-tock of the well-maintained grandfather clock on the other side of the room. He kept his hands firmly on the armrest, unsure of what to do with them. He looked over at the polar bear in the charcoal grey suit with the red tie sitting behind the large oak desk, before looking away.

"I promise you, Eli," Dr. Barry Snowson calmly said with a smile, "this is a safe place." Barry's initial assessment of the human boy before him was that he was a product of systematic abuse and neglect.

Eli nodded automatically, still very visibly nervous. Eli sat there for a moment and gathered his courage. He sat up straighter, and made eye contact with the polar bear. Barry smiled, taking this as a good sign.

"So, Eli, how are you feeling?" Barry kicked things off with one of the classic staples of therapists everywhere.

"I'm f-fine, uhm, s-sir," Eli said, stuttering a little.

"Please, feel free to call me Barry," the much larger mammal said. Eli nodded.

"Your parents thought that it would be a good idea for you to see me. That you could use someone to talk to," Barry explained, having been surprised to hear from Nick completely out of the blue a few days ago.
"Uhm... okay... so I'm..." Eli looked uncomfortable.

"You're what?" Barry asked, keeping his voice soft and even.

"I'm n-not in trouble? I didn't d-do anything wrong?" Eli asked.

Barry shook his head.

"Not at all," he said, discreetly writing down something on a notepad, "they were just a little worried and felt that I could help."

Eli said nothing but nodded, only partly seeming convinced.

_He does show signs of long term neglect. And his earlier flinching was a sign of physical abuse_, Barry thought to himself before continuing.

"Before coming here to Zootopia, would you get in trouble a lot?" Barry asked.

Eli looked down and nodded, unable to meet his eyes any longer.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Barry pressed.

Eli continued to look down as he nodded once more. He took a breath just before he started.

"I-I got in trouble a lot, all the time," Eli said, leaning back in his chair while Barry patiently listened, "sometimes because of an accident, like the time I was pushed by one of my foster brothers and knocked over a vase. Other times... I don't really know what I did..."

"How were you punished, Eli?" Barry asked.

"... A lot of times, I was sent to bed without dinner... or lunch... or sometimes even breakfast..." Eli
"And other ways?" Barry was almost too afraid to ask, but knew that he had to, for Eli's sake.

"Sometimes, there was hitting... it kinda depended on where I was staying... some places were better than others..." Eli was still looking down.

"And do you think that it was always your fault that you were denied food or hurt?" Barry asked. Eli said nothing, and meekly nodded.

"Your parents said that you had been in the system back where you came from for a long time," Barry said, looking at some notes he had written down.

"No one wants to take home a kid who causes trouble all the time..." Eli said quietly.

Barry took a second to put his thoughts into order and cleared his throat.

"Eli," Barry said, waiting for the boy to look him in the eyes, "please look at me." Eli slowly raised his gaze to meet the polar bear's.

"Eli, it was not your fault," Barry said, his voice kind yet resolute.

"Wh-What do you mean?" the boy asked.

"I mean, from what I have heard from you as well as your parents, what you went through was not your fault. What you have described to me are forms of abuse that, from some other humans that I have met, I know would have gotten those who were supposed to take care of you into some very big trouble, had they been caught." Barry explained this to Eli, watching the boy's reaction, which he judged to be confused.

He believed that he was to blame for all of it, Barry thought as he let Eli process what he had been told.
Ralph was looking in the mirror, adjusting his light blue tie. He was dressed in a navy suit, while Nadine was dressed in a white sundress. Today was the day of the in-home inspection, and they wanted everything to go perfectly. It was another fifteen minutes before the social worker was due to arrive, and it was very apparent to any to observe that the wolf and the tigress were both very nervous. Ralph looked over to his mate, and gave her a reassuring smile. He took her much larger paw in his and gave it a squeeze. It wasn't often that she let her emotions show, especially when she was nervous.

"We can do it, Kitten," Ralph said as he looked up into Nadine's eyes, offering her a smile, "we can show that we will be great parents, and that this is a safe and healthy place to raise a baby."

"Our baby," the tigress said as she leaned down to nuzzle her mate. Just then, the doorbell rang. They looked to one another before Ralph went to the front door. He inhaled and tried to make himself seem as calm as possible. He opened the door with a smile, and then looked around, confused, as no one was there.

"Down here," came a female voice. The timber wolf looked down to see a female squirrel in a maroon pant suit holding a clipboard.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wolford?" she asked, smiling in a comforting manner as she saw the very evident anxiousness on his face.

"Uh, yes?" Ralph answered.

"Hello there," she said in a relaxed voice, "I'm Maureen Treeclaw. I'm here for the in-home inspection."

"Of course," Ralph said as he moved aside, "please come in, miss Treeclaw."

"It's actually missus," she said as she stepped in, first noticing the fidgeting tigress before her as well as a set of electrical sockets that had a plastic covering over them.
"So, shall we get started?" Mrs. Treeclaw asked.

"Oh! R-Right," Ralph said, wringing his paws nervously.

"Alright then, I'd like to start off by seeing where the baby will be sleeping."

Elsewhere...

"But I don't see why we have to actually go into the shop!" Chaz complained to Arnie, as the two pulled up to the curb right next to Eyevory Tusks.

"Because," Arnie said, looking over at the pouting timber wolf, "it's important to show Baily that he's being supported. A strong support system is necessary when helping others integrate into society." Chaz rolled his eyes, knowing full well that his rhino partner was quoting some pamphlet or other about helping homeless mammals.

"And by show support, you mean go in and buy some ridiculously pricey crystal or magic powder," Chaz said, making air quotes as he said the word magic, "because these new-agey, psychic shops hardly ever have any customers, right?"

"Actually, according to my aunt, her shops's generally done pretty well for itself. And Baily's presence has helped bring in some new customers," Arnie explained; his aunt Phyllis, the elephantine proprietor of Eyevory Tusks, had claimed that the increase of business was due partly to Baily being an exotic newly-discovered species, and partly to his positive life energy. But Arnie elected to omit that part, as he had a feeling that Chaz would have broken down laughing. The two froze as they got out of the squad car, and not due to the temperatures of Tundratown. There was a line of all sorts of mammals leading from the door of his aunt's shop, going all the way down the sidewalk and around the corner.

"Woah," Chaz said as they started to make their way to the door, holding up their badges and muttering "ZPD business" to those who were taking offense at them for cutting in line. They entered the shop to find Arnie's aunt behind the counter, ringing up an order for a pair of raccoons.
"Terrance, are you really sure that you want to... come out... to your parents... today?" one of the raccoons asked the other.

"Nico," said the raccoon named Terrance as he turned to speak, "I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And for better or for worse, I don't want to hide it anymore. That amazing mammal who divined our future with his cards told us to let nothing stand in our way," Terrance said, paying for the packet of incense he was also purchasing before leading Nico out of the shop.

"But, Terry," Nico said as he hurried after his mate, "I don't actually remember hearing him say anything like that!" Their voices faded as they passed through the door.

"Sometimes the querent reads more into their own prophecy than what was actually said," Phyllis said casually to Arnie, giving him a knowing wink, just before the next patrons in line, a pair of tigers, entered the shop.

"Aunt Phyllis, when you said that business had picked up, I thought you were talkin' about a few extra looky-loos. This," Arnie gestured to the line outside the door, "is amazing!"

"Welcome to Eyevory Tusks," Phyllis addressed the tiger couple, giving Arnie a smile, "how may we assist you on your journey today?"

"Uhm..." the male tiger, who was wearing a wool sweater and a pair of jeans, said a little awkwardly, "we... uh... we were hoping to get a... uh... a reading..." He looked uncomfortable saying it, while the female, who was wearing a white coat with matching white jeans, was practically bouncing on her feet.

"From the human psychic!" she said, before seeming to remember her manners. "Please."

"Well, he is with another querent at the moment, but I do believe that they shall be done shortly." After Phyllis said it, a familiar male lion strutted out from behind the curtain leading to the room for fortune telling.

"Well, Phyllis," former mayor, Leodore Lionheart said jovially, "that human of yours has done it again!" He smiled as he counted out some bills to cover the session, while the tiger couple, who looked at Lionheart with a pair of raised eyebrows, quickly headed back behind the curtain.
"Oh?" Phyllis said as she rang up the reading and handed Lionheart his change. "My employee seems to have given you satisfactory service once more?"

"Definitely! According to his cards, I'm going to be taking a trip soon! They also said some other things that I now know all add up! I'll find my way to becoming Mayor once again... by becoming a professional garbage collector!" Lionheart said proudly.

"So a garbage mammal?" Chaz couldn't stop himself from asking, only just barely containing his snicker.

"Absolutely correct." Leodore turned to smile at the officers.

"May I ask how?" Arnie asked, politely, of the former mayor.

"I'm afraid that that little epiphany I had must remain a trade secret for now," Lionheart said with a wink. "Of course, I'll be sure to include my heroic rise back to prominence in my autobiography. Good day, Phyllis!" And with that, he left.

"Wasn't expecting that," Chaz said, before he broke out into laughter. Arnie sighed and rolled his eyes, reluctantly letting out a chuckle of his own.

At that moment...

"HOW?!"

Walter Cruz turned to look at his hare friend, Jack, who was sitting next to him at the table in the cafeteria.

"How what, buddy?" he asked, already knowing what had the hare all worked up.

"How could they go and make you the valedictorian over me? ME?!" Cadet Jack Savage asked,
pointedly ignoring the stares and sniggering of their fellow nearby cadets.

"My money is on politics," the human joked.

"Politics?" Jack seemed to consider that for a moment. "Yeah... actually, that makes perfect sense!"

"I was kidding, Jack," Walter said, already regretting opening his mouth.

"No, just think about it," the hare said, hopping up onto the table.

"Much like myself, you are the very first of your species to join the police academy here," Jack said as he started pacing.

"But what about that bunny cop?" Walter pointed out, watching Jack's ears briefly twitch in his direction, not once stopping his back and forth pacing around the various trays of food.

"That's different, she's a bunny. I'm a hare. Completely different species," was Jack's answer, much to the amusement of the watching cadets.

"Unlike me, however," Jack continued with his original train of thought, "you are of a newly discovered species, one that is looking for some proper footholds in our society. Therefore, the best way to help your species integrate into the greater mammalian society is to bump you up to valedictorian, to show off and to make your species seem normal. Thus pushing one much more deserving down the list one space!" Jack hopped down to his seat with his tray of assorted veggies still waiting for him.

"That would be a good theory, Jack," came a voice from behind them. They, and a few others, turned to see the arctic vixen cadet, Skye Winter, "if it wasn't for the fact that Walter here," she winked in the human's direction, "actually bothered to study and got perfect scores on all the written tests, and was more than adequate for all of the physical portions. But even if he himself was not valedictorian, there's several other mammals ahead of you, Jack." Skye looked pleased at the stink eye that the hare was giving her.

"Namely, myself." Jack opened his mouth to angrily respond to that, but was cut off by the vixen.
"Oh, and congratulations, Walter," she said before casually sauntering away.

"She always has to get in the last word," Jack said in a huff as he turned back to his tray, choosing to instead focus on his food.

"I think that she might like you, Jack," Walter said.

The hare stopped eating and swallowed, mulling over what Walter had just said.

"You're probably right," Jack leaned back, his ears perking back up, "I do have a tendency to drive the females wild. It's really more of a curse," Jack said. Walter and the other mammals at the table were finding it hard not to burst out laughing, wanting to spare Jack's feelings, not that he seemed to notice.

"That poor little lady just doesn't fully understand her feelings for me yet, heh, but she will," Jack said, casually eating a carrot, oblivious to a few mammals starting to choke due to their trying to keep from laughing, Walter included.

"Yup... the only cure for what ails her is to take two doses of vitamin Jack, and then to call me in the morning. In fact, I'll go see about writing her up a prescription," Jack hopped down and bolted after Skye. The second he left through the doors to the rooms, everyone who had been trying not to laugh, finally got a reprieve.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that you enjoyed the newest chapter, dear readers! I apologize for the lateness of this chapter. Monsoon season has started for where I live, and so I have to be conscious while I write of the potential sudden loss of power. Sorry.
Hello there, dear readers! I'm super excited to bring to you the next chapter of *The Keyhole!* Once again, this chapter was proofread by the amazingly wonderful *Trismegistus Shandy*, whom I would like to thank once again! Be sure to let me know what you think of the chapter! And please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So, sweetie, how was your meeting with Doctor Snowson?" Judy asked as she drove, looking sidelong at Eli in the passenger seat. Her human kit looked confused, then turned to respond.

"I-It was okay... uhm... h-he was... nice..." Eli said, blushing a little, feeling embarrassed.

"That's great, sweetie," Judy said, looking back to the road. The moment began to stretch onward, awkwardly. "I'm really proud of you, Eli," Judy said in an attempt to alleviate some of the building tension.

"F-For what?" Eli asked, perplexed.

"Well, some can find the idea of going to see a therapist pretty scary, or something to be ashamed of, but you agreed to go anyway, despite that. That's why I'm proud of you, for being brave," Judy explained. Eli sat back, blushing a bit more. This was due to the knowledge that only small children were told that they were brave for going to any kind of a doctor. But the thought did bring a smile to his face, happy that for once he had a mother to say that to him. Judy giggled as she briefly looked at Eli, always feeling a swell of pure joy whenever she saw his smile.

*He has been smiling more and more these days,* Judy thought to herself as she took a sharp right, making Eli inhale sharply and lean back into his seat, clutching onto the armrest and the door for dear life. Judy noticed this and rolled her eyes.

"I swear," she said as she took a sharp left, cutting off a Pizza Shelter delivery jackal on a scooter, who opened his mouth to say something about the bunny's driving, until he noticed that she was in a police cruiser, and simply shut his muzzle, "you and your father are just too skittish about my driving."
"S-So, Mom, Dad," Nick said, gulping, the russet fox looking nervously between the two older foxes before him as they stepped inside, "it's nice to see you two."

"It's always nice to see you too, Nicky," the female russet-colored fox said as she pulled her son into a hug. Despite his nervousness, Nick's tail swished a little as he hugged his mom back. The hug ended and Marian stepped back, letting Robert have a turn.

"Heya, Nicky," the arctic fox said as he too pulled Nick into a hug, "so where's our little grandkit? Is that them over there?" Robert asked, pointing into the living room. Nick and Marian's eyes followed to where Robert was pointing to an empty couch with a single grey throw pillow on it.

"Dad's eyes still bad?" Nick asked his mom, who nodded. Robert whirled on them.

"I can see perfectly well, and don't need to be goin' to any eye doctor!" he insisted, just before Marian cleared her throat and shot him a stern look that he could see despite the fuzziness of his vision. Robert's tail tucked itself between his legs again.

"Wh-Which I'm sure that the optometrist that I'll be seeing in a few days will agree with," he said, flashing his wife a smile. Nick smiled, the antics of his parents always something he found quite entertaining. All three heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Nick looked out the window to see his mate hop out of the cruiser, and his kit open the passenger side door and shakily step out.

"That's them," Nick said, heading for the door, only now noticing the present his mom was holding. It was a box wrapped in emerald green wrapping paper, and tied with a bright violet bow. "You guys got Eli a gift?"

"Well," his dad said, "we are meeting our grandkit for the very first time. It helps to make a good first impression."

Nick stopped as the front door was opened, hearing Judy's voice as they entered.
"--both here in one piece, which I think is the important part," Judy said to an unconvinced-looking Eli, who smiled at the sight of Nick, before looking curiously at the other two foxes.

"Robert, Marian," Judy addressed them, a little surprised herself, having expected them to be arriving much later that day, "it's nice to see you two again!"

Marian smiled and stepped forward, embracing the energetic bunny before her. "It's always a pleasure to see you, dear," Marian said, holding Judy out at arm's length and looking her over. "As pretty as always," Marian said, making Judy blush a little beneath her fur, making it only barely visible, "one more reason why Nicky is so lucky to have you in his life."

Now it was Nick's turn to blush, though his was much harder to detect, except for Marian who could always tell from Nick's body language, even if she couldn't see his blush beneath his fur, not that he was of the mind to argue that fact with his mother. Robert greeted Judy as well, his tail wagging again, before he turned to address Eli.

"Wow," he said, leaning back to look, as much as he was capable, up at Eli, "they weren't kidding when they said humans are tall." Robert then noticed Eli shifting nervously as he stood before him, making Robert snicker.

"Nor were they kidding about them being skittish, either." That earned him an elbow poking at his ribs from Marian, who rolled her eyes before smiling sweetly up at the much larger mammal.

"Hi there, honey," she said to Eli, "I'm your grandma, Marian."

"And I'm your grandpappy, Robert!" Robert said, holding a paw out. "Put 'er there."

Eli nervously took the offered paw and shook it carefully.

"Hehe, heck of a grip he's got," Robert said, before moving forward and wrapping Eli's shins in a hug.
"Alright, the nursery is absolutely perfect," Mrs. Treeclaw said, scribbling onto her squirrel-sized clipboard. She then smiled up at the nervous couple, hoping that she was coming across as reassuring.

"Wonderful," Nadine said, unconsciously playing with the hem of her sundress. Not normally one for dresses or skirts, she was feeling a little uncomfortable. Ralph saw his mate fidgeting and smiled, wrapping an arm around the tigress’ waist, giving her a gently squeeze. She smiled down at her timber wolf, and let out a low purr. His tail started wagging before he swallowed and focused to make it stop.

"You two shouldn't be so nervous," the voice of Mrs. Treeclaw got their attention. They looked down at the squirrel, who chuckled.

"So far, everything that I've seen shows me that this is a safe and healthy environment and that you two would make caring and loving parents," said Maureen.

"Thank you," said Nadine, who smiled as a weight was lifted from her shoulders.

"Just a few more things to check off of the list and then we'll be done," Mrs. Treeclaw said, resuming her inspection. She smiled as she entered the kitchen, spotting every single cabinet and drawer fitted with child safety locks.

*Perhaps a little enthusiastic, but overall, these two seem to be wonderful,* she thought as she scribbled some more notes down on her clipboard. Just behind her, Ralph and Nadine were holding paws, both terrified and giddy at the same time.

*Over in Tundra Town...*

Baily and Sophia were both walking down the sidewalk, the lioness on her day off and Baily on his lunch break. Sophia looked curiously at Baily's red hair, which had been cropped close when he had
first arrived, a style that he apparently preferred as he kept keeping it that short for a few months. But now Sophia could see that he was apparently letting it grow out, which she felt looked good on him.

_I wonder how long he's going to let it get._ she wondered to herself as they made a beeline for a cafe that they had discovered a few weeks ago. The prices were fair, and the seating area was heated.

"So, uh, Sophia," Baily started, looking a little shy, "are you doing anything tomorrow?"

"Hmmm, no," Sophia said, just before placing an order for the chicken omelette sandwich and a tea. "Why?"

"Uhm... w-well," Baily gulped and quickly ordered a vanilla espresso and a beetle burrito. He had very early on gotten over the idea of eating bugs and trying several bug-based dishes, at Sophia's suggestion and much to her delight, as it was an excuse to cook for him. Baily took a breath and pressed on. "I've heard of this place that I'd really like to go to, and thought that maybe you'd like to join me tomorrow."

"Oh? What is it, some kind of spa?" the lioness asked, intrigued, her tail swishing behind her out the back of her seat.

"I think so, Phyllis recommended it," Baily said, remembering how his elephantine employer kept pushing the place on him.

"Ooooh, I haven't been to a spa in years! What's it called?" Sophia asked, starting to get excited.

"The Mystic Springs Oasis, at least I think that's its name," Baily said as their porcupine waitress returned with their orders, setting them down before scurrying off, careful not to impale anyone.

"Hmmm," Sophia said, picking up her fork and knife, "I don't recall ever hearing of it before. But the name just sounds so relaxing!"

Baily and Sophia shared a smile, making small talk as they enjoyed one another's company.
"MOMMY!!"

Mrs. Otterton was startled out of the conversation she was having with several other mothers at the park to see her youngest pup, Sarah, sitting at the base of a slide, crying. In an instant she was up and rushing over to her adopted human pup's side.

"Sarah, baby, what's the matter?" she asked, suddenly spotting a scrape on Sarah's shin, just below her pink shorts.

"Notta baby," Sarah sniffled, trying to hold back her tears.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Mrs. Otterton smiled, reassuringly, rubbing Sarah's back, before zipping open her purse and pulling out some band-aids and some antibacterial ointment. "Did you get a scrape going down the slide?"

"Nu-uh," Sarah said, shaking her head, "I got scratched after I tripped."

The otter quickly took care of the small injury on her pup's leg, kissing the bandaged spot.

"There, does that make it feel better?" she asked, her heart rejoicing at the smile that appeared on little Sarah's face.

"Yes, mommy, thankies!" Sarah said, before hugging her mother close. When finished, she made to get up and go play with some new friends she seemed to have made, a little lynx girl and a young warthog boy. Her mother watched her, smiling at how quickly her daughter was making friends.

Back at the Hopps' Residence...

"And here you are, buddy," Robert said as he and Marian sat on either side of their new grandkit, Marian holding out the gift. Nick was looking on with interest from where he sat next to his father,
"Th-Thanks, uhm," Eli said while taking the gift into his hands, "Grandma and Grandpa."

Eli sat there and looked at it for a moment, before he started to tear away the wrapping paper, undoing the bow first. A white box was revealed, which he quickly opened. Inside was a folded piece of triangular red cloth. Eli gently reached in and pulled it out, noticing that it had a golden button attached to one corner. He looked it over, noticing that it had been altered, with more red cloth added to it. Nick looked at the cloth as he took a sip, suddenly remembering just what he was looking at. He sharply inhaled, which caused him to sputter and choke a little. He coughed and hacked for a little bit.

"M-Mom, is that what I think it is?" Nick asked in between coughs.

Marian nodded. "That's correct, Nicholas," she said, using his full name to convey her seriousness. Eli wasn't sure just what his gift was, but he was starting to catch on that it was significant, at least to his grandparents and his dad.

"My old... Junior Ranger Scout neckerchief," Nick said, looking at the cloth in Eli's hands. Eli looked at it again, it suddenly clicking as to why it had been altered; it was so that it could fit him.

"When Judy told us about Eli thinking about joining a scout troop, we both decided that it would make for a wonderful gift," Marian said.

"And by we, your mother means she," Robert joked, chastened when Marian leaned over Eli's lap to gently tug the arctic fox's ear.

"What was that, Robby?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"Uhm, ow, I-I mean to say, that it's a great gift." Robert winced, rubbing his ear when his wife let him go.

"That's what I thought you said, Robby dear." Marian chuckled, making Robert smirk at his wife.
"Hold on a second... why would you be giving that as a gift?" Nick asked, confused.

"Well, dear," Marian said as she turned to address her son, "it was something that meant so much to you when you were a kit. Even after that horrible night, you still kept the neckerchief with you, all the way until you were sixteen."

Nick blushed underneath his russet fur, giving Judy a look when he noticed the bunny giggling as she still filmed him.

"And when we spoke to Judy, who said that Eli here was going to be joining his friends' scout troop, I just knew that it would be the kind of gift for you to pass on to your kit."

"I... wait, when did you and Judy talk about this?" Nick asked, confused, before turning to the bunny. "Well, Fluff?"

"Ehehehe," Judy chuckled nervously from behind her phone, "u-uhm, shortly after they called you."

"Uh-huh," Nick said, looking unamused, "and you didn't think to possibly mention this to me?"

"Oh, cut her some slack, Son," Robert said, clapping his paws together, "she wanted it to be a proper surprise."

Nick still had a sour look on his face, but then was subjected to the wide, sad-eyed look that Judy only ever pulled out rarely. The big guns. After a few moments, Nick sighed. He frowned at his dad's laughter.

"Well," Nick sighed, smiling up at Eli, seeing him grow excited, "at least these new Ranger Scouts are going to be different."

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it! And, thank you all once again for taking the time to read my story.
"Alright. I'm going to just come right out and say it," Honey Badger said in a hushed voice to the armadillo beside her in the van that they had procured. "We might need to think about a different subject to procure."

Edwin was watching a certain family of otters and their adopted daughter as they enjoyed a picnic in the local park. The brown-skinned little human girl was delighted as her new daddy helped her to start flying a kite while her mother filmed them. The two younger otters giggled as they wrestled next to the picnic blanket, almost knocking over the lunch basket.

"I, unfortunately, agree," Doctor Shellison said with a sigh. "Perhaps we should set our sights on the supposed baby girl? That one wouldn't put up much of a fight."

Honey shook her head. "No. That wolf and tiger cop couple are adopting it."

"A pity," Edwin said, his left eye twitching. "I suppose some couples out there are just so desperate to be parents. Although that's probably what these things posing as children are counting on. Perhaps we should target one of the adults then?" Edwin said, looking at his watch. Its face he had long since smashed with a hammer, while he had still been wearing it, due to its ticking noise.

"Actually, I was thinking that your original target was the correct option," Honey said with a smirk. Edwin froze just as he was about to take a sip of his coffee.

"You mean the one called Eli," the armadillo asked, his eye twitching even more.

"The one and the same. I've been making some observations that have revealed some new data. And from this data, I am already formulating a plan." Honey smiled wickedly at the shocked look on Edwin's face. He quickly recovered, his muzzle forming a smile.
"Do tell, do tell," he said, excited.

"Soon, Doctor Shellison," Honey said as she made her way into the driver's seat. "I'll tell you first what the data has informed me, and then my plan on our way."

"On our way where?" Edwin asked as he scrambled into the passenger seat.

"We're going to need a few specific supplies, and then we'll be all set for our 'human-trap'," Honey said, making air-quotes, just before starting the engine.

FINALLY! I'll finally be able to examine the Eli creature up close! I will learn all of its secrets! Edwin thought with glee.

Meanwhile...

It had been a week since Eli had received his neckerchief from his grandma and grandpa. The very next day at school, after having double checked that he had his mom and dad's permission via quick texts, the human boy informed his mouse friend, Big Mike, that he wanted to join his Ranger Scout Troop. The mouse had been ecstatic, and promised Eli that he was going to love it. He had even handed Eli a pamphlet; unfortunately, forgetting that Eli was a significantly larger species of mammal, he had handed him a mouse-sized one.

After getting a larger pamphlet, the week had progressed normally, with Judy dragging Nick along, literally using his neck tie, to get Eli's new scout uniform. The fox had seemed reluctant to do so initially, not that that ever stopped his bunny. All too soon, the night of Eli's swearing in was upon them. Eli looked nervously at his reflection in the mirror, standing there in his uniform, adjusting his hat. A pair of russet paws reached from around Eli's back to secure his red neckerchief. Eli turned his head to see Nick sitting on the desk behind him, smiling his casual smile.

"There we go, buddy," Nick said, feeling an odd wave of nostalgia. He remembered how nervous and excited he had been as a kit. He hid his frown as the memories of that night briefly resurfaced. "You're looking good, Eli."
"Th-Thanks... Dad," Eli said with a blush. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted something. Eli turned to see his bedroom door barely cracked open with a grey-furred arm holding up a phone.

"Mom?" Eli asked as Nick rolled his eyes.

"Your mother wants to record us bonding," Nick explained, his tail giving a little wag.

They could both hear an audible sniffle. "Just act like I'm not here and," there was another sniffle, "continue making a beautiful memory to cherish."

Nick leaned up close to his kit's ear. "This whole thing has been making her act pretty emotional, in case you haven't noticed."

"It has not!" Judy's slightly muffled voice said indignantly.

Eli held back a chuckle, having noticed the bunny that was his adopted mother becoming emotional during the past week. More than once, Nick had explained to him that bunnies were naturally emotional.

"Now, get back to bonding, you two!" Judy ordered from behind the door.

"Yes, ma'am," Nick chuckled. Once Eli's final scout uniform inspection was completed, the three packed into the car, Nick insisting on driving, and made their way to Eli's swearing-in ceremony. It was taking place in a small auditorium at a local community center. Nick had been a little uneasy about the idea of Eli joining the Ranger Scouts, but he had done some additional research to find that so far, there had been no complaints of specism or anything like that. Another surprising thing he had learned was that parents were encouraged, and sometimes required, to be more paws-on with their children's participation. Such as swearing-in ceremonies becoming a little social gathering for said parents.

"Oh! Judy! Nick!" The three turned their heads in the direction of a small mouse woman who was waving them over after they had entered.

"Isabella," Judy said with a warm smile as she greeted Big Mike's mother. The little mouse dragged her husband by the arm towards the three.
"Hello there, Eli sweetheart," Isabella said as she smiled up at the boy.

"Hi, Mrs. Musculus, Mr. Musculus," Eli said back.

"Mikey is right over there, with the other members and the Scoutmaster," Isabella pointed over towards the stage, where several young mammals in the green scout uniform, identical to Eli's, were talking with an adult deer buck wearing a similar uniform, a green wide-brimmed hat nestled on his head just in between his antlers. Eli thanked Isabella and, after looking back to receive a nod from his own mother, made his way over to the group, doing his best to avoid the stares he could feel coming from some of the parents.

"He's just so excited! Since Eli decided to join, so did Isaac. And now they're all going to be in the same troop together," Isabella said.

"I'm just so happy that he's made friends," Judy said, giving a sniff. Nick chuckled and rolled his eyes, while pulling the emotional bunny into a hug.

"Uhm, e-excuse me?" Surprised, Nick and Judy turned to the speaker who had addressed them. It was an uncomfortable-looking zebra.

"Yes?" Nick answered.

"A-Are you, uhm, officer Nicholas Wilde?" he asked.

"That's what everyone tells me," Nick said with a smirk.

"My name is Aiden Equus and, uhm... c-could I have a moment with you?" Aiden asked. Nick looked him up and down. He was wearing a navy sweater vest with a white dress shirt underneath and a pair of khaki slacks. Nick gave Judy one last squeeze before following as Aiden led the way. The zebra stopped, looking even more uncomfortable, once they were separated from the rest of the parents.

"Alright, now what's this about?" Nick said, ditching his usual snark to get right to it. He wanted to finish this as quickly as possible and not risk missing a moment of Eli taking his oath.
"I... well... I..." Aiden let out a sigh, "I wanted to apologize to you."

"For?" Nick asked, confused.

Aiden looked down guiltily before looking back into the fox's eyes.

"Many years ago, I was in the Junior Ranger Scouts, in Pack 914." As the zebra spoke, Nick's eyes went wide. He studied the mammal before him, and started to notice some similarities with a certain zebra boy who had been in that troop on that horrible night.

"The same troop that I had wanted to join, had gotten my mother to scrape together enough money to buy the uniform, had been so excited to join... and then been held down and muzzled by," Nick said, his voice flat.

Aiden winced as Nick recounted what had happened, and nodded.

"Yes... I was... I was one of those boys who did that to you...") Aiden admitted.

"I heard that the Junior Ranger Scouts disbanded," Nick said, keeping his voice even.

"Yeah... we... uh... we weren't the only troop who had done something like that... and you... you weren't the only predator kid we had done that to either... parents started to complain and... then there was the Scoutmasters getting caught saying some pretty specist things and... well..."

"So... there were other predators that you guys bullied," Nick said, a slight edge creeping into his voice. Aiden flinched, as though having been physically struck, and then nodded his black and white striped head.

"Yeah... there were... when my parents found out that I had been doing stuff like that... they were furious. I wasn't allowed to be a part of the scouts anymore after that," Aiden said. "I... I'm so sorry, Mr. Wilde, for what I did."
Nick stood there and stared hard at the zebra before him for a few heartbeats before letting out a breath.

"That moment," Nick started, "was the single worst moment of my life. It was after that day that I started to view the world in a very harsh light, and my trust in others was virtually shattered."

Aiden looked miserable, but didn't know what else to say.

"It wasn't until a very special mammal came into my life, five years ago, that I started to learn to trust again." Nick held up a paw to forestall the zebra when he seemed about to speak.

"And it was with great hesitation that I gave my okay to let our kit join the newer, supposedly much better, scout group. My mate and my son may not have realized it, but I did hesitate, worried that because he's different, that he would go through something similar to what I did." Nick let out a sigh.

"It's hard... to let go of the pain... and for the most part I have. I will admit, though, that this has made some of that pain flare up," Nick said, "but I'm done clinging to it." Nick left it at that neither saying he accepted nor rejected the zebra's apology. Aiden, still looking guilty, nodded. The two started to make their way back to the main group of parents, who were now starting to take their seats. He could see Eli standing on the stage, next to a familiar-looking coyote boy whose tail was a blur of excitement, a cougar, a white tiger, and a zebra.

"I take it," Nick said, gesturing casually to the zebra child as he addressed Aiden, "that that one's yours?"

"Yes... that's my daughter, Lyla," Aiden said, smiling a little; "which one's yours?"

"My kit's the one in the center chair, Eli," Nick said as he spotted two grey ears with black tips. He looked up at Aiden and gave him a nod before taking his seat next to Judy, giving the paw not holding her phone up a squeeze. She looked over at him, surprised, before leaning over to give him a kiss. Nick reciprocated, and the two turned their eyes towards the stage.

Eli was blushing a little. He had been surprised to find Lyla, who was now standing to his left, had decided to join the same troop as him, Troop 608. Isaac had decided to join because he didn't want to feel left out, and was now practically bouncing with excitement as he stood to Eli's right. Scoutmaster Greene had introduced all of the new scouts. To the right of Isaac was Kimi, the young white tigress who kept trying to catch Eli's eye and giggled whenever she did, making Eli blush a
little. Directly to Lyla's left was a cougar boy by the name of Chuck, who seemed just as nervous as 
Eli was. Behind them stood Mike and the four other current members of Troop 608, an elephant boy, 
two black bear twins, and a chinchilla.

"Alright, scouts," Scoutmaster Greene said, clapping his hooves together to get their attention. "It's 
showtime. Mike," he said, pointing a hoof at the mouse boy, who stood at attention, "you're up, 
Troop Leader."

Mike nodded before quickly scampering his way over to the podium. He hopped onto the offered 
hoof of the scoutmaster, who safely deposited him next to the microphone.

"Welcome, parents of scouts new and old!" Mike said, with no hesitation. He looked back at Eli and 
Isaac and gave them both a thumbs up before he continued.

"Today we are gathered to witness the swearing in of Troop 608's newest members." Mike started 
with Chuck, asking him to step forward, raise his right paw, and recite the oath. Eli felt nervous, 
worried that he was going to slip up and forget what to say. He then felt a reassuring hoof hold his 
hand and give it a squeeze. Lyla giggled at Eli's blush, neither one of them catching the smirk from 
the white tigress, whose tail was swishing playfully.

"Welcome to Troop 608," Mike said as the scoutmaster handed the cougar a deep green sash, for 
sewing on merit badges. Lyla let go of Eli's hand as it was her turn to take the oath. After she had 
finished and lowered her right hoof, she too was given her sash. Then it was Eli's turn. He was so 
nervous, he barely heard his friend ask him to raise his right hand, which he did. Eli took a deep 
breath, and recited the oath.

"I, Eli Hopps, promise to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy." A simple sentence, and he didn't 
slip up on a single word. Mike beamed at him as Eli was given his own sash, and he took his place 
next to Lyla. He looked up to see the white tiger girl, Kimi, looking at him and smiling. He felt Lyla 
take his hand in her hoof again, and missed seeing Kimi roll her eyes with a large grin on her face. In 
the audience, Nick noticed, and chuckled when he immediately deduced what was happening.

"Guess I'm going to have to give Eli a talk about girls," he quietly said before he was punched, 
lightly, in his arm.

"He's too young for that, Nick," Judy whispered. Nick opened his mouth to argue the point, but the 
look she gave him silenced the tod. He simply nodded, smiling as he caught a shared look between 
the zebra and the tigress. He recognized the competitive look they briefly shared for what it was, and 
saw how oblivious Eli was to it.
Poor guy, Nick thought with another chuckle as he stood to clap along with the rest of the parents, once Isaac and Kimi had taken their oaths and sashes, he has no idea what's coming.

Later That Night...

Ralph crept into the nursery, his tail swishing excited behind him. He smiled when he saw his mate sitting in the white rocking chair, their daughter in her arms. Nadine's ears twitched, and the tigress looked up to see her wolf entering. He was in his pj's while she was wearing her favorite red silk nightgown, having gotten up in the night to check in on her cub, who had been awake and wanting attention. She looked down at little Rosalie, the name that they had picked in honor of Nadine's late aunt, the human infant smiling up at her, making gurgling noises.

Ralph said nothing, holding the bottle he had warmed up for his little girl, which Nadine took. Continuing to cradle Rosalie, she guided the bottle to the baby's mouth. Rosalie accepted and began to drink from the bottle, kicking her little legs. She was wearing a simple fleece onesie.

"Can you believe it?" Nadine asked her mate in a soft voice, not once looking up from her baby. "We have a daughter now."

"I know, it almost seems like a dream," the timber wolf said, his tail still swishing.

"Then I hope neither of us ever wake up," Nadine said before she started rocking back and forth in the chair, humming a lullaby. Ralph watched, feeling like the luckiest mammal in the world.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, dear readers! I hope that you enjoyed the newest chapter!
Hello there, dear readers! I'm excited to bring you the newest chapter of The Keyhole! Once again, this chapter was proofread by the awesome Trismegistus Shandy! Be sure to let me know what you think! And please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Aren't you just a little cutie," Bonnie Hopps cooed to the human infant in Sharla's arms. The black-wooled ewe, while fairly short herself, still had to lean down a bit to allow the older bunny to ogle little Jeremiah, who was babbling excitedly in her arms.

"I think he likes you, Mrs. Hopps," Sharla said. Presently, she was wearing her air force uniform, which was a crisp light blue shirt and black slacks. There were several small badges pinned just above her left front shirt pocket. This uniform also came with a blazer; on the shoulders were the bands that denoted her rank as lieutenant. She had just returned from the nearby base.

"Please, Sharla, I've asked you before to call me Bonnie," Bonnie said as she reach over to tickle Jeremiah's chin. The baby squealed in delight, reaching over for Bonnie's ears. She deftly evaded him, while still cooing at his cuteness. Bonnie herself was wearing a pair of overalls, a pink flannel shirt, and a sunhat. She had been working in her garden when Sharla had decided to stop by, baby in tow.

"Sorry, Bonnie, it's a little hard going from formal address to informal in the same day." Sharla let out a sigh, but her smile only grew as she looked down into her arms and nuzzled the baby.

"Gideon stopped by earlier, to pick up some additional supplies for his shop. He seemed... a little tired..." Bonnie said, remembering the bags underneath the fox's eyes.

"Yeah, Jeremy here kept having nightmares last night, so Gid kept waking up to comfort him. He kept telling me to go back to bed, that he'd got everything covered. So I decided to give him a break and take this little guy to work with me," Sharla explained, letting out a soft yawn.

"They let you walk around with a baby on the base?" Bonnie asked, surprised. Sharla smiled and shook her head.
"No; there is a daycare on the base, but I did keep checking up on him," Sharla said, starting to bounce Jeremy in her arms as he started to get a little fussy.

"It's not easy trying to balance a career or a business while also taking care of a baby," Bonnie said, reaching up to pat the ewe on her shoulder. "You know, if you ever need a babysitter, just give me a call or stop on by."

Sharla took a moment to think that over. "Actually, I might just go ahead and take you up on that offer, Bonnie. It has been a while since me and Gid had us some, *ahem*, alone time," Sharla said, suddenly blushing beneath her dark wool as she realized what she had just said in front of her best friend’s mother. "O-Oh! I-I-I mean, uhm, M-Mrs. Hopps, uh, B-B-Bonnie, what I mean to s-say w-was--" Sharla was silence by a wave of Bonnie's paw.

"Oh hush, sweetheart," Bonnie said with a warm smile, "don't you go gettin' flustered on my account. I know exactly how important some alone time can be between a couple, especially considering how much time and energy babies require."

Sharla's face was still blushing, hidden by the darkness of her wool and skin, but she smiled back. "Thanks Bonnie... uhm," Sharla said, looking at Jeremy for a second before continuing, "would it be possible fer you to watch him tonight... I was actually kinda hoping to surprise Gid, once he got some rest, with dinner tonight... and I was hoping that I could find a way to make it romantic. I even... heh, have a new dress that I was planning on wearing."

Bonnie chuckled as she thought about what it was like to be that young and in love. "Oh course, Sharla. Just bring little Jeremy over whenever you're ready for your date night."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hop-- er-- Bonnie!" Sharla said excitedly, making the baby squeal in pure joy once again.

At that Moment...

"I don't see why you had to go and drag me here on our day off," Chaz whined, the timber wolf looking sourly at his rhino partner.
"I didn't drag you anywhere," Arnie said with a roll of his eyes, "you just invited yourself, like you always do." The two, dressed in casual jeans and T-shirts, were walking through the front doors at a New Dawn facility, located in the heart of Savannah Central. They nodded to two homeless mammals, a skunk and a fox, sitting on the bench outside. "Besides, it's not like it would kill you to help out your fellow mammals."

"It might," Chaz said, his tail tucking itself between his legs at the look that Arnie shot him. They entered the building into a long hallway, with several mammals walking from one room to the next. As they started passing by open doors, Chaz couldn't help but peek inside. They passed by several classes being taught, a few sessions of group therapy, and several different support groups.

"The closed doors," Arnie's voice rumbled as they walked, catching the timber wolf by surprise, "are private one-on-one therapy sessions; checkups, drug counseling, and stuff like that."

"Oh," Chaz said, sniffing the air. He had initially been worried that, with his superior sense of smell, he would have been overwhelmed at this place. However, aside from the normal scents he picked up in the city, he didn't smell anything that would make him turn tail and run. A small part of him felt a pang of guilt, for assuming that the place was going to reek.

"So, what do you do here?" he asked, curious as to where they were going.

"Check in on the folks here, see how they're doing, if they need any help, or just someone to talk to. Also I help to pitch in with the kitchen now and again," Arnie explained as they came out into a large cafeteria. Chaz looked around, seeing mammals eating and conversing, some sitting in chairs around several communal televisions, some playing chess, and some looking over suits and ties on racks, of various sizes for many different species. Chaz remembered how Arnie explained that there were businesses that donated suits to help the homeless mammals look more professional when they would apply for jobs, as well as to help them have some more variety with what they had to wear.

"Over in the back there is a communal laundry room. You'd be surprised how often the things most mammals take for granted are sorely missed when you don't have access to them anymore," Arnie said, pointing across the room to another set of doors. Right next to them was an older male cheetah who was standing near them, muttering to himself.

"And don't mind Mr. Spottickson," Arnie whispered when he noticed Chaz staring uncomfortably, gesturing to the cheetah, "he's harmless. He's just spent a lot of time all alone."

"Are a lot of them like that?" Chaz whispered back.
"They're all just mammals, Chaz. Unfortunately, there are a lot of homeless mammals suffering from some mental illness or another. In some cases, it's part of the reason why they're homeless in the first place. But they're just people, who need a little help. That's what New Dawn's all about," Arnie said as he led Chaz past some tables. Arnie received several warm greetings and offered some back in return.

"Huh, this place seems a lot more lively than that soup kitchen we helped out at," Chaz said.

"Well yeah," Arnie replied. "It's always a good thing when people are willing to donate their time to helping others, but soup kitchens... they really don't do enough to help. Don't get me wrong, they're helping to feed those with a meal, but that doesn't really do anything more. When they're done with their meal, they're still homeless. Here, we try to help those that need it in other, more long term ways."

Arnie then walked over to a table where an elderly female squirrel was playing chess against a warthog who seemed to be in his forties. "Hey there, Mrs. Sciurillus, Mr. Phaco, who's winning?"

"I am, naturally," Mrs. Sciurillus said with a smirk.

"Not this time," Mr. Phaco said with a grunt, nodding towards Arnie. "Oh, hey, Arnie," he said as he moved a bishop to take one of his opponent's rooks, "I just got myself a job down at that auto shop, around the corner."

"That's great, Steve, told ya that those classes would be a big help," the rhino said, excited.

"And yet he still argued that he wasn't going to be learning anything new," the squirrel said as she took the warthog's queen, much to his annoyance.

"Hey, I took the classes and I passed all the tests, alright?" he said as one of his pawns took her bishop. "What about you, Mary? Have you spoken with your niece recently?"

"I have," Mary said as she moved her knight into check; "she and I have a lot of catching up to do. I think that she thought I was dead."
"Well, what's important is that you two are talking," Steve said as he moved his king out of the way, unknowingly into an easy checkmate for Mary.

Chaz listened to the conversation between the two friends as he looked around. He watched as a moose, who looked to be still in his twenties, grabbed a suit off the rack to go try on in the changing room. He saw a few volunteers going about and offering help to various mammals. He even saw one of the volunteers talking to Mr. Spottickson, who responded, and even cracked a smile. Chaz's tail started to wag as he looked back at Arnie, now involved in the conversation with the two who were already setting up for another game.

_I guess there are worse places to spend your day off_, he thought to himself.

Elsewhere...

Russell was walking home from school, flanked by his two newest friends. On his left was Roger, a hippo who enjoyed collecting Enchantment: the Congregation cards. On his right was Erik, an otter and captain of their school's swim team. Russell's first day of school, despite his nerves, hadn't been too bad. He had accidentally gotten on the wrong side of a male lion in the halls, until Roger and Erik had stepped in. The two had already been long-term friends, and had been more than accepting of the human, who had become a part of their group ever since.

"This time, I just know I'm getting Osula, the Quartz Dragon stratumtraveler card!" Roger said as he held up the booster pack he had just bought at the store he had begged the three of them stop at on the way. It was a game shop that also sold comic books and various trading cards. The employees all seemed to know Roger.

"You say that every time," Erik said, nudging Russell who smiled down at him.

"Well, this time will actually be it!" Roger said as he carefully opened the booster pack and started going through all the cards. He smiled and read off a few cards and how rare or common they were, as well as how useful there were for his various decks, before he finally got to the last one.

"Oh, not another Triston the Trickster," the teen hippo complained before sighing and shrugging off his backpack and unzipping it. He pulled out a little plastic container just for the transportation of his cards and put his new ones in it. He zipped it all back up into his backpack and put it back one, his
mood brightening right back up. "Next time, guys, next time."

Russell and Erik laughed at Roger's antics, the hippo joining in. The three friends chatted about classes they had, what females had caught their attention, which always flustered Russell, much to the bewilderment of his friends, and other such things high schoolers discussed. Erik explained that he had practice tomorrow, so it would just be and Russell walking home solo. Russell had been surprised, and happy, to know that his new friends lived really close by. First, it was Roger's place that they came upon, the hippo telling his friends that he would talk to them later, before heading inside. The next was Erik's house, which was, admittedly, a bit on the small side. Soon, after fist bumping with his otter friend before he too headed inside, Russell was walking the rest of his way home.

It was not that much further from Erik's house before Russell was walking up the driveway, past part of Mrs. Spitz' front garden, and using the key to the front door he had been given. No sooner had the teen human had shut the front door than he found a little grey blur of energy attaching itself to his leg and giggling.

"Wussew!" Ethan said, giggling in excitement. Russell smiled down at his little foster brother, and pat his head. It took a little bit of convincing to get Ethan to detach himself from his leg, but soon the young fox kit was reaching up to grab Russell's hand, Russell himself bent down low to take Ethan's paw, and was leading him into the kitchen. Ethan was pointing to the fridge, on which were several crayon drawings and other art projects made by some of the other kids. Russell noticed a new piece which he assumed Ethan had made. It took him a second to figure out what he was looking at, before he realized that it was a picture of himself and Ethan, holding hands and smiling. It was very clearly a young child's crayon drawing, but seeing it made Russell's heart swell.

"He made it in preschool," Mrs. Spitz said, walking in and giving Russell a hug, which he returned.

"It's amazing, buddy," Russell said down to Ethan, whose tail was wagging in delight, before Ethan started to hug Russell's leg again. Mrs. Spitz and Russell both shared a laugh, before she asked him about his day, gently pressing him to be a bit more detailed than just saying it was fine.

Meanwhile...

"So this is the place?" Baily asked aloud as he, dressed casually in a shirt and jeans, and Sophia, wearing a cool white sundress, stood before the front doors of the Mystic Springs Oasis.
"Looks like it," the lioness said to human, taking him by surprise as she looped her arm through his and led the way. "This place looks pretty relaxing to me."

Baily said nothing as he tried to think of something to say, but couldn't do much more than smile back at her.

At the ZPD Police Academy...

"I never thought I would ever have to box a rhino," cadet Walter Cruz said as he took a seat on the gym bench, while a giraffe cadet was taking his place in the ring, "let alone ever win."

"You and me both, buddy," said the hare cadet who was sitting next to him, having already sparred with a rhino earlier. "Don't go taking this the wrong way," Jack said, making Walter ready his eyes to roll, "but your species looks a little on the... delicate side."

"This coming from a little bunny," Walter casually shot back, making Jack furrow his brow.

"I've told you before, I'm a hare, big difference!" Jack had hopped up and was now standing on the bench seat, pointing an accusatory finger at the larger mammal. "And in case you hadn't noticed, I'm the one who softened the big guy up for you." As surprised as Walter was at having defeated his rhino sparring partner, he had been outright shocked when Jack had gotten the best of the one he had fought.

"They change them out after each match," Walter pointed out as yet another rhino got in the ring to spar with the giraffe cadet.

"Once more you get yourself hung up on trivial details," Jack waved away dismissively.

"You sure do have a tendency to get yourself all worked up," said a feminine voice. Both males turned to see Skye, the arctic vixen cadet, smiling at them from another bench. "Then again, bunnies have a tendency to be quite emotional," Skye said.
"Try to provoke me all you want, Skye," Jack said, hopping down off the bench and making his way over to the vixen, resting his paw on top of hers, "we both know that you can't resist me. So, once we graduate, how about I take you out on the town?"

Walter smiled at his friend, who was a persistent little hare. Skye seemed to think it over.

"Alright, let's do it," she said with a smirk. Jack's ears drooped behind his back.

"Well, it was worth a shot," he said, a little dejectedly, as he started to make his way back over to his seat by Walter. He had just sat down, just as the giraffe, Mike, took a punch to the gut, when it finally seemed to click for Jack.

"Wait, did you just say yes?!" he asked, right back in front of Skye in the blink of an eye.

"Sure," Skye said, chuckling at the little hop of joy that Jack couldn't resist doing, "while you can be pretty annoying, I don't think that you're a creep."

Jack looked over at her beforeshrugging. "Hey, I'll take the win."

"It also helps that you're pretty cute," Skye said, watching Jack for his reaction. His left ear twitched.

"Like I said, I'll take the win," Jack said before making his way back over to the bench to take a seat by Walter.

"And that's how it's done," Jack said, putting his arms behind his head as he leaned back u against the wall.

"What? Wearing a female down until she finally agrees to go out with you?" Walter asked, jokingly.

"Yup," Jack said, smugly.
"Can it truly be that simple?" Edwin asked after hearing Honey's plan to capture the human boy known as Eli.

"I have every reason to believe that it shall be," she said with a smirk. The two shared a knowing smile, before resuming watching the house from the van.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! Please let me know what you think!
Hello there, dear readers! I'm super excited to bring to you the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! Once again, this chapter has been proofread by the wonderful *Trismegistus Shandy*! Please enjoy and let me know what you think!

"Alright, Troop 608," Mike said from atop a large desk. He and the rest of the troop were currently gathered in a semi-circle in an empty classroom at West Mammalia Middle School. Eli had learned that the Ranger Scouts counted as a school club and so were given a free room for club meetings during lunch, as well as before and after school provided that they reserved a room a day in advance, which Mike prided himself on keeping on top of. Presently, they were not in their uniforms but their regular school clothes.

"First things first, let's take attendance," Mike said just before Isaac let out a groan.

"Mike," the coyote complained, "there's only ten of us in the troop. You can just look around and see we're all here."

"That's not the point, Isaac," the mouse explained, "there's a procedure to follow here, so, in alphabetical order, Adam."

"Here!" said the elephant boy, proudly.

"Chuck."

"Here," said the cougar boy, in between bites of candy he was snacking on.

"Chuck, please wait to eat your gummy tarantulas until after roll call," Mike asked.

"Sorry," Chuck said, looking sheepish.
"Darryl," Mike resumed reading off the list on the mouse-sized clipboard he was using.

"Here," came a surprisingly deep voice from the chinchilla boy, who was sitting in a desk and leaning back, a pair of sunglasses over his eyes.

"Eli," Mike asked, looking up to smile at his friend.

"Here," Eli said, smiling back. He was aware of Lyla sitting on his left, flashing him a grin.

"Isaac."

"Here," the coyote boy said, his tail wagging despite trying to look focused.

"Kimi."

"Present," the white tigress purred. Eli turned to see her flash him a wink, which left him confused.

"Lyla."

"Right here," the zebra girl said, frowning at Kimi from behind Eli's back, and getting a smirk in return from the tigress. Mike looked at the two girls and rolled his eyes.

"Okay, I'm here, so next is Ned," Mike said, continuing.

"Here," said one of the black bear twins, looking like he was trying to hold back a laugh.

"Nice try Ted," Mike said, sporting a smirk of his own, "I'm not gunna fall for that one again."

"Awwww," both bear brothers let out simultaneously. Eli looked between the two, and they seemed perfectly identical to him. Mike got the two correct calls of "here" from the bears and finished off checking the names on the sheet.
"Alright, now with that out of the way," Mike said, striding forward confidently on the desk, "I
would first like to welcome our new members for joining Troop 608, the greatest Troop in all of the
Ranger Scouts!" Adam trumpeted loudly from his trunk before settling down and looking
embarrassed.

"As is tradition, each new member gets to suggest an idea for a group project for us all to vote on
doing in a few months. Who would like to go first?" Mike looked around at the five newest
mammals to the troop. He spotted Kimi’s paw shooting up.

"Yes, Kimi?" Mike motioned to the excited tigress.

"I know that this is a little stereotypical for Ranger Scouts, but my suggestion is a camping trip!"

"Alright, camping trip is our first suggestion. We do have a few of those scheduled already, but I
think we could find a way to turn that into a big project for us all." Mike nodded and walked over to
the dry erase marker on the desk. After taking the cap off, he wielded it like a spear to write on the
whiteboard behind the desk. He had to lean out a little to get the marker to reach, but he managed to
write the words "Camping Trip" large and legible enough for the others to read.

"Next suggestion?"

"How about a charity bake sale?" Lyla said, not waiting for Mike to call on her after her own hoof
shot up. "We could get not just ourselves but our families involved as well and raise some money!"

"Do you have a particular charity in mind, Lyla?" Mike asked, already reaching over and up to write
Lyla’s suggestion above Kimi’s.

"My dad likes to help out with the homeless organization, New Dawn. They're always accepting
donations to help the homeless."

"Okay," Mike nodded, adding the words for "New Dawn" right next to the bake sale suggestion.
"Next?"

"OH! We could put on a play and reenact episode 17 from season 3 of Sun Journey: The New
Isaac suggested, practically jumping out of his seat, his tail wagging even moreso than just a little while ago.

"Seriously?" Mike asked, letting out a groan at the ecstatic nod from the coyote, before writing the suggestion above Lyla's, having to reach over while standing on his tiptoes. "Okay... next?"

"I like the bake sale idea!" Chuck said around a mouthful of gummy tarantulas.

"Okay, what about you, Eli?" Mike asked, turning to face his human friend.

"W-Well," Eli said as suddenly all eyes were on him, "the camping trip sounds pretty fun," Eli was oblivious to the smirking wink Kimi shot Lyla from behind his back nor Lyla's initial frown, "but you said we were already going to be doing some of those, and the bake sale sounds like a lot of fun too, and it's for charity." Once more, Eli was oblivious, only this time to the zebra giving the tigress the smirking wink, with Kimi letting out an annoyed huff.

"Plus," Eli started, smiling brightly, "I've got a pretty big family, and I think that a lot of them would be happy to help."

"Okay, so we have three ideas from our new members, and already three votes for the bake sale, one for the camping trip, and one for the play. It's time for everyone else's votes." Mike said, putting two lines next to Lyla's suggestion.

"My vote's for the camping trip," came Darryl's voice, "we don't take nearly as many of those as we should." Mike marked on the board the chinchilla's vote.

"Agreed, plus I'm not that good of a cook," Adam said. Mike marked the board.

"Three for the bake sale, three for the camping trip, and one for the play. Ned? Ted? You guys care to chime in?" Mike asked the bears who were grinning excitedly.

"The play!" they said, simultaneously. "That was the greatest episode of the series!"

Isaac whipped around in his seat, his tail a blur. "I know, right?" Mike rolled his eyes again as he put
"Okay, so we have ourselves a three way tie. I have the tie-breaker vote, and I'm voting for... the bake sale." Mike made a fourth mark next to Lyla's idea despite a few groans. Lyla looked excitedly over at Eli, who smiled back at her. Kimi casually scratched her chin, her tail swishing playfully behind her seat.

*At that Moment...*

"You just had to say something, didn't you?" Judy sourly asked Nick as she wrote out another ticket at a car in front of an expired meter. She and her partner were presently on parking duty in Tundra Town.

"The Chief walks in with that new furcut and I'm not supposed to make a single joke? I still maintain that that's entrapment, Carrots," Nick said as he too ticketed a nearby car, while Judy had already gotten another five. Even on parking duty and almost six years knowing her, the fox still was surprised at how much energy and enthusiasm Judy put into their work.

"Nick, you know I love your jokes," Judy started, turning to look Nick in the eye, which, despite his aviators, she knew she was successfully doing. "But you have to start setting a better example for Eli."

"Fluff, it's not like he was there in the briefing room with us," Nick defended.

"I know that you sent of a video of the entire exchange to our kit," Judy said, crossing her arms. She was trying to maintain her unamused frown, which was proving a little hard with Nick smirking at her.

"Judy," Nick said as he sauntered over to her, bending down so that his mouth was inches away from her own, "I promise I'll try to set a better example from now on, okay?"

Judy was caught a little off guard by the sudden seriousness of Nick's tone, but she recovered and smiled up at him.
"Thank yo--" she was cut off by a quick, yet passionate kiss. Anyone who happened to be passing by would have easily missed it, yet it still packed the same power as the very first kiss that they had shared, and so Judy needed a few moments to collect herself. When she did, she saw Nick ticketing another car.

"And that puts me in the lead, Fluff," Nick said. Judy marched up to him, her feet crunching in the snow. She stood just a few feet in front of her mate and grinned. In a motion that was even faster than their kiss, she scooped up a pawful of snow, packed it into a ball, and nailed Nick right between his eyes. Once again, no one passing by could have caught it. All they would have seen was a fox meter maid who suddenly had a face full of snow. Nick spluttered and let out a chuckle as he wiped the snow from his face.

"I see that that's gone and gotten you out of your adorable bad mood," Nick said, resisting the urge to step closer and cuddle his mate to his side, with his tail wrapped protectively around her. The department had no problem with officers dating, but it did have a problem with public displays of affection while on duty.

"Maybe," Judy said, smiling up at Nick and also resisting the urge to bury her face in his fluffy neck ruff, "but what I said is still valid, Slick."

"You're right, and I meant what I said. I will try to set a better example for our kit... but I am probably going to slip up every now and again," Nick said.

"That's okay, just so long as you try," Judy said.

"Good... which means now might be the best time to let you know that I already sent that video to the entire precinct as well." Nick said, ticketing another car.

"Oh, Nick," Judy said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, you know that you love me--" It was Judy's turn to cut him off with another snowball to the face. Judy wasn't a fool; she knew that Nick was much better at separating their relationship from work. She was aware of how intently he followed any and all news about the investigation of the escape of Doctor Edwin Shellison, alongside her. Since they were so close to Eli, the crazed armadillo's intended victim, they were not allowed on the case, which they both understood.
But that didn't stop them from worrying. Nick was aware of how much more it was affecting Judy. It scared him to think of anything happening to Eli, his kit. But, adopted or not, she was a mother, and each day that Edwin avoided capture was just another day where a frantic worry at the back of her mind was eating at her even more so than it ate at him. Still, he smiled, knowing that little distractions like these helped her, as well as him.

Meanwhile...

"Welcome to the Mystic Springs Oasis," Yax said to the human and lioness who entered. The two saw the yak with the shaggy head of fur sitting behind the front desk, meditating.

"Thank you," Sophia said as she and Baily approached; "we're new here, so we're not sure of where to go."

"Just head on through those doors," Yax said, gesturing to the large double doors nearby, "and enjoy your time here on this plane of existence." Yax then resumed his meditation. Baily and Sophia looked at one another and shrugged.

"Seems to be a pretty laid back place," Baily said as they made their way to the doors.

"Well, what kind of a spa isn't laid back?" Sophia joked as Baily held one of the doors open for her. She smiled and thanked him before stepping out into the warm sunlight, and froze, her eyes wide. Baily exited and saw her expression, becoming concerned.

"Sophia, what is it?" he asked, looking around. It took a second to register for him as well, but the human man suddenly realized that there were nothing but mammals as far as the eye could see, sans their clothes. Despite having watched more than a few nature shows back home, it still did little to prepare Baily for the sight before him. He tried not to stare, but couldn't help but follow Sophia's gaze towards an older male lion, nude, facing them, doing yoga.

"G-Grampa?!" Sophia said, making Baily cringe. The lion looked over, surprised, before he smiled and, still very limber, walked over to the two.

"Sweet Pea, it's so good to see you!" he said, coming right up to her and pulling the stunned lioness
into a hug, seemingly clueless to the awkward situation.

"And this must be your fella, Baily," he said, releasing Sophia before pulling Baily into a hug as well.

"It's nice to finally meet you, young man. Sophia here has been telling us all about you. I'm Keith, by the way." The lion let go of Baily and started to shake the stunned human's paw.

"A pleasure to meet you too," Baily gulped, "s-sir."

*Elsewhere...*

Ralph's tail wagged as he watched Rosalie gurgle happily with her blocks. She was currently in the playpen he had set up downstairs in the living room. Ralph had intended on keeping an eye on his pup while watching the game that he had been so excited for... but he was finding it hard to keep up with what was happening on TV. His tail started to thump against the couch as she reached for him, cooing. Unable to help himself, he picked her up and cradled the human infant in his arms.

"No boy is ever going to be good enough for my little girl," he said to her with a smile, making her clap her hands and laugh, which in turn prompted him to give her a nuzzle. He grabbed the remote and turned down the volume as he started to bounce his daughter in his arms.

"Da!" Hearing that, Ralph froze, his ears perking up and facing Rosalie, who reached up to try and grab them.

"What'd you say, baby girl?" he asked, feeling a sudden surge of excitement.

"Da! Da-da!" Rosalie babbled, reaching with both small chubby hands for the timber wolf's ears. Ralph's tail was wagging so fast and with so much force, a small part of him was a little worried that he was going to sprain it again, like he had when he first proposed to Nadine and she had said yes.

"You just said Dada!" Ralph said, his voice barely a whisper. Almost immediately, his phone was
out, and he was calling up Nadine. They'd had to take up different shifts with a new baby to take care of at home, so the tigress was currently out on patrol with her new partner, Delgato. She promptly answered.

"Hi, honey, sorry I'm late, we got caught up in a bit of a chase," Nadine explained on the phone to her mate.

"Nadine," Ralph practically shouted, "she just said Dada!"

"What?"

"Our daughter just said her first word, and it's Dada!!" Ralph was practically jumping with joy, still keeping in mind the baby in his arms.

"She said Dada? And I missed it... BECAUSE OF YOU?!" Ralph froze as he heard a sudden yelp in the background of the phone call.

"I can't believe that I missed our little girl's first word because some drunk frat boys decided to take a high speed joy ride!" Nadine sounded thrilled, sad, and furious all at the same time. Ralph had a feeling that the aforementioned frat boys were about to be tazed.

"I'm sorry you missed it, kitten," Ralph said, just before there was a zapping sound and another yelp, followed by a whimper.

"I'm coming home right away," Nadine said, "after I drop these idiots off at booking. Delgato will take care of the paperwork."

"Delgato will do what?" came the voice of the lion officer. Ralph didn't hear Nadine say anything, but he smiled, knowing the look that the lion was receiving was most likely one that didn't brook any argument. "Uh... I mean, of course. Y-You go and see your family when we get back to the station."

"I'll be home soon, I love you," Nadine said.

"I love you too," Ralph replied. He chuckled after their call ended and laid back with Rosalie resting
on his chest. "Pity those that kept your Mama from hearing your first word."

Chapter End Notes

And that, dear readers, was the newest chapter! I hope that you enjoyed it! Be sure to let me know what you think!
"Oh, Bonnie, little Jeremy just sounds adorable! Please tell me that you took some pictures," Marian gushed into her phone just before she set it down on the kitchen counter and started going about making herself some tea.

"Naturally," Bonnie told the vixen. After Nick and Judy had officially started dating, informing their parents of that fact, Bonnie and Marian had become fast friends... after some initial awkwardness mostly on their husbands' part.

"I've never seen a human baby before," Marian explained as she set the kettle on the stove. "Robert and I did enjoy a stroll through the park though, and we saw this adorable little human girl. She was playing with two little otters that she kept calling her big brothers, it was just so precious."

Bonnie let out a coo at the thought. "Well, I will say this for little Jeremy at least, he is very rambunctious. The second he gets set down, he starts crawling every which way. Although there was a slight issue with him pulling some of our older kits into hugs and crying his little eyes out whenever they tried to leave his grip. I made sure to get plenty of pictures of that as well."

"Naturally," Marian said with a giggle, "one of the joys of being a parent is getting to embarrass our kits, after all."

"Agreed. Why, not too long after Judy told us that she was dating Nicholas, she made me swear to never show him any embarrassing pictures of her as a kit." Marian could hear the smile in Bonnie's voice.

"Nicky made me promise not to show his mate his, what he calls embarrassing but what I call adorable, pictures of him as a kit too!" Marian smiled at just how similar Nick and Judy could be at times. "But I don't recall ever saying anything about sharing them with my friend who just so happens to be the mother of said mate."
"And I do not believe that I made any such promise with my little Bun-Bun either," Bonnie said.

Meanwhile...

"C'mon sweetie, say 'Mama'," Nadine cooed to Rosalie as she kneeled next to her daughter's playpen, her phone on and recording. Rosalie, for her part, was playing with a set of multi-colored stacking rings.

"Say 'Mama'," Nadine tried again, having been at this for the past half an hour. Rosalie giggled happily, falling over with a big red ring in her little hands.

"How come Daddy gets a shout out but not Mommy?" Nadine asked with a sigh, smiling down at her baby. Rosalie looked up at the tigress that was her mother, and smiled back. Nadine looked down at her phone, which was buzzing to let her know that the battery was almost dead. With another sigh, Nadine stopped recording and got up to go look for the phone charger. As she looked, she listened to the baby babble away.

"Ma... ma-ma!" Rosalie said, reaching for the tigress, who froze in her tracks and whirled to face the baby.  

"Did you just say 'Mama'?" she asked, walking over to the playpen and looking down.

"Ma-ma," Rosalie said before she started gurgling.

"You said 'Mama'," Nadine said, wiping a tear of joy away before her phone buzzed again, making her look down at the device. "And just when I stopped recording too," she said with a laugh before giving a shrug and taking a seat next to the playpen. She reached in and started to tickle the baby, who squealed in delight.

"That's right, I'm your mama," Nadine said, a deep and contented rumble radiating from her. The joyous feeling she was experiencing reminded her of the time after Ralph had proposed to her, and how she couldn't make herself stop purring for almost a full hour.
"Ooooh, that sounds like a wonderful project, sweetie," Judy said, looking up and proudly beaming at Eli, who smiled and blushed at the praise. Judy and Nick had been in the living room when Eli arrived home from school. He had been both excited and a little nervous to tell his parents about his scout troop's upcoming bake sale.

"New Dawn, eh?" Nick said, chuckling. "I don't suppose that a rhino cop visited your school today to talk about that place?" Nick asked.

"Uhm... no," Eli answered, looking a little confused.

"It's a wonderful program, Nick," Judy said, patting the cushion next to her, inviting Eli to sit down.

"I'm sure it is; all I'm saying is that Arnie is constantly pushing that place every day, so naturally I would assume he had some hand in a scout troop participating in a charity event for it," Nick explained, holding up both paws in mock surrender. Judy rolled her eyes at his smirk before turning to address her kit.

"I'm very proud of you, Eli," she said, hugging her human kit's side, which Eli returned, much less nervously than when she had first started hugging him.

"Thanks, Mom," Eli said, a warm feeling blossoming in his chest as he said it, "it was actually my friend Lyla's idea." The fox went a little stiff at the mention of the zebra girl's name, but he said nothing.

"Just wait until I tell your grandma, she'll organize an entire baking platoon!" Judy said, only half joking.

"Hey now," Nick chimed in, "don't forget your nana, because I know that she'll be wanting to get in on this. She may not have a legion of bunny minions, or bunions, at her disposal, but it's quality over quantity."
Judy rolled her eyes again. "Slick, this isn't another baking competition. And I'll thank you for not trying to reignite that temporary rivalry between our moms again."

"You mean like the one that sparked at the last Carrot Days Festival? I had nothing to do with that," Nick defended, holding back a laugh at just how all-out his and Judy's moms had gone trying to outdo each other.

"It's not funny and yes, you absolutely did," Judy shot back, turning her attention to Eli once more.

"This is going to be so much fun!" Judy exclaimed, the tips of her ears tickling Eli's chin and making him laugh. She saw this and became very thoughtful for a moment. "Sweetie, would you mind leaning down just a bit?"

Eli complied while Judy stood up on the couch as Nick looked on, a little confused. Judy's paws guided Eli's head down until the top of it was facing her. She then smiled and started to rub her chin on her kit's head. She finished and told Eli he could sit back up straight.

"Eli, honey, do you know what chinning is?" Judy asked.

"Uhm... no?" said Eli, resisting an urge to rub the spot on his head.

"Well, it's something bunny parents do with their kits, usually right after they're born. Basically, there's a gland under my chin that makes a distinct scent, which we use to mark our young. I can't believe it took me this long to remember that I needed to mark my kit! It's important in rabbit culture!" Judy said, suddenly feeling guilty. She looked up and saw the wide grin Eli had and felt instantly better.

"Thanks, Mom," Eli said. Nick watched his mate and his kit and smiled, his tail thumping against the couch lightly.

"I really should take the time to teach you more about rabbit culture and traditions, since they're now your culture and traditions too," she said, taking Eli's hand in both of her paws. They both turned to look at Nick as he cleared his throat.

"Let's not go forgetting about vulpine culture now," he said, giving Eli a wink, "it's your much more fun and interesting culture after all now too."
"You're sure about this?" Edwin asked as he looked over a piece of paper on the desk before him while Honey rummaged around in an old trunk she had dragged in earlier.

"Positive," she said, tossing out old articles of clothing, "it's joined the Ranger Scouts. The motivation for this move is unknown. Let's make a note of finding out why when we manage to examine it."

" Hmm," Edwin scratched his chin, "perhaps for observational purposes."

"Either way, it works to our advantage." The honey badger looked up at the armadillo and smiled.

"Agreed. Now, we only need to learn of the scout troop's scheduled activities, and we can capture it, alive of course." Edwin's left eye began to twitch as he leaned back in his seat. He frowned, but nodded to the frantic Honey.

In Tundra Town...

"Where are we going, Renato?" Lily asked, tightening the grey wool winter coat around her shoulders as the two exited the train. She was wearing a white blouse and jeans, planning on surprising Renato herself when he had arrived. The jaguar had surprised her earlier in the day first by arriving, out of the blue, at her door with a bouquet of lilies, as well as an unexpected invitation to a day out somewhere special. The location was a secret, but he had asked her to bring something warm.

"It's somewhere special to me," Renato said; he was wearing a navy blue blazer with a light blue undershirt. He offered her his arm, which she took with a smile. They garnered a few stares from some of the mammals at the station, including a few humans, not that they cared. Lily looked out at the district as they exited the station, taking in the sights. The pair strolled down the street through...
several blocks before they made their way out to a ski tram facility.

"This place is usually packed," Renato explained, Lily loving listening to how his accent shaped his words, "but my employer, once he found out about my, eh, plans, rented it out as a gift to me, just for the two of us."

Lily blushed at that, her heart fluttering in her chest.

"He sounds like a wonderful boss," Lily said as they entered the tram, being waved through by a friendly reindeer attendant.

"He is, but I would never wish to be one to cross him," the jaguar chuckled, a slight purr mixed in. They took their seats, Lily resting her head on Renato's shoulder, as the tram began to make its way up a steep slope. They sat in comfortable silence, watching as the district became smaller and smaller, until they finally reached the top. They stepped out into a ski resort. Lily looked around, seeing a set of rails of an overlook. Renato gently took her hand and started to lead her towards the railing. When they got to the edge, Lily's breath caught in her throat. Spread out before them was the entire district of Tundra Town. All of the houses and shops, the towers and buildings, all of it, looking like a bright and shining miniature version of a winter wonderland.

"I can see why this is your favorite place," Lily said, finding her voice.

"It really is..." Renato's voice trailed off. "Lily..." Renato turned to face her as she looked up into his eyes, tracing a finger along his scar.

"What is it, Renato?" Lily asked.

"I was hoping to ask you something, Lily," he said, looking down.

"I'm listening," was her reply.

"I was hoping to ask you out to dinner," Renato said, steeling himself.

"We have dinner all the time," Lily pointed out.
"Si... but... that's just as friends," Renato said, "this... I would like to take you to dinner... as more than... just friends..."

Lily stood there a moment and smiled. "Well of course," she said, standing up to gently kiss Renato. He jumped a little in surprise when her lips met his, but he recovered, and the two lost themselves in the moment.

ZPD Precinct 1...

"Oh... my... goodness! She is just so CUTE!!!" Benjamin Clawhauser squealed as he looked at the pictures being shown to him by Ralph, now in his street clothes, his shift having ended earlier.

"She's my little princess," Ralph said, his tail wagging.

"And she called you 'Dada'?' Ben let out a near ear-splitting squeal at Ralph's happy nod. "I can't even begin to imagine how wonderful it must be!"

"I don't know how to describe it, Benji," the timber wolf said, looking down at the picture of Nadine cradling a sleeping Rosalie with a dreamy expression on his muzzle.

"WOLFORD!" Both Ralph and Ben jumped a bit as Bogo started to make his way towards them in the atrium. "I would like a word with you about your squad car."

"Th-the squad car, chief?" Ralph said, nervously playing dumb.

"Yes, I would like to know just why is it that it's missing both its front and rear bumpers?" Bogo said, folding his arms and glaring down at Ralph, who gulped.

"Francine and I were pursuing a perp in the Nocturnal district, sir, and, uhm..." Ralph said, not sure how to explain the minor fender-bender with the fleeing suspect's car, as well as the accidental
reverse fender-bender with the car that said suspect had stolen in an attempt to escape. He relayed what had happened to the large and imposing cape buffalo, who opened his mouth to speak. Acting on pure instinct, Ralph held up his phone, which was still on the slideshow setting. Bogo watched the pictures of the happy family for a moment before sighing.

"I suppose that accidents happen," Bogo said with a snort before heading to his office.

"Quick thinking," Ben said, once he was certain that the chief was out of earshot.

"Thanks, Benji," Ralph said, putting his phone away, "I think I'll head out now before I push my luck."

"Smart call, and just as a heads up, that only works on the chief once. Rammathorn found that out the hard way," Ben cautioned.

"Thanks for the tip," Ralph said, heading towards the parking garage.

At the ZPD Police Academy...

Jack jogged alongside Walter as they made their way through the course.

"Okay, I know when to be the bigger mammal," the hare said to the human, "and so I have decided to step down as valedictorian. You've earned it, buddy."

"I already am valedictorian, and we've known that for a while now," Walter said, looking down at Jack briefly, not wanting to get tripped up by the roots as they passed under the trees.

"True, but I was just about to edge you out. But I decided instead that it's more important to be a better friend, than the best in our class here at the academy," Jack said, effortlessly hopping over several roots.
"I'm pretty sure that you're fifteen or sixteen down the list, but thanks, Jack, you are a good friend," Walter said, both excited and nervous for their upcoming graduation.

"It was fourteen, thank you very much, but the details are irrelevant," Jack dismissed with a wave of his paw.

"I'm also pretty sure that, as police officers, the details are crucial," Walter said with a smirk to match Jack's own.

"Hey now, we're still just cadets," Jack said.

"I was a sergeant before I came here," Walter replied.

"Emphasis on was, as in, not anymore," Jack shot back. The two shared a chuckle as they continued with their training. Unbeknownst to the two of them, a certain arctic vixen had been jogging behind them, now taking a quick breather as she let out a laugh.

"His head may be a little inflated, but he's just too adorkable not to like," Skye said to no one, using the term she herself had first coined to describe the hare, combining adorable and dork. All of the other cadets, not including Walter and Jack who had yet to hear of it, agreed that it was a fitting term for cadet Savage.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter!
"So..." Baily said as he looked down at his mug, which was steaming in the crisp air of Tundra Town, as he sat across from Sophia at a cafe. The two had been awkward around one another ever since what they both simply referred to as The Incident.

"So..." the lioness said as she stared at her own coffee, before she let out a sigh. "It was a very awkward situation." Sophia decided on being direct, which Baily was internally grateful for as it did manage to shatter the tension.

"Very... but at least your grandpa likes me," Baily said.

"That was the, I wanna say third, biggest surprise of that day. Usually, after my grandpa meets a new... friend of mine and starts to get to know them, he doesn't seem to usually like them."

"Maybe that's just him being protective," Baily offered, smiling a little.

"He's very protective of me. When I started high school, he insisted I take some martial arts classes, for when I started dat--uhm, making friends." Sophia blushed and looked away. Baily didn't say anything, content to sit there and smile before taking a sip from his mug.

"A-Anyways, there's going to be a big family get-together, a barbecue," Sophia said, taking a quick and nervous drag from her cup.

"That sounds like fun," Baily said, his mind drifting back to his own family. He felt a twinge of heartache from all of the pain that they had caused him, minus his own grandfather, but it quickly settled back into the faint and very dull pain he had grown accustomed to.
"And my grandpa wanted me to invite you." Sophia's voice snapped Baily back to attention.

"Wait, what?" Baily asked.

"He," Sophia blushed some more but she was determined to press on anyways, "said that because of how often we've been seeing each other, and how close he feels we are, it was only appropriate that you be invited as well."

Baily took a moment to process this new information before a slow, yet cautious, smile grew on his lips. "Does that mean that we're... uh, friends?"

Sophia was inwardly nervous and excited. "I... I'd like us to be... if you wanted to, of course!"

"I'd like that," Baily said, reaching over to rest his hand on Sophia's paw. The lioness smiled at the human and let out a faint purr.

_Meanwhile..._

Mr. Otterton hummed to himself as he made his rounds in his shop. "The orchids are definitely feeling better," he said to himself. The otter's ear picked up the sound of giggling, and he followed it to the source. There stood his adopted daughter, Sarah, as she looked around with wide eyes at all of the flowers, before the little human's eyes found her father. In her left hand was a piece of paper, and in her other arm was her plush otter, Gracie.

"Hi, Daddy!" Sarah said with glee as she ran right up to the otter and gave him a hug.

"Omph! Hello there, Princess, did Mommy spring you from daycare a little earlier than expected?" Emmitt asked, adjusting his glasses, which had become a little askew.

"I sure did," Mrs. Otterton said in a sing-song voice as she entered, followed by their two boys, Elliot and Oscar. Elliot, the oldest, was wearing a yellow soccer uniform, having just come from practice, while Oscar was just wearing a green shirt and shorts.
"Hi, Dad!" they both said, amused at their little sister's antics.

"Elliot's practice had to end early, so I thought that maybe we could all go out for a surprise picnic in the park," Mrs. Otterton said, motioning towards a picnic basket she was holding. "Plus, I knew Sarah would want to show you her art project."

"Look, Daddy!" Sarah excitedly said as she held up the paper that was in her left hand. Emmitt took it and looked at the picture. It took him a second to determine that it was a picture of their family. Sarah had drawn, in crayon, four brown ovals that he figured were otters, two of which were bigger than the other two, and a stick figure with what looked like Sarah's pigtails. The family was surrounded by what Emmitt guessed were flowers.

"Well, this is beautiful, Princess," he said, smiling up at his little girl, "I think that we'll hang this up on the fridge when we get home."

"YAY!" Sarah cheered, hugging her father again.

"OOMPH! But first, I'll need to close up the shop real quick."

Back in Bunnyburrow...

"And there's yer change. And thanks again fer stoppin' by Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff, Mrs. Vermili," Gideon said as he handed the boxed pies and the change to the older anteater. She gave the chubby fox a warm smile before she left. Gideon hummed as he wiped down the counter before heading into the back. He crept quietly, as little Jeremiah was in his bassinet, snoring. His muzzle broke into a grin as he watched the human baby. He was snapped out of his thoughts by the jingling of his shop's front door. He crept back out and turned to address the newest customer.

"Welcome to Gideon Gre--oh, hey there, Darlin'," the fox addressed Sharla, the black sheep standing in front of the counter, leaning over the counter and resting her closely trimmed black-wooled head in her hooves. She regarded her fiance with a playful expression. After having just come home from the base, the ewe was still in her uniform.
"How's our little Snickerdoodle?" Sharla asked, using the nickname that Gideon had first coined when he was trying to calm the crying infant down.

"He's fast asleep, Darlin', which is a nice change from him crawlin' all over creation," Gideon said as he approached the counter, making Sharla chuckle. The two shared a kiss, both quickly reminiscing about their alone time a few nights ago. They had since, in the chaos of suddenly having a baby of a previously unknown species to take care of, developed a system. It allowed them to make time for romance in between caring for Jeremy.

"He's a little explorer, after all," Sharla said after they broke off their kiss. "I'm just happy at how much healthier he is. I think back to how he was when we first found him, and it just makes me shudder."

"I know how you feel, Darlin'," Gideon said as he took her hooves in his paws, looking down into her eyes.

"And I think that we're doing the right thing, Gid," Sharla continued; "we're giving him a home and a family that's gunna love and take care of him from now on."

"I ain't gunna lie, Darlin'," Gideon said, looking down; "I didn't think that this was a good idea. But... I was wrong... and I ain't ashamed to admit it." Sharla's smile lit up the room, as it always did in Gideon's eyes.

"I think that you're making for a wonderful dad." Sharla stood up straighter.

"And it certainly don't hurt that I've got an amazing mom in my corner." Gideon, suddenly feeling the urge to, stepped around the counter and scooped Sharla into his arms, spinning them around. Sharla's hooves shot to her mouth to block the squeal of surprise and delight that almost escaped her lips, not wanting to wake the baby.

"Then I guess it's a good thing that we got a letter from Child Services. They're gunna be coming out to do an in-home inspection in a week," Sharla said as she rested her head against Gideon's chest, suddenly feeling him tense up.

"What? W-We gotta get the house ready then! I gotta finish paintin' the nursery," Gideon said, starting to fret.
"Gid."

"Y-Yeah, Darlin'?"

"Please don't worry," Sharla said, reaching up to cup Gideon's cheeks in her hooves, "we'll have the house all ready in time fer them." Gideon quickly began to calm down, instinctively nuzzling Sharla's hooves.

"It's just scary ta think about, Darlin'," Gideon said after a moment.

"I know, Sugar Tail, and there ain't nuthin' wrong with that. But workin' ourselves up ain't gunna help anything, least of all Jeremy." Sharla slipped back into her accent, which, with the help of her pet name for him, of course helped to bring a smile to Gideon's muzzle.

"Yer absolutely right, Darlin'," Gideon said, giving his ewe a squeeze before setting her back down. Sharla reached up to plant a kiss on his cheek, giggling a little at the blush he still got underneath his fur. Just then, they both turned towards the sound of Jeremiah starting to fuss.

"Looks like someone's awake," Sharla said, giving Gideon another reassuring hug before heading into the back to see to the baby. Gideon watched Sharla dote over Jeremy and start to calm him down, the sight making his heart flutter much like it did on their first date. His tail matched his mood as it started to wag before the door jingled again, and Gideon had to resume running his shop.

"Welcome to Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff, how may I help ya?" he addressed the family of bunnies.

Elsewhere...

"Oh come on, Buddy," Nick said as he reached up to nudge Eli as they stood next to Judy at the front of the line at Jumbeaux's Cafe. Ever since earning his badge, Nick, usually accompanied by Judy, had chosen the cafe to be a regular stop for him each week in uniform, much to the elephant owner's dismay. Nick tended to take a little satisfaction at the specist owner's annoyance. "The buttery beetle chocolate pecan crunch is something I'm sure you'll love."
"Nick, don't pressure him into doing something he isn't comfortable with," Judy lightly admonished her mate.

"Yes, dear," was Nick's slightly sarcastic response, instigating another eye roll from the bunny. Jerry Jumbeaux looked from the two to the human standing next to them, and shook his head in confusion, but wisely chose to say nothing.

"Whatever flavor you want, sweetie," Judy said, reaching up to give Eli's hand a squeeze. Her human kit smiled and looked up at the elephant.

"One small scoop of rocky road in a waffle cone, please," he said politely. The elephant muttered darkly under his breath as he put on a plastic trunk sleeve, and scooped a ball of ice cream just smaller than Eli's head onto a cone, handing it over. Eli had to use both hands to hold it, and looked at his frozen treat in surprise.

"A triple scoop of the buttery beetle chocolate pecan crunch for me, also small and also in a waffle cone," Nick said, pulling out his wallet.

"I'll take a triple x small broccoli frozen yogurt in a cup." Judy said, rolling her eyes as Nick was handed the towering ice cream cone, somehow managing to look casual as he carried it and set the money on the counter, while Judy was passed a cup with a green-swirled frozen treat, sized much more appropriately for someone Eli's size.

"Keep the change, Jerry," Nick said, giving the cowling elephant a wink, before turning towards the door and, using his shoulder, holding it open for his mate and his kit.

"Is this really all for me?" Eli asked, looking at his ice cream in amazement.

"It sure is, buddy, but ya might wanna eat it quick before it all melts," Nick said.

"We have a cooler with ice and some empty ice cream containers in the car. What you don't finish, we'll keep for desert," Judy said, just before enjoying a spoonful of her frozen yogurt.

"For the next six months, apparently," Nick snickered. The three took seats in the new outside
section of the cafe, underneath one of the umbrellas with the smaller tables and chairs. They had just taken a seat before Judy's ears perked up, hearing a voice calling her name.

"Judy!" The bunny cop turned in the direction she heard the voice, and saw a large polar bear in a black suit and tie striding towards them, a tiny little shrew standing on one of his massive paws.

"Hi there, Fru Fru!" Judy smiled at her friend as she was held up to Judy's eye level. The bunny then nodded politely to the polar bear. "Hello to you too, Koslov." The polar bear looked down at Judy, but retained his stoic facial expression.

"And hello to you too, Nicky," the arctic shrew said to Nick who smiled awkwardly, still feeling a little nervous around the daughter of Mr. Big.

"Nice to meet you again, as always," Nick said, formally, making Judy and Fru Fru roll their eyes simultaneously.

"How's little Judy doing?" Judy asked about her goddaughter.

"Wonderfully, her daddy took her to her first ballet lesson today. I would have gone myself, but there were a few important errands I needed to see to."

"Awwww," Judy cooed, having adored the shrew named after her. Judy then noticed Fru Fru looking at Eli and decided to introduce him. "OH! Fru? I would like you to meet the newest addition to the Hopps-Wilde family, Eli."

"H-hello Mrs. Fru Fru," Eli said, remembering his manners, "it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Fru Fru giggled as she smiled at the human. "My, my, he's quite the little gentlemammal. I can see your parents have been raising you right." Fru Fru motioned to Nick and Judy as Eli blushed. "You weren't kidding when you said he was shy," Fru Fru whispered to Judy, just below Eli's hearing ability. Judy reached over and rested her paw on Eli's hand, the one not holding his ice cream cone.

"That he is, but he's also a total sweetheart, and there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not proud of him, as well as how far out of his shell he's come already," Judy said, making Eli blush and look away, but smile nonetheless.
"Aww, I gotta say, I was a little scared when these humans first started showing up. But now, Daddy's hired one!"

"Really?" Judy asked, surprised.

"Uh-huh! Little Judy was about to fall in the river nearest the house, and this human wanders by, looking really confused and scared, and sees what's happening. Without thinking, he caught her just as he himself fell into the ice water. Koslov fished him out while Kevin carried him back to the house to warm up and meet Daddy. He was covered in scars and burns, but seemed really sweet despite that. He told Daddy about how one minute he was at home, with his wife berating and hitting him as she usually did, and after she pushed him out the back door, he suddenly found himself in Tundratown. It was especially shocking to him, because he was living in a desert in someplace called Arizona."

While the two were chatting, Nick took Eli and their only partially eaten ice creams to the car, to put them in the containers in the trunk. They returned just as Fru Fru was finishing up.

"That's amazing!" Judy said, now worried about little Judy.

"I know! Raymond is currently training him on becoming a bodyguard."

"Huh... I didn't see that one coming," Nick said after taking his seat.

"Normally Daddy prefers our... ahem, bodyguards, to be polar bears. But this human is just so BIG that he might as well be one!"

"What's his name?" Nick asked, interested, never before having heard of the Big family hiring any other kind of mammal for their bodyguards.

"Robin," Fru Fru said.

"What, like the bird?" Nick asked.
"Sure. Or like the legendary fox who would steal--"

"From the rich and give to the poor," Nick finished. "I used to love those stories as a kit, but as I got older, I started to prefer the legends of Taurro."

"The masked bull?" Judy asked, giggling a little at the idea of a young Nick running around with a toy bow and arrow before trading it in for a fake fencing sword and a black cape.

"Yup. The one who would carve a T with his sword wherever he struck, and who was suave with the ladies," Nick flashed Judy a wink. Judy giggled while Eli looked embarrassed, which Nick noticed. "Hey now, bud, I will have you know that as your father, I reserve the right to embarrass you in public from time to time. Especially by flirting with your mother, like so."

"Dad!" Eli complained, but chuckling. Judy thumped Nick on his chest, her ears turning a bright shade of pink on the inside. Fru Fru watched the three and cooed.

At that moment...

"I love coming here, Henry," Bogo heard his wife, Beth, say as she rested her head against his shoulder. He smiled down at the cape buffalo cow whom he had known almost all of his life, and rested his chin on top of her head, in between her curled horns, as the two gazed out at the water from where they were standing on Lion's Gate Island. This being the spot that the police chief had gotten down on one knee and proposed to her, much to her shock and joy.

"As do I, dearest," Bogo's voice rumbled contentedly as the two stood there, watching all of the different boats drifting lazily about. The Chief had left early today, always looking to make time for his wife. His job meant that he wasn't always successful, but Beth was a very understanding and patient female. Of course, running her own company meant that she was kept fairly busy as well. Bogo opened his mouth to speak when suddenly he noticed that all of the nearby outdoor lamps turned on, shining almost blindingly for a moment, with some burning out with loud pops.

The cape buffaloes blinked as their vision started to clear, to see a boat heading right towards the rocky shore of the island. The boat had several patchwork sails billowing in the breeze, which matched the overall patchwork look to the vessel itself. Before the two could react, the ship ran aground right below the railing where they were standing. Reacting, Bogo passed his wife his phone,
already having a number dialed and ready to go, as he climbed over the railing and dropped down onto the deck. Beth, while worried, knew to get back as she informed Clawhauser of the situation.

"Hello? Is anyone on board?" The Chief called out. He already had a pretty good idea about the answer to that question, and his ears soon picked up the sound of coughing. There was a makeshift cabin, fabricated from pieces of tarp. Cautiously, Bogo opened the flap. His nostrils were assaulted by a sour, sickening smell. He looked inside to see a human struggling to his feet.

As his eyes adjusted, he could see that the human was not in good shape. His facial fur had grown out and was matted, much like his hair. His left eye looked around with an almost wild look in it, sunken in his skull. There was a fresh cut that ran across his right eye. The human was shirtless, and his flesh a deathly pale. All across his body were what Bogo recognized as cigarette burns, a sign that the human male before him had been tortured. Looking down at the man's legs, covered in a very tattered and torn pair of jeans, he saw that the human's left leg was broken, and very discolored.

He's been tortured, and that leg is clearly infected, Bogo thought to himself.

"Hello there," he said in a calm and clear voice after the human stared at him in shock for a few moments, his breathing seeming to be labored as he swayed unsteadily on his good leg, "my name is Henry Bogo. I know that you probably have a lot of questions, and I promise to answer them to the best of my abilities. But first, I think we need to get you to a hospital."

The human seemed to take a minute to process what had been said before he responded.

"Sounds good to me." His voice came out in a very dry rasp.

"An ambulance is on its way, care to tell me your name?"

"My name is Alex Harcourt, I'm twenty-seven years old, and I officially hate my father," was what the human said before a coughing fit started. He looked ready to collapse onto a pile of tarp that Bogo realized he must have been using as a bed. Amazingly, though, he remained standing, looking Bogo right in the eye.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, readers! I hope that you enjoyed the newest chapter! Feel
free to let me know what you thought of it!
Hello there, dear readers! I'm back with the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! Once more, I need to give my thanks to my friend *Trismegistus Shandy* for proofreading this chapter! I hope that you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Okay, I'm just lost," Roger said, leaning back on the couch.

"It's simple," Erik explained. The teen otter stood up to address his hippo and human friends who were both stuck on the same question in their algebra homework. "You just use the F. O. I. L. method. First, you use the first parts of the two equations, then the outer parts, which means the first part of the first equation and the last part of the last equation, then the inner parts here, and finally the last parts. And boom, you've solved the problem!"

Roger scratched his head and looked a little helpless, math having never been his strongest subject, while Russell seemed to be starting to get it. The three were having a study session at Russell's foster home, with Mr. and Mrs. Spitz checking if they needed anything fairly regularly.

"I don't even understand why we need to learn this anyway," Roger complained just before Erik rolled his eyes and started to walk him through the problem, explaining everything along the way. Russell felt he was being watched and looked up just in time to see a tiny grey-furred face duck away under the nearby coffee table, making Russell smile.

"Wanna come out from your hiding spot, Ethan?" the human teen asked, setting his text book down. There was a giggling fit as a grey and blue blur dashed out and into Russell's arms, the little fox kit hugging him close. Today he was wearing a pair of blue overalls and a blue shirt.

"I thought that you were supposed to be taking a nap," Russell said as he held the giggling fox close, his little grey tail a blur of pure joy.

"And I thought we were gunna study together so we don't fail the upcoming test," Roger said with a huff as he started to understand Erik's advice.
"FOIWEW!" Ethan proudly said, making Russell and Erik chuckle and Roger roll his eyes.

"Everyone's rubbing it in," the hippo said with a smile as he watched his friend and his friend's adopted little brother interact.

Elsewhere...

"And that last dozen carton of eggs should just about do it," Marian said as she wrote on a clipboard, smirking.

"Uh... Marian? Sweetheart?" Robert said, having been the one putting away the bake sale supplies.

"Yes, Robert?" Marian asked as she set her clipboard down and walked over to the kitchen sink to wash up, turning the oven on to 350 while passing it.

"Don't you think that you might," the older fox looked nervous as he continued, "just might, dearest, be taking this a little too far? I mean, it's just a bake sale..."

Marian looked at her husband and rolled her eyes, internally grateful that she had ensured that he kept his appointment with the eye doctor. "I swear, Robbie, I have no idea where you get this notion that I get way too competitive. I'm just making a large batch of baked goods to help the homeless mammals of New Dawn."

Robert relaxed his shoulders a little. "And if I happen to show up Bonnie in the process, well, that just makes it all the more special." Robert immediately tensed up after hearing this.

"Marian, remember that this is about Eli and his troop helping others, alright?" Robert asked, with a pleading note to his voice. Marian let out a huff.

"Oh, I know," Marian said, smiling at the thought of her grandkit.
"Uh... Bon-Bon?" Stu stood in his kitchen, looking nervous.

"Yes?" Bonnie asked in a sing-song voice.

"Uhm... you do remember how... uh... heated that little competition between you and Marian got, right?" Stu asked, looking ready to run.

"I think that you and I are remembering last year's Carrot Days differently," Bonnie said with a chuckle as she used a rolling pin on the cookie dough she had made.

"I... uhm... I agree with you there, Bon-Bon... but... uh..." Stu gulped and steeled himself. "I'm remembering the rapid escalation and I... oh... I just wanted to make sure that you know that this event isn't about you or Marian."

"Yes, Stuart," Bonnie said, using the bunny-shaped cookie cutter on the flattened dough. She then turned her attention to the other bustling bunnies in the kitchen, all working on various baked goods.

"Tiffany, I need an ETA on those blackberry pies," Bonnie said, getting a rapid "Four more minutes, Mom!" in return.

"Terrance, remember to knead the dough," Bonnie addressed to a chocolate-colored male bunny.

"Mom, I really need to work on the tractor!" Terrance complained, growing silent at the sharp glare from the matronly bunny.

"Yes, Mom," he dejectedly said. Stu let out a sigh.
"Hey there, Squirt," Thomas said after waving his younger, but significantly taller, cousin over. The teenaged rabbit was standing in front of West Mammalia Middle School, his blue backpack slung over his shoulder. He was wearing a grey T-shirt and jeans.

"Hi, Thomas," Eli said with a smile as he approached, Isaac in tow, with Big Mike riding on his head.

"A couple of friends of yours?" Thomas asked as he looked at the coyote with the mouse on his head.

"Yeah, this is Mike and Isaac," Eli said, introducing them. "Th-this is my cousin, Thomas."

"Hiya!" Isaac said, his tail wagging, bouncing where he stood.

"Hey, Isaac, cut it out!" Mike called out, nearly being shaken off of Isaac's head.

"Oops, sorry," Isaac said, reining himself in. Thomas smiled at the antics of the two before turning back to address Eli.

"Uncle Nick called a little while ago. They got a report that your school's buses were all vandalized a little while ago. They're both a little tied up at work at the moment, so they asked me to walk you home."

"Oh?" Eli asked.

"Yeah, I would have been happy to drive you home but... well... the truck Mom and Dad got me is a little on the... small side," Thomas explained while Eli nodded.

"I understand," Eli said, before frowning. "Do they know who it was that did it?"
Thomas shook his head, understanding perfectly the real question. Was it the work of the crazy armadillo?

"The police aren't sure, but, that's why I'm here," Thomas said, sounding cheerful, to try and help keep Eli from feeling too scared.

"All they told us was that the buses were temporarily out of service," Mike said. Thomas nodded at that.

"So, ready to go?" Thomas asked just as a white tigress jogged over.

"Hey there, Eli," Kimi said as she strode up to the human boy, stopping when she spotted the bunny before them. "Who's your friend?"

"Hi, I'm Thomas, Eli's cousin," Thomas said, looking the white tigress up and down. He took note of how much closer to Eli she was standing as opposed to his other friends.

"S-since the buses are out of order, Thomas was gunna walk me home," Eli explained.

"We've got a science project that we're working on together and we were going to work on it tonight at Eli's place," Mike explained to the bunny; "can we come with?"

"Well, sure," Thomas said.

"Oh! My house is on the way and my mom's stuck in traffic, so can I tag along too?" Kimi asked, making what her parents call the 'kitten eyes' at Eli, who then turned to Thomas. Thomas had to keep from smirking.

"I don't see why not. So long as you guys' parents are all okay with it." That statement resulted in three different sized phones being whipped out and a series of quick texts. Once the last parent, Mike's dad, had responded with the okay, Thomas started to lead them away from the school.

"Hey, Thomas?" Eli asked after a moment of walking, unaware of Kimi staring at him.
"Yeah, Squirt?" Thomas asked while Isaac and Mike snickered at the nickname. Kimi was trying not to giggle.

"Is your school nearby?" Eli asked, looking around.

"No, it's quite a few blocks away."

"Then how'd you get to our school so soon?"

"Oh, well, we get out an hour earlier on Fridays," the rabbit explained as they started to cross at a crosswalk. The group was unaware that they were being watched as they walked. The ones watching them were none other than Edwin and Honey. The armadillo and honey badger were currently in a red van that Honey had stolen, wearing disguises.

"I told you that it wasn't a good idea," Honey hissed to Edwin as they both looked through binoculars, her blonde beehive wig jiggling as she turned her head to face him.

"How was I supposed to know that it would think to stay with a group?!!" Edwin hissed back, his voice a little muffled in the fake beard and mustache. "And before you go criticizing, maybe you need to remember that we must remain inconspicuous, yet you chose a vehicle for us that is the exact opposite!"

"It has tinted windows!" Honey argued back.

"It has a grey driver's side door and a mural of a fox warrior holding some fox maiden being struck by lightning on the side!" Edwin's voice was starting to rise.

"I only stole this van because we needed a vehicle that could house the creature once we captured with your ever so brilliant plan! I didn't exactly have time to go car shopping!" Honey threw her hands up into the air, her wig going all askew to reveal her fauxhawk.

"Well, it would seem that it's a moot point," Edwin said, calming down, his eye twitching, "I suppose that we will have to wait for the bake sale to make our move, as you originally planned. I just thought that we could expedite things if the students, and therefore the creature, didn't have
Edwin let out a sigh as he slid over to the passenger seat. Honey frowned, but said nothing further, and started the van back up. She checked to make sure that the radio was off. The very first time she had started up the vehicle, the speakers had blasted some form of rap in a foreign language.

Meanwhile...

Shortly after being found by the very large and imposing-looking cape buffalo, Alex found himself being loaded into an ambulance by a cougar and a hyena pair of EMT's. He had looked all around himself at the people gathering, their phones out and filming, and saw all sorts of different species of mammals. Alex hadn't been sure if it was the lack of water, the starvation, the isolation, or the infection, but he had been sure that he was hallucinating. On the ride to the hospital, he had promptly passed out. It was when he had initially awoken in his hospital bed that Alex had started to think that this was no simple delusion.

Presently, Alex stared at his reflection. He had managed to take a shower, and gotten ahold of some scissors and a razor. He ran a rough and calloused hand over his freshly shaved face. He would have to find a barber to get a proper haircut, but was satisfied with getting all the mats and knots out of the wild brown growth atop his head. A single steel grey eye stared right back at him from the reflection. His right eye was under a patch; the doctor, a panda, had informed him that they'd done what they could, but the eye was too badly damaged to be saved. Much like Alex's leg.

He looked away from the scarred, burned, bandaged, stitched up, sickly pale, almost skeletal figure staring back at him, down to the bandaged stump where his left leg from the shin down had been. Alex had been informed that the infection was quite severe, but was responding to the antibiotics that they were keeping him on. He put on the scrub shirt, a light blue that matched the pants he had been given, the left pant leg rolled up, and gathered up his crutches. Alex exited the bathroom to see the chatty male beaver nurse, Robbie, waiting with another IV bag of the fluids that they were also keeping him on to treat the dehydration.

"You have a visitor," Robbie said after Alex got into bed, climbing up a small step ladder that folded up beneath the bed, in order to hook up the IV.

"I can't imagine who," Alex said, his voice not as raspy as it had been.

"It just so happens to be the local chief of police who fished you out of the ocean a few days ago," Robbie said as he climbed down.
"Oh," Alex said, unsure of what to say. Robbie flashed the human a winning smile before heading off. A little bit after the beaver had left, Bogo entered, knocking on the doorframe. Today he was wearing his uniform.

"Mr. Harcourt, glad to hear that you're improving," Bogo said as he pulled up a chair next to the bed.

"Nice to meet you again, Chief... Bogo," Alex replied.

"Mr. Harcourt... I have some questions that I would to ask you," Bogo began.

"I have a feeling that these questions are going to relate to how I came to be here, but sure, ask away." Alex smiled as Bogo nodded.

"You were found in a very severe state. Starvation, dehydration, the... infection." The cape buffalo looked uncomfortable as he motioned to the missing leg, to which Alex just nodded and signaled him to continue. "You had many cuts and bruises, and I was informed by the doctors that they had to remove four bullets, which amazingly missed any vital organs. And you were covered with many cigarette burns and had a severely broken leg."

"Sounds about right, sir," Alex said before taking a sip of water from the glass on the table next to his bed. There was a freshly filled pitcher right next to it. "And I take it that you would like to know how I amassed such a collection."

Alex waited for Bogo to nod before diving right into it.

"I was captured by pirates," Alex said frankly, "or at least that's what I think that they were. I couldn't understand most of what they were saying. I was sailing on a sailboat one day, when suddenly four little boats came out of nowhere and surrounded me. Everyone was wearing black hoods and screaming in another language, oh, and brandishing guns. After that they took me to some island that they'd turned into a fortress, and tossed me into a small room that I'm pretty sure that they'd been using just for keeping hostages."

"I see... is something like that a common occurrence of your world?" Bogo asked.
"I'm not really sure... the news was commenting on something like that happening for a while, but I never really paid that much attention. I kinda changed my tune about that when they were breaking my leg with a hammer."

"So they broke your leg?" Bogo clarified.

"Yup. Right after the first time I tried to escape. And then they broke it again the second time I tried." Alex said. Bogo heard the casualness of Alex's voice, but noticed the trembling hand that held the glass of water.

"Not once did I ever seen anyone's face, they always kept them covered around me. There were a few who spoke English though, but they all had accents. When they found out who I was, that's when they started to burn me, well, every time I told them that I didn't have any money to give them. My father is Bastion Harcourt, the eighth richest man in the world... and he had completely cut me off long before I took my little sailing trip."

"May I ask why that was?" Bogo queried.

"He and I never really saw eye to eye on a lot of things, and after our last fight, he threw me out and cut me off... hence why I stole the boat." Alex noticed the raised eyebrow on the Police Chief and elaborated. "He had originally given it to me as a graduation gift, back before he realized that I hated him. So I decided to take it back... obviously not one of my smarter moves."

"Did these pirates come to understand that you had no access to any funds?" Bogo asked, choosing to gloss over the theft.

"Oh yeah," Alex said before setting the glass down, "so they dragged me to some room with a satellite on it with some cameras-- everything looked patched together, by the way-- and then somehow managed to get ahold of him. There was a live video feed and I'm assuming one for me, because one of the English-speaking guys was telling my father that if he wanted me returned home alive, he was to transfer to them one hundred million dollars to some bank account that they sent him. That's when he... told them to go ahead and get it over with... and the live feed of him ended. They kept me alive because they thought that maybe it was some kind of negotiation tactic, but I could tell that they were starting to realize, in the days that passed, that that was not the case. I think some months had passed at this point, total, in my captivity. I figured that I was gunna die, so I ripped out a piece of the box spring under the mattress that was my bed, and fashioned it into what I think is called a shiv."

Alex took a breath as he looked down at his hands, before he continued.
"I... waited... until the guy who brought me my food came... and that's when I made my third escape attempt. I'm surprised that it worked, actually, considering I was hobbling around on one leg. I'm also still surprised that they had a huge propane tank in the main building of their compound. And that they kept flares near it. I opened the valve a little and hobbled away outside and hid behind a rock formation. By then, they were already looking for me, so when I threw the metal food tray I had kept with me into that main building, they all ran in. I left a door open, fairly certain that that was gunna be the end of me as well, and fired the flare right into the room." Bogo listened, enraptured by Alex's story.

"The blast happened and a piece of shrapnel is what caused this," Alex said, pointing to his eyepatch.

"And you got them all?" the cape buffalo asked.

"Well, there was one who was hobbling around after I came to. He had been burned all over, and he's the one who shot me. He couldn't really aim at that point, just waved his automatic gun around, getting off a bunch of shots, before he finally collapsed." Alex's hands shook again.

"Why the patchwork boat?" Bogo asked after a moment of silence.

"There were a few boats that had gone out somewhere, I don't know where, the day before, and the few that remained were all pretty badly damaged from the explosion, including my sailboat. So I put one together, and loaded up what water and food I could, a lot of it canned and out of date. I realistically figured that if the remaining pirates didn't return in time to start searching for me, then that I would probably sink. But at that point, I was kinda beyond really caring. I drifted for a while, after trying, and failing, to find land or another passing ship. The wind died for the longest time, and then I started to run low on food and water. And then they were gone."

"Eventually, I went to sleep, and was woken up by my boat running aground on something and... well... you know the rest." Alex took another deep breath and made his hands cease their trembling. Chief Bogo was at a loss for words.

_In Sahara Square..._
"I gotta say, Carrots, I'm looking forward to giving the speech at the academy," Nick said as he slowly drove their squad car down the busy street, nodding to a few camel joggers.

"Well, it is pretty exciting, getting to be the one to give the very first human officer his badge," Judy responded, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.

"True enough, not that I'm surprised by their asking me to give the speech this year, what with being the very first fox cop. And I get it. I mean, it's not like there is anyone better to ask." Nick said with a smirk, waiting for his bunny to respond.

"Except maybe the very first bunny cop," Judy responded, knowingly taking the bait. She had long since learned to recognize when her mate was feeling playful.

"Meh, that's old news, and not nearly as controversial," Nick said as casually as he could, risking a single peek beneath his aviators to see Judy's pink nose twitch. She opened her mouth to speak when she saw two camels roll into the road ahead of them, very obviously fighting. Nick pulled to a stop and parked the car as he and Judy went to go and break it up, preferably without having to tase or tranq anyone.

\textit{Savannah Central...}

Lily Blackthorn looked herself over in the mirror. She was wearing a simple white blouse and jeans, smiling at her reflection. She heard a knock at her door, and made her way to it. She grabbed her purse from the couch as she did, and opened the door with a smile at the sight of the very nervous-looking black jaguar before her.

"Hello, Renato," Lily said. She took in that he was just wearing a green shirt and jeans, keeping it casual as well.

"Lily, y-you look wonderful," Renato said, smiling, but also nervously. Lily blushed just before she stood up a little to kiss him on the cheek, and then offered him her arm, which he quickly looped his around. She took a moment to shut and lock her apartment door before they started walking down the hall together. Lily found his nervousness about going on their first official date to be adorable.
"So what movie are we going to be seeing?" Lily asked as she allowed herself to be led towards the elevator.

"I w-was thinking of a double feature, *Shriek* and *Shriek 2," Renato offered.

"That sounds lovely," Lily said, resting her head on his shoulder. Renato started to become much more relaxed and smiled down at the human female.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, folks! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter! Be sure to let me know what you think!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Hello there, dear readers! Once more, I am excited to bring to you the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! I must give another shout out to my friend, and an awesome author, *Trismegistus Shandy*, for proofreading this chapter! I genuinely hope that you enjoy the new chapter, and also, be sure to check out my newest story, *Found*!

Also, this is going to be an Eli-centric chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Once more," Scoutmaster Greene said, the deer beaming at the assembled troop 608, "I have to commend you all for your efforts today. This bake sale is going to help a lot of mammals that need it." The scouts were all in attendance and in their scout uniforms as they stood in one of the currently unused classrooms at the New Dawn facility.

All of the scouts sported grins, including Darryl, whom Eli had come to learn tried to keep a neutral face, all in an effort to cultivate a cool and aloof attitude. The chinchilla spotted Eli looking at him, and stifled the grin.

"And," the scoutmaster continued, "Lyla and Eli both deserve special recognition today. Lyla, for coming up with the idea for the bake sale in the first place, and Eli for bringing in the largest contribution of baked goods I have ever seen." Eli and Lyla both looked happy for the praise, and also both sported a blush. It was just as the scoutmaster informed them that he was going to go assist the New Dawn volunteers with the setting up of the various stalls, that Eli noticed that Lyla was holding his hand in her hoof. The zebra let go just as Mike, who was riding atop Eli's head, cleared his throat.

"Alright, troop 608," the mouse said, "it's time we split up into groups of two to begin manning the booths. Ned, Ted," the black bear twins snapped to attention, having both been snickering about something, "you'll both be in charge of mammaling the booth by the east door."

"Can do!" The twins enjoyed speaking simultaneously quite a bit, as Eli had come to find.

"Chuck, Darryl," the cougar and chinchilla both nodded, "you two will be handling the table by the
western door. And Darryl, you are in charge of making sure Chuck doesn't go sneaking any of the sweets."

"Got it," Darryl said with a smirk, while Chuck looked sheepish.

"I wasn't gunna," he complained, not meeting Mike's gaze.

"Right," Mike said, looking skeptical, "Adam, Isaac, I'm assigning you two the northern door." Adam, the elephant, let out an excited trumpet from his trunk, while the coyote across from him let out a sigh.

"I still say that the play would have been more fun," Isaac said.

"Maybe, but this is for charity, plus, you can always re-submit the idea at our next meeting for consideration." That bit of news seemed to perk the coyote boy right up, and his tail became a happy blur. Mike rolled his eyes as he saw Kimi and Lyla shooting each other dirty looks on either side of Eli, just outside of his line of sight.

"Kimi, Lyla, you two will take the booth at the southern entrance," Mike said, trying not to take too much satisfaction from the dual shocked expressions of the two girls' faces. He had already decided on pairing them up a while ago, as the silent competition between them had gotten quite old, fairly quickly, at least to the mouse. He had also decided to have them working at the booth that Scoutmaster Greene was going to be at the most, to keep them from escalating things.

"And Eli, you'll be with me. We're gunna be checking on all of the booths, and of course helping out wherever we can. Understood?" Mike bent low over Eli's head just as the human boy looked up, the two making eye contact.

"Yes, Troop Leader!" Eli said, excitedly.

"Alright then, Troop 608, move out!" Mike called out, receiving a chorus of "Yes, Troop Leader". He kept an eye on Lyla and Kimi, the zebra and the white tigress wearing clearly fake smiles as they made their way to the southern booth. He shook his head before directing Eli over to where their parents were. Ned and Ted were already in place nearby, with Mike pointing out that Ted was working the cash box, and that Ned was standing behind the booth, awaiting customers. Once more, Eli wondered how Mike could tell the difference between the twins. Nick and Judy, both off duty and dressed casually, were directing various cousins and siblings of Judy, each carrying in trays of
different kinds of baked goods.

"The mouse-sized cookies will be closest to the front, with elephant-sized ones in the back, and all of the other sizes in between following that pattern." Judy's voice floated over to the two friends as they approached. The other bunnies nodded towards Judy, and started to head towards the nearest booth, with Mike's parents just before it, meeting and greeting the smaller mammals that were entering. One of Judy's ears twitched in Eli and Mike's direction, and she turned. Her face lit up at the sight of her kit, and so the bunny officer bounded over, giving Eli's shins a warm embrace.

"This is such a wonderful thing you kids are doing," she said, "I'm so proud of you."

Eli blushed and leaned down to return the hug. "Thanks, Mom."

"Careful, Fluff, you hug any tighter and you start to cut off the circulation to his legs," Nick joked as he approached, reaching over to give his kit a hug as well.

"Oh hush," Judy said, letting go.

"Yes, dear," Nick said. He looked around, seeing the scouts setting up their booths, stopping to assist the volunteers of New Dawn, and smiled. For him, something like this had been the dream of a young kit. The fox felt a swell of pride and joy to know that, while he may have missed out, his own kit wasn't. He then noticed his mate looking at him, her ears drooping in worry.

"You okay, Nick?" she asked, taking a step towards him. Nick nodded, before scooping his bunny into his arms. She let out a short squeak of surprise, cut off as their lips met. Eli looked away, simultaneously happy that his parents loved each other, and him, so very much, as well as uncomfortable watching them kiss.

"Well, it was nice to see you again, Mr. and Mrs. Hopps, but Eli and I really need to make the rounds," Mike said, Eli feeling a couple little tugs on some of his hair. Judy, still in Nick's arms, broke off the kiss.

"Alright you two, we'll be right here, helping get everything ready," Judy said, having to take a moment to catch her breath.

"Now, why did he assume that I took your last name?" the two boys heard, just as they made their
way towards the southern door, per Mike's directions. As they walked, different bunnies would call out to Eli to say hello, and usually give him a hug, provided that their arms weren't full of baked goods. After the thirtieth cousin, Mike was more than a little amazed that Eli knew all of their names so far.

"Your family is really close," Mike observed as he directed Eli towards the southern booth, wanting to check in on Kimi and Lyla.

"Y-Yeah," Eli said with a smile, "your mom and dad seem really enthusiastic." Eli recalled the two dropping Mike off, both hugging him and embarrassing the mouse boy by making sure his scout uniform wasn't wrinkled, before they excitedly ran off to begin helping.

"Oh yeah," Mike said, enjoying the view from atop Eli's head, "they are at that. Any after-school activity that I'm a part of or show any interest in, they like to encourage. Partly, I think, because it'll look good for college, and partly because they want to make sure I have a lot of fun. A lot of mice are picked on by larger mammals in school, and I think my folks both went through that when they were growing up." Eli thought about this as a certain tigress and zebra came into view, both setting up the displays for the baked goods, while each resting a paw, and hoof, on the money box.

"Hi, Eli," Kimi purred, her tail swishing.

"Uhm, h-hi again, Kimi," Eli said as he approached.

"How're things here?" Mike asked.

"Just fine," Lyla said after setting a basket of chocolate muffins down, "we're almost ready for Kimi start taking orders while I run the cash box."

Kimi let out another pur. "That's very nice of you, Lyla, but you can be the one who takes the customers' orders, and I'll take care of the cash box." Kimi's voice was sickeningly sweet.

"Oh no," Lyla said, mimicking the tigress' voice, "I insist."

"Actually," the Scoutmaster said, stepping in as Kimi was about to retort, effectively silencing the two, "I'm expecting that this booth will get the most foot traffic, so it's gunna have to be all hooves on deck. I'll mammal the cash box while you two both take orders."
The two girls looked at each other before looking away.

"Yes sir, Scoutmaster Greene." They both looked miffed at speaking simultaneously, but said nothing further. The deer gave Eli and Mike a wink before sending them on their way.

"Wh-where to next, Troop Leader?" Eli asked.

"The western booth next, we gotta make sure that Darryl is keeping Chuck out of the sweets," Mike said. Eli chuckled and the two started to make their way there.

Elsewhere...

"So a troop of Ranger Scouts just up and decided to organize a bake sale for your favorite charity," Chaz said, looking over at Arnie with crossed arms, "the very same troop that Officers Hopps and Wilde's son just so happened to be in, and you expect me to believe that a certain rhinoceros partner of mine had absolutely nothing to do with it?"

Arnie looked around his horn at the timber wolf, and let out a snort.

"I didn't, Chaz," he said with a sigh. The two were in uniform as they pulled up in front of the New Dawn facility, Arnie wanting to stop by and check out the bake sale, as well as check in on the place in general.

"Uh-huh," Chaz said skeptically, getting out of the cruiser as Arnie put it in park.

"I honestly had nothing to do with this!" Arnie was starting to get annoyed. He was happy about the bake sale, and all of the attention and the funding that it was going to garner for New Dawn. He was simply annoyed that his partner had decided not to believe him.

"Oh, puh-lease," Chaz said, sporting a smirk as he needled his partner and friend, "you push this
place harder than most drug dealers we bust push their own product.”

Arnie rolled his eyes. "I do not. When it does come up in conversation, organically, I only bring it up because this is a wonderful organization dedicated to helping our fellow mammals."

Now it was Chaz's turn for an eye roll, but Arnie spotted the tail wagging and chuckled.

"Have you ever thought of getting your Aunt Phyllis and maybe Baily involved in this place? I'm sure that a lot of these mammals would appreciate a free paw or hoof reading." Chaz continued to smirk. "Or maybe they could pass around some free crystals imbued with luck energy or something."

"That's not even funny," Arnie said, stopping to regard his partner.

"It's a little funny," was Chaz's reply.

"No, it isn't, and you'd better not mention luck crystals around her, or else you will be treated to a lecture on the different types of crystals and the different types of energies that can be housed in them for over an hour." Arnie walked past the wolf.

"Over an hour?" Chaz questioned as he followed his partner inside.

Meanwhile...

"There are quite a few mammals already inside and out," Edwin said as he looked out the rear van windows with a pair of binoculars, watching the New Dawn facility. He was currently dressed in an old faded and worn green military jacket. He had on a fake black beard, with a ragged black toupe.

"It'll make for the perfect cover," Honey said. Today, she had on a black beanie, with a navy blue windbreaker, and a pair of ripped and torn jeans.

"But what if someone sees?" Edwin asked, worried about them being caught just before they could
grab the specimen.

"Oh, don't worry, they'll all be looking in the exact opposite direction," the badger said. She grinned, and the armadillo felt a chill rush down his spine. "You just wait five minutes after you see me enter, and start up the van. Keep the back doors unlocked and the engine running."

"U-Understood," Edwin said to his partner. He was starting to feel a similar feeling on the day he had shot the creature with the Nighthowler pellet. He couldn't quite place it, especially as his left eye began to twitch, but it was a very unsettling feeling.

Honey grunted as she opened the back doors, pushing the trolley cart with her. On it was a series of, very apparently, hastily made cakes and cupcakes, some burnt and slathered with icing, others uneven, and others still falling apart as they jostled. She then reached down and unzipped a black bag in the back of the van, pulling out the tranq pistol, and tucking it into a pocket inside her jacket. And with that, she was off. Edwin watched her go, and for the oddest reason, thought of his siblings. Mainly Charlie, as he was the only one who was still on speaking terms with him, or at least had been.

Back inside...

The inside of the New Dawn building was a hive of activity. With all of the booths set up and the bake sale underway, there was a festive atmosphere all around. Eli and Mike continued to drift from booth to booth, offering help to anyone who needed it. As they did their rounds, the two started to drift over to the northern entrance where a small crowd was gathering. Eli smiled as he saw both sets of his grandparents, and started to quicken his pace. They were standing next to two additional sets of tables that had been set up at the northern entrance. On one were cakes and cookies and pies expertly stacked taller than a giraffe standing right next to it.

On the other was a massive cake easily as big as the table itself that was a work of art. It was in the shape of a castle, complete with a chocolate moat and a working cookie drawbridge with black licorice chains. It was iced a bright lavender for the walls, white for the crenelations up top, deep blue for the tops of the towers, with green icing made to look like individual blades of grass with multicolored icing roses surrounding it. Overhanging the moat were two identical and perfectly sculpted lion heads.

Eli slowed down as he came within earshot of his two grandpas, who were discussing something.
"I thought that you said that you were going to talk to your wife, Stewart," Robert said, frowning at the bunny farmer around his glasses. Stu thumped his foot as he looked the arctic fox up and down.

"I did, and it's the reason why we didn't need to rent an elephant-sized eighteen wheeler to deliver everything!" Stu said.

"No, you just needed to rent out an old school bus," Robert said.

"Well, what about you? You said that you were gunna talk your mate down!"

"I did! If it wasn't for me, she would have incorporated a chocolate fountain to make chocolate and vanilla waterfalls streaming out of the carved lion heads!" Robert said, noticing Eli approach, his glasses allowing him to spy the little mouse on his head.

"Oh, hi there, sport," Robert said, putting on a nervous smile. Stu hopped in the air and turned around, looking up at his grandkit also with a nervous smile. "Hiya, Eli!"

"Hi, grandpas," Eli said, not once looking away from the cake castle which, even if it hadn't been on the table, was still easily taller than he was.

"There's our grandkit!" Marian's voice brought Eli out of his amazement as he turned to regard his grandmas. "And it would seem that he's already spotted something he likes, perhaps even something he likes the best."

Bonnie regarded the vixen with a wry smile. "Or maybe he spotted something so gaudy that he couldn't help but look at it? Something other than a tried and true classic cake, or pie, or batch of cookies."

"Mom," Judy's voice cut through the tension like a knife as she strode forward, Nick trailing behind her and looking up at the tower of sweets and then at the castle in awe.

"Oh wow, you both really outdid yourselves this time," Nick said.
"Nick, you're not helping," Judy hissed before turning to regard her mother and Marian, her foot starting to thump in annoyance. The two older females started to look embarrassed under Judy's gaze.

"I'm nipping this competition in the bud, right here and now. This is a bake sale, not a bake-off. This is for charity, not trying to show anyone else up, okay?"

Bonnie looked abashed, as did Marian.

"We're sorry, Judy," the vixen said, wringing her paws.

"I guess we just let our competitiveness get the better of us," Bonnie finished, a little annoyed at the collective nodding coming from the many assembled bunnies, some of whom she heard muttering in agreement.

"That's okay," Nick chimed in, slipping a paw around Judy's waist in order to pull her in closer for a hug, "a little competition can be a good thing from time to time." There was a general nod to that statement.

"Besides, seeing what you two are capable of competing against one another, just imagine if you two ever worked together on a project like this," Nick joked, his ears laying flat at the collective gasp from all of the bunnies.

"Hmm," Marian sais, a sly smirk on her muzzle, while Bonnie seemed to be considering what was said as well.

"My little Nicky certainly makes a good point, Bonnie, with my love of design and your baking legions."

"We could absolutely crush all of our competition," the matronly bunny said, Marian nodding happily as her tail wagged. Stu and Robert simultaneously let out a groan and clapped their paws to their faces.

"Good goin', son," Robert said to the surprised Nick, "you just went and opened a very dangerous door."
Everyone was surprised by Eli bursting into laughter just then, Mike joining in.

Near the northern entrance...

And in place, Honey thought as she unloaded the messy baked good onto the table, watching the human boy sharing a laugh with those present. She felt inside her jacket and fingered the tranq gun, one paw resting on the handle of the trolley.

Now to wait for the distraction...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliff-hanger, but I just couldn't resist! I hope that you enjoyed the chapter! Please feel free to leave a review!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hello there, readers! I am so happy to bring you the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! I would also like to let you all know of my newest project, *Found*, which was inspired by the stories *The Rehabilitation of Dawn Bellwether* and the sequel *A Lamb Among Wolves* by the amazing author *WastedTimeEE*! I absolutely recommend them! And I would like to, once again, thank my friend and proofreader, *Trismegistus Shandy*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chuck looked around. The cougar boy checked to make sure that Darryl was busy with a customer, an elderly capybara, before grinning to himself. With one more discreet look at the chinchilla, he reached over to a basket of chocolate cookies with white chocolate chips, single clawed finger extended with the intent of lifting up the plastic wrapping and sliding a single cookie out.

"Don't even think about it," the deep voice rumbled, making Chuck jump, literally. He whirled around, nervous, to see Darryl looking over his shoulder at him, over his shades. "No snacking on the product, Chuck."

Chuck nodded, looking abashed, and resumed putting the money in the cash box.

***

"Say, Arnie?" The timber wolf looked to his partner, who was looking around with a wide grin on his face.

"Yes, Chaz?" the rhino asked, excited at all of the different baked goods for sale, and the festive air.

*So many mammals are going to be helped.*
"I was wondering..." The timber wolf paused and looked away, rubbing the back of his head with a paw. They were in sight of the tower of baked treats and the castle cake, out of the way of a line of various mammals waiting to make a purchase.

"Yes?"

"What... uh... what does someone need to do to... uh... help out at this place... from time to time?"

Chaz looked uncomfortable while Arnie smiled down smugly at his partner.

"Well now, Chaz, why would you want to know that?"

Chaz let out a groan. "Okay, look, you were right about this being a great place to help other mammals, okay?" Arnie chuckled and clapped his friend on the back.

"I knew that you'd come around eventually. And anyway, there's all sorts of things that you could do to help, big and small. I can even get you one of the newer pamphlets." Chaz rolled his eyes, but his tail still gave a wag.

***

"Thank you sir," Kimi said cheerfully as she passed the kangaroo the basket of chocolate muffins before turning to regard Lyla. "And that's another sale, bringing up my total to two hundred dollars, so fa--"

"Hold that thought just one sec, Kimi," the zebra girl said, holding up a hoof, before turning to resume her transaction with the group of lemming business mammals that were each passing her by, and each making a purchase. The tigress' eyes went wide as she watched each of the smaller mammals walk by while placing an order, placing the amount due on the table in front of Lyla, and happily accept their baked goods which were handed off, one after the other. Her mouth fell open at the growing stack of bills that Lyla was racking up.

"And thank you very much, Miss!" Lyla waved to the last of the long line, who had all made a large U-turn, and were promptly making for the exit. Lyla, casually counting up the money, turned to Kimi. "Sorry, Kimi, they were on their lunch break, what were you saying?"
A low rumble started to leave the white tigress' throat before the scoutmaster stepped in. "Very good work, scouts," he said, opening the cash box and holding out a hoof, "it's really nice to see you two so enthusiastic about helping others. I swear, most kids your age get too wrapped up in their own little worlds to see what's really important."

"Thank you, Scoutmaster Greene," the two girls said in unison, once more both looking annoyed at speaking simultaneously. They handed off the money, which was promptly locked away, and resumed taking and filling orders.

***

"Eddie, you can't just stop taking you medication!" Charlie looked exasperated as he sat on the park bench with his brother. Charlie was wearing a charcoal grey suit with a red tie, having had to leave work early to deal with his younger brother.

"Charlie, that stuff doesn't do anything for me except make me drowsy; besides, I am so close to a breakthrough!" Edwin said, his eye twitching. Their mother had been the one to call Charlie, him having always been the responsible one, and the one of their litter who was always willing to look out for Edwin. She'd called after she had dropped by for a visit to find Edwin, in one of his manic states, having gone days without eating or sleeping, constantly muttering something about making the electrical infrastructure of the city more streamlined. Charlie had promptly arrived, after apologizing to his boss for the sudden emergency departure, and talked Edwin into going to the park with him. It took quite a bit of coaxing on Charlie's part.

"Eddie," Charlie let out a sigh, already started to feel exhausted from the conversation, "you haven't slept in four days. And you haven't eaten anything either. And you're not making any sense. When you're not muttering to yourself about streamlining everything, and not explaining what you mean, you're cursing mammals you seem to think are trying to steal your credit."

"But Joakim is trying to steal my work, I just know it! He's always had it out for me!" Edwin insisted, his eye starting to twitch.

"Joakim is your attorney," Charlie slowly explained, already not looking forward to the call he was expecting from the capybara.
"That's just what he wants you to think!" Edwin insisted.

"Eddie!" Charlie said sharply, making his brother cringe back a little. "You are in one of your states, and you need to start taking your medicine."

"But I don't need it anymore! I've been feeling much better!" Edwin started to insist.

"Eddie, the reason that you've been feeling better is because of your medication. You have to go back on it."

"But--" Edwin started, only to be cut off.

"Mom called me up in tears. Were you aware that you're about to get evicted? You haven't paid any of your bills, and your work has left so many messages because you haven't been showing up!"

"I... m-my breakthrough?"

"Eddie, you are a brilliant mammal, but that doesn't mean that you can't take your medicine. Think about what you're doing to Mom!"

Edwin was silent at that, hanging his head.

"I-I'm sorry, Ch-Charlie," Edwin said, his voice starting to crack. Charlie gave Edwin a reassuring smile while reaching over to hug his brother.

"It's okay, Eddie, but you gotta start taking your medicine again," Charlie said, patting Edwin on the back.

"...O-okay... Charlie," Edwin said.

Edwin came out of his reverie. The memory was from five years ago, back before his other brothers
had cut him out of their life entirely. Just after their mother had passed away. Charlie had always
been there, but each time seeming a little more run down. Especially after Edwin had been arrested.

"Charlie," Edwin said aloud. The armadillo thought about his brother some more, and couldn't help
but think of what he would say if he knew what was going on. His thoughts drifted to their mother,
and what she would have thought of what he had done, and what he was about to do.

"B-But... it's for the... th-the betterment of mammalkind!" he weakly insisted to no one corporeal. "I-it is!"

***

Any second now, Honey thought to herself as she slowly unloaded the undesirable baked goods that
were part of her cover. She did so one-pawed, keeping her other paw inside her coat pocket, never
letting the human boy out of her line of sight. Her thumb brushed against the barrel of the tranq gun,
and she smiled.

Gotta be ready to strike. Just grab it in the confusion and get the creature to the van. She continued
to watch, even after she unloaded the last cupcake.

***

BANG!

Judy had been in the middle of trying, and failing, to keep a swarm of her younger siblings from
clambering all over Nick. At the sudden loud sound, she froze and looked to the northern entrance.
There was smoke, followed by screams, as panicking mammals all started to make a rush for another
exit. The fear swept through many different mammals as a stampede began to form.

"Eli," Judy looked to her kit, who had looked around confused and worried, but whose eyes locked
onto his mom's. "Stay back and out of the way while we handle this."

Eli nodded as he stepped back from the amassing crowd. There was a sudden sting on the back of his neck.

"Oh no," Mike said as he held onto Eli's hair, "I hope Lyla and Kimi are alright. That explosion happened near their--WOAH!" Eli pitched forward and then backwards, staggering on his feet. Mike lost his grip on Eli's brown locks, and suddenly fell forward, landing inside one of Eli's uniform pockets. Eli, having already started to feel woozy from the darting, was knocked backward onto a trolley that had rammed him from behind.

"Success," Honey whispered in excitement. In the confusion, no one noticed as she wheeled her prize out the door she had entered from, mammals too busy panicking. She quickly wheeled the unconscious human boy towards the alley where the van was parked. She was a little confused to see Edwin standing outside of it, holding his head in his paws.

"Doctor Shellison, help me load this thing in and restrain it, we have got to make out getaway!" Edwin looked up, and the color drained from his face as he looked upon the unconscious figure on the trolley.

"D-doctor Honey, wait," Edwin started, "th-th-this... we just... oh dear gods, we..." Edwin didn't finish his line of thought. A dart was sticking out of his chest, where there was no natural armor. In seconds, he had fallen over onto his shell, rocking back and forth. Honey sighed, and worked to load Eli into the back of the van, happy to find that the engine was still running. Once in the back of the van, Honey got out the zip-ties, and restrained Eli's arms behind his back, followed by his ankles. She took one more look at Edwin out of the back doors, shaking her head at his unconscious form.

"You just had to go and disappoint me, Doctor Shellison," she said before shutting the doors and making her way to the front of the van. Gunning the engine, she pulled out, unaware of a tiny pair of eyes peeking at her out from Eli's pocket.

Oh no, oh no, oh no, Mike thought to himself as he pulled out his phone. He set it to silent before he started to make a call.

***
"Where does anyone even get a smoke bomb this big?" Arnie asked as he examined the device inside the brown paper bag. It had been the source of the noise and the smoke, having been tossed into a trash can near the entrance. Chaz looked away from the tigress scout who was helping a limping zebra scout over to a bench.

"And why would they set it off at a bake sale for the homeless?" Chaz asked, letting out a low growl.

"Probably someone's idea of a prank," Arnie said.

"ELI!!" The two officers looked towards the source of the familiar voice, to see Judy running around, starting to look frantic. "ELI!!"

"Hopps? What's the matter?" Arnie asked. Judy looked to the two and bolted straight for them. "Have either of you seen my kit?! I told him to get clear of the confusion and now... I CAN'T FIND HIM!"

"Does he have a phone?" Chaz offered just as Nick showed up.

"He's not answering," Nick said, frowning but trying to keep a calmer head.

"He always picks up for us!" Judy said, looking ready to resume her search. Kimi and Lyla, who were sitting together nearby, were watching intently.

"Judy!" Judy's ears turned in the direction her name was being called and looked to see Mrs. Musculus, with her husband trailing behind her.

"I just got a call from Mikey! He says that they've been kitnapped!" Mike's mother's eyes were already welling with tears as she brandished her phone. Judy and Nick both felt their stomach's drop. Arnie was already reaching for his radio while Kimi and Lyla both let out worried gasps.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry again for yet another cliffhanger, but stay tuned! Also, feel free to leave a review!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hello there, readers! I am happy to be back with another new chapter of The Keyhole! I had to take a little break to work on some of my other stories, like Found and my non-fanfics like The Thaumaturgist. Also, this chapter is a little shorter than usual, sorry about that. This chapter was proofread by Trismegistus Shandy, whose stories I absolutely recommend!

Anyways, I present to you chapter twenty! Feel free to let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So..." Cadet Jack Savage said while pacing back and forth in front of Walter. The human cadet chuckled inwardly at the sight of the hare strutting about confidently back and forth before him.

"So?" Walter queried, already having a good idea as to what Jack had pulled him aside to the barracks to talk to him about.

"So... next week is our graduation. Are ya nervous?" Jack looked up at Walter with a smirk.

"Why would I be nervous?" Walter asked.

"Well, as Valedictorian, you'll be expected to give a little speech. And since you're the very first of your species to become a police officer, naturally there's probably going to be a lot of press there. And all sorts of important mammals, probably the mayor as well. Not to mention the very first fox officer. And I'm pretty sure the very first bunny cop will be there too, and she was valedictorian as well." Jack said, continuing his strutting.

"I've never really had a problem with public speaking, Jack," Walter said, having by now become well-versed enough to read the hare. He had already figured that the discussion about their upcoming graduation was just a smokescreen so that Jack could work up the courage to bring up what he really wanted to talk about.
"Besides, I'd figured that you'd be more concerned about your date with a certain arctic vixen," the human said, watching the ever so slight quiver in the hare's perked-up ears.

"Concerned?" Jack gave a wave of his paw before puffing out his chest, fists on his hips. "What would I have to be concerned about? A date with an attractive female who practically swoons at my every passing?"

"Wait, are you talking about that time that she slipped on the wet tile in the halls while you were walking past?" Walter asked.

"I plan on taking her to a day spa," Jack went on, ignoring the question entirely, "just as the warm-up act. Then dinner at a fancy restaurant, followed by an evening stroll through the park."

"You're taking her out to a spa?" Walter asked, confused. "I have never heard of anyone going on a date at a spa before."

"That's what makes my plan so brilliant!" Jack said, in the blink of an eye standing next to where Walter was sitting on his bed. "And original. Everyone knows that females can't get enough of originality and creativity!"

"Uh-huh," Walter said, still sounding dubious. "And what kind of spa is it?"

"Well... it's a day spa... so... uh... eh, okay I'm not really sure on the details. But from what Dennis told me it sounds beautiful, relaxing, and scenic." Jack recalled the reindeer who, after hearing about the upcoming date, had been quick to volunteer the idea. Jack hadn't noticed a few other cadets holding back snickers upon hearing Dennis pitch him the idea.

"So it's actually his idea then, not yours?" Walter looked at Jack, who hopped down and casually leaned up to rest an elbow against one of the human's legs.

"Walter, Walter, Walter," Jack said, shaking his head with his usual smirk, "a great artist draws inspiration from their surroundings, and I am no different."

"So now you're an artist?"
"When it comes to the art of love, I am one of the greats." Jack puffed out his chest again. Walter rolled his eyes.

"Okay, and what's the spa called?"

"The Mystic Springs Oasis," Jack said with a wink, "that's right, I know how to pick 'em."

"I think that particular credit goes to Dennis."

*Meanwhile...*

"Just one step after another," Robbie said, gently encouraging the human using the parallel bars. Alex was holding onto a rail on either side of himself, helping to keep steady as he familiarized himself with walking with his prosthetic leg. He smiled, taking a second to look sideways at the beaver nurse with his one working eye, the second one underneath a bandage, blind.

*I really hope that this isn't all just some fever dream or a hallucination*, Alex thought as he reached the end.

"Great job, Alex," Robbie said, looking up and smiling.

Alex just gave a shrug to the smaller mammal, looking around the rehab room at all the other patients working with their physical therapists. *"It's... different..."

"That's for sure, but you're coming along great!" Robbie said.

"I'm actually a little surprised that you actually were able to make *me* a prosthetic at all," Alex admitted as he went through the bars again.

Robbie shrugged with his usual smile. "*We actually have a human who was a prosthetist back where you all came from; he appeared two months ago.*" Robbie frowned a little at the memory of first
meeting the prosthetist, a large human male whose face had been badly burned on the left side.

"That sounds lucky," Alex said, still taking short even steps.

"I'll say." Robbie shook off the memory and shifted his focus back to Alex.

_In Bunnyburrow..._

"And that's another five blueberry pies ordered, Sugar Tail," Sharla said with a wink at Gideon who was hard at work in the back of his shop. She giggled at the slight blush she saw inside his ears at her pet name for her mate.

"I'm on it, Darlin'," Gideon said, taking a moment to start gathering up supplies. Today had proven to be unusually busy for the shop, and the chubby fox had been grateful that Sharla's friend, Bobby Catmull, had volunteered to babysit Jeremy. He stood there for a brief moment and smiled. The human baby had been curious about the cougar, and had felt the need to tug on his whiskers and then his lips with his pudgy little hands. Gideon then got to work on the next set of pies, finishing them just in time to pull the most recent finished batch out of the oven and put the new ones in. He quickly boxed them and carried them to the front of the store where Sharla was taking some more orders. They then switched, Sharla standing up on her tip-hooves to give Gideon a quick peck on the side of his muzzle before heading into the back to start baking while he took his turn mammaling the register.

"Four lemon meringue pies, two key lime pies, and one dozen cookies," Gideon announced, handing the packaged baked goods off to the warthog female, who smiled and licked her lips. "Save it for the party, Sharon," Gideon heard her muttering to herself as she left. He was about to turn to the next customer in line, when he saw a series of bunnies running about frantically outside his shop door. Flashing the waiting moose an apologetic smile, Gideon made his way to the front door and poked his head out. He spotted two swarms of bunnies from the Hopps family, the adults, not the kerfluffle of little kits, packing all together into two separate trucks.

"Thanks for letting us borrow your trucks, Mrs. Leapington!" came the voice of one of Judy's littermates. He was a brown bunny whom Gideon always forgot the name of, and was presently sitting in the lead truck, speaking to an older female rabbit.
"It's no trouble on my part, Justin. I hope that you can help your sister find her kit," Mrs. Leapington said, wringing her paws worriedly.

"So do I," Justin said, looking grim. With a nod, he fired up the engine, the rear truck doing the same, and both bunny-laden vehicles pulled out in the direction of Zootopia, kicking up large clouds of dust.

_Judy's kit's missin'?_ Gideon wondered, feeling a sudden pang of fear for his friend, as well as a sense of unease. The dust clouds were starting to disperse, and Gideon was considering calling up Bobby to make sure Jeremy was okay, when he spotted a wizened older bunny, walking along in the same direction as the trucks went. The fox recognized the oldest living Hopps relative, known only as Pop-pop, walking along with his cane thumping the ground.

"Gunna go and get that varmint. No one takes one of our kits and gets away with it." Pop-pop said, looking around and squinting before seeming to get turned around. He then shook his head, and started muttering darkly about what he would to the varmints in question when he caught them, but now he was heading in the opposite direction. Gideon saw Mrs. Leapington shake her head before going after the much older bunny. Certain that Pop-pop was going to be fine, Gideon quickly went to the back of the store.

"Sharla," Gideon said. His little black ewe looked over to him, her smile quickly fading as she took in the look on his face.

"Gid? What's wrong?" she asked, feeling a sense of unease.

_Elsewhere..._

_He has my kit... he has my kit... HE HAS MY KIT!!!_ Judy choked back a panicked sob as she felt her mother's arms around her. They were standing off to the side of the entrance, with Stu on his phone having called Justin to gather up some more of the adults to come help with a search. Nick was also talking on his phone, worriedly looking at his mate. His normal cool and casual demeanor had evaporated instantly when he had learned that their kit had been abducted. He had just ended his call with a distraught Clawhauser and turned to try and console his mate, wanting nothing more than to find whoever took Eli and tear into them, when he spotted Thomas sprinting towards them.
"Uncle Nick, Aunt Judy!" Thomas looked disheveled as Nick looked over the teenage bunny who had quickly organized a search amongst the Hopps family. "We found the guy that attacked Eli!" There was a moment of pause when everyone froze in place, before Judy, with furious tears in her eyes, looked up at her nephew.

At that moment...

"Eli, please try to wake up," Mike pleaded, pulling open an eyelid on his unconscious human friend. The pre-teen mouse had lost the signal on his phone after describing some surroundings he had seen pass by in the back of the van, careful not to alert the crazed badger. He wasn't sure of where they were, thinking that maybe they were now in the rainforest district, due to the humidity. They were in a warehouse, Mike knew that much, as he had seen the badger hop out after pulling inside to close and lock the large doors. He continued to hide in Eli's pocket after she had returned to move the unconscious human child, which had been a little difficult considering how much larger than her Eli was, before finally dragging them inside a cage just large enough to hold Eli. Honey exited, making sure to lock the cage, scurrying away somewhere. Mike had waited, listening, before getting out and trying to rouse his friend.

"M-Mike?" Eli mumbled, slowly coming to, but his eyes were unfocused. "Where's my mom? Where's my dad?" he asked in a small voice.

"Th-they'll find us, buddy," Mike said, clamping down on his own fear. Taking a deep breath, Mike started to look around, taking in his surroundings.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, readers! I hope that you enjoyed the new chapter, and please feel free to leave me a review!
Chapter 21

Hello there, readers! I'm happy to bring to you chapter twenty-one of The Keyhole! Once again, this chapter was proofread by my very good friend, Trismegistus Shandy! I hope that you enjoy it!

Baily recited his favorite poem as he laid out a spread before himself. Since today had been a relatively slow day for the shop, he had decided to practice with one of the other tarot decks that were available for demonstration. This one had different dragons depicted on each card, which naturally drew his attention. He had just turned over the three of swords when the bell for the door chimed.

"Welcome to Eyevory Tusks," Baily said, looking up to see a familiar lion face.

"Ah, Barry!" Leodore took off his coat and hung it on the rack by the door. "Just the mammal I was looking for!"

"It's actually Baily, sir," Baily said.

"I was looking to get some otherworldly input on some plans of mine, Barry," Leodore said, having not been listening. Baily had quickly learned from Phyllis, as well as from his own experience, that the former mayor was the type of mammal to speak at someone, rather than to speak with them.

"How can I help, sir?" Baily asked, noticing the thick manila folder Lionheart was carrying under one arm.

"I have with me my plans for my heroic climb back on top, which I figured I could bring with me today and, after consulting with you of course, make notes and tweaks as necessary." Leodore affectionately patted the folder.

"Oh... well, sir, I would be happy to give you a reading, but I'm not sure if--"
"For instance," Leodore cut Baily off, setting the folder down on the counter and flipping it open to the dead center, "my brilliant plan to rise to the top of the waste disposal union has... well... not been going as smoothly as I had initially hoped. For starters, they actually expect me to handle other mammals’ refuse. I mean, I was aware that I had to become a... garbage mammal... to even join the union, but I figured that I could just be the driver. But not only was that idea an apparent no-go, when I attempted to throw my hat into the ring to be voted in as the newest Union President, I was informed that I lacked the knowledge and experience for the position.” Leodore huffed and shook his head. "Apparently being mayor doesn't automatically qualify you for some of the more menial jobs these days..." Leodore grumbled.

The red-headed human, whose hair had now grown to tickle the back of his neck, noticed some newspaper clippings sticking out at odd angles, including one with the lion before him presenting something to a bunny in a police uniform on a stage of some sort.

"And after I created the Mammal Inclusion Initiative..." Leodore grumbled some more before perking right back up. "Anyways, Barry, I was hoping to pick your brain... or pick the... whatever of the aether on what my next move should be."

"W-well, sir, I promise to do the best that I can," Baily said, remembering Phyllis' advice when it came to dealing with certain customers... and her additional advice for when he had to deal with Lionheart. Appreciating the distraction from his thoughts about the upcoming gathering of Sophia's family that he had been invited to, as well as the distraction from his anxiety over meeting everyone, not counting her grandfather, for the very first time. Baily shuffled the deck he had been using before grabbing one of the small sack cloths holding the rune stones, and started to lead Lionheart towards the back room for readings.

Elsewhere...

"I'm not getting a signal," Mike said as he stood on top of Eli's head. They were in the cage, Mike having helped Eli to calm down after he had awoken.

"D-do you think that they'll find us?" Eli asked, nervous.

"Well of course," Mike said, making himself sound confident in the hopes of keeping Eli's spirits up, "your mom and dad are practically supercops. Plus, I was able to give directions, sorta, from the locations I was able to see before my phone cut out."
"Where are we?"

"Somewhere in the Rainforest District. I think I saw some canals, but I'm not entirely sure," Mike said, trying his phone again, only to sigh at the utter lack of a signal he was getting. They both froze when they heard a loud slamming sound not too far off, along with some muttering. Mike quickly dove from where he had been standing into Eli's open shirt pocket, just as Honey returned, dragging a folding chair behind herself. She smiled viciously as she saw Eli.

"Good, you're awake," she said as she set the chair up close to the cage. She held up a taser and fired it up for a few seconds, smiling smugly at the shrinking back Eli did as she did so.

"Don't worry. I have no intention on using this on you, provided you follow the rules," she said.

"Wh-what do you want?" Eli squeaked out in a small voice.

"RULE NUMBER 1!" Eli flinched as she screeched before she calmed herself down and took a seat on the chair, grabbing a tape recorder. "I'm the one asking the questions here."

Eli said nothing and waited. Honey tilted her head as though waiting for him to respond, and nodded approvingly before she continued. "And what I want is for you to answer my questions." Eli nodded as he felt Mike carefully reposition himself in his shirt pocket.

"Rule Number 2 is don't try to escape," the deranged badger said as she hit the record button.

"This is Doctor Madge Honey Badger, beginning the questioning of the alien entity known as Eli Hopps," she spoke into the recorder before turning it towards the cage. "Now, how did you arrive here on this world?"

"I-I d-don't kn-know!" Eli said, tears beginning to well in his eyes.

"Do you expect me to believe that a member of a space-faring species has no idea as to how they arrived? Especially when that member is the very first one?" Honey asked incredulously.
"I s-swear!" Eli said, flinching at the sound of the taser going off again.

"I'll ask you again," the badger said once the buzzing stopped, "how did you get here?"

"We-we aren't space-faring! I was hiding in a subway when I found a strange hallway! I followed it and it came out here! And when I turned around to look back down the hall, it was gone!"

The badger rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "Alright, we'll circle back to your method of transportation. Instead, how about you go ahead and start explaining some of the details of your invasion."

At that very moment...

"Chief, please!" Judy said as Nick gently wrapped an arm around her shoulder and flicked his tail around her legs, offering her comfort. "He has my kit!"

Chief Bogo looked down at his bedraggled officers and frowned. They were living a parents' worst nightmare. "Hopps," he said in a voice softer than usual, "you know that I cannot do that. Ralph and Nadine are already with him in interrogation. They'll find a way to get where your son is out of him, I promise."

Judy's shoulders shuddered, and Nick held her close. Bogo looked at the fox who, while comforting his mate, looked just as distressed. "C'mon, Judy," Nick said, starting to lead her back down the hall of the police station, "Ralph and Nadine are experts when it comes to questioning suspects, and Mike gave us some great directions to go by. The whole force as well as your family, not to mention my parents, are already searching the areas that were described. We'll find them."

"Nick... I just... I was standing right there... I promised him that he was safe..." Judy started as they walked out into the atrium, fighting back from outright breaking down.

"He will be, Judy," Nick said, internally feeling the exact same way. The moment he had learned that Eli had been abducted, Nick felt something he had never felt before. It was as though his insides had dropped out, leaving him hollow, before the pain and fear and everything came rushing right back. Clawhauser looked down from his desk at the two, feeling awful for them. He was about to
offer Nick and Judy some words of encouragement when someone cleared their throat to get his attention. The portly cheetah looked down to see an armadillo standing before him, wringing his paws nervously.

"Hello there," he said, "my name is Charlie Shellison... I was informed that my brother was involved in... uhm... a potential kitnapping..."

Judy's ears had flicked right up and, in the literal blink of an eye, she was standing right next to the armadillo, who jumped back a little, before recognizing the bunny officer.

At the Otterton Residence...

"But Mommy," Sarah whined, "you promised we could go to the park!"

"I know, sweetie," Mrs. Otterton said to her youngest, and largest, child, "but we can do something else around the house today instead, and then go to the park some other time, okay?"

The little human pouted but nodded. "'Kay..." Sarah said, disappointed, before hugging Princess Gracey close and making her way to her room. Mrs. Otterton frowned, hating to disappoint Sarah, but fearful after watching the news about the human child abduction a little while ago. She had called up Emmit, who had agreed to pick up the boys from school, and who had also agreed that it might be too risky to take Sarah to the park.

At the Spitz's...

"I'm home!" Russell called out as he stepped through the front door. As usual, he looked down to see a certain grey little fox kit, latching himself to his leg.

"Hiya, Ethan," he said, bending down low to ruffle the kit's headfur.
"Wussel!" Ethan yipped excitedly. Just as the human teen was shrugging off his backpack, Mrs. Spitz hurried in from the kitchen.

"He just walked through the front door," she said before hanging up her phone. She then rushed over to Russell and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

"Sweetheart, I was so worried!" she said, tucking her tail between her legs.

"I'm sorry," Russell said, confusedly, "there was some road work going on, so I had to take a detour."

"Oh, sweetheart, it's terrible!" Patricia said with a whine.

"What happened?" Russell asked, feeling a sense of dread.

"I just heard on the news that a human pup was abducted today! And when you were late, I just started to worry." Russell looked down into the face of his legal guardian before hugging back.

"I'm sorry," he said once again, feeling another quick squeeze from the husky, who let go to quickly wipe away a tear from her eye.

"That's alright, sweetheart, I was just worried is all." Patricia felt something on her leg and looked down to see Ethan frowning and hugging her. She cooed and reached down to pry him off and scoop the little kit into her arms.

"It's alright, Ethan, it's all going to be alright," she softly murmured, looking back up at Russell as she said the last part.

Meanwhile...
"I am very disappointed, Eli," Honey spat the human boy's name. The questioning had not been going as well as she had hoped.

"But it was to be expected. The first footsoldier in the invasion of our world would of course withhold information. Still though, I'm holding out hope that we can be civil about this."

Eli tried not to let out a whimper as he sat curled up in a corner of the cage, terrified. He flinched when Honey hopped off her chair and stretched a little.

"So I'll tell you what. I'm going to go and get something to eat, maybe calm myself down a little, and during that time, you can sit there and think long and hard about the consequences for not telling me what I need to know. And trust me," Honey said, leaning in menacingly close to the bars of the cage, "there will be consequences. See you in a few."

Eli watched the badger saunter off and out of sight. He held his breath after hearing a door slam, letting it out just as Mike popped his head up from his pocket.

"Okay, so she's crazy," the mouse boy said, clambering out of Eli's pocket. "I think that it's time we take our leave."

"B-but..." Eli said, motioning to the cage around him. Mike nodded and slipped through the bars, walking around to the latch and the lock. He held up two paper clips that he had retrieved from Eli's pocket, and started to unfold them.

"Watch closely, buddy, because I'm going to teach you how to earn your lock-picking badge."

Eli nodded and smiled tentatively. "Y-yes, Troop Leader."

Mike smiled back as he finished unfolding both paper clips, and inserted both ends into the keyhole of the lock. After a few seconds, there was a click, and the latch was unlocked. Eli quickly scrambled out, Mike scaling his friend to sit on top of his head.

"Okay, since she went that way," Mike said, indicating a door at the far end, "let's go ahead and try a different exit in the opposite direction." Eli followed Mike's directions, especially when they both agreed to be silent as they made their way out. More than a few times, Mike would give Eli's hair a little tug to indicate a change in direction. Soon they found themselves standing outside, looking over
a river that was flowing sluggishly beneath the steps they were standing on. They both started to feel a sense of relief before freezing at the abrupt and all too familiar screech coming from back inside the warehouse. Mike directed Eli down the stairs and out into the trees themselves while he tried his phone again, still not getting a signal. Mike looked around, noticing a lack of anyone else nearby.

"Okay, this is a pretty run-down area. But we can't be far from a public place. If we follow the river, we're going to find a densely populated area, plus it can help cover our tracks, Mike thought to himself as he kept a level head, and directed Eli accordingly. They had just made it into the trees when they heard her.

"YOU BROKE RULE NUMBER TWO!!" They could hear Honey screech from where they had been after first emerging from the warehouse. She looked around for any sign of Eli, and let out a snarl before she started to sniff the air and, recognizing the familiar scent of the human, started to track where he had gone.

With a sharp tug of his hair, Eli was spurred into action as he started to follow the river, trying to keep out of sight of the badger.

*Looks like Eli will be earning his captive escape badge today,* Mike thought to himself, thinking back on what he'd learned when he had earned his.

Chapter End Notes

And that, dear readers, was chapter twenty-one! I hope that you enjoyed it! And feel free to let me know what you think!
"So, Lily, how are you liking your new job?" the black-furred jaguar asked the human woman sitting across from him. Lily smiled.

"Working as a hospital record keeper wasn't my first choice, but so far it seems to be wonderful. And the steady paycheck isn't bad either."

Renato chuckled as they waited on their orders. They were sitting on the outdoor patio of Misty's on the Vine, awaiting their orders.

"I felt the same way when I started out working for Mr. Big," Renato said as their grizzly bear waiter re-appeared to place a chicken salad before Lily and a broiled chicken sandwich before Renato.

"From what I've heard, he sounds like quite the gentlemammal."

"Si, he is very kind to those who are... eh... loyal to him," Renato said, taking a sip of his tea.

"I'm just happy to finally feel like I'm doing something, for the first time in a long time," Lily said, a wistful smile on her face. "Even if it is just keeping track of medical records."

"That's an important job, Lily," Renato said, "with so many different species and all the many different treatments to keep track of."
Lily's smile grew. "Thank you Renato," the human woman said, reaching across the table to take one of her jaguar companion's large paws in one of her slender hands. Renato's smile matched Lily's as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and the two sat like that, in comfortable silence.

Meanwhile...

"O-officers, I'm so sorry for the actions of my brother. I'm not really sure just what it is that he's d-done now though," Charlie stammered out as he looked between the serious faces of the fox and bunny standing before him, feeling a sense of deja vu from a few months ago, when Charlie had been called out to Bunnyburrow to deal with the actions of Edwin.

"He... he assisted in the abduction of our kit," Judy said, her violet eyes rimmed with red. The new piece of information nearly floored the armadillo before them.

"Oh my goodness, I... I don't... I'm so sorry!"

"Mr. Shellison," Judy started, her face calm and collected, "has your brother been in contact with you recently? We need to know if he's mentioned anything to you about where he might have taken our son."

"Do you mean since his e-escape? Well, no. I-it's as I told the officers who interviewed me on the very day he disappeared from the institution, I haven't heard anything from my brother," Charlie said, feeling guilt for not having anymore information to give the two officers and looking down at his feet.

"Well... do you think that Edwin," it took all of Nick's concentration not to snarl out the name, "can be convinced to talk about the location?"

At that Charlie looked up. "Maybe... maybe if I were to talk to him..."

"I think that that could be arranged," Nick said.
"Alright, I don't see her, but keep moving," Mike said from atop Eli's head. They had tried to follow the river in order to lose the demented badger who seemed to have Eli's scent, and at first, it had seemed to work. But while completely off balance, Honey was not stupid. She had tried to cut them off downstream, forcing Eli and Mike to change their route. Mike still kept trying to get a signal, while they moved to circumvent their pursuer once more. "I got half a bar for a second there, so I think that we need to keep moving south... and hope that she doesn't have a cell phone jammer on her."

"Okay," Eli huffed, following the directions as they were conveyed to him from Mike, mostly verbal, but some in the form of a quick tug on the human boy's hair from the mouse. Especially when Mike felt that Honey was nearby.

"I won't let you get back to your mothership!" Three rapid sharp tugs had Eli crouching in a shrub as they heard her voice calling out, again. "And I promise you that if you do not surrender yourself, immediately, I'm going to have to enhance my interrogation methods!" Without uttering a word, Mike communicated to Eli to slowly back out and around a bend with a fallen tree in the underbrush. Mike had once more started to get a signal on his phone, but as the badger had gotten nearer, it had once again slipped away. Taking a quick survey of the surrounding area, he started to guide Eli in a southerly direction once more.

"Just give us the location, and we can work something out," Ralph offered, being the good cop. While normally very stoic and naturally intimidating, thus making her the go-to 'bad cop' when she and Ralph would interrogate suspects before they were reassigned different partners, Nadine's face was a a glowering mask bearing down on the frightened, paw-cuffed armadillo.

"B-but... th-the creatures... I j-just w-wanted to understand them!" Edwin meekly protested.

"That," Nadine spoke with a deep growl, the tigress taking a step forward, causing Edwin to shrink
in on himself and curl up slightly, defensively, "was a child that you helped to abduct. A CHILD!"

Edwin gulped. Ralph put on a relaxed smile, doing his best to not growl himself. He had seen the shell-shocked expression on Nick and Judy's faces. Having known them ever since they had been a fresh recruits, he had never once seen that look from them before. And now that he and Nadine had a child themselves, he understood how he would have felt in the same situation with his little Rosalie.

"Now, Doctor Shellison, we can be reasonable about this situation," Ralph continued, "and your cooperation could mean the difference between being sent back to the mental institution... or being sent to prison. You just need to take a moment and consider which one sounds better to you."

Sweat was condensing on Edwin's forehead as the words sunk in. "B-but... my research!" Edwin stated, jumping a little as there was a knock on the two-way glass. The tigress and timber wolf officers shared a look before getting up and heading out the door of the interview room. Edwin sat there, nibbling nervously on the ends of his claws, when the door opened again. Edwin had expected either the tigress or the wolf to return, maybe even the large and terrifying Cape buffalo. He had not been expecting the sight of his brother Charlie entering. Edwin looked at his brother, feeling a small ember of hope spark to life, but frowned when he saw the haggard-looking appearance of the other armadillo. He watched as Charlie took a seat across from him at the table.

"Oh, Eddie," Charlie started, his voice laden with emotion, "you've really done it this time..."

"B-but... Charlie... I-I... I just wanted..." Edwin trailed off upon seeing the look in his brother's eyes. It was a look that filled him with more dread than anything else. It was the look of utter disappointment.

"Eddie... you need to tell them where the child was taken."

"B-but," Edwin said in a small voice, "i-it's not a child... i-it's a creature." Just outside the glass, Judy had to mentally restrain herself from screaming out He's my kit! Not some creature to study! She drew strength from her mate, who seemed to her to be thinking along similar lines, based on the scowl on his muzzle.

"Eddie," Charlie said, a little more sternly, "he is a child. And you helped to cause this. You have to help fix it. Please, just think about what mom would say if... if she were still with us."

Edwin looked down at his cuffed paws and let out a shuddering sigh. "I'm sorry." it came out in just
barely a whisper. Charlie reached across the table and gently rested a paw on Edwin's. "Okay..."

Presently...

"Alright, around here is where we're going to start our grid search," Stuart said, holding up a map of the rainforest district and beginning to direct groups of bunnies, grouped by the first letters of their first names, to different sections of the district. The various assorted family members very quickly set about the search in their assigned locations.

"Let's go find our grandkit!" Robert said to a fire hydrant a few feet away from Stu. Marian cleared her throat, and the arctic fox remembered to put his glasses back on. As amusing as that would normally have been, everyone was much more focused on the task at paw.

"Right-o!" Stuart said, his brow furrowing. He felt the gentle touch of his wife's paw resting on his shoulder and he turned to see Bonnie and her worried smile. "We'll get our grandkit back," Stu softly said.

"Of course we will!" Marian said, her paws wringing as she said it.

"You're darn right!" Robert said with a growl.

"Grandma, grandpa!" Both sets of grandparents, and over a dozen bunnies, turned to the source of the voice, to see Thomas sprinting towards them. "They got an address!"

Chapter End Notes

I hope that you enjoyed the newest chapter! Please feel free to leave a review!
Chapter 23

Yay! Here we are at chapter 23, which is how many chapters *The Door* is! WOO! I have already met my personal quota! Anyways, I am so happy to be bringing to you the newest chapter of *The Keyhole*! This chapter was proofread by the amazing, and adorable, *Trismegistus Shandy*! Please enjoy and feel free to leave a review! YAY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"WHERE ARE YOU?!!" Honey's screeching voice cut through the air and straight to the bone. Eli reflexively cringed, and could feel Mike do so on top of his head. They were hiding behind a log, listening to the snarls and mutterings as the crazed badger fervently searched for them. "YOU ARE MY DISCOVERY, MINE! YOU BELONG TO ME!"

Eli let himself be guided away, crouched and stealthily. Every time they had tried to go towards an area where there would be mammals who could help, Honey had cut them off. She had no intention of letting Eli just slip away. A few tugs from Mike, and Eli turned to the right, crossing a small stream. They came out into a clearing, Eli quickly thinking to hide behind a stump. Mike held his phone up, willing it to get a signal, even just a weak one. His eyes went wide as he saw two bars suddenly appear on the screen. He smiled, until he heard the badger padding into the clearing nearby. She was snarling and looking all about. Mike then saw something that made his stomach drop. The battery symbol on his phone... it was almost empty and flashing red. He swallowed around a lump in his throat, and opened his contacts before selecting a name, and hastily typing out a text.

*Please get it,* he wished to himself, having to look around, before tugging on Eli's hair again to get him moving off to a different direction.

Meanwhile...

"He said he would be here!" Judy said, silent tears streaming down her cheeks, dampening her fur. They had followed the officers dispatched to the warehouse in the Rainforest District that Edwin had given them. They hadn't been allowed to search inside, and had to wait while their fellow officers had cleared the building. They had been surprised by a familiar-looking van parked inside, Nick recognizing the mural on the side immediately.
"Judy," Nick said, his voice hoarse, but pulling out all of his con-mammal concentration to maintain a calm demeanor for his mate, "the van is here. More officers are on the way to search the area, not to mention that this place is now swarming with bunnies. We're going to find him." As Nick said it, Judy could hear various family members calling out for Eli and Mike.

"But Nick," Judy said, her voice breaking, "she tranqed that armadillo. Maybe she had a change of plans and ditched the van here and took Eli and Mike somewhere else?"

"We'll find them," Nick said, hating himself for how unsure he felt as he said it.

"Aunt Judy! Uncle Nick!" The two whirled to trace the origin of the voice to see Thomas sprinting towards them.

"What, what happened?" Judy asked, fearing the worst.

"I got a text from Mike!" the teen bunny said, holding up his phone.

_We escaped, in the rainforest, no one around, still chased by crazy badger, staying near rivers and creeks._

Judy was frozen to the spot for just a moment before she and Nick shared a look. Thomas watched and could see a spark of hope suddenly flare into a roaring blaze of determination in both his aunt and uncle's eyes. He felt a slight urge to jump back when they turned that burning gaze towards him.

"Tell everyone," Judy said, before she was off at a full sprint, heading straight towards the greenery.

"Start with the other officers, and then the family, bud," Nick said, before giving chase behind his mate and partner. He knew that it was reckless for them to head off without any backup. He also knew that it would be pointless to try to argue that fact with the bunny who had stolen his heart and who was now dead set on finding their kit. And he was also aware of the fact that he was just as fixated as she was, and that there was no point in trying to argue that aforementioned fact with his own self.
At that moment...

*No no no nononononoNONONONONONO!* Honey thought, gripping two pawfuls of fur on the sides of her head and tugging, almost ripping them out in clumpfuls. Her white fauxhawk was now frayed, with some bits of prickly bushes sticking out of the very tip. She started waving the tranq gun around.

"I KNOW YOU'RE HERE!" she screamed. "WE COULD HAVE BEEN REASONABLE ABOUT THIS, BUT NOW, I'LL EVISCERATE YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME?! NOW GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!!"

In the underbrush behind her, Mike was guiding Eli away, still keeping them near the waterways, hoping that help would arrive soon.

*Not much incentive to come out, really,* he thought to himself, feeling Eli tremble beneath him.

"Don't worry, Eli, I didn't get my Stealthy Escape from Pursuit badge for nothing either!" Mike whispered once they were a bit further away, hoping to calm Eli down.

*Nearby...*

"Eeeeeeeliiiiiiiiiiii!" Marian called out as she, Stuart, Bonnie, Robert, and a pawful of Stu and Bonnie's adult children moved about in a group.

"Thomas said that they were going to stay near the rivers and creeks. We're going to find them," Stu said, stopping to look around, his foot thumping for a bit as he thought. His ears started twitching, and he pointed in a single direction. "Running water coming from over there."

"Let's go!" Robert said, knowing which way to go due to still wearing his glasses. The others followed suit, spreading out as they did so.
"Eli!" Bonnie called out, joined by the others in a group in a chorus of voices.

In the brush...

Eli stopped as he heard voices calling his name. Mike heard it too, and leaned down to look his friend in the eye. They both smiled, hopeful that this nightmare was soon to be over.

"No! It can't just end!" Honey's voice was so near that the two boys froze and held their breaths. Honey was on the other side of a bush that they were hiding behind. "I'm so close, I can feel it! GAH! Okay, if I miss my opportunity today, then I can just regroup and come up with a new plan later. I got it once, I can get it again. It will take some planning, but I can get my claws on that thing again. Yes."

They heard a shuffling sound getting closer, the two simultaneously realizing that the badger was trying to come through the bush they were hiding behind. They started to backtrack, when suddenly Eli felt a twig snap underneath his show. The snapping sound was deafening to the two. The shuffling paused for a moment, and the two were once more holding their breaths again. A few heartbeats passed, and still no noise.

"THERE YOU ARE!" Honey screeched and lunged forward, face first out of the bush. Eli screamed and stumbled backwards over a fallen log, scraping his hand as he did so. He heard a THUNK and saw a tranq dart sticking into the bark of the trunk, right where his left leg had been just seconds before. He scrambled to his feet and started to run, still being guided by Mike tugging on his hair. They were running in a serpentine pattern, every now and again hearing another thunk from another tranq dart hitting a tree.

"SO THAT'S HOW YOU ESCAPED! A FILTHY LITTLE TRAITOR TO ALL MAMMALKIND!" Honey was literally frothing at the mouth, beyond reason, as she continued to chase. Once she fired her last dart, she snarled and threw the dart gun at Eli's head. Mike's looking behind them and quick thinking had Eli duck down. Mike then watched as the badger whipped out the taser, and started to gain on them.

"Keep to the water, Eli! They'll find us!" Mike said, still giving helpful hair tugs along the way.

"YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY! I WON'T LET YOU!" Honey said, grinning wildly as she
started to gain on her quarry. She felt the creek water splash on her paws, almost slipping and scrabbling on the smooth rocks underneath. With a great leap, she soared towards the human boy's leg. Mike watched, and time seemed to slow to a crawl. He could only watch helplessly as the spark danced between the two points on the taser, as it and its crazed owner neared his friend. But then, out of the corner of his eye, the mouse watched as a grey blur shot out from a nearby bush, and collided with the badger in mid-air. Mike saw the look of insane triumph on her face quickly turn to one of surprise and confusion. It was then that Mike realized that he was looking at Eli's mom, and felt a chill run down his spine at the look of pure anger on her face.

Eli kept running, only slowing when a russet fox stepped in his path.

"DAD!" he yelled, running towards the open arms of Nick. He dropped down to his knees and hugged his adoptive father, the tears coming forth as he sobbed into the fox's shoulders.

"It's okay, buddy, we're here, and you're safe," Nick whispered, rubbing Eli's back as he said it.

"B-but she's right behind us! She has a taser!" Eli said, turning to look behind him. Nick's paws gently, but firmly, grabbed the sides of Eli's face, and kept his sight directly in front of him.

"Your mother's got that sorted out, buddy," he said, Eli only now taking notice the nearby sounds of shrieking, followed by a series of heavy thuds.

"Oh wow, I've never seen a bunny body slam a badger before!" Mike said excitedly.

Nick rolled his eyes but smirked. "You should have seen her when she took down a group of giraffe bank robbers with her bare paws." Nick continued to hold Eli's attention, not wanting him to focus on what was happening behind him as Judy, exactly by the book, took down Honey Badger. Presently, she had the dazed and quivering kitnapper pinned on the ground, half of her face driven into the mud. Judy glared down at her, restraining herself from unleashing her full fury onto the subdued badger. She blocked out the tranq gun, and the cage, and the taser she had just seen her try to use. She blocked out the worry and terror and heartache she'd had to go through because of the badger before her. She calmly waited as voices could be heard getting closer, but wouldn't relax until she saw the badger beneath her in pawcuffs, in the back of a squad car.

A short while later...
Judy had her arms wrapped around Eli's neck, hugging close, and feeling him hug her back. She felt Nick's arms around the two of them as well, and only then did she start to feel that her family was safe. Honey had been formally charged and read her rights as she was taken away. The badger's eyes had seemed to have a listless half-glazed look to them, not that Judy cared one bit. Her kit was back with them, and his kidnapper was being taken away.

"I'm so sorry sweetie," Judy said, crying into her kit's shoulder.

"B-but, Mom," Eli said, "you saved me."

"It was my fault that you got taken in the first place!" Judy said as she sobbed. She felt Nick start to gently rub his paw on her back.

"No, Carrots. The fireworks and the stampede it caused was a planned distraction. The only ones at fault here are the two lunatics who are now both in custody." Nick looked up to see Eli nodding along, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"B-but... I'm supposed to be his protector!" Judy professed.

"Y-you are," Eli's shaky voice broke in. His mother's amethyst eyes looked up into his own as he smiled down at her. "Y-you saved me, Mom... you are my protector. You both are."

Nick smiled up at his kit before regarding his mate. She smiled and sniffled, wiping away some tears.

"Still, though..." she said, her ears still drooping behind her.

"No, Judy," Nick said, reaching over and grasping one of her paws in his own. "You saved our kit, as well as Mike."

Judy could still feel the guilt deep down, but chose to ignore it, at least for the moment, and enjoy being reunited with her son. It wasn't much longer before they all looked around to find themselves surrounded in a sea of bunnies, and two older foxes. Nick smiled and tugged on the collar of his shirt nervously.
"And of course, everyone else did their part and helped to save Eli as well," he said, just as the paramedics arrived.

*Later that evening...*

"S-sounds like a good idea to me, Mike," Eli said into his phone. He was currently Muzzle-Timing with the mouse boy. He almost giggled remembering at how much Mike's parents had held him close and cuddled him, before remembering not just his own parents' actions, but also how the same had happened with his grandparents and his aunts and uncles. Presently, he was in his room, several litters of his younger cousins scaling him, while others were all over his room. The swarm of kits had basically decided to sleep in a pile with Eli tonight.

"Okay then. I've already spoken with the people in charge of New Dawn, and they are on board for us setting up another bake sale next week. I think that they really want to try and get past what happened today," Mike said.

Eli nodded. "M-makes sense." Eli then heard his mom calling his name, as well as his aunts and uncles calling for their own kits. "I gotta go, Mike... and... uhm... th-thank you..."

"No problem," the mouse said with a warm smile, "like I said before, I don't ditch my friends, nor would I ditch my troop members." With that, their call was ended, and Eli followed behind his cousins as they flowed like water down the stairs and headed towards the kitchen. Eli saw his mom looking at him, clearly still a little worried, but smiling brightly despite her worry. When he approached, Eli bent down and the two shared another hug before joining the rest of the family for dinner.

"I have to say, this salmon steak is a little tough, and a bit bland, Nicky," Robert's voice carried out of the kitchen. "I think that you may have overcooked it."

"Robert," Marian's voice said. "that's your wallet. Please put your glasses back on."

"Yes, dear," the older arctic fox said in resignation.
Ralph and Nadine were sitting on their couch, the TV on, but neither one paying it any attention. The tigress and the timber wolf were too busy watching their adopted human daughter as she gurgled happily, from where she was cradled in Nadine's arms. Ralph leaned in and started to nuzzle his baby girl, making her giggle and coo, all while Nadine let out a low rumbling purr. The new parents needed the reassurance that only their little bundle of joy could bring, after the events of the day. Ralph started to take notice of the news program that was covering what had happened at the homeless shelter. He frowned for a moment before switching it off. He and his mate had something much more important to give their attention to. His smile returned in force when Rosalie reached out a tiny chubby hand and placed it on his nose, giggling, and saying "Da... da!"

Ralph's tail thumped against the cushions of the couch.

"Once again, Daddy get's a shout out, but not Mommy," Nadine playfully said.

"Well, it's clear to me that she's already a Daddy's Girl," Ralph said, receiving a playful punch to his arm.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! SUPER YAY! I hope that you have enjoyed the chapter. Please feel free to leave a review! YAY!
Hello there, dear readers! I'm SUPER excited to bring to you chapter twenty-four of The Keyhole! This chapter was proofread by the amazing Trismegistus Shandy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"--in what is being called the trial of the decade. The now notorious Honey Badger, is being tried for the kitna--" The screen went dark.

"Hey!" Jack said indignantly as he sat up on his bunk, looking to see who had switched off his tablet that had been resting at his feet. "I was watching that!" He spotted a certain arctic vixen standing there, smiling slyly at him.

"Jack," Skye said, leaning over the hare cadet, taking some satisfaction at the darker shade of pink the insides of his ears were turning, "is there any specific reason as to why I've been hearing a rumor that our date is going to be at some place called the Mystic Springs Oasis?" Her tail was slowly swishing back and forth.

"W-well," Jack said, his ears drooping, "I thought that it would be more original to take you to a fancy day spa than an upscale restaurant or cafe?"

Skye could hardly believe her ears. A spa? Really?Well... I do have to give him some points for originality.

"Hmmm," Skye said, appearing to be thinking it over. Jack started to panic internally before Skye's tail wagged a little. "A little unconventional, but I'm game if you are."

Jack looked like he was about to hop up, only to have his tablet thrust back into his paws. "Alright then, just give me the details and when it's going to happen whenever you get around to it," Skye called over her shoulder as she exited the room. Jack sat there, staring after her as she left, before he hopped down and sprinted down the hall in the opposite direction, a large smile plastered onto his face. He ran from room to room, all in the blink of an eye, startling a few fellow cadets, before he finally found Walter sitting outside, scribbling notes onto a small yellow notepad. He ran up to the human, before slowing down and composing himself.
"Heya, Walt," he said, puffing out his chest as he strutted forward, "working on your valedictorian speech?"

"Huh?" Walter said, looking over at his friend, nodding, "oh, yeah. Just trying to make sure I don't sound like an idiot."

"Oh yeah? Well, me and a certain cute little arctic vixen were discussing my brilliant idea to go to that spa place," Cadet Savage said, casually leaning up against the bench Walter was sitting at, looking up at the human with a smirk.

"Well, that's great Jack, really," Walter said, happy for his friend, "but, like I said, I'm trying to work on my speech and--"

"Yup," Jack interrupted, not having been listening, "once again, the great female-luring Savage has struck. The ultimate predator."

Walter smiled and rolled his eyes. "Okay. You're a hare, which makes you a prey mammal, but fine. Still, I really need to work on--"

"Hey now, I'm not just a hare, I'm an alpha hare. There is no lady out there immune to my charms." Walter contemplated the possibility of pulling one of his eyes' muscles with all of the rolling they had been doing since meeting his new friend, before he tried once again.

"Jack! That's great and all, but can we please discuss it later, after I've finished working on my speech? The graduation ceremony is coming up soon, after all," he said, surprised to find the hare nodding in agreement with him.

"Absolutely. After you're done with your speech, I'll be more than happy to help teach you all you need to know about attracting females. Be sure to bring the notebook with you," Jack called over his shoulder, puffing out his chest as he turned and headed back inside. Walter tried to focus, and to not laugh. Especially since he knew just how well Jack could hear. It was quite the internal struggle.

At the Hopps-Wilde Residence...
"Just like that!" Nick said as he supervised Eli tying the neckerchief of his scout uniform his own self. After a few tries, Eli did it how his adopted father had showed him perfectly. "You got it, buddy!"

Eli smiled at his reflection in the mirror before looking down at the fox.

"Thanks, Dad," he said, bending down to hug him when Nick opened his arms. They both enjoyed the warm moment, and then Nick spotted something that made him chuckle. It was a phone in a grey furred paw, poking through the partially opened door. On the other side, Nick could hear a light sniffling. Eli turned to see it before turning back to Nick.

"Mom still trying to catch every moment of our bonding on camera?" he queried.

"Oh yeah, big time," Nick responded.

"Just pretend that I'm not here!" Judy's voice called out from behind the door.

"Too late, the moment's passed, Carrots." Eli stood up as Nick sauntered over to the door, opening it to reveal his grey bunny as she finished tapping on her phone.

"Cheese and crackers, I was hoping to get more," she said, her foot making a thump in mild frustration. She then looked at her mate, and then her kit, standing there in his uniform. She felt a swell of pride, tinged with a slight dash of fear. Her ears drooped a little as she stepped forward to regard her adopted kit.

"Eli, sweetie, you know that you don't have to do this," she said, "after everything that happened, no one would blame you for deciding to sit it out, at least this year."

Eli smiled down at his mother. "I want to do it, mom," he said, still loving being able to call her that, "after... my kitnapping, everything we worked so hard for at New Dawn was spoiled. They still need all the help that they can get... and..."

He wrung his hands as he said this, looking down at his feet, shuffling them.
"I-I'm still kinda... scared... but," and he turned his gaze to Judy and Nick, the latter having come closer to wrap an arm and his tail around his mate, "I don't want to stay the k-kind of person who l-lets being afraid stop them from d-doing the things that they want to do." The pair smiled at their kit.

After another brief hugging sensation, the family made their way down to the car. Eli and Nick both hesitated after Judy jogged forward, keys in paw, starting to adjust the driver's seat for her size. She shot them both a quick look. "Oh come on, don't tell me that being unnecessarily scared of me behind the wheel is going to stop you two from going," Judy said with a roll of her eyes. Eli took a deep breath, and then got into the back seat. Nick gulped audibly, and then climbed into the passenger seat.

At that moment...

Ralph's paws clacked rhythmically as he typed away on his computer in his cubicle, catching up on filing some backlogged police reports. He stopped when he felt his phone buzzing and pulled it out. He smiled at the muzzletime request notification he was looking at, knowing that Nadine wouldn't be sending it to him unless it was important. He tapped the screen and immediately saw the fangs of his mate in a wide grin.

"Ralph!" the tigress said, her voice filled with excitement.

"What's going on?" Ralph asked, seeing the camera shift until he was staring at his daughter, Rosalie, sitting in her playpen. He was about to ask again, when his breath caught in his throat. Little Rosie was grabbing the mesh sides of her playpen, and trying to hoist herself up. She had a look of stern concentration on her face before, finally, she managed it. Her little legs wobbled for a second, and then she fell back down onto her bottom, smiling and giggling and reaching for Nadine, babbling and cooing.

"She stood up," Ralph said, softly. The video shifted back to Nadine's face, after she had bent down and scooped her adopted human cub into her arms, rocking her.

"She's been trying all day, and just a few minutes ago, she got really close!" Nadine said, looking like she wanted to jump for joy. Her mate's tail was already wagging, having knocked over the ficus plant that was next to his chair. He jumped up and, before he could even think to hold it in, let out a howl.
AWOOOOOOO!!!! This of course started to set off just about every other wolf who could hear him in the building, which in turn set off some wolves who just so happened to be walking by the precinct at that moment, just as the front doors were opened. This of course set off other wolves around the city, who in turn set off others.

"WOLFORD!" Ralph's ears drooped and his tail immediately started to tuck itself as he turned to see Chief Bogo striding towards him, looking thoroughly annoyed. "You had better have a good reason for violating the department policy about howling or so help me I will put you on parking duty for three weeks straight!"

Ralph looked up at the cape buffalo and tried to give him a winning smile, which came off more as a grimace, and held up his phone showing Nadine, still holding the baby, who was trying to playfully grab her mama's whiskers. "My pup stood up for the first time today, Chief," he said.

Bogo looked at the screen for a second, before looking back at his officer. "That only works once, Wolford. You're on parking." Bogo said with a snort, before walking off, not at all surprised to heard from Clawhauser that the mayor was on line one, and how he already had a good idea just what it was going to be about. Ralph looked down at the screen and saw his mate and daughter, his smiled returning to his muzzle.

"Worth it," he said.

Meanwhile...

Sharla was going over a recent field report in her office, stealing glances at the picture on her desk. It was of Gideon holding Jeremiah, dressed in a little fox onesie complete with ears and tail, standing in the shop. The human baby had both tiny hands extended towards the camera, whom Sharla had been behind, smiling. Hearing her door open, she quickly got back to work, looking up at the sight of her superior, Captain Rangifer, entered. There was a small smile on the serious reindeer's muzzle. Sharla stood up, standing at attention. He chuckled before handing her a file.

"Congratulations are in order," he said in his gravelly voice. Sharla looked confused as she took the folder.
"Sir?"

"You've been officially selected to be a part of the next mission into space."

Sharla was stunned. Ever since she had been a little lamb, she had dreamed of becoming an astronaut. She had studied and worked, and spent her entire life attempting to achieve that goal. And now... it was happening. She felt a rush of elation as she looked down again at the picture of her fiance and their baby. She couldn't wait to share the news with them when she got home that day.

"Thank you, sir!"

Elsewhere...

"Nervous?" Baily sat up straighter in his subway seat, looking to his left at the smiling lioness beside him.

"A little," the redheaded human said. He was clutching the blue-lidded dish containing the potato salad he and Sophia had worked together to make.

"Understandable," Sophia nodded, reaching a paw over to gently squeeze his knee, "but don't worry. My grandpa already likes you, and I'm sure that the rest of my family will too. Plus, this isn't any kind of formal event. It's just a family get-together and barbecue."

"Right," Baily said, offering her a smile, which she gladly returned. He then went back to actively trying not to think about literally stepping into the lions' den, internally chastising himself, due to knowing how important this was to Sophia.

At the Otterton Residence...
Mrs' Otterton hummed to herself as she added the last few treats to the picnic basket. Granted, it was a little larger, and therefore slightly more cumbersome, than what she used to pack for picnics in the park, but it was a happy necessity since their family's newest addition. She looked up from the bag of candied mussels to see her daughter, Sarah, enthusiastically tying her sparkly new shoes. She filed a mental note away to thank Judy once again for recommending the Little Rondentia shoemaker. Sarah had recently learned how to tie her shoes, and was so excited about reaching what Mrs. Otterton guessed was a milestone for human children. After the abducted human and mouse boys had been found, and their abductors apprehended, she had started to feel safer taking her daughter out of the house.

"All ready to go?" she called to Sarah, who jumped up and eagerly ran over to her.

"Uh-huh! I tied my shoes, mommy!" Sarah held up one of her feet to show her handiwork.

"You sure did, honey," she said, clapping her paws together, and happily accepting the hug she got. She then called out to her boys and Emmit that it was time to go, and heard them thundering their way down the stairs, while Emmit was closing up the shop.

_Today is going to be a beautiful day_, she thought to herself, _gazing out the window at the bright and sunny day._

_In Tundratown..._

Renato's joy was so apparent that it practically radiated off of him. He was walking along, his paw holding Lily's hand as she walked beside him. They were both dressed for the freezing weather as they perused various souvenir shops. It was when they were waiting at a crosswalk that the limo pulled up next to them. The jaguar immediately recognized whose car it was, and felt a little nervous. The door opened and two polar bears got out, both wearing suits and ties. Renato immediately recognized one as Kozlov, who was holding a small arctic shrew, standing in his massive paw. He looked down into the wizened face of his employer.

"Hola, Senor Big," Renato said as Lily leaned up against him, looking confused before recognizing the name. Renato had spoken of his job quite a bit.

"Good afternoon, Renato," Mr. Big said, "I spotted you as we were driving by and decided to say
hello, as well as finally get to meet this beautiful young lady whom you've mentioned." Mr. Big then turned to address the human woman. "It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance. I am known by most as Mr. Big," he said, holding out a tiny paw. Lily smiled and reached her free hand forward, not at all perturbed by this sudden introduction.

"I am happy to meet you as well, Mr. Big. Renato has spoken very highly of you," Lily said. Mr. Big took her pinky finger in his paw and pulled it forward a little, to lightly brush his lips on the knuckle. He then released her finger, now smiling.

"I am pleased to see that Renato was not only not exaggerating your loveliness, but your charmingness as well. I would be honored to have you both over for dinner, perhaps some night this week?"

"That sounds lovely," Lily answered before Renato could, the jaguar now starting to feel nervous.

"Excellent. I am certain that my daughter and her family would enjoy meeting you as well," Mr. Big said.

At Dr. Snowson's Office...

"And how are things going for you at school, Russel?" Barry asked as he sat across from his teenaged human patient. The boy looked up at him and smiled. Barry like how every time he saw Russel, he was smiling more and more often. He had been coming out of his shell with greater frequency.

"Pretty good, doct-- Barry," Russel said, remembering what Barry had told him, "I've been getting all A's and... uh... I'm thinking about joining the chess club."

"Oh? That sounds like a great idea, Russel," the large polar bear said, still smiling. "It'll help you to meet other mammals with a similar interest."

"Yeah... I mean, you already know about my friends already. I kinda like playing it though, and I met some guys at the club already, who all seemed really nice," Russel said. Barry noticed a slight redness to Russel's cheeks and ears, but said nothing, choosing to let his patient continue.
"And... uh... I-I've been... talking with someone about... uh... g-going out... I mean... uh..." Russel started to shift around in his seat, looking uncomfortable. Barry had to stop himself from chuckling, remembering how he himself had been about a crush at that age.

"Go on," Barry encouraged, to which Russel complied.

"Uhm... h-he's a dingo... named Sydney Canis..."

At New Dawn...

Stuart Hopps and Robert Wilde stood next to each other, exasperatedly watching as a team of bunnies unloaded the elephant-sized eighteen wheeler that had been rented. They were unloading a massive cookie ferris wheel. They presently had no idea how they were going to get it into the building for the new bake sale, but both males were certain that their mates, whom were working in tandem walking around the bunnies, barking orders through megaphones, had a plan.

Thank you so much, Nicholas, the arctic fox thought to himself as he looked on, these two working together is an even bigger nightmare than them competing. Stu was thinking something similar just as a police squad car screeched to a halt in front of the building. He smiled a little at the sight of his little girl hopping out. And then he and Robert both snickered at the sight of the still-frightened Nick cautiously climbing out, having left panicked claw marks in the seat where he had gripped in fear. Judy helped a pale-looking Eli out of the back seat, and he and Nick seemed to share a look.

"Oh stop being dramatic," Stu and Robert could hear Judy lightly chastise the two, "we got here in one piece and we made great time!"

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, ladies and gentlemammals! I hoped that you enjoyed the new chapter! Please feel free to leave a review!
And there you have it folks! I hope that you enjoyed the very first chapter of my newest story! Sorry for the late updates, by the way. I was participating in an online challenge for writers, to write at least 50,000 words for a novel in the entire month of November, which by the way, I totally managed to do with three days to spare! But it did leave me a little drained, hence the slow updates. But now that it's over, I'm back to writing for my other stories!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!