Red Tails and Wilde Skies

by Selaxes, stevegallacci, Tom1380, winerp

Summary

In the early spring of 1940 the predator Axis forces have set the world ablaze with war attempting to return prey species to the position of labor, slaves and food. Standing against the tide of madness are the forces of Zootopia. As the war escalates Judy Hopps will be pulled into the conflict when a pilot is shot down over her family’s farm, and meeting Squadron Leader Nicholas Wilde will introduce her to his squadron of all fox volunteers, the Spitfire squadron known as the Red Tails.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter by Selaxes

“Tally-ho! Tally-ho! Huns at two O’clock! Break and engage!” Squadron Leader Wilde ordered his squadron of Supermarine Spitfires, taking his paw from the throat microphone to lower his flight goggles down before turning his plane and pushing the throttle forward for more speed. As he did that his eyes scanned the airspace around him to ensure there weren’t any other fighter flights that could join the fray. “Barker on me!”

“Affirmative, Sir!” the young, high voice of Wilde’s wingmammal sounding excited and brittle.

The fox smiled beneath the oxygen mask as he lined up on the lead enemy aircraft. “Steady on, Barker. Cover me and when we get back to the aerodrome the first round’s on me!” Cheers came back over the radio as the other five pilots in the squadron heartily agreed to the offer.

Nick Wilde, volunteer pilot for the Zootopia Air Corps, let the smile turn into an almost feral expression as he lined the enemy plane up in his sights, the enemy not knowing that his flight was there until Nick’s .303 caliber rounds chewed through the engine compartment and fuselage of the lead fighter emblazoned with the canted black crosses of the Predator Axis. Black smoke belched from the forward part of the plane a moment before flames erupted from the serrated looking exhaust ports, the aircraft shuddering with the rapid firing of his guns. He wished he had one of the variants command was supposedly working on that would be armed with twenty millimeter cannon, but difficulties had kept the fighters that defended Zootopia armed with more traditional machineguns. Granted, he carried substantial ammunition, but that was a necessity as the Axis Bf 109 fighters were just durable damn planes and took a lot of rounds to bring them down.

“Scratch one!” Barker chimed out excitedly. “Good shooting, Sir!”

“It’s not over yet, Barker!” Nick admonished. “On your tail! Pull up! Pull up!”

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Judy had heard the engines of the airplanes long before she saw anything, the action overhead hard to keep track of with the puff ball cotton clouds of early summer. Holding onto the brim of her straw sunhat, she watched the action above her family’s farm with wide, amethyst eyes. More and more flights from the Predator Axis had been flying over as late, though news over the wireless had informed her and her family that the Zootopia Air Corps had done their job of keeping incursions to a minimum. Like so many others, Judy often found herself glued to news reports coming over the radio in the evening as they listened to the war to keep the Predator Axis on the other side of the Zootopia Channel and from making it to the surrounding countryside and the city itself.

Zootopia stood strong in opposing the forces that wished to see prey mammals returned to a life of subservience and, sadly, food. Radio newscasts voiced reports that volunteers from other cities and countries had joined Zootopia, including a number of predators that disagreed with their carnivorous brethren. There were even rumors of a predator only squadron in an aerodrome about fifty miles as the crow flew from Bunnyburrow. Judy wasn’t sure what to think of the rumors. Then again, the young bunny wasn’t sure what to think anyway as she’d never even met a predator. Rabbits, definitely, even sheep and a few bovines and, once, an equine, but she’d never even seen a predator even though there were a few that lived in the valley and lands around farm.

All of that was moot at the moment as she watched the planes high in the sky swarming around each
other like angry hornets, the deep buzz of their engines interspersed with the rapid pattering noise of machineguns. Every so often one of the planes in the air above would veer off with a thin trickle of grey-black smoke to go down in the hills well outside Bunnyburrow or disintegrate in a fiery ball. Then two of the planes drew closer, one very close to the aircraft it was chasing, so close and low to the ground that Judy could see the Blue and red roundel with black ‘Z’ in the center for the Zootopian Air Corps forces, the second plane with the boxed black ‘X’ of a Predator Axis warplane. They were so close that the bunny not only heard the guns of the second plane but could see the flashes from the gun muzzles as rounds chewed into the Allied airplane, the engine suddenly sputtering and misfiring.

A third fighter moved in with the ZAC markings and shot at the one in the middle of the chase. Fire erupted from the engine cowling with the sound of tortured metal and extreme engine failure and Judy watched as it broke off its pursuit before it disappeared into the hills where a black cloud with fiery striations erupted moments later, the actual sound of the explosion coming seconds later.

The first plane had tried to make altitude during the final seconds of the battle, but it had apparently suffered too much damage. When Judy found it again, its path of dark smoke easy to follow against the white clouds and blue sky, she gasped as she saw a small speck fall away a moment before the Zootopian plane exploded in a ball of fire. She lost the speck until the white mushroom shape of a parachute flared open, the figure dropping slowly from the heavens.

Unfortunately he was slowly descending into the trees at the edge of the Hopps’ family farm.

Judy had been making her way to the field that she was supposed to be working that day when her ears picked up the sound of the planes. Her family had been working hard in complying with a request that they reduce their carrot crops and add potatoes and different greens to the things they grew along with soy beans and other legumes, the same as other farms in the valley. With the tools that she’d need in the small cart attached to her bicycle rattling about, Judy turned the front wheel to the tree line and pedaled hard, her heart beating frantically with what she just saw and afraid that the pilot might be hurt and needing her help. She was familiar with the injuries that could be incurred living on a farm, and if he needed help, Judy was obligated to render assistance if she could.

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“Well, this is a peach,” Nick grumbled as he swung almost twice his height from the ground, the shroud of his chute hopelessly tangled in a maple tree. And a pine. And another pine. “At least I didn’t break my fool neck,” he said as he spun half a circle one way before slowly turning the other. “And this is what I get for having my survival bag on my leg…”

The flyer tried to raise his left leg to reach the knife that was in it so that he could cut himself free but the shoulder straps from the parachute had his extremities splayed outward uselessly. He took in a deep breath, not really enjoying the way his lower stomach, and regions further south, hurt with the inhale, the shock when the chute had opened putting a terrible strain on his body. He figured that under his fur he was already starting to bruise. That might hamper the night on the town he’d been thinking of that morning before the squadron was scrambled.

With a grunt, Nick brought his leg up slowly, once more trying to reach the canvas pouch strapped to his lower leg, finally coming to the conclusion that it was not only useless, but it also had to be today of all days for him to forget to put his jackknife in the pocket of his flight jacket. “Mother of Foxes,” he muttered, “please don’t let me be up here too long. I owe the guys a pint and I’d really like to be there for them to collect. Not to mention Darla…” He stopped his slightly blasphemous but heartfelt prayer when he heard a high gasp of surprise.

“Fox!” the grey bunny below screeched and raised a short handled pitchfork, her amethyst eyes wide
with shock and fright as her nose twitched in what he would normally have found a rather adorable way.

“Where??” Nick gasped back as he tried to look all around, the movements making him spin a little more energetically. “Oh, you mean me!” Nick’s response to the bunny hadn’t been at all what she’d been expecting and she simply stared as if the vulpine dangling from the tree were mad. It had even interrupted her nose twitching, more the pity. It truly had been adorable. “You’re pretty quick, huh? I bet nothing much gets by you, does it? Now then, you wouldn’t happen to have a knife or shears or pruning scissors somewhere about your person, would you? As much as I’d like to, er, hang around and chat, I need to get back to my squadron, and then explain to my crew chief why I don’t have my plane anymore.”

The rabbit simply stared, one eyebrow going up while the other stayed lowered in a half scowl though the pitchfork was still pointed at him in a very businesslike manner.

“Hmm. Would I really like to get down now? Yes. Yes I would. This really isn’t all that comfortable, you know…” Nick sighed as he seemed to have encountered the one bunny in the whole countryside that had no sense of humor whatsoever. “You know what? You’re right. It’s probably best I just stay here. Finnick’s going to be mightily put out that I lost my plane. This is probably safer.”

The bunny, it seemed, had enough of his talking and prodded his foot with the pitchfork, the light touch eliciting a slight laugh from the fox.

“Don’t do that! I’m ticklish!” he told her with a few toe wiggles.

“I’m thinking that maybe I should just poke holes in you until you stop yapping so much, fox,” the bunny told him angrily. “You Axis preds aren’t worth your pelts!”

Nick threw up his paws, his expression quickly shifting to worry. “Whoa! Whoa! Easy there, carrot girl! I’m not Axis! See?” he said as he tried to lower his arm enough to show the bunny the patch on his shoulder. “I’m with the Thirteenth Fighter Squadron. You know, the volunteer foxes for Zootopia? I got shot down by an Axis plane!”

“That’s what one of them would say!” the bunny insisted as she lifted her weapon a little higher.

“No, one of them would be speaking a different language. Really. If you want I’ll happily become your prisoner just as long as I can get out of this tree. Really.” He gave her a smile and wiggled his fingers at her in a little wave. “By the way, I’m Squadron Leader Nicholas Wilde. We call ourselves the ‘Red Tails. Get it?’” He asked with a little swish of his caudal appendage and watched as her expression stayed the same. “Um, you have heard of the ‘Red Tails’, right?”

Judy shook her head, but she was beginning to have her doubts that the mammal dangling from the parachute lines was actually an Axis flyer. Though the smile and the muzzle full of knives wasn’t overly reassuring, he was still a predator and there was the distinct scent of blood about him. However, Axis or not, leaving him in the tree wasn’t the best idea. The fox would be able to get down eventually and it would be better if she could keep an eye on him. “Toss your gun down,” the bunny directed imperiously with a jab of her improvised weapon. “Slowly! If I think you’re going to shoot me I’ll poke more holes in you than my Grammy’s colander!”

“Sure!” Nick agreed readily. It was difficult, but he was able to take the revolver out from the shoulder holster with just a finger and thumb and let it fall to the needle and leaf strewn ground. “And I really would appreciate it if you didn’t poke me full of holes. I was hoping to knock back a beer or two with my boys tonight and I can’t really hold my drink if I leak too much.”
“Shut up,” the bunny ordered as she picked up the revolver and used it to replace the pitchfork, the gun looking almost comically large in her paws. At least it would have if not pointed at the fox.

“Yup! Shutting up, now. Bunnies with guns should be listened to, and I’m listening. See? Shutting up right now!” He snapped his muzzle shut and gave the rabbit a closed mouth smile while lifting his right paw as much as he could in a Scout’s salute.

Judy shook her head as she stepped back to her bicycle and found a pair of pruning shears, the gun never really wavering as the barrel stayed on the fox. He watched, wincing once when she stumbled slightly on a tree root and expected the pistol to go off, fortunately nothing happened and she stopped staring at him to keep an eye on the ground as well. Next he knew she was scrambling up the tree behind him. It was easy to tell when she began to cut the lines to the chute as the fox dropped a little closer to the ground with each snip of the shears until he fell the rest of the way to the earth, grunting as his feet and legs took his weight before rolling with the impact.

“You know, if you weren’t holding me prisoner with my own pistol, I’d kiss you. How embarrassing to wind up in a tree with all these lovely fields around us. As it is, I definitely owe you—“

The fox’s running monologue was cut off as he felt the barrel of the pistol pressed against his head and the very loud sound of the hammer being cocked back.

“Or I can give you a rain check,” Nick muttered as he lifted his paws. “Nope. No stealing kisses from cute carrot farming bunnies. No, ma’am!”

“Shut up! Take the lines and tie one wrist. I’ll be watching so none of that fox trickiness,” the bunny ordered. “When you’re done, put your arms behind your back.”

Instead of continuing to speak, Nick did what he was told, the lines actually making fairly good bonds for as thin as they were. He got a good length from the parachute harness and secured his right wrist showing the knot to the doe before holding his arms behind his back as instructed. When she began to fasten the thin cord to his other wrist, Nick neither moved nor made a sound. The pistol in her paw was loaded, cocked, and he was keen on keeping the bunny from shooting him accidentally.

It wasn’t the prettiest of knots, but the bunny was satisfied that it was sturdy. She was rather adept at tying things quickly from years of working on hay bales and bundling crops for market or transport. Only when she was sure that the fox wouldn’t be able to easily escape did she step back. “Walk. And if you look like you’re going to do anything or try to run, I’ll shoot you.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Nick agreed readily. “Um, do we have a particular direction you want to go or should I just choose a random direction? If that’s the case, I’d really like to go that way,” the fox told her with a nod of his head towards the northeast. “That’s where the aerodrome is and I’m pretty sure my commanding officer is getting a little irritated that I’m not there. And Finnick,” the red fox said with a wince. “Yeah. Finnick’s going to be a little hot under the collar. He just fixed my plane. He might even try to punch me again…”

“Do you ever shut up?!?” the bunny snarled. “And walk that way!” she ordered while pointing at a distant farmhouse.

Nick began to shuffle his feet, somewhat enjoying the feeling of not hanging from the tree, his elation tempered by the bunny that was prodding him in the back with his own sidearm. “Sometimes. Like when I’m asleep. By the way, did you know that you’re actually cute when you’re being forceful, demanding and angry?”

“Don’t. Call. Me. CUTE!” the bunny said as she all but bit off each word as she spoke them and
fought the urge to squeeze the trigger on the revolver in her paw.
Stuart Hopps looked at the load of produce that was ready to head to the Zootopian Army Quartermaster’s Depot for use in the war effort, pleased with the amount, and it was only a quarter of what the farm would be able to provide. The rabbit was enjoying his feeling of satisfaction when voices brought him out of his contemplations. One of the speakers was more than familiar, his daughter Judy normally sounding terse when she dealt with others. He loved his kit, but the Rabbits’ Messiah knew the doe didn’t tolerate foolishness. The other voice was completely alien to him, and male, which caused Stu to frown. All of his bucks that were of age were off helping with the crops, a few in the different military branches or factories. When he stepped around the corner of the open barn the older rabbit let out a squeak of surprise and he fell back half way through the door, his paw over his chest as he saw his girl with a fox. It was almost as shocking to see the large revolver in her paws.

The scowl on her face wasn’t surprising in the slightest.

“I caught this fox after he was shot down,” Judy said matter-of-factly when the fox stopped and she darted around him to stand next to her father. “He says he’s one of ours, but I’m not so sure.”

“Well, of course not!” Stu whispered out of the side of his mouth, his nervous brown eyes staying on the vulpine pilot. “He’s a fox and you can’t trust them!”

“We need to turn him in,” the bunny told her parent.

The older rabbit’s head jerked back a fraction of an inch. “We could shoot him first. It would be safer that way…”

“I’m not going to kill a mammal just because it would be easier!” the bunny exclaimed. “Predator or not, we’re better than that, Dad!”

The two rabbits devolved into an argument-counterargument regarding his disposition, of which Nick fervently hoped the bunny won. He understood and sympathized with the plight of the prey animals and what it would mean if they lost the war, but this was more than a little disconcerting. Who knew rabbits could be so vicious? Swallowing hard he spoke up, hoping that he wasn’t hastening his own end, despite the wisecracking of earlier.

“Um, excuse me? Rabbits? Hellooooo!” the fox said, raising his voice until the pair of lapines looked at him. “Not to state the obvious, but the nearest military facility with a jail is about an hour from here. I’m sure they’d love to interrogate me and learn all the nasty Axis secrets that I have like troop movements, invasion plans, secret weapons and the like.”

The light brown buck and silvery grey doe looked at him, one with caution, the other with unbridled malice, though they said nothing, their silence encouraging Nick to continue to push on his own behalf.

“Actually I don’t know any of that, but there’s probably a reward of sorts,” Nick told them, more than happy to give them the envelope of pay script in his footlocker from a fortuitous night of poker the previous evening. So, the promise of a reward wasn’t really a lie… “I mean, pilots are fairly
valuable, highly trained and educated—"

“And irritatingly talkative!” the bunny snarled once more. “If you don’t shut up I swear I’m going to muzzle you with bailing wire!”

Nick sighed in resignation before the bickering as to his fate began to wear on his nerves. It had been a hell of a day already and now that the adrenaline was wearing off he was feeling fatigue set in, and with it a fairly short temper. He wanted to get back to the airfield, to find out if his squadron was still in one piece or if they’d lost another of their number in the fight. He tried counting to ten a couple of times until the discussion finally got to him.

“Hey! Bunnies!” the fox snarled, his eyes hardening several degrees. “Wilde, Nicholas P. Serial number zero-nine-zero-seven-one-nine-six-nine. Squadron Leader for Thirteen Squadron! By the Laws of War that’s all I’m required to give. Now, if you don’t mind I want to get back to the aerodrome and look in on my guys, ok?” He waited as the two rabbits simply stared before taking half a step forward. “NOW!”

The last word was barked out so loudly and sharply that the bunny actually flinched, her finger tightening on the pistol. The round that was accidentally discharged embedded itself in the dirt not even six inches from the fox’s foot, causing him to glare with an intensity that set the noses of both father and daughter to twitching madly as their pupils dilated with a flight-or-fight response.

“That’s it. I’ve had enough!” Nick grunted before slipping his right wrist free. A full step brought him to the bunny and he snatched his pistol out of her paws before slipping it back into its holster. “I swear. Try to play nice with some mammals and they still act like animals!” he grunted before turning and looking around, his paws on his hips. “There!” Nick grunted in triumph as he saw something poking out from under a tarp in the open barn. “Does that work?” the fox asked as he went over and through back a section of musty smelling tarpaulin to reveal a motorcycle that had seen better days.

“H-how did you got out of that?” the bunny asked in surprise and irritation, following the predator before she knew what she was doing while her father padded off to the farmhouse. “I tied that knot myself! How’d you get out of it?!?”

“I spent the past few summers working at a carnival in Foxcroft to pay for school,” Nick told her as he looked the bike over, nodding in appreciation. “Harley Davidson, 1934 VLD,” the fox said with a grin slowly spreading over his muzzle. “I won many a race with one of these!” He cracked open the gas tank and sniffed before nodding in satisfaction then checked the oil.

Once his examination was one Nick threw a leg over the saddle and nudged the kick-starter to the ready position before squeezing the clutch and stomping down. The motorcycle sputtered fitfully and Nick reached down along the side, his fingers adjusting the fuel feed toggle before stomping the lever down again. On the third try the engine coughed to life, blue smoke puffing fitfully from the exhaust until the small engine began to warm with a couple of twists to the throttle.

“Now that’s music to my ears!” Nick chuckled. Ensuring the bike was in neutral, he fished around in his pants pockets for a moment before withdrawing his paws. Of course he’d had no money on him; it was all back at the aerodrome. Shaking his head he pulled out a thin steel chain from around his neck and brought his service tags out, snapping one of them off and tossing it to the female bunny. “Bring that to the airfield and you can get the bike back and money to pay for the gas I’m using, but I’ll make sure it’s filled up before you leave, okay?”

Just as Nick was about to drop the motorcycle in gear, the older rabbit reappeared, Nick not having seen him leave while he was tinkering with the bike. As the buck came back around the barn from
the direction of the house, he had a double barrel shotgun that he leveled at the fox, his lower jaw trembling as his eyes glittered.

“Get off my boy’s motor sickle!” he ordered in a tremulous voice as the rabbit dropped the barrels in Nick’s direction. “You get off it right now! He’s gonna come home and it’s gonna be waiting for him! You get off it!”

Judy had been looking at the tag and realized that it was the same style tag that her brothers that had volunteered for military service had gotten and darted to her father, pushing the shotgun down with her paw. “Dad! No! He…he really us one of ours!” she told her father and held up the small metal chit. “Look!”

As the bunny was interceding on his behalf, Nick shut the bike off and stood. Something wasn’t right, but it seemed worth his life to do as he was told. The rabbit scrutinized the service tag before letting the shotgun drop, the dual muzzles hitting the ground as tears began to flow freely and silently. The pair talked softly with the grey bunny nodding and taking a step backwards before turning to the fox.

“Come on. I…I can give you a ride back to….to wherever you need to go,” she muttered sullenly, pointing to the battered and ancient farm truck. “Can you turn the crank?” the doe asked as she got in behind the wheel and checked the gear shift.

Nick nodded wordlessly and stepped to the front, resting one paw on the radiator cap before grasping the starting crank. He gave it a yank at the bunny’s nod, jerking his arm out of the way as the engine caught. It sputtered for a moment until she fiddled with the spark advance and choke. Soon the little motor was chugging away steadily, Nick slipping in to the front seat.

“Uh…is he okay?” the fox asked as he hooked a thumb at the still quietly crying rabbit as the bunny put the truck in gear, the leaf springs at all for points squeaking in protest as the wheels bounced over the uneven ground until they made it to the path that led to a road.

“Dad…he’s…” she began before pausing to wipe at her own eyes as her expression firmed up. “My brother, Virgil, he loved that motorcycle. Used to race every chance he got. When the war started he was one of the first rabbits from Bunnyburrow to volunteer.”

“Sounds like a real stand-up fella,” Nick said with a nod. “Sounds like someone I’d like to meet.”

Judy shrugged halfheartedly. “He wasn’t supposed to be near the fighting. He was a courier. We…we got a letter saying he’d been captured…”

Nick felt a knot of tension form and begin to turn his stomach. Most prey animals that were captured didn’t last long in the Axis prisoner of war camps. “Aw, geez,” he muttered. “I’m sorry…”

“Yeah, well, Mom and Dad didn’t take it well. Dad…Dad has convinced himself that Virgil will come back some day.” The bunny dashed at her eyes again. “So what about you?”

Nick tilted his head quizzically. “What about me?”

“Why are you fighting?”

The fox sighed and sat back. “Because what’s happening is nauseating,” Nick said just loud enough for the bunny to hear. “Centuries of progress and a few unenlightened mammals are going to ruin it for the rest of the world. The same reasons that all wars are started. Power. Greed. All of it’s a load of shit, if you’ll pardon my vernacular. My friends and I don’t want to see us return to the bad ol’ days.”
The bunny cast her passenger a hard look. “What do you have to worry about? You’re a predator. The Axis doesn’t look at you as a hot lunch that can work until it’s time to be put on a plate.”

“Call it an over developed sense of right and wrong.” Nick settled further back and crossed his arms over his chest. “So, what’s your name, carrot farmer girl? All I know at this point is that you hate being called cute and you’re scary when you’re holding a pitchfork and terrifying when you have a gun. Thanks for not blowing my toes of, by the way. It would be more than a little difficult to fly a plane with only half a foot. And walking. Can’t forget walking. Oooo. Or dancing! It’s impossible to go dancing with pretty girls if your foot’s missing.”

The bunny cast a chilly look at the smug fox before turning back to the packed dirt of the road. She finally answered just as the pilot opened his muzzle to either ask again or make some other infuriating comment. “Judy. Judy Hopps.”

“Well, Judy Judy Hopps, I’m happy to meet you. Happier still that you didn’t kill me. Just stay on the road that follows the train tracks,” he directed. “When you see the signs for Cecil Flavideau Aerodrome, we’re there. Stop when the soldiers tell you to at the guardhouse or they’ll shoot us both, okay?”

“Okay.”

When several minutes passed by without any quips or further attempts at conversation, Judy looked over once again. The fox, Pilot Officer Nicholas Wilde, seemed to be asleep, for which she was grateful for. It had been more than just a trying day and the sooner it was over so she could return to her life, the better. Judy did try to avoid the lager potholes in the roadway, or places where rain erosion had rippled the hard packed surface.

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The aerodrome wasn’t what Judy was expecting at all. She thought there would be large hangers and acres of airplanes. Instead there were two modest hangers, a small blockhouse with a tower attached, some single story buildings, what was obviously a beer hall and an empty field. The acres of planes turned out to be eleven all told with an antiquated biplane painted a garish yellow off to the side and a few trucks and jeeps.

She blinked in surprise as the soldiers that stopped her at the checkpoint turned out to be a brown bear and a fellow rabbit, both armed with their weapons pointed not quite at the sputtering truck, but the threat was implicit. “Squadron Leader Wilde? That you, Sir?” the rabbit in olive drab asked as he tilted his Brodie helmet up and scratched at his head, his accent clearly marking him as a native of Zootopia and not one of the Burrow communities.

“In the fur!” the fox said with a smile as he sat up straighter and smacked his maw after a sound nap.

“Crikey, Sir! We heard you was done fer! Shotdown an all that!” The rabbit elbowed his companion, the bear hardly noticing the enthusiastic rap to his knee. “Lookit ‘ere, Bruce! Squadron Leader Wilde’s back!”

“I can see that, Hobie,” the bear replied with a look of long suffering at his companion’s obvious enthusiasm. “Welcome home, Sir,” the ursine said with a proper salute. “Group Captain Faulkner will be glad of this bit of news.”

As the bear and the fox talked, Judy eyed the rabbit buck who walked jauntily to her side of the truck and leaned on the window frame with one arm while looking at her with undisguised interest. “Well, now! Aren’t you just a lovely little thing! Where’d th’ SL find you at, pretty?” He adjusted the sling
of his rifle then dropped his paw over the bunny’s where it still held onto the steering wheel. “What says you an’ me go get a pint after I get off duty, there, love?”

“I think not,” Judy muttered as she slid a little closer to the fox, her look one of mild revulsion.

“Oy, now,” the buck said in a humorous tone, though his expression still held the edge of a leer. “A fine beauty of doe such as yerself, an’ a strappin’ buck like meself…we could show each other a thing or two, couldn’ we now, me lovely?”

“As you were, Private!” the bear growled deeply before turning back to the officer in the truck.

The buck flinched at being called down from his clumsy attempts to flirt but turned back to the guardhouse, though not before openly ogling the bunny with a very suggestive look, even going so far as trail a paw down Judy’s arm as he departed. If either the fox or bear noticed the shudder that ran through her at the unsolicited attention they didn’t show it.

As if Judy would degrade herself for such an uncouth rabbit. She’d rather open herself up to the fox before letting a rabbit such as the one on guard hold her paw, much less what the Private was contemplating.

“Where’s the rest of the squadron?” Nick asked as he stood slightly and eyed the aircraft parked on the ready line.

“Last word we had was they were chasin’ the Huns back ‘cross the water, Sir.” The huge bear with sergeant’s stripes looked away for a moment. “Uh…Sir?”

“Yeah?” Nick replied distractedly.

“It’s…um…it’s Pilot Officer Tod, Sir. He…er…he won’t be comin’ home, Sir. Though…though you should know…”

The fox looked at the enlisted soldier for several moments before dropping bonelessly onto the seat of the truck, a slightly dazed expression on his vulpine face. “Ronnie Tod?”

“’Fraid so, Sir. Lost him just on the other side o’ the hills that side of the valley.” The bear gave the pilot a sympathetic look. “He was a good lad, Sir.”

“Yeah,” Nick replied in a soft, thick voice. “He was.” With a sigh that seemed as if a great weight had settled upon him, the fox turned to his ersatz rescuer. “I suppose this is where we part company, Miss Hopps,” he said as he held onto the window frame and swung his body out. “I’d like to thank you for getting me out of the tree, even if it meant getting tied up and almost shot.”

The earlier, joking, almost flippant and irreverent tones were gone, and Judy wondered just how many pilots the young officer had lost. It looked to the bunny as if he were doing his utmost to hide the pain inside, something that she was all too familiar with. The loss of her brother had hit her hard, Virgil having been far closer to Judy than any of her other siblings. Oddly enough, the thought that Virgil and this fox would have gotten along splendidly flitted through her mind as she tried to think of something to say. Then, before she could speak at all, the fox swooned, his eyes fluttering slightly before rolling back in his head. As he was caught by the bear his woolen flight jacked was pulled up, the uniform shirt beneath dark with blood.

“Cheese and berries!” the bunny swore, her eyes wide as she finally realized why the fox had smelled like blood. “Do you have a doctor here?!”

“We do!” the sergeant said as he got the fox back onto the seat before realizing there was no possible
way to keep Pilot Officer Wilde inside the truck. “Over on the other side of the tower and-“

Grab him and get in the back!” Judy ordered as she pushed the clutch in and forced the lever into gear.

The bear nodded and scooped up the unconscious flyer before simply stepping into the bed of the vehicle. “I'll send someone else to the gate, Hobie. Hold anyone that shows up until relief arrives!” he growled as the old model truck sank all the way so that the frame was resting on the axels with his mass. “Go, Miss,” he then told Judy. “I'll point you the way!”

Chapter End Notes

That's the problem with war that we've learned from history; no one goes untouched. And as is sort of a thing with me, a little cliffhanger.
“Sergeant Bruington, report,” a voice directed tersely as someone entered the hospital that was part of the airfield.

Judy looked up at the newcomer, surprised to see that the speaker was a rabbit in the blue-grey of the Zootopian Air Corps, his sleeves emblazoned with the four piped stripes of a Group Captain. Of course there were rabbits in the varied services, but that a squadron of foxes was led by one caught her off guard.

The bear stood up and snapped to attention from where he’d been sitting with Judy after getting the bunny a cup of tea. It wasn’t the best brew, but all things considered, it wasn’t half bad and there was even sugar available to sweeten it, though the milk had come from a can. “Sir! This young lady found Squadron Leader Wilde on her parents’ farm and returned him to us. Neither of us knew that the Squadron Leader had been injured during the loss of his plane, Sir!”

The buck turned to Judy and nodded solemnly. “You have our gratitude for returning one of our own, Miss. Squadron Leader Wilde is a valuable asset to this wing. If I may, where were you when he came down?”

Judy tried to speak, the piercing golden brown eyes of the dark grey and tan rabbit causing her to falter slightly, not unlike some of the stricter teachers she’d had during her school years. While there was clearly concern in the older buck’s eyes and bearing, he also gave off the air of an individual not to be trifled lightly with. “I-i-in Bunnyburrow, sir. He landed in the trees on the far side of my family’s farm.”

The Group Captain nodded, a sort of moue of approval twisting his mouth making his long whispers twitch. “Ah. Bunnyburrow. Good land through there. Wouldn’t mind going back to visit it once this dmnable war is over.” He nodded before returning his gaze to the bunny. “Very well. I’ll give you a script so that you may recuperate the petrol you expended to bring back our wayward fox. I know that times are more than a little strenuous and I wouldn’t think about depriving your family the resources needed in the support of our lads.”

The buck turned to go when Judy jumped down from the chair she was sitting in, her paws tightening on the cup of tea she held, slightly shocked by her own temerity. “Group Captain? May… may I stay for a bit? At least until Nicholas is out of surgery?”

The officer raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Are you so concerned for a predator, Miss…?”

“Hopps, sir. J-Judy Hopps.”

The buck nodded. “Miss Hopps, then. Are you so concerned for a predator, Miss Hopps?”


The ghost of a smile flitted across the officer’s short muzzle. “Yes. Some mammals have extreme difficulty in believing that predators are willing to fight alongside those of us that are threatened.
for your request, I don’t see why not. As I’ve already said you’ve done us, and Squadron Leader Wilde, a great service.” He stopped with his paw on the latch of the door that led back outside. “That, and I don’t think Nick would be too disappointed to find a rather pretty face waiting for him when he’s brought out. That fox has a certain weakness for lovely young ladies. Sergeant, if it’s too late when Squadron Leader Wilde is wheeled out, establish Miss Hopps in the visiting officers’ accommodations.”

The bear saluted smartly, though by the time his paw was raised the old rabbit was already gone, though it had been easy for Judy to tell it was with less stress than what he’d entered the building with. She set the cup of tea on the table next to the chair that was a little too big for her to comfortably sit in before jumping up to continue the wait. The bear looked down at her. “Do you need your cup topped off, Miss Hopps?” he inquired softly.

“Hmm?” Judy intoned distractedly. “Oh, no. Thank you. I’m fine.”

“Very well, Miss,” the ursine mumbled before resuming his own seat that was a bit too small for him, also ready to remain waiting for however long it took the doctors to tend to the fox.

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“It was a hole,” Nick growled sullenly as he was wheeled out of the medical theater on a gurney that was too large for his lithe, vulpine frame, and tried to cross his arms over his chest before giving up, the anesthetics and morphine that he’d been given complicating even the most rudimentary motor skills. “All you had to do was put a few stitches in. Now it’ll be a week before I’m fit for flight status.”

A pig in a high collared lab coat rolled his eyes as he made a note on a clipboard. “Bacon bits, Nick!” the surgeon exclaimed in exasperation. “It was a bit more than a hole, not to mention the blood you lost. Now then, I want you to eat more fish, cheese and eggs and decrease your coffee and tea. Drink more water and milk instead.”

“Yes, mother,” the fox replied petulantly. He turned to see a bunny with slightly anxious eyes regarding him, her lavender orbs seeming to drink in the illumination from the bare bulbs while also looking sultry, dark and mysterious. “Carrot farmer girl!” he exclaimed with a wide grin, his argument with the physician forgotten for the moment before it faded into a frown. “Wait. What are you still doing here?”

“Well, I wanted to make sure you wer-“

Judy was cut off before she could explain that she felt more than a little responsible for the fox’s condition, not realizing that he was injured when a boisterous group of foxes all in various flight suits and jackets came in through the door, their loud tones filled with relief.

“There he is!”

“You don’t look that much worse for wear, Sir!”

“Bah! Getting hurt’s the only way to get Nick to take it easy. Right, Sir?”

One of the foxes, quite a bit younger than the others pushed through, his amber eyes wide with concern as his ears pressed down along the edges of his garrison cap. “Nick! I mean Squadron Leader Wilde! It’s all my fault, Sir! If I’d been paying better attention I’d’ve seen that Hun on my tail and-“

“Gentlemammals!” Nick barked, the group falling silent, particularly Pilot Officer Barker who was
acting far too kit like at the moment. “You interrupted a lady,” he said with a wavering paw held out
to indicate the bunny who the crowd only then noticed. “Miss Judy Hopps, may I introduce the ‘Red
Tails’. These are the pilots of the Thirteenth Interceptor Squadron. Boys, this is the bunny that saved
me and brought me home. Why, if it weren’t for her I’d probably have bled to death hanging in that
damn maple tree.”

Before she could retreat a step with so many predators regarding her, Judy found her paws being
shook by the foxes with words of sincere thanks and gratitude. Not knowing what else to do, she
simply smiled and nodded at each of the vulpines with muttered returns of, “It was nothing,” and,
“No, it wasn’t like that at all,” with the pilots simply thinking that she was being humble.

“Now, now, boys. Give Miss Hopps some room. She’s not used to us and we’re the first predators
she’s ever met,” Nick admonished. He turned to his wingmammal. “Barker, go to my quarters and
get me some real clothes, if you would. Then I think the least we can do is treat Miss Hopps to
dinner in proper Red Tail style.”

The doctor cleared his throat pointedly and gave his patient a pointed glare.

“Oh, come one, McSwiney! One medicinal brandy isn’t going to kill me, is it?”

“Just one,” the pig said firmly. “And no beer, either. Balk me on this and I’ll nix your flight status for
two weeks!”

Nick turned to the bunny with a look of suffering. “You know, sometimes there just ain’t no justice.
The one time I could really use a drink after the day I’ve had, and I’m not allowed. Is that fair I ask
you?”

Judy just shrugged as the crowd departed in the same noisy manner it had arrived, the different foxes
mollified that their leader was well enough on the mend that he was chastising them in his normal
good humored way.

“You hold on, Pawson,” Nick told one of the last foxes in the group, his sleeves marked with the

Judy, despite her forward nature, had learned as a kit that there were times to be silent and
unobtrusive and she thought small thoughts as her feet drew her incrementally closer to the gurney,
her ears fully erect so that had she been on the other side of the room she’d most likely have been
able to hear the two foxes whispering. When the other fox laughed she jerked her head in surprise.

“He lost his plane, but Ronnie’ll be back come morning, Nick. He had to ditch his plane off the
beach. Huns poked holes all through his tanks so he didn’t have the fuel to make it back in,” the
other fox told his leader. While the same height as Nick, this character Pawson was a touch huskier
and his fur wasn’t nearly as vibrant. “Coastal watch is sending him back as soon as they can arrange
transport.”

The news had an immediate and drastic effect on Nick as he sank back against the pillows on the
gurney, his eyes closing as a shiver ran through him. “Bless the Mother of Foxes,” he whispered, his
words clearly heard by the bunny. “If I had to write another letter to the parents of one of my
friends…”

“Yeah,” Pawson said. “Not today, though. I’m going to go tell the cooks we’ve got a VIP guest and
to put out their best.”

Nick nodded, still too caught up in the relief he wouldn’t have to write another condolence letter.
When the door shut it left the bunny fox alone for a moment. She and her parents might have had to deal with the loss of her brother, Virgil, but it seemed that the fox had suffered more and that he and the others had volunteered for the war. Suddenly she was overcome with guilt and chagrin for not only how she’d treated the flyer, but thinking that her pain and loss was greater than his. “Nick? How…how many letters have you had to write?” she asked softly once she’d stepped up to the side of the gurney.

The fox sighed and opened his eyes, staring at the rather unremarkable ceiling without really seeing it. “Not counting the foxes that work as our ground crew and mechanics? There were twenty six of us when we first volunteered. Now we’re down to twelve pilots…”

Judy slapped her paws to her mouth, her eyes widening in horror. Fourteen out of twenty six flyers had died and the war wasn’t quite a year in for Zootopia and the surrounding lands like Bunnyburrow and Deer Brooke. The fox had watched more than half his friends die. “Oh…Nick,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry…”

“Hey now,” he said as his eyes refocused on the here-and-now. “None of that. They went doing what they felt was right. Besides,” he continued, a wry smile and wink being sent the bunny’s way, “protecting cute girls is always a good thing!”

“Don’t call me cute,” Judy muttered half-heartedly before feeling her own muzzle twisting into smile of her own as the fox’s outrageous demeanor was more than just a little infectious.

“I could call you ugly, or hideous, but those would be completely blatant lies,” Nick told her with a flirtatious leer. “All joking aside, though, thank you. I really could’ve been in serious trouble hanging up in that tree had it not been for you.”

Her ears darkening in a deep blush, the bunny looked away, unaccustomed to compliments; flirting absolutely, especially with the number of bachelor bucks in Bunnyburrow. But she’d never heard such things from someone of a different species. Judy was saved for the moment with the return of the young fox named Barker.

“Got you a jumper, Sir,” the fox enthused, his youth evident not only from the energetic manner in which he seemed not to really walk but bounce with every step, but also in his eyes and his voice. “I’m just going to head out to the field if that’s all right, Sir. The Angels will be coming back soon and I thought…”

“Go on, with you,” Nick said with a laugh. “Go count the planes.”

Barker sketched a quick salute before darting for the door, his tail throwing off his gait as it wagged happily.

Nick started to flick the sheet back so that he could slip into the grey one-piece flight suit before realizing that the bunny was watching him with a sort of idle curiosity. “Hey, Carrots,” he said, the bunny not even stirring in the slightest. “Miss Hoppes?” Still no response. “Judy!”

“Hmm?” the doe inquired with a completely innocent expression, unaware of what she’d been doing.

“I’d like to get dressed, if you don’t mind,” the fox pointed out. “Now, I’m not going to say that bunnies have certain, er, reputations for good reasons, but I’d rather not damage your wonderfully bucolic sensibilities…”

Judy finally realized just where she was staring and yanked her deeply pinked ears over her face.
“Sweet cheese and berries!” she swore softly before turning about and finding a privacy screen and thick curtain that would enable both of them to enjoy a semblance of solitude while the fox got dressed. She heard the rustle of fabric and chewed slightly on her bottom lip while she waited, wondering why she’d felt so interested in the prospect of the fox getting dressed when just a few hours before she’d been ready to skewer or even shoot him for being a predator. Perhaps it was because Nick and the other foxes really weren’t all that terrifying and that they weren’t much different than her and the rest of the Hopps family. Heaven knew these foxes were doing more to help out than several other rabbit families in the Burrows, though they were more than happy to give their opinions on the war.

“Ready?” Nick asked as he popped around the edge of the screen, standing slightly bent over and leaning on a walking stick. It was understandable as his injury had been in the abdominal region and if it were as sore as when Judy had had to have her appendix removed, he was doing exceedingly well.

“I suppose…” the bunny said with a shrug.

“Oh, it won’t be that bad, Carrots. We’re not all that different than you and we only eat meat occasionally, but never in front of guests,” the fox said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Judy looked at the fox with something on the border of disgust and shock until she saw the grin and her irritation earlier in the day returned for a moment. “That’s not very amusing, Squadron Leader Wilde,” she informed the fox tartly.

“But it is true. “To be honest we may eat a little poultry, perhaps fish when we can get it, but most of the food even close to meat that you’ll see any of us here have comes in the form of crickets and grasshoppers that have been pan fried. It gives them a rather interesting nutty flavor. You just have to be careful of the legs. They can get caught between the teeth, and with grasshoppers you can actually choke to death on-“

“No more, please!” Judy begged as she stuck her fingers in her ears like a kit. “If you keep talking I won’t have any appetite at all!”

“Understood, Miss Hopps,” Nick said with a chuckle. “Shutting up now.”

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The sun was a paw’s width above the horizon when a low drone from the southwest made the bunny’s ears perk up as she was escorted to the pilots’ mess while simultaneously offering support to the fox who politely insisted he was capable of making it to the dining facilities. “What…” Judy asked as she followed the direction of the noise a fraction of a second behind her long ears as they swiveled and twitched of their own accord.

“Over there,” Nick told the doe as he leaned over, trying to hide the wince of pain from his abused stomach. The wound hadn’t been all that deep, but it was rather long and doing anything caused the sutures to pull and twinge despite the morphine that had been given to him. His paw pointed at a small series of dots in the sky.

As each of the aircraft approached they appeared to hang completely motionless for a moment before dropping ever-so slowly to the crushed grass of the airfield. The first was a two-engine aircraft painted in the slate and olive green of the Zootopian Air Corps, the dark blue and red roundel of the ZAC with a large black ‘Z’ in the center prominent on the wings and fuselage. Ground crew that consisted of both prey and predator mammals in light grey or khaki jumpers directed the plane with brightly painted batons and chocked the wheels as soon as the propellers luffed to a stop. The next
three planes to land were Supermarine Spitfires, and while they were decked out in the normal colors of the other aircraft parked along the flight line, the ones that specifically belonged to the fox’s squadron had long, stylized sideways ‘S’ insignia that took up the last third of their planes’ fuselage, each one a curious reddish-brown with white tip.

When the third and last Spitfire landed, Judy went back to regarding one of the squadron’s fighters, her eyes widening as she realized that the strange paint scheme was a stylized fox’s tail. She looked up at Nick, her face breaking into a wide grin. “‘Red Tails’! I get it now! Because you’re all foxes!”

“Can’t get anything by you, can we?” Nick asked with a wink and grin. “Want to meet some very special mammals? We call them Angels.”

The bunny looked up at the odd question until a high, feminine voice caused her to look back to the flight line as the pilots disembarked and strode towards her and the Squadron Leader. Judy then did a double take. The crew for the first plane were all…bunnies? The three pilots for the Spitfires were vixens. All of them bore the sort of swagger that Judy was starting to associate with pilots, but the way their clothing was cut, including their flight jackets, left no doubt whatsoever that the newcomers were all females!

“Miss Hopps? The Angels. They are fully qualified pilots and their job is to transfer aircraft from the factories and depots out of Axis bomber range to the airfields that need them,” Nick explained as he stood a little straighter as a bunny with Flight Leftenant stripes on her jacket’s sleeves stopped a respectful distance away and stomped to attention before snapping a salute.

“Squadron Leader Wilde! Flight Leftenant Scampington reporting, Sir!” the bunny delivered crisply with all possible military bearing.

“As you were, Leftenant,” Nick said as he returned the salute and relaxed a little himself. “Oh, Leftenant, I’d like for you to meet Judy Hopps, a rather nice young doe that helped me out of a tree this afternoon. Judy? This is Stella Scampington, senior officer of the Angels. She and the others of her group of mixed female pilots that’s helping us win the war. Without her and her squadron of ladies we’d have nothing to fly!”

“Is that why we had to tack another plane onto our delivery roster today?” the bunny officer asked, her eyes narrowing as her ears twitched into an erect, petulant angle and she put her paws on her hips. “What happened?”

Judy couldn’t help but flinch as the tone of the question wasn’t one that you were supposed to use on a superior officer. She jerked slightly when Nick placed his paw between her shoulders and steered her towards the dining hall, a somewhat subdued grin now gracing his muzzle. “Why don’t we discuss this over a good, hot supper, hmm? And I think we’ve got some of that wine you like laying around here somewhere…”

“And what’s with the walking stick?” the pilot bunny asked in a slightly higher tone, her grey green eyes hardening into little bits of cold glass as her cream and white fur bristled about her neck and small tail. When the fox only shrugged and continued on Stella jumped in front of Judy. “Hopps, huh? Why don’t you tell me what happened and then I’ll figure out if I’m going to have a new coat for winter when I shave this bloke’s tail.”

Judy gave Nick an apologetic look over her shoulder as she was physically hustled along and shrugged. Truth be told, Judy liked this little hellion of a bunny and figured that there were things that she could learn from Flight Leftenant Stella Scampington. The other bunnies and vixens that fell in behind all began giggling in amusement as they left Nick staring after the coterie in no small amount of worry in his eyes.
So, the Angels are based on the ATA in England during WWII, and their later counterparts in the US. There are some amazing stories for some amazing pilots and you really should go look them up! They were as talented and brave as any person in those insane days and have my utmost respect and admiration.

As for the doctor, McSwiney...to be honest I based him on our family doctor when I was a kid. He was a Scot that looked disturbingly like Doc Brown from 'Back to the Future', and got me in trouble on a regular basis. The most memorable time was when mononucleosis first appeared, what people back then called 'the kissing disease', and told my mom that I probably got it by, and I quote, "kissin' an screwin' all th' girls!" He was a great physician, though, and I lament his passing two years ago.

Here's to you, Doc!
Chapter 4

Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“To Miss Hopps!” Flight Lieutenant Pawson said as he stood and lifted a jack of bitter ale towards the bunny that sat on his commanding officer’s right side. “To bringing our esteemed leader home more or less in one piece, not filling him with even more holes than the Huns did, and seeing Squadron Leader Wilde back to us. Huzzah!”

The rest of the pilots’ mess filled with shouts and cheers, all of the males and females toasting a rather embarrassed Judy who fought the urge to hide her face behind her ears. She smiled weakly and lifted her own glass mug filled with amber ale and raised it back before trying to take a sip and failing, unable to get past the strong odor and even stronger flavor. The only ones at her parents’ farm that really drank ale or beer were her father and a few older brothers.

As soon as the toast was concluded, the different pilots went back to their good natured carousing with one another. The meal had been passable, though instead of fresh vegetables and fruits, most of the offerings had been tinned, the contents turning out to be varied globs of colored goo. How could they call the one putrid dish that was placed on all the tables peas? The substance was about as far from peas as a pawful of mud! And the carrots…if she’d shown up at her parents’ table carrying a bowl of what their cook had called carrots the rest of her family would have burned her at the stake for blasphemy!

“Is this really how all of you eat?” Judy asked while trying to keep the horror and revulsion from her face.

Nick tilted his head and looked down at the various courses. “For the most part,” the fox admitted. “I assure you that if you add the right amount of petrol to it you can barely tell that it was inedible in its previous incarnation.” The joke was lost on Judy, though, and the fox sighed. “Many of the young mammals that are on the lines believe that officers have it soft, that we’re treated better than they are. This is true to a degree. While we have actual beds that are dry in rooms that are warmed, I don’t allow food to be served to my squadron and I that differs any from what the lads in the Army receive. We aren’t any better. We just have a different job to do.”

The bunny recalled a letter from her brother that mentioned something along those lines, that some of the officers he’d seen felt that their rank was supposed to hold certain privileges that the enlisted ranks didn’t receive, but it seemed not to be the case with this group of foxes. If the pilots that consisted of the Angels were bothered by the meal, none of them showed it.

Once they’d all eaten, Judy far less than the others in the mess, more than a bit of good natured fraternization began to take place. The large radio was set to Zootopia Broadcasting Station three, the energetic notes of swing and big band jazz blaring from the speaker from such musical greats as Bambi Carrington, Thumper Jonze and Flower Miller while thrown in were singing groups like the Anshrew Sisters and Rosemary Mooney.

As the different pilots finished their drinks, a few broke off into couples to dance, Judy trying to keep her eyes in her head as she watched rabbit does pairing off to cut a rug with some of the foxes! It was bad enough that she’d never even met a predator before this morning, and now she watching them
dance together! When one couple caught her attention, a small sound of shock escaped her throat as the extremely young seeming Pilot Officer Barker was engaged in some fairly steamy kissing with one of the other bunnies, Pilot Officer Harecourt. Judy was distracted from the display when Stella Scampington relocated to the chair on the Bunnyburrow doe’s right.

“Something wrong, Miss Hopps?” the Flight Leftenant inquired with a smug, knowing smile.

Before she could think better of it, Judy lowered her head, though her eyes kept darting to the very mismatched young couple as they moved to a far corner table and the bunny climbed onto the fox’s lap, their entire demeanor indicating something close and intimate as their heads were close together and the doe touched the vulpine pilot’s muzzle and face tenderly. “They were kissing!” she husked, unsure as to how she felt about the display. It was unexpected, to say the least, and on the verge of appalling.

At the same time the very public display had been…intriguing.

“Ah. Well, all of us do have strenuous jobs. Who are we to begrudge them a little comfort, hmm?” Stella inquired with a smile as she drained her jack of ale and refilled it.

“B-but…he’s a fox!” Judy continued in a harsh whisper.

“Told you she was observant,” Nick interjected as he leaned over before wincing and sitting back up, his paw on his stomach.

“Yes. P. O. Barker is a fox,” Stella agreed with a nod.

“That’s…it’s…” Judy struggled trying to put into words what she saw, but unsure how, and unable to find the right words.

“What?” the other doe inquired with an amused expression. “Ah. That’s right. You’re from Bunnyburrow. You’ve never really met predators, have you?”

Judy shook her head and answered softly. “No.”

“I suppose it’s different in the city, there are prey mammals and predator mammals all together. In schools, businesses, the cinema…and for the most part they all get along. But not in Bunnyburrow. I visited there before the war. I used to stay with an uncle and his family for portions of the summer when I was a kit. Nothing but rabbits. My god, it was so boring!” Stella sipped her ale as she draped an arm across the back of Judy’s chair. “Do you think I should stop them?”

After giving the question some thought, Judy shrugged. “I…I don’t know…”

“Do you know why I let things like that happen?”

Again the grey bunny shrugged. “I don’t know that either.”

“The answer is very simple. There’s a war on. These little moments might be the last time that they get to be happy, share a little warmth, be happy for a little bit. Tomorrow young Barker there might not come home. Or even Harecourt. We see combat, too, you know. More than a couple of times we’ve run across enemy planes while ferrying Spitfires to the outlying airfields. I haven’t lost one of my girls yet,” and with that she poured a little salt on the table before tossing a pinch over her left shoulder, “but you just never know. Might be the Huns that get one of us, or a technical glitch. Gremlins are just as deadly as bullets, you know.”

Judy blinked. “Gremlins?”
“Pilot superstition,” Nick said where he nursed a cup of tea and looked none too pleased about it. “Whenever something on a plane doesn’t work, we call it a gremlin. Little fairies that are mischievous and like to break things. Get in behind an enemy plane and your guns don’t work? Gremlins. Come back from a mission and one of your wheels doesn’t come down? Gremlins. It’s easier to blame a gremlin for problems than someone else or yourself.”

“My point is,” the white and cream furred doe said as she took the conversation back, “that I can’t deny those two what might be the last little bit of affection they know. And as for P. O. Barker being a fox, I’ll take him over a great many number of rabbits any day of the week. How many rabbits do you know that are staying in Bunnyburrow that could be serving? Instead you have those like Nick and Barker, Pawson, Mawris, Vulney who come from the other side of the ocean to fight for us when they aren’t even in this war. At least not yet. But they’re here and they’re putting their tails on the chopping block everyday so all those rabbits back in Bunnyburrow can be safe.”

Stella gulped down the rest of her ale and set the mug down on the table, perhaps a little harder than called for, before getting up and stepping back behind the other bunny to plant a long, deep kiss on Nick’s muzzle. When she let the surprised fox go and turned back to Judy her expression was challenging as her eyes shone with the barest hint of inebriation.

“So, yes. I’ll take these foxes over a great many rabbits.” She began to walk away, her tail twitching suggestively with the sway of her hips. “You might want to think on that when you get back home.”

Judy watched as the bunny stepped up to the modest bar in the mess and grabbed a bottle before heading outside. When Nick leaned over and spoke it was enough to cause her to start slightly.

“Don’t mind Stella, Carrots. She…well, she’s been through quite a bit,” the fox said.

“Maybe,” Judy answered. “But…she’s right. There are plenty of bucks in Bunnyburrow that should be serving.” She sat up straighter and pushed her jack away not wanting any more of the bitter brew. “A lot of does, too, for that matter,” she added softly. Shaking her head and rubbing at her eyes, Judy gave the fox an apologetic smile. “I truly don’t want to be rude, but do you think you could have someone show me where I’ll be sleeping? I really do need to get an early start tomorrow morning. My Dad’s going to be cross enough as is with me being gone all night.”

“It’s on the way to my quarters,” Nick said. “I’ll show you, myself.” He waved at the rest of the pilots to carry on as he leaned slightly on the walking stick and walked to the door of the mess. He did pause for a moment at a small side table where a number of votive candles in shot glasses flickered fitfully and took a moment to replace a few that were getting low and added another to the collection. The fox then turned to the door and stepped out of the mess with his back straight and head held high until he and Judy were outside. As soon as he was out of sight of the others the fox let out a sigh and bent over. “Mother of Foxes I’m starting to feel sore!”

“It’s going to be like that for a couple of days,” Judy told him as she stepped under his other arm, smiling a little at the look of shock on Nick’s face as she helped support him. “I had my appendix removed when I was ten. I was sore for a week! If you have a spare pillow or cushion to hold while you sleep, it helps. And no laughing. You’ll swear that you’re going to pop open if you laugh.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” With the added assistance it wasn’t too much trouble getting to the visiting officers quarters. “And here we are. You have your own facilities, so you needn’t worry about sharing with any of the boys. Oh, I also had a few things brought over. I know the clothes will be too big, but if they’re just for sleeping who’s to know? It won’t be the most comfortable, but I’m afraid it’s all we can manage at the moment.”

“It’ll be fine,” Judy told him. “Thank you.”
“No,” the fox said with a smile. “Thank you. You really did get me out of a pickle today. I owe you for that.”

The bunny smiled. “Even though I almost shot your toes off? And poked you full of holes?”

“Even though,” Nick answered with a gentle smile. He turned to go when the bunny said his name to stop him.

“Nick? How is it that right now you’re being more than polite, but when I found you, you acted so… infuriating? Like everything was a joke?”

The smile faded from the fox’s muzzle. “Ask me some other time. You never know. I just might answer you. But not tonight.”

Before she could say anymore Nick turned and moved off into the dark leaving Judy alone with even more questions, a tangle of emotions, and a deep, bone weary exhaustion. Her paw found the handle for the door to the guest quarters and she entered with a small shake of her head. The rooms themselves were a drab tan color and everything was stark and functional without any sort of esthetics to soften the harshness of the room. The furniture was fairly roughshod and aged while the bed was little more than a thin mattress on a metal and spring frame. Despite that the cot looked incredibly enticing. On the end were couple of simple undershirts and a pullover sweater. The blankets looked thick enough and Judy took one of the undershirts and stepped into the bathroom that could be described as Spartan at best, the cinderblock walls not even painted and the concrete floor was also unadorned.

Despite the lack of refinement, the lavatory was at least clean, almost painfully so with the smell of bleach still in the air. And the hot water spigot actually provided hot water, that little detail being quite luxurious all things told. Cleaning herself as best she could, Judy finished taking care of her nightly routine and draped one of the shirts over her narrow shoulders, giggling at the image in the mirror. With a bit of rope she could turn the simple garment into a dress. The fabric smelled freshly laundered, and there was no indication that anyone had ever worn it previously. Judy set her regular clothes on a crude wood chair before climbing up onto the cot and slipped between the cool sheets, tugging the covers up to her chin before reaching out and tugging on the pull chain for the single light in the room.

In the dark she listened to the sounds of the airfield. It wasn’t like the quiet of her parents’ burrow, the only noises at home were that of a multitude of siblings and cousins. Here there were engines from trucks and generators, the voices of soldiers on patrol and the occasional sound of metal on metal from the distant hangers. As Judy sorted through the noises she felt herself begin to relax, though it was less from properly identifying each sound as it was the events of the day catching up on her. Before she knew it her eyes closed and she drifted into slumber.

The dreams, however, were rather odd, filled with images of blue sky and clouds, each perfect in their individual uniqueness, while through it all a pair of green eyes dominated it all.

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“Breakfast?” Squadron Leader Nick Wilde asked as Judy finally emerged from the visiting officer’s quarters.

That the fox was already up with the sunrise barely smudging the eastern sky was something of a surprise until Judy noticed that the entire squadron seemed to be moving around the parked planes when she glanced in that direction. They were climbing all over their aircraft while mechanics of all species worked on engines or adjusted items deep within the confines of the Spitfires. Some were
loading belts of ammunition into the wings while others helped fit teardrop shaped tanks for extra fuel underneath.

“Just coffee, I think,” Judy said trying to stifle a yawn and smiling apologetically.

“I hope they didn’t wake you,” the fox said with an answering smile as he gestured to the flight line. “We tend to get an early start around here. Up before the sun and get ready for the call that enemy planes are on the way. Lots of activity, then sometimes lots of waiting with a few moments of sheer terror to break the routine.”

The bunny shook her head before looking to where the sound of a rotary engine firing up drew her attention. At the nearest point of the parked aircraft the twin engine Avro Anson was starting up, the unmistakable features of Stella Scampington leaning out the window to talk to a ground crew mammal as the starboard engine warmed up. She nodded and slipped back inside the mottled camouflage colored plane a moment before the second engine belched to life in a cloud of exhaust. “I’m used to getting up early. I think I’ve actually slept in later than I like!”

“Well, we can blame that on the day you had yesterday.” He gestured to the pilots’ mess with his walking stick. “And coffee is definitely available, as is tea and some scones. We might eat the same tinned rations as others, but I insist that we at least have good coffee. Climbing into a cockpit without a cup is just unthinkable.”

The bunny looked at the pilot and saw that he was only half joking. “I might have to take you up on the scones, then.”

As soon as she was set with a cup and something to nibble on, Judy followed Nick back outside in time to see the twin engine Anson taxi to the end of the runway and pause while the engines were brought up, their droning buzz turning into a roar before the brakes were released and the plane began to move. It only took a few moments before the tail lifted, then the entire aircraft was airborne, the wheels retracting into their wells. As it climbed, Stella banked the craft for a long, slow turn that had her and her Angels heading back to their own airfield, probably for another day filled with ferrying replacement planes to where they needed to go. Hopefully none of them would need to come to this airfield.

“Oh, I took the liberty of having my mechanic fill up your family’s truck along with the inclusion of two cans of gas in the back to cover whatever you use returning home. Um, I also had him give it a good looking over. I’d feel terrible if you broke down on the way back,” Nick informed the bunny. “There aren’t too many places to get help between here and Bunnyburrow.”

It was an unexpected gesture and Judy was grateful. “Thank you, Squadron Leader Wilde,” she told him.

“I thought we were past that,” the fox told her with a grin. “Besides, I like it when you call me by name.”

Judy blushed slightly. “Thank you, Nick.”

“Come on, then. Let’s get you on your way home. Your father looked as if he knew how to use a shotgun and I’d rather not him show up here looking for the predator what took his daughter.”

“About that,” Judy began, her ears darkening even further, “I really am sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Things have been hard on everyone, and after what you told me I can understand his reasons. I think in the same position I’d be tempted to fill me with the contents of a
couple of shells as well.” He gave the bunny a slow wink as they ambled to the truck where a fennec fox in mechanic’s overalls stood with his pointed garrison cap tilted at a careless angle and wiped his paws on a grease-stained rag. “How’s it looking Finnick?” Nick inquired.

The diminutive desert fox shrugged. “All it needed was a bit o’ tender lovin’ care,” he answered in a voice that was so deep it caused the bunny to stop in her tracks, her face a study of surprise. “Tell yo’ pa to change th’ oil more often,” the sandy colored vulpine instructed. “That an’ th’ next time it starts t’ misfire, pull th’ plugs an’ soak ‘em good in a bit o’ gas before takin’ a brush to ‘em. Also, he might wanna get the excess moisture outta th’ distributor. Also repacked the bearin’s with grease, but he ain’t got much time left on that front right one. It’s worn somethin’ fierce.”

“I’ll let him know,” Judy told the gruff little mechanic. “Thank you,” Judy said and held out her paw after only a moment’s hesitation, not because of the grease and oil stained furry fingers, but due to the gruff nature of the small fox himself.

“Yeah,” Finnick said, his expression softening along with his voice as he accepted the gesture. “Now, if y’all will pardon me, I got some new planes t’ go over, includin’ this guy’s bird. Need t’ make sure they up to snuff for the next mission.” He nodded before turning away, the end of a cigar appearing from a pocket and getting stuck in the corner of the desert fox’s muzzle.

“It looks as if I need to thank you again,” Judy said as she paused by the side of the truck and looked up to the fox. “And I still feel the need to apologize.”

Nick shook his head, his smile easy. “Don’t worry. Really.” He poked his head around the rabbit and spied something he’d instructed Barker to put in the old truck and nodded. “Just get home safe. Who knows. If you look up you might see me again one day, hopefully without an Axis 109 putting a lot of holes into my plane.”

Unsure what else to do Judy simply nodded before reaching inside and setting the choke and advance on the aged vehicle and stepped around to the crank. Before her paw could wrap around it, Nick’s was there, his fingers engulfing hers as he drew her away.

“I might be stitched up like a ragdoll, but I can still do that. Go on and get in the truck,” the fox told her, again with the easy smile, though his eyes were large and soft as well.

“But you aren’t supposed to strain yourself,” the bunny said, her heart in her throat as her fingers were still ensconced by his.

“I think I have enough in me to get this old jalopy going,” Nick told her as he nodded. “Come on, now.”

Judy reluctantly did as she was told, though whether that reluctance was from the fox possibly hurting himself or from the almost electric thrill that ran from her paw and straight to her chest from his touch was unknown. It might have been from both but the bunny had no time to think about it as Nick jerked the crank, the little four cylinder engine firing with greater ease than it ever had in her memory. Theputtering of the firing sequence was also much smoother without any of the hiccups or occasional backfires that accompanied a cold start.

With another smile of gratitude, Judy adjusted the choke and put the truck into gear before looking at Nick once more as the fox switched paws for his walking stick and tossed the bunny a little salute and wink as she began to move.

Before Judy could say or do anything, Nick turned on his heel and headed towards the hangars and the activity around the parked airplanes, leaving her alone with her thoughts and her still beating heart. As she neared the gate a pair of soldiers in olive drab fatigues lifted the gate, one a polar bear,
the other goat that had his flat helmet cut to accommodate his curved horns, both waving as the bunny passed by. Before she got too far away to hear them, the sound of the alert siren began to peel, its harsh voice climbing and them fading only to start up again. With a wide-eyed glance back, Judy watched as little puffs of blue smoke began to erupt from the serrated looking exhaust ports of the fighters as their engines fired to life.

The beating of her heart that had begun to finally slow jumped again and Judy found her foot pressing harder on the gas pedal as she leaned over the wheel. The only consolation she could feel at the moment was that at least Nick wouldn’t be going up for whatever event had triggered the alert. Then her ears snapped up as she tried to figure out where that thought had come from as the truck bounced down the road back towards Bunnyburrow.

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It wasn’t until Judy was halfway home that she noticed the small basket sitting on the seat next to her and pulled the truck over. With a curious expression she found a couple of sandwiches stuffed with slices of cucumber and tomato and padded with lettuce, the thick bread slathered with mayonnaise and two small jars of tea along with a wrapped package of sweet biscuits that had a sort of fruit jam between them. A small note in flowing script with her name on it simply said it was for the trip home, the only signature being a neat ‘N’ with curled ends.

Smiling happily and the furor at the airfield pushed from her thoughts for a moment, Judy unwrapped one of the sandwiches and took a bite, holding onto the wax paper package as she put the truck back into gear and trundled back onto the roadway.

Chewing rapidly, the bunny’s thoughts again turned to the wayward flyer, as they had the entirety of the twenty miles she’d already travelled and wondered when she might see him again before shaking her head. If her family knew that she felt a small, but rather insistent, attraction to the fox that went against all sane reasoning they’d lock her away. For her own good, of course.

When she finally pulled up to the farmhouse just before midday her father looked at Judy as if he were surprised she’d returned at all. “Did you get that fox back to…well, wherever he needed to go?” Stu asked a bit harshly.

“Squadron Leader Wilde,” Judy corrected with a sigh. “And yes.” Judy then took a little time to tell her father what had happened, including her mother in the tale as they entered the kitchen of the farmhouse, Bonnie Hopps tending to cooking while keeping track of numerous bunny kits at the same time. “Dad…Nick…he gave this to me to pass on to you,” she said as she handed him an envelop that had also been in the basket left in the truck.

Stu eyed the folded paper warily, as if the simple fact that it had come from a fox would make it something dangerous. He finally snagged it out of his daughter’s paw and opened it, his expression one of surprised confusion as he found a small booklet of ration stamps. There was also a small bundle of notes, not military script, but actual money as well, followed by a small letter. The rabbit set the stamps and money aside as he read the note, his eyes narrowing as he made a small sound in his throat before balling up the paper and throwing it across the room. With heavy steps he left through the door he and Judy had come in through, disappearing around the corner of the house.

“What was that all about?” Bonnie asked as she stirred a steaming pot on the stove.

“I have no idea,” Judy admitted. She scooped up the money and ration stamps and plopped them into the clay jar that she knew her mother kept her emergency fund in. “We’ll hold on to that for a rainy day, huh?”
“How much was it?” the older bunny asked, her ears perking up.

“Almost two week’s worth of gas rations and thirty pounds,” Judy told her mother as she picked up the balled letter and opened it up.

“Sweet cheese and berries! Thirty pounds? Is that fox rich or something?”

“His name’s Nick, Mom, and I don’t…think…he’s…”

Judy trailed off as she skimmed the letter, her paw going to her mouth as her eyes filled and began to darken the fur of her cheeks. When she looked up at her mother it was to find the older bunny staring at her in utter confusion.

“Well?!”

The younger bunny swallowed and took a deep breath before she could read the letter aloud. “It says, ‘Dear Mister Hopps, While I know that a letter from a predator is probably the last thing you could possibly want right now, I’d like to tell you that you are not alone. If I could, I’d trade places with your son, Virgil, so you could have him back again. It’s not right that a father should grieve for a son, and it tears my heart to know that this damned war has already seen too much of that sort of thing, and will see more before all this is over.’

“I know that in the end my words mean next to nothing, but I promise you that I, and the rest of my squadron, will do everything we can to help in bringing this damnable conflict to an end. I’d like to see you enjoy the time with your other sons without the threat of war hanging over them. I’d like to know that one day they can go outside and look up to the sky and see just clouds, not warplanes. I’d like to think that they will be able to fill their ears with sounds of music and birds and the voices of the ones that love them and not the harsh thunder of guns.’

“I think Virgil was a very fortunate rabbit to have a father that has as much love in his heart for him as you do and only hope that when the time comes my own father can say that he loved me with even a tenth of the strength that you do your boy. All of us have lost someone, and as a way to remember them, to hopefully bring them home one day, we have a table that we keep candles burning, hoping the light will guide them back to us. Please forgive me if it’s forward of me, but I have one lit for your son with the prayer that he may return to you’

“With utmost respect and gratitude, Squadron Leader Nicholas P. Wilde.’”

Judy lowered the letter to look at her mother, the older doe also damp eyed. “We’ll just put that in a safe place for now,” Bonnie said as she tried to flatten the crinkled paper before tucking it into a cookbook.

“I…I’ve seen the table where they have the candles…” Judy husked, finally realizing what the impromptu shrine was for. “I watched as Nick added one to them.”

Bonnie had slipped the cookbook back onto the shelf it came from before patting her daughter’s shoulder, her breath hitching as she, too, mourned for her lost child. “You like this fox, don’t you?” she asked as she turned her attention back to the pots on the stove.

“What?!”

“He sounds like a brave individual,” Bonnie continued. “But why is a predator flying against his own kind?”

“Oh,” Judy stammered. “Um, well, he and the others in the squadron don’t like what’s happening
any more than we do, Mom. They’re disgusted by it. And not all predators feel the same way, Mom.”

The older doe made an indelicate sound. “What sane mammal wouldn’t be disgusted?” She dipped a spoon into the pot and peered over the rim. “Would you let your father know lunch is ready. Then go get your brothers and sisters. Most of them are in the west field so a good shout should do.”

Judy nodded and stepped out to do as she was asked, her mind tumbling over the question that she’d misconstrued.

“Yeah,” the bunny whispered to herself as the screen door closed loudly behind her on the thick spring attaching it to the frame. “I do like him. I just don’t know why…”

Chapter End Notes

So, not much of an end note here. On to the next chapter!
“I’ve got him!” Barker called out over the squadron frequency as one of the Me-109’s broke from the fight, its passage marked by a thin trail of smoke. A little slip of the rudder and a tilt of his wings and his Spitfire drifted in to the sweet spot as the young fox’s thumb hovered over the red button attached to his machine guns.

“Negative, Barker!” Nick’s voice said in the earphones that were part of his flight cap. “He’s done for. Back in formation.”

“But, Sir! I can make sure he’s finished off!” the Pilot Officer protested.

“We’ve got bigger fish to fry, Barker! Those bombers are headed towards Zootopia! We can’t let a single one through, now get back in formation!” Nick ordered more sternly.

The young fox was already turning off, his disappointment clear in his voice. “Understood, Sir. Altering course.”

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Nick shook his head in his own frustration. He understood the reason Barker wanted to chase the Messerschmitt, but the squadron had been scrambled to intercept the bombers that were headed to the city. It was beyond him why the Axis Air Command had thought that a daytime bombing raid was a good idea. While the He-111’s were fairly fast and maneuverable as far as bombers went, a daytime raid was tantamount to asking pilots to commit suicide, the aircraft slow and balky compared to the fast, nimble Supermarine Spitfires. A saying that his father had used on several occasions came to mind. The old fox had called it a ‘turkey shoot’.

Still, as outmatched as the bombers were, even one bomb could have disastrous results on a city as densely populated as Zootopia, and Nick didn’t even want to think about the damage or loss of life that a single five hundred pound bomb could do.

They found the bombers at a little over eleven thousand feet, the large aircraft trading altitude for speed to get past the engagement point their fighter cover had encountered Nick’s Thirteen Squadron. His pilots knew what to do, but the fox felt he had to rein in young Barker, the other vulpine far too enthusiastic for his own good. “All right, boys. Hit them from above, fast passes. Don’t get caught in their flanks. It’s too good a kill zone. Let’s keep the folk in the city safe and happy!”

The rest of the squadron called out as they followed their commander, Nick lining up on the tail bomber and stitching the fuselage from nose to tail, Barker following suit, though it was redundant as the much larger plane was already belching smoke and orange flame before Squadron leader Wilde finished his attack.

By the third bomber that he and Barker took down, Nick just wanted it to be over. The bombers were still a threat to the city, but this was simply sickening and the loss of life made the fox want to vomit. How many were just fliers like himself following orders because there was really no other choice. Unfortunately the ease of taking out the bombers had made Barker too complacent and he
passed the next at too shallow and angle, letting his plane fly into the zone where both the dorsal and side gunners could line up the young fox and with horror Nick watched as a stream of 7.92 tracers, an untold number of regular solid slugs between them, chewed into the other fox’s aircraft.

“Barker! BARKER! Pull out!” Nick ordered frantically as fuel began to spray from the perforations throughout his airplane. “Barker!”

The stricken Spitfire peeled away in a lackadaisical arc, the aircraft losing altitude slowly. With a wrenching of his gut, Nick pulled his plane up next to the other fox’s and looked over, a sound coming from his throat as he saw that there was no help for his youngest pilot. Most of the young fox’s face was missing on the left side and there were a number of bullet holes in the portion of the fuselage where the cockpit was, not to mention the ones in the canopy panes.

“Don’t worry…sir…” Barker’s voice said over the radio in Nick’s ears. “It…it doesn’t hurt…at all…” The vulpine lifted his left arm, struggling to get the limb up with the shredded mess of his shoulder, but manage he did, giving his squadron leader a thumbs up before slumping to the side. "Tell…tell ma…tell her I…love her…”

Nick watched as the Spitfire began a lazy, slow dive to the right, the smoke that had been coming from the engine cowling sparking with flames. The flames bounced back in the slipstream before igniting the copiously leaking fuel. Within fractions of a second the aircraft was little more than a fireball that began plummeting until it met its own shadow in a field that had been allowed to go fallow, fiery bits of debris spreading out in a circle as Nick could only observe the loss of another one of his pilots in impotent horror. Ripping his oxygen mask off, the fox gulped the thin, cold air of his own cockpit, his nose registering the fear scent of his own body before his throat constricted in a long keening wail. When he finally drew in a breath and looked up it was to see the last bomber from the formation falling from the sky, some of the five mammal crew actually getting out in time to deploy parachutes even as trucks in the distance kicked up a dust cloud from the road they were on.

“Head for home, Red Tails,” Nick was able to call out over the radio before sucking in air and prying his paw of the yoke. He tried several times with numb fingers before switching his radio off so that his sobs wouldn’t be heard by the rest of the squadron.

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The damage had been done and Hauptman Jan Johansson eased the throttle to keep the engine from overheating as he scanned the air around and behind him for pursuit aircraft. There was no one near him as he plunged through the clouds, though his efforts to spare his damaged engine were for naught as the Messerschmitt’s power plant continued to heat up to dangerous levels and was beginning to throw oil as well. Fortunately he still had enough altitude to formulate a decision, that particular fact verified by both instrument and a quick look at the mostly level fields below.

And at least the Hauptman had control of his plane for the moment.

Neither was there any immediate sign of habitation. The nearest town was some miles away as was the closest farmhouse with structures that seemed rather universal the world over. The amount of heat, no matter how Johansson feathered the throttle, continued to build, and now the Daimler Benz engine was starting to misfire. Were it not for the lack of pursuit to ensure his demise, the Axis flight captain would have had no luck at all. As it was, he had plenty of altitude to bail out safely. He couldn’t help but consider the lack of verification as a sign of sloppiness that neither he, nor his superiors, would have tolerated.

The Axis pilot jettisoned the canopy after ensuring his goggles and flight cap were securely in place, wincing at the ripping torrent of air, momentarily forgetting just how noisy the slipstream was, even
without the roar of the engine. He glanced down to make sure that he wasn’t bailing out directly over trees, recalling stories of broken bones from paratroopers that had had the misfortune of learning that maple and oak trees weren’t all that flexible. That is, if they were fortunate. It seemed that broken necks and backs were just as common in parachuting mishaps. With economic movements the Hauptman flipped the gun sights out of the way then disconnected his headset. He double and triple checked the straps for his chute, the small survival kit with its minor amount of necessary supplies, sidearm and once satisfied tripped the catches for the straps that kept him firmly in the seat. Glancing down once more, his paw found the little crank that extended the flaps, increasing not only drag, but the overall surface of the wings so that the crippled and dying plane would stay up instead of stalling despite the reduced speed.

The next thing Hauptman Johannson knew was the gut wrenching jerk of the parachute breaking his freefall that pulled a pained grunt from his diaphragm, the straps that held him into the emergency apparatus cutting deep into his groin as he was slowed drastically. A slight miscalculation and he would have been able to sing soprano with the Castrati the Church used, neutering a ploy to keep male singers sounding boyishly pure. He held on tightly to the risers, trying to keep himself from drifting to the trees, though in all honesty there was no way to really guide a parachute. Then his feet hit the ground, his legs bending at hip, knee and ankle to absorb the impact, though it was still enough to knock the wind from his lungs.

Jan only lay there for a few seconds to catch his breath, but it felt much longer as he continued to come down from the adrenaline flooding his bloodstream, both from the aerial combat then bailing out of his plane. As his senses returned he took silent stock of his condition, relieved that nothing was broken, not even sprained, nor was he on fire from some last moment mishap with the overheated engine. Jan was able to look up just in time to see the speck of his aircraft vanish past the tree line, the smoke that had trickled from the engine cowling darkening and growing thicker. The explosion that finally reached his ears sounded muffled and subdued, a sad end for what had been a fantastic machine.

The plane had been Yellow-Four. It had seen Jan Johannson make the last eight kills of his twelve total, now the wonderful little plane was no more and would be the tally for an enemy pilot. Truly an ignominious death for the mechanical steed that had carried him so faithfully with never any major faults, and a plane that had been, in his honest opinion, the finest aircraft the flight captain had ever piloted.

With a slightly melancholy sigh the Axis officer began to gather up his chute to hide it after his landing. The chances were too great for a patrol, either the actual military, or the civilian guard that this country was riddled with, to come looking for him. His, and all pilots downed in enemy territory, were charged with ‘Raising havoc and fear with the local population’. Jan snorted in dark humor. If intelligence was correct, their odds being equal to a coin toss of actually being right, the local population were all prey mammals. He was fairly sure that an enemy flyer who had parachuted safely down would be enough to cause the havoc and fear he’d been ordered to sow

The task that immediately concerned Jan was where to go from here.

Once his parachute was bundled as tightly and into as small a burden as he could get it, the Axis pilot headed for the cover of the trees. The soft ground under a fallen log provided the perfect place to ditch the chute. Though the silk could have been useful as an impromptu tent, in the late summer lushness of the countryside the stark white would have been too easily spotted by searchers. Once it was hidden with plenty of debris scuffed over the silk shroud, Jan pulled out the crude map stored in a thigh cargo pocket, his other paw fishing the small compass from the pocket of his leather and wool flight jacket. It was easy to tell that his best direction of travel, and escape, would be east and south, angling for the coast, and from there hopefully find a boat, something…anything to get him across
the Zootopian Channel and back to Axis held territory.

With a plan, Hauptmann Johannson set off, shaking his head as he again thought about his orders if he were ever to be shot down. ‘As if burning a few barns and murdering helpless civilians would be any more frightening than an enemy pilot…a predator at that…running free in their lands!’ Before the New Order, such things would have been absolutely unheard of.

He recalled stories of the Great War, the one his father fought in just a couple of decades prior, when downed pilots treated each other with decency and respect, serving each other tea and observing the polite customs of proper gentlemammals before being imprisoned. Not so these new times. Talk circulated among the Axis squadrons of lynch mobs, of Jan’s contemporaries that had been brought down and being relentlessly hunted by terrified locals.

And who could blame them?

Terrible things had been happening, and when a people elected to act in a savage and vicious manner, it was only proper that they should expect vicious savagery in return. Yes, terrible things were happening, and not for the first time, Jan Johannson questioned his place in the scheme of things as he made his way east by southeast.

No, he wouldn’t follow the orders. The odds were already against him. There was no reason to give the mammals of this land even more reason to hunt him. He would, however, follow the plan that he developed. Get to the coast; find a boat, then on to freedom. Just like in the films shown at the cinemas. Besides, simply being an Axis flier, a predator and on the loose would be a boogeymammal enough for these poor folk. There was no need to offer added incentive to nail his pelt to a wall.

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Rain. Even for late summer there seemed to be too much rain. Had it been the warm, welcoming rain that nourished crops, Jan Johannson wouldn’t have minded, but it was the third straight day of a miserable, chill downpour that kept him soaked all the way to his skin. Granted, it did ensure that he had plenty of water to drink, but a belly full of water was poor substitute to a belly full of a good hot meal of soup and fresh baked bread spread with thick, creamy butter…

With a shake of his head, Hauptman Johannsson banished the thoughts of food away, his rumbling gut telling him almost constantly that it needed filling. He had been a spare mammal to begin with, trim and in shape, but the forced starvation had pared that down to something that was almost grotesque. The only benefit that he could see in the continuous rain was that it kept searchers from looking for him too diligently. No sane mammal enjoyed being out in the wet.

That and the rain was helping to mask his scent.

Just that morning he had avoided a pair of searchers, wolves at that, who argued heatedly about what they smelled, what it belonged to, where the source of that scent was going and from what direction it had come from. If he hadn’t been careless and allowed himself to be seen by a chicken farmer that was out spreading corn for his flock…but the thought of one of the chickens had overridden better sense, or sense that the Hauptman would have had were he not so painfully hungry. Instead, Jan had fled, though he hadn’t recalled running away. He’d still been spotted, though.

More and more of his thinking was clouded by imminent starvation, though he also had an inkling that the ‘vitamins’ that had been in his survival pouch were to blame. He’d been told that they would keep him going and functional even in the most trying of conditions, but it seemed as if he’d been lied to. Now on his fifth day of taking the foul tasting pills, his head throbbed constantly, his paws had a distinct tremor to them, and it only required a few minutes of exertion before his entire body
trembled and he’d be forced to take another simply to function.

As he sat behind a log, shivering from both the pills and the chill that his nearly waterlogged body couldn’t shake, he listened as the pair of searchers decided to call an end to their pursuit. Perhaps they were predators that were sympathetic to the New Order? Or were they simply fed up with the cold rain? Regardless, the two wolves padded off, their footfalls squelching noisily in the sodden ground before the continuous, maddening rush of rain covered even their angry bickering. Letting out a sigh of relief, Jan had let his head fall back, his mouth open, and let the rain fill his muzzle before gulping down the cold water.

Jan could have taken other mammals that he’d seen, and had his indoctrination into the New Order been complete, he may have. But there was a part of him that screamed in defiance at the thought of having a ‘someone’ on his dinner plate instead of a ‘something’. The thought of actually consuming the flesh of another that was capable of thought and speech was…terrifying. Even though, as of late, the rations back at the aerodrome were better than before, there was nothing identifiable about it. Well ground, no bones or distinguishing features…it was easy for Jan, and possibly others that felt the same, to believe that it was meat, just meat.

Not a former neighbor.

Not that moral acuity was a problem for some. There were stories of some infantry units that had given up all pretenses of trying to hide what, or more accurately, who, their meals came from.

“No!” Hauptman Jan Johannson husked fiercely to himself. “I am an Officer and a Gentlemammal! I will not engage in behavior that is morally reprehensible!”

Though there was a part of his mind, still unclouded by the pills that inquired what kind of hypocrite he was. Those new rations had to come from somewhere…
With a sob of anguish, partly of what he knew, deep down in the darkest recesses of his soul, and partly due to the madness of his hunger, the flyer lurched to his feet and continued his push to the east, to the only thing he had left that drove him.

It was getting harder and harder to think, sometimes the Hauptman losing entire blocks of time, his mind drawing blanks when he tried to recollect what he did hours before…or minutes. With a weariness of mind, body and spirit, he pushed on, one foot in front of the other, focusing as much on that as he could. Everything became a blur as starvation gnawed at him from the inside, a lack of sleep because of the ‘vitamins’ were keeping him awake. It was a sort of hell, never ending. Just misery, hunger, wet and cold.

So miserable was the Axis pilot that he stood for almost ten minutes staring incomprehensibly at the barn before him, subconsciously knowing that the structure could be his salvation, but unable to make the connection. Then realization struck him like a lightning bolt to a copper rod and he staggered through an unlocked door with an inarticulate sound of relief and joy. Barely aware of what he was doing, Jan found a pile of loose straw and began to burrow into it, unmindful of the dust that filled his nose or the way chaff poked through his soaked, filthy and matted fur to stab and cut and irritate. He was simply too happy for the relief from the insanely relentless rain and cold. As he wormed clumsily further into the loose hay he could feel the warmth enveloping him. With another hoarse sob he folded his arms under his head before passing out into an absolutely exhausted state of unconsciousness.

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Belle followed her sister into the barn before pausing, the empty bucket in her paws bouncing off her knees, though that went unnoticed as the kit’s nose began to wiggle fitfully as she sniffed the air of
the barn. Normally the small bunny loved the smells in the barn, the hay that retained the aroma of the summer heat and sunlight along with hints of soft rains, though after the previous week of grey skies and wet weather, it definitely smelled like sunlight. Or gold. Belle associated colors with the things that her nose picked up. Just like freshly picked green beans were what green smelled like and carrots were a happy orange. What should have been a happy scent for the kit was off, though. It was almost a putrid smell, like when one of her siblings had been sick and throwing up a lot. Belle didn’t like the smell at all and hesitated as her older sister also halted.

“Someone’s in here…” the older bunny said.

Belle nodded, for some reason the combination of the sour smell and her sister’s reaction causing the kit to start trembling in apprehension as her eyes grew wide, pupils dilating to their fullest as she looked around the barn. “Judy?” she whispered, her high voice almost lost in the sounds of the world coming from outside the barn door. “I’m scared!”

Without making any noise, the older bunny took the bucket from her sister and set it down as silently as possible. “Belle!” Judy whispered, her nose still wriggling. “Be as quiet as you can and go get the others. Tell them to come to the barn! Go! Quickly!” she breathed urgently.

The kit didn’t argue or put up a fuss, of which the older bunny was grateful for, and backed out of the barn silently before bolting for the farmhouse. Looking around, Judy spied a pitchfork, already familiar with its ability to function as an impromptu weapon and wrapped her almost dainty paws around the wooded shaft of the handle. So armed, and feeling slightly better with the tool, she advanced further into the barn.

It still caused a bit of a start when Judy saw the figure lying in the hay at the back of the barn. She felt her heart speed up within her breast and gripped the pitchfork more tightly. Now that she was familiar with the Zootopian Air Corps uniforms for flyers and officers, the bunny knew that she was seeing an enemy pilot for the first time. Instead of the browns, tans and khakis or slate gray dress uniforms that Nick and the others she’d seen wore, the wayward aviator was dressed in blacks and grays, the cut alone marking him as different. That and he was some sort of cat, in all not much larger than a fox, but still rather alien looking in his wholly different uniform and appearance.

Apart from looking as if he’d been living wild and under a rock, his fur matted and filthy, the enemy feline was the source of the terrible, gut-churning reek. Some of it was from his unwashed state and uniform smeared with all manner of mud and grime, but there was more to it; a sour smell that Judy associated only with the very sick. Despite having a weaker sense of smell than most mammals, even Judy could tell that there was something very off about the figure. That and there was a gauntness to him, sort of a hollow, wasted look that instantly reminded Judy of old Mister Cooper, a rabbit that had passed some years back as his body was quite literally consumed from within by some form of wasting disease.

Come to think of it, the smells that both mammals had exuded were quite similar, though the cat’s was slightly different, almost like rotting fruit. If not for the noticeable flaring of his nostrils, Judy would have thought the feline already dead…

“Judy!” Belle whispered as she stepped up to her sister, her little paw wrapping in the fabric of the older bunny’s working shirt, a simple cotton button down. “I told Petey to tell the others. They’re coming now!”

The older bunny waved for her sister to be more quiet as the cat’s ear twitched and swiveled towards them, then settled. Both had tensed as they thought the strange mammal was about to wake, then relaxed when nothing more happened.

When the feline leapt to his feet it was all Judy and Belle could do not to scream in reaction, both
hopping back slightly as Judy tightened her grip on the pitchfork, the kit tightening her grip on her sister. Then it looked as if the enemy flyer was about to collapse. It took demonstrable effort for the cat to retain his feet, moving as if he were very drunk or very ill. Judy decided on the latter as the cat’s yellow-green eyes had a feverish glaze to them.

“So much for a short nap and finally getting warm and dry,” the feline said, his voice somewhat clear, though raspy and raw and flavored with a distinct accent and emphasis put on the wrong syllables. “Oh, dear. It looks as if my captors are a pair of pretties,” he continued after looking blearily at Judy and Belle. He made a somewhat comical attempt to straighten his dirty and ragged uniform with clumsy paws. Even though they were dirty, his pale colored claws shown starkly against the black of his flight jacket. “I’m afraid I am not at my best at the moment,” the Axis officer apologized as he swayed slightly.

Judy watched as the feline wavered jerkily, unsure whether he was in pain or going to be sick. Regardless of his haggard state, she wasn’t going to let her guard down and shifted slightly so that Belle was behind her, the kit watching everything with a sort of rapt fascination as she nibbled nervously on a thumb claw. “You can sit down if you want. You’re not going anywhere until the authorities come and get you.” To emphasize her directions, Judy motioned to the hay with the pointed tines of her pitchfork turned weapon.

The cat considered her words for a moment, still wavering where he stood and awfully wobbly. BLAM!BLAM!BLAM! The barn shivered under the three loud explosions that seemed far too loud in the confines of the barn. Before Judy could even think to move the downed flier had filled his paw with a pistol and discharged it, the barrel of the weapon pointed well over the heads of Judy and Belle with the slugs impacting and burying themselves deep into the wood of one of the overhead timbers in a shower of dust and splinters. The explosions had been so loud and sudden that Judy dropped her pitchfork in surprise and fear, Belle also dropping the small potting spade that she’d picked up to defend herself, with and each of the does slapping their paws over their ringing ears.

The enemy ran out of the barn, or tried to, in his state the feline only being able to muster an erratic shamble. He was stopped as bright sunlight fell upon him, the glaring, golden-white light the first he’d seen in…how many days? His brain was still addled from the foul little pills and thinking was far too difficult. Sneezing once at the almost harshly intense light, the Axis flyer saw the tree line just ahead past a fence that at any other time wouldn’t seem so formidable an obstacle.

Then there was the house that also lay in his pat of escape and the growing horde of rabbits that impeded Jan’s path of escape. As he changed his angle of travel slightly there was a deafening BOOM! that was far louder than the cat’s pistol had been and his left arm felt as if it had just been stung by a swarm of bees as he danced a little in pain. “Aaaahhhhh!” he grunted, his head whipping down to see his flight jacket peppered with multiple tears and little holes. A shotgun, then, fired, blessedly, at long range. Any closer and the blast could have ended Hauptman Johannson quite easily. Trying to shake off the stinging in his arm, he began to stagger once more for the promise of the tree line, his steps less sure and more erratic than before.

The next thing Hauptman Jan Johannson knew was that he was at the fence. He looked at it in a dazed state and even considered climbing it, though as weakened as he was the simple wire strand fence might as well have been a twenty foot high wall of solid block and stone. Climbing it would be impossible and a small portion of his mind knew it as he fell on his rump before letting gravity win completely. The ground felt surprisingly good, warmed from the sun with more heat cascading down upon him. He was just so tired. His eyes rolled up as he tilted his head, the crowd of bunnies advancing upon him, some with startled looks, others with confusion, and more than a couple with seething anger.
Jan lifted his paw to defend himself before blinking in confusion as he wondered where his pistol had gone. Had he dropped it when the shotgun blast had struck him? Or had he dropped it afterwards? It didn’t matter. ‘Too tired to care. Let them kill me,’ he thought as his eyes fluttered closed. Yes. They could kill him in his sleep. It would be painless then…

“Say let him bleed out!” Stu yelled at his children gathered around the cat, the older rabbit already half tempted to empty the other barrel of the shotgun into the Axis flier at point blank range.

“But, Dad! We can’t do that!” one of his older children said, Jeremy looking at his father with a horrified expression.

Stu bristled and his brown eyes, normally soft and understanding, hardened into something more akin to cold, unfeeling stone. “Considering what his kind probably did to Virgil it’d be a damn sight more merciful!” he railed.

The sentiment was shared by a few, but it wasn’t a unanimous consensus. As the debate was sallied back and forth, Judy and Belle drew near, their ears still ringing from the gunshots in the barn. The doe released her younger sister’s paw as she stepped forward, her eyes noting where blood oozed freely from the feline’s arm onto the ground as a result of the shotgun blast.

Judy looked from the cat to the rest of her family before settling on her father. “Why isn’t anyone taking care of him?” she asked simply, breaking into the impasse.

“What??” Stu shouted in astonishment. “He tried to shoot you and Belle!”

“No, in point of fact he didn’t,” Judy said flatly. “He aimed well over our heads. He was trying to scare us so he could escape.”

Stu and the other Hopps rabbits looked at their sisters, Belle nodding silently but emphatically as she sucked nervously on her thumb, her free paw again twining itself in Judy’s shirt.

Though earlier contact with the allied fox had taken the edge of possible contact with military predators, the unambiguous encounter with an obvious Axis flyer had Stu’s blood up and his daughter knew that she had to talk him down before he did something rash that they might all regret.

“Dad…I miss Virgil, too. But there’s a bounty on captured enemy officers, and they need him so they can wring whatever information they can out of him.” She might not be able to bring her father’s compassionate side to the fore, but she was fairly certain that she could appeal to his practical aspect.

With a deep inhalation of breath that he let out explosively, Stu stomped away without saying anything else. Or at least he tried to stomp as much as a rabbit could on the springy grass that had been revitalized by the rain of the previous week. It didn’t mean that the enemy feline was unguarded, though, as numerous rabbits and does surrounded the unconscious pilot with what looked to be the entire offering of the Steers & Raebuck catalog of farm implements.

Also keeping an eye on the captured pilot was Judy’s older sister, Barbara, the doe being part of the Female Reserve, though embarrassingly home on maternity leave. She held the feline’s pistol in one paw while her other was wrapped around her distended belly. “This is a nice piece,” she mused from where she sat on the end of a wheelbarrow between the lifting bars. “Wish I could keep it.”

Judy took it upon herself to tend to the pellet wounds in the cat’s arm, the Axis flyer not even stirring as she peeled his flight jacket away, realizing at the last moment that it was actual leather and felt her
mouth twist into a rictus of revulsion. Beneath the jacket was the remnants of what looked to be a
dress shirt, the fabric as filthy as the rest of the feline, and the tattered remains of a necktie. Once the
wounds were bound, the amethyst eyed bunny began looking through the enemy flyer’s pockets.
She found a billfold, not leather thankfully, with his identification papers indicating he was one Jan
Johannson, a Hauptman, or the equivalent of a captain, in the Axis Luftwaffe. There was also a
creased sepia toned photograph of a female similar to the feline, her arms filled with two kittens,
smiling warmly at the camera.

Then Judy found the small metal tube of pills that had kept the cat going. “What are these?” she
asked and passed them to Belle who took them to Barbara.

“Mmm.” The pregnant doe said with a look of distaste. “Pep pills. They can wake you up if you’re
feeling groggy…keep you up at night when you gotta stay awake. Too many will make you sick,
which might be why he smells so terrible. I bet he’s the Axis pilot they’ve been looking for, the one
that went down over in Fen-on-Down that they’ve been looking for. I guess he’s been using these
the whole time.” The doe shook the metal tube. “Maybe letting Dad shoot him would have been a
mercy. He’s going to be sick for a long time as he tries to come down off these.”

Instead of trying to drag the Axis feline somewhere else Judy covered his still form with a blanket
and left him on the ground. If he had a fever, of which she suspected to be the case, staying in the
sunlight would help keep him warm. That and whoever came to get the prisoner could just as easily
pick him up from where he lay than if they put his still form somewhere else.

Nor did they have long to wait.

In a shorter amount of time than anticipated a staff car and truck appeared, the truck carrying a full
squad of infantry. A few of the soldiers made the connection of the Hopps’ farm and the ‘capture’ of
the fox Squadron Leader. There were a few jokes traded amongst the soldiers about the farm and its
apparent attraction to pilots, or perhaps one of the Hopps does in particular that was attracting the
attentions of aviators from both sides. The officers that directed the troops and medic that had arrived
for the enemy predator assured everyone that there was indeed a bounty that would be promptly
paid, and also promises to Judy that the pilot would be treated decently and according to the Articles
of War regarding the dispensation of prisoners.

Eventually life on the Hopps’ farm settled back into a state of semi-normalcy, though the rabbits, and
more than a few neighbors, tended to watch the skies a bit more closely from that point on.

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Hauptman Jan Johannson decided that Heaven looked like a hospital room and that angels were
hedgehogs as his condition was treated. Doctors said that he was severely malnourished and it would
take a while for him to replace the weight he’ lost. His arm ached terribly, but that was to be
expected from taking the brunt of a shotgun blast. It was odd as that last part still seemed like
something from a dream, the images sort of wispy and only half-real, a series of impressions, really,
viewed through smoke or fog…

The most ‘real’ thing to Jan was the headache that refused to depart, the pressure in his skull making
it feel as if his head would come apart at any moment. And the shakes that palsied his entire body.
All of this, he was told, was a result of detoxification from the pills. The doctors also said that due to
the number that he’d consumed just to function there might be lingering damage to his heart and
liver, but they’d know more once he was well on the mend.

Most of the period after being shot down was a blur when the cat could recall anything at all. There
were huge gaps in his recollections, entire periods that were just…blank. It was more than a little
disconcerting to the once-pilot that had always prided himself in being in control of his own fate.

Then the day came when Zootopian Air Corps officers arrived. Jan woke to find them standing over his bed, a little surprised to find that apart from the two foxes the highest ranking officer was a rather stern looking rabbit. They took seats around the bed, the introductions rather terse and perfunctory before the questions began. The first were, of course his name, rank and service number, all of which he answered. The next questions were a little less comfortable.

“You survived in the countryside for eight days?” the rabbit officer inquired as he looked at something on a clipboard before jerking his brown eyes up to regard the Axis prisoner.

“I honestly can’t say,” the cat admitted. “I…I think that sounds right, but my sense of time, you see…”

The two foxes shared a glance while the rabbit simply raised an eyebrow. “Yes. I know all about the amphetamines that you were living off of. They do have a tendency of scrambling one’s egg. A simple yes or no will suffice if this strikes you as being correct, though.”

Jan frowned. Had it been eight days? Trying to recall the amount of time from bailing out of his aircraft to…something about a barn… “I…yes. I think that is correct. I recall…miserable. I was cold and wet and very hungry. Then I found a barn and…”

The officers stared at the prisoner. “Go on,” the rabbit prompted.

“Two bunnies. Quite pretty. So adorable you could just eat them up!” Jan said with a smile before he realized what he’d just said. The expression faltered. “Please! I am not meaning that the way it sounds! So…so many things have changed. Little sayings have such terrible meanings now…” He shrunk in on himself and sighed tremulously as his eyes took on a haunted look. “So many…” he swallowed before reaching shakily for a glass of water and took a sip almost choking on the liquid before getting the glass back on the small table. “Jokes…sayings…so many things are different because of…because of what is happening…”

“Yes,” the rabbit said, his eyes a touch flatter than they’d been a moment before. “You were saying?” he pressed.

“Yes. The barn, the farm. I…I think it was there I was captured. Too exhausted to run…to fight. I wanted to get away…to not hurt the two bunnies. I think I fired my pistol. At the roof. To frighten them so I could escape.” Jan shook his head before clutching at it with his paws. “It is so hard to recall my memories.”

“Again, it’s understandable.” The rabbit made a notation on his clipboard. “And how were you shot down, if I may ask?”

The feline smiled. He could remember that. “A Spitfire. Truly a remarkable aircraft. I wish we had them, then this interview might be different.” He snorted softly. “Even our Oberstleutnant, our Wing Commandant, has told our Reichsmarshal that he wanted a squadron of Spitfires.” Jan nodded. “I will recall that airplane until the day I die. I believe they are part of the squadron called ‘Red Tails’. They use magic, I think. Their pilots are ferocious. Dedicated. I think it was an honor to finally lose to one of their number. They conduct themselves the way officers are supposed to, first and foremost as gentlemammals. Unfortunately they are as thick and tenacious as flies this season!” he added with a slight smile.

“Yes. Quite the testimony,” the rabbit replied. “Now, you harmed no civilians while you attempted evasion and escape?”
“No,” Jan answered as he shook his head. “I did try to steal a chicken, but I was seen and fled.”

“That matches one of the reports we have.” The rabbit made a final notation and stood. “Hauptman Johannson, I am to inform you that as per the Articles of War, you are now a prisoner of the Forces of Zootopia. As such you will be treated with the respect due your rank. As soon as the doctor has cleared you fit for travel you will be interred at a Prisoner of War camp for the duration. I am also to inform you that any attempts to escape, to carry on in an aggressive and or belligerent manner against Zootopia or its citizenry will void all assurances of a fair and proper treatment and you will be summarily executed. Do you agree to the terms that I’ve just informed you of?”

“I do agree, Group Captain,” Jan Johannson said. He watched as the rabbit and foxes stood before speaking again. “Group Captain? Do you think it would be considered treasonous if I said that I am glad that the war is over for me?”

The rabbit stopped and adjusted his brimmed hat before turning to regard the prisoner. “Not really. I just pray it’s over just as quickly for the rest of us as well.”

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Just a few short weeks later Hauptman Jan Johannson was delivered to POW camp 7. As he stepped out of the truck under his own power, actually having put on enough weight to satisfy the doctors, the cat looked at the place that would be his home for an uncertain future. Sturdy fences and barriers in triple layers surrounded what looked like quaint camping cabins from a summer camp the feline had attended in his youth. Laid out in symmetrical rows with small plots containing vegetable plants the camp could almost be taken for a resort were it not for the armed soldiers and multiple rows of barbed wire and machinegun festooned guard towers.

All things considered, it didn’t look to be all that bad a place to await the end of the war and the day where Jan might be allowed to go home. Just as he was to step through the gate, numerous guards keeping a wary eye on him, Jan stopped at a sound from overhead and looked up as a flight of fighters roared past, their back thirds decorated with the stylized fox’s tails, on the wings the Zootopian roundels with bold ‘Z’. He snapped to attention, his heels coming together as his arm whipped up, outstretched fingers a fraction of an inch from his eye as he rendered a salute to the pilots of the aircraft.

Yes. Jan Johannson, formerly Hauptman, might have been their enemy, but he was still an officer and a gentlemammal.

Chapter End Notes

And here we have the first collaborative chapter for this story by stevegallacci! It gives a rather solid perspective on the 'other side' of things. It should be noted that in Real World history, the Nazi war machine had a serious problem with the use of methamphetamines. In one of the final battles on the Eastern Front there was one unit that lost almost half its total strength to frostbite, the soldiers unable to tell that they were in danger due to being drugged on speed. Even Adolf Hitler himself was an addict to methamphetamines, his doctors prescribing those with myriad other drugs to their Fuhrer. It sort of explains the insanity, does it not?

That and there was a terrible debacle with recovering addicts in the post war years. Even when it came to their own, the Third Reich cared very little about the lives it destroyed.
Chapter 6

Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The light from her father’s private study was on causing Judy to tilt her head in confusion. It was well after two AM and for Stu Hopps to be up was a sure sign that something was direly wrong. Clutching the front of her simple flannel robe tighter at her throat, the bunny padded softly to the partially open door and knocked softly on the frame. “Dad?” she inquired in a hushed voice. “Are you all right?” Waiting for a few seconds on an answer that didn’t come, the doe went ahead and pushed the door open, her ears dropping along the back of her head. “Dad?”

Stu didn’t even look up as he sat at the small desk where he normally balanced the accounts for the farm, wrote checks and retreated to when he simply needed a few moments of quiet solitude. In front of him was a half empty bottle of whisky, an inexpensive glass tumbler before him with a small measure of the amber liquid, and the most heartrending, forlorn look in the buck’s bloodshot and bleary eyes. Judy went to her father’s side and placed a paw on his shoulder.

“Dad?”

Under his eyes the soft brown fur was matted and gummy, mute testament that the rabbit had been crying again, something he seemed to be doing that a great deal as of late. Almost as if the tender paw of his daughter was more than Stu could handle, a small sound came from deep in his throat as he buried his face in his paws and silently shook. Doing the only thing that she could think of, Judy simply knelt down and wrapped her arms around the rabbit that had always seemed so strong and dependable her entire life, trying to give back some of the comfort that her parents had always given her. She rested her cheek on her father’s shoulder, drinking in the smell of the buck, the scent of working in the fields and the resulting mix of musk, soil, the moisture from crushed plants…all of it told her the story of Stu Hopps, a farmer and fairly uncomplicated mammal that loved each and every one of his children.

“Oh, Daddy,” the bunny whispered as her own eyes began to fill. The encounter with the Axis pilot had been trying on all of them. “You did the right thing,” she whispered. “I know it was hard, but you did the right thing.”

Stu sobbed once before his arms slipped around his daughter. “I would have!” the buck husked. “I swear if I hadn’t been stopped I’d have spread his head all over the yard! But…but…” He sucked in a breath and rubbed at his face and nose with a kerchief. “At first I thought that thing was a monster…something to be killed.”

“What stopped you?” Judy asked, both of them still maintaining hushed tones, as if the subject had to be kept quiet, kept secret, as if what had happened was something shameful.

“I…couldn’t do it…” Stu said as tears continued to stream down his face, slicking the fur under his eyes and dropping onto the desk top. “That cat wasn’t a threat. If anything he was the most pathetic and wretched thing I’ve ever seen in all my years.” He sniffed and rubbed at his nose. “Killing him wouldn’t have done any good and it wouldn’t have helped your brother.” Stu lifted his head and looked at his child with a wan smile. “I miss Virgil so much I just can’t think straight sometimes.”

“I know, Dad. And you aren’t alone.”
The buck could only pat his daughter’s back, incapable of words at the moment.

“Finish that up and let’s get you to bed, old rabbit,” Judy told him with feeling.

Stu just shook his head. “Had enough. It’s not helping, all it’s doing is giving me a sour stomach.” He pushed the tumbler to Judy. “After the day you had it might do you some good to finish it off.”

Judy had never really had spirits and picked up the glass. The contents smelled interesting and she tried to toss it back the same as she’ seen her father and brothers do. And promptly had her breath stolen from her as it felt like liquid fire had just rolled across her tongue and down her throat. The effect was immediate, violent coughing and she threw a look of betrayal at her father until he pounded her on the back.

“For the love of carrots!” she finally sputtered. “Daddy! That’s vile!”

“It can be,” Stu said with a weak smile. “At least I’m positive that you never snuck into the liquor cabinet. Come on. We should both be in bed.” He put his arm around the doe and led her out of his study, turning off the desk lamp as he went, then paused at the intersection of the hallway, Judy’s room in one direction, his and Bonnie’s in another. “Judy, do me a favor.”

“Anything, Dad,” the bunny said, a small trill of nervousness running through her with her father’s tone and expression.

“You keep on doing what you’re doing. Be there for me and don’t let me lose myself. You be my star, bitty-bun.” The look in his eyes was pleading. He meant what he was asking and was actually afraid that he was losing himself.

“Oh, Daddy!” Judy exclaimed softly as she threw her arms around the old buck’s neck. “When I don’t know what to do I just ask myself what you’d want me to do!”

The admission melted to rabbit’s last reserves of composure and he sobbed as he held the doe tightly to him, taking comfort in her love and faith in him. “Thank you, bitty-bun. You might save your old dad from himself yet.”

Eventually they parted, Stu shuffling off, the last of his energy dissipating with every step and Judy keeping an eye on him to make sure he got to his room all right before turning to her own. No sooner had she shut her door and shucked her robe, hanging it from the bedpost, then her thoughts turned to Nick. Had he heard about the enemy pilot yet? Was it his squadron that had been responsible for bringing the lynx down? As she tugged her nightie down properly before climbing into her bed, the most important question she had was if the fox was thinking of her before shaking her head at the schoolkit silliness of such a thing.

Judy took a moment to pluck the latest letter that Nick had sent her from the little drawer in her nightstand that held all of his post. For some reason Judy had found that she wanted to talk more to Squadron Leader Wilde after their first encounter and sent a letter to him. She hadn’t expected a reply three days later and it was with a great deal of anticipation that she’d opened a letter addressed to her in neat pawwriting, the letters crisp and concise. The fox had said that he was surprised to find something in the post for him from the Hopps doe, but responded to the things she’d said, and answered some of the questions posed to him.

Over the few weeks since finding him hanging from the trees in his parachute, Judy had learned that he and the other foxes of the Red Tails had all been friends growing up in a place called Foxcroft in the United Vulpine Territories on the other side of the ocean. She also learned that he’d been in college striving for, of all things, a degree in art. That bit of news had caught the bunny quite
unaware. He also told that life in the UVT in general, and Foxcroft specifically, had been rather nice. While the city had been predominantly populated by foxes, there were plenty of other mammals there. It was one of the reasons that Nick and his cronies had volunteered for the Zootopia Air Corps. They didn’t want to think what would happen to friends and neighbors if the Axis won, and felt it was their moral obligation to help out in any way possible.

Eventually the letters became less formal, more open and with a certain amount of warmth and Judy now looked at the delivery of the daily mail with enthusiastic anticipation. Barbara had tried to wheedle the reason for her sister’s sudden kittish behavior with the letters she was receiving, but Judy remained closed-muzzle on the matter. There was no denying the smile that she wore more often than the frown and serious, pinched look that Judy was known for, and when she got a letter, normally waiting for the postal carrier at the end of the lane to the farm, she would scamper off to her room for almost an hour before reemerging with a noticeable little skip to her steps.

The last letter, though, caused Judy concern as she held it up as she lay in bed. The Squadron had lost one of their own, the young Jonny Barker, and Nick’s words seemed heavy and distinctly lackluster without the fox’s usual banter and anecdotes while the content was almost as formal as the first couple of letters that he’d had sent. It worried the bunny and she determined that after morning chores she’d do her best to go to the airfield to see the fox. Maybe a visit would cheer him up. Never mind that for some reason the thought of seeing Nick filled her with a sort of anxious delight that made her shiver slightly with the delectable feelings that ran through her.

A couple of crates of fresh fruits and vegetables might not be bad to take with her, either. After seeing the tinned rations that the pilots and soldiers at the field were eating, Judy was positive that some fresh produce would be more than appreciated. Her mind made up, Judy placed the sheet of paper to her nose and sniffed deeply, finding Nick’s scent on the letter, a heady, earthy musk that the bunny found she enjoyed immensely. With a smile tugging at her muzzle, she returned the letter to the drawer with all the others and tugged on the pull chain attached to her little lamp and pulled the blankets up over her as her head nestled into her pillow.

Then recent events, and the half glass of whiskey, caught up with her and she thought no more until her wind-up clock began ringing just a few short hours later.

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The day had dawned clear and Nick Wilde led his squadron into the patchwork blue and white sky as a proactive measure against Axis incursions. It was one of the few days as of late that the weather was perfect and reminded the fox why he’d learned to fly. There was a sort of peace in the cockpit and as he and his friends threaded their way through and between cotton puffball clouds. The world was green and vibrant beneath them, plots divided neatly into crops with thick, deep woods all about while the waters of the Zootopian Channel lay blue and enticing off the coast, it was easy to forget that there was a war on. Perhaps someday it would be over and all mammals could see the world the way he did, but for now Nick and the others had a job to do, and he shook his head vigorously to chase the fanciful thoughts from between his ears.

One last musing quashed what enjoyment of the moment and the sun streaming through the canopy to warm Nick’s fur; Jonny would have loved a day like this.

As soon as the thought flitted through his consciousness the fox felt his heart grow heavy and his shoulders sagged. The reaction wasn’t enough to change his flying, but Nick felt himself gulping for air as sorrow struck him hard in the gut and he tugged his mask off before batting at his eyes. He took a moment to collect himself, craning his head this way and that to scan the skies before touching the switch for the radio microphone that was strapped around his throat and forced a lightness into
his voice that he didn’t feel. “All right, boys. Nothing going on today. Let’s go back. First round’s on me.”

There were cries of acceptance at the announcement, cheers for the Squadron Leader, but Nick ignored them all. At the moment he wanted nothing more than to climb into a bottle of something potent and pull the cork in after him followed with maybe sleeping for a week solid. Then again, that wasn’t a bad thought. He was due leave, but the concept of essentially abandoning his boys and the Red Tails for any amount of time when anything could happen had kept him from acting on taking the long deserved break.

After a while the long dirt strips that marked Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome came into view and the squadron began a long orbit, the lowest in rank landing first, as per Nick Wilde’s orders, the Squadron Leader himself being the last to land, always. He was also always the first in the air, but then he felt it was only proper as the commanding officer of his unit of foxes. The first two planes set down without mishap and taxied to their ready positions, ground crew already starting to swarm the aircraft as Nick began another long circle of the field. The squadron set down in pairs, Nick being the last.

He lined up on the field of mottled reddish-brown dirt with crushed grass after glancing at the bright orange windsock that hung limp before running through a series of actions in meticulous order. First he dropped the main landing gear, extended the flaps and increased power from the engine to the propeller to compensate for the increase drag of the plane and worked with the greater wing surface so that the Spitfire would remain aloft at the slower velocity. Through it all Nick paid attention to gauges, the feel of the plane and altered the bite of the blades with nuanced adjustments to fuel feed. Just before his wheels touched the earth he tripped the catches and slid the canopy back, drinking in the smell of gas and oil along with the humid summer air. Within moments the fox pulled his plane up to the lead position on the ready line and cut the powerful Rolls Royce Merlin engine.

As soon as the blades of the propeller stopped, ground crew rushed forward, chocking the wheels and began the post flight maintenance of the plane as Nick climbed wearily from the cockpit. As soon as his feet were on the ground the fox tripped the release for the chute straps and slung it over his shoulder.

“Hey, Nick!” Finnick called, walking out from under the wing of the Spitfire next to the Squadron Leader’s, not even having to duck due to his short stature. “Group Cap’n wanted to see you soon’s you touched down. Ol’ rabbit’s in the O-club waitin’ on ya.”

“I’d like to dump this stuff first,” the red fox replied in a tired voice.

“Ya ain’t got time,” the small mechanic said as he worked the stub of his cigar around the sides of his muzzle and tugged on his cap, the brim curled up and grease stained. “He was bein’ serious, Nick. ‘Sides, you look like ya could use a drink’r two. G’on. I’ll take care of yer plane for ya.”

Nick let out a sigh and turned from the ready room, no action meaning no real reason for a debriefing, and headed for the small building that was officially the airfield’s officers’ club, though all that meant was that there were a few more bottle of higher end scotch and whiskey than the enlisted and noncommissioned officers’ establishments. The desert fox had been correct in that Nick felt as if he could use a drink.

No sooner had he slipped past the doorway into the gloom of the club, the air thick with the smell of booze and stale cigarette, cigar and pipe smoke as well as the grease from the fryer. Dropping his parachute bundle to the side of the door, Nick unzipped his flight jacket and pulled his cap off as his eyes found the Group Captain at the end of the bar, the black and grey rabbit holding a glass of dark beer in one paw, a cigarette in a thin holder in the other.
“Pint, Squadron Leader Wilde? Or would you prefer something a bit stronger?” Group Captain Faulkner asked, his voice precise with his educated Zootopian accent.

“A beer will be fine, Sir,” Nick replied as he took the stool next to the commander of Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome. “You wanted to see me, Sir?”

As Nick sat the buck slid from his seat and stepped around the bar, plucking a mug from the rack behind the polished counter and turned to one of the taps, angling the pour to reduce the amount of foam. “I’d like to discuss your leave status,” Faulkner told the pilot as he set the topped mug down. “Specifically, your refusal to take any.”

“With all due respect, Sir, I’m a volunteer and…”

“And assigned to my airfield, which puts you under my charge, Nicholas,” the rabbit said with a pointed look. He shook his head once and took a long draught from his glass. “Nick, you haven’t taken leave where all of your lads have at the very least enjoyed a fortnight away from this place,” he said without his normal stiffness. “You can’t continue to push yourself. I also know that you won’t listen to reason, and I’m sure it stems from that damned stubborn streak of yours. That’s why I’m ordering you to take leave. Effective immediately.” He pulled a small bronze coin, a replica of some ancient coin that had a hole drilled through it with a pair of keys attached by a small chain. “Take my car. Go to Zooptopia for a bit. Go anywhere…just as long as you get away from here for a while.”

“But, Sir…the squadron…”

“Will be here when you get back,” The Group Captain said with a soft, understanding expression. He plucked at the wings that were embroidered on his uniform jacket. “You realize you have to earn these, they don’t just pass them out, yes?”

Nick said nothing, his only response was to lean forward onto the bar and stare at his yet untouched beer.

“Nick, you need this. You need to do this, or I won’t have any choice but to declare you unfit to fly.” The rabbit made a moue as he fully turned to regard the fox. “Even if you decide to just take a week, I’ll be satisfied.”

Nick finally nodded. “I…I’ll take a week at least,” he said quietly.

“Good lad,” the Group Captain said in relief, clapping the fox on the shoulder. “I was serious about taking my car, though. I don’t get to drive her as often as I’d like. A good drive would do her a world of good.” Faulkner finished his beer with a sigh of appreciation and slid from his stool. “Now. Why don’t you go to your quarters and pack a few things and consider where to go. I’m sure something appealing will come to you.” Without waiting for a reply the rabbit resettled his officer’s hat on his head after brushing his ears back and departed, leaving the fox alone.

Nick continued to stare at his beer before lifting the mug and draining it in a couple of hefty swallows and stood before heading for the door. He hardly paused to grab his chute pack as he yanked the door open and walked to his personal quarters. Perhaps Group Captain Faulkner was right in that Nick needed a break from it all. Then again, to threaten his flight status was a bit of a low blow. As he neared his accommodations, Nick figured that he could trade a few days in exchange for keeping his wings. Maybe he could find a nice place to crawl into that bottle he’d been contemplating.

The red fox had most of his gear stored and hung up before he noticed the figure sitting on the edge of his cot and blinked several times, unsure if he was actually seeing what he thought he was or if he
needed leave more than he realized. “Judy? Am I seeing things or is that really you?”

The bunny stood up, the cot low enough so that she could sit with her feet still on the floorboards, a sort of embarrassed smile on her dainty muzzle. “Um, the…your Group Captain told me to wait here for you,” she told him.

“Okay That sounds like something that Faulkner would do,” Nick agreed as he unfastened the shoulder harness with his Webly revolver secured in the leather holster. “But what are you doing here?”

“Oh,” Judy said with a grin. “I brought some vegetables and blueberries from the farm for everyone here. I thought it would be a nice change from that tinned stuff all of you were eating.” She made a face of disgust. “I really don’t know how anyone can call that food.”

“How did you get here?”

“The train. It stops in Bunnyburrow, you know. I caught it there…you know, they were really helpful about unloading the truck…and took it to Hamsterdom Station then caught a truck here. Group Captain Faulkner seemed happy to see me again. He actually came to the farm when we found that pilot hiding in our barn and…”

Judy knew that she was babbling a bit, her nerves suddenly getting the best of her, especially now that she was once again in the presence of the fox that had turned her world upside down. If anything her brothers and sisters, especially Barbara, would have laughed at the normally tough-as-nails bunny they always knew for acting like a tomboy now behaving like a flustered schoolgirl. Then Nick was right in front of her and she found herself looking up into his incredibly green eyes. When he smiled she felt a slight tremble run through her knees as her legs went a little weak and couldn’t fathom why.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing that I not only have leave, but the use of a car. It’ll make getting you home a lot easier.”

He stepped past the doe and began to finish divesting himself of his flight uniform, unaware of the momentary panic on Judy’s face as she turned to regard him with something on the edge of panic. She didn’t want to go home! She’d had to talk fast and give away some of the farm goods she’d gathered to get to the airfield!

“Let’s go somewhere!” the bunny blurted as she turned around, trying to convince the fox not to drop her back off at her parents’ farm. “Y-you and me. W-we can go somewhere nice and you can tell me about where you come from…F-Foxcroft! And why you wanted to study art and-”

The bunny had been completely oblivious to the fact Nick had been disrobing in front of her and it was only when the fox stepped in front of her and put his paws on her shoulders that she realized he was clad only in a pair of boxer shorts that barely met the requirements of modesty and felt her ears heating in a blush that swept over her cheeks beneath her fur and all the way down her throat and front. Despite her realization she could feel her tail twitching excitedly as her nose wriggled furiously.

“Judy,” Nick began in a firm tone. “Do your parents even know where you’re at?”

The doe felt her ears grow even hotter, though it was shame this time and …whatever the other blush was from. “Um…you see…my sister…”

“Yes or no, Carrots. Do they know where you’re at?” Nick’s eyebrow went up. “Better yet, do they
know who you’re with?” The look in her eyes was all the answer that the fox needed and he sighed in exasperation. “This is just peachy, Judy. You’re old buck already wants to shoot me and now you’re going to give him a reason to go on a fox hunt.” Nick turned and tossed the towel that he’d used to dry off the areas that he’d just washed without indulging in a full shower in a show of irritation. “Well, shit. Today’s just shaping up beautifully.”

“It’s not like that!” Judy said as she darted to where Nick leaned on the dresser that held the basin of his wash water. “I…I’m nineteen, almost twenty. I…I want t-to volunteer!” She watched as the fox turned to look at her with skepticism clear on his vulpine face. “Really! M-my sister…Barbara…she…she’s going to give them the letter telling them w-what I’m doing tonight!”

As she spoke, Judy had closed the distance and found her eyes skimming down the fox’s bare front until she found the flaw in his creamy yellow torso fur, her fingers parting the soft coat almost of their own volition, tracing the scar that he’d gotten from shrapnel when he’d been shot down over her family’s farm. She felt her eyes starting to sting slightly as she touched the ridge of scar tissue, able to tell from touch where the sutures had been, the wound itself having been ragged instead of a clean cut.

“How can I not volunteer when you and my brother and so many others are risking your lives? I…I see so many in Bunnyburrow that should be helping and they’re doing nothing! I don’t want to be like them!” Judy sucked in a shuddering breath. “And Jonny…I-I liked him. He was sweet and just…”

“Don’t,” Nick husked, his eyes closing against the pang at hearing the pilot’s name.

The bunny nodded vigorously. “But that’s just it, don’t you see? How can I stay on the farm when you and the others are willing to fight and I live here?”

“Do you even know what you’re asking, Judy?”

She nodded. “I do. Remember, I’ve seen the enemy. And so did little Belle. Maybe…maybe if I help, and others join in, we can end this all sooner. But I’m going to help, no matter what.” Judy reached into the pocket of her dungarees and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “And I’ve got two weeks before I have to report. Look. Flight school. I’m going to be an Angel.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I’m not sure how it was in England during WWII, though I'm fairly sure Tom1380 could get some good stories for us, but in the US at the outbreak of war there were stories of guys that were listed as 4-F, or unfit to serve, that actually committed suicide. I don’t think we'll ever see anything like that again.

I believe it's different, though, when it's your home being threatened. But these are things to discuss in places other than here, preferably with a bon fire and good beer at hand.

Oh! And I forgot to mention, because it wasn't easy to figure out how to work it in, but GC Faulkner's car is a 1936 MG T Series Midget TA. It was an open two-seater with a 1292-cc four cylinder engine that produced a whopping 10 HP! Maybe not the fastest of cars available, but they were right classy looking!!!
Chapter 7

Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The process to set Flight Officer Pawson in command was fairly simple and before too long Nick had a garment bag and small suitcase with necessities packed and loaded into Group Captain Faulkner’s car and began the leisurely drive to Zootopia. It wasn’t until arriving in the city and heading to the rather lush if dated district that sat on the banks of the Mammalia River. The inn that Nick wanted was known for being far more accepting of predators than many other such establishments and according to Alex and Jamie Morgan, two of the fox’s ace pilots, numerous activities that one could lose themselves in.

The drive through Zootopia itself was rather sedate, many mammals pausing as Nick and Judy rolled down the streets, a few eying the fox with suspicion despite his grey Zootopian Air Corps uniform and cap. “I don’t think they believe that I’m on their side,” the fox said lightly.

“Well, I don’t think it’s very fair!” Judy groused as she crossed her arms across her chest and frowned. “You’re risking your tail.” She saw a large moose who was all but sneering at the fox behind the wheel, his clothing indicating that he was either a moderately successful business mammal or some other mid-level company functionary. “What are you looking at? He’s serving, what are you doing?” the bunny asked loud enough for several pedestrians to look at the doe for her outburst.

The moose gave the odd pair a shocked look before lowering his head and walking along a little faster.

“Geez, Carrots,” Nick commented with a chuckle. “I didn’t bring you here to pick a fight with folk.”

“It’s not right!” the bunny protested with a truculent pout. “Your serving, my brother served…look at how many here are just going around as if nothing’s happening!”

“And that’s something that getting pissed about isn’t going to help,” the fox informed her. “To be honest, I wouldn’t mind if they really could just go about their lives. That’s going to change soon enough and no one will be able to ignore it.” Nick saw something and began to pull the car over before pulling to a complete stop. “Right now, though, there’s a matter that’s more pressing that we need to take care of.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

Nick gave his passenger a smarmy grin and pointed to the place that he’d pulled over at. “This place and you. I noticed a distinct lack of luggage when we departed, and I can’t take you to some of the places that I’d like to go while we’re in the city if you’re wearing dungarees and flannel shirts. That and I have a feeling if you don’t have something to change into you’re going to get a little fragrant.” He held his paws up in a placating gesture. “Don’t get me wrong. There’s something I find appealing about ‘eau de farm girl,’” the last was added with an endearing expression.

Unfortunately the return look that Judy gave was anything but light as she frowned while her ears drooped in chagrin. “I…I don’t have a lot of money…”

The bunny was forced to look up at the fox when he placed a gentle finger under her chin and lifted her head up, a warm expression in his eyes as his face continued to beam at her but lost the sharp,
joking twist to it. “My treat, Judy. Consider it a pre-graduation from flight school gift and celebration.”

“But I haven’t even reported in, yet,” she pointed out. “I don’t even know if I’ll pass.”

“You’ll pass,” Nick told her with confidence.

“How do you know?”

Nick’s eyes grew slightly more serious and he leaned a little to the left, closer to the bunny with his arm draped on his seat back. “Because I know you. You don’t back down from anything, do you? No matter what you charge on. And if you’re scared it just makes you that much more determined to push through and rise to the situation.”

“How do you know that?” Judy persisted, her expression one of surprise and slight irritation, as if the fox might have been checking up on her.

“How did we meet?” Nick inquired with a laugh. “Big bad predator hanging from a tree, itty bitty bunny finds him and takes him captive? You’re cute, fluff, but I’ve seen you in action. You don’t know the meaning of quit. That’s how I know you’re right; you’re going to be an Angel.”

A sort of warmth suffused Judy’s chest and spread to the rest of her as her ears perked up and a smile slowly spread across her short, dainty muzzle. “How is it you’re the first person that thinks I can do this?”

“Like I said, Carrots. I’ve seen you in action.” Nick opened the door and got out of the car, stepping around to open the passenger side for the bunny. “Although I’d love to know why you guys can’t put the driver’s side on the correct side. This is completely bass-ackwards.”

Judy snorted as she stepped out. “Oh? You mean you don’t like the steering wheel being on the right side?” she asked with a grin.

“Ha-ha,” the fox deadpanned. “C’mon. Let’s go get you some new duds, carrot farmer,” he told her as he offered his elbow. “I suddenly feel a very odd urge to go shopping.”

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It took more time to shop than Judy had anticipated. Just when the bunny thought she had enough in the way of clothes and personal items, Nick would drag her to another store, moving with more haste than she expected with the argument that places would be closing soon. Then in a boutique that specialized in dresses and outfits that Judy had only glimpsed in the occasional fashion magazine or movie, the fox had let her pick two outfits before having the salesgirl get the doe into a couple of other choices of his. And for what seemed the hundredth time that evening Nick paid for everything, making Judy feel terrible about taking advantage of the fox’s generosity once more.

For the doe that had never been out of Bunnyburrow the rest of the afternoon and evening were a whirlwind with so much to see and do that she couldn’t recall very many details. Dinner was enjoyed at a swanky club that had a live band that played soft jazz and swing with food that was indescribable in taste and several glasses of wine had Judy feeling a bit lightheaded. Then they were back in the car as night deepened and didn’t stop again until the fox pulled up in front of an inn in the river district of Zootopia.

The inn, Bella Noche, was one of many older buildings that lined the boulevard and was three stories and covered in white stucco. Large arched doorways enabled the patio area to be both outside but with plenty of protection from inclement weather. From the second floor veranda hung thick drapes
of ivy giving the place a rustic feel while lamps with colored glass panes added to the already romantic atmosphere. Judy had no choice but to allow Nick to help her from the car as the wine with dinner was making her extremely giddy and the bunny was even fighting off a case of the giggles.

“That’s it, Carrots,” the fox said as he deposited the doe in a tall wingback chair inside the inn’s lobby. “No more for you.”

“I feel fine!” Judy replied with a grin, though her eyes had a hard time focusing on Nick, though she was fairly certain he was grinning at her. It might have been a little easier to tell if there weren’t two of him.

“Yes. I’m sure you do feel fine. Just do me a favor and sit tight while I go see about our rooms, okay?” Nick raised an eyebrow as the bunny nodded, even that little action causing her to sway as she fell back against the chair’s padding before stepping to the desk.

Judy watched the fox go, enjoying the way his tail was flicking side-to-side with each step. That was completely unfair. Fox tails were quite attractive. How was it that the powers that be let foxes have such beautiful, fluffy tails and rabbits only got little puffs that barely seemed worth mentioning? It was completely not fair. The bunny was pulled from her ruminations on the finer points of vulpine caudal appendages to realize that the fox attached to the fascinating bit of anatomy was in a rather heated conversation with the mammal behind the counter…she thought it was a hedgehog, but Judy couldn’t be sure as the room was tilting at a very odd angle. Next she knew Nick was coming back.

Oddly enough, watching him approach was just as wonderful as watching him walk away had been. How curious.

“There’s been a SNAFU, Carrots,” Nick began. “I reserved two rooms, but they gave us the Regent’s Suite instead.”

“Iss tha’ bad?” the inebriated bunny asked with a grin. “Sounds like something contagious,” Judy slurred.

“It means there’s only one bed and all of the other hotels and such in the area are full with mammals relocating from further into the city.”

“So? I don’ take up mush room…mushroom? Do they have mushrooms?” the unfocused lagomorph inquired blearily. “I like mushrooms!”

“I’m sure you do,” Nick chuckled. “Well…nuts. I’m sure there’s a couch I can use…” he muttered. “Stay here. Don’t move.”

“Mnmm-hhmm!” the doe agreed with a grinning nod that made the world tilt even more crazily than it had been. Before she knew it the bunny was dozing off, feeling warm and pleasantly numb when something poked her shoulder. “Mmmm…lea’ me ‘lone…” Judy said with a frown. The chair was far too comfortable for her to even contemplate moving but before she could snuggle down into the cushion a pair of arms scooped her up. Whoever carried her smelled different, but it wasn’t an unpleasant smell and there was the added benefit of nice, thick fur that felt so incredibly good and with a contented sigh she nestled into that. “Ooooo…fuzzy blankies…” she cooed drowsily. If she could stay there until morning that would be just fine with her. Judy curled tighter into that warmth as her besotted mind continued dwelling on fox tails and such as she began to breathe softly in alcohol induced slumber.
A soft moan of misery brought Nick out of a deep, dreamless sleep, the fox wondering where he was for a moment before recalling the previous day and evening in a moment. Sitting up and rubbing at a slightly stiff neck and shoulder he looked to the large bed that held a single small occupant and blinked before kicking off the sheet that he’d found in a closet and swung his legs to the carpeted floor and shambled across the room. As he moved his paw snagged the receiver for the phone and he lifted it up, the front desk answering immediately.

“Could you send up a double order of coffee, toast and scones, fruit and a pot of tea?” Nick inquired, listening to the answer before nodding. “Yes. Squadron Leader Wild. Yes. Thank you.” With the order placed he looked down at the bunny who was in the middle of the bed and frowning, her eyes closed before Judy pulled a pillow over her face. “A little too much last night?” he asked with a particularly smug expression.

Judy made a sort of croaking sound and worked on getting her voice to work. “I’m never going to drink again…” she muttered darkly through the pillow.

“Uh-huh. Don’t believe you. Maybe next time you should listen to me and not order a third bottle.” As the bunny groaned again Nick walked back to the couch and plucked one of the inn’s robes from the arm rest and slipped it on. Greeting room service in his boxers and undershirt would be highly inappropriate, not to mention he didn’t feel like damaging the delicate sensibilities of the bunny that was enjoying her hangover any more than they already were. “I have coffee and tea coming up with breakfast. After that you should feel better.”

“Uuuuunghhh…do you have to smug so loudly?” Judy mumbled as she rolled over and burrowed further into the pillows while hauling the covers up over her. Then the blanket began to flick out in different spots several times before a very wretched looking bunny poked her head out of her warm refuge, horrendously bloodshot amethyst eyes squinting at Nick accusatorily. “Where are my clothes? How did I get into…this?!” she croaked with a raspy, panicked voice.

“Oh. Well, I put you in it. What you had on was nice, but it wouldn’t have been very comfortable to sleep in, would it?” the fox told her with a perfectly neutral expression. “That isn’t comfortable?”

Judy let the covers fall away to look at the satin nightgown she was in before pulling her ears over her face. “You undressed me while I was drunk?!” she screamed before clutching her head in both paws. “ow-ow-ow-ow…”

“Yeah. Hangovers and loud voices don’t mix well, Carrots. But it’s okay, I didn’t look while I was getting you changed,” Nick said with a grin.

“That’s any better?” the bunny wailed. “Instead of looking you had your paws all over me? You…you masher!”

“No. In point of fact I didn’t. I had one of the maids take care of you. I am an officer, remember. I might be mouthy and obnoxious, but I don’t take advantage of girls that are passed out, thank you,” Nick told her with an earnest expression.

“You’re not just saying that?” Judy asked as she parted her ears just enough to peek an eye out. The fox held up a paw. “I swear on my grammie’s grave I didn’t lay a paw on you except to carry you up here.”

“Oh,” Judy responded in a small voice before looking at the bed. “Um…where did you sleep?”

“On the couch,” Nick told her as he hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “It’s not bad for the sitting,
but it’s hell on the sleeping.” He stretched a little before wincing. “Look, you mind if I take a shower? Breakfast should be here shortly but I want to see if the hot water will take the kinks out. Just sign for everything when it gets here, all right?”

“Hold on before you go in there,” Judy said as she slid out from the bed, realizing as soon as she had her feet on the carpet that the nightgown was actually far more modest than what she normally wore to sleep in. “I need to…um…you know…”

The fox tilted his head before laughing softly. “Carrots? You have your own bathroom over there,” he said pointing to a separate bath for ladies. “This is a high class establishment and wouldn’t be so crude as to have us both use the same bathroom.”

Sometimes it was difficult for Judy to know when the fox was being serious or joking, though her hangover wasn’t helping in the slightest. She did notice that the items he’d bought for her the previous day were already in the room and took a moment to get her fur from looking so roughshod, smoothing down the tufts that stuck out from her cheeks and shoulders with a small brush after taking care of necessities. In a slightly better mood, the bunny returned to the main portion of the suite, her ears twisting to catch the sound of running water from Nick’s bathroom. She was pulled from the sound of water splashing, wondering how the shower would feel as all she’d had back on the farm was a wash tub where the only way to get hot water was to boil it in a kettle before bathing. Then a knock on the door pulled her attention away from idle musings.

Judy signed the receipt as Nick had requested, penning it a tip amount of a pound while the steward pushed the cart to the small table that sat near the balcony doors and accepted the slip of paper and his pen before withdrawing. The first carafe turned out to be coffee but the smell from the tea pot was far more interesting, the hint of jasmine coming from the porcelain container was just too enticing. She actually made it to a second cup sweetened with sugar and was contemplating a scone when Nick emerged from a cloud of steam and looking far too awake and happy the bunny considering her state.

“You’ll definitely want to eat something, then a shower might be a good idea for you as well,” the fox said as he sat down, his paw already reaching for the coffee.

“Did I really drink that much last night?” Judy asked softly.

“Yup.”

“Did I behave terribly?” she asked in an even smaller voice.

“Not too bad. You giggled a lot and started to fall asleep in the lobby.”

“But…no…you know?”

Nick grinned. “Carrots, you didn’t do anything bad.”

The relief in the bunny’s expression was clearly evident. Judy recalled how some of her brothers acted one night after sneaking a bottle of their father’s liquor and had been a little worried that she might have behaved in an unseemly manner. She told the fox about that smiling when he chuckled at the tale.

“Some mammals are like that. They have something like a complete personality switch when they get boozed up. Speaking of which, you might want to be a little more careful from now on.” He slathered jam onto a scone and passed it over to the doe with a few grapes and strawberries also on the little plate. “You don’t have to drink if you don’t want to, and as you found out this morning, the
after effects aren’t always fun. Don’t be afraid to say no. There are some out there that would have no problem taking advantage of you if you got all drunked up.”

“And you didn’t put me in this?” she asked and plucked at the nightgown.

“I told you I didn’t. I know better than to tempt myself.”

Judy gave the fox a hard look over the brim of her teacup. “Why do you keep saying things like that?” she asked. “In fact, when I first found you in that tree you seemed to go out of your way to be…um…to be…”

“To be what?”

Judy’s brow furrowed as she set her cup down and worked her mouth around before speaking in a harsh whisper.”Well, to be an asshole!”

While it was amusing that the doe had a hard time using foul language, yet more evidence of her upbringing on a farm, Nick let his discomfort show. “Yeah. I guess I was. And I still can be at times. It’s…I guess it’s how I hide the fear.”

Some of the harshness vanished from the bunny’s expression. “Fear? You?” She picked up the scone and nibbled a little. “I didn’t think you were afraid of anything.” Judy’s expression grew wry and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Even little bunnies pointing pitchforks and guns at you!”

The fox shook his head. “Not fear for me. Fear for my guys. Every time I get in the cockpit. Hell. All of us are afraid. You won’t see it, though. We bury it. Hide it. Push it down and cover it with bravado and boasting and drinking and carrying on. But it's there. It's always there.” For a brief moment a strange look flitted through his emerald eyes that Judy caught before it vanished. “I’m tired of writing letters home to tell my friends’ parents that their boy is dead. Oh, they get the standard platitudes, ‘your son died a hero for a great cause,’…that’s such a load of shit.”

Judy put her scone down and leaned forward. Despite treating her to time in the city, dinner and hotel rooms and clothes, this was the first real glimpse into the fox that she had, save the little bits in his letters and she was listening intently.

“All of us…we knew that we could try and sit this war out. An ocean away…but it would find us sooner or later. No one’s going to get out of this one untouched. Not like the first war. And hiding from it or ignoring it won’t help. It’s…it’s like it’s a living thing, this war…and it’s hungry and all the lives in all the world won’t satisfy it.”

The bunny was a little shocked at the faraway look in the fox’s eyes as he spoke, his voice getting softer, thicker. She was tempted to reach out to touch him, but something stayed her paw, as if to move or even breathe too hard would shatter the moment.

“Too many letters, Carrots,” Nick whispered. “Too many times there wasn’t even enough of my friends to send home for a funeral. There was Timmy Lopes. He was the first. Made an intercept over the Channel. He went down with his plane. Sank before we could even radio it in for rescue boats. Lex burned up a couple days later. Bf 109 ripped his plane apart and tracers ignited the petrol onboard. Henny…”

Nick kept rattling off names, how his friends died, all the while his expression grew more distant, more pained. When he finally reached the last, the fur under his eyes darkened as tears silently slid from his eyes.

“When Jonny…” Nick whispered, the tears coming harder now. “I promised my aunt I’d watch out
“for him…”

Judy’s paws went to her muzzle. “Nick,” she said softly. “I… I didn’t know… your cousin…” She watched as the fox nodded slowly before folding his arms and hiding his face, his shoulders shaking in hushed sobs. It was then that she went to him, her arms wrapping around his shoulders as he rested her head against his. After a few moments she found herself stroking the fur between his ears and down his neck, sharing his grief as much as she could. “I liked him. He was sweet and kind.”

Nick lifted his head after several more minutes of grieving, his tears finally slowing. “He was a good kit. Always laughing and smiling. Too gentle for this mess. But he insisted on coming with us when the rest of the squadron volunteered. There was no way we were going to leave him behind, no sir.” He brushed the tears away. “Mother of foxes, he used to make us laugh! He was in his last year of high school when the rest of us decided to volunteer for the ZAC. So he busted our chops to let him come along, and I mean he was relentless!

“I was in class at the university working on modernist artists when this roar filled the hallways and the next thing I know Jonny rode his little motorcycle into the classroom, his smile splitting his muzzle from ear to ear as he held up his diploma and doctor’s clearance to ship out with us and told me there was no way I could tell him no anymore! My professor liked to have a heart attack, I thought that old fox was going to drop right there when Jonny goosed the bike and spun the back around leaving a four inch wide rubber smear on the floor before gunning the engine and taking off in a cloud of smoke.

“It was a good thing he got out when he did ’cause we could already hear the sirens for the cops coming. The dean of the university didn’t take kindly to young reprobates riding motorcycles in his school at all.” He sobered up as his smile faded a little. “This is going to crush Emily…”

“Who’s Emily?” Judy asked, her arms still around the fox.

“Oh…the bunny that was dancing with him that night you took me back to the airfield. She really was sweet on Jonny. He used to tease her saying she was ‘Barker Mad’. She really did like him…”

It was only then that Nick seemed to realize that he had a bunny of his own holding onto him, trying to do what she could to alleviate his sadness and after a fraction of a moment spent regarding the possible ramifications, placed a kiss between her ears.

“Thanks, Carrots.”

“For… for what?” Judy asked, her ears turning dark pink as she jerked back a little but didn’t fully retreat.

“Letting me get that out.” He watched with a smile, warm and genuine as the bunny tried to play it off, the blush spreading far enough so that her nose also turned a darker shade before he slipped an arm around her and pulled her close, relishing the warmth that radiated from the bunny, feeling her stiffen for just a second before relaxing into the embrace, nuzzling his neck and face without really thinking about it. “Okay. Finish your breakfast and go get cleaned up. We have something to do today.”

“What… what’s that?” the bunny inquired as she reluctantly let go of the fox and made her way back to her chair, her steps just as unsteady as they’d been the previous night after drinking too much, though alcohol had nothing to do with her present giddy state.

“You’re going to flight school. I’m going to make sure that you go in there with as much knowledge as I can give you without actually taking you up.”
The shower was unbelievable and Judy reveled in the cascade of continuous hot water that came out of the oddly shaped spigot. She’d heard that one or two of the more prosperous families in Bunnyburrow had such things, but there had been no way for her to really understand what a luxury it was. Then there was the seemingly endless supply of hot water itself. By the time she was done the bunny was thoroughly waterlogged with her paw and foot pads wrinkling like prunes and grinning broadly. “That was fabulous!” she exclaimed to Nick as she finally exited the separate bathroom, wrapped in a thick robe of her own, though it was so long that the hem dragged on the floor as she walked and the doe almost felt like a kit playing dress-up in her mother’s clothes.

“There are a few benefits to city life,” the fox told her with a smile. He’d taken the opportunity to get dressed as Judy cleaned up and was looking rather sharp in uniform with a crisp white shirt and tie, his flight wings almost glowing against the slate blue-grey jacket.

“Would one of those be the chance to walk around with a handsome pilot?” the bunny inquired with a smile as she regarded the fox with a lowered head, openly gazing at Nick through her eyelashes.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say handsome,” Nick retorted as he ran a finger around his collar, the look that he was getting causing the room to feel rather warm all of a sudden. “I will make the guess that you feel better than what you did when you woke up?”

“Definitely. I don’t know what’ll happen, but after the war I plan on having a shower in my house. Even if I have to learn plumbing to make it happen. That was absolutely divine!”

“You country bunnies and your quaint ways,” Nick told her teasingly. “Oh. The packages from last night came so take your time picking out something to wear, but not too long.”

Judy turned and looked at the pile of bags and boxes that she’d accumulated, most of the outfits and clothes Nick’s idea anyway. She’d have been happy with a couple of blouses and simple ladies chinos but the fox had different thoughts regarding her wardrobe. In the end she settled on a smart but fairly casual pantsuit in light cream with open jacket and matching wide brimmed fedora with a swatch of lace mesh tied into the wide hatband. Nick seemed to like the outfit, insisting that she get it despite the twenty dollar price tag, and smiled with warmth at the fox’s appraising eye when she stepped out of her bathroom wearing it. The only change he made was to readjust the hat so that it sat at a saucy angle.

“Hmm,” Nick intoned as he tilted his head. “I don’t think I can take you out looking like that.”

“What? Why not? Is something wrong?” Judy asked as she tried look herself over by turning left and right in self inspection.

“Oh, yeah. Something’s wrong all right. You’re too pretty. I’ll have to fight off half the city to keep them from trying to steal you away.”

It took a moment for what he said to sink in and Judy realized her blush was back, unaccustomed to hearing any sort of flattery save the clumsy attempts of different bucks back in Bunnyburrow to get her to accompany them to the hayloft or behind a barn for little pinch and tickle. “Stop saying things like that,” she protested weakly.

“It’s true. I guess there’s no help for it, though. Lovely doe out and about in the city…I just know I’m going to get into a fight,” he commented as he held out his arm for the bunny, though the smile on his face was quite warm and pleasantly happy.
They had lunch at a little café, but for the most part their shopping foray consisted of a few different toy stores before they went back to the inn. Nick had bought several toy airplanes, dowel rods, string and tape, and a notebook with a few pencils. Once they were back in their suite with a fresh pot of coffee and another of tea, the fox began teaching her about aircraft and flying using the toys and drawn diagrams in the notebook. He instructed her on the basics of pitch, yaw and roll, the lifting mechanics of wings, and the different parts of planes.

They had dinner delivered via room service so the lessons could continue. Then Judy convinced him to tell her about some of the engagements he’d been in, his descriptions accompanied by two of the toy planes that he’d attached sections of the dowel rods to.

“So there I am, on his twelve O’clock, pretty as you please, and coming out of the sun. This was before the Axis really started pushing things and all of us were hoping that the war would end before it really got started. Then he lined up on Jamie, one of the Morgan twins, and I didn’t really have a choice at that point.”

Judy could almost see the story unfolding as if she’d been there. “Did you get him?”

“Yeah,” the fox said tiredly. “I did. Second plane I shot down that day. Those Messerschmitt’s are tough planes, though. Took a lot to knock him down. That was also my fifth kill. I officially became an ace that day.”

“You don’t like this, do you? The war I mean?”

Nick shook his head. “What sane mammal does? It’s such a waste, but I can’t walk away. The Axis has to be stopped. After prey are subjugated then they’ll turn on the predators that didn’t go along with them. Foxcroft and places like that? They won’t even hesitate to bomb my home flat.”

Judy poured the last of the coffee into his cup then refilled her own with tea. “So what would you do instead? I know you were studying art, but I don’t really see you doing that for a living.”

The fox shrugged. “Don’t know. I guess I’d find something to keep me flying. I love being up in the clouds, looking at the world below. I figure after all of this is over that air races will be more popular than ever, and all the advances in aircraft design mean there’ll be a need for test pilots. I guess I’ll think about it more when the war ends. Making plans now seems…wrong.”

Judy nodded. She had thoughts of her own more than once that even if the war ended the world could never go back to being quite what it had been before. That and following in the footsteps of her mother, being some homebound bunny dropping a litter of kits every three months held absolutely no appeal. Then again, seeing Zootopia, she wondered what else there was out in the world to see. That thought drew her gaze outside to the city that was just starting to come to light with the sun dipping below the horizon when she was reminded of another question.

“Nick? What are those balloons for? The big ones all over the city?”

“Ah,” the fox said as he lifted his cup in gratitude for the refill. “Those are barrage balloons. They make bombers fly higher where it’s easier for antiaircraft batteries to target them. A bomber can get tangled up in the cables and some of them have explosives to take down low flying planes. The problem is that they really aren’t much defense against a serious bombing run. The planes just go higher. The drops are less accurate, though.”

They sat in silence for a few before the bunny’s ears perked up. “Oh! I forgot I had the desk send up
something for us!"

Nick gave Judy a quizzical look. "Should I be worried?" he asked with a half smile.

"Maybe a little," the doe replied as she darted to one of the closets and pulled out a brown package then ripped the top off. "You said something about this on the way here, and I figured you deserve it for everything you’ve done." She knew that the fox’s eyes were on her as she grabbed two glasses from the bar and returned to the little table, putting her burden down before removing the rest of the packaging to reveal a bottle with peeling label and no small amount of dust. "You said you liked a good scotch, so I found this!"

The smile fell from Nick’s muzzle. "Why, Miss Hopps. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were trying to get me tipsy so you could take advantage of me."

Her answering grin was far too smug. "Maybe," she admitted shyly. "Or maybe I want to know why everybody likes this so much. So you are going to teach me how to drink this stuff."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Nick asked, his expression turning to one of concern. "I mean, you were pretty well done in last night after a few glasses of wine. This is a bit more potent."

"Okay. Three drinks, then," Judy persisted. She began to tap her foot rapidly when Nick continued to stare at her. "Seriously. Just three and we’ll see how I do."

"How about two?"

"Three," the bunny replied in a firm tone.

The fox sighed through his nose. "Okay. You’re a big bunny. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you," he told her placing the shot glasses closer.

Judy cracked the top and poured equal measures in both before setting the bottle aside and passed one to her companion. "So, how do I do this?"

The fox shrugged. "Some mammals toss it back in one gulp," he told her, watching in horror as the bunny did just that then laughed at her face and the coughing fit that took her. He stood so it would be easier to pound lightly on her back to help Judy get her breath back. "You didn’t let me finish," he admonished her good naturedly. "I tend to be one of those that likes to sip it, to relish the flavor and the age. A proper scotch should be old enough to drink itself, by the way."

"Oh…Rabbits' Messiah…!" Judy choked out, her eyes alternating between squinting in pain and going wide in despair. "You like this stuff?!"

"Absolutely. But you have to drink it properly. Now," he continued resuming his seat. "I like sipping. Get a little muzzleful, roll it around and swallow slowly."

Unheeding of what had just happened, Judy poured another measure and followed Nick’s example, her face scrunching up until she swallowed. "Bleeeeaaghhhh! Nick! That’s even worse!"

"Yeah," he said with a sly grin. "It can be, but after the second or third sip you find you just don’t care because you can’t taste anymore."

By the agreed upon third round, Judy found that the fox was right and that she really didn’t care about the taste, or much of anything else, really. She looked across the table to find Nick looking at her with intense eyes that might have made her blush had she not been so tipsy. "Hey."
“Yeah.”

“You’re looking at me that way again,” Judy pointed out with a grin.

“Yeah. I know.”

“Why?”

Before Nick could answer, a sort of muffled, rolling thud came from outside the balcony doors shortly followed by another, the deep sounds shaking the floor and walls and causing the bottle and glasses on the table to dance around a little.

“What was that?” the bunny muttered with a confused look even as Nick shot to his feet.

“Judy! Get on the floor!” he ordered as he darted to the wall switch and killed the lights as outside the first mournful wail of an air raid siren began to spool up followed by others. “Come on! We have to get somewhere safe!”

“What is it, Nick?!” the bunny asked in sudden terror brought on more by the fox’s reaction than anything else. She yelped when Nick physically lifted her up and carried her to the nearest bathroom and deposited her in the tub then darted back out into the main portion of the suite. “NICK?!”

When the fox returned it was with blankets and the cushions from the couch and he set the thick covers in the tub with Judy then threw a blanket and the cushions over her. Fortunately the thick couch sections were wider than the tub. The whole time he worked, the deep booms grew closer and more powerful with the accompaniment of sirens. “Bastards swung way south!” the fox said as he got in the tub. “Came up from the southeast to avoid intercept!”

No sooner was Nick in the tub then Judy wrapped herself around the fox, her body trembling with tears of fear slicking her cheeks. She drew in a ragged breath, snuggling closer as Nick’s arms slipped around her in an attempt to allay her fears…to keep her safe.

“Okay. Okay. It’s going to be okay,” he whispered into her ear, emphasizing his words with a kiss to the side of her head. That was followed by another.

By the third kiss, Judy began to respond in kind, her paws scrabbling against Nick’s shirt and moaning in a stuttering tone when he reciprocated. As the bombs dropped closer, less time between the explosions, the blasts louder and more energetic, it only fueled the desperate passion. Judy swore then and there if she were to die, it would be while doing something that she’d dreamed of just a little while after meeting the roguish pilot. As they joined in frantic ardor the whistling of the falling bombs drowned out the cries and impassioned sounds from the fox and bunny, the booming detonations vibrated through the world, through their bodies, though in between they heard the other as they called each other’s name.

Just as they reached simultaneous climax, the world erupted in thunder and fire as the pair screamed in defiance and passion before the world went black.

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Judy woke with a start, the scream that the nightmare she’d been experiencing had elicited dying in her throat. With longing that rapidly turned into frantic searching the bunny felt around the small confines of the tub but found no Nick. Fear and worry began to form as an icy knot in the pit of her stomach even while other, deeper places were still warmed by the love they had shared. Pushing against the cover of blankets and cushions, Judy tried to call the fox’s name, her voice a ragged croak.
“Nick…”

The bunny coughed once, the corner she’d managed to lift letting in dust and smoke that clawed at her already raw throat.

“Nick!”

She squeezed out of the tub and fell unceremoniously on the floor, scrambling with trembling limbs to get up and staggered into the main room of the suite. Apart from the dust and cloudy air the room didn’t seem much different until she turned to where the balcony and wall that had contained the French doors leading out to the railed platform was gone, a gaping hole now looked out onto the city and the street below. There, framed against the glow from fires stood the fox, his arms limp at his sides and his tail laying on the floor, as lifeless and unmoving as the rest of him.

“Nick?” Judy called, a little softer, afraid to draw any closer to the gaping chasm, at the same time unable to refrain from moving closer to her fox. When she drew near and he silently, instinctively reached for her paw, a sigh of relief escaped her throat. “Blessed goddess, you’re still alive,” she whispered as tears of not quite joy slipped from stinging eyes. Then she saw the carnage.

The bombs seemed to have cut a swath of destruction from the waterfront to the inn and past. While Bella Noche was mostly intact, the structures on the opposite sides of the lane weren’t so lucky and only now could she hear the wailing and crying of mammals for those they lost, lives shattered…a world at war.

“I-i-is th-there…” the bunny began, looking up at Nick.

“We should get down there and see if we can help. Then the best thing we can do is get you Badgerton Airfield and I go back to the squadron. This isn’t over and it just got a lot worse.”

Judy nodded as she leaned closer and nuzzled herself against the arm and paw that held hers, simply happy that she was alive and so was Nick. For the moment, that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

So, there was a comment about the sudden romantic moment from a reader whose name I can’t remember, and it was commented that in this story Nick and Judy have only known each other a few days. Actually, if you’ve been paying attention our favorite pair have been trading letters for well over a month, and during WWII there were many a courtship that was much, much shorter. Imminent death makes you really want to live, and if you’ve never been in the situation, you just don’t understand how much. And nothing demonstrates that desire to live the way making love does.

Seriously.

Those that have are simply nodding in agreement right now. They know.

Now, once before I asked anyone if they caught the little Easter Eggs I was throwing into the this story, and I'm going to point out a few right now.

Remember Judy's first dinner with Nick and the rest of the Red Tails? The band leaders were named for the characters from 'Bambi'. I think there were a couple that got that.
The other one is in this very chapter, and that's the name of the inn that Nick and Judy were staying at; Bella Noche. It was the love song from 'Lady and the Tramp', which I thought was rather fitting for this chapter!

Pay attention! You never know what I'll throw in next! ;)
Chapter 8

Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~My Dearest Nick,

I just wanted to let you know that everything you taught me worked and I passed my classroom exams at the top of my group! Our instructor, a really cranky old badger, just don’t let him know I called him that please, said that come Monday I can start my actual cockpit instruction! Isn’t that great! I’m so excited! I know it’s only a Miles Magister, but I’m so excited! I can’t believe that it’s only been three and a half weeks of classroom work. It seems like they’re really trying to push us through. The males on the other side of the airfield are getting more intense training, but they’re going to be on the lines, so I guess it’s understandable.

The worse part of all of this is the terrible food at the mess hall. I can barely remember what my mom’s cooking was like. I miss fresh vegetables and the fruit trees will be about halfway through the season. Maybe if we can get some leave I can get home and get some real food. You’ll see some of that as well, of course.

I did get a letter from my parents. They’ve gotten over my leaving and they’re worried, but Barbara has calmed them down and told them that what I’m doing is important. She works in the logistical corps with the Defense Ministry, and has told them that I’m doing something that’s important, but that it isn’t as dangerous as a lot of other things. I guess with you coming down on the farm, and then that Axis flyer, has caused a stir in Bunnyp burrow. Rabbits are lining up to volunteer now. Even my sister Jillian volunteered and is being posted to a hospital unit as a nurse.

Oh, and Barbara had her litter. Two bucks, two does. Small litters are normal for the first time. She’s happy, but she’s also getting anxious to get back to Zootopia. She doesn’t like having to sit out like this.

The only thing I can think of that would be better would be to see you again, but I know how tired you and all the others must be. I’ve been keeping up with as much news as I can and there are times I get so scared that…no. I’m not going to say it. I know that you and the others are being careful, but I hear talk of how many bombers are being shot down and I can’t help but cry because I know you’re up there doing everything you can to keep all of us safe! But sometimes I wonder when will it ever end? So many names of pilots that aren’t going to get to go home.

I just want this to be over so I can be with you again.

It feels like so many years ago since we saw each other, even though it’s only been a few weeks, since you and I were in Zootopia and I keep thinking back to that night, how it felt to have you hold me, what we did as the bombs fell. I wish we’d done that sooner and I want to do that again, to just be with you, to wake up with your arms around me. But I have to be strong, don’t I? I know it’s hard on you, too. And I know I can’t be there for you and if you needed to, you know, be with another, I’d understand. You have so much responsibility that you need something to distract you. I just want you to be happy and if you need to, I won’t be angry.

I’m sorry. They’ve just called lights out! I’ll write again as soon as I can. Stay safe and fly high and know that I’m thinking of you and that you are in my dreams and thoughts!
With hugs and kisses all for you!

Judy~

*****************

~My Judy,

You silly bunny, I told you in my last four letters that I don’t want anyone else. I want you! One day we can do all of that and share breakfast while I look into those beautiful eyes of yours and realize over and over how lucky I am. Days will be spent rebuilding our lives, doing things that help the world become beautiful again. In the quiet moments I think of all sorts of things, like maybe a house with flowers all around it. Sterling roses and violets so that I’m reminded of you…some kits to keep things interesting. What do you think?

No, it doesn’t surprise me at all that you were the top of your class! Not only are you a tough bunny, you’re smart. I’m betting you surprise your instructors every day, too, don’t you? If more pilots were as good as I know you are I think this whole mess would already be over. We’ve finally gotten replacements here. They’re good kits, but that’s how I see them. I know I’m not much older than they are, but I feel older. That’s me. Guess I’m just turning into an old grey muzzle.

I find myself thinking back to our time in the city as well and if I could, I’d go back and do things a little differently. And I sure as hell wouldn’t have spent that first night on that stupid couch. So many opportunities that I let slip through my paws because I was trying to be a gentlemammal… Your fox isn’t all that bright at times, is he? I had something incredible staring right at me and I missed a lot of chances. I guess I’m just a dumb fox, huh?

I still can’t get you out of my head. You’re there in my thoughts, in my dreams, and sometimes I can almost hear your voice. Thinking of you is what keeps me going. It reminds me that I’m not just flying and fighting for what I think is right. Now I’m flying for you. Someone better tell the other side to watch out because this fox isn’t about to let this chance escape.

Now if you’ll excuse me I need to go whip these kits they sent me into shape. I’ll be damned if I let these youngsters slack off and gold brick while I’m in charge. Time to go to work, Carrots.

With all my heart,

Your Nick~

*****************

Group Captain Rupert Faulkner looked over the briefing room and approved the manner in that the veteran pilots sat interspersed with the replacements for Thirteen Squadron, colloquially known as the Red Tails. There weren’t just foxes in the pilots’ briefing room today but also a trio of rabbits, three skunks and two raccoons. All of them wore their flight gear and Mae West floatation devices, the bright yellow rubber life vests glowing starkly against the grey uniforms of the Zootopian Air Corps. The senior officer struck a cigarette and blew a cloud of bluish smoke towards the rafters of the ceiling as he waited for the flight group to settle a little and finish cups of tea or coffee. The three rabbits that were filling vacancies in the roster wouldn’t be going up with the others and it was easy to tell that they were disappointed. That really wasn’t Group Captain Faulkner’s problem, though. He was less worried about fresh out of flight school pilots and their feelings than he was about the new mission that lay before Thirteen Squadron.

Most mammals would have balked at the assignment to Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome, citing the unit’s
number designation as being unlucky, but Nicholas Wilde and the rest of his foxes had shown that they didn’t factor in luck and succeeded through skill, determination and dedication. They made their own good fortune.

“Thoughts, Squadron Leader?” the experienced rabbit asked the young officer next to him, Faulkner only glancing at Nick for a moment before turning his attention back to the rest of the room.

“We’re best suited for night flights and intercepts, Sir. We’re up to it.” Nick nodded slightly as he also looked over the room, his eyes serious though his expression was one of pride. With the new replacement pilots they were back up to their original strength of twenty six pilots and planes.

Faulkner nodded. “But are you up to it. That’s what concerns me.”

Nick nodded solemnly. “I am, Sir.”

The black and grey furred buck gave the younger pilot an almost paternal look of affection that only lasted for half a moment before his normally impassive mask slipped back into place. “So, no chance of talking you into finishing up your leave? I’d feel better if you’d take a little more rest.”

The fox shook his head. “Getting bombed tends to take all the fun out of leave, Sir. Although I might ask for a bit of time away when Judy graduates flight school…”

“Ah, yes. And how is Miss Hopps? You received a letter from her today, didn’t you?”

The pinkening of Nick’s ears was unmistakable as was the sudden churning of his tail in rather happy wagging. “She’s doing well, Sir. She should be soloing in the next couple of days. She got top of her training group in classroom work.”

“Spectacular. I’d hate to see what shape the squadrons would be in without our Angels, eh, Nick?”

“Absolutely, Sir.” Nick looked at some of the new pilots and frowned, his tail ceasing its side to side motion. “I’m going to revoke Pilot Officer Harette’s flight status, Sir. I’ve tried talking to him about his behavior and attitude. If things don’t start changing soon I’m going to recommend a transfer to another squadron. Maybe down to Ottershire. Let him fly reconnaissance for a while.”

The Group Captain frowned. “You’ve just gotten Thirteen up to full strength and you’d intentionally short yourself a pilot? I might call that a questionable decision, Squadron Leader Wilde. It’s not something that most officers would do.”

The fox shrugged. “Better to be a mammal short than have someone that refuses to be part of the group. No one trusts him to cover their tails. He’s too much of a wild card and showboat and that would lose me more pilots than just transferring one. If any of us had wanted showoffs we’d have stayed back in Foxcroft and joined a flying circus, Sir.”

“Perish that thought,” the rabbit said. “You and the other Red Tails have been a godsend, Nick. I’d hate to think what could’ve happened without you and yours.” Faulkner took another pull of his smoke. “Do what you think is best. You’ve demonstrated that you don’t make decisions arbitrarily. No matter what you decide, know that you have my full support, of course.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Could you use and orderly for a couple of weeks, Sir? I’ve noticed that Leftenant Champers is on leave. Harette could serve as a replacement for the time being.”

The Group Captain smiled. There were very few punishments that were as chaffing to a pilot as being denied the opportunity to fly. “You know, now that you’ve mentioned it, I could do with an orderly. It’s so tasking to pull myself away from such vital and satisfying work that my desk holds to
fetch little necessities such as midmorning tea.” He turned to the fox and inclined his head. “I’d be most grateful for an attentive orderly.”

“Excellent, Sir. I’ll see to it right away.” Nick gave the rabbit a smart salute before turning and heading to the rostrum at the front of the room, his irritation starting to vanish at the solution to one of his biggest problems at the moment.

From the start the Red Tails were a fairly independent group with what could be considered grossly lax discipline in other squadrons. No one called the room to attention, the remaining foxes that comprised the original members of Thirteen Squadron automatically going silent and giving their leader their undivided attention. All but one of the newer pilots that were paying attention also went silent and turned to face the rostrum, though Pilot Officer Harette was far too involved in telling one of the other rabbits of his recent exploits with a bunny nurse to notice that the rest of the briefing room had fallen silent.

“So there she is with this completely astonished look and pointed at the other doe that had walked in and told me, ‘Reggie, this is my sister Nora’. And they were absolutely identical! So I told her, ‘There’s more than enough rabbit to go ‘round’. I tell you, those does had me literally hopping the entire weekend!’” Harette finished his tale with a chuckle that died when the rabbit he’d been telling his story to only swallowed with an expression that clearly said he’d rather have been anywhere else at the moment instead of next to the crass young pilot.

“Impressive exploits, Pilot Officer Harette,” Nick deadpanned as he adjusted the papers in front of him. “However I think it would be best to focus on mission briefings while in here, right?”

“Yes, Sir,” the rabbit muttered, a frown forming on his muzzle.

“That said, Pilot Officer Harette, if you’d be so kind as to wait for me in my office. As soon as I’m done here I want to discuss a special mission that I’ve selected you for. If you wouldn’t mind stopping by the mess and getting me a cup of coffee on your way, and something for yourself, of course, I’ll be along shortly,” Nick instructed. As expected, the arrogant rabbit seemed to perk at the mention of a special mission, his youth and inexperience belying his air of bravado. The fox waited for the pilot to shut the door before looking at the rest of the squadron. “Now that we’ve had our daily briefing of PO Harette’s bedroom prowess, perhaps we can get down to business.”

Nick turned to the map behind him and started placing red pins along the coastline that bordered the Zootopian Channel before adding a series of brown pins and small clusters of blue. He then turned back and gave his squadron a sober look.

“Nighttime bombing runs directed at Zootopia are expected to increase as the summer progresses with fighter flights harassing the various squadrons during the day in an attempt to exhaust pilots and thereby reduce the effectiveness of reactions to incursions coming from across the Channel.

“Thirteen Squadron has been charged with the intercept of these night raids with other squadrons covering defenses during daylight hours. Due to some of our pilots lacking necessary capabilities when it comes to seeing in the dark, Thirteen Squadron will be split into a day group under the command of Flight Lieutenant, or Leftenant for you local boys, Pawson. I’ll be taking the rest of the Squadron for night missions.

“This will also mean an extra workload on ground crews, so pilots will be helping their mechanics and support staff, and that means everybody, including me. Due to the extended operational hours of the squadron, the mess will be staying open round the clock, though the officers’ club, NCO and enlisted clubs will have very limited hours. If either Lieutenant Pawson or myself think that any pilot has over imbibed, we will levy charges of dereliction of duty on that flyer, and make no mistake,
gentlemammals, I’m dead serious about this.”

Nick picked up a long, white painted wooden pointer and stepped back to the map.

“The red pins are the primary areas of insertion for the recent bombing raids that have been targeting Zootopia. For the night group these are the areas that we’ll be concerned with. Before any of you ask, no, we will not be continuously flying to try and cover these points. The Ministry of Air Defense has established several new radar stations, and with the recent attacks and sudden influx of volunteers, expanded the ranks of the Observation Corps. We will be ready to go, though, all day and all night with the split squadron.

“Daytime flights will be bolstered by the other airfields around us. Night flights are just us for now, though with extended radar and observer coverage we should be able to intercept bomber flights before they make the Zootopian coastline, and definitely before they get near the city or industrial targets. I don’t want a single bomb to make it to the city, am I absolutely clear?”

All but the replacement pilots knew of Nick’s encounter with the first blitz raid and nodded or called out agreement with his order, the replacements mimicking the veteran flyers.

“Intelligence is of the mind that daytime raids may be bolstered by dive bombers. We all know how effective they’ve been on the continent. Thirteen is to focus on dive bombers first, fighters second. A Messerschmitt can’t do nearly the damage a Stuka Ju eighty seven can. I’d like to see plenty of kill markers on your planes from those. They aren’t fighters. They’re fast in a dive, but they don’t want to tussle with a Spitfire and they sure as hell don’t want to tussle with Red Tails! Am I right?”

“Yes, Sir!” the room erupted.

“Knock ’em down. Hit ’em fast,” Nick directed before looking at his second in command. “Mari, you want to get the lights?”

Marion Pawson, apart from Finnick, was one of the foxes that Nicholas Wilde had known the longest and the three were nigh inseparable. While Nick and Mari raced motorcycles at different fairs and carnivals, Finn had been the one to keep them running, making modifications and specializing the bikes with an almost unbelievable knack for machines and their workings when he wasn’t tooling around with airplanes. Mari and Finn had both been enrolled in the same college as Nick, though where the oldest of the red foxes had been studying art, Marion had been working on a degree in aeronautical engineering and saw the chance to fly fighters as vital practical experience. Finn had come to make sure that his two friends stayed alive. As soon as the lights were off, Mari leaned against the wall and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strikes and fired up a cigarette as his friend began to run through a series of slides.

“This is what we’re stopping,” Nick said as he stepped to the side of the screen that was set off to the side of the map, the image that was thrown up a picture of the street that had held the inn that the fox and Judy Hoops had stayed in. “This wasn’t a military target. It was a quiet boulevard with homes and businesses.” If anyone noticed the slight thickening of the Squadron Leader’s voice, they were wise and said nothing.

At his nod, Jamie, one of the Morgan twins, switched slides. The monochrome colored slide showed the same street, rubble littering the paving and sidewalks with blurry figures running back and forth as they worked with fire brigades to quell the flames that liked up through the debris. The only clear figure was a little ewe, the lamb dominating the center of the shot. Her dress was torn and it was easy to tell, even with the sepia colored image, that her shins were bloody and scraped, her face slick with tears as she looked at the camera. Her eyes were haunted, disbelieving at the carnage. In her tiny hoofed paw she held the remnants of a doll that was more than half missing.
“This is Dawn,” Nick said, a small catch in her voice. “Seven years old and she has nothing left. Her father ran Bellwether Toys, just a small shop where he made most of the things that he sold. They lived above their shop and the bomb that hit in front of it left this poor child an orphan. She lost her parents, a sister and a brother.” He nodded at Jamie who switched slides. “This was a street side bistro. Ten tables, the family that ran it had been there for two generations and the youngest of the family had just married and started the next generation after his wife gave birth just a week before to two girls and a boy. All of them are now dead.”

Nick signaled regularly and the slides changed, each one with an explanation, a tragic story, lives shattered. When nick nodded to Pawson the fox turned the lights back on and all could see the darkened fur under the Squadron Leader’s eyes, the reaction to seeing the horror of war come home evident in the eyes of his pilots as well.

“I was there when the bombs dropped and what I saw I will never forget. This will happen again and again unless we do our jobs, gentlemammals,” Nick told them. “Right now we are the line of defense. It is up to us to stop this. If one bomb falls, boys, then we have failed. I don’t want this to happen again. I don’t want to have to pick up another child and wipe her eyes and tell her that her mommy and daddy are gone. I don’t want to have to tell a little girl that I don’t know why it happened. And I am depending on you to help me.”

Nick set the pointer down and let his gaze fall on each of his pilots. “We have a job and we’re going to do it. We’re going to do it and we’re going to show everyone that not all predators are like those of the Axis. Pawson, get your pilots together and brief them on your next operation. Those of you on night flight head to the mess hall and have a good supper before finding your beds. I’ll speak to you again when we muster at twenty hundred hours. Dismissed.”

As Nick passed through the group of pilots under his command, he noted with approval the high spirits and enthusiasm and hoped that it would be enough to get them through this most trying of times. Once outside he let out a breath and shook his head before settling his garrison cap on his head between his ears and headed for his personal office and the next challenge that faced him as a leader. The red fox’s steps were brisk and sure, but his thoughts were anything but. His musings were dominated by a silvery furred bunny with gem like eyes and the soft, warm feeling that she filled him with.

As soon as Nick entered his office, Pilot Officer Harette leapt to his feet with a crisp salute. “At ease, Harette,” the fox said as he stepped behind his desk and took a seat. He looked over the trappings of his desk, his eyes resting on the framed picture of Judy, the black and white photograph capturing her perfectly save for the lavender shade of her eyes. She rested her cheek on folded arms and the smile that graced her dainty, short muzzle was the same smile that Nick had woken up to the last time they were together. He wanted to touch her, to hold her so bad that it hurt.

Nick also noticed that the frame wasn’t in its correct position, evidence that Reginald Harette had picked it up and looked at it before replacing it on the wood surface of the desk. Suddenly the red fox didn’t feel like mincing words.

“Pilot Officer Harette, I want to know why you’re here,” Nick said as he fixed the rabbit with a neutral expression.

“Sir?”

“I think it was a fairly straight request. Why are you here?”

Harette blinked as his mouth worked up and down a couple of times. He pushed his shoulders back and finally spoke. “To fly and fight against the Axis, Sir!”
“What else?”

“I’m not sure I follow, Sir.”

“Why did you join the ZAC?”

“To protect my home, Sir.”

Nick’s muzzle formed a moue before he frowned. “You hate the Axis.”

“Yes, Sir, I do.”

“As do I. As do your squadron mates. So why have I heard you putting your fellow pilots down?”

“Sir?” the buck asked after swallowing hard, a slightly panicked flash in his eyes at the fox’s words.

“Tail-sniffers,” Nick said clearly, his eyes locked onto the rabbit’s brown ones. “I believe that is what you’ve referred to nearly all the foxes in this squadron, myself included. Pilot Officers Mascowitz and Gunlee, our two raccoons, you’ve called trash-pandas, bin-bandits. Some of our mechanics that happen to be squirrels you’ve referred to as nut-chasers. These comments tell me that you’re a rather bigoted individual, Harette. Has anyone here committed some act against you to deserve that level of disrespect?”

The buck lowered his head, his ears already pressed down the back of his head and neck. “No, Sir,” he said in a far quieter tone.

“Then is it that you feel superior to your fellow pilots?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. Because you’re not, no matter what you may misguidedly believe. You haven’t flown any combat missions, you haven’t faced what others in this squadron have, and due to your comments, I don’t trust you to function as a part of this squadron. With the things you’ve said I’m not convinced that you would perform your duties to the best of your ability or keep your squadron mates safe. And being I feel this way, there’s really no point in keeping you with Thirteen Squadron.”

Nick let his brows slip together in a scowl and laced his fingers together and set them on his desk. It was easy to tell that because he spoke in an even tone at a restrained volume that the fox’s words had far more impact than if he’d railed at the young buck.

“Until you can demonstrate that you can treat your fellow pilots with the respect they’re due, your flight status is revoked. Until I’m convinced that you can function as an integral part of this squadron, you won’t even get to look inside a cockpit. And, as it’s impractical to have personnel that aren’t contributing, you are relegated to functioning as Group Captain Faulkner’s orderly. Now, pass me your wings.”

Harette blinked in surprise. “Sir?”

“The wings on your uniform. Pull them off and pass them to me. Likewise you will remove the wings from your other uniforms.” When the rabbit didn’t move, a look of disbelief and anger starting to form, Nick stood so quickly he sent his chair scraping across the wood of the floor. “Wings! Now!”

Reginald Harette pulled his wings off, the action accompanied by the sound of popping threads and clenched them in his paw for half a second before holding the patch out to the fox, a look of chagrin
vying with one of anger on his face.

“Prove to me you’ve really earned these and I’ll personally sew them back on,” Nick said as he put the cloth wings in one of the drawers of his desk. “Oh, and I wouldn’t bother letting your father know. Wealthy and influential he might be, but he has no pull with me or with my squadron.” Nick sat down and ignored the young pilot, his behavior part of the demonstration that the buck wasn’t as important as his ego indicated. “Oh. One more thing. Don’t ever, and I mean ever, touch anything on my desk or in my office ever again,” Nick said as he focused on filling out a myriad of forms.

“Group Captain Faulkner is waiting. Dismissed.”

Harette stamped his foot as his arm snapped up in a salute before he turned smartly and fled, taking care to not slam the door on the way out. As he replaced his uniform cap, the buck fought to keep his anger and embarrassment in check as he strode to the building that held the Group Captain’s office, to his credit only a little moisture forming in one eye in humiliation that Harette quickly batted away.

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The sun was just starting to come over the horizon as Nick slid the canopy back and taxied his plane to the end of the flight line, the fox wanting nothing more than a cup of soup, or something else simple and hot, and to curl up on his cot until sundown. He was surprised as the propeller stopped spinning to see Group Captain Faulkner walking forward. Tripping the releases for the straps of his seat, nick began to shift his weight in preparation of climbing out of the cockpit. He glanced to the left of the plane as the Group Captain ran an appreciative paw over the flap of the wing, a small smile of musing on his muzzle.

“Got two more to put on the side,” Nick said as he swung his legs over the edge of the cockpit. “Seven bombers in all for the squadron. They didn’t even see us before we were on them. The other five turned and ran just after they reached the halfway point over the Channel.”

“Well done, indeed,” the rabbit said. “There’s something I need to discuss with you. Come to my office after your briefing. I’ll have food and coffee waiting.

“Yes, Sir,” the fox told the airfield’s senior officer, waiting for the rabbit to depart before sliding to the ground.

Nick’s legs felt tired and watery, his muscles trembling slightly. It was something he was accustomed to after spending hours in the cockpit that also included pulse-pounding and adrenaline fueled combat. With a grunt he disengaged the straps to his chute, tugging on his trousers to get the very personal bits of his anatomy settled into a more comfortable position before tugging off the Mae West life vest and opening his flight jacket all the way. The day was going to be warm, but flying at altitude never was.

Ticking from the cooling engine came from under the cowling and on his way past the forward part of the aircraft, Nick paused at the bit of art he’d finally put on his plane. He wasn’t sure what Judy would think of it, though it wasn’t as risqué as some of the nose art on various bombers that the fox had seen. It was a rather small, as far as personalized touches went, rendition of Judy in a one piece teddy, her amethyst eyes warm and seductive, sitting with her legs drawn up as she looked over her shoulder and a pair of soft white wings sprouting from her back. The words ‘Dreaming of My Angel’ in flowing purple and dark blue shadowed script sat beneath it at a forty five degree angle.

The fox had been rather proud of getting the colors and details of the bunny right and kissed the pads of his fingers before touching the barely permissible artwork. “You got me home again. Thanks,” he whispered before trudging of to his quarters to shuck as much of his gear as he could before the briefing.
“How many this time?” Finnick called out as the small vulpine walked up in washed but stained overalls.

“How many? Seven total. Two for me,” Nick replied with a tired half smile. “I’d say make sure you get the gun camera film, but there isn’t much it’s going to show with these night flights.” He touched the smaller fox’s shoulder then pushed on to his quarters.

Almost half an hour later he stood before Group Captain Faulkner’s door and knocked three times.

“Enter,” the rabbit said, Nick finding him going over reports while a stag in a green and tan uniform sat in one of the larger chairs the office had. There weren’t any distinguishing badges, pins or even rank insignia on the cervine’s uniform to denote what he was or did. The large deer sat with almost boneless relaxation in the chair, his attitude almost carefree. “Squadron Leader Wilde, I’d like you to meet Major Trent Mallory. The Major is with attached to the Zootopian Special Services branch.”

“Major,” Nick said as he stood at attention and gave a precise, if tired, salute that the stag waved off.

“Rest easy, Wilde. I know you’ve had a long night.” The Major didn’t even need to stand as he reached for the coffee service Faulkner had in his office. “How do you take it, Nick?”

“Black’s fine, Sir,” the fox replied, giving a cautious glance to the Group Captain who continued to look over and occasionally sign off on the reports in his paws.

“A little uncivilized,” the stag joked with a grin, “but being uncomplicated has its rewards. Now then, I think I’ll let Rupert here debrief you and fill in the gaps that might need explaining.”

The rabbit finally set the papers down and looked at Nick before gesturing to one of the other two chairs that was more suited for smaller mammals. “One of the things that Major Mallory does, well, those that we’re able to speak about, is funnel communiqués from resistance groups so that they’re farmed out to their appropriate offices. Through the Major and his section we’ve learned valuable intelligence on troop movements, installations of interest, even high ranking Axis officers and where they are. The latest one, however, is one that may help boost morale here on the home front.”

The deer cleared his throat and turned to the fox. “You see, Squadron Leader Wilde, apart from scheduling drops for supplies, weapons, possibly medications, my section also helps with the, ah, retrieval of a wide variety of things. Equipment, film, and so on. Occasionally we get a call for pick-ups that are a little less orthodox. In this case it happens to be a group of POW’s that have escaped. They’ve managed to contact the resistance and have made it to the coast.

“What my office would like is for you and your group of Red Tails, quite the appropriate name there, by the way, to make a night run to retrieve them. Apart from valuable information, it would be a bit of a kick to the tail of the Axis high command that we were able to pull some of our people out. For this we’ve secured a Grumman G twenty one ‘Goose’ amphibious plane.

“Now, with your experience and capabilities in night flying, you and your squadron are, of course, the perfect choice. And we don’t foresee any serious problems as the rendezvous point is well away from vital Axis positions. The G twenty one is capable of flying under their radar and the forecasts for tonight are calm skies and seas, but more importantly, no moon.”

Nick blinked. “Tonight. You want to run this mission tonight into hostile territory without me or my pilots being familiar with that particular section of the coast.”

“Well,” the stag said, a little less sure of himself, his earlier easy manner decaying a touch. “That is…”
“Where’s the plane and when’s the rendezvous?” Nick cut the other officer off. “If we have a chance to pull some of our people out then we need to take it. The Red Tails are ready.” He turned to the rabbit behind the desk. “I’ll need maps, any aerial photographs we might have of that part of the coast. Major, where’s the Grumman at?”

The deer blinked before a smile began to tug at the corners of his muzzle. “Well, Rupert, I see what you mean. I like these chaps! Wish we had more of them.” Mallory crossed a leg over the other. “The plane is parked near the naval station at Bentwood.”

Nick nodded. “Sir, I'll want three of my pilots to provide cover. The Morgan twins and Pawson. Ronnie Tod will be my copilot for the Goose as he’s the only other one experienced with twin engine planes. We’ll depart in the hour for Bentwood.”

The Major nodded and smiled. “I’ll send a message for my mammals to be ready for you, Wilde.” He stood and held out a hoof for the fox. “I’ll also make sure that there’s a place for all of you to rest up and that there’s a hot meal waiting.”

“We’re going to need it,” Nick said as he shook his head to banish some of his fatigue. “And coffee. Lots of coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

One of the things that I've always enjoyed tossing into my stories are letters. They are a great way of covering time that's passed while also keeping the plot flowing. That and it enables me to possibly get a little more emotion out of a particular tale.

Apart from that, not much else to say. On we go!
“Let’s try that again,” Ronnie said in an exasperated tone of voice. “It was better than the last time, but that little drop of a foot is more than a little rough on the spine, Boss.”

Nick rubbed at his face and tried to force some of the tension from his shoulders. “Running it again might help, but you’re the better float pilot,” the red fox told the other vulpine in the copilot’s seat. “We don’t have time for me to continue making these practice water landings.”

The kit fox eyed his friend with consternation. “Well, what do you want me to do?” he asked testily. “We’ve only got…” he glanced at his wristwatch and frowned, “another eight hours before we have to cross the Channel.”

“You fly. I’ll be your copilot,” Nick said simply.

The smaller fox looked at his superior and friend with surprise. “You’re the senior officer, Nick. It wouldn’t-“

“Right. I am. And I’m ordering you into this seat,” Nick said, cutting off the other pilot. “You’ve got as much time in these flying boats as you do a Supermarine. You take the left seat, I’ll be your copilot. It’s the only choice that makes sense.” He watched as the kit fox’s muzzle twisted into a frown. “Ron, you’re the best one for the job and these guys deserve the best. They’ve been through enough.”

“You sure?”

Nick snorted as he finally began to relax. “Hey, I don’t need to be the hero and this is too important for egos. You’re the better pilot in this plane, you fly the mission.”

Ronnie Tod exhaled and sagged into his chair with a look of relief. “If you didn’t get the next landing I was going to suggest that. Or scrubbing the mission altogether.”

“So why didn’t you make your suggestion earlier?” Nick asked with annoyance.

The kit fox shrugged and gave the other a wry grin. “I figured I’d give you another chance. You’ve almost got it down, but you need to finesse things just a bit more. Plus, well, hell, Nick. You’re the Boss!” The flippant answer got the smaller vulpine a swat with Nick’s garrison cap and he raised his arms in defense while laughing the last of the tension away. “Sorry! Sorry!”

“You’re going to be sorry if you do that again, runt,” Nick growled before also sighing in the release of tension. “You should know by now that I listen to you guys when you say something that makes sense.”

“You’re going to be sorry if you do that again, runt,” Nick growled before also sighing in the release of tension. “You should know by now that I listen to you guys when you say something that makes sense.”

“Yeah,” Ronnie muttered. “Unless it’s one of us telling you to take it easy for a bit. We mention you taking a break and you get this look like you’re going to bite our tails off.”

Nick held up a paw to deflect the lecture that was coming but the kit fox plowed on anyway.

“C’mon, Nick. You act like the war’s gonna be won or lost if you’re not in the cockpit. We need
you, but I’ll be damned if we need you as a strung out basket case.” Ronnie began to ready the plane for takeoff as the Grumman bobbed on the small swells of the harbor inlet where they were making their practice runs. “Now, this time try adding a little more to your flaps and feather the throttle when we’re about to skim the water. That way we ain’t bouncing from wave to wave…”

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The world was dark and the only lights in the black expanse were the cold points of stars and the occasional fitful glimmer from electric bulbs on the other side of the Channel. To vulpine eyes there was far more detail and the two foxes in the Grumman ‘Goose’ easily saw the world in a sort of grey-green monochrome. It was easy to understand why Nick and his squadron had been tapped for night flights as the world was clear to them, though washed of the normal color it held in the day. Nick pulled himself away from looking at the water below as he felt a presence between him and the fox that was actually flying the plane and found a raccoon gripping the bulkhead between the cockpit and the rear compartment that had been gutted clean.

“Soup, Sir?” the raccoon asked as he held up a container in his free paw, his voice clearly accented Zootopian. “It’s chicken noodle, Sir.”

“Seriously?” Ronnie asked from the pilot’s seat. “How in the hell did you get chicken noodle soup?!” He tripped the automatic pilot, the mechanism following the course and altitude that the kit fox had established before grabbing the thermal canister. “I haven’t had chicken soup since we left home!”

The raccoon, one of the mammals personally selected by Major Mallory for the mission, was genial enough, but like every other individual in the stag's unit wore a uniform completely devoid of rank or distinguishing badges. He didn’t look all that old, but was loaded down for down and dirty business with a Sten Mk II submachine gun, a rather nasty looking dagger on his belt and, of all things, a Walther P-38 pistol in holster. “Tis true, most folk tend to frown on those of us that have sharp teeth eatin’ meat, but occasionally we get a few perks for our parts in this sorry mess.”

The enclosed space filled with the smell of soup as Ronnie Tod poured a measure into the cup that was part of the canister’s design and sipped with a bemused expression. “Mmmm! Right now I’d say that’s almost as good as my Ma’s!” the kit fox told the others with a smacking of his muzzle.

Devon Banderbee, no rank, but the Major had told both foxes that he trusted the mammal implicitly, particularly if the situation got, as the deer put it, ‘sticky’. Now Devon was looking hard at the kit fox, his cheek tufts twitching as he ground his jaws together. “Not sure how you Colonials do things, but normally we’re civilized enough to let our superiors have first go at things,” he said with a slight growl to his voice.

Nick held up a paw to stave off any unpleasantness, the nerves of the three mammals already a little frayed with the mission and heading into what was essentially enemy controlled territory in a plane that was not only slow, but unarmed. “Standing tradition in the Red Tails is whoever’s in the left hand seat gets dibs, Devon. It’s not a snub of rank. He’s got a more stressful job than I do, so if there are treats, like that soup, the mammal in that chair goes first.”

The raccoon jerked back slightly as his dark eyes grew thoughtful. “I…I didn’t think of it like that. Pardon me for speaking out of turn.”

Ronnie looked back and shrugged. “No big deal,” the kit fox said. “You do things different than us, we do things different than you. The thing is we’re on the same side against something ugly.”

Devon snorted as his irritation vanished and a smile pulled at his sharply tapered muzzle. “You’re too
right, mate.”

Nick accepted the soup as Ronnie looked at a map with the help of a very dim red lamp that was low enough that it wouldn’t harm his night vision, but bright enough to make out details on the specially colored illustration, then glanced at his watch. “Looks like we’re about fifteen minutes from our rendezvous point, Boss. Our boys still in position?”

Nick paused in pouring a cup of the soup and looked up, craning his head around. “Yeah. I got them. They’re high enough to be showing up on radar, but I doubt the huns will be sending up an intercept for three Spitfires and us.”

The kit fox shook his head. “We’re too low. We’ll be lost in the chop from the Channel. I’m more worried about a patrol boat or infantry out along the beach.” He glanced out the cockpit, even leaning forward and scanned the water below. “I mean I haven’t seen any sign of boats or anything, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there. A couple of coves could hide a pretty good sized ship.”

Nick tossed the soup back, silently agreeing with his friend that it was one of the best things he’d tasted in a long time before passing the can back to the raccoon. He kept his silence, all three of them knowing what they needed to do, the challenge in the mission, and what failure would mean. If they failed the pick up the chances were the escaped POW’s would be rounded back up. If that happened and they were lucky it would mean getting shipped to a camp. If the enemy felt that the situation warranted, they’d be executed. If Nick and Ronnie messed up bad enough, they’d be captured as well, and all of them knew this.

“Five minutes,” Ronnie Tod said aloud, his ears perking up as his eyes began scanning the coastline ahead of them, the light colored sand of the beach ahead with their breaking combers showing up as a fuzzy, almost white line to his night acclimated eyes.

“And there’s the signal,” Nick said as he pointed out the front windscreen. “Southern point of that little strand of beach.”

Banderbee leaned forward, all but crawling into the cockpit and looked out at the weak point of light. “Dash-dot-dot-dash-dot. It’s them, alright, Sirs.”

“They’ll be paddling out to us on boats?” Ronnie asked as he began to descend slowly, trying to angle his approach that would take them in at the best angle to make the pickup with a clear line for a rapid departure.

“That’s the plan, Sir. They’re not flashing the signal for us to drop down closer,” the raccoon told the two foxes. “And we’re all set back here.”

The kit fox set his mouth into a tight line as Nick scanned the beach and as far inland as he could for potential trouble and felt as the plane’s altitude began to change, the red fox nodding with the familiar sensation, though his testicles drew closer to his body as adrenaline began to flood his bloodstream. What they planned and what could easily happen were two very different things and this was the point that Nick knew everything, no matter how careful they were, could quite readily go to hell in the proverbial pawbasket.

“Almost…almost…there,” Ronnie said as the bottom of the boat hull shaped fuselage tapped against the tops of three waves before settling enough so that the lurch of the plane from the resistance of the water became a steady rushing noise that blended with the engines. As the kit fox began to prepare the control surfaces for takeoff once the plane slowed with a greasy feeling on the surface of the Channel, Nick kept an eye out for the escapees they were there for. The kit fox maintained enough power to the two Pratt & Whitney radial engines to keep the propellers turning as he coasted as close
to the beach as he dared before turning the plane about for a quick departure.

“
The raft is in the water,” Nick said as he glanced out the window, two inflatable rafts with indistinct figures on them bobbing over the breaking waves. “Go open the door, Banderbee. The faster we can get everyone onboard, the faster we can get the hell out of here.”

Marion ‘Mari’ Pawson continuously scanned the night sky and the progress of the Grumman sea plane as he and the twins, Alex and Jamie Morgan flew cover for the amphibious plane. Marion had no problem flying with either of his longtime friends, though the two couldn’t be more different if they tried and it was hard to believe that they were only born minutes apart. Where Jamie was a rather suave and debonair fox, as good at flying a Spitfire as he was wooing the ladies and making both look easy, Alex was a bit more rough around the edges with a hell-bent-for-leather attitude. In fact, the only things that they had in common at all were the love of good beer and attractive vixens. In the end, though, both were solid pilots and good in a tussle.

As it stood, Pawson wished they could use the radio, but the chatter would most definitely be picked up by Axis listening posts and the mission was already dicey at best. The twins were following his lead, despite the necessity for avoiding the radio and as he began a slow turn, scanning the water below he could make out the Grumman and, just barely, a pair of small boats that seemed to be making their way to the bobbing seaplane at a snail’s pace. “C’mon, guys!” the fox muttered, his jaws clenched tightly as he hissed through his teeth. “Paddle faster!”

The fox kept looking away from the progress below to continue his nervous watch on the night sky. When Pawson looked down again the first boat had finally made it to the plane, the second one drawing even with the tail. Then a dim flash of white caused him to jerk his head to the left as he felt his stomach knot in sudden anxiety. As he watched the churning of water that caused little sea animals to glow with weak luminescence, Pawson’s eyes made out the lines of a patrol boat. Filling the cockpit with heated swearing that was barely audible over the roar of his engine, the fox tipped the plane up on its wing tip before dipping into a dive.

“Shitshitshit!” Nick swore as he helped Banderbee physically haul bodies into the aircraft as a deeper sound than either the Grumman’s engines or those of the Spitfires above carried across the water a moment before the glowing spear of a spotlight flared to life and swept the amphibious aircraft before slewing back, pinning all of them in a glaring shaft. The red fox had never felt as naked as he did in that moment and could hear the faint shouts of alarm and orders from the patrol boat. “Get in! Get in NOW!” Nick ordered frantically.

Fortunately the largest of the mammals that they were rescuing was already onboard, the boar somewhat emaciated and lighter than he should be had he been healthier. As the last few clambered through the square shaped hatch in the side of the plane, a stuttering, rapid cracking noise emanated from a point just to the side and below the spotlight, the ‘Vweet!’ of bullets passing close interspersed with the smacks of rounds against the plane’s fuselage.

“Down! Everyone down!” Nick screamed as he and Banderbee struggled to get the last of the POW’s in the Grumman, the final mammal hanging half in the aircraft, half in the water. “Go, Ronnie! GO! Get us outta here!” Just as the engines roared to full power, the blast of air throwing up a heavy spray of saltwater, the mammal hanging out of the doorway slipped a little before the red fox growled and hauled with all of his might, claws burying themselves deep into the dirty fabric of the shirt the figure wore that had become slippery with the addition of seawater. “Get your ass in here!” Nick grunted before tumbling back and crashing to the deck with the last of the escapees falling on
him in an exhausted lump. Not really thinking, the fox cradled the ragged figure to him and prayed as
the Grumman sped up, the whole aircraft bouncing roughly as it forced its way through the slightly
choppy sea while Banderby added covering fire to the escape, his Sten chattering away like a string
of firecrackers.

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The spotlight of the boat was all Pawson needed as he lined up his sights and depressed the button
on his control yoke, barely hearing the stuttering of his fighter’s machineguns as they spat steady
streams of .303 caliber rounds, each one spitting out a tracer every fifth shot. He watched as some of
the rounds struck the patrol boat, the red fox gulping as he saw that it was one of the Axis’ E-boats, a
rather terrifying small vessel that he’d heard a few of the sailors at Bentwood talking about. The
bullets that didn’t hit the boat splashed harmlessly into the water kicking up splashes of water that
looked a silvery tinged white to Meri’s vulpine eyes, though it was the sparks and splinters of wood
that he was interested in.

Then he reached the point where he had to pull up or risk putting his plane in the drink or diving into
the boat and Marion Pawson wasn’t quite ready for that sacrifice yet. As he leveled out the fox was
already bringing his plane around for another run only to see one of the twins following his superior
officer’s example. Before Pawson passed the other Spitfire he saw the guns in the wings of the other
fox’s plane winking with flashes of fire, Jamie stitching the boat from stern to stem, Alex right on the
tail of his brother to continue the attack.

Just as Pawson got to an altitude that would enable another pass, the E-boat erupted in a flash, the
whole of the wooden fast attack craft disappearing in a ball of yellow flame that rapidly turned into a
dark orange. Mari had to blink several times to try and clear the dazzled sparks of the after image
from his sight, a feral smile pulling at his muzzle. Unfortunately he was caught in the expanding
fireball then the vision of the Grumman Goose as it lifted clear of the water, the wake it had been
leaving stopping as the plane clawed its way up followed by Nick’s voice on the radio.

“Red Tails head home! Mother of foxes knows we are!” the other red fox directed.

Pawson didn’t have to be told twice and as he craned his head around he saw both of the Morgan
brothers fall into formation with him, the squadron’s second in command waggling his wings a
couple of times in greeting before heading west and paralleling the amphibious plane beneath the trio
of fighters.

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“Feels wrong…” Ronnie grunted as he adjusted the throttles for the twin-engine seaplane as his eyes
darted across the panel in front of him. While the fuel level looked fine the oil pressure on the port
engine kept fluctuation slightly and the controls weren’t quite as tight as they’d been. “Boss. Can you
head back and peek through the window and see if there’s any damage to the wing on the left that I
can't see? I can keep her up, but she’s acting like a drunk dancing partner.”

Nick nodded and slipped the headset off his ears, a paw on the smaller fox’s shoulder as he slipped
through the doorway. On either side of the rear compartment the mammals they’d just rescued, eight
in all, were laying on the deck, some breathing hard from the pulse-pounding escape, all of them
looking more than a little rough and extremely underfed. There wasn’t a one that didn’t show signs
of bruises or cuts from their various ordeals and Nick’s heart went out to his passengers.

He bent down to lookout a window and saw that there were a couple of holes in the wing and the
engine didn’t sound quite right, the nine cylinder radial stuttering a little as if one of the pistons
wasn’t firing properly. He couldn’t tell if there was smoke coming from it in the gloom, but Nick
thought it was best they keep an eye on power plant. The Pratt & Whitney engines were dependable and durable, but they weren’t indestructible.

As Nick turned to return to the cockpit, he realized that three of the mammals were huddled around Devon Banderbee, the raccoon’s eyes glassy as they stared into nothingness. A dark stain that covered most of his chest told all the story that the fox needed to know and knelt down. As he pulled his gaze away from the young soldier and looked around the cabin Nick saw the holes that had stitched their way through the fairly thin skin covering the aircraft. The pilot facet of his mind wondered if there were similar such holes on the far side of the engine nacelle that he couldn’t see. It would explain the irregular sounds coming from the radial.

“Did you know this raccoon’s name, Sir?” one of the mammals asked of the fox.

“What did you know this raccoon’s name, Sir?” one of the mammals asked of the fox.

“Hm?” Nick grunted as he was pulled from his thoughts and the exhausted feeling as the adrenaline began to fade from the blood coursing through his body. “Er…yeah. Devon Baderbee,” the fox answered before standing up on slightly trembling legs and stepping to a small locker that was mounted to the bulkhead separating the two compartments from each other. He found a pile of blankets and doled a couple of them out for the POW’s in case they were in shock before draping one of them over the still form of the dead raccoon. Then he spotted the small canvas bag of soup canisters and passed those out as well.

“Sure glad you fellas made it when you did,” the mammal that had asked the raccoon’s name said. “The Huns were getting closer to finding us. Resistance group that helped us escape did what they could to throw the trail off…but it was only a matter of time…”

Nick finally looked at the speaker and felt a little jerk of surprise run through him. His fur was mottled dark brown and tan and he had dark amber eyes, but it was his features that caused the jolt of surprise to trickle through the fox. “You wouldn’t happen to be a Hopps, would you? Virgil Hopps?”

The rabbit tilted his head as a curious frown pulled his face into a bemused expression. “How…?”

“Nick!” Ronnie called from the cockpit, his voice edged with urgency.

Before the rabbit could answer Nick began to make his way the few feet to the cockpit, having to grab a rail that ran overhead the entire length of the cabin as the Goose shuddered violently enough to make the red fox think they’d just caught a round of flak. “What the hell was that?!” Nick asked as he dropped into the copilot’s seat.

“That’s things breaking!” the kit fox growled as he held tightly onto the yoke, his expression taught with his ears pinned back and panting. “That and I don’t have the strength to work the rudder!” Ronnie told him.

Nick glanced over and saw that the other vulpine’s left leg was a sodden mess, past it through the side of the plane was another hole that wind whistled through. “Shit, Ron! Why didn’t you tell me you’d caught a round?!”

“ ‘Cause I didn’t know, Boss!” the other pilot replied. “I swear to the Mother of Foxes I didn’t feel a damn thing!”

Nick slipped his feet over the rudder pedals as he took hold of the yoke that mirrored Ronnie’s and leveled them out without the sideslip that had been plaguing the flight. His eyes darted over the instruments and he shook his head. “That engine’s going to crap out,” he groused. “Go ahead and cut it. We’re only…” Nick glanced at the map not really needing anymore light than what the
instrument panel provided and did the calculations in his head, “...twenty five minutes or so out of Bentwood, even on one engine.”

Ronnie Tod took the reprieve to pull the belt from around his waist and wrapped it around his leg just above the wound to his calf muscle. “I don’t know if I’ve got it in me to set us down,” the kit fox said after glancing through the door to the rear cabin and dropping his voice.

“I can get us in and down,” Nick said as he increased the power to their remaining engine and compensated with the rudder and other control surfaces, bringing the amphibious plane out of the dip and yaw it had been in.

“You sure, Boss?” the other asked in a slightly slurred voice, his eyes blinking rapidly when the red fox turned to look at him.

“Hey! Which one of you back there knows first aid?” Nick inquired. He snorted when the rabbit that had been in the back poked his head through the bulkhead door.

“I know enough to keep a mammal alive,” the buck answered solemnly.

“Good! Get him back there and bandage that leg!” Nick ordered with a jerk of his head to the other fox. “Give him a syrette of morphine, too. Just one, though. Then get your fluffy tail back up here!” When the rabbit hesitated Nick snarled, fighting the slight shimmy that began to tremble through the plane. “Now, Hopps! C’mon!”

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Pawson looked down out of his cockpit then tilted one wing up to give him a better and unobstructed view of the Zootopia Channel beneath his fighter and frowned. The Grumman with his friends should have been below him but all the red fox saw was water. When he finally found the Grumman twin-engine it was much farther behind than it should have been and Pawson banked while dropping altitude and reversing the course of his Spitfire. He didn’t even bother to look to see if the Morgan twins were following, knowing that nothing short of a direct order would deter the two brothers. Matching course with the Grumman, Mari saw that one engine was out though it didn’t seem that there were any other issues. The aircraft wasn’t on fire, there were still two vague figures in the cockpit, and the course remained steady and true to get the plane back to Bentwood.

The fox maintained a close watch on the seaplane until they neared the naval station and as soon as the keel of the fuselage began to split the water Pawson turned for the airfield where he and the Morgan twins had flown out of just a few hours prior. Rolling his shoulders, the red fox felt the tension flow out of his upper back as he turned for the landing field that was lit more than well enough for his night sensitive eyes, glad that the mission was over and more the ready to return to Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome.

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Nick felt his shoulders tighten, along with other parts of his anatomy as he began to add the flaps to the trailing edges of the wings, and pushed the throttle for the remaining engine almost to the stops to compensate for the increased drag of the extended wing surface while giving the plane so much rudder that it flew at a canted angle. Everything on the Goose felt sluggish and reluctant to his commands as he tried to follow the advice given to him earlier by the now doped fox in the passenger compartment. His jaws clenched in nervous anticipation, Nick let the plane slowly settle, wincing at the first thump from beneath his feet as the aircraft touched the surface of the bay before bouncing up several inches. Swearing hotly he let the partially crippled craft sink back down, not even daring to exhale until the Goose was well and truly floating, his paw throttling the remaining
engine back to just above idle speed as he steered for the dock where naval mammals were waiting for the aircraft’s arrival.

The throttle came back and Nick pried his paw from the plastic knobs. His grip had been so tight that his fingers were still curled and refused to open. He shook his head at it all. If it had just been him in the plane he wouldn’t have worried so much. It was the inclusion of the POW’s that had concerned him, especially the rabbit that he’d had sitting in the copilot’s seat just in case he’d needed a little extra strength to wrestle the controls. Fortunately that hadn’t been the case and the relief that he hadn’t been needed was clear on the buck’s face as well.

“Hey, kid. Go through there and open the hatch over the nose. There’s a coil of rope. Toss it to the yo-yo on the dock so he tie this thing up, will you?” Nick directed as he sat back a little and let the idling engine slowly drag the Grumman seaplane to the dock. The mammals waiting could strong-arm it into position. Nick didn’t have the finesse that Ronnie did with a float plane and knew that after the last forty minutes he was more likely to cause some sort of spectacular disaster instead of being part of a daring rescue.

Through the forward glass the fox watched as the hatch lid flipped up before the rabbit’s head poked up, a coil of rope in his paw that he threw to a hippo in Zootopian Navy blues, the hefty animal deftly catching the line as a pair of elephants caught the rest of the plane and physically pulled it around to the dock. As soon as Nick heard and felt the bumps of being tied up he cut the remaining engine and sat back before closing his eyes and letting his breath out in a long whistle.

“We’re tied up, Sir,” the rabbit said as he reappeared from the nose compartment. “Sir? Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I think so.” Nick sat up and fixed a smug but tired grin in place and patted the panel in front of his control yoke. “Tell you what. Next time I get into one of these I’ll know what the hell I’m doing.”

The buck shrugged. “You did okay as far as I’m concerned, Sir. You got us home.” He held out a paw to help the fox up. “Your other fox is going to be okay. His leg’s more messy than dangerous. Bullet went all the way through the meat. I’m… I’m sorry ‘bout Banderbee, though. There wasn’t anything that could have been done for him, Sir.”

“I got this, kid. You don’t look like you’re in all that great of shape yourself.” Nick pointed out as he levered himself out of the seat, the rabbit catching him when his fatigued legs started to tremble and threatened to give out.

“I think at this point we’re ‘bout the same, Sir,” the buck replied with an easy smile as he slipped under the fox’s arm.

The pair of elephants were helping everyone out of the plane whether they needed the assistance or not and as soon as the pair reached the door in the side of the fuselage were lifted up and out before being set on the weathered planking. Before Nick could even take a step on his own the rabbit was there once more adding assistance until the fox waved him away. “Really. I got this, kid.”

“Sure you do, Sir,” the buck replied without the faintest hint of sarcasm. “What I wouldn’t mind knowing, Sir, is how you know my name? That is if it isn’t too much trouble to ask, Sir.”

Nick stopped and blinked. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he muttered, his eyes widening in surprise. “You really are Virgil Hopps?”

“Corporal, Signals Corps, Zootopian Army,” the buck confirmed. “I don’t think we’ve met, so that
can’t be it, Sir. My job didn’t throw me around a lot of pilots.”

“I guess not,” Nick agreed as he reached up to scratch his head still not quite believing that one of the escapees was Judy’s brother. “Um, well, I heard about you after your sister captured me,” the fox told the rabbit with a lopsided grin.

Before more questions could be asked or more elaborate explanations given medics and the like swarmed the group and separated Nick and Virgil, someone pressing a cup of hot tea into the fox’s paw. To the side a litter crew took the covered body of Devon Banderbee away. Another group was tending to Ronnie Tod’s leg, half of his trousers missing as a pair of medics cleaned the blood away and liberally sprinkled the entrance and exit of the injury with sulfa powder.

“Mission accomplished, Squadron Leader Wilde,” Major Mallory said as he stepped forward through the crowd of smaller and shorter mammals.

“Not satisfactorily, Sir. We lost a mammal. Banderbee was a good guy. I liked him,” Nick said as he took a sip from the cup and winced before handing it off to someone else. “Sorry. Milk in tea is just wretched.”

“So uncivilized,” the stag said with a sad grin as he turned his head to follow the departure of the raccoon. “Still, a job well done, Wilde. I’m fairly certain there’ll be medals in it for you and your foxes. Rightly earned I might add.”

Nick shook his head as weariness began to assert itself. “We’re not in this for medals, Sir. We’re in this because we believe with all of our hearts that it was the right thing to do.” The fox nodded to the mammals that they had rescued. “This? This was the right thing to do as well.”

The Major nodded, clapping a hoof on the pilot’s shoulder. “You’re right of course. I’ll make sure that we see to your friend. He’ll get the best care possible and be up in no time, I’m sure.”

“Tell you what, though, Major,” Nick said before the stag could turn away. “If you really think I deserve some sort of reward, I’d like to be the one that takes Corporal Hopps home. I know his family, Sir. I’d sort of like to see their reactions.”

The deer looked at where a nurse was administering a shot of vitamin supplements to the rabbit while one of several doctors looked him over. It wasn’t uncommon for POW’s to develop a variety of health issues due to malnourishment and cases of almost debilitating lice and mites. “I think that can be arranged. We can debrief him a little here and then visit him at his home as he finishes recovering.” He smiled once more before pausing. “Oh, and you’re squadron is on stand down for the next fortnight, Squadron Leader Wilde. I’ve looked at the numbers. It seems you and your Red Tails are trying to win the war single pawedly. I think it’s time you let some others have a crack at the huns.”

Before Nick could voice a protest the stag walked away, though he did pause at each and every POW that had been rescued, spoke to them and shook paws, the few moments that he gave each one looking both amicable and personal. As Nick sagged a little he wondered if it would be possible to get a cup of coffee somehow.

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“Sir? May I come in?”

Nick looked up to see Virgil Hopps standing in the doorway to the private room he’d been assigned temporarily, the rabbit in a clean and pressed uniform of olive green and darker tie. “There you are,”
the fox said as he closed his small kit bag. “Ready to go?”

The buck nodded. “Yes, Sir. Um…you said we’re taking a side trip first?”

“I did. That’s why we need to hurry up. We have an appointment I don’t want to be late for.” He could see the nervous glint in the rabbit’s eyes and smiled. “Look. I know you’re anxious to get home, but you’ll want to see this.” The red fox hoisted his kit bag and flicked his garrison cap open before settling it between his ears. “Come on. Our ride’s waiting. At least I can guarantee you a better one than the last time you flew with me.”

The mismatched pair left the barracks that were part of the Navy annex of Bentwood and took the short walk to the airstrip that was actually paved instead of naked dirt. Waiting for Nick and Virgil was a Miles Magister, the guards nodding the fox and rabbit through after verifying their identification papers. Nick stowed his bag and showed the young soldier where to put his before motioning the buck in.

“Been a while since I flew one of these,” Nick said as he settled into the pilots seat and began a preflight check after doing a walk around of the aircraft. “Had to log a few hours in these before they let me and the boys fly our Spitfires. When the war’s over I might have to look into getting one.”

Virgil only nodded and began to put on the flight cap at the fox’s direction, taking a couple of moments to adjust his ears as he tucked them under the cloth covering. He then sat patiently as Nick adjusted the strap that held a throat mike and showed him where to trip the talk button.

“I think we’re ready. And don’t worry about being on the radio. I have these set to intercom. Just don’t touch any of the controls and we’ll be fine, okay?”

The buck answered twice before he remembered to trip the push-to-talk button. “Right, Sir,” Virgil said and swallowed hard. Flying didn’t bother him all that much, but he was more than anxious to get home.

“Hey, Virgil? Call me Nick when no one else is around, alright?”

“Understood, Sir…er, Nick,” the rabbit replied with a rueful smile and shake of his head.

Within minutes they were airborne with the naval base at Bentwood falling away. Nick banked the plane once they reached cruising altitude and Virgil sat back as much as he could and tried to relax while making sure that his paws and feet were well clear of any of the controls. He knew that the Magister was used as a trainer for fighter pilots, with some of them even being armed in a pinch for additional air protection around Zootopia.

As far as the city went, the rabbit only having spent a few hours in the sprawling city after basic training before being shipped across the channel. He watched as the buildings of Zootopia grew larger in the distance, the fox taking them to a place that he hadn’t divulged to Virgil and the rabbit was a little put out that this trip was taking him in the opposite direction of home.

“Sir? I mean, Nick?” the buck asked as he tripped the throat mike. “Where are we going?”

“That’s a surprise,” the fox said from the forward cockpit of the trainer.

“Uh…yeah. You said that before.” The rabbit frowned and looked back out of the canopy, his muzzle twisted into a frown. “Then could you tell me how, uh, knew my name? You still haven’t told me that.” It took a moment for Virgil to realize the strange sound was the fox in front of him laughing.
“It’s a long story, but the short of it is your sister, Judy, really did capture me.”

The buck blinked a couple of times, his ears struggling under the flight cap he wore to assume a position that would have indicated his confusion but such was unknown to the fox. “I…I’m not sure I understand.”

Nick regaled the rabbit with the action that had caught him against three Messerschmitt fighters before his squadron could aid him and having to bailout over the woods that bordered the Hopps’ farmstead. He filled in all the details save the ones in regards to Stu Hopps’ pain and anguish at his missing son. He did, however, tell of Judy almost shooting the fox in the foot with his own pistol. By the time he was done speaking the wheels of the plane were rolling on the sparse grass that had been crushed by countless aircraft takeoffs and landings.

“And Judy told you about me?” the rabbit inquired with surprise.

Nick didn’t answer immediately, climbing out and helping the rabbit down so he didn’t step on a sensitive area of the wing. They left their kit bags in the plane, though the fox grabbed his flight jacket and slipped it on despite the warmth of the day and slipped a pair of sunglasses with smoked lenses on. “She told me,” Nick said as he straightened the buck’s tie. “She told me how much she loved and admired you as well.” The fox then turned his head left and right as ground crew technicians came up and began the process of giving the aircraft a once over while yet more wheeled a tank of petrol up to top off the fuel tanks. “C’mon. We’re going to be late if we don’t hustle our tails into gear.”

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There must have been two dozen trainees in their respective ranks, each divided by gender with the larger group comprising males that would be deployed to the various squadrons that kept Zootopia and the surrounding counties safe from Axis incursions. Virgil was looking on in confusion until he saw one small bunny in the female ranks, his eyes widening in complete shocked awe as he recognized his sibling.

“Is…is that…Judy?” the buck husked, his mouth falling open as the doe stepped forward to receive a set of wings, saluted smartly and returned to her original place.

“Yup,” Nick drawled. “I hate to say it, but this is partly my fault, though I’d have to say that most of it is because your sister is a lot like you. She knows that there’s no sitting this one out and we need everybody. She was in Zootopia the first time bombers got through. Judy’s seen what this is all about.”

“She…bombs? Zootopia?!” Virgil whispered, his expression horrified.

The fox nodded. “Yeah. I forgot you weren’t here, so you might not have heard. We were in the city and the bombs fell and we just got missed. A few feet and neither one of us would be here. She’s going to be an Angel after today. Females Auxiliary Transport Air Corps. They’re the ones that make sure the various airfields and squadrons get the planes they need.”

Virgil had, of course, heard of the Angels through Barbara Hopps, his and Judy’s older sister. Then something else that the fox said sank through. “What were you doing in Zootopia with my sister?” he asked suspiciously.

Nick chuckled self consciously as he rubbed the back of his neck then saw the pointed expression the rabbit was giving him. “I…we…” The fox shrugged. “Well, damn it, kid. I’m not going to lie. I love your sister. She…she makes me feel like I never have before. I didn’t want to. I fought it every
step of the way, but I don’t want anyone else but Judy.”

The rabbit simply raised an eyebrow before extending his paw as a smile slowly grew across his muzzle. “You and your friend came for me in the others in a plane that didn’t have any weapons, put your own tail on the line, and you got me home. You think I’m going to say no to you and Judy?”

As he reached out and accepted the paw that was offered, a surprised look on his face, Nick couldn’t help but feel a knot of tension and worry that had tied his stomach up loosen and dissipate.

“Seriously?” the fox asked cautiously.

“Serious!”

“Wow. Well, I sure hope you put in a good word for me with your old buck. I’ve already had him aim a shotgun at me and it wasn’t a pleasant feeling in the slightest.” Nick put his paw on the rabbit’s shoulder and gave Virgil an honest look. “Now, you want to help me surprise your sister?”

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The graduation from flight school and the awarding of her wings had seemed to both take forever and no time at all and once released with the rest of the cadets, Judy scanned the small crowd for a particular mammal, her heart leaping into overdrive as she saw the red fox standing not all that far away. She ran to him as fast as dignity and the uniform skirt she wore would let her, skidding to a stop just a couple of feet from Nick and jerked up right, her arm coming up in a crisp salute, though the grin on her muzzle was anything but regulation, the bunny’s amethyst eyes sparkling with a sense of achievement that was well deserved.

Nick returned the salute, a smile of his own splitting his muzzle. “I told you that you’d make it,” he said as casually as possible.

“And the top of my class!” Judy exclaimed.

“I expected no less,” the fox said.

The doe fidgeted slightly and looked around surreptitiously before noticing that there was no one really watching them. “So, Squadron Leader Wilde, would it be grounds for disciplinary action to give you the kisses that I’ve been saving up for you?”

“I’d like nothing more, but before you do I thought I’d give you the little graduation present that I brought you. I had to go a ways to get it, but I think the whole thing was worth it,” Nick replied, honestly wanting to collect those kisses, but the day wasn’t about him and what he wanted.

“You didn’t have to get me anything!” Judy exclaimed, her tail twitching furiously in curiosity.

“I think I did,” the fox told her as he stepped aside revealing Virgil who’d hidden behind the larger mammal.

Judy stared for several moments, her smile slowly fading as her mouth fell open. Both of the other mammals could see the lower rims of her eyes starting to fill with tears, the excess moisture making her amethyst orbs glitter in the bright midday sun as her entire body began to tremble. Just as slowly as her expression had changed did the doe sink to her knees, the tears that had welled finally spilling over and coursing dark tracks in her fur as her arms lifted, paws trembling, reaching for the brother that she’d believed was lost.

“Virgil?!” the bunny whispered tremulously, sinking that last fraction of an inch to the ground.
Then he was there, her brother was in her arms, his own holding his sister as they sat on the ground and wept, Judy’s voice coming out in ragged, relieved sobs, her eyes, disbelieving, locking onto the fox who wept for the reunion.

“Is...is it r-really you?”

“It’s really me!” the rabbit whispered back before both were rendered speechless with the emotions that ripped through both and spilled into the other.

Nick stepped away to give the two a bit of privacy and wiped at his face, ready to intercept anyone, regardless of who they were, that might interrupt one of the most beautiful moments the fox had ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

I think that I first fell in love with the Grumman G-21 'Goose' way back in the 80's. It was the plane flown in a little series called 'Tales of the Gold Monkey'. Sort of a 'Magnum, PI' meets 'Indiana Jones' but with a plane...

I did figure that should I ever get fed up and want to move to the Caribbean or South Pacific that I would have to look into getting one. Fly off somewhere, land on the water, crack the cooler open and just start fishing. That would be good, yeah...

On an historical note, I didn't find out until recently that there was an actual 'Ronnie Tod' in WWII. Brigadier Ronald John Fredrick 'Ronnie' Tod was a British Army officer who was instrumental in the development of the British Commandos. You can find him and his exploits on Wikipedia and several historical websites. It's fascinating reading!

My Ronnie Tod in this was that I needed a fox with the naming tradition set up in Zootopia, and have a buddy from my time in the Army that I used as the basis for the character. Another example of art imitating life, I suppose, no matter how inadvertent it was!
“So, my fellow residents of Bunnyburrow, as one of your own, I applaud you for your efforts. Buy war bonds, keep our boys in the fight!” The figure that looked out over the modest gathering concluded, his uniform crisp and clean with sharply pressed creases.

The crowd that had coalesced around the vehicle on which the soldier stood cheered and applauded after the impromptu little rally speech, all of them brought in by the spectacle of the tank being driven of the flat car of the unscheduled train that had steamed into town. The speaker grinned down at them all with his well practiced public smile firmly in place. He’d been doing this since getting back from the across the water, going from place-to-place and town-to-town with the tank trying to drum up support and get the mammals to buy into war bonds.

Once he’d been released from the hospital, that is.

Though this latest was a bit of an ‘on the fly’ performance. The sound and the sight of such a menacing machine had made a lot of the mammals of Bunnyburrow nervous as they’d never seen one apart from newsreels shown in the community barn that served as the town cinema and were more accustomed to tractors and farm machines, not engines of war. So the soldier had jumped up and started the small rally right then and there to settle things down. He’d been born and raised in Bunnyburrow and the first time he’d travelled away from the isolated community was when he’d left for his army training and in the process learned just how isolated the rather bucolic community was.

He was a light tan in color with darker fur ringing his ears and flecking his arms and legs, and while young, his rich brown eyes made him appear older with the things he’d seen.

It hadn’t taken him long time to get the mammals around him to calm down. He’d told them that he came from Bunnyburrow, born and raised, giving them his family name, and that this lucky buck had come back to them. Once they had heard his nick name the massed rabbits and other prey mammals had practically jumped out of their fur. The reaction had taken him aback, other mammals for the other towns and cities he’d visited had cheered him and clapped politely for a soldier that was asking for their help, but he’d never had such a roar as this and from comparatively so few to make that sort of exuberant sound.

“Lucky Buck, every one!” came the chiming voice of the public relations officer that had been assigned to the rabbit while he had been going around, a rather young yet sharply dressed stag with a knack for spewing propaganda at the drop of a hat. “And you’ll see more of him at the county fair next week so make sure you tell your friends and family to come on down to support the war effort!”

The crowd hollered again and started to disperse, going about their business, chatting excitedly, or coming up closer to look at the tank that stood in front of them. Buck took a moment to watch them all, it was strange being back and seeing his own town folk again, especially after the hell he had just come through that capped off the last couple of years. He hopped down off of the Mk 1 A9 Cruiser to stand next to the stag.

This wasn’t the tank he had fought in. He’d been fighting in Mk 2 Matilda, but his, and nearly all the tanks Zootopia had been able to field, had been left behind as they had retreated from Bullkirk. His own had most likely already been melted down to help the enemy’s war machine. The tank behind
him wasn’t a great one, but to the civvies it looked impressive enough and that’s what mattered.

Lucky Buck, his nick name, had come from his fellow tankers and soldiers, and the propaganda mammals had gone nuts for it. His real name was Edward James Sward, Sergeant with the Zootopia Armor Regiment and tanker ace. He’d been in the initial wave of the Expeditionary Forces sent over in the doomed first offensive and things were worse now. They’d been stopped and driven into retreat back across the Channel. This was how he had become a POW for a short time. Now it was the Battle of Zootopia and it was up to the fighter planes to defend them from Axis bombers.

Ed and his crew had always seemed to have luck on their side. Other soldiers had started to coin the phrase ‘Lucky Buck’ and the name had stuck. Then it had been painted on the side of their tank and as successes and kills had racked up. As far as the other soldiers and officers of the Expeditionary Force were concerned Ed and the rest of the crew had become celebrities, rallying their fellows. In fact, the other side had started to take note of the rabbit’s growing fame.

Then his tank crew had started a rather annoying tradition of slapping his right foot before battle. This rapidly spread to the rest of the company and before he knew it others were slapping the side of the turret where a stylized rabbit had been painted in white with the name ‘Lucky Buck’ written underneath.

Lucky rabbit’s foot, very original.

“You’ve gotten pretty good at this, Buck,” the Stag said nodding happily with his quick uptake after assessing the mood of the crowd. “That saved us from a rather bad start to our time here.”

The stag’s name was Dan Antlerbee. The two of them had not gotten along at first before the rabbit’s opinion soured. Though they weren’t very far apart in age, Buck had found the naive stag extremely taxing thanks to him being completely ignorant of the real experiences of war and had been brash, talking about the matters he knew little or nothing about. On top of that had kept trying to find out what had happened to him during the fighting in Cervania and his time as a POW. It had taken a rather heated exchange of words to get Dan to stop. After that they had slowly found neutral ground and now got along fairly well. Most of the time Buck rather enjoyed the stag’s company now that they had something of an understanding and their disparate ranks were disregarded when and where they could.

Buck shook paws with a local, his warm smile fading as the civilian turned away talking to his wife excitedly.

This putting on smiles for the civvies had not come naturally to Ed, and after going through what he had he’d found the crowds would put him on edge. The stag had spotted this reaction and helped Buck learn how to be a bit more of a showman, though he hadn’t gotten over it he had, at least, gotten use to it.

“Well, I’ve been travelling with you long enough, Dan. All the BS is bound to rub off on me eventually,” he muttered back so only the stag would hear him, flashing him a quick smile.

Dan chuckled and turned around to direct the rest of the team that worked under him. “Yeah, yeah.”

Buck turned back to look around the station and drank it all in. It was like nothing had really changed since he’d left. It was years since he stood at almost the very spot before leaving for volunteer service, the only real sign of the war were some sand bags piled up here and there and, of course, the propaganda posters on the walls and fences.

‘Loose lips sink ships!’
‘Keep calm and carry on!’

‘War savings! Save for the brave!’

‘You give us the FIRE, We’ll give’em hell!’

Apart from that it really didn’t look any different. It was even a nice warm sunny day the same as the day he had left. He breathed in deeply taking in the scents of home. It made him feel so much more at ease and happy...more so than he’d felt in a very long time...

This was his home. His real home.

Looking down the rabbit that had come to be called Lucky Buck saw two small children, a bunny and a lamb, looking at him with wide-eyed wonder. Buck grinned a much more natural smile then before. He waved to them and walked over tell them about the tank. The kids always loved the tank. It made their day to get to stand on it and look inside the open hatches, but as Buck approached their eyes went wide in fear and they shrank back slightly.

His smile fell. Turning away he walked back to the tank, feeling the small bubble of happiness pop.

The station might have stayed the same but he hadn’t. Buck bore the clear signs of the war on him. The right side of his face was heavily scarred, the thin, dark trenches running through his face fur making him look rather intimidating. His ears were more of a sight but he was in his uniform with his beret placed on his head so ears were down and back. The uniform also hid the other scars that ran over his arms and upper body, these were mostly thanks to shrapnel.

Mostly.

He had seen the look of fear on the faces of other mammals, more than he cared to think about, and every time it made his insides twist.

Buck hopped back onto the tank and picked up his canvas pack where he’d dropped it on the engine deck and slung it over his shoulder, pushing all the negative thoughts aside for the moment. He was home now and going to see his family again, a family he thought he would never get to see again. All fifty of them.

The rabbit was from a much smaller clan in Bunnyburrow, one of the smallest as a matter of fact, and rather poor, but his family was a good loving one.

“So nearly there.” Dan said as he came back over to the soldier. “You’ve done exactly as promised you would and the Army is grateful! Especially after what you been through. And now there’s only one more show to go, and on your home ground, even!”

Yeah. One last propaganda show at the county festival. A regular Bunnyburrow event that was held every year, and even though the war was on, this tradition wasn’t halted. It was a time where all of the mammals of Bunnyburrow could come to gather to do a little extra business, celebrate and be a community.

After he had made it back, Lucky Buck had been taken to a military hospital to be debriefed and given a chance to recover. The Defense Ministry had offered to take him out of the war. He’d done enough they’d told him, but he’d refused that offer. Buck had too much of a score to settle with the Huns. So after some healing and thinking time, the rabbit had asked to help with some public relations work in exchange for some R&R. They’d readily agreed to this.

He felt he owed the lads who hadn’t made it home to keep working any way he could. He believed
something like that would be a good way to start. Then, when he was fit and the country ready for round two, he would get some revenge on the mammal eating bastards. All he needed was some heavy metal, a cannon and the chance to get a panzer in his sights.

“Least I could do,” Buck said looking at the stag and shrugging a little as he did. “Well, am I to drive my tank home?”

“No, no. I’ve gotten one of the local ARP wardens to drive you to the Sward farm. The warden practically begged to give you a ride. I’m then going to harbour the tank in a garage I’ve been offered for use. Well, more of a barn, really, but I’ve been assured that it’ll be secure,” Dan said as he looked around the platform and spotted the black uniform and white helmet of the air raid warden and pointed him out. “Ah! There’s the Warden.”

Edward couldn’t help but groan quietly to himself. He knew that old goat, Mister Hodges, and pulled his beret a little further down.

“Old friend of yours?” Dan couldn’t keep the smile of his face seeing the look on Edwards face.

“Could say that,” he muttered back.

Back when Buck was a kit and whenever his father had sent them into town to pick up things from the local general store, Hodges had always been a grumpy old git and seemed to favour the larger rabbit families and, for some reason, taken to giving the Sward kits a hard time. In retaliation Buck and his siblings had taken to winding him up, daring each other to find new ways to annoy the goat. Now, though, Old Hodges seemed strangely happy to see him and was standing with his arms behind his back rocking on his hooves, obviously fighting the urge to come over to the pair and start rambling.

“Well, there’s your chariot to drive you home so the folk around here can catch their first glimpse of the famous warrior rabbit of Bunnyburrow!” Dan looked down at him still grinning putting on his best PR voice.

Buck just looked back with a flat expression.

The stag laughed again and held out his hoof, nodding when the rabbit took it.

“Seriously, though. Say hello to your folks for me and enjoy the start of your furlough. You’ve earned it. And don’t worry about setting up or tending the tank, either. The lads will see to that. You just catch up with the thirty or so family members you have.”

Buck now smiled back. “It’s fifty. And so you know, we’re one of the small warrens.” He patted the rather shocked looking stag on the arm and started to walk away but not before he heard Dan mutter “Bunnies!”

The goat finally lost that battle with his own sense of restraint and propriety and stepped forward once he saw Buck walking over to him. “Edward! It’s been a long time,” he said stopping to looking down at the rabbit.

“Yes. That it has, Mr. Hodges,” he replied hitching his smile back up with some effort, looking up at the goat with mixed feelings as memories flooding back.

They shook amiably enough and started walking out of the station.

“It’s great to see you again after such a time, seems like you had a rough go of it out there from what we heard over the wireless.”
And there it was. The beginning of the probing to get more news out of him. Buck noticed the small
glance Hodges gave him as he had said it.

“As bad as to be expected,” was the rabbit’s simple answer, his voice rather flat and the polite smile
gone from his face.

“Yes, well your family will be over the moon to see you! Never seen them so shocked as when they
found out you’d gone missing in action and such.”

Buck ignored the goat as they stepped out of the station and walked the short distance to the edge of
town. The rabbit paused to take it all in. The commercial portion of downtown Bunnyburrow
seemed as busy as ever, mammals of all kinds scurrying around tending to their morning chores or
picking up purchases of goods they couldn’t make on their own, a couple of them glancing their way
as the strange pair stood at the top of the steps to the station proper. It was a rare sight to see
uniformed mammals in town, particularly when they showed up with a tank.

The goat cleared his throat rather nervously obviously sensing the change and noticing the look on
Buck’s face as he had been ignoring him.

“Well you made it home, that’s wants important! I always liked you and your family, such spirited
little devils you were!”

Now that was a lie and quite typical of Hodges. He wasn’t necessarily a bad soul, just one of the
funny ones that was always a tad bit off. Buck also noticed by the evidence of his walk and the way
he was looking so proud of himself, chest puffed slightly and his arms held a little out from his body,
the new role of Air Raid Patrol Warden had clearly gone to his horns.

They climbed into an old van which stuttered into life with a cloud of blue smoke and made their
way through town to the other side where the Sward farm lay.

“As you know I’m the chief ARP here, and you will be happy to know I run a tight ship!” Hodges
puffed out his chest pompously then went into a great rant about how he was making sure mammals
were sticking to the rules and the fines he had given out to those who broke them.

Buck was only listening enough to say an odd, “Yeah,” or “Really?” or made appropriate noises.
The rest of the time he was looking out over the fields now speeding steadily by, each entrance to a
farm had sign reading the name of the family who owned it.

‘Carrington’s Farm’, ‘Bounder’s Farm’, ‘Cotton’s Farm’...

Nothing seemed to have changed much in Bunnyburrow. It was comforting to the rabbit, but there
was a small sense of worry starting to steal though him as they wound their way around the country
side.

Buck had looked forward to seeing his family again, more than anything else it had kept him going.
Now as they got closer to their farm he started to feel rather anxious. He’d changed. He’d seen a lot,
done things he never thought he or any other mammal could or would do...

Would his family see him as Edward? Or would they see the war torn rabbit that struggled to sleep at
night waking up retching and coughing, trying to clear the blood that he still felt on his paws and
even in his muzzle?

A sudden flash of panic hit him at the thought of them seeing through him...seeing what he had done.
The rabbit nearly shouted for Hodges to stop so he could jump out, a panic attack about to grip him
but as he jolted forward in his seat, heart racing, a sound he knew ravaged the air around them.
A glorious sound of flame and fire; the type that told you that someone was looking out for you, that someone had your back.

A Spitfire flew low over there van, so low he could clearly glimpse the pilot, the stylized red fox tail painted on the back third and series of letters identifying the squadron down the side.

His panic forgotten, Ed ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward leaned out of the van, one foot on the step and a paw on the roof to stop him falling to get a better look. While he’d been fighting the sound of those friendly Spitfires and Hurricanes that watched over them had always given him a measure of comfort and courage. And at one very dark time, hope that they would get him home alive. He’d seen those red tails before as he and the others were being pushed back to the beaches of Bullkirk, all the while the enemy had been pounding them from land and air, determined to wipe them all out.

Then that sound and those wings had come down from on high and gave Buck and his mates in uniform much needed time and space to regroup and retreat. He would never forget that and wanted to meet those foxes.

He grinned madly, his panic forgotten. Buck grabbed his beret as two more Spitfires zoomed over head, their engines, however, didn’t drown out the words that made the rabbit’s blood boil.

“Damn foxes! Showing off all the time! You must agree with me that I find it very questionable with the enemy we’re fighting that they let predators fight in our forces!” the old goat Hodges groused with a sour expression.

Buck looked back at the other mammal, a red mist descending over him...the same kind of mist he had felt in the heat of battle.

He’d been getting really fed up with this attitude towards predatory species around them. Yes, the Axis force was made up of predators, but those were a group of mad mammals believing in their twisted logic and insane ideology. And he’d met them, been a prisoner of their army and, at one point, had even dined with what he believed was the most evil mammal that walked the earth. But even though he’d been through all of that he knew that the preds of Zootopia, and for that matter even some of the Axis nation, didn’t believe in the madness coming from the leaders of the Axis war machine and crazed devil that lead them. He knew. Buck had fought by the side of Zootopia preds and met the poor predator souls who had had the courage to stand up to the Axis savagery.

“Two members of my crew...two of my mates were predators from Zootopia. A stoat and a swift fox. Two good mammals...better than most I’ve met, and most definitely better than you,” Buck all but snarled, deep anger flaring in his chest with ice edging his words. He was fighting the urge to jump at the goat and knock the sense into him. He'd seen this attitude during their days of training, but the military had stamped out the foolishness quickly. And once they got into combat they all became brothers in arms seeing that they were together in the fight and most of the mammals quickly dropped their prejudice against Zootopian predators... most of them, at least.

As for his own crew, they’d become family to him. They’d fought, laughed, cried and had died together.

All of them bar Buck, himself.

“Here will be fine, Mister Hodges.” Buck spoke briskly in clipped tones. He’d mastered his rage for now, but he wanted off and quickly grabbed his pack and slung it over his shoulder.

The goat looked taken aback at the rebuke and lost his ability to form words. He pulled over, Buck jumping from the running board and settled his pack.
He turned to the goat and touched the front of his beret in a salute that was almost contemptuous.

“I would advise you to have a long think about the group we are fighting and learn the difference from us and them. Thank you for the lift, good to see you again,” the rabbit said before he turned and walked off down the road, leaving a chagrined and speechless Hodges in his wake.

Edward James Sward, the rabbit that was now known as ‘Lucky Buck’, didn’t mind the walk. The rabbit needed the excise as he was still recovering from his ordeal and a stroll through his hometown would do his body and mental health a world of good.

It took him a good while to reach his family’s farm, he had walked past two others before reaching the Sward holding, and rabbit farms were big.

‘Clay’s Farm’, ‘Hopps’ Farm’ and finally the weather-beaten wood sign hanging from the post box that read ‘Sward’s Farm’. He stopped and leaned on the fence and looked down the dirt track that lead to his family’s burrow.

That same fear and panic hit him again. Even if they still accepted him...saw him, would he be able to cope being around them all again? Buck found that when he was alone he longed for others, but then when he was with others he wished to be alone. He took off his beret and rubbed his forehead with his arm before brushing his tattered ears back. On the outside he was a visage of calm. On the inside he was struggling to get a hold of himself. What would the lads of the Zootopian Armor Regiment think of him standing there, trembling at the thought of seeing all fifty of his family again when his own crew would never see theirs...

He patted the fence post and began the walked down the drive.

“Get a grip.”

The rabbit walked slowly trying to enjoy the moment, though his stomach still felt like a pit of writhing snakes. But as he strolled down the long curving path with its high trees on either side, small memories seeped into his mind that put him at ease once more. An old rusted out wheel barrow with a broken axel sitting by the side of the road, ivy and weeds now laying all over it. That had been from him and Jess, his sister from his litter, and their brothers Jake and Josh. They’d been racing down here when Buck and Jess’ wheel barrow had broken sending the front digging into the earth and Buck soaring though the air landing in a heap in the dirt while Jess had been underneath the upturned barrow.

That had been a fun morning. At least it had until they got back to the barn and their dad had found out that they’d broken the wheel barrow. Jess got a hard rap on the knuckles from mum’s wooden spoon while he, Jake and Josh had gotten a good whack on the back sides for that. Well, more than one if truth be told.

Buck couldn’t help but laugh quietly.

And there was the chunk out of the tree where Tommy had crashed the tractor when they’d been teaching him to drive it.

There were Ellie’s garden faeries, or whatever she called them. Twig dolls with feathers and pretty stones sewn into them, an old rabbit superstition supposed to ward off bad spirits and let the good ones in.

He stopped looking down the road, beams of light shining through the shrubs and trees lining the
sides of the road, all in all making a rather beautiful tunnel. And at the end he could see buildings. The front of the barn and the side of the small two story house that sat above the warren that lay underground.

Ed could hear rabbits talking, his tattered ears tilting towards the voices. He swore that his ears weren’t as sharp as before, more than likely thanks to the constant loud business of war. He put his beret back on making his sure his ears were down and the tears and notched edges out of sight then started to walk forward, smiling at the feeling of the dirt of home on his feet.

“You got that socket there, Ben?”

“Yeah, dad.”

“Damn thing. Really don’t need this right now. I wanted to be helping your mother getting ready for when Edward gets back.”

“When’s he supposed to be back, dad?”

“Today or tomorrow. Boy needs to learn to write more often.”

Buck smiled as he got to the end of the lane and stopped, leaning against a gnarled old oak tree that still had a tire swing dangling from one of the thick branches. In front of him was the house was his father and Ben, who’d grown considerably since he last saw the young rabbit. The youngster was helping their dad fix their old tractor. He didn’t feel any panic now, just calm. He liked this, quietly watching his dad try and fix the motor. The rest of the family were either all in the house, underground, or out working the fields.

“I can’t figure this damn thing out,” he turned the key it turn over but nothing happened.

“Sounds like it’s not getting any fuel, dad,” Buck said, smiling and still leaning against the tree.

There was a bang of a head hitting metal and the grumbling sound of his father trying not to swear. His father was a stocky, well built rabbit, hard working and hard wearing. He’d been the rock of this family, maybe a bit strict and hard at times, but ultimately a good father.

He was typical in color, the many shades of brown, white and greys that made up most rabbits. However his deep chestnut eyes and dark rimmed ears gave the elder Sward a distinguished appearance and set him apart.

He looked over, his face full of shock, one paw on a good lump now forming on his head.

There was quite for a number of heart beats, then Ben ran over with a loud cheer and hugged him around the waist. “EDWARD!”

Buck tensed for a moment then relaxed, ruffling the kit’s head.

“Hey, Ben! You’re a bit bigger since I saw you last!”

His father fell back against the tractor with a gasp, his paw now clutching his simple shirt over his heart as if he was seeing at a ghost.

“Edward...” the older rabbit whispered.

He seemed to mentally shake himself then walked briskly forward and pulled his son into an almost
desperate embrace.

“My god, boy! Don’t give your old dad such a start!” he muttered pulling back his eyes overly bright.

Edward had never seen his father cry.

Henry Sward, the unmovable force that was to be sometimes feared, sometimes tense and occasionally easy going, but always respected in his upbringing, was fighting back a lump in his throat and a tear in his eye. He cleared his throat loudly and regarded his son with his paw on each of the younger rabbit's shoulders, pride and joy showing on all of his features.

“Well, wait 'til you mother sees you! She’ll begin fattening you up at once. The whole family can’t wait to see you!” He grabbed Buck’s bag and lead him towards the front door, an arm around his son’s shoulders. “She’s been fretting around like a bunny possessed since we got your letter,” the elder Sward said.


“Thanks, dad,” Ed said pulling back a bit, at least until his father still saw that it really was him though the scrutiny made him a little uneasy.

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“Thanks, dad,” Henry joked making Ben gasp and Buck laugh.

“Well, wait 'til you mother sees you! She’ll begin fattening you up at once. The whole family can’t wait to see you!” He grabbed Buck’s bag and lead him towards the front door, an arm around his son’s shoulders. “She’s been fretting around like a bunny possessed since we got your letter,” the elder Sward said.

“Yeah! Mom even burned the stew yesterday!” Ben added while running ahead to the front door to open it.

The house that sat above the warren was used as an entrance hall, storage area, and a place to entertain larger mammals, a rare event, or other families. When having guests it could sometimes be too much to throw them down into the fluffle of bunnies that made up the family.

What happened next was overwhelming for Edward. He walked with his father down stairs as the older rabbit proceeded to tell him that their family had grown to fifty five strong with more on the way as some of his sisters had gotten married and started families of their own. He also discussed plans on expanding the Sward burrow to accommodate the future kits. Then they reached the warren proper and dozens of rabbits and bunnies of all ages turned to look at the elder Sward and Buck.

A moment’s silence descended, the general feeling a little awkward until the youngest of the trio spoke up, several more following suit that grew until the level filled with the susurration of voices. “Hey! Edward’s back!” Ben shouted over the quiet crowd.

Then all was chaos.

They barely got to the bottom of the stairs before Edward was pulled into the center of his family with pats to his back, hugs, paws shakes and enough kisses to dampen the fur of his cheeks, though some of that was from the copious amount of tears that had sprung forth from his family.

Words of sheer joy and disbelief that he’d made it home to them filled the rabbit’s ears. Few had held out hope they’d see Edward again after they’d all received word of his capture and thought him to be dead. To have him back was miraculous and amazing and sparked a flurry of questions asking about what happened as his family pressed around Edward with others vying for position just wanting to give him the next hug.

It was all a little too much and the only response that Edward could say was how great it was to see them all again. He could feel that sense of panic start to grip his chest again and he needed space to take them all in. Then a short, plump bunny forced her way to the front of the furry throng.
“My darling boy!” she husked quietly, putting both paws either side of his face, her light blue eyes glistening with tears. “What have they done to my beautiful kit?”

Buck smiled down at the doe, the panic that had been building instantly fading under his mother’s tender touch. He’d always been a mother’s boy.

Henry might have been the head of the Sward clan, but Clare was the heart of their family, though she was quite the formidable bunny in and of herself. She was always there for all of her children and never seemed to run out of either energy or love when it came to the family.

“Mom,” was all he could say, his voice quavering slightly as he hugged her back.

Ed was with all his family, in the warmth of home and safe underground from all the fighting, bullets, shells and bombs. As he straightened up to look at them all Edward couldn’t help but feel his chest loosen. Overbearing as his family was, it was great to see them all safe and well, their faces beaming with delight.

Well, until his beret was swiped from his head by one of the younger kits. The crowd laughed along with him as he tried to turn and grab his headgear back, but to no avail. “Hey, you little...”

Then there was a sudden collected gasp from all of the rabbits and bunnies gathered round their wayward kin. Edward’s ears, which had been down behind his head like they always were while he wore his beret, had come up to their full height and revealed the damage of war. He winced he hadn’t wanted his parents or siblings to see them like this. He’d been hoping to try and somehow break it to them gently as he was concerned of the reaction.

His mother’s eyes were full of horror, along with many others while rabbits further back were muttering in shock.

His battered and torn right ear had struck several of those closer speechless.

Damage to a rabbit’s ears was not too uncommon as accidents did happen. However, such damage like Edward’s in rabbit culture was something that others would take note of and talk about, and not kindly. It was the sort of thing that made a rabbit stand out from the rest. Some saw the scarring of ears as a sign that a life was a rough and dangerous. Others saw it as a trait to avoid indicating a foolhardy or careless nature. Ears were an important part of lapin culture.

“Oh, Edward. What have they done to your beautiful ears?” Clare whispered, her paws reaching up to touch the tattered flap of furred flesh.

Edward quickly pulled away before she could make contact, clearing his throat, laughing and shrugging his shoulders, trying to brush it off. “I’ve had a rather rough time as you can see.”

It was his dad who broke the tension in the room.

“Yeah. No joke. I did say you looked like crap. Well, anyway I bet you showed those bastards who was boss like a proper Sward. A proper hero.”

The crowd cheered and all Buck could do was smile and laugh as best he could along with them, feeling both embarrassed and nervous. The panic was now flooding his chest once more. He had to move...get some space. The look his mother was giving him was making him want to run from the guilt.

He needed to get away from the crowd.
“Now give him some space, everyone. He’s back and not going anywhere,” his dad called and thankfully the swarm loosened its pressing strangle hold on him.

Edward’s beret was returned by a rather embarrassed kit whom he smiled at and ruffled his ears to try and make him feel a little better before he was pushed into a seat by his mother who was complaining in a soft voice at how thin he was.

“Well the enemy didn’t feed us too well, mum” he joked and instantly regretted it. The other rabbits gathered around laughed, but it brought back a rather horrifying mental image of an extravagant dining room with a snow leopard in a black uniform at the other end.

Clare Sward bustled off to get her son some food as his father put a rabbit sized pint of cider down in front of him which he grabbed with gratitude and took a long swig. Edward’s almost greedy quaffing of the pint drew a couple of looks, though the other mammals about the room stayed blessedly quite.

“So, how’s the farm been? What’s been going on?” Edward inquired with a sigh of relief as the flavor of apples rolled over his palette, the sweet taste of home washing the memory of the dining hall and snow leopard away for a moment.

His father launched into the latest farm news, how the crops had been, how the war had changed things around town and that the various farmers were getting several needed incentives for helping out with the war effort. Henry then told his son that he’d struck a deal with Stu Hopps for a small patch of woodland that that he wanted to clear for special project he had in mind. The Hopps’ farm was much larger than theirs and the woodland was far too much work at that time to clear with the crops that had been put is, so part of the deal was that the Swards would clear it.

This was good, and Edward began to relax. The less they spoke about what had happened back in those lands across the Channel the better. Besides, how could the rabbit convey to his family what had happened...what he’d seen or done?

His mother returned with a bowl of vegetables that looked like a bit of heaven on a plate. It had been an age since Edward had seen good, home grown food the likes of which was brought to him, fresh from the soil, crisp and sweet, the aroma half the taste. He looked at it and paused, the last time he had seen vegetables anywhere near this good was in that dining hall...and there had been something else decorating the plate other then the veggies...

He started eating, pushing the forming memories down into a dark pit within his mind. Edward’s mother then started to tell him that they had planned a party, something rabbits called a ‘Finding Festival’ for the following day, among other things to celebrate his return, something Buck was not overly excited about.

A Finding Festival was a tradition that went back hundreds of years with rabbits, as they were all farmers and the whole family had to work the fields to make sure everyone was fed, the young rabbits and bunnies never had a lot of time to go out and find mates and meet other families to make friends and such, so these were held twice a year. Each time a different family hosted the celebration. It was always a happy time, a good party with lots of food, dancing and, well...finding, so to say, and judging by the look in his mother’s eyes she was hoping he would find a suitable bunny to settle down with.

Buck had always enjoyed these gatherings as a young kit, and as he had grown had enjoyed them even more when he got the eye for the does. Now, however, it was the last thing on his mind, another duty he would have to perform, for his family, or more so for his mother’s sake. He wouldn’t be taking a doe home, however.
Edward had explained this festival to his two non-rabbit crew members who had found it extremely interesting, and with Buck’s added bravado of what happened at the end of these parties they confirmed that rabbits got their rather free-spirited reputations rightfully. They never could quite understand the liberal way bunnies considered the whole mating thing and he was happy to tell them that rabbits didn’t understand why folks were so touchy about it. Edward, however, did assure them that although they weren’t expected to find a mate at the first attempt, the single lapins were encouraged to get to know each other. This raised eyebrows and elicited a few rather rude comments from the crew. Edward further explained that it was taboo to get a doe in a family way before one was married, though not all the does had this way of thinking which was all quite normal. There was an unspoken etiquette surrounding the whole thing.

“We are good at multiplying,” came the words of Tim, the other rabbit in his crew, when their cohorts just looked on in disbelief.

“So, Edward, what’s your plan now that you’re back?” one of his brothers asked after their mother finished mentioning the Finding Festival.

He took another bite of food to give him time before answering. What he was going to say would more than likely upset his family as he was sure that when the Army had visited the burrow after he had been brought back, they had told them they were going to let Edward leave the fighting, leave the war...but he had other ideas.

“Well, I might as well tell you now that I’m not back for good. As soon as I’m cleared I’ll be heading back to the Regiment.”

“What!” the collected cry from parents and siblings alike rang out.

“Edward James Sward if you think you are going back out there...” his mother began with her trusted wooden spoon pointing at him, her face stern.

He stopped her with a raised paw, took another big swig of his cider and continued.

“It’s done, mum. I’ve made my choice. I’m not finished with them yet,” he said rather more fiercely than he meant to, his mother lowered her spoon and looked over at his father who was quite.

“Look,” he said realizing that he might have hurt his mother with his tone, “I’m here for a good couple of weeks before I’m due to report back, and I’m planning on making the most of it and enjoy the time with my family. I’ll be heading off to visit the airfield not far from here, though. I owe those Red Tails my life...and many others owe them for that matter. Plus it’ll be good to see how the other side lives.”

Edward paused, looking at them all in turn. He knew they wouldn’t get quite understand what he was talking about. He’d always seen the Zootopian Air Corps as a kind of opposite to the Zootopian Tank Regiments. Their aircraft were light, agile and elegant while his tanks were heavy, powerful and menacing. One in the skies, one on the ground.

“Another thing while I’m home...I don’t want to talk about what happened. I just want to forget about it for a bit, be with you guys and relax the Sward way on the lands we work.” He looked at his father.

Henry nodded, a small smile returning to the elder rabbit’s muzzle.

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell the others to not bother you with that hellish business. However, I will say this though,” the Sward patriarch said, his eyes overly bright again. “We thought when we got that letter that you were missing in action, like Stu’s boy...that we would never see you again. We hoped that
you’d come back to us and knew you were still out there. We’re proud of you lad, and just glad you made it back.”

Chapter End Notes

And this is Tom1380's first contribution that lead to the 'Lucky Buck' spin-off!

The reason that I was thrilled with this is rather multifaceted. I was Army myself, so showing more than one perspective in this AU was just the right thing! I, however, was not crazy enough to get into tanks. I was Infantry, and that means I was a different sort of crazy. Even moreso as I was also with an Airborne unit...

We respected tankers, though! Great guys to have around when things got hot!

Still, give Tom1380 some props for this, he certainly earned 'em!!!!
Chapter 11

Chapter by Selaxes, Tom1380

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Buck awoke with a start. He knew time was running out and if he’d been capable of it sweat would have soaked his fur while the covers of his bed wrapped around him like a snake. The rabbit pulled them off himself savagely.

They were coming! He must get free before they got there to take him away!

Buck sat up, finally fighting free of the constricting sheets he looked around, panting wildly as his heart pounded so hard his chest hurt. As he sucked in gulps of air his surroundings and his senses caught back up with him and he felt some of the tension and gut wrenching fear slip away.

He was home.

Home in one of the dorm like rooms of the family warren with his brothers. Well, six of them in this particular room within the underground portion, all in bunk beds. He put his paw over his mouth trying to muffle his heavy breaths then as quickly and quietly as he could Buck slipped out of bed and hurried out. Staggering into the nearest bathroom he leaned over the sink and gagged violently. Despite the clenching of his stomach nothing came up but bile.

This was becoming standard after his nightmares, vomiting and coughing, always reliving that moment as if he was there again. Ed hoped he hadn’t woken up his siblings in their dorm his first night back. He thought that maybe he might get a decent night sleep, but that had been the worst nightmare in a long while.

He spat into the sink and sipped from the tap as if he hadn’t had water in days. Wiping his muzzle with the back of his paw he looked into the old mirror. His ears were hanging low in front of him...his torn and battered ears. Buck’s inevitably found the perfectly round hole in his right.

4-4-6*

That was his number during his time in the POW camp, his identification to the enemy stamped onto the metal disc that had sat in that perfectly round hole.

Edward hung his head and shook it clearing away the though as he arms trembled.

Walking back out into the hallway he was in luck, knowing if he’d had woken any of his brothers or sisters they would have been spying on him. He knew that much for certain. That’s what they’d always done when they’d all been younger, kits inherently curious. Now it might have been a demonstration of concern and worry, but there were those that were just plain nosey as well.

Buck quietly padded back into the dorm, a single candle inside a protected lamp was lit in each room to give those inside a little light if one had to wake up to use the loo. A rabbit’s eyes weren’t great in the dark, so warren rules meant tidy dorms.

Other larger rabbit families had the time to dig out rooms so many of them wouldn’t have to share space after reaching a certain age. However, the Sward clan being fifty five in number meant they didn’t have the free paws to get this sorted yet, so rabbits shared. This was fine and normal in many warrens, and perfectly fine in his with many of Ed’s younger siblings finding comfort in close
He looked to a small wind-up clock on the nightstand, the barely visible face showing that it was five-thirteen. Well, he wasn’t going back to bed now. Some rabbits would be up at this hour, but not many. The Sward family took shifts to do different jobs as was required to run a farm, and families this size meant twilight shifts, so rising at this hour was nothing new.

He threw on some trousers, a loose shirt and waistcoat, and, finally, a flat cap and left the room without making a sound. It felt very strange to be back in normal clothes...almost wrong. When they worked on the tanks in the field they had their denim overalls, but now now he was back in his civvie clothes.

They’d spent the whole previous day talking about the farm with Buck catching up with his many relations. Well, most of them. He hadn’t caught up with all of them there were still many to find and chat with, which would all come in good time.

One of the topics had been the woodland his dad had acquired from the Hopps for his special project. It turned out that his father wanted to plant apple trees and start making cider on a larger scale. The Swards had always made cider, and as a family it was there preferred alcoholic drink of choice. Buck definitely agreed with his father’s plan, that and to his mind they made the best, something many of the other rabbit clans agreed with. Unfortunately they just didn’t have the time or space to take it further than small batches. Now with the war on there just wasn’t enough time or paws to clear space for the extra trees to make it happen. Buck felt that he had the time and he needed some hard work to help him get back to full strength again, so he would make a start on that woodland.

Buck walked though the warren and, as his nickname suggested, his luck was holding out as he didn’t meet anyone on his way out into the main hall. Nor did the rabbit encounter anyone as he went up the stairs into the house and finally out into the early morning air. He could see a pink hue in the sky to the east as his paws slipped silently through dew laden grass while he breathed in the cool air and listened to the sounds around him.

This was heavenly; the quite morning with the birds starting to make their songs to greet the sun, the dew hung on the trees, grass and flowers like jewels and as he took it in he spotted more of the twig dolls. They were legion. Buck saw them in trees hidden, in the grass, by the fences, in buckets, plant pots...you name it they were there. It was like an army of the Sward lands, protecting their farm. Buck wondered if with all the uncertainty and fear in the world if the younger kits found these little things comforting. There were far too many of them to have all been made by Ellie.

Through the dim light he spotted the tractor still sitting there with the tools still scattered around it, forgotten with all the excitement that had taken place the day before.

Well, first things first.

Buck got his paws to work fixing the tractor. After spending a couple of years in and around tanks this wasn’t too hard. It certainly wasn’t as bad as replacing a torsion bar or one of the road wheels or re-linking a track. In a couple of moments the carb was off and Buck discovered that the float camber full of dirt and grinned. It wasn’t hard to figure this one out. One of the younger rabbits had run it out of fuel, dragging all the dirt and sediment at the bottom of the reservoir into the fuel lines and carb and blocked it.

With the carburetor now clean he made sure the fuel lines were clear and turned the starter toggle. It chugged twice and turned over, the body of the old machine rattling and creaking as it did, a cough and a belch of black smoke, another sputter then it came to life with a rumbling purr.
“That a’girl,” he said, giving it an affectionate pat. Machines needed some kind words and some love, too. At least that’s what he believed. Buck was sure that during his time in the tanks he and his crew had gotten their beast to start or out of a bog by willing her out and talking to her.

He hopped on and drove it around the back of the large barn to where it was normally harbored, then shut it down and jumped off and started to grab the things he needed for his work.

Axe, crosscut saw, felling wedges and a sledgehammer, amongst other things, Buck dug out storage boxes before putting the tools in one of the more rickety paw pulled carts and set off towards the woods.

He didn’t want to take one of the better carts as the others would need it for the more proper work around the farmstead. Buck also knew that this was normally a two mammal job minimum, but he wanted some alone time and to do something for the family on his own. He knew it wouldn’t take them long to find him, he had left a quick note saying he had gone out to do a proper day of work and that was it.

The walk through the fields was wonderful, seeing all the crops and the hard work his family had put in. The crops had changed more than a bit since Buck was last here, all for the war effort and growing what was needed, of course. By the time he got to where his father wanted to start clearing the sun was up enough for him to work. The rabbit paused to look up at the trees, memories flitting through his mind of younger days and innocent times. He’d played in these woods as a kit, made forts and castles and could see some fresh ones through the branches, younger siblings following suit. Buck would have to make them a new one when he was done.

Taking off his waistcoat and flat cap, Buck took the axe in his paws and picked out his first tree and set to work. He’d always loved this kind of work, it was therapeutic. Every swing, every ‘Thunk’ of the axe head hitting wood, every grunt of effort felt like he was working out the tenseness and stress he had felt. It was like all the hurt was being sent down the shaft of the axe into the head then exploding into the splinters of wood that flew away with each blow.

He cut out a nice wedge into the side in which he wanted the tree to fall, then with the saw cut into the opposite side. After making a good cut, he put the iron felling wedges into the cut and started to hammer them in. After a good couple of whacks the sound of cracking wood that was also felt in the ground under his feet came and the tree began to fall. Hopping out of way in case the back of the tree kicked up, he watched and listened to the dull boom as it hit the dirt and loam around the base of the trunk.

Buck grinned from ear to ear. Now that felt good! A step of progress for himself and his family. Another bonus to all this was his family wouldn’t go cold next winter with all the fire wood. That and they’d be able to sell a lot of this off for some extra money. That knowledge made him feel even better. With a sort of bemused expression, Buck grabbed his saw and axe and started to sort the tree he’d felled to clear it out of the way. And that’s what he concentrated on all morning, only stopping for a moment to grab a drink from the stream, or pick a dandelion flower and leaves to munch on, one of his favorites. Buck wasn’t as fit as he had been so he couldn’t work quite as full on as he’d done in the past.

That would change, though.

It must have been around noon by the time he heard voices coming up from the main portion of the farm. Good timing, he thought, as he was just brining down the next tree. The hard, loud sound of splintering wood and the ‘BOOM’ of it hitting the earth was something to see.

“Cheese and crackers, Edward!”
That was Josh, and sure enough he was the first one to walk around the newly fallen tree, with a look of surprise on his face.

Edward put his flat cap back on putting his ears down, which he’d spotted Josh staring at, and walked over to the group.

Josh, Ben, Chris and Charlotte.

Ben being the youngest, Josh and Chris being from his own litter, and Charlotte. She was two litters older then he was.

“See you been busy all morning. We brought you some lunch,” Charlotte said placing a basket down onto the grass nearby.

“Been looking for you for hours,” Chris said looking over Edward’s handy work.

“Not quite ‘hours’, Chris, but awhile,” Josh added walking up beside Edward and rolling his eyes. “Come on, lad. Time for some lunch,” arm around Edward’s shoulders he lead him over to the grass where they all sat down.

The banter that began to flow back and forth almost made the day feel like old times.

“Been back a day and already wondering off,” Charlotte said with a half smile.

“Well, you know I got to get back into the swing of things quick, haven’t I? ‘Swing’! Get it?” Buck inquired with a smirk.

“You’re really not funny,” Chris told him.

Lunch was simple but good and consisted of bread still warm from the oven, margarine and some things they had picked up along the way.

Ed smiled at them all fondly as these were some of his closer siblings.

“Dad nearly lost the plot when he saw you had gone off, then proper lost it when he found the tractor had disappeared, then almost cried when he found it and it worked!” Chris said with a laugh as he bit into his bread.

“Really?” Edward asked with concern.

“Yeah. Your note was a little vague.”

“I just needed to make a start on something and I woke up early anyway, so I thought what the hell.” Edward couldn’t tell his siblings that were seated on the grass around him how much this little exchange meant to him. It was prefect, quiet and calm, just what he needed. Every now and then he would go silent and let them talk, content to just listen. Most of it was gossip; who had been seen behind the hay bales with a Hopps or a Clay rabbit or bunny, who had fallen out with who and why, and what they all thought of it.

“So, Edward, you looking forward to the Finding Festival?” young Ben asked brightly. He was trying to sound like his older brothers and sisters who had a great interest in this. To the kits as young as Ben, however, it was nothing but a massive play time. While the older bucks and does were brushing fur, prepping their Sunday best to make sure the look as good as they could, the younger ones knew it was one of the few times they could simply cut loose and not get in trouble for it.
If Ben had asked his brother that last night, he would have said yes, but it would have been a lie. Now, though, Buck was thinking it might be fun, though the crowd might get to be a little much. But with the size of the gathering, even their small farm and how spread out these things became, he was fairly sure it wouldn’t be too bad and could nip off for a bit of privacy if needs be. That and sitting there with his siblings Edward felt like there was nothing he couldn’t quite handle.

“Yeah, be a good laugh to catch up with Clays and the Hopps,” Buck said with a more genuine smile.

“You tell me you ain’t thinking about finding a doe for the night,” one of the brothers said. “I bet you’re proper rusty, could do with a good polish, hey?”

“Chris, don’t be so vulgar,” Charlotte said frowning at her brother.

“What? I know you have eyes on William Clay, you know the dark brown rabbit with the white face,” he teased.

“Oh, hush!” The red ears gave Charlotte away.

They all laughed.

Edward guessed that if he hadn’t joined up he, too, would have been looking forward to this as a chance to find a mate, or even just a girlfriend if he didn’t want anything too long term. But at this time he wasn’t interested in all that. That wasn’t to say he wouldn’t want to share a bed with a nice doe for the night, a bit of mutual warmth and maybe more. He just didn’t want to do that with as close friends as the Clays and Hopps were. It wouldn’t be right. Would it?

The talk moved into what they were going to wear, and after Chris getting rather ‘Are you serious?’ looks from Edward, Josh and even Ben for asking Edward what he would wear, Buck let them talk amongst themselves again.

Buck reached down to pick up the tin that held the margarine. The lid was recessed into the can, not unlike a paint pot, and he tried to get open it the best he could with his paws, only to grumble and pick up the knife. He hadn’t noticed the others had stopped talking and been watching.

“Um, Ed?” Chris said rather tentatively.

He looked up at him then saw that they all looked rather shocked. Buck winced again as they’d spotted the fact that he didn’t have claws. A rabbit’s claws were never something to boast about but they were there and quite useful much of the time. His had been pulled out when he had been captured.

That happy little bubble had once again popped.

“Guys, don’t worry. They’re growing back, see?” He showed them by pulling back the fur on his finger with his thumb and exposed the fresh claw growing back, his voice as light as he could make it. “Just not quite long enough to use yet, though it’s one way to get the dirt out from under them, hey?” he said grinning and trying to brush it off, though his stomach was a pit of nervously writhing snakes again.

His siblings looked at each other but didn’t probe any further and started commenting on his work again.

“So, were you going to do all this on your own?” Josh asked raising an eyebrow.
“Why? You want to help?” Edward tossed back to Josh, a grin now on his face, though it wasn’t his true smile but his PR smirk. Buck wouldn’t be allowed to forget his time as a POW, even for a little while. Every inch of him held a nasty reminder.

“I would, mate, but you only have one axe.”

“Yeah, but the saw can be used by two and I have just the tools to start prepping this one,” Buck said patting the tree he had just felled.

“...damn...”

“You had to open your mouth!” Charlotte pushed Josh over as they all laughed while Buck gave a smile that didn’t quite light up his eyes like it use to.

No Sward was scared of hard work, so they all got to their feet and started to set to it. Josh and Chris were sawing up the recently felled tree while Charlotte and Ben were taking the smaller branches off.

Buck took position in front of the next tree and started to swing. This time, though, with each hit he grunted and each swing he put more force into it. It was one way to work the snakes out of his belly.

It wasn’t long before another tree came down to a big cheer and they all concentrated on sorting what was left, rendering the branches and trunk into manageable pieces. Then the sound of a distant engine caught everyone’s attention and it wasn’t long after that the old tractor came into view. It rumbled to a stop a few yards away, their dad jumping down off the tractor and smiling ear to ear. Henry Sward couldn’t help the jovial mood, thinking how amazing it was that a son returning from the dead could make him so happy and have such an impact on everyone in the family.

“You made a start on our family’s future, I see,” the elder Sward said.

“Yeah, about time you stopped going on about it,” Josh said laughing but stopped when their father shot him a look that said run or else, which Josh nearly did, his nose and tail twitching. Their father shook his head quickly laughed himself, and for the second time that day Josh got pushed over.

“I’ve been sent by your mother to collect you all. About time you get washed up ready for tonight. The Clays are putting up the stage and some of the Hopps are helping clear the yard for dancing.” He stuck his thumbs in his pockets looking around the small dent they had made in the tree line. “So, my boy, is this the work you mentioned?”

“Yeah. I’ll clear as much as I can, then when this is all over, I want to taste the finest cider in Zootopia and beyond.” Buck looked at his father while patting his shoulder and smiled.

Henry regarded them all, not only Buck, but his other kits as well and felt his chest tighten, as if the sight of them all there holding the tools of their lively hood and the dirt in their fur was a source of great pride.

“I tell you what, you five will get to drink the first batch,” Henry told them with a firm nod as he stood a touch taller with a content expression.

“Now there’s something to look forward to!” Chris patted Josh and Charlotte on the back while Ben jumped in the air with glee.

“Now, grab your stuff. We need to get back or your mother will have my pelt.”

They went about collecting the tools while Edward looked back at the woodland. They’d made a damn good start today and he’d get this going as far as he could before he left again. Shoulder the
axe he jogged back to the tractor and jumped onto the back of the trailer his dad had hooked up, then they set off back to the warren.

“So, you still know how to Lindy Hop, Ed?” Josh grinned.

“You insult me,” Ed replied grinning back. A proper Bnnyburrow rabbit never forgot how to Lindy Hop.

When they arrived back at the house Buck could barely recognize it. He jumped off the back of the tractor and looked around mouth open, his folks had pulled out all the stops this time round and gotten things ready for a grand party in just few hours. Rabbits all over the property were busy getting everything just right. Hay bales were being placed all over to provide places to sit, a fenced off yard right in front of the house had been cleared and rollered flat while the Clay rabbits had parked one of their larger flat trailers on the far side to act as a stage and instruments were already being set out. Before the war they would have holiday lights strung out but it was summer and the days would be long enough for them to make do. There where flowers everywhere along with bunting and homemade decorations, most carrying the Zootopia flag.

A paw painted banner had been set over the stage with bright bold letters. ‘To Finding lost family and Finding new love’

The barn was open and the inside had been cleared. To each side of the barn were plank tables for food and drink and it seemed Buck’s father had brought out his reserve of the finest Sward cider with the other families adding beer, ale, bitter and lots of it. Part of this festival was about families coming together to share so the Clays and Hopps would bring food and drink themselves adding to the feast.

While the food wasn’t quite as extravagant as past festivals, they were lucky that there were veggies and could eat off the land, but the selection was more subdued without the normal baked treats. Though what was set out looked great and was nothing to scoff at including Hopps blueberries and Clays strawberries, now that was a treat!

“You done gawking?” Charlotte asked as she grabbed his arm and marched him off into the house to start getting ready.

“That’s amazing. You’ve all been working on this?” he asked slightly stunned as they walked down the stairs to the main hall where equally manic activity was going on, all of it final preparations for the bi-annual soiree.

“What the devil? Look at you two!” their mother’s reprimand sounding across the hall cutting off any reply Charlotte could’ve made. Nothing got past the Sward matriarch and she walked over, her wooden spoon in paw as if it were a Field Marshal’s Baton, something that was never a good sign. No rabbit in the Sward warren could stand up to Clare’s glare. While it seemed all rabbit mothers gained a natural talent to put fear into the hearts of all that dwelled within their walls, Buck’s mother had become the master of such tactics.

“Do you need any help? I haven’t done anything to-“ Buck was cut off by a wave of her paw and spoon.

“Not looking like that you’re not! Now go get ready. You’ve done more than the enough, now scat,” her voice softened as she finished and the spoon applied to their backsides to hasten them wasn’t meant to hurt but to hurry the two along.

Charlotte and Buck didn’t need telling twice.
Buck headed back to his dorm to collect his cleaning things, brushes and so on while Charlotte waved her goodbye and padded off to her own.

Once he had all his things he made his way male bathing room.

It was funny, when he had joined the military living with a large rabbit family had definitely put him in good stead for life in a barracks with no privacy and no real personal space. Yeah, the barracks hadn’t been homely or comfortable or warm like his home, but it hadn’t been too bad and the sharing of everything way of life was nothing new.

They had male and female areas, though no hot water, which wasn’t a problem. Just having running water was a luxury to Buck now. As he entered he was hoping the bathing area would be empty, which of course it wouldn’t be. Sure enough a handful of his brothers were also getting themselves set for the night’s events, all talking happily of the celebration to come or the does they had their eyes on.

The room was large and tiled while one side had old wooden benches with hooks above. From that the next wall held sinks and a couple of old mirrors, on the other side was the showers themselves one big room with about twelve show heads there would be other such rooms around the warren to cope with the many rabbits. As Buck looked at the set up he realized that maybe the term ‘shower’ was a bit of a misnomer. In reality it was a series of pipes that let out into hanging buckets that had holes punched in their bottoms and not the spigots that he’d used in the military.

Open showers were all completely normal with army life in this day and age, however Edward did have something he didn’t want his siblings to see. One was how skinny he’d become. The other were the scars from the shrapnel that were concentrated down the right side of his body. Like his ears it was what Buck felt would let them see what he’d done...see through him. Or even stopping them from seeing him as their brother altogether. It was a sign of his survival even as he wished with all his heart that his crew and friends had also survived. It made Buck feel somehow tainted, unclean, and baring his body left him feeling wide open and vulnerable.

“Hey, Ed! Where you been all day?” one of his brothers asked throwing Buck a towel, spotting that he didn’t have one himself.

“Up at the woodland. Started clearing it for dad,” he said catching the proffered towel in his nearly clawless paws.

“Ah...that’s where you went off to?” his brother turned back to his mirror and trimming the fur around his ears.

Buck undressed and got under the water without looking or talking to anyone else. Best to get on with it. He made sure to keep his ears down even though the others could still see the damage, and his back to the room. Buck did notice the chatter died and a tense silence had replaced it. As he washed it felt like the tension was getting thicker, congealing into a thick sludge that threatened to suffocate Buck, the splashing of water over his head and face not helping that visual in the slightest. A surge of panic gripped his insides like an iron fist and he was sure they were seeing something else, not him...he could tell. It wasn’t their brother Edward in the shower, but a monster from the battlefield that was tainted with the same madness that the enemy held. Something foul and dark...

A killer.

He retched unable to suppress the gag that crawled up his throat, he did his best to disguise it as a cough. However, the eldest brother in the bathing room who had thrown him the towel picked up on Buck’s panic and did his best to engage the chatter once more. The distraction of mentioning one of
the more popular Clay family does helped and as conversation started back up this gave Buck his chance to finish cleaning and quickly get away.

He brushed the last of the dirt from his fur with such force it looked like he was trying to take his coat and the skin off his body and rinsed as quickly as he could. Turning off the water over the bucket and grabbing his towel, he wrapped it around himself, still wet he grabbed his dirty clothes, said a quick goodbye to his brothers and left the shower room and walked across to his dorm. Unfortunately it wasn’t a clean escape.

“Ed! Put some clothes on won’t...Ed....oh, my lord...”

Buck tried to smile apologetically but all he could do was grimace to the small group of his sisters who had been comparing dresses for the evening. He grabbed the door handle and nearly tore it out of the door as he pulled instead of pushed. In his panic he then pushed so hard that he half staggered into his dorm and slammed the door shut behind him.

Leaning back against the door he tried to hold off the panic that was now surging through him. Buck was doing his utmost to control his breathing so his sisters wouldn’t hear him. Fortunately no one tried to enter or see if there was something the matter and left him in peace.

Thank the heavens his dorm was at least empty. He staggered over to his bunk and sat down heavily on his bed, his head in his paws.

He slowly, and with a great deal of effort, brought his breathing back under control then started to try and unlock his shoulders that felt like they were trying to hold up the weight of his tank. This was something he knew he would have to get use to, of course. His family would be shocked and he couldn’t snap or pour scorn his siblings for staring. How could they not? Still, he hated the stares and the way that when he looked at mammals they quickly turned away again. Or even worse...pity. That and they whispered on the trains behind their paws, almost sounding accusatory. His ears weren’t as sharp as they once were, but they were still good enough to hear them. Buck balled his paws into fists pulling on his own fur. They had seen him for what he was now...

NO!

He stood up and grabbed the frame of the top bunk and gripped it as hard as he could, the wood actually creaking slightly.

He was home and his family all around him. They hadn’t seen what he was yet, otherwise he would have been turned out. His sister’s reaction had been one of sympathy, not horror. Again he was being foolish and, to his mind, selfish. His crew...his bothers in arms, had not come home. Buck was home and he owed it to them to enjoy this time, even though at that moment he wanted to be alone in the woodland working...working until his paws bled. To work the storm out of his body, mind and soul with brute physical exertion, not being surrounded by hundreds of excited rabbits clamouring to talk about what he had been through. But he had a duty to his family as well, to go up there talk to them and smile like he’d learned.

He truly wanted to be with his family. Buck turned and slammed his fist into the frame on the bunk growling at himself. “Get a grip!” He was a sergeant in the Zootopian Tank Regiment, after all!

He got to his feet with that in mind and started to get dressed, knowing just what to wear. His olive green dress uniform, which had seen him do all of his public appearances, and it felt good to put it back on, like a second pelt. Like thick cast armor.

One he could take cover behind.
His family had asked to host this event to celebrate his return and he owed it to them to go up there and at least try to enjoy himself.

As he finished getting dress and made sure his uniform was as exactly as it should be, the medals and ribbons in their proper places and no loose threads from his chevrons, Buck realized that this wasn’t just about him, wasn’t just about his family. Satisfied that he looked proper, Buck then crouched down to his trunk that every member of the Sward warren had to keep their most personal things in under a lock. He pulled out a small cloth draw string bag and opened it, four tin tags fell into his paw about 30mm square. They used to be connected and double sided marking. Identity tags with a round part that joined the two sides together.

The tag was what had left him with that prefect round hole in the remains of his right ear. These were the tags the Axis SS clamped to the ears of captured prey. And in his paw was his own, the number ending 4-4-6 and that of his one of his crew, a loader, a rabbit like himself called Tim Burrowington. Tim’s tag number ended in 4-4-4. It was all that Buck had left of his crew and to him this was his connection to them. Everything else that had been a part of his crew, the little things that had brought them together had burned along with their home on the battlefield with the Matilda Mk2 that had been named ‘Lucky Buck’.

He closed his paw around the tags and put them into his right breast pocket, swiped his ears back and placed his beret on his head.

Ed left his dorm, some of his sisters were still there talking quietly but stopped as he closed the door softly behind him. They looked at their brother with wide eyes, still unsure as to the display minutes before.

“Sorry about that, girls. I was having a bit of a silly moment. Pay it no mind.” He smiled with a small nod and walked off towards the world above.

In his uniform he felt more in control and at that moment it was what he needed to keep it together.

He was stopped a couple of times along the way by different family members complementing his uniform or asking him if he was excited, he talked with them all until they had to rush off to get ready and eventually made it above ground. It was still all paws on deck but things looked like they were reaching the final stages of preparation.

He watched quietly, standing to one side in the warm summer air, enjoying the small moment to himself while he observed all the movement and activity. Then he saw some ears twitch and tilt towards a distant sound which Buck picked up a heartbeat later. Yeah, his ears were showing signs of wear.

However he knew that sound and frowned in surprise while the rabbits around him looked a little alarmed at the roar that was making its way up the lane. That wasn’t the sound of an engine that the rabbits of Bunnyburrow had heard before.

He walked to the entrance of the lane that led to the Sward farm to see the A9 Cruiser making its way up the drive with an antlered figure sitting on the turret. A load of rabbits and bunnies all rushed up and stood behind Buck looking at this iron monster as it clattered to a halt before to them the engine being shut off and the resulting silence almost deafening.

Dan Antlerbee looked embarrassed to have caused yet another scene.

“Dan! What brings you out here?” Buck asked, his paws on his hips while frowning up at the stag.
Dan jumped down looking a little embarrassed.

“I’m really sorry, Buck. That damned Hodges had blabbed where the tank was parked, to what seems to be the whole town! I had a load of mammals wanting to have a look so it had to be moved, and I couldn’t think of anywhere else to park it.”

The throng of bunnies around Buck were torn between staring at the tank or at the uniformed stag, many had never seen anything like the Cruiser before.

“Everyone, this is Lieutenant Daniel Antlerbee,” Buck introduced the stag to the crowed of ever growing rabbits to try and spare the cervine the awkward stares.

“Afternoon everyone! Sorry to barge in like this and my apologies if I have interrupted a...is this a party?” he inquired looking around. It was his turn to look confused.

“Ed, what the in the rotten fields is going on?” Henry Sward was striding over, looking at his son, the deer and the machine behind him as if they were from another world entirely.

“Dad, this is the stag who has been taking me around while I have been doing my talks, he’s a friend of mine,” Ed said as he brought his father forward to meet Dan who was now smiling.

“Mr Sward! It’s a pleasure to finally get to meet you! Dan Antlerbee, Department of Public Relations,” the stag said getting down on one knee to be at the rabbits height so he could face him as an equal. To rabbits this kind of over the top getting down to their level was normally offensive but in the case of a deer doing this it was quite the opposite as their antlers would be rather dangerous if he bowed his head to look down. It was a custom for the stag, when formally meeting someone of a small species, to get down on one knee and was a sign of respect.

His father brightened as Ed introduced him, and this only increased as Dan introduced himself so properly. Trust Dan as a public relations figure; he had to know all the different cultural rules for each species and he had played that one out rather well.

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you, Dan. What brings you to our farm in...that?”

“My apologies, but I was hoping, if it wasn’t too much trouble that is, if I could park this here at your farm out of harm’s way until Buck does his speech at the country fair?”

His father looked a little confused and looked at his son.

“Buck is my nickname, dad. Well, ‘Lucky Buck’,,” Edward told his father. “It’s an army thing.”

His dad, still looking slightly confused, turned back to Dan who was looking around again.

“Could I ask what the occasion is?” Dan asked.

Buck grinned. This should be interesting seeing how Dan reacted to this, but as his dad explained the stag didn’t look all that surprised.

“Oh! I’ve heard of these!” the stag said with a wide smile, his interest clear.

“Well, Dan, as friend of my son...Buck,” he shook his head with his own smile, “you’re welcome to join our festival if you want. That is if you don’t find it too hard being surrounded by hundreds of rabbits.”

Dan looked rather surprised at being invited to the event.
“I don’t know what to say except that it would be an honor, sir!” he replied.

His father laughed good naturedly. “Call me Henry, lad”.

“Then Henry it is. And it’s only polite that I bring something to this event so I see you have some music. I’ll head back to town and grab my equipment and what not, and we will make the Sward Finding Festival the envy of Bunnyburrow!” he turned and walked back to a car that had followed the tank up the lane which now held the mammals that had driven it there that were a part of Dan’s publicity team.

“I’ll be back in a flash!” and with that he drove back down the path.

Buck couldn’t help but laugh as he turned to look at his father.

“I guess I should move this as he’s left it in the middle of the road.” He hopped up onto the tank with an ease come from long practice and familiarity with the machine and looked down at them all. The younger kits were looking on in wide eyed amazement. Kids always loved the tank. Well, this was a good chance for this machine that was built to kill to do some good and spread some happiness. If there was one thing that could make Buck feel better, it was making kits happy.

“Come on then! What you waiting for? Jump on!” he called and there was a sudden scramble of not only the younger bunnies, but some of the adults too, to climb on and sit on the metal beast. Once they saw how at ease Edward ‘Buck’ Sward was with the machine, the others seemed to relax almost at once, plus a lot of them wanted a ride.

Buck slipped down into the driver position and left front hatch to give him a better view. This tank was a real death trap in his eyes, but to the rabbits around him it was an indestructible machine with its three machine guns and two pounder cannon.

Buck sat there for a moment looking around inside this tank, it always felt strange sitting in this tank while they had been touring. On one side it brought back some horrible memories; on the other some good ones and a strange feeling of being in a world he understood more than any other, even more so than farming. He’d trained in these tanks and had become a commander of one. Buck knew how they ticked and what they needed to be at their best...they had become a home away from home.

Yet this home was missing the family that went with it and this spot, the driver’s position, had belonged to a good swift fox named Kevin Tipping. Kevin had always had a picture of his wife and kit on the instrument panel.

A small head hanging upside down in front of his hatch jolted Buck out of his brooding.

“This is amazing, Ed! You can drive this?” the kit asked stumbling over his own words in his excitement.

Buck smiled a true one again, his boys would have been happy to know that he could make some kits happy with their house of destruction.

“Yeah, I sure can. Now tell everyone to hold on tight!” With that he fired it up and took them for a good trip around the barns. The A9 had a full tank of fuel and he was sure they wouldn’t miss a couple of liters of petrol and once the tank rides had finished it would look pretty impressive out front.

Chapter End Notes
So, the return of Edward 'Lucky Buck' Sward continues. Personally I thought Tom1380 did a pretty damn fine job of amping things up! A little more coming right up!!!!
Chapter 12

Chapter by Selaxes, stevegallacci

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was more to the aerial battles over Zootopia than Spitfires and Messerschmitts. The less glamorous Hurricane was also hard at work, and despite their unimposing nature, the rabbit pilots who flew in some of those squadrons enjoyed a sterling record of service.

The pilots of the squadron got the last of their after breakfast tea together as they collected for their morning 'sermon'.

The comically small and fuzzy CO scuttled up to the front of the room. Despite his appearance, he had been a decorated pilot in the first war and an able commander here. The unit was too small and intimate to need a podium or other formalities of that sort, though the wall behind him was painted in 'black board' flat black to use as an oversize surface as needed. There was also a roll down motion picture screen available.

"Other than the day's assignments, which I'll wait 'till last, we have some new intel to pass on to you regarding the hostiles. Captain Twillingham."

With that, a Hedgehog stepped forward. "I'm Captain Twillingham, in from Zootopia Central Command. I've come with a bit of heads up for you in your intercepts of enemy bombers, especially the Junkers.

"The last few downings have found a couple of machines fitted with improved defensive armament. So far, most appear to be unit level improvisations, but we can expect versions of them to become standard over time.

"The first is more of the various guns are being bulk belt and bin fed units instead of the smaller magazine fed types, and the newer guns have a higher firing rate. So, expect a greater volume of fire. And more guns in the main cabin in general, but so far, the arrangements seem to be haphazard, partly due to how cramped the space is to start with.

"One machine was found with a 20mm gun in a flexible mount firing forward, and we can expect more of that kind of thing in the future. A couple of Heinkels have also had a 20 in the nose mount, too.

"Another addition is a paired machinegun in the lower aft position. That type weapon is going to be something to watch out for, as you now have paired guns, each firing at about a thousand rounds a minute rate, and they might get mounted else where."

There was muttering about that as one of the new unit losses was while attempting a below and behind attack.

"As always...as you can, use your gun cameras. Even if there isn't a kill, the film can give us hints to detail changes on the machines, as well as unit numbers and such."

"Thank you for that, Captain Twillingham." The CO was concerned, but things needed to be done. "Okay, then. Something more to worry about. But as for our ops today, it will be more of the same. First flight will be on the line and ready to go as we're signaled. Though they didn't exactly ask for it,
I'd like second flight to be ready to go right behind them."

The pilots nodded. They were already largely at that level, so it wouldn't be a hardship to keep everyone at the ready. But, before anything more was said, a runner burst into the room. "Sir! Bandits, crossing sector twelve, heading due north." A formation going that way wouldn't be their responsibility, but the enemy commonly did multiple attacks to thin out the defenders, so they had to be ready for a likely thrust in their section.

First thing in the morning attacks were uncommon, perhaps there was filthy weather down south. The newfangled radio detection system wouldn't be affected, but poor visibility could prevent final visual interception. Things were all too clear in the skies up here, though.

"Remember the daily codes and stand by your planes, and good hunting."

The CO and a couple staffers went to the comm center, a small separate bombproof where the 'phones and radios hid. Central plotting was on the line, and the CO took down a couple notes. "Runners!" And four young Ranger Scouts with ZAF armbands popped up before him. He gave them a simple code number that they wrote on clipboards and sent them off. Each one in turn ran to the ready aircraft to show the pilots their patrol zone without broadcasting anything to unwanted ears.

Then they were off.

For this kind of patrol, the formation was to maintain radio silence until contact with the enemy. But they were able to communicate with each other after a fashion. Several knew Morse code, and could use their navigation lights as signals, others used informal hand signs.

Flight leader Talbot was as much a veteran of this thing as anyone, the war was little more than a year on and he had been on the continent in the opening actions, so he was already the 'old mammal'. Most of the flight with him were newer to the fight, though none, at the moment, were so green as to be a concern. While not as bad as in the first war, the first few sorties were the most hazardous to freshly minted pilots, and these lads had a bit of seasoning in them.

Further, they were mostly bomber interceptors; the Spitfires down on the coast were the ones to tie up escorting enemy fighters, who were already coming to the edge of their effective range. Anyone who got though would be sucking fumes and loathe to engage in combat. That left the bombers as 'easy meat' for the Hurricanes. At least in theory.

But these bombers were fast-ish, not as lumbering as they were portrayed, and attacking them with rifle-calibre machine guns took a bit of work. Their own 20 millimeter cannon were on the horizon, but for now they had to make-do with the .303’s. And that the bombers could shoot back, and now with increasing effectiveness, added to the task.

While most pilots prided themselves on their keen eyesight, Talbot was not the least shy about using a pair of binoculars to scan the sky ahead of him. Enemy formations were usually not all that big, maybe a score of machines, or if more, rather scattered into smaller clusters. And as they were likely flying at a modest altitude, contrails were an only sometimes thing.

Being able to spot them an extra few miles away could mean the difference between a well-positioned attack and a fruitless game of tag.

And lucky day. He had them. And far enough away that they likely didn't see him yet. He hand signaled to the rest of the formation, the bombers didn't likely have the frequency monitored, but he didn't want to jinx any surprise they might be able to gain. They were in a perfect vector to be able to climb above and slightly behind the enemy, so they could make fast diving attacks.
The notion of hovering behind a target and leisurely hosing it with gun fire looked great on the flickers, but as they could shoot back just as easily made that tactic dicey at best. Fast slashing attacks at advantageous angles were the real key to success, and the added speed of the dive helped.

Several miles closer and the bombers began to bunch up, they'd likely seen the flight now, and Talbot felt free to broadcast the intercept, giving course, speed and altitude. These looked like a well-disciplined group, holding a fairly tight formation to provide mutually supporting fire.

"Flight, keep an eye out, those bombers aren't going anywhere anytime soon, so make sure there isn't anyone else up her with us." Becoming over-focused on an objective was a quick way to get bounced.

Then, almost on cue, "Hopps to flight leader, I got someones due west."

Talbot got his glasses up, there they were, but fortunately they were not fighters; instead it was another bomber formation. Curse the luck. This batch alone was about all they could reasonably engage, and even then not stop all of them. Another whole group. Damn. He called it in. He had been told that the radio detection network was optimized to work outward, on and beyond the coast, and less coverage of deep in-land traffic. That's why they had a fairly wide search pattern instead of a direct line on the threat.

"Flight leader to Hopps. You found them, so they're all yours. Harass them as you can, but more important, stick with them and call in their progress. Vector another unit that can engage." Jonny Hopps was a good lad, ought to be able to handle that. He didn't like taking anyone away from this attack, but once another flight was on the other threat, he could get in with that action.

Then they were on the enemy. The attack was done in pairs from opposite sides of the bomber formation, to divide the collective gunner's attention. The first pass did not seem to have any effect. Even with eight machine guns firing, hitting with telling damage was an only sometimes thing.

The second pass had more success, with one of the Junkers wobbling out of formation, the cockpit 'greenhouse' shattered and the crew likely slain within. The type of plane had the crew of four all together in the cramped space and they fought, and often died, as a group.

The third was also unsuccessful, moreover, one of the Hurricanes, Jackson's, was now streaming coolant and he likely only had moments before his engine over-heated. With luck he could find an aerodrome or just a particularly wide farmer's field to land on.

And so it went. The fighters harrying the bombers over the countryside. One bomber dramatically exploded and the remains fell as a fireball. Another slid out of formation trailing smoke. The rear half of the cockpit greenhouse was jettisoned and two of the crew crawled out to parachute. A third dropped out of the lower gunner's position. Then the machine rolled over on its back to begin a death dive, and only then did the fourth, the pilot, fall clear.

While Talbot and the rest were keen on attacking and destroying the bombers, with the knowledge that crews were being killed at times, they still held their breath for the safe exit of fellow aviators once the hated machines were slain.

Then Harrison's machine fell out of the attack and was not responding to radio hails. As the Hurricane was still flying at full throttle, no one could afford to pursue it with any hope of returning to the fray. "Is anyone out?" Talbot called. No one wanted to disengage from the fight with rounds still in their guns. Dilby was in the middle of an attack pass and yelped, "That would be me!" as he veered away, his guns now dry. "I got some holes in me, but I'm fine. I'll look after Harrison."
Those kinds of 'Flying Dutchbeast' flights were an occasional and awful event, a dead pilot in a still functional plane. Dillby would follow Harrison, with the forlorn hope he was simply unconscious, a thing that could happen too. He would otherwise escort the dead to a final crash site, or, more grimly, if the machine threatened to approach a town, he could nudge it into a dive and crash it short.

All too soon the action was over for the flight, out of ammo and low on fuel, they had to disengage. They had downed six bombers and two more were trailing something they shouldn't, fuel or coolant, but unless they witnessed an actual downing, such didn't count.

Talbot could hear several other air battles raging in the sector, but no one, so far, coming to take up the battle on this particular remaining enemy formation. There was still something like a dozen tons of bombs heading to rain down on their home.

Spirits were somber after on the flight home. They had only hurt, but not stopped their part of the enemy attack, and Harrison was likely gone. Then as they arrived back at base, there were extra anxious moments on the ground when Jackson's, Hopps' and Dillby's machines didn't touch down with the rest.

And there was more bad news, Porter's plane didn't stop after landing and tangled in a perimeter fence. No equipment failure, he'd been hit and couldn't operate the brakes.

As Talbot got ready to land, the leader was always the last down, he had the small satisfaction of seeing that the second flight was away, chasing down some other enemy formation no doubt.

The CO scampered out to meet him as he climbed out, his ground crew relieved to see him whole, though they immediately began a check out of the machine to make sure it was alright for reload for another sortie if necessary.

"Bad day," The CO observed.

"Any word on anyone?"

The CO made a face. "Nothing yet."

"Any new business coming?"

"Nothing from Central. Second flight is after the tail end of this one. As I guessed, the morning attack was to take advantage of dirty weather to the south. Wonder if the Boffins will come up with those radio thingies that could fit in a plane?"

"That would be a thing, dirty weather or night fighting could be a real option."

"Heard there are some nocturnal types doing what they can to work the night bombers."

"What? Didn't know we had any cats in the formations."

"No, it's those foxes, the expats. Heard they're doing well, just not enough of them to really do the deed."

"Yeah, even with us at full strength, we haven't been able to stop them all either."

And the day wore down, ground crews worked on the Hurricanes, all of them had at least a few holes in them, though the enemy guns were also rifle calibre 8mm, nearly identical to their own .303s. Unless they hit something vital, the smallish holes were otherwise a mere nuisance, and were quickly covered with doped fabric patches.
One fighter was going to need some more detailed examination, with too many holes in potentially important places. And another needed an engine change. Plenty to keep the crews busy.

Porter's plane was chewed up enough to need depot level repair, and crews began to disassemble it for transport. Porter himself was also a bit chewed up, and he was going to hospital for a good while. When asked why he didn't call out his injuries when it happened, he simply pointed out there wasn't anything anyone could do about it, and as he could still fly, so there it went.

News on the missing pilots came slowly. Jackson and his plane were fine, aside from the radiator hit, and were expected back the next day. Dillby followed Harrison's plane for another one hundred and fifty miles before it bellied in hard, largely wrecking it. Harrison was presumed, but not yet confirmed, dead. Dillby found an aerodrome to land and refuel at and was expected back later that day.

Hopps was missing.

And the whole of second flight had strayed too far away in a running battle with their bombers and had to land elsewhere. They shot down four without any losses. But due to logistics issues, they wouldn't be back until tomorrow either.

At officer's mess that night, things were particularly subdued, with all of second flight's pilots out, and nearly half of first flight also not on hand, the tables were awfully empty. On one paw it was now their best day so far. Ten enemy bombers down, forty enemy crews dead or captured. At a cost of one rabbit and plane lost outright, another rabbit and plane out for repairs, so to speak, and one missing, status unknown.

In the cruel calculations of war, the enemy offensive wasn't sustainable at this rate. But the enemy wasn't fighting an entirely rational war, driven by a blind ideology. It seemed they would rather see the world in flames than give up their mad passions.

And defeat or victory wasn't a sure thing for either side at the moment. Zootopia and its allies were holding their own to be sure, but it wouldn't take much. A change in tactics, a critical error, an unlucky break, for things to go very badly.

The CO announced that the squadron had been ordered to stand down for recovery. They had been given the rest of the week, but he had counter-offered just the next day, to get second flight back and reconsolidate first. The few pilots on paw had to agree, they couldn't stand the notion of being idle as the enemy prowled their skies.

The next morning was cold and drizzly, matching the mood of the squadron. Second flight was ordered to wait out the weather. Harrison's body had been recovered and was being forwarded to his family directly. Word was that his wounds, though fatal, and the crash, had not disfigured him. He'd been a fine fellow in life, and perhaps there could be some small comfort in seeing him one last time.

And they had found Hopps. He had been shot down, wounded, and was still in the wreck when it was found in a woods early the next morning. He was not in good shape, but no word beyond that limited assessment.

Unit morale was in the dumps, and the CO relented on the extended stand down. He went so far as to allow those troops not actively on task to have day passes into town, though on such a dreary day, there wasn't a lot of interest.

Later in the day he got an odd request from the quartermaster.
"You want to what?"

"Yessir, I'd like permission to disassemble the surplus housing to expand and re-enforce the warrens." The old rabbit sounds sober. And the CO could understand the sentiment, the official medium size mammal barracks had scarcely been used by the nearly all rabbit unit, most had settled into the modified bomb-proofs as improvised warrens.

"I'm going to have to say no, as while we're all rabbits here for now, Zootopia is more than just bunnies, and if we get a change in mission or different personnel, we'll need the housing for them." He checked some paperwork he had in his desk. "But, I can authorize you to solicit supplies from the local economy. I'll have Baker come over and hash out a budget later."

Later, while writing ‘The Letter’ for Harrison's family, he got a welcome interruption.

It was Talbot. "Good news, Sir. More on Hopps. He got some holes in him, and got battered a bit in the crash, but he's expected to make a good recovery. He never got another unit to rendezvous with him while he still had fuel, so he engaged the formation. Ground observers confirmed he got at least two, then it seemed he ran out of fuel and luck at about the same time, he and his bird got stitched and he was trying to dead stick it down when he lost control. Dropped it in some woods and it took a while for anyone to find him."

"That is good news. Where is he now?"

"Local hospital, town of Duckworth. Should be able to get him closer to home in about a week."

Chapter End Notes

And a chapter by the esteemed stevegallacci!

I will be completely honest and admit that this gentleman knows a great deal more about the history of aircraft and aerial combat than I ever will and was one of my inspirations for getting into writing in the first place with his 'Albedo Anthropomorphics' comic. He really is one of my driving factors for becoming a better writer and I can't begin to tell you how thrilled I am that I can not only share his contributions to this story, but also count hi amongst those I call friend!
Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward pressed his back against the rear wall of his father’s barn and pulled his beret off while gulping air. It wasn’t that the scarred rabbit wasn’t thrilled to be home or to be once more around family and friends, but the constant press of others and the endless string of the same questions over and over were starting to get to him. He ran a finger around the collar of his uniform shirt and closed his eyes for a moment to try and quell the turmoil that had tightened his chest, a small part of his mind that never shut down and was always evaluating the situation noted that the rough planks that formed the wall were feeling more than a little weathered and would need a good coat of paint before winter set in. It could be a nice distraction if his father let him tend to that. Since that morning Buck found that some of the simple work that he used to occasionally skive off was in truth rather therapeutic, keeping him busy while allowing his mind to work on problems that bothered him.

As both his breathing and heart rate calmed, the rangy rabbit recalled the excuse he’d used to get away from the press of curious farmers, and lifted a home canning jar that had been pressed into service as a mug to his muzzle and gulped down half of the contents. Henry Sward’s cider had been known to put many an unwary mammal under the table; however, Edward found the drink more refreshing than anything else. If he was fortunate it would be just enough to knock the harshness off the constant on edge feeling the rabbit felt.

Resetting his beret, Edward caught the sound of soft humming and turned his head in the direction it came from. At first there was a moment of irritation, thinking that kits were playing on the tank that was parked next to the barn. He wasn’t overly concerned that one of the curious kits would get inside, and even if they did they wouldn’t be able to get into too much trouble as Edward had disconnected the ignition for the engine. The weapons were inert and there wasn’t any ammunition for either the gun or the Besa that was mounted on a pintel to the top of the turret. What did worry him was a kit taking a tumble from the steel and iron machine, or maybe getting a finger caught in something. Gods of rabbits knew that he would have been the same, if not worse, when he was younger and was presented with such temptation. The kits always loved the tank, after all.

It wasn’t a kit that was examining the vehicle, though.

As recognition flared in Edward’s brain, the feeling of panic returned, for far different reasons this time as he watched the yellow furred bunny walk slowly around the Cruiser, her paw touching the flank, fingers running lightly over rivets and welded seams. Edward’s paw came to rest over his chest and heart as it hammered wildly, his mouth open as he tried to suck in a breath. As mahogany eyes drank in the sight of the doe, the world fell away and ‘Lucky Buck’ was taken back to a time that didn’t know war, when he was young and the world was fresh and new and everyday was a chance for adventure and joy.

When he’d first met Daisy Hopps, Edward had been eight years old, the bunny with sunshine yellow fur and sapphire eyes a precocious three. His best friend, Virgil, like Edward himself, had many siblings, younger and older, but Daisy was completely smitten with her older brother and Virgil doted on her to distraction, the bond they shared transcending the ones that littermates often formed. No sooner would Virgil enter a room that the golden kit was in than she was scrambling onto his lap. That odd connection was extended to Edward and within a short span of time all three were nigh
inseparable. From that point on, wherever Virgil and Edward were, Daisy wasn’t far behind, the little waif tagging along as she dragged one of her paw-sewn stuffed dolls behind her.

As Edward and Virgil grew older, and invariably got into mischief as young bucks were wont to do, Daisy was right there with them, often providing an alibi when the two shirked chores to raid neighboring farms to pick pears and peaches as everyone knew nicked fruit and vegetables always tasted better. When they abandoned tasks such as weeding fields for a bit of a swim at the small lake on the far end of the two properties, Daisy swore that the pair of rascals were hard at work. In fact, the little bunny had saved the two miscreants numerous trips to the woodshed.

Then, of course, there was the time that Daisy provided a lovely distraction while the two families were in town and had focused old rabbit Whittlefur’s attentions to her while Edward and Virgil availed themselves to the row of penny candy that sat in a row of jars, their color treasures too enticing to ignore. That little bit of mischief had been the doe’s idea. Edward wondered if perhaps the sweet, wide-eyed little bunny had been corrupted by his and Virgil’s antics or if she’d always been the brains to their brawn.

It wasn’t until much later that Edward wondered just how much they had done because neither could tell the little bunny no.

Eventually the day came when he and Virgil began to notice that does were quite different than they were and delightfully so. As the pair reached puberty the ick factor of does was replaced with fascination, though Daisy had never quite fallen into the classification of other girls. She had been too like them. Though the Sward rabbit did recall more than a few instances when he had been chatting up or flirting with either Daisy’s sisters, or bunnies from other families around Bunnyburrow, while the yellow furred kit glared at him with irritation, other times with a knowing smirk.

One memory did stand out as Edward watched Daisy in her examination of the tank and that was the day that he and Virgil had left for the army. There had been tears and perhaps a little confusion from parents and siblings, but not her. Daisy had stood tall and defiant as she watched the two board the train that would carry them away, her ears perked while the expression on her face remained unreadable. They both received letters from her during training, and she often went into detail about the goings on back home and who was doing what, though more and more often Edward found his letters to be a bit more, well, personal. She often asked if he’d found some doe to flirt with or some such. Of course, subjects like that weren’t really topics that a proper rabbit discussed with his best friend’s sister.

During his capture and imprisonment, Edward more than a few times discovered his thoughts turning to the yellow hued bunny, and found that he could recall with surprising clarity little details that had come to mean everything to him. He recalled the way that after one foray into Farmer Burrfoot’s raspberry patch and the three of them gorged themselves on pilfered berries that Daisy, who had just turned thirteen, looked like a dolled up mammal with her lips and muzzle fur stained red. Virgil held his stomach from eating too many berries and laughing as he rolled on the ground while Edward joined him in his mirth until an irate Daisy leapt at him and rubbed her mouth all over his. At least that’s what he told himself she did at the time. One didn’t kiss his best mate’s sister in front of him, after all.

The humming stopped and Edward watched as Daisy moved to the front of the tank and simply stared at it giving Edward a chance to really look at the doe that had been such an important, yet unrealized, part of his life. The gangly kit was gone and in her place stood a doe that was heartrendingly beautiful. She didn’t move with the uncertainty that all adolescents experience as they acclimate to their adult form, but flowed with a sort of innate grace in every motion. Daisy’s fur was
just as vibrant as ever, like her fur was made from the rays of the sun itself and her eyes were an even deeper and more vibrant blue than Edward recalled. The suspender dress she wore was colored in a rich blue and green checkered pattern that complemented her coloration perfectly, and beneath that she wore a white cotton blouse with puffed short sleeves and a ‘U’ shaped neck line.

Put simply she had to be one of the most exquisite mammals that Edward had ever seen in his life.

As he observed her, Daisy let a small smile tease at her muzzle. “Are you going to say hello, or are you just going to look at me all day, Edward?” she inquired softly.

Even her voice was lovely, like warm honey that caused the fur along the rabbit’s spine to try and stand on end and he had to tug his beret down as his one ear and the remnants of the other tried to perk up. “Er…I’m thinking that maybe I should stay right here for the moment,” the rabbit answered after several moments of his jaw working up and down with no sound coming out.

“And why would you do that?” the bunny replied teasingly.

“Because I think I’m a little nervous at the moment.”

Daisy turned her head to finally look at him, giving a slow blink as she did so, though when her gaze locked with his Edward felt his heart stop before lurching once more into beating hard. Daisy stepped from the tank and came towards him, her paws wrapped around the woven loop of a wicker basket. She didn’t stop until only the basket was between them. At this short distance it was impossible to miss the sudden welling of moisture in her eyes before it spilled over her lower lids and down her cheeks in silent tears. The smile melted away as her muzzle twisted with deep pain and the doe’s ears fell.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered. “You and Virgil…on the same day…” Daisy blinked and kept her eyes closed for a moment before opening them again. “I thought you were dead.”

The rabbit raised a paw to reach out to the bunny that had been one of his oldest friends, unsure what to make of it when she flinched away from the touch and shook her head. “Daisy…” Edward began, wincing when she shook her head violently, the motion causing her tears to fly away in glittering droplets.

The bunny drew in a shuddering breath and lifted her chin defiantly. “How long have you been back?” she asked softly. “I know you were captured…we’ve all heard the stories of what’s been happening…but how long have you been back?”

Edward swallowed. “A, uh, a couple of weeks,” he replied weakly, his stomach starting to knot up in tension.

“And in all that time you couldn’t let anyone know? Even just a word to tell us that you were alive at least?” Daisy made a soft choking sound as she swallowed a sob. “To let your mother know…to let me know?”

“I…I’ve got no excuse, Daisy,” he relented.

When the bunny carefully set her basket to the side and stepped forward, Edward felt the urge to bolt, something that he’d never done before, even in the thick of fighting. How unfair was that? He’d faced Axis panzers, infantry, even suffered torture as the prisoner of a mad mammal that had seen him as a toy and possibly a meal, and here he was, terrified by the second best friend in all his life.

Sometimes there just wasn’t any fairness to life at all.
When Daisy touched him it was all he could do to stand there and let her. Edward tried not to shiver as she lightly brushed the fur of his face to examine the scars, took his paws in hers and looked at where his claws were finally growing back in. When she touched the ravaged end of his ear, though, it was almost more than he could bear. “Please,” he husked. “D-don’t…”

The bunny ignored the request, her soft finger pads running along the torn, red-skinned edge of the missing ear before tracing the perfectly round hole that had been punched into the remaining flesh. As she touched the semi-hard scar tissue, Daisy’s expression grew into one of concern and sympathy. “Oh, Edward…” she breathed. “Thank you. I think the price was too high, but thank you.”

That was the last thing that the rabbit expected and his head tilted in confusion.

“What? You don’t think I know why you and Virgil went off? If I weren’t a doe don’t you think I’d have been right there with the both of you?” She shook her head sadly. “Does aren’t allowed to fight.”

Edward tried to swallow past his dry mouth and throat, the task made even more difficult when Daisy moved closer, her scent making it to his nose that had begun to twitch despite his experience at quelling outward demonstrations of his emotions. She’d always had a sweet scent that reminded him of spring rains and the flowers that followed after, of lazy summer afternoons and dusky evenings. It was like everything good from his life before the war was a part of her scent. What was truly staggering was the surge of emotion that came with that smell. He wanted to bask in it, in the warmth that came from the bunny…

But she was one of his best friends! It just wasn’t something one did with friends.

Was it?

“Wh…what are you d-doing?” the rabbit stammered as Daisy placed her paws on his chest after laying his tattered ear back down and smoothing it with a gentle stroke.

“Welcoming you home,” the bunny told him as she lifted her face to his, teasing the fur on the end of his chin with her pink nose.

There was no way that Edward could resist the temptation.

Before he knew it his arms were about the doe as he held her tightly to him. She was solid and real and a small part of him marveled at the feel of her heart beating so close to his before matching it. When Daisy’s arms slipped around his neck it was enough to make Edward lightheaded in a way that his father’s cider never would. Then the kiss deepened for a moment before the bunny pulled away and slipped out of his hold. He was about to speak when the bunny’s eyes lost some of their soft warmth and flashed with an almost glacial hardness.

Edward’s head snapped back as Daisy’s fist connected with the point of his chin with enough force to ring his ears slightly. It didn’t quite stagger the rabbit, though it took half a second for the world around him to come back into focus and he found an irate doe looking at him with her arms held rigidly at her sides, paws curled into tight fists. Perhaps his and Virgil’s instruction years before on how to punch hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“And that’s for not letting us know you were alive!” Daisy hissed vehemently.

Edward shook his head to clear it as the bunny spun and started to reach for her basket before going limp and it was all he could do to catch her before Daisy hit the ground in a boneless heap. “Oh,
“shit!” he muttered as he lowered her down to the grass. “Oh, shit, ohshitohshit!” He kept the bunny cradled in one arm as he pulled off his beret and began to fan his friend with it, not really knowing what else to do at the moment, too off kilter from the tumultuous reunion until he heard a familiar voice coming from inside the barn. “Ben! BEN!”

The rabbit’s younger brother came trotting out, a grin plastered to his face until he saw his older sibling’s predicament. “Ah, Rabbit’s Messiah, Ed!” the younger buck exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. “What did you do?”

“She fainted. Go get Mrs. Hopps, will you?” Edward instructed desperately. If it had been anyone else he’d have let them lay on the ground and gotten a bucket of water to throw on them. But it wasn’t anyone else. It was Daisy and she had thoroughly wrecked his ability to think clearly. Fortunately Ben was adept at following instructions and bolted to find the matriarch of the Hopps family.

By the time Bonnie Hopps and Edward’s own mother arrived the rabbit was in a right state unable to get the bunny to come around or even give an indication that she was going to be all right. Fortunately both does were more than well versed at tending to emotionally distraught children and took control of the situation without preamble.

“Edward, carry her to the house and get her on the couch in the front room. Then go and get a kettle on,” Claire ordered.

The rabbit simply nodded and scooped the unconscious Daisy up as his mother led the way, Bonnie pausing long enough to pick up the basket that her daughter had been carrying and followed the others.

Once inside, Daisy covered with a light blanket as Claire Sward got a bowl of cold water and dish towel, Bonnie took a seat at the small kitchen table and Edward set up the kettle, lighting the gas burner with a long match. As soon as he turned around his mother swatted him with the wooden spoon that she hadn’t been carrying, though it appeared in her paw as if by magic. “Edward James Sward!” she began in a frigid tone, her eyes flashing dangerously. “What did you do to that girl to make her faint?”

It was common knowledge in the Sward family that when their mother used all of their names that there was going to be absolute hell to pay. He backed up with his paws raised chest high in surrender. “I swear I didn’t do anything, mom! She kissed me, then she punched me, then she fainted! Rabbit’s Messiah, mom, I swear that’s all that happened!”

“Don’t say his name in vain!” Claire warned with another smack of her spoon. “And I tell you now, Edward, if I hear different not even that…thing you have parked by the barn will keep me from switching your backside ‘til your fur falls out!”

Before Edward could voice an argument in his defense his mother stomped silently out of the kitchen to tend to the young doe leaving her son and Bonnie alone. The older doe nudged one of the chairs out for the rabbit, smiling widely when Edward dropped sullenly onto it, his arms going across his chest. “I really didn’t do anything,” he muttered. “Well…I don’t think I did.”

The doe chuckled softly. “Oh, you did something, but it’s not really your fault, Edward.” When the rabbit looked up in confusion Bonnie simply smiled. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

The doe reached across the short expanse of the table and placed her paw over one of his and patted
it in a matronly manner. “She loves you, Edward, and more than just a friend. That child’s been in love with you since she was quite little. In fact, she told us when she was six that she was going to marry you because you were the only buck for her and that way you and Virgil could really be brothers.”

The rabbit blinked several times as he tried to digest what Daisy’s mother had just said. “Love? Me?” he asked rhetorically, though as he thought about, little instances when they were all younger, the way Daisy acted around him, things both said and done, it all made sense.

And he’d been too thick to realize it.

Edward glanced through the wide doorway that led to the upstairs living room, the one further down the lower levels was actually large enough to hold most of the Sward clan, and watched as his mother brought the bunny around, helping Daisy sit up. When Bonnie’s paw tightened where it rested on his he glanced over to the light brown colored doe. “Go set up a good tea and the two of you talk it out,” she advised until a thin sounding mewl came from the basket. Bonnie looked to the basket. “Oh, dear. Sounds like someone’s awake and wanting their first supper.”

Glancing at the basket then turning to look at Daisy where she walked into the kitchen a little unsteadily, his mother holding her arm for support he saw that the bunny had a slightly sick expression on her face. With a steady paw Edward lifted the soft blanket that covered the top of the basket to reveal two kits that were starting to squirm and fuss in soft, whispered voices, each one covered in fluffy yellow fur almost the same shade as Daisy’s. “Edward, can you set up the tea for Daisy. Then show her the nursing nook so she can tend to her wee ones,” Claire instructed as she helped the young doe into a seat. Once their charge was taken care of both she and Bonnie picked up a kit each and cuddled them while making soft cooing noises.

All the rabbit could do was nod mutely as he tried to wrap his thoughts around the day’s continued string of unexpected revelations.

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“So,” Edward began after showing the golden furred doe to the kitchen’s nursing nook, “who’s the lucky rabbit?” he asked trying for a neutral, if not cheerful, tone as helped Daisy into the rocking chair that was there, the cushions on it paw-sewn with floral print cloth, but thick enough to be quite comfortable.

No self respecting warren would be without nursing nooks for mothers to tend to their kits in virtually every room of their house. Normally they were cozy little alcoves that provided a modicum of privacy. Granted, breasts weren’t a sexual trigger for most mammals as they never developed until a mother had young to tend to, regardless of species. Nursing was something of an intimate endeavor, though, and a time for a parent to bond with offspring in an important point in the kit’s development.

“I don’t know,” Daisy answered in a soft voice that was flavored with shame. She heard the bustling of activity stop from the other side of the curtain that separated the nook from the rest of the kitchen. “I…it’s complicated and stupid all at the same time.”

From the counter where he stirred in a bit of sugar and almond milk into his own cup and one for the bunny Edward shrugged. “Oh.”

He set the spoon down and carried one of Claire’s fine china cups and saucer to the nook and pulled the curtain back without thinking, his sensibilities a little numbed from the day so far and forgetting what was going on. Daisy looked up to find the rabbit standing as still as a statue as he watched her
nourishing her kit with her own body, her dress lowered and blouse open to let the tiny bunny feed. Edward’s eyes were a bit wide and his muzzle was slightly open as he regarded the sight before a single tear coursed down his cheek, the tiny scars that left pocks in the fur causing the errant drop to change direction several times before it landed on his uniform shirt.

“Edward?” Daisy inquired, her thin, delicate brows knitting together in concern as another tear followed the first a moment before both the rabbit’s eyes were streaming copiously. “Edward, what’s wrong?”

The rabbit shook his head as his jaw moved up and down several times before words came out, his voice thick and choked with emotion. “I...I’ve seen so much in the past few years...some things I can’t explain...some were terrible...but this, this is the most beautiful thing that I have ever set eyes on, Daisy.”

When Edward was finally able to move he set her cup of tea down with trembling paws, his eyes only leaving the nursing kit to look into the doe’s, his own filled with awe and wonder and a warmth that had been absent until that moment. He continued to observe in a state of delight as Daisy let the kit finish before putting it to her shoulder to burp then held out the tiny bun. “Would you like to hold her?”

The light that flared from within the rabbit was priceless and filled his entire being with something from the old Edward before he left with Virgil to be a soldier. “H-her?”

Daisy nodded with a smile as the kit gave a satisfied belch and smacked her mouth sleepily. “Her. Two little does.”

She passed her contented child to the buck, noticing how despite his large, scarred paws Edward held her with a loving tenderness before bringing her to his face to nuzzle her gently before lipping her still half formed ears in a bit of grooming that normally only parents engaged in. He then held her to his nose and took in the kit’s scent, his eyes closing halfway, though Daisy noticed that his pupils dilated for a few moments before returning to normal. She watched with stunned awe at the interaction. What had just happened shouldn’t have, but all the signs were there.

It was what a buck would do with his kits...

“Do I know the father?” Edward asked as Daisy got the other kit situated to suckle and feeding of the other little bun began in earnest.

The doe shook her head and lowered her head in something almost like shame. “Edward...it...it was a rough time,” Daisy whispered. Instead of speaking further she simply took care of her kit, stroking the small bunny’s head as it nursed until it had its fill and burped it as she had the other.

When Edward held his paws out the doe silently complied with his request and took the other back before returning her to the basket. Daisy watched as the rangy buck went through the same process of taking in the kit’s scent, grooming its ears and nuzzling the tiny head with tender affection.

“What are their names?”

Daisy’s ears pinked up in a blush and she busied her paws with rearranging the blankets, watching as her children wriggled to each other, neither settling until they were comfortably touching and yawning in synchronicity before dozing off with full tummies. “This is Virginia,” the doe said as she touched one, the kit nuzzling her mother’s finger pad before touching the second, “and this is Edelle.” Daisy looked up, her face crumbling as she began to weep. “I-I named them after my brother and the rabbit I l-l-love...” she whispered before dropping her head in her paws and sobbing.
silently.

With no hesitation or thought of whether it was proper or not, Edward knelt and gathered the doe into his arms and held her until the storm had passed. It was some minutes before Daisy could even begin to compose herself and when she sat up the rabbit darted to the kitchen to wet a towel for the bunny and cleared the ravages of her crying before lifting her chin with a finger so that she had no recourse but to look into his eyes.

“Let’s get you fixed up,” Edward said as he tugged her blouse closed, resolutely not looking at the bared fur of her chest, “freshen up our tea, and we can have that talk. Sound good?”

Daisy nodded and smiled, not protesting when he carefully lifted the basket with the sleeping kits and carried them to the kitchen table. As Edward tended to both getting the tea set and checking on the kits, making sure that he didn’t make too much racket and disturb them, though Daisy was fairly sure her girls could sleep through nearly anything, she felt an unfamiliar warmth suffuse her.

Perhaps things would turn out as she’d hoped for so long.

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“I was a wreck,” the golden doe admitted as she held her tea in both paws and stared at the creamy brown surface. “Mom and Dad actually sent for the doctor when the telegrams came telling everyone about Virgil and then you,” Daisy said. “The doctor sedated me as they were afraid I was going to go into a depressive fit or maybe do something stupid. I don’t blame them, now, but at the time I hated them for it. It was like all of the color, all the warmth and joy in the world was gone and I really wanted to die.”

She looked up at the rabbit, the memory still fresh enough that it could be seen in her eyes and smiled when Edward touched her paw but remained silent to let her continue.

“You and Virgil were my everything,” Daisy continued, unable to keep the tears from starting again. “Of course it wasn’t long after that that everyone here began to understand that there was a war and there was no escaping it. One of those foxes from that airfield had to bail out and landed in the woods at the edge of the farm. Judy found him and thought she had an Axis flyer at first. That was a right mess. Then weeks later when a real one was shot down on the edge of the county and found in our barn…all of us learned the difference then.

“I didn’t meet the fox, and I only saw the enemy pilot as soldiers were loading him into a truck to take away. I sort of just…well, I did what I did. Chores or helping around the farm, but I wasn’t there.” Daisy snorted derisively. “I hurt so much that…I guess you know. I was like a machine, I think.

“There was a soldier, though. A rabbit. He was part of the group that was left as the officers talked to everyone to learn what had happened. I should have said no, Edward. I really should have. But he seemed…nice. He said things and almost made me feel good.” Daisy looked at the rabbit across from her and shook her head as she pushed her cup away and buried her face in her paws, too ashamed to continue the story.

“It’s all right, Daisy,” the buck told her gently, his paw coming to rest on her shoulder. “You’re right. I do know. It’s a way of feeling a little warmth and a little comfort. I think it’s a way of telling yourself that you’re still alive.”

The doe nodded as she lowered her paws. “Exactly! But…the gods damn me…I should have said no!”
This time when the rabbit took her paws and spoke it was in a firm tone of voice, almost his 'sergeant’s voice’, though not as harsh. “Stop it. Right now. You aren’t to blame. You needed something, and maybe it wasn’t the best choice, but look at them!” Edward said as he directed her gaze to the sleeping kits. “There’s nothing bad at all right there. If anything they’re some of the loveliest kits that I’ve ever seen!”

“But I don’t know who...he gave me fake name, Edward. Yes, my kits are sweet and beautiful and I love them dearly, but they’re bastards with no father and a mother that’s stupid enough to be talked into hiking her skirts for the first smooth buck that comes along!” Daisy lamented.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Edward told her gently. “I’ve met mammals that could talk the birds out of trees. But you know, all of this will work out.”

Daisy snorted in derision. “Yeah. I just have to find a rabbit that doesn’t mind raising a pair of bastard kits and a mother that’s a who-mmmphhh!”

The doe found it incredibly difficult to continue speaking with Edward’s muzzle pressed to hers and tried to pull away for a moment, though it was the feel of his paw on her cheek that stopped her as the kiss stretched out. When they parted, both a little out of breath, the buck had a strange expression as he looked at her.

“What?” Daisy asked somewhat dazedly.

The rabbit shook his head slightly. “I’m waiting to see if another punch is going to follow that one.”

It took a moment for what he said to sink in and despite herself, Daisy found a smile, warm and genuine tugging at her mouth. “Not this time,” she told him softly.

“Good. You throw a hell of a right. Now, what’s say we get our moms to keep an eye on these two and you and I show them their mom and dad can dance better than any other rabbit out there.”

“I think…” the bunny began before what was said sank in. Daisy’s eyes grew wide as her ears twitched up then snapped back down. “What did you say?”

“Well,” the rabbit began with a grin. “It’s a Finding Festival, isn’t it? Took a while, but I think we’ve both found what we’ve been looking for, don’t you?” Edward’s grin grew wider as the bunny stared at him. “I love you, too, Daisy Hopps. I think I always have, but there are times I can be a little thick, hey?”

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Daisy was laughing as she and Edward stumbled into the barn paw-in-paw, the doe leaning against the rabbit as she fanned herself with her free paw. “Oh, my! I haven’t done that in a long time!”

“You could’ve fooled me,” the scarred rabbit said with a chuckle of his own. “I forgot how thirsty I get after...what was that? Four rounds in a row? Five?” He grabbed two jars of cider, his head tilting quizzically when the bunny waved it away.

“I can’t have that while I’m nursing,” Daisy told him with a shy smile.

Edward nodded. “You’re right. Heavens forbid we get Edie and Ginny tipsy so they sleep the night through,” he told the doe sardonically. He tossed Daisy a wink before setting the jars down and picking up two cups of pressed pear juice. He noticed the twinkle in the doe’s eyes as he gave the two kits shorter, more familiar names.
“I didn’t mean that you couldn’t have one, unless you want to try nursing,” Daisy teased.

“Oh, no! If I did that their first words would be the kind you don’t say in front of polite company! That and I’d be a right sore substitute for the real thing. I’ll let their mother handle that. As a compromise, though, I will help take care of changing them.”

The bunny laughed and was about to tease the rabbit a bit more when an uproar from outside drew everyone’s attention. “Oh, hell,” Daisy muttered, her juice forgotten. “Is Dad having a fit?”

Before Edward could say anything the doe was running from the barn to where her father had slumped to the grass on his knees, the old rabbit’s head bowed as strange sounds came from his throat. Bonnie was there, a stunned expression on her face as she rested her paws on Stu’s shoulders.

“How’s Dad?” Daisy asked as she looked pointedly at her father, afraid of the answer to her unspoken question.

Instead it was Stu that looked up, his trembling paw reaching up to pull his flat cap from his head, a stunned look on his face as the fur under his eyes darkened with tears. “It’s Virgil,” he husked in a wet croak.

“What about Virgil?” Daisy asked, suddenly glad that Edward had joined her and took strength from his presence. Instead of responding verbally, Stu simply held out the thin paper telegram in yellow from Zootopia Telegraph and Telephone. The doe actually read the simple missive three times to herself before speaking aloud. “Hopps, Virgil Benton, Stop. Safe and well, Stop. Arriving today in style with friends, Stop.”

The paw that held the telegram began to tremble violently while the other went to her muzzle as her eyes filled. Daisy was completely unprepared for the surge of feelings on an already emotional day and started to slump a little when she felt Edward’s paws slip about her waist to steady her. She spun about with a look of wonder in her eyes before throwing her arms around the rabbit’s neck with a small sobbing cry.

Those rabbits and bunnies that were close enough to hear Daisy as she read off the telegram passed the word to others around them, the speed of which the information was distributed stunning Lieutenant Dan Antlerbee. He looked up from where he was keeping an eye on the loudspeakers and accompanying devices with a slight frown. “What’s going on?” the stag inquired from an older rabbit in worn tweed and flat cap. “This was an impressive gala already, but I swear that everyone just jumped several notches in their excitement.”

The aged rabbit chuckled. “The Sward boy left home with his best mate,” the old timer said, his words whistling slightly due to the loss on one of his prominent front teeth even though the rest looked rather healthy. “Young lad name of Virgil from the farm next door. Got the telegrams for both of ‘em lost at Bullkirk. He’s comin’ home t’day. Seems you done brought a bit o’ luck to this town, youngster. That day saw a good deal o’ tears bein’ shed. Good to see things balance out like.”

“Well,” the stag said as he lifted his cap to rub at the spot between his recently sprouted antlers for the season, “Edward did earn the name ‘Lucky Buck’ for a reason!”

“Lucky he is!” the rabbit cackled. “Many a buck are gonna rue today. Looks like he done got hisself that Hopps doe, though ain’t no surprise. She were thick as thieves with young Edward an’ her brother, Virgil. Even though she did get in a spot o’ trouble.”

Dan looked askance at the rabbit. “Bit of trouble? What kind, if I might ask?”
“Oh, sommat 'bout a rabbit that was with them officers that picked up that Axis cat that they found yonder in the barn. Sweet talked the bunny into givin’ in t’ him. Got her in a family way and told her a fake name. We rabbits might be a bit freer with our ‘fections than most mammals, but that’s not sommat that’s done in these parts.” The rabbit scowled as he spoke before clenching a paw into a fist around his walking stick and shook it in emphasis. “You get a doe with kits, you take your share o’ responsibility an’ that’s that!”

Dan nodded, more than anything else than to placate the old buck that was working himself up into a right state, and headed over to where the sergeant was standing with an even more emotional group of rabbits than the rest. He was a little surprised to see Sergeant Sward with damp fur under his eyes. “Buck? Is it true? Your friend is on his way home as well?”

Before the rabbit could answer the sunny colored doe looked up, also crying, but also clearly elated. “Buck?”

“Sure! ‘Lucky Buck’! That’s the name he earned,” Antlerbee said with a puffing out of his chest. “Tanker ace, hero. Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward. He’s famous in army circles!”

Daisy tightened her hold on the rabbit and smiled up at her longtime friend. “I don’t know about that, but I can tell you about a lucky doe,” she whispered with a kiss to the side of the rabbit’s jaw.

“Nicknames are just something that happens in the army,” Edward told the bunny. “And about that…um…other thing…”

Daisy watched as he retrieved the basket with Daisy’s kits and carefully lifted the blanket and hoisted a bunny baby in each paw before stepping back to their mother. Before she could say anything he rested his chin atop her head between her ears and nuzzled her lovingly before doing the same with the utmost caution to the doe kits then kissed each one. Chinning all three for the whole world to see made it clear what his intentions were.

Dan Antlerbee was left confused when an older doe made a sound of joy, the rabbit that had been weeping began crying anew, and the golden yellow doe with Buck looked on with stunned delight. “What just happened?” the stag asked, completely baffled by rabbit traditions.

“What happened?” Edward repeated with a grin. “I’ll tell you what happened. Lieutenant, may I introduce my bunny, Daisy Hopps and our girls, Edelle and Virginia.” His smile began to fade a little. “Um…that is…well, if you’ll have me, Daisy.”

“Of course I will,” the doe said as she stood on her toes to reach the rabbit’s muzzle with her own. “Dumb Buck!” she whispered happily.

“Er…congratulations?” the confounded stag said as he took his hat off. “Well, this is turning into a bit more of a celebration than I thought it would be.”

Edward grinned as he held both Daisy and the kits close, realizing that, despite the doubts he’d had since the battle of Bullkirk and his capture, he now had more to fight for than he had before. He would petition for a placement back in the tank regiment and return to the war. His job wasn’t done yet, and he would make sure that the world would be a place where his new family would be able to live in peace. “Well, Dan, we have a lot to celebrate.” He grinned feeling lighter in heart and soul than he had in a while. “After all, this is a Finding Festival. I found something that I damn near lost. I’m not taking the chance on missing what’s right in front of me again.”

“Too right you’re not,” Daisy said as she nuzzled her head against Edward’s uniform shirt, her heart swelling with pride and affection that she could finally show without fear.
Chapter End Notes

So, a little more in the way of Tom1380's Finding Festival! I have no idea where he came up with the idea, but I thought it was brilliant, and something that could definitely keep spirits up in Bunnyburrow.

Just a little more to this shindig and we'll get back to the war along with some upcoming chapters by other talented writers!!!
Chapter 14
Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It was near sundown but the Finding Festival was just starting to build up to the raucous affair it normally was. The smallest kits would soon be heading home, too young to appreciate the reason for the bi-annual celebration, while older rabbits and bunnies were enjoying the chance to socialize and sneak off to explore their entry into the world of adult pursuits, within limits for the most part. More experienced siblings and relatives enjoyed the comfort and pleasure of shared affections while still others established actual courtships. Many were just happy for the opportunity to stay up well past the time they’d normally be sent to bed with the knowledge that chores for the next day would be minimal and they could forget about the troubles just across the Channel. Lanterns hung on wires and strung between trees or hastily erected posts were lit while the sun inched its way to the horizon when a cloud of dust on the country lane drew the attention of a small portion of the crowd.

Inside the car, an Austin 8 in Zootopia Air Corps dark blue, a mixed group of mammals sat, two of them more than a little agitated. “Oh…buck-balls,” Corporal Virgil Hopps muttered as he looked from the back seat of the car to the large gathering up ahead. “I can’t believe I’m coming home during a Finding Festival,” he lamented.

“Virgil!” Judy husked as she placed her paws over the ears of the other anxious passenger. “Language!”

If the lamb in the front seat noticed the slip, she didn’t show it, her tiny hooves clutching her doll to her as her green eyes widened behind her wire famed glasses. “What if they don’t like me?” the little ewe asked in a tremulous voice.

Nick lifted his paw from the gear shift and tousled the lamb’s head wool as he turned to give the ewe a smile and wink. “Are you kidding? They’re going to love you, popcorn!”

“He’s right, Dawn,” Judy agreed after turning back around from giving her brother a hard look. “You’ll have all our little brothers and sisters to play with, plus lots of other kits. And this way we know you’re safe and our Mom and Dad will look after you. I think you’ll like Bunnyburrow.”

The lamb tried to put on a brave face for the two that had been there after Zootopia had been attacked, Dawn losing her entire family when a bomb had landed just outside her parents’ toy store. Since pulling her from the rubble and seeing to her immediate care, the fox and bunny she sat between had kept in touch with her through letters, both visiting when duties permitted. As such, Dawn had latched onto both as a surrogate family. When they’d shown up at the orphanage where the lamb had been placed and asked if she wanted to live in Bunnyburrow with Judy’s family, Dawn had agreed readily, though now with the reality of the situation and seeing just how big Judy’s family was, a trill of fear ran through the ewe as well as uncertainty. She tried to nestle against both of her guardians before finally gravitating to the bunny next to her.

“But I wanna stay with you and Nick,” Dawn told them in her small, high, breathy voice.

“We’d like that, too, honey,” Judy said with a reassuring hug and smile. “But Nick and I can’t really take care of you with our duties, and there’s just no place for a lamb at the airfield and I’d get us both into big trouble if I tried to sneak you into an airplane!” she said with a playful touch of her finger to
the lamb’s nose.

Nick’s paw stopped the teasing of the puff of wool on her head and came to rest on the lamb’s shoulder. “It’ll be fine, popcorn. I made you a promise I wouldn’t let anything happen to you and I don’t break my promises.”

Dawn brightened and scooted closer to the fox so that she could wrap her arms around his middle and rubbed her face on the fabric of his uniform. If they said that everything was going to be all right, she believed them, having bonded with the two after the worst night of her young life. She tightened her hold incrementally as Nick slowed the car down before stopping. Dawn looked up as the fox returned his arm around her and gave her a squeeze and a smile.

“I think you and I will let Virgil and Judy say hello to their family first, then will have them meet you. How does that sound?” Nick inquired.

The fact that he and Judy talked to her like she was a person had helped the traumatized ewe and she nodded while the bunny adjusted the bow in the puff of her head wool. “What about Mister Tod? He needs to take care of his leg,” she pointed out with a glance over the seat to where the kit fox sat with his garrison cap pulled down over his eyes. He lifted it a touch so she could see the wink and smile.

“Oh, don’t you worry about me, Dawn,” the other fox said with a smile as he sat up and adjusted his headgear. “I’ll be okay, kiddo.”

Before anyone else could say anything, a rather dazed looking Virgil got out of the car and Dawn watched as he stepped to the front of the car, the tracks of tears clear on his face as his amber brown eyes continued to well up as an older couple came jogging towards the car and stopped, the slightly paunchy rabbit pulling his flat cap off while the doe clenched her paws to her muzzle. “Is that your mom and dad, Miss Judy?” Dawn asked before turning to look at the bunny in the front seat.

All Judy could do was nod silently as her own fur grew damp. She sniffed loudly and dabbed at her face with the kerchief that Nick passed over. “I guess I better get out and make sure the rest of the family doesn’t mob him,” she told the others with a smile as her parents broke down and met their lost son as they all tightened their arms around each other.

Nick nodded as he hoisted Dawn into his arms and reached for the latch to the door. “C’mon, popcorn. Let’s get a little air before we meet the others,” he said, making sure the lamb had a good hold of her doll.

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Stu Hopps couldn’t believe his eyes and felt his heart lurch so hard that he couldn’t help but put his paw over his chest as it suddenly felt as if he were trying to breathe in water instead of air. The moment didn’t even seem real, just the heartbroken wishes of a father that wanted his son back, until his paws actually touched the illusion of Virgil and the image proved to be real with a solidity and warmth. Stu couldn’t even see his boy’s face as his eyes filled and blurred the world.

“Virgil?” the older rabbit breathed tremulously, his other paw joining as he grasped at the young rabbit. “My boy?”

“I’m home, Dad,” the uniformed buck whispered, his own state not much better than that of his parent.

Stu pulled them together, not even caring that he was making something of a scene, sobbing noisily as he held on to the prodigal rabbit with all of his strength, a small part of his mind wondering just
when his son had grown so big or tall when he couldn’t lift the other onto his lap like he used to.

“My boy!”

Virgil could do little more than clutch his father to him as the other sobbed uncontrollably. Then another set of arms and warmth joined them, the young rabbit looked up and saw his mother for a moment before he had to squeeze his eyes shut, throwing an arm around her shoulders as they stood there, none of the three able to remain standing on their own with the crushing sense of relief filling them and depended on the other two. Virgil felt the kiss that his mother placed on his cheek while his father did the same to the top of his head and gave up all pretense of composure as he wept with the knowledge that he was finally home.

Judy batted at her eyes as she tried to give her brother and parents a moment, another rabbit stepping up to help her keep the crowd at bay, though it took a moment for her to recognize Edward Sward. The last time she saw him was the day he and Virgil left on the train. There were a number of scars and a good portion of his right ear was missing, but despite the scars he had the same warm light in his eyes that she remembered. He grinned self consciously before jerking upright and snapping his arm up, his fingers stopping a fraction of an inch from his eye in a parade ground salute.

“To hell with that!” Judy cried as she launched herself at the rabbit, as shocked and pleased to see Edward as she’d been to see her own brother. “What happened? When did you get back?!?” the bunny inquired as she let the larger buck put a bit of space between them.

“Yesterday,” Edward said as he smiled warmly. “And look at you! All grown up and a pilot, as well!”

Judy shook her head with a chuckle. “Just a ferry pilot.” She looked at his ragged ear, noting the perfect circle that was punched through it, just like Virgil’s. She’d had a hard time wrapping her imagination around the fact that her brother had been treated as a food source and tagged the way some farms she’d read about raised poultry. At least chickens, turkeys and fish didn’t speak.

They both turned at the motion of Virgil, Stu and Bonnie finally getting their initial greeting out of the way and parting slightly, though the tears were still flowing copiously from all three. Then Virgil saw his best friend and what little composure he had left crumbled. Before Edward could even acknowledge the other, they had their arms around the friend that neither thought they would see again, something passing between them with just a look that only a few that had seen the things they had would ever understand.

The two rabbits separated though didn’t really let go of the other, Bonnie and Stu joining the pair along with Judy as Daisy approached as well. The bunny said nothing as she gave her brother a warm embrace and kiss to the side of his head before pulling back the blanket of the basket in her paw. “Look. This is your Uncle Virgil,” she told the kits that were awake and moving around. “When you’re older he and your Dad are going to teach you so many things,” she glanced at the pair of rabbits that had been so important in her life and grinned wickedly. “Though most of it will be getting into trouble!”

Virgil’s eyebrows went up in surprise before his sister moved to Edward’s side and wrapped her arm around the rangy rabbit’s waist, a grin spreading across Virgil’s muzzle. “There’s a bit more to the telling about what you see,” Edward told his friend at the expression of pleased wonder. “It can wait for the moment.”

“Just as long as there’s some of your old buck’s cider when you do!” Virgil laughed. Then the mirth slipped from his face. “Wait! I got some mammals you need to meet!” He spun about and waved the two foxes forward. “These are the ones that got me and a lot of others back! This is Pilot Officer
Ronald Tod and his commanding officer Squadron Leader Nicholas Wilde! Me and the others owe them our lives.”

As the pilots moved forward the others who nodded in greeting or extended paws except for Stu who grew wide-eyed as he recognized the fox. “You.”

Nick tried to smile in a friendly manner as he shifted the lamb in his arms in preparation to run if need be. “Pleasure to see you again, Mr. Hopps,” the fox got out before the old rabbit moved faster than he’d anticipated and grabbed the flyer in a surprisingly strong grip. As he felt the tremor that shook the rabbit Nick realized just how bitter the knot of pride and dignity must have been for Stu to swallow and patted the other mammal’s shoulder.

It took almost half an hour for the throng to move into the barn, Stu and Bonnie hardly letting their son more than an arm’s length from them.

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While reluctant to tell the others about his time as a prisoner, Virgil was more than happy to tell them of Nick and the other fox’s participation in his rescue, of making a water landing in an unarmed seaplane and helping the rabbit and others aboard as the patrol boat bore down on them and they took enemy fire. He then mentioned Pilot Officer Ronnie Tod’s injury and the bullet that tore through the kit fox’s lower leg. That was all it took for the maternal nature of Bonnie Hopps to kick in and she got the small fox to sit on a bale of hay before fussing over him and ordering some of the younger rabbits to take care of him. Because of what the pair of vulpines had done for her Virgil they were as good as family where the matron of the Hopps family was concerned.

Henry and Claire Sward had appeared in time to hear the story, greeting Virgil and Judy with almost as much affection as they had their own son, though both were more than a little intimidated by the pair of predators in their midst until they listened to the story of the rescue.

Stu was impressed by the telling and eyed the taller red fox with respect and grudging warmth. Instead of saying anything, though, the older rabbit demonstrated his own acceptance by stepping behind the table where the different beers and ciders were and began pouring drinks. “Nick,” the rabbit said as he held out a jar, passing another for Judy to give to the kit fox. “You got no reason to like me with the way I treated you,” the rabbit began. “And I’m feeling poorly about some of the things that I did and said, but I’ll tell you truly, you and yours always have a place with us, I don’t care what anyone says.”

Nick could only blink in response. It was a day of firsts and new beginnings. “Mr. Hopps, you’ve just shown me another reason that I fly,” he said with a tip of his mug, both mammals sharing a smile after half a second. It wasn’t until he took a large swallow that the smile turned into a grin. “Mother of foxes! What is this and can I get some to take back to the airfield?”

The rabbit was laughing softly, something that his face was suited far better for than the grief stricken expression he’d had the last time Nick had seen him. “First off, you can drop the ‘mister’. I’m Stu, that’s Bonnie and that’s what you’ll call us. As for what you’re drinking, it’s my own recipe. I brew an ale with different fruits for these little events. This year’s is blueberry.”

“Fair enough, Stu. As long as you call me Nick,” he replied automatically and took a sip of the potent ale. “And yes,” the red fox said as he looked at the dark, almost black contents of the jar and grinned even more. “Yes it is!” Just as he lifted the mug for another taste, Nick felt small arms wrap around his leg and looked down to see Dawn holding onto him, hiding a little shyly from the boisterous revelers around her. When the fox scooped her up in one fluid motion she bleated in pleasant surprise, an arm automatically going around Nick’s neck. “Well then, Stu. What do we have
on tap for a pretty young lady?"

The rabbit cocked his head at the lamb, still not sure how she fit into everything despite his and Bonnie’s promise to Judy that there was room for her at the farm and moved over to the punch that had been made for kits and decidedly nonalcoholic. He poured a bit into a turned wood cup with a smile and wink. “I’m sure that this is just the thing a little lamb would enjoy.” Stu passed the cup over with a flourish. “So, what am I supposed to call you?” he asked warmly as the ewe had to give Nick her doll so she could hold onto the punch.

“Dawn,” the lamb answered softly as she shyly turned her face into the fox while keeping an eye on the rabbit through her slightly too large glasses.

Stu smiled and held out a paw across the plank table. There was plenty of room and despite the bulk of their crops being sent to the war effort, they had more than enough to provide for the lamb. “Well, isn’t that just a fitting name for such a little ray of sunshine!” He rested his paws on the cobbled together table. “What do you think of Bunnyburrow so far, Dawn?”

The ewe was reluctant to answer for a moment and looked around for a second. “It’s almost as noisy as the city,” Dawn finally said in her high, whispery voice.

Stu and Nick both chuckled. “That’s because you came at one of the big celebrations that we have twice a year. And after this there’s the county fair, but after that it gets a little quieter,” the rabbit told her.

Before either of the adult mammals could say anymore a very exuberant Belle came pelting into the barn to refuel with something to drink and nibble on. Many of the smaller kits had broken into games of hide-and-seek or chase and the winded state of the bunny indicated that she was playing as enthusiastically as her peers. The kit skidded to a stop as she saw the fox, her eyes going wide as her ears jerked fully upright.

“Papa!” she whispered loudly. “There’s a fox here!”

Nick snorted in amusement while Stu came around from the table. “This is Squadron Leader Wilde. You didn’t meet him the first time he was here. He’s your sister’s friend and one of the foxes that rescued your brother, Virgil.”

Belle cocked her head to the side as she looked up. “You did? Really?!”

“I guess I did,” Nick replied with a smile as he knelt, careful not to jostle Dawn too much to keep her from spilling her punch. “And who are you?”

The little doe’s eyes widened. “You live in Zootopia?” Belle asked with animation and a hint of envy as her voice climbed to an excited higher register.

“I did,” the lamb replied as Nick put her down, her hoofed feet tapping on the floorboards though she was reluctant to leave the fox’s proximity.

It was easy to tell that Belle had a whole slew of questions she wanted to ask. Then she saw the doll that the ewe held. “Oh! She’s beautiful! They’re not the best, but I have a bunch of dresses that I
helped my Mommy make for mine. Wanna see if they’ll fit?”

Few things could have interested Dawn more and she perked immediately before turning to the fox. “May I, Nick?”

“Sure thing, popcorn. I’ll be here if you need, okay?”

The little ewe only nodded before scampering off with the bunny in the direction of the Hopps’ farmhouse leaving Nick alone with Stu. The rabbit added to the pilot’s mug before nodding to a less crowded corner of the barn where his son and a few of the Hopps congregated around the kit fox that had arrived with the entourage. “Virgil filled us in on the rescue you and your friend flew,” the buck said. “I can’t thank you enough for that. And I won’t ever be able to apologize enough for the way I treated you before.”

Nick shook his head and held up a paw. “These are hard times, Stu. There isn’t anything to really thank me for. I just did what was right.” He looked out the door at the gala and mass of rabbits and bunnies. “Now then, would you tell me what this is all about? I can’t say I’ve ever seen anything like this.”

The rabbit actually laughed, the sound deep and rich. “Never heard of a Finding Festival?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Nick answered truthfully, wondering just what the cause for the celebration could be during the present state of affairs in the world.

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Nick flopped down onto a hay bale that had been set out as a seat for those needing to take a break from the dancing and general merriment. As he looked around he noticed that there were less rabbits than there’d been about an hour prior. He chuckled to himself as he was fairly sure where those rabbits had gone, particularly after Stu Hopps had informed him just what a Finding Festival was.

Many of the attendees had given the fox a polite berth when Judy had dragged him out to the dance area. While pleased about the return of one of their wayward sons, many had still never really interacted with a predator, though when Nick demonstrated that he could not only keep up with a passable Lindy Hop, then showed them some of the dancing that was popular back in the United Vulpine Territories, or Vulpania as it was more commonly called, his acceptance grew. Ronnie Tod was actually more readily accepted as he wasn’t much taller than many of the rabbits and bunnies at the festival, and at the moment had a fluff of teenagers around him as he described some flying exploit complete with acting it out by using his paws to explain what he was talking about.

“Think you’ll be all right if I go get us something to drink?” Judy asked the red fox, a pleasant grin on her dainty muzzle.

Nick nodded. “Something light and refreshing. I think your old buck’s ale has about done me in.” He watched as she spun about, noting with surprise that her uniform pants were actually quite form-fitting and it was a spectacular view, indeed. Nick was roused from his contemplations, wondering how Judy would take to finding out that she now graced the side of his Spitfire when the sound of a throat being cleared drew his attention.

The fox looked to the left and up, the rabbit buck with the scars and tattered ear standing a respectable couple of feet away. As soon as Nick met his eye, Edward Sward he recalled, jerked upright before his arm snapped up in a crisp salute. “Squadron Leader Wilde, may I have a moment, Sir?”
Nick smiled and waved the rabbit to relax. “Social situation and I think I’m tipsy, Sergeant,” he chuckled. “Besides, I hate getting saluted.” He held out his paw. “I’m just Nick. And you’re Edward, right?”

“Yes, Sir,” the rabbit replied accepting the gesture to the hay bale next to the officer. “I mean, Nick.” He glanced up to see what had garnered the fox’s attention moments before and smiled when he saw the retreating Judy just before she vanished into the barn and grinned. “If I might be so bold as to say, some of my brothers are going to be a little put out by you. More than a couple of them have had their eyes on Judy for a while now,” Edward said softly so his words didn’t carry past their immediate area.

“Ehh, I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Nick replied, suddenly wary.

“Relax, Sir, um, Nick. I’m not like some of my kin. Had a fox on my crew that was closer to me than many of my brothers. He was family, if you know what I mean, Sir. Um, Nick.” Edward pulled off his beret and rolled it up between both paws as he rested his elbows on his knees. “That’s sort of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You wanted to talk to me about a fox on your crew?” Nick asked slightly confused, though the ale he’d had wasn’t helping him any. Then he noted the insignia and the Sergeant’s epaulets and that he belonged to the Armored Regiment.

“Not just my crew, but all of us that were at Bullkirk, Sir. We were in the thick of it and it was rough on the ground. I remember a point that we were about to be over run, more than few enemy panzers converging on our line. The only thing that saved the soldiers that we were covering during the retreat were a gaggle of Spitfires. Oddly enough, they all had an interesting red fox tail painted on them.”

Nick sobered a little, his smile dissolving slowly as he regarded the rabbit. “We didn’t do enough…” the fox began.

Edward shook his head. “Don’t think that, Sir…er, Nick. You and yours had your paws full that day. I wanted to thank you, though. You saved a lot of good mammals that day. I promised that if I ever met any of you, especially the leader of those fine pilots, I’d show you how much what you did was appreciated.” From behind his back Edward pulled a bottle that looked extremely old with a pressed wax lozenge that secured a ribbon over the cork in the neck. “And when I made my escape I came across this. It can’t make up for what you did for those of us on the ground, but it’s a start.” He passed the bottle over with a widening smile. “A little something to share with you and your mates.”

“What…is this…?”

Edward chuckled. “From what I was able to gather this is about a hundred and twenty year old brandy. Got it from one of the huns. Figured the bastard owed me.”

Nick wasn’t up to date on the value of such things, though he knew what he held was rare and quite valuable. “I can’t take this! My guys wouldn’t know good liquor from bathtub gin for the most part!”

He watched the light from the nearest lantern shine through the amber liquid.

“You can take it,” Edward said as he held up a paw when Nick made to pass it back. “Just this rabbit’s way of saying thanks.”

“But,” Nick began before realizing it would be a futile argument and finally nodded. “Tell you what, as I’m going to be here for a few days to make sure Dawn gets settled in and so our Flight Captain doesn’t have me arrested for not taking what he calls a proper leave, why don’t we get together
tomorrow and enjoy this?”

The rabbit perked up, honored that the fox would make such a suggestion. “You mean it, Sir?”

“I do, at that!” Nick clapped the rabbit on the shoulder. “And you can show me around that tank on the other side of the barn. I’ve never been in one, and it sure looks like the kits are thrilled by it.”

“The kits always love the tank,” Edward said with a grin.

"Is Dawn all settled in?” Bonnie asked as Judy came back from the Hopps’ house.

The bunny chuckled. “She is, but there was a lot of giggling going on. I think she’s going to be alright. She and Belle have become quite the friends in just a few hours.”

“That’s good. The poor dear’s been through more than enough.” Bonnie said as she slipped an arm around her daughter’s shoulder and snuggled her close. “I think we can make sure that she’s happy here and safe. Your sisters are quite good at sharing a bit of cheer with others.”

“They are at that,” Judy agreed.

“Speaking of, I think it might be time to put your fox to bed. From everything I’ve heard he’s had a rather busy past few days,” the older doe said as she gestured to a bleary eyed Nick who was watching the latest round of dancing from the slightly smaller crowd of bucks and does spinning in the dancing area.

“He thinks that he and his friend are setting up in the barn,” Judy informed her mother.

The Hopps matron raised an eyebrow as her ears twitched together and stood straight upright. “That fox! He’ll do no such thing!” Bonnie declared in a quiet voice, though her tone made it clear that she wouldn’t be disobeyed. “He can sleep in your room. We’ll put his friend with Jeremy and Bailey. Since Danny left for the Navy there’s an open bed there,” she declared before looking at where the kit fox was reclining with his leg up. “Well, unless a doe has taken a shine to him.”

Judy could only stare in disbelief at her mother in complete disbelief. “M-my room…my room?”

Bonnie gave her daughter a pointed look as she crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. “Judith Laverne Hopps, do I look like a complete idiot?” She watched as her child shook her head silently. “I’ve had my suspicions, but all it took was seeing the two of you get out of the car with Dawn to know. You’re an adult. If you can put on a uniform, then you can by goodness make the choice that is best for you.”

“B-but Dad…and the others…” Judy stammered with wide-eyed astonishment.

“I’ll deal with your father, though after bringing Virgil back I think your old buck would be fine with anything regarding Nick. And if anyone of your siblings says anything I’ve got buckets of wormy turnips from last year that they can eat until every last one is gone.” Bonnie sighed. “I was young, too, you know. I know what it feels like to fall for someone that’s different.”

“Wait…what?!?”

The older doe smiled warmly before turning her daughter by the shoulders and pushing her gently to where the red fox was sitting. “It’s a story for another time dear. Now go put him to bed. And don’t worry.”
Judy could only shrug as she did what her mother said, Bonnie having moved off to find her brothers that Ronnie would be rooming with. As she drew close the bunny saw that Nick had indeed had more than enough frivolity. She interrupted the conversation that the stag accompanying Edward on his support tour and speaking engagements was trying to have with the flyer, much to Nick’s relief.

“Sorry to barge in, gents, but Squadron Leader Wilde has had a rough past few days and more than a couple drinks than was good for him when compounded with the number of flight hours recently.”

“Oh,” Lieutenant Antlerbee said with an affable smile. “Not to fret. I’ve heard tell that you’ll be about for a while, and Buck and I will be here for the week before we head to Swinton on Down for our next engagement, so I’m sure we’ll have a chance to talk again.”

Nick blinked. “Buck?” he asked looking around. “Which one?”

The stag laughed. “I’m talking about ‘Lucky Buck’! Sergeant Sward. It was a nickname that he picked up in the regiment. Tank ace in one day with five enemy panzers knocked out of action. His mates used to slap his foot for good luck before a battle.”

Judy had moved around so that she could help Nick stand and began to lead him towards the Hopps’ farm house. “Perhaps we can meet up in time for tea tomorrow, Leftenant,” she told the taller mammal in a friendly manner.

“It would be my pleasure, Pilot Officer Hopps, Squadron Leader Wilde!” the stag said.

Waiting until they were out of earshot Nick leaned a little closer to Judy’s ear. “Thank the Mother for rescuing me! I don’t think I’ve ever met a mammal that could talk so much!”

The doe laughed as they crossed the Sward yard and then through the notch in the stone wall that marked the line between the two farms. “Then be careful if you meet Mari. She’s of the mind that once she gets through school she’s going to be a reporter.” The bunny’s face lost some of its humor. “That is if the war ever ends.”

“It’ll end, Carrots. They can’t keep this up forever. Sooner or later saner heads will prevail.”

The bunny shrugged before looking up sharply at the fox. “Wait a moment,” she said in a suspicious tone while giving her companion a pointed look. “You aren’t all that drunk, are you?”

The fox chuckled softly. “Definitely not as much as I’d like to be, but I don’t want to let anything slip.”

“What do you…EEEP!”

He’d made sure that there was no one around, his better than rabbit vision in the dark enabling him to verify no prying eyes would spy them as he pulled Judy to him, one arm slipping around her waist, the other reaching forward to cup her face in a gentle paw. He held the doe up as one of her feet lifted, meeting his kiss with her own enthusiasm.

“Sorry. I’ve been wanting to do that since we got here,” Nick told her with a softness to his voice that Judy had only ever heard him use when speaking to her or Dawn.

“I’m not going to complain,” she said with a warm smile, wanting another kiss. “Oh. And you aren’t sleeping in the barn.”

“I suppose that I could sleep in the car…”
Judy reached up and pulled the fox’s face down with both paws, her grin mischievous while her eyes regarded the little she could make out of Nick’s face with the near absolute darkness. “Mom said that I’m to put you up in my room.”

“And where are you going to sleep?”

“In my room…” She felt the smile that slowly stretched across the fox’s muzzle.

“Have I told you that I think your mother is really a wonderful doe?”

Judy laughed with her own smile. “You can tell her in the morning,” she whispered and pulled him down to her once more.

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Dawn bounced up to Nick with a brightness to her that Nick and Judy hadn’t seen since the night the bombs fell on Zootopia. She was dressed in a second-paw jumper that Bonnie kept around for young bunnies to play in, the lamb apparently using the clothing for precisely that reason. She launched herself up so that the fox had little recourse but to catch her before hoisting her high. The ewe let loose a peel of laughter that only grew more exuberant when he brought her back down and nibbled at the wool of her neck, Dawn scrunching her shoulders and neck in an effort to protect herself.

“Someone definitely woke up refreshed and ready for the day,” Stu said as he set his cup of tea down next to the newspaper that had arrived with the sun.

“Is that true, popcorn? Did you have a good night?” the fox asked as he plopped the lamb down on his lap before adjusting the bow in her puff of head wool.

“I did! I love it here!” she exclaimed in a breathy, high voice full of excitement. “I didn’t know farms could be so much fun! The grow all of my favorites and there’s a stream and Missus Hopps has a flower garden and said she can teach me to cook and Mister Hopps said he’ll teach me how to drive the tractor and I have so many new friends like Belle and Ivy and Rosalie!”

Nick smiled as Dawn told him everything that had happened since arriving the day before. Fortunately Bonnie Hopps understood the dilemma and brought a cup of coffee over for the fox as he and Judy paid complete attention to the little ewe, a small enigmatic smile on the older doe’s face as she looked on. The lamb continued to tell the fox and bunny of all the things she planned to do that day with the younger Hopps kits. When she was done talking, her cheeks, nose and the inside of her ears flushed with excitement, Dawn regarded her rescuer with green eyes that were just a shade off from Nick’s and looked a little larger due to her glasses.

“You know, if I didn’t know better I’d think you liked it here,” the fox observed with a wink. “The thing is, Mr. and Mrs. Hopps have agreed that you can stay here as long as you want. I think it’s a good idea because I know that they’ll keep you safe and you can go to school with your new friends. How does that sound?”

The lamb’s mouth fell open in unbridled glee. “Really? I can stay here until the war is over and you come home???”

Nick smiled, a lump starting to form in his throat as his eyes sung a little. “You sure can, popcorn,” he croaked around the unexpected surge of emotion.

“You’re the best, Poppa Nick!” she exclaimed and threw her tiny arms around his neck in excitement and joy before jumping down and doing the same to Judy, Stu and Bonnie both. Then Belle and her sisters called for Dawn and the ewe bounded outside, small bleats of pure happiness following her.
When the others turned back it was to find Nick walking into the other room. Stu reached up under his battered flat cap and rubbed at the spot between his ears in confusion. “Is he feeling unwell?”

Judy shook her head, a puzzled expression on her face. “I don’t know…” she trailed off before getting up and following, concern replacing confusion.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever understand foxes,” the old rabbit said as he picked up his paper in one paw and the fresh cup of tea Bonnie poured for him after adding a dollop of honey. When his arm was hit with the end of his wife’s tea towel, Stu looked up in chagrin. Bonnie had accepted the fox, though the buck was still just a touch wary, and he was being honest about not really understanding foxes. “What was that for?”

“Didn’t you hear what Dawn just called him?” the doe asked with an irritated expression, her arms crossed.

Stu blinked. “Called him Nick. She’s been doing that since yesterday,” he answered, still perplexed by his wife’s surly mood. When Bonnie’s foot began to tap on the floor rapidly it was enough to make the rabbit cringe. This was a sure sign that he was on the verge of being in rather serious trouble.

“She called him Poppa Nick,” the doe said, nodding when the light of realization appeared in her husband’s caramel brown eyes.

“Hmm,” Stu finally grunted as he opened the newspaper in his paws. “Then I suppose it’s a good thing that little lamb has him and Judy to take care of her when all this is over, isn’t it?”

It was Bonnie’s turn to look at her spouse with surprise, the buck waiting several long moments, letting his words hit home before lowering the paper so she could see the soft smile on his short muzzle.

“I’m old, wife of mine, but I’m not blind and this still works,” he informed her with the tap of a finger pad to the side of his short muzzle indicating his nose. “Just don’t tell them I know. I’d like to have a little fun with this.”

“How long have you known?”

Without even looking up from his article the rabbit shrugged. “Anyone that’s ever been in love could see it plain as day. Known since yesterday when they brought Virgil home.” At that he actually lowered the pages. “Speaking of which, the boy still asleep?” He saw Bonnie nod and smiled paternally. “Good. He had a rough night last night. Let him sleep as long as he needs.”

The doe poured a tea for herself and sat down next to her husband. “Is that why you kept getting up last night?” Bonnie inquired with a warm smile as she put a paw on Stu’s arm.

“Had to make sure it wasn’t a dream,” he told her, his voice sounding gruff, though it was through the effort of keeping his emotions in check. The moisture that filled his eyes thwarted his attempts, though, and he was glad when Nick and Judy returned to the kitchen table to see that the fox was in no better shape. “Welcome to my world, Nick,” Stu commented before turning back to his paper.

Chapter End Notes
So, a few people got a little salty with my treatment of Dawn Bellwether in this story. Now, before anyone goes off half-cocked, I would say that normally I agree.

In the movie, Dawn Bellwether is an absolute psychotic. She professes friendship and then happily tries to kill said friend (yeah, talking about Judy) and watches with glee at what she believes to be a savage attack coming. That, in my opinion after discussing it with SophieWitch, make Dawn completely unforgiveable in the movie. She's cruel and sadistic beyond redemption.

But then in this, I wondered what sort of mammal could Dawn be if she were brought up differently, and here's my take on it. It's fun to write Dawn this way.

Now, on a separate note, Tom1380 and I have been talking, and we've realized that we need more slang and swearing that is species specific, and that is where you readers come in! One of our favorites to date is 'Buck-balls'. It's a good one for rabbits, as is 'Pelleting one's britches,' to indicate fear. We need more, though. So, if you have ideas for slang or swearing, drop us something in the comments. If we really like it, we'll use it! Let's share the creative process, hey? ;)}
Laughter was a great thing to be able to enjoy. The night was winding down but the last of the dancers who still had the energy were going strong and enjoying the last couple of songs and Edward ‘Buck’ Sward couldn’t help but laugh as his mother and father were giving it a good go showing that they still had it. As was Virgil, who had been dragged out to the dance floor, somewhat reluctantly, by one of Buck’s single sisters. Buck himself was leaning on the fence with a jar of cider in his scarred paw with his brother, Ben, sitting on the top of the fence clapping along in time with the music, his eyes wide with joy that he had managed to stay up so late. In fact he was one of the last of the younger rabbits to be up, and with his maw covered in a healthy dose of jam he looked like he would never be happier. They both laughed again as Virgil seemed to be having a bit of trouble dancing with Ed’s sister who had yet to master the Lindy Hop, but was giving it an enthusiastic try.

Edward then spat a bit of his cider out as partners were changed thanks to the orders of Dan. The stag had been on the microphone most of the evening introducing songs and kept up commentary and Virgil was now dancing with Buck’s mother, Claire. Both Ben and Ed were now shaking with mirth, tears coming to their eyes as they watched on, wiping his dripping chin with his sleeve. How long had it been since he had laughed like this? How long since he was really carefree? It had been an age since he had felt so happy, like it was something from a lifetime before. The moment almost felt surreal and the joy in him bubbled with a sort of effervescence.

He took another swig from the jar in his paw while looking for his new mate, Daisy. She’d headed off to put the kits to bed after one of older Sward sisters who had young ones of her own had offered to baby sit the kits for the rest of the night until they came back. It was an offer that the fresh, young couple couldn’t pass up. They had also been gifted a rare treat in that one of the spare bedrooms in the cottage that sat above the Sward warren had been given to them so they could spend the night together. Even at the Finding Festival these rooms were kept locked as they were for guests, so it was rather exciting to get to sleep or stay in them. Edward’s younger brothers had also been sent off to collect his trunk from his shared dorm so he had everything he needed.

With all that and a good amount of cider in his system he was definitely a very happy rabbit. Buck was also looking forward to getting his yellow fur and blue eyed doe back at his side so he could enjoy the rest of the evening with her. Not for the first time that night he thought of marring her properly. They were mates by word, but he wanted to make it real, and before that he wanted to show his love and mark her in spirit.

Buck felt a tap on his left arm and turned hopefully to see the blue eye doe, but surprisingly it was to find Bonnie Hopps, whose foot was tapping rapidly, eye brow raised and a smile that made ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward worried. He’d been told off by the mother of the Hopps nearly as much as his own. Growing up as he, Dasiy and Virgil were always together meant that they practically lived at each other’s warrens and the two matriarchs had shared in the raising of the three lapines. Thus Bonne Hopps could put the same fear into him as his own mother could.

“Well, Edward, it’s not fair that Claire gets to dance with my son and I miss out.” She knew she had him on his back foot and enjoyed it very much.
So, swallowing and resigning himself to his fate, he wandered out to the dance floor. It was now Virgil’s turn to laugh and to claim some pay back. To the surprise of Ed and Virgil their mothers gave them a both a run for their money as they kept pace with the fast, bouncy music forcing the boys to work harder than expected. Ben meanwhile was now clutching his sides, his own tears of laughter streaming down his face. Buck made sure to push him playfully off the fence onto the hay bale below, winking at the young rabbit as he did so, earning him a grin and a stuck out tongue from his brother.

It was all going well and both Buck and Virgil thought they might be about to get their freedom as the song drew to a close, but Dan and the band were too enthusiastic about having both the returning rabbits on the dance floor and were not about to let them off that easy. With a couple of nods from the band to Dan and back, the stag spoke up into the large microphone once more.

“Well, ladies and gents!” Dan said over the music which slowed down and quieted off to a simmer, the drums bubbling away while keeping the rhythmic bounce in the background while also keeping the four on the dance for a little longer, the two males wondering what was about to happen.

Edward was looking daggers at the stag, knowing that particular mischievous grin and spark in the young deer’s eyes.

“I’ve been hearing words down the old violet grapevine that these boys know how to dance,” he said into the microphone and winking at the two bucks who looked back with expressions of pure thunder, a warning which the stag promptly ignored.

“So why don’t we, for the last dance of the night, change partners!” Dan called out to a rousing cheer from the crowd, both their mothers giggling and dancing off the dance floor paw in paw leaving the two bucks in the middle side-by-side.

The music was starting to build again and they both knew what the others wanted to see. Ed and Virgil had developed a reputation for dancing side by side when in their were teens to show off their moves to various does and annoy the older brothers as much as possible. There was no doubt that their displays were a bit of a crowd pleaser and had always gotten them gals afterwards.

Ed looked at Virgil, reading his best buddy’s face. They were both exhausted. This would have been easy if they had been healthy and not dancing all night already, not to mention rather copious amounts of beer, ale and cider. A loud whistle that they both knew sounded from the fence and they both looked over at Daisy, the doe whistling with her fingers in her dainty muzzle loud enough make the ears around her ring.

“Well, Ed, looks like we won’t be getting out of this one,” Virgil shrugged.

“Yeah. Let’s see if we still know how to do this.” He couldn’t let his new mate or best chum down. Then the music kicked back up and they both were off. It was still the Lindy Hop, but instead of one you would do with a Doe on the end of your paws, it was done side-by-side and the dance was supposed to match with the other, and a couple of fun moves like silly rolls. It was almost a little comedy act that they use to do, but as they went for it they were definitely rusty and by the end of the song they were laughing along with the crowd, their arms around each other’s shoulders. The last of the revellers cheered and with a parting bow they wondered off to the fence where Daisy and Ben were grinning ear to ear, Daisy now successfully teaching Ben how to whistle with his fingers.

“Looks like we’ll need Drill Sergeant Rogers to get us into shape again,” Virgil offered panting.

Edward let out a shout of laughter. “Yeah, you can forget about that, we can just pull a plough
They both leaned against the fence for support as they caught their breath. The day had been a great one and for a long moment they didn’t say anything, just the three of them being together was enough. They watched as Ben was whisked away by Claire and the three couldn’t help but chuckle as his whines and complaints that he wasn’t tired followed him back to the burrow, all the young rabbit’s protests mixed with barely disguised yawns.

“You know, I think he has the right idea,” Virgil said while smiling at the others rather apologetically.

They’d barely had any time together that evening, the amazing moment of Virgil’s return had been the most amount of time as there were too many friends and family members desperate to get their minute with the both of them.

“We have all day tomorrow guys. There’s no rush, why don’t we go down to the stream early and get Judy, Nick and the others to join us later,” Daisy said holding on to both their paws with an almost proprietary fierceness. Here were the two males that meant more to her than anything else in life save her kits, both back from the dead. There was a lot to catch up on and more personal introductions to make. After all, Ginny and Edie had to meet there uncle properly.

“You know what, that sounds like a damn fine idea,” Virgil nodded.

“Mm-hmm. Definitely sounds good to me. Why don’t you and Virg go back to your warren, you can grab the kits off Lilly, I’ll sort Dan out a nice place in one of the barns for the night, and I’ll meet you back at the cottage. Then in the morning it’ll be like old times.” Ed felt another lump in his throat, this time it was more of happiness than anything else. He still couldn’t quite believe that he was standing there with the two of them, though this time he disguised his emotions well.

“The barn? Is that fair?” Daisy didn’t look too thrilled at the idea of the stag being made to sleep in the barn.

Edward just laughed.

“It’s a bit of pay back. Don’t worry. He’s very hard to upset”, Edward said as he turned to give his best friend that was more like a brother another hug, still fighting the lump in his throat.

“Can’t say how good it is to see you, bud”.

It seemed Virgil was fighting the same lump and nodded unable to keep the grin off his muzzle.

“See you in a bit,” Daisy gave Buck a quick kiss, which seemed to confuse Virgil, the rabbit stuck between joy that his sister was happy and wanting to tell Buck to behave himself. Buck smirked then put a very innocent expression on his face, raising his paws up as the brother and sister walked away.

Edward watched them walk back to their warren before heading over to Dan and explaining his sleeping arrangement, and as expected Dan wasn’t fazed at all, still over the moon that he had been invited to join in the festivities. Ed spotted Joanna Clay who had been playing the fiddle for most of the night looking at the Stag with a little more interest than Ed thought normal, though he might have been imagining it. He gave Dan a paw in putting away some of his equipment. Then for the first time all day he found himself alone, his back resting on the side of the main barn where he had started, the rough, warn boards at his back.

A couple things had changed since earlier in the day. The tank hadn’t moved and as he looked at it he realized that he missed Daisy’s humming. Her voice wasn’t in the air when he watched her
examining it, but that moment and memory would be something that stuck with him until his end days. The lack of her soothing voice was regretful, but Lucky Buck couldn’t believe how things had changed in such a short time...so many wonderful things. Judy and Nick bringing back Virgil, finding his blue eyed doe at last along with a family all his own.

He drew in a deep breath taking in the warm night air, the familiar scent of home giving him as much peace here he could want and watched as rabbits and bunnies headed off in all directions, most still talking happily about the night’s fun and drama, or talking in giggles and hushed tones ears flushed with excitement and promises of the night to come.

Then another sound made his ears twitch and tilt under the beret that he had somehow managed to keep on his head.

It was the slurred words of his least favorite brother, Scott. And by the sounds of it he well into his cups and inside the barn talking. Edward didn’t hate his brother, but Scott had given him a hard time growing up and been a bully to many of his younger siblings. Not surprisingly he was one of the bigger bucks of the Sward clan with a bit more brawn than anything else. They’d already shared words that evening for the first time since his return, unexpectedly his elder brother seemed to have found a new respect for him, giving him a macho paw shake saying how happy he was to see him. It had been a nice, though unexpected, surprise. But at that very moment Ed found he wasn’t in the mood for Scott’s drunken bravado and as he made to wander back to the cottage to meet up with a doe he was desperate to spend time with when something of what Scott made him stop in his tracks.

“I tell you he’s a messed up proper monster. You seen his ears? Well, I saw the rest of him in the showers. Those preds been chewing on him I tell you! What do you think they did to him?”

The panic feeling of snakes awoke with Ed’s gut, writhing with unease and a mix of anger and hurt that pulled away the happiness that had filled him just a second before. It was typical Scott and his idiot friends. Ed forced himself to ignore them. He was too happy and feeling too good to let it ruin his night. Again he began to walk away the word ‘monster’ weighing him down, but again he stopped as he heard the next set of words.

“Think they made him eat meat?”

Buck’s breath caught in his chest at the mention of it. Why would Scott even wonder such a thing? He must know what he was implying by saying that! The nausea started to pull his insides around, the snakes now slithering up his throat.

“You look at me like that, but now we got meat-eaters chasing our does!”

Buck felt the red mist begin to descended upon him again, a burning hot rage pushing the snakes back making the panic die in the fires of anger. How could he now say things like that about the very foxes that had saved the lives of so many and two of them being so close? His paws curling into his fists, no matter how hard he clenched them he didn’t need to worry about his claws biting his palms, Ed forced the anger deep inside so that it wouldn’t take over like it had too many times before.

‘He’s drunk and talking stupid,’ Edward told himself, trying to control the rage that he’d never had before he went off to war, before he went to see his friends die. This was what Buck was so scared of...of his family seeing. He had to get a grip and leave his idiot brother to his brain dead friends. But he couldn’t move away. He didn’t even notice that his ears had raised up of their own accord, making his beret fall to the ground. Edward could hear the blood rushing around his head and through his body, drowning out what Scott had said to make whoever was in there laugh. His brother’s next words crushed Buck’s defensive lines he’d put up to hold the fire that threatened to consume him, simply wiped it away with what he said next.
“Well, at least scab got that whore and her bastard kits as a welcome home present...I can’t believe we’re letting her get with him after what she...”.

Buck didn’t even register that he had turned and bolted into the barn stopping dead at the door. His fists were trembling and his entire body vibrated with the urge to smash his fist into his sibling’s muzzle. The last time he had been this angry, the last time he had felt like this, had been over the Channel and that time he had walked away with blood on his paws and a body behind him. This time it was lucky for Scott that he didn’t have any of the tools a soldier carried, lucky he didn’t have his revolver, lucky that something held him back...held him back from diving at his own blood and kin and sinking his fists into his face to knock out his teeth. Inside his head a little voice telling him that Scott was drunk and that he wasn’t worth it. And this little voice was Daisy’s and it was enough to stop him going too far.

The rabbits in the barn spotted Edward, their faces all went from drunken laughter to looks of alarm...then to fear. The figure of the war-torn rabbit, ears high, one whole and one cut and mangled, his eyes those of an enraged hunter, a predator, staring down its prey. At that moment, to them, Buck was a demon from a world the rabbits in the barn had never seen; born from war, torture and suffering the fools couldn’t begin to imagine.

To their eyes the rabbit in front of them wasn’t a rabbit at all. He looked like an Axis predator that had just stepped around the corner armed, with teeth and claws, blood stained and ravenous.

Only Scott stood in front of him. Buck didn’t notice that there were five of them in the barn enjoying the unguarded cider, didn’t notice that there were two Hopps rabbits speaking ill of their own sister, one Clay and another one of his own, his younger brother Lucas Sward, looking rather uncomfortable with what was being said but trying to be one of the gang.

Scott used to scare Buck as a kit, being so much bigger then he was. But not now. Though his elder was still bigger, he didn’t feel the same fear. Ed had faced worse, much worse. Going back to his childhood he would have loved to make Scott and his friends noses twitch like they did to his, make their ears fall and their eyes fearful. But it didn’t give him any satisfaction now.

The rushing of blood in his ears made it feel like he was once again standing in a burning tank the burning inferno drowning out everything else. Ed wanted to beat his brother into the dirt for the way he spoke about his mate, the bunny who had gone through so much without him, who had, in spirit, visited him at his darkest hours and kept him putting one foot in front of the other. Now Scott stood there as bold as brass, drunken and slurring insults.

Again he moved without really thinking. Ed marched up to his brother so they were nose to nose, one still one twitching. As Buck looked up into the face of his brother the rest of the barn was silent, an empty table behind Scott stopping the larger buck backing down from the Lucky one.

“You listen here, boy,” his words were tremulous with rage, but that beautiful internal voice was stopping him from shouting. “You can talk shit about me, but if you ever call my mate and kits that again, I will show you how predators chew there meat.”

Although his voice had a slight quaver to it there was no doubt of the promise of serious harm in the quiet tone that grew colder and harder with each syllable, like deadly steel.

“You can talk crap about me, but if I ever hear those words come out of that twat mouth again, I’ll make sure you muzzle is wired shut and you wind up drinking your supper for the next year.”

His mahogany eyes hardened and chilled noticeably, like glass or stone and didn’t waver in the slightest as he refused to back down.
“You dare...you dare talk about my family like that again, I will show you what it’s like to be chewed like meat.”

His brother didn’t say a word. The colour had drained from the soft flesh within his ears and nose and all he could do was swallow hard in reply, trying to gulp down his terror. Scott was frozen to the spot, one of the most dangerous traits rabbits had inherited from their wild ancestors. The look of utter terror in his brother’s eyes made Edward’s murderous rage rise even more and his fingers flexed as if he had claws of a predator and he had to ball them up into fists again to stop him from him striking the timid thing in front of him, the muscles taut all the way to his shoulders.

“You call Daisy a whore when you brag about how many does you’ve shagged?” Edward asked acidly. “You’re nothing but the lowest sort of hypocrite I’ve ever had the displeasure of knowing.”

He hadn’t realized that his paw had raised and he jabbed his finger into the other rabbit’s chest with every syllable he spoke. Ed let it curl back into a fist and lowered it to his side before he did more than poke his sibling.

“Apologize.”

Nothing but whimpering stammers and stutters came from Scott as he tried to comply, shrinking in on himself as his brother continued to glare at him.

“Fuck off,” Buck finally uttered in disgust.

Then he noticed the others were almost as still as Ed’s older brother and his contempt grew until he could contain it no longer.

“GET OUT!”

The quintet of rabbits scampered out of barn as if their tails were alight. All he could do was stand there rooted to the spot in a blizzard of emotions. He breathed deep trying to conquer his outrage, pushing that monster back into its rusty cage that he kept locked.

“Ed?” a questing voice spoke at the door way to the barn.

Edward wheeled around to face the speaker and Charlotte shrunk back at his stare catching a glimpse at what her brothers and the others had run from.

“What’s going on? I heard a shout and saw Lucas running as if the devil himself was chasing his tail.” She looked nervous, almost as scared as the fleeing bucks had been.

Edward blinked and forced himself to relax as much as he could, softening his eyes and stance, clearing his throat trying to rid it of the tightness he suddenly felt.

“He was with Scott who was...”

As his temper ebbed away it was replaced with one of guilt and dread, he had done what he was most scared of; he had shown his family what he was.

“He said some rather unsavoury things about Daisy and the kits.” He couldn’t say anymore but Charlotte seemed to understand or guessed.

“Okay. Lucas looked really scared. You must have given them quite a fright,” Charlotte observed. She seemed as if she wanted to say more until a male voice called from behind her.

“Coming, William,” she called back over her shoulder, a smile creeping back on to her muzzle.
Ed didn’t notice as he was too distracted fighting with himself.

“Don’t worry, Ed. Let it go. You know how much of an idiot Scott can be,” and with that she touched his upper arm before stepping back and skipped off to William Clay, the one she had found that night.

That panic which he had forgotten about for the whole evening had now come back, clawing at his insides, making his breaths come in quick, hard gasps, the ravaging fire that had been roaring with in his head was now replaced with the drumming of his own heart. He suddenly felt cold empty, horrified at what he had just shown. Needing air Buck staggered back outside spotting his beret laying in the dust looking like someone had trampled it while running. Bending down to pick it up he felt the world give a nasty spin forcing him to fall paw and knee gasping. Edward wanted to run to the woods and hide from everyone.

He was not the rabbit he had been.

His tormentors had succeeded in turning him into a savage animal, ripping him down piece by bloody piece; all for the fun of it, all for the challenge. And now his brothers would know. The Swards, the Hopps, the Clays...everyone would know what he was.

They had seen it and word would spread like fire through dry grass.

Ed paused, staying like that while trying to regain control, telling himself that he was a fool for letting his stupid brother push him so far, that he was being weak that he was showing them all what a monster he had become. Buck looked up at the sky and saw it alive with stars, the tiny sliver of silvery moon having dipped below the horizon hours ago. They would see what he had done, what he could do. What would his king and country think seeing him like this? What would his crew say? What would Virgil make of him?

And what would Daisy think of him?

Like so many times before it was the thought of her, that voice, that got him back to his feet. Ed hadn’t realized what that...what she truly meant to him until just that day. Why had he never been able to figure that out before or the many months being a POW, looking to the blue sky whenever it showed through the clouds, just to see that blue that so matched her eyes, and made him think of her? A few months ago he just thought it was home that he was thinking of. But it wasn’t home. It had been Daisy. She was the reason he’d kept his sanity and hadn’t given in. And now, to him, he knew it was so much more.

Edward steadied himself, his breathing going back to normal. Edward would find Lucas in the morning and talk to the young rabbit to make sure he was okay. He’d had every right to be angry at Scott and had been fortunate he hadn’t lost his temper and done something they both would regret even more. But Lucas hadn’t said those things. He would talk to his mother and father, explain what he’d done. This was his family and they wouldn’t think him a monster.

“Get a grip”, he muttered before setting off, beret back on, back in control for now.

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“Ed, where have you been?” Daisy beamed at him as she opened to door to their room for the night.

The very sight of her was enough to ease his soul, he instantly felt better for seeing the young doe. Ed took off his beret without thinking, protocol that had been drilled into him and was automatic taking over, and started to enter the cottage almost timidly, stopping just outside the threshold. He
couldn’t find any words as he looked at her. She was still in her dress and still looked as beautiful as she had when he’d first seen her that day. Radiant, stunning, and enough to make his eyes start to feel full.

Maybe even more beautiful as she seemed to be filled with a luminescent quality that shown in her eyes and even her very fur.

She rolled her eyes at him, shaking her head while still smiling. Daisy then leaned against the frame with her arms crossed over her breasts, her expression partly amused, partly challenging.

“You know you don’t need to ask my permission to enter, solider.”

Edward blushed and cursed himself for being a fool and stepped to her. At that moment he needed to feel her warmth, to finally hold on to her. As he moved to her she pushed off of the door frame and inched closer to meet him. Then their arms were around the other, bringing them together, his arms wrapping around her gently at first, then with a bit more strength.

Daisy’s eyes closed and as she pushed her twitching nose to his chest, her paws grabbing the front of his uniform as if she was doing everything in her power to keep him as close as possible, to make sure he was as real as possible. How long had she been waiting for that moment? How long had she dreamt of Edward holding her in his arms? It was the most incredible feeling the doe had ever experienced! Even though she could feel under his uniform that he was under weight and too thin, Daisy had never felt so warm, wanted, loved and safe.

All the while Edward was drinking in her scent, his nose all but buried in the fur of her cheek and neck. As strange as it was for him, it was twitching madly, but as far from fear as it was possible to get. He was lost in Daisy’s personal scent, a sea of flowers and spring and life and to him this is what heaven must smell like. He wished he had a fox’s nose in that moment so he could revel in that small, take every part of that glorious aroma in. Despite his own subdued sense Edward wanted to roll in it until it enveloped him completely. And almost as an added treat he could feel her heart beating against his own.

Who knew how long the stood like that Ed drinking her in, his thumb running gently though the fur at her slender shoulders and neck or ears while Daisy melted into the touch and solidity of the one rabbit she’d always loved. The bunny pressed her head against the rabbit, listening to the steady beat of his heart. For all she cared, in that moment they could stay like that until the end of time. And so they would have embraced longer were it not for a small murmur of young kits stirring. The couple pulled back but didn’t fully separate. Both looked at the other and grinned in chagrin as the moment broke the though each bore a sense of affection and contentment in their eyes.

“I just fed them both,” Daisy spoke as she walked over to the basket that held the tiny souls that Edward loved so much already.

He padded up behind his mate, looking down into the soft bundle of blankets, Ginny and Edie both stirring slightly. With a soft whisper of soothing words and brushing his paws lightly over the blanket, Edward rocked it gently and soon both little bunnies stilled, going back to their slumber.

Edward was lost in them now, taking in everything about each bun, while Daisy watched him as he simply looked at the bunnies and let the basket tilt to and fro with his finger on the woven edge. He looked back up at her and she felt her soul grow warm as her eyes looked into Edward’s who were overly bright, the smile making his scarred facade one of pure joy.

“They’re beautiful, so like their mother,” he spoke softly, his voice breaking slightly.
Happy that both kits were sound asleep once more with the gentle assurance that they were safe and watched over, he turned to face Daisy. Enraptured in her gaze, all of Ed’s troubles were now gone, his fears were left some where far away, along with the war...along with everything else at that moment. It was just them his family and the blue-eyed doe that along with her children had taken up residence in his heart.

Again he felt his thoughts being robbed as he looked into those sapphire orbs, the bunny’s expression so warm, so full of affection. They were even more mesmerizing then he remembered. Then, without a word or any sort of overt signal they again came together, pulling the other close with a gentle ardour that grew with the first touch of paws.

A rush of need had hit Edward with such force it had rendered everything else irrelevant. It was Daisy he needed in his arms, to hold and to touch, but that wasn’t enough. We wanted her with his very soul such was the longing in his heart. There were no words that needed to be spoken aloud. No ‘you were everything, you kept me alive’. No ‘my world died with you gone’. No words could come close to showing the feeling the two rabbits had for each other, only actions could speak that now.

Once again they were in each other’s embrace, and while just as loving and wonderful as before, there was an underlying sense of desperation. Their lips came together as they kissed, with all the passion their newly discovered world held. Nor did it break or falter as they tumbled into the soft sheets of the bed. The moment only grew as the need to be close to the other becoming a powerful force.

Buttons started to come undone on Ed’s uniform his jacket now on the floor and the top shirt now open, Daisy’s dress was rising up shapely legs with the suspender straps halfway down her arms. The doe moved a paw so she could slip it into the undershirt the rabbit wore, but a soft paw closed around Daisy’s wrist brought them to a pause. Both were panting with the heat of the moment, the culmination of so many dreams each had left unspoken and the restrain, gentle as it was, brought the moment to a standstill. She looked up at the one accepted, desired, as her mate and was surprised to see his ears back and his rich mahogany eyes cast down shamefully.

Edward wanted to go on, wanted to be with her in the purest form, to show Daisy how much she meant to him and to mark them as mates in its most true and wild way, to make love to bunny in his arms. But as only his shirt now hide what lay underneath he found he couldn’t go any further. The rabbit had been marked and torn and he felt ashamed to bring the effects of what had brought both of them so much heartache to the front. He didn’t want her to see him so weak, he didn’t want to see the horror in her eyes, or pity. How pathetic was it that he couldn’t even give himself to the most beautiful creature in the world or stop love from blossoming in its truest form.

She would be scared of him if she saw the scars. He knew she would look at him differently. A smaller part screamed this wasn’t true he knew that Daisy would see him under all of it, but it was just too much. It physically hurt to stop at that point where ever fibre of his heart and soul wanted more, but his head just could let it go. As he brought his eyes up to meet hers again, feeling them full of anguish at disappointing his heart’s desire, it was his turn to be surprised. Instead of seeing an expression of annoyance or frustration that he expected to see, Edward found her smiling warmly at him. Her soft, velvety paw touched his cheek he could help but melt into the contact, a sigh escaping him.

“Ed,” she began in the most tender tone possible, “you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Daisy resumed slipping her other paw beneath his undershirt, feeling the scars and little ridges of
hard flesh where fur would never grow back, though she didn’t flinch and, if anything, her eyes grew warmer.

“I want to see you, Edward Sward. All of you,” she spoke softly to the buck. She didn’t want him to shy away, to lock himself in the cage that she had spotted behind those eyes over the course of the day. Daisy would nurse him through it, her strong soldier needed a strong doe, and if she wasn’t allowed to protect and stand by him on the front lines, then by the Rabbit’s Messiah she would protect him every other way she could.

She needed to see him all of him.

“The good.”

She stroked his cheek, his eyes opening once more to look at her.

“And the bad,” she moved the paw he still gentle restrain, feeling him resist for a fraction of a moment until he let go of her paw. Slowly she slid the uniform tunic off his shoulders followed by the undershirt, revealing his torso.

Ed couldn’t bring himself to look at her as she regarded him, she was shocked but didn’t show it. The last time she had seen him like this had been not long before he and Virgil had left. They’d been swimming in the small lake and back then he had the body of a fit young buck that worked the lands, strong and lean with a healthy coat of fur.

Now his once learn body was under nourished but clearly he had been putting weight back on. Then there was the uneven fur, large patches much shorter the rest as if he’d had mange or bad fleas at some point. Granted, he was clean now, his fur healthy, but the signs of what he’d endured were there.

Lastly there were the scars, places were the fur had grown back wrong, or leaving long lines. Some were odd shaped and ragged and somehow she knew those to be from claws and jaws.

She softly ran her fingers down his chest and she could feel them in full, discovering what the fur hid. She didn’t speak and just touched, feeling him tremble. After a moment her eyes were back on his face, his eyes closed tight as his nose twitched. After a moment he opened them.

Daisy looked back at him squarely, her own eyes and face warm and kind. There was no look of pity, no horror, no revulsion; just a warm look of truest and most sincere affection.

“What are you so scared of, Ed? It’s still you, I love you I always have and nothing is going to stop that. Not even these,” she ran her paws down his chest tracing the grooves cut into his fur, until they reached his belt which she undid to bare the rest of the rabbit.

He smiled weakly and that small smile meant more to Daisy then Ed would ever know.

Ed breathed in deep taking in her scent, before leaning into her once more his kiss slower but deeper than it had been before. He laid her back with almost reverent tenderness. It was now his turn and he slowly pealed away the dress until it was only Daisy below him and nothing more.

In the dim light her coat seemed as if it was made from the rays of the sun, warm, soft gold that drew his paws to her, shifting slightly as he explored her form by touch and feel and caress. Her sapphire eyes were shining back at him, the jewels that were the windows to her soul, watching and seeing him, Edward Sward, and nothing else. He leaned over Daisy again, just drinking her in and memorizing every last bit of her. When next he leaned down and kissed her once more, it stretched on for a lifetime. When this kiss ended, both drawing in much needed air, he lay down behind her
and pulled her to him and put his arms around her.

“Is this ok? I...I just want to hold you tonight,” he said softly, the smallest catch in his throat.

“Mmm...” she hummed back in assent. This was enough for the moment. There was plenty of time for them now and they would claim each other when the time was right.

“Besides” Edward said drawing Daisy back to him as he reached over her, moving the basket onto the bed next to them. “Not sure it’d be proper, in front of the kits and all,” he looked down at her and winked. Surprised at the sudden thought she could help but giggle.

“You have a point there Lucky Buck,” she wiggled her tail as she spoke which made Ed gasp and groan as they were still pressed into one another, Daisy snuggled deep into the hollow of his body. “Glad their Dad still has some sense, but I’m still going to have you”.

Edward grinned while nuzzling her neck softly before both dropped into a restful sleep, feeling more complete than either ever had before.

Their bodies were so warm that combined with the cozy late summer night there was no need for covers. The fur and gentle heat of the other was all Edward and Daisy needed. Between that and their new little family they’d formed, both nestled into a little piece of heaven.

Edward had lost his faith of the Mother Rabbit and all that came with it when he had seen what mammals were capable doing to each other. What he did believe was that maybe there had been once actually been heaven, but that it was gone, spread all over the world so you call always find little fragments of it. He believed this because he found one of those pieces right there inside that cottage, with his own new family around him. Around him, past the walls and floor were his parents, his brothers and sisters sleeping soundly below, his friends and neighbours to his sides...he had never felt so at peace. Edward had found his heaven and he didn’t have to die to get there. Despite the trials endured he’d survived and found them again.

The rabbit couldn’t help but smile drowsily at that thought and once more he breathed Daisy’s scent in greedily, unable to stop himself. He didn’t think he could feel this at ease. Ed was so relaxed in a clean, warm bed, in the warm night air, with Daisy nestled softly against him already sound asleep, a content smile upon her dainty muzzle. It didn’t take long for sleep to pull him away to join her.

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It was cold where he stood. The wind was cutting past him through him, drowning out all the sounds and replacing it with a great roar. As each gust push with such force it was blew his ears down, Edward opened his eyes to take in his surroundings even as he huddled against the frigid gales. Everything was shrouded in shadow, so much so he couldn’t really make out where he was. All the details were hidden under the veil, but what he could figure out was that he was standing in a corridor or between two buildings which were low and made of wood.

Then a jolt to his gut struck him as he recognized his surroundings.

No! He could be back again...not in that place! Not this nightmare again...

Ed turned to flee. No sooner did the rabbit move than he felt the squelch of mud under his feet and between his toes, the thick, greasy sludge from the camp sticking to him like a vile, malodorous glue that slowed his movements. As he struggled, Edward glanced up and the heavens and saw that it was lit by thousands of what looked like eyes; the eyes of predators with the green glow that one would sometimes see in low light. If he was there, standing in that spot between the hutches, with the wind
and stars then that creature must be there and as the thought flashed through his mind he turned, a sudden hatred filling his soul, a revulsion that filled his heart and spilled over into a blinding rage. A dark figure stood at the far end of the narrow space. The silhouette was made of a deeper darkness that filled the space blocked that path of escape.

Launching himself at the shadow, Edward attacked with a ferocity that was nearly unheard of with rabbitkind, using paws, feet and his powerful jaws to ravage the dark, indistinct figure. His limbs were given additional strength from the combination of terror and rage that filled him. With a guttural scream, the shadow figure dissolved, seeping into the thick mud between the wood walls.

He stood panting feeling a savage triumph coursing though his veins. Revenge, even against the nebulous figure, felt so good. Edward pushed his pain into the thing that had taken so much from him in a place where he had so little hope. It made him feel powerful where he had been powerless.

A sound like claws clicking together came from behind him and Ed spun around. Two sets of those glowing eyes were peering at him from the other end of the narrow corridor between the hutches. Two predators that lurked in the gloom, but he couldn’t make out what they were.

“I didn’t think you had it in you, meat. To kill like one of us.”

That voice...Edward knew that voice but it couldn’t be. He was gone! He was long gone when he’d fled from that beast across the Channel.

The two pairs of eyes that watched the rabbit merged to a single set and then suddenly burned yellow, with slits for pupils.

“How knew you could be like so like us? Perhaps you should have been born with fang and claws.” Another laugh, a sound that made him freeze to the spot, making his nose twitch and his body tremble.

No he wasn’t like them, he wasn’t a monster, he went to fight to save a world from the madness.

“Look at what you gone and done Edward James Sward”.

He turned to look at the shadow figure he’d killed and instead of the amorphous blob of inky darkness it was ...

He screamed as Scott lay in the mud, his face and body bloodied and broken, his eyes like cold marbles that were already starting to cloud over.

Edward fell to his knees and sobbed, shaking his brother trying force some sign of life from him before he threw his head back and let loose a primal scream...

Other voices joined Edward’s, though where his was an inarticulate vocalization of his anguish, the ones that taunted him from beyond his sight were quite clear. And familiar.

“MONSTER! MURDERER!” they shirked, the voices of his parents, his siblings. Of every mammal that he’d ever cared for.

And to add to the shame and wretched misery, Daisy, standing several feet away and pointing at him with an accusing finger, her eyes not the warm sapphire orbs she’d regarded him with, but cold, glacial, and filled with revulsion.

“Savage!” the doe hissed.
He raised a bloody paw to her, reaching out imploringly to the one he’d accepted as his mate, that had also accepted him, to make her feel better...to show her it would be all right. He had to prove to her that it had been someone else and not Scott. Daisy shrank back, cowering in fright with her arms protecting the wicker baskets with the kits inside.

“Please!” he begged...

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Edward Sward sat bolt upright his paws over his mouth to stifle the actual scream that had been building. Had he been able to perspire his fur would’ve been matted in a cold sweat. he was trembling and panting like he had run a mile at a full sprint and Ed could still taste the fear pheromones that were on his tongue.

He looked around feverishly, fully expecting there to be a fossa or snow leopard waiting for him, but no; he was in the cottage on his parents’ farm. As he spun his eyes swept the room they settled on the doe next to him clad only in her own golden fur. Daisy hadn’t stirred in the slightest during her mate’s nightmare, and still slept peacefully next him. She still one arm around the basket and provided a truly beautiful sight to the rabbit.

But, no.

He didn’t deserve her, didn’t deserve what she offered. Not after the things he’d done. He was a tainted soul, a husk of the Edward Sward he had been, torn apart with the leftovers pieced back together. He got out of bed his paws still over his mouth stifling his heavy breathing, trying to stop himself from reacting and being sick.

Gods of Rabbits...what had he done? How could he even set foot back here? What was he even thinking? Edward felt that he was no better than the predators that were waiting for him over the Channel. He had no right to share a bed with the doe he loved, the one bunny that had kept him going, and now he’d soiled her with his own sickness. He looked down at himself without really seeing his body in the darkness. The paw not held over his muzzle easily found the scars that peppered his form. For all he’d been through and done, he might as well have been covered in blood.

He heard a soft chirring mewl from the basket and Edward’s eyes shot open in utter terror. He felt that he’d brought a dark evil with him, and the two little innocent kits were in jeopardy of the taint that surrounded him. Slipping off the bed cautiously so as not to wake the slumbering Daisy, Edward snatched up his clothing, putting the articles on in a frantic, almost blind panic. Before fleeing he found the rolled up blanket in his footlocker and tucked it up under his arm without really thinking about it.

He needed to get out.

Closing the door softly as he could while fighting the urge to slam it, Edward bolted, heedless of the direction that he fled, his heart thundering in his chest. He had no idea where his legs were taking him until he burst out onto a well worn path, the stars, so bright and clear in the countryside reflecting off lake that sat near the Sward and Hopps farms. He stumbled as his right leg proved unable to keep up the punishing pace that his panic had pushed him into and fell to the ground in a heap.

He pushed himself up onto his paws and knees and looked out over the lake. This place was a sacred place to Edward. This was where he had the fondest memories of his childhood and as he gazed at the dimpled surface as a cool breeze made the water shimmer and the leaves rustle, his panic eased off a little as he took a deep breath. When he fell to the ground something popped out of the rolled up
cloth.

He looked down at the blade that was now laying next to his legs. It was a thing of ugliness and the blade was covered in the symbols and rhetoric that the Axis embraced. It was a savage object that suited its last master well; a knuckle duster hilt meant for a larger paw, hark black leather grip, and high carbon polished steel. It was a violent blade for a violent mammal. Buck had stolen this trench knife the last time he had seen its owner, and what a moment the passing of the blade had been, something he would never forget.

Apart from scars, haunting memories and the pair of ear tags that he pulled out of his pocket, the knife was the only other thing Edward had brought back from his escape.

Edward reached into his pocket and slipped the two tags out. One was stamped with the number the Axis preds had given him, the other was Tim’s...

As he lifted his eyes once more to the lake, the faces of so many mammals seemed to lift from the surface. Tim, Kevin, Jeremy...other mammals, fellow soldiers from the POW camp, the vixen that had put him back together so many times. There were soldiers that he saw only for the briefest moment that fateful day in the coastal village of Bullkirk. There were even some faces of predators in enemy uniforms that appeared. All of them regarded the rabbit as he sat as still as a statue while gazing at the water.

Then coming to the forefront of the mass was Virgil, his ear also perforated for the tag that identified him as not only prisoner, but also as food. Then, pushing past all of the others, came Daisy. Even in the dark of night her fur almost glowed. In her paw she carried the basket, the starlight enough to reveal the ears of the kits within poking up over the edge, their fur the same sunshine yellow of their mother.

It wasn’t until the faces of all the others vanished that Edward realized that he was really seeing the doe, that she’d followed the rabbit that had accepted him as a mate. She was wrapped in one of the thin sheets from the bed where they had lain together.

She said nothing as she sat on the grass next to Edward, placing the basket close at paw, and said nothing. Even though no words were exchanged, he felt the last vestiges of the nightmare dissipating, like fog in the morning sun. After untold minutes passed, the bunny reached out slowly, though with no hesitation, and placed her paw on his.

“I know that you’re hurting, Edward,” Daisy said so softly it might have been a whisper. “But you aren’t alone. You...you’ve seen things that no one should ever have to see...lived through something that I can’t imagine. I know that you think that you’re...that you’re broken. Maybe you are, but that’s okay. I’m a little broken too.”

As she spoke, Daisy’s paw tightened on his and she rubbed the thin fur of his scarred knuckles. Along her cheeks were the tracks of silent tears that caught the starlight and glittered as if she had tiny chips of diamond in her soft fur.

“I...I was hoping that maybe I could take the little pieces of me and give them to you so maybe you aren’t too broken.”

When she sniffed and her voice grew a touch thicker, it caused Edwards heart to twist in his chest and he found his own mahogany eyes seeping tears of his own.

“If...i-if you do...don’t want me...I-I-I’ll understand...”

The offer to cease their burgeoning relationship cut through the rabbit like the shrapnel that had
peppered his body and burned with an even greater intensity than the flames his tank had been consumed in. He felt shame, so much doubt and sobbed once before he let the doe pull him onto her lap, her paws stroking his ears and head, not even flinching as she encountered tattered flesh and scars. Daisy used her touch to soothe and calm, and as she tended to his heartache and doubt with infinite patience and affection, Edward wondered why he was so terrified.

Daisy’s heart went out to the rabbit as her mate curled up on the ground and rested his head in her lap. She began to stroke his ears and the fur on his head, along his cheek and neck. “I will always be here for you, my sweet Edward, mate or not,” she crooned before bending over to nuzzle his cheek. “You remember when we were kits and I used to lie for you and Virgil? I never wanted to see you hurt or in trouble, and that hasn’t changed. I love you too much.”

Edward shivered and squeezed his eyes tightly shut against the burning and full feeling beneath his lids. Her gentle paws continued to stroke his ears and neck as she bent over him, almost as if Daisy were protecting him with her own body.

“I’ve always loved you,” she whispered and nuzzled her rabbit.

It took a bit for Edward to get to a point that he could speak and turned his head just enough that he and Daisy could look each other in the eye. “I love you,” the rabbit replied, not just saying the words, but feeling them even though it was his belief that he was unworthy.

“C’mon,” the doe said after touching her nose to his, taking in the rabbit’s slightly muskier, male scent before chinning the top of his head. She got to her feet and all but hauled Edward to his feet, silently guiding him back to the cottage after retrieving the basket with Ginny and Edie. To ensure he wouldn’t bolt again her fingers were twined tightly with his.

Once inside Daisy once more undressed the buck before helping to clean the dirt, debris and grass stains that resulted from his fear induced flight into the night. She then made sure her kits were safely ensconced in the basket and tucked in before once more turning to the mate that she’d wanted with all her heart since she was a kit herself. Once Edwrd was taken care of and had drained a glass of water, Daisy let the sheet that wrapped her fall to the floor. She covered the short distance to him and knelt, her paws on his knees as she looked up into his rich amber brown eyes.

“Lay back,” the doe said softly.

Edward blinked at the quiet request, though the look in the bunny’s eyes made it quite clear that she wouldn’t take no for an answer. When he hesitated a moment too long the doe pushed him back, getting the rabbit situated on the bed. When Daisy lay down, it was to face him as her paws cradled his face and brought them together.

She said nothing more as her muzzle met his, feeling Edward start slightly before giving into the kiss. When his paws slipped around her shoulders and wais, Daisy sighed, letting the kiss deepen before pulling back slightly, her fingers trailing down the rabbit’s scarred face.

“Do you love me?”

Edward nodded before whispering his answer. “Yes.”

“Do you know that I love you?”

The rabbit again nodded and swallowed hard, his heart pounding within his chest as the warmth that emanated from the bunny drove the icy snakes of fear back into the darkness. “Do you know that I will always be here for you? No matter what, Edward, good or bad, day or
night, I have always been yours and I always will be.” She ran her thumb over his whiskers. “Do you want this, before we go further. Do you want me and do you want to be the father to my girls?”

Edward sucked in a shuddering breath before nodding. “I do, Daisy, I really do. But I-“

She placed her paw over his mouth. “No buts, Edward. It’s yes or no.”

The rabbit looked almost as if he were cornered, a slightly panicked cast to his mahogany eyes until he barked out his answer. “Yes!”

With that single word so much happened, almost as if the entire world shifted. Darkness fell away from Edward’s soul like the shucking of heavy mud from his feet. The cold places of his heart and soul were filled with something like an effervescent warmth that was completely Daisy, filling him so much that it was astonishing just how empty he had been. When the doe pulled herself tight against him, their limbs twining and fur rubbing against the other’s it was like a cleansing bath that was less physical and more spiritual. Then their muzzles met once more in a kiss that deepened so much that they were forced to share their breath with the other and for the buck it was like the first breath of life entering him.

The next that Edward knew was that Daisy had rolled over, pulling the prodigal rabbit over her. He hovered like that for a moment before taking that final step and looked into sapphire eyes and saw not only acceptance, but also encouragement and, above all else, a fathomless love that knew no bounds. As he slowly advanced, Daisy opening herself to her chosen, it was with the realization that he was finally coming home. Sinking to the ends of their bodies, a gasp escaping the doe’s throat as his own heart seemed to stop before starting back up again, beating stronger than ever, Edward accepted and took one of his oldest and dearest friends as his mate, as his love, and as the strength that he needed.

Their motions were perfectly meshed, moving together until the ultimate culmination of gentle passion and in the bliss and soul-shaking afterglow they realized that for the first time in months, they had something that had been all but smothered.

They both had hope.

Edward and Daisy each cried at the beautiful thing that they’d just shared, touches, caresses and kisses following their union until exhaustion claimed both with gentle warmth and, still joined, held each other and let sleep take them to a place where there was no darkness, no fear, no nightmares. Where they travelled in their slumber was a place where peace and love reigned supreme.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that had the possibility of ending badly, but there are times that love does conquer, eh? And the story of Lucky Buck and Daisy isn't done, not by a long shot!

And there's a great deal more that all of you will learn about Ed's time as a POW, so there's that to look forward to!

Now, onward!!!!
“Nobody works the day after a Finding Festival,” Belle informed the lamb next to her as they made their way from the Hopps’ farmhouse to the small plot of land that had been left to go fallow that year. Grasses and clumps of wildflowers had claimed the bit of ground and honeybees buzzed from blossom to blossom as the two passed through a spot in the fence.

“Why’s that?” Dawn asked in her high, breathy voice. “It’s only Wednesday! Don’t they have jobs to do?”

“Sure!” the bunny said with a knowing grin. “Everybody in Bunnyburrow works. But they’re all too busy doing other stuff or complaining about over hangs.”

The lamb blinked her green eyes, clearly confused. “What kind of other stuff?” she’d seen the results of mammals drinking too much and the headaches that would follow after over imbibing after her late parents had thrown a party a couple of years earlier before the start of the war.

Belle snorted. “Well, the ones that aren’t sick from too much cider and beer are…you know…kissin’ an’… other things.” She gestured with her small basket at a particularly vibrant clump of bluebells and primrose. “Oh! Those look nice.”

“What kind of other things?” The lamb was clearly perplexed and clueless about what the bunny was talking about and only glanced at the late season flowers.

Belle paused and looked at the lamb, her ears flicking into a ‘Y’ shape of disbelief that dawn wasn’t versed in the way of things between boys and girls. “You know,” she began in an ‘it’s obvious’ tone of voice before dropping into a conspiratorial whisper. “Bailey says they’re bakin’ love…”

Dawn blinked again, her own floppy ears twitching in confusion at the unfamiliar term that the bunny’s older brother used. “Baking love?” the lamb repeated with even more puzzlement.

“Yeah! They do that and if the right things happen Bailey says that the doe will get oven buns.” Several long moments passed before Belle doubled over in laughter. “Mother of Bunnies! You honestly don’t get it!” The little doe was too engrossed in her mirth to notice the flicker of irritation on the ewe’s face. She got herself under control and wiped at golden brown eyes. “You know!” she exclaimed before leaning closer to the lamb and whispering into her ear and a cupped paw to keep her voice from carrying. “Sex!” she finally concluded gleefully.

Dawn tilted her head as her ears flickered, her mouth twisting in even further confusion. “Huh?”

Belle sobered and sat down in the grass. “You really don’t know what I’m talking about?” She watched as Dawn shook her head a little harder than necessary, her ears flopping around her head slightly. The bunny then began to educate her new friend on something that Belle had known about for a year that was a large part of rabbit culture. Then again, walking in on one of her brothers with a doe he’d met at the Finding Festival the previous autumn had caused the little bunny to be exposed to certain facts quite a bit before her parents had anticipated.

Facts and information, some of it quite erroneous, that the bunny now enthusiastically passed on to
her new friend.

There was no shortage of strange looks from the lamb, sounds of disgust during a couple of points, and one look of amazement. As she digested the new information, there was one nagging question that ate away at Dawn’s curiosity. “But…why? It sounds awful!”

Belle nodded solemnly. “That’s what I thought…still do, too! But Momma said to one of my sisters that as rabbits and bunnies get older they get surges that make them want to be together like that.”

Dawn shook her head as she held up her hoofed fingers, each splayed as if she were trying to ward off something unpleasant. “I hope I never get surges!”

“Me neither!” Belle agreed. Then a thought occurred to the doe. “Your mommy and daddy never told you about sex? Truly?”

The lamb’s countenance fell, her ears and shoulders sagging at the same time. “I don’t have a mom and dad anymore. They died in the bombs that were dropped on Zootopia.” She sighed as she recalled her parents and brother, the toy shoppe that they all worked in as a family business. Then she brightened a little. “But now Nick and Judy are going to be my mom and dad so I don’t have to be without a family!”

Now it was Belle’s turn to give the lamb a disbelieving look. “Huh?”

“That’s why they brought me here!” the lamb brightened. “When the war’s over they said we get to be a family and they’re gonna teach me to fly and everything!”

“But…Nick’s a fox…” Belle pointed out, mimicking the ewe’s mannerisms when she was trying to explain what she knew about physical relations between adults.

“So?” Dawn replied, a small scowl forming between her brows.

“But…well, Nick and…and Judy?!” the bunny exclaimed, her voice an incredulous whisper. “True?”

Dawn nodded. “That’s what they told me…” the lamb said, a small seed of doubt taking root at Belle’s disbelief.

“But Judy’s a bunny! And Nick’s a fox!”

The lamb’s lower lip stuck out petulantly as she crossed her arms in front of her. “They said we get to be a special family,” she informed the bunny in a truculent tone, her face pinching into a slight scowl. The questions were enough to cause the lamb’s breath to hitch as she began to feel the pressure building in her eyes. Yes, Dawn wanted her family back…her real family, however she knew that was impossible. But there were two mammals that had taken her in, held her at night when the dreams of bombs falling from the sky woke her up in bleating sobs. At least Dawn had Nick and Judy. The orphanage that she’d been sent to had more kits, cubs, pups and lambs who had no one.

Before Belle could say anymore the sound of deep droning touched their ears. As was always the case anymore, Dawn looked up, quickly picking out the tiny specks up in the sky. As the sound grew louder she felt the bunny draw closer, her fear causing her to tremble as she remembered the Axis pilot she and Judy had found in the barn. When the lamb looked at her friend she saw that her ears were flat against her back and Belle’s nose was twitching rapidly.

“Don’t worry,” the lamb said as her hoof found the bunny’s paw. “Those are Hurricanes,” she informed the kit confidently.
“Ho-how do you kn-know?”

Dawn pointed up. “Nick showed me! See the front? It’s kind of pointy and narrow. And how the wings are shaped at their ends? Nick and Judy taught me how to tell what a plane is by its silly-wet!” She smiled before the expression faded. “No…that’s not right. Its…its silhouette! That’s it! The silhouette. That means the shape.”

“And you can tell what they are by that?”

Dawn beamed. “Sure! I can teach you how to do that, too!”

The previous conversation was forgotten as were potential hurt feelings with the innocence and ability to change tack that young mammals had. The pair hunched over a bit of bare dirt, the flowers forgotten for the moment as Dawn drew airplane shapes in the dust. She covered most of the Zootopian Air Corps planes, several Axis variants and a few that Nick had shown her from pictures.

“Gee, you sure know a lot about airplanes,” Belle conceded, actually impressed by the lamb’s knowledge.

Dawn nodded with a bit of pride. “Nick said it would be a good idea for me to learn because then I’ll know if an airplane flying over is safe or if I need to run away and find a shelter to hide in.”

The pair continued to talk and eventually returned to the task of gathering flowers when a gruff voice pulled the two away from their endeavor. “I don’ see no fox,” a rabbit about the same age as belle and Dawn with a fluffle of others declared in irritation. “I jus’ see another stupid Hopps bunny an’ a lamb!” The speaker was mostly white with blotches of reddish brown that looked like mud splattered all over him and wore a scowl. “No preds would show up here ‘cause my pa would fill their hides with lead.”

“Not all predators are bad, Martin Pennyfur!” Belle spat in extreme irritation.

Out of all the rabbits and bunnies the kit knew, Martin Pennyfur was her least favorite. He was a bully, a loudmouth and crass. Then again, as far as Belle was concerned, the entire Pennyfur clan was nigh upon useless. Their family owned one of the larger mercantile establishments in the Tri-Burrows valley and that tended to make the Pennyfur’s believe they were better than the other denizens of the area.

“What are you doing here, Martin?” the Hopps bunny asked acidly. “We don’t want you on our farm!”

The young buck sneered as he crossed his arms over his chest, his head tilted as he assumed a taunting stance. “I heard tell there were foxes at your stupid festival last night an’ we came to see ‘em.” Then his dull brown eyes fell on the ewe. “Who’re you?”

“Dawn,” the lamb answered quietly, one ear flicking nervously. She ground her foot into the dirt before picking up the flowers that she and Belle had picked for Judy and Mrs. Hopps when the rabbit kit jumped forward and knocked them out of her hooves. “Hey!”

“You seen any foxes? Foxes are part of the Axis an’ should all be shot!” Martin exclaimed.

“Nuh-uh!” Dawn bleated. “There are lots of good foxes like my Poppa Nick!”

The ewe slapped her hooves over her mouth as she realized that her admission in the heat of the moment might not have been the wisest thing to say as the rabbit directed his attention to her.
“You a fox lover, little baa-baa?” Martin asked derisively as he stepped closer and pushed his pink triangular nose so close to the lamb’s that she had to cross her eyes to see him properly. “Everybody knows preds are the enemy!” His muzzle twisted into a smirk. “You said your da’s a fox? So you one of those Axis lovers? Think they got the right of it?” The rabbit poked the lamb in the chest as hard as he could with each word, his tone accusatory and cruel. “Hey, Gary. What’s that word they call mammals what side with the preds?”

Another rabbit buck, perhaps a year or so older than Martin smirked at Belle and Dawn. “Collab’rators.”

“Yeah! Tha’s it! Collab’rators!” Martin turned his attention back to the ewe. “So you a collab’rator? Sidin’ with the Axis, huh?” His smile faltered as he twisted his mouth into a snarl before he pushed the lamb so hard that she grunted in pain and surprise as she sprawled backwards in the dirt. “Aw, is the li’l collb’rator lambie gonna cry?” the buck taunted before pushing her again as she tried to regain her hooves.

Unfortunately Dawn did start crying at the verbal taunting and the bullying, her reaction only causing the five rabbits to laugh and point.

“Little lamb’s all cryin’!” Martin taunted even more with a mean-spirited grin.

Belle moved in to help her friend stand back up, noticing with dismay that Dawn had scraped her elbows pretty bad. “Go away, Martin!” she cried in as much fury as she could muster.

“Go away or what?” the rabbit asked as the others drew in closer. “It sounded like you was gonna say ‘or else’. You aren’ gonna do nothin’!”

Goaded past sensible thought, Belle stormed over to the offending kit and pushed him as hard as she could. “Get out of here, Martin Pennyfur, or I swear I’ll tell on you!”

The rabbit skidded a little in the grass before his sneer turned to a look of complete outrage. He regained his feet and raised his paw balled up into a fist, though before he could let fly the blow his ear was pinched and tugged upwards. Yelping at the sudden discomfort he looked up to see one of the foxes that he’d heard about, Martin’s ear pinched between a finger and thumb.

“FOX!!!” the other rabbit kits screamed before fleeing as fast as their legs could carry them.

As for Martin his nose began to twitch furiously as his eyes grew large in sudden fear and he fought the urge to wet his dungarees.

“Yep,” Ronnie Tod said with a smile that let the kit get a good look at his teeth. “A fox. Now then, I’m not sure what’s going on, but you don’t live here, and even if you did, hitting girls and pushing them down onto the ground is completely unacceptable.” The kit fox let go of the ear but before the rabbit could scamper away he snatched the back of the kit’s shirt. “You okay, Dawn?”

The lamb nodded and pushed her glasses back into place after wiping at her eyes. “I think so, Mr. Tod.”

“Yeah, well, you look a bit scraped up to me. Let’s go get that taken care of, sweetie,” he nodded to the basket of flowers. “You want to grab those, Belle? No point in doing all that work and just leaving them on the ground, is there?”

The bunny looked at the fox then at the flowers before gathering the bouquet up. “How did you know we were in trouble?” the doe asked as they started back for the farm house.

“I was over by that tree trying to catch a little nap when I heard the ruckus,” the kit fox said as he
glanced down at the rabbit he had a hold of. “What’s your name, kid?”

A bit of the little buck’s attitude began to seep back and he frowned. “I’m not tellin’ a pred nothin’!” he protested. “Fer all I know you might be an Axis spy!” he spat between the gap in his front teeth where his adult incisors were only partially grown in.

Ronnie and both girls snorted in laughter, further infuriating the rabbit. “If I was an Axis spy I can assure you that you wouldn’t know anything that I wanted to know about.” He tightened his grip when the kit tried to pull away. “No, no. Stick with me, sport. If you won’t tell me your name I’m pretty sure that Mr. and Mrs. Hopps know who you belong to.”

Belle switched the basket to a different paw and took Dawn’s hoof as she helped her friend along. “He’s Martin Pennyfur. His dad owns the big store in town.”

“Shut up, you stupid bunny!” Martin fussed, swinging his paw in an ineffectual swat until the fox gave a small warning shake.

“Don’t hit girls. I thought I already told you that,” Ronnie warned.

It didn’t take the small group long to make it to the farmhouse and Bonnie, in the middle of setting up lunch for the adults, looked up in some concern at the commotion. “Oh, goodness!” the older doe exclaimed as she saw the raw state of the lamb’s knees and elbows and immediately set about getting the necessities for tending to the hurts children received on a regular basis. “What on earth happened.”

“A bit of roughhousing, Mrs. Hopps,” Ronnie said as he nudged the now frightened rabbit forward. “And a bit of bullying.”

Bonnie shot the rabbit a glare, her other kits having encounters with the Pennyfur rabbit before. “Did you do this, Martin?”

“Maybe,” the kit in question replied sullenly.

Before Bonnie could say anything Nick and Judy entered the kitchen, paw-in-paw and laughing, the red fox seeing Dawn and her bloody scrapes and went to the lamb with all humor slipping away. “Holy smokes, popcorn,” he said as he knelt next to the chair she sat in as Bonnie dabbed at the injuries, Dawn trying her best not to bleat in pain and fresh tears. “What happened?”

“Martin Pennyfur did it!” Belle blurted out, actually relishing the chance to get a little revenge on the kit that had tormented for so long, her paw pointing accusingly.

Nick’s head turned slowly to regard the little buck that quailed at the sight of the red fox, his eyes growing even larger as he huddled further between his shoulders. When Nick’s ear flicked it was all the kit could do to truly wet himself. “Belle, being a snitch isn’t a good thing,” the fox said softly. “Telling on someone if there’s something dangerous involved is one thing, but doing it to get someone else in trouble isn’t very nice at all and you’re a better bunny than that, right?” He returned his gaze to the white and russet young buck. “However, I have to agree that this is absolutely unacceptable.”

Martin began to tremble. “A-are y-you gonna ea…eat me?” he got out past swallowing the sudden knot of fear in his throat.

“Now that’s a disgusting thought,” Ronnie said as he released the kit and limped to a chair, wincing as he sat down, his paw going to the bandages that covered the healing bullet hole in his leg and rubbing gently. “There’s hardly enough to you for a good soup.”
“As you were, Tod,” Nick ordered, his eyes staying firmly on the rabbit kit. “Pennyfur…” He smiled. “So I’m guessing your family owns the store in town?” When the kit didn’t answer the fox frowned, that doing more to make an impression on the terrified rabbit than almost anything else that wouldn’t traumatize the kit for life. “Martin, was it? Martin, I take things like this to my little girl very seriously. Run on and tell your father I’ll be coming to speak with him soon.”

The rabbit didn’t move and it required Judy steering him towards the door. It wasn’t until the screen door swung closed, the kit backing out until he was past the threshold, that he turned his back on the vulpines and dashed away. Once the bully had left Nick directed his attention to Dawn.

“Are you sure you’re okay, popcorn?” he asked with a gentle paw cupping her face as he wicked away the tears that had seeped into her wool with his thumb, his expression one of tender concern.

Dawn nodded and gave a brave smile, her wooly puff of a tail twitching happily. “I’m okay, Poppa Nick,” she said as the last of the scrapes were cleaned, the injuries looking much worse than they actually were and threw her arms around the fox’s neck. “I got to be brave and strong like you an’ Momma Judy.”

Though the lamb couldn’t see it, the fox’s face was once again an expression of stunned amazement and affection and his mouth opened a little as he breathed heavily at the twist of emotion, his eyes filling and running over the lower lids. On the other side of the kitchen Judy had the same look on her face as she covered her muzzle with her paw so that she wouldn’t make a sound and ruin the moment.

Interruption came in time so that Nick didn’t fully break down as Daisy entered with Ed in tow. “Hey, now,” the rangy rabbit said as he clenched his beret in the paw that wasn’t holding his bunny’s. “Looks like we either missed something or got here just in time,” he commented as Bonnie finished putting away her cloths used for injuries and a jar of witch hazel.

Ronnie Tod lifted a cup of coffee that Bonnie had been kind enough to brew up and gestured at Nick, Judy and Dawn. “No big, Buck,” the kit fox said with a wink and grin using the large rabbit’s nickname. “Kits being kits and other mammals getting into the family sort of mood that the two of you started last night is all.”

“Huh!” Ed grunted in approval and a smile while Daisy went to her sister and hugged her in congratulations. The rabbit then took a chair and let his smile turn into a grin as he looked on where Dawn held on to her foster fox. “Well, you got yourself a good family, girl,” he told the ewe as he set the basket with the kits down and accepted a cup of coffee from Bonnie. “So, the reason we stopped by was that I need to get that beast by my dad’s barn out to the fair grounds and wanted to see if anyone wanted to take a ride?”

Both Dawn and Belle perked up, so much so that they almost forgot the flowers they’d picked before trouble came calling. The lamb’s ears began flicking in excitement. “Can we, Poppa Nick? Can we ride in the tank?!”

“Yeah, can they, Sir?” Edward mimicked with a wink at the fox, a happy grin on his muzzle as well.

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The day had been almost as eventful as the one before with the Finding Festival. Nick, Judy and Dawn had gone with Edward Sward to deliver the tank to the fairgrounds where a stage was being set up that the veteran’s speeches would be given from. The support crew took care of the tank, the weasel in charge of the vehicle’s maintenance griping about an oil leak, tiny rabbit footprints all over the bow plate and turret and a lollypop that was half melted on the back deck over the engine.
Later there was a protracted supper with the mixed Hopps and Sward clans, a great deal of the furor that swirled around the massive dining hall in the Hopps' domicile revolving around Virgil, Edward and Judy. Nick and Ronnie were only peripherally involved, being foxes there were still more than a few rabbits that eyed them with caution and a couple with outright distrust or fear. After things settled down more adult beverages began to appear. Adolescent bucks and does chaperoned their even younger siblings off to bed with the help of a couple of mothers like Judy’s sisters Barbara and Daisy as conversations became a tad more serious with inquiries about how things were going on the other side of the Channel.

Discussions broke out with those that were for and against the war. One of the loudest and most belligerent was a Sward buck that Judy informed Nick about. “That’s Scott,” she said softly. “Bit of a dunce and likes to push those smaller than him around. He’d argue with you about the sky being blue and water being wet!”

“Every family’s got one,” Nick said with a chuckle as he shifted Dawn on his lap so Judy could adjust the bow in her puff of head wool. Once the bow was reset Nick looked down in time to catch the lamb in a huge yawn. “Looks like you might be ready for bed, popcorn,” he observed.

Dawn stuck her lower lip out in a pout. “Wanna stay up with you an’ Mamma Judy,” she said tiredly just before another yawn hit while she rubbed at her eyes with her balled up hooves.

“It’s alright, honey. We have all day tomorrow and the rest of the week to be together, Judy said as she gave the lamb a warm smile and brushed the backs of her fingers along Dawn’s cheek in a very motherly fashion. “Besides, everybody in your room gets a story before they go to sleep and you don’t want to miss that, do you?”

“But we had one last night! We get another story tonight, too?” the ewe asked with pleasant surprise. Apart from dolls, they’d learned that Dawn was an avid reader for her age and tended towards adventures by Rudyard Kipling or tales from Bearingway, and surprisingly enough the stories of the fox Robin Hood.

“Every night,” Judy promised.

Nick smiled when Dawn nodded again and slipped from Nick’s lap. “I can take her if you want,” he offered.

Judy chuckled warmly. “And have you get lost again? That’s okay. Besides, I wanted to swing into the kitchen and get a cup of tea.” She leaned down and nestled her nose into the fur of Nick’s cheek before holding out a paw for the lamb.

Instead of going with Judy, Dawn jumped up and wrapped her arms around the fox’s neck, kissing his cheek before hugging him tightly. “G’night, Poppa,” she whispered. As soon as her hooves touched the floor she took the bunny’s paw and asked if Judy knew what story she, Belle and the other bunnies in her room were going to get.

Nick watched them go until a pair of rabbits in simple country garb surrounded him. The fox looked up to find Stu and Bonnie taking seats next to him, the Hopps patriarch passing a jack of beer to Nick. “It’s not the blueberry ale, but I think you’ll like it. It’s my honey wheat brew.”

The fox took a sip, the offerings of the simple families of Bunnyburrow turning out to be better than anything he could get in the United Vulpine Territories. Nick took a long draught and held up the jack after letting the drink roll over his tongue then smacked his mouth appreciatively. “Stu? If I can get this on a regular basis, would you adopt me?”
The head of the Hopps clan chuckled before setting a paw on Nick’s forearm and smiling. “Nick, Judy has chosen you, and she showed everyone that last night. That daughter of ours has always gone her own way, never really following what any of us would consider proper behavior for a doe, but she’s a good bunny.” The expression on Stu’s face changed, softening while holding something like…acceptance. “Nick, I never met a predator before you. There are a few around Bunnyburrow, but they keep to themselves and I guess that’s because we never really made them feel welcome.

“Then all that stuff started happening across the Channel and a lot of us here…myself included…well, we thought that how we felt about preds was justified. Virgil and Ed there,” he pointed down the table to where the two sat, the Sward rabbit with recently returned Daisy Hopps, Virgil with a young bunny that Nick didn’t know, “went off to join the army and whatnot. I guess they saw what was going on a lot more clearly than the rest of us.

“We didn’t know that things were so bad over there, and I guess none of us really wanted to. When we heard about what happened at Bullkirk…we believed that we lost our boys forever. That was one of the worst things I’ve ever been through. But one came home and you brought my son back and you showed me that you predators aren’t at all what some of us thought…what I thought. You put your tail out to get cut off for us and this isn’t even your country! You and your boys,” he added with a gesture of his own beer to where Ronnie was nursing a drink with heavy eyes, his leg propped on a chair.

He placed a fatherly paw on the fox’s shoulder and smiled warmly.

“Whether you want it or not, I think you already are a part of my family,” Stu said as Bonnie leaned closer and added her paw to Nick’s other shoulder. “You’ve given all of us a gift that we can’t ever thank you enough for.”

“Nick,” Bonnie said softly, “you’ve given more than just one. You brought our son home, you’ve fought to protect us, and you’ve made our little Judy a very happy bunny. Stu’s right. You already are a part of our family.”

The fox was a little embarrassed at the affection that the two were showering upon him, though the Hopps pulled back when their daughter reappeared and wrapped her arms around Nick’s neck while leaning against his back. Nick felt his body flush at the feel of her solidity and warmth, the reaction filling him with a sort of anticipatory zeal.

“You two aren’t getting Nick tipsy, are you? I sort of had plans for him tonight,” Judy said with a wicked grin.

It was still something of a surprise that rabbit culture was so open with their romantic lives, and Nick couldn’t help the flush of embarrassment that heated his ears. “Carrots! These are your parents!” he whispered in shock.

Judy snorted delicately in amusement at Nick’s reaction. To her it was strange that other mammals weren’t as open about things as rabbits were. “Silly fox! I have more than two hundred brothers and sisters. You don’t think that they don’t know?”

“Yeah…but…I mean…” the fox foundered.

“Uh-huh,” the bunny giggled. “Silly fox,” Judy again said in a whisper that tickled Nick’s ear with the warmth of her breath and caused him to shiver slightly. “C’mon. I have a treat for you.” She hauled him up by grabbing his paw and started away from the dining hall, waving a cheery goodnight to her parents, various siblings and friends from the Sward family.
Nick found it hard to look anyone else in the eyes, though Virgil caught his attention and gave the fox a wide smile, a nod and a salute with his own beer, Ed Sward doing the same while his own mate, Daisy, simply looked on the retreating couple with a knowing leer.

Ducking his head at that, Nick let Judy lead him to her room just as she had the night before. This time he realized that it was two lefts and down instead of the left and right that he’d taken trying to find it on his own after going to the privy late at night and had wound up wandering the halls until almost sunrise.

Judy’s room wasn’t the most lavish, the table, nightstands, chest of drawers and bed all simple affairs that bespoke not only the rather bucolic lifestyle of the rural countryside, but also the need for the family to exercise a certain frugality in furniture. Fortunately someone…or a number of someone’s, had taken away the bed that had been in the room and put in one that would more comfortably fit both Nick and Judy.

The bunny smiled warmly as she pulled him inside and shut the door, her paws slipping Nick’s uniform jacket off and putting it over the back of the desk chair before reaching up to his uniform tie. “So, what exactly do you have planned?” Nick asked in a soft voice, finding the manner in which he was being disrobed incredibly arousing.

“Mmmm! So many things,” Judy answered as she bared her lover’s body, relishing the feel of his fur under her paws. “First I’m going to get you out of this uniform. Then you and I are going to have a drink. After that I plan on giving you the best grooming you’ve ever had. After that? We’ll just have to see where the night takes us, won’t we?”

As she spoke Judy helped her fox out of his trousers before pushing him back towards the bed by placing a paw on his chest. After she got him to sit on the edge she turned and got a bottle and pair of glasses from her desk and poured two measures of high end scotch, remembering precisely which brand Nick preferred from their time in the city of Zootopia. The bunny then showed that she was a little more competent when it came to hard alcohol when she put the glass on one side of her muzzle, rolled it with her paw to the other side while tossing it back and let it fall, catching the now empty glass in her other paw.

Nick could only blink in surprise.

“One of the girls at flight school taught me a few things,” Judy said with a challenging gleam in her lavender eyes. “That and I think I’ve developed a certain appreciation for scotch.”

Nick took a pull of his own glass, his eyes widening in surprise before he plucked the bottle off the desk. It was definitely his preferred label from one of the more notable distilleries, a single malt that was more than forty years in age and tasted outstanding. His eyes widened when Judy added a bit more to his tumbler.

“Now, you sip that one and I’ll be right back,” the bunny instructed with a quick kiss to the end of the fox’s nose.

“I thought you said you wanted me sober?”

The bunny cast a glance full of promise over her shoulder. “I want you relaxed. If you’d stayed with Dad and the others they would have done their best to drink you under the table, and a big, strong fox like you can handle a little nightcap. Now lay down and get comfortable. I’ll be right back.” She hesitated for another short moment before regarding the fox with a very warm and pointed look. “Oh. And, Nick? Loose the boxer shorts.”
The directions had barely left the bunny’s muzzle before the door shut leaving Nick alone. Then again, there wasn’t any reason that he could come up with not to follow Judy’s request and laid back against the pillows with the glass on his chest feeling more content and comfortable than he had in a while. In fact, as he thought about it, he often found himself to be completely at ease around Judy. He was so relaxed that Nick slipped into a very light but refreshing state that wasn’t quite a doze. It was interrupted only when the doe reentered the room. The fox cracked his eyes open to look at her, then they widened drastically as he saw what she wore.

Judy was dressed in lingerie of soft pearl white and long open gown, the fabric sheer enough that it was as if the bunny were dressed in wispy transparent spider silk that clung to her form and flowed like liquid with every step. At the base of her left ear was a bow, the satiny material the same shade as the rest of her ensemble, another ribbon tied about her neck with a small rose of fabric.

Nick nearly spilled the remains of his drink as she sauntered towards the bed, a pair of brushes and a fur rake in her paws. Once close enough the bunny put a foot up on the bed, parting the gown she wore and exposing the garter about her shapely thigh that continued to more enticing areas of her body.

“Nick? There are three things that I need to point out.”

“Oh?” the fox managed after a long moment of blatant ogling that caused Judy to smile about.

“Yes. The first is that you’re still over dressed. The second is that you need to lay on your stomach.”

Nick nodded. “And the third?” he asked, finally finishing the sweep of his emerald eyes up her body until he met her gaze.

Judy giggled happily. “The third is I think you’re drooling.” She held up a brush. “Now, be good and do what you’re told.” She hurried him along with a swat of the brush to his rump after plucking the glass from his paws and once he skinned his boxers off took a moment to admire the expanse of red fur in front of her. No rabbit had ever enflamed her with desire like Nick did and she found him to be more than exotic and arousing. Then there were the thoughts that had filled her quiet hours that weren’t taken up with the lessons of flight school that centered around Nick and resultant fantasies that made the bunny feel deliciously wonton.

It was with a shiver of delight that Judy straddled the fox’s lower back, the base of Nick’s tail pressing into her in a delightful way that caused heat to roll through her body like a tidal wave followed by strong feeling of desire. As she reached up to his shoulders with the long brush in both paws the doe couldn’t help but roll her hips in response to the pressure against her feminine parts. Meeting other females in flight school that had far more experience in erotic encounters than Judy possessed had provided her an extended education in more than just flight. Another doe had told her not just how to please a male, be he a rabbit or other mammal, but also how to make romantic encounters far more satisfying for herself and a raccoon sow in their group had expounded upon that information.

As it was, Judy was far too enthralled with the solid reality of the fox that she at first couldn’t stand, then quickly became a vital aspect to her personal world, under her body, warm and real and oh, so delectable. She reveled in the feel of his longer, coarser fur rubbing against hers, the deceptively rough guard hairs that gave way to softer layers, the way he felt between her legs, lean and strong. When she slid down the length of his legs in her ministrations with the brushes it only added to the flush of carnal yearning that continued to build deep in her body. A small part of Judy’s mind was aware that the room was rapidly filling with the scent of her arousal, but didn’t care as much as she would have just a few short months before.
What truly thrilled the bunny was that Nick was responding to the scent she was putting out and inadvertently smearing on her lover’s fur.

Without really thinking about it, Judy began to haul the length of Nick’s long, lustrous tail up so that she could direct her attentions to that. A breathy moan escaped her throat as she inadvertently dragged the full length of her fox’s caudal appendage against her sensitive assets, the friction from the rich fur bringing her to a small, shivering climax.

While her state of desire was understandable, particularly after the forced separation between her and the fox, the Finding Festival and being back amongst so many rabbits and bunnies that were in the throes of their own urges had helped to trigger her present amorous attitude. Then again, she had been in right state since Nick had shown up at her graduation ceremony, the sight of the fox in his slate blue ZAC uniform causing her lower belly to clench with need and raw, pure lust.

It took all of the bunny’s control to finish what she started, reining herself in and letting the warm anticipation grow like she’d been told by some of the other girls at flight school that had befriended her. “Roll over and let me get the front now.” Judy directed in a voice that was deep and breathy with passion.

As soon as the fox complied, Judy slid back up his legs, though when she glanced into Nick’s heavily lidded eyes the brush fell from her paws and the entire grooming session was forgotten. His gaze was soft and heavy, his emerald orbs were full of more love and passion than Judy had ever had another look at her with and as she lost herself in a green sea, falling into the depths. It carried the full weight of his affection and own desire, but there was more to it than that. Judy had had rabbit bucks look at her with undisguised lust since she turned fourteen, it was a given in Bunnyburrow. Never had another looked at her with such a potent mix of emotions as Nick did and it left her feeling as if she were flying without an airplane, her body enveloped by clouds and the warmth of pure sunlight along every square inch of her body.

When Nick tried to conceal his own state of arousal from her, it only added to the deep love that bubbled happily in the bunny’s heart and soul, it was an endearing gesture that showed her that he saw her as more than just a romp, something that Judy had never really thought about until recently. Then again, she always thought that she’d wind up like her mother or any number of her sisters, simply a housewife bunny that gave whatever husband she settled on litter after litter of kits. Without thinking, one paw on his chest as she leaned forward, her own expression mirroring her fox’s as she caressed Nick’s face and elegant muzzle.

The bunny’s touch was, as always, absolutely electrifying, and Nick was unable to keep his own paws still as Judy straddled his lower body, her fingers, warm and gentle, stroking the fur of his face. How was it that he’d had to come halfway around the world and get involved in a war to find the mammal that he was made for, and she for him? He watched as she leaned her face into his paw, the look in Judy’s eyes caused a sensation to roll through Nick, the kind of feeling that he got when flying, pushing a plane to its limits, the sort of unbridled joy of freedom and excitement, but it was also more…Judy was more.

He watched as the bunny leaned closer, moving slowly, inexorably to him, her amethyst eyes taking on a luminous quality that only grew more intense the nearer Judy drew. Her breath washed over his muzzle, like a summer breeze, sweet with a touch of mint that caused a lump in Nick’s throat that was equal parts desire, anxiety and affection. How such a delicate bunny could make him, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, fighter pilot, ace, and quite the ladies mammal in his time so completely hers left him spinning.

And Nick would have it no other way.
When their muzzles finally touched, the world fell away for both and each opened up to let the other in as the kiss deepened. While the fox found the rounded but sharply edged teeth that Judy had delightfully different Judy relished the feel of Nick’s fangs, each immensely enjoying how the other tasted and how different they were. By the time they parted, one of the bunny’s paws still on Nick’s chest, the other twined about his neck while he had his own on her hip and around her waist, both were panting with the height of passion.

Hardly releasing her hold, Judy shifted her weight slightly so that she could feel the fox’s aroused state with the most intimate portion of her body. The heat and the pressure were irresistible and the bunny pressed herself harder against Nick’s body, muzzle open as she panted with need, her ears flushed pink in high ardor.

“Now I’m over dressed,” Judy breathed as she wiggled happily, her small puff of a tail twitching with her urgency. “Wanna help a bunny out, flyboy?”

Nick needed no other prompting and slipped the translucent dressing gown from her shoulders, letting it puddle on the edge of the bed before it slithered to the floor. “I think I might be able to lend a paw,” he eventually replied as his fingers found the hook-and-eye closures for her bustier. There was an undeniable delight in slowly baring her grey furred body and the swath of white that ran from the doe’s chin to her inner thighs. Nick took several enjoyable moments to caress and pet the expanses that were revealed, smiling at the way the doe shivered at his touch or gasped softly.

When he helped her out of her panties, taking his time to slip them over her lean, muscular legs, Nick breathed in deeply through his nose, drinking in the sweet musk that intensified, wanting to actually roll himself in the redolent aroma of bunny lust that flowed from Judy. As his paws moved along the length of her thighs and lower legs with the baring, Nick made sure not to touch the garters Judy wore, finding that leaving them on only added to her beauty and allure as did the ribbon around her throat and the one about her ear. Then her muzzle was again pressed to his in a kiss that was filled with longing, intense and potent. When she shifted, placing herself just right, the tip of his unsheathed foxhood nestled into the wet heat of her body, the sensation drawing gasps from both.

Again they parted, looking at each other with intensity, Judy silently imploring her fox to let her continue, Nick giving his silent acquiescence. This was for Judy and he was more than happy to let her do with him as she wished. Unlike the first time they made love, there was no reckless abandon with bomb blasts drawing nearer and death coming for them, though the lack of threat didn’t diminish the moment in the slightest. As Judy slowly rolled her hips back, taking almost the entirety of her lover in one slow movement, both sighed and moaned as their bodies joined in the most intimate embrace possible.

With a look of utmost pleasure and delight Judy began to rock her lower body slowly. Each revolution of her hips impaled her a little more deeply as she acclimated to Nick’s size, and she loved every moment of it. Judy also loved seeing the look on Nick’s face as she shared herself with him, the heat and friction as they moved together taking them to heights of bliss that neither had ever known before. Then she felt the swelling of his knot, a curious fox trait that thrilled the bunny to no end began to press at the opening of her most intimate place. She shifted slightly, her paws on Nick’s chest for stability, and pressed down, her muzzle open in a silent moan as she worked the entirety of her lover into her body.

“Judy…you don’t have to…” Nick breathed when he realized what she was doing, worried that it might hurt her, bunnies being different than vixens and unaccustomed to that vagary of fox anatomy.

Judy silenced her lover with a finger to the end of his muzzle, a smile spreading over her own. “Shhhh,” she admonished sweetly. “I want all of you, my beautiful fox,” she told him. Her smile
faltered and her eyes closed as she relaxed and felt the swollen base finally slip fully into her and threw her head back in a quiet sob as she experienced another small climax. As she came down from the orgasm, though her pleasure hardly diminished, Judy started to move with more vigor and enthusiasm. “Your turn, my sweet Nick,” the doe said as her fingers tightened in his chest fur.

Judy lifted her arms up so that her paws were behind her head, the motion stretching her torso in a way that Nick found enticing and incredibly beautiful and ran his own fingers up through her fur against the lay, the contact making the bunny moan softly as she sped up her pace. When he cupped the subtle swell of her breasts, his thumb pads stroking the light pink nipples that lay under her fur, a tiny moaning sob escaped Judy’s throat and she squeezed his hips in response where she straddled him. Even as he caressed her breasts Nick touched places deep within her body and Judy couldn’t help but fall forward to grasp her fox tightly, wanting nothing more than press as much of her body against his as he could.

The bunny sighed tremulously with the glitter of joyful tears in the corners of her lids until she opened them as much as possible. Gem colored eyes peered through mere slits and she saw that her mate was hesitant and nodded gently in encouragement. He would have stopped before knotting her had Judy not reassured him before peppering his muzzle with tiny kisses, little nibbles and lippings.

Nick sat up, clutching the bunny to him as he began to move as well, his small thrusts along with her own gyrations pushing both to the pinnacle of their lovemaking. He couldn’t help but growl softly with each deep penetration into Judy, the pressure and slick, wet heat causing his own hungers and needs to increase.

“Goddess of Bunnies, Nick…” Judy husked as she felt so wonderfully full and complete with each meeting of their bodies. “Yes…pleeease…yes!” She was claimed by the ultimate pleasure as her body released the building tension deep in her loins in an explosion of sensation that caused stars to flash behind closed lids and tightened her hold on the fox with arms, legs and the most sacred place within her body as she rode a tidal wave of pure, unadulterated rapture.

Nick’s soft growls became a high, keening grunt as he, too, felt his passions culminate and throbbed repeatedly, his essence spilling forth deep within his beloved bunny as he held her tightly, his tail wrapping up around Judy possessively. That Judy had sunk her teeth into his shoulder to keep from screaming aloud only added to the moment, his deepest vulpine instincts reeling exultantly as the mate of his dreams marked him in the throes of greatest passion.

The shared pleasure of simultaneous climax let both of them down gently, fading into a warm, soft afterglow that wrapped both in something almost alchemical, bringing the pair even closer than their coupling had and they held each other as heart beats and breathing slowly returned to normal. Judy was the first to stir and pulled back slowly, blinking her eyes back into focus as she released the grip she had, her fingers and paws almost as deep into Nick’s fur as he was into her body. She watched with a surge of deepest affection and love as he opened his own to look at her, his own arms loosening enough to hold her gently but firmly in place against him.

The fox saw the crimson that stained Judy’s soft lips and before she could realize what she’d done softly kissed away his own blood. Nick pulled back and looked at the bunny, one paw cradling her head while the other rested on the portion of her hip just above the swell of her rump, his fingers idly teasing the puff of her tail. “I’m sorry,” he whispered before tilting his head forward to lean against hers. “We’re going to be like this for a little bit.”

Judy chuckled throatily and nuzzled herself under Nick’s chin, her eyes closing in complete satisfaction. “Don’t you dare apologize. To be honest, I rather like it. I thought it would be uncomfortable, but it feels quite good.”
“Well, it does make after love snuggling feel a little more special,” Nick quipped as he nestled his chin between the doe’s ears. When Judy giggled happily it caused her to move enough that both shivered with the resultant sensitivity that followed intimacy and left both gasping before breaking into joyful laughter and a series of kisses and caresses.

Eventually Nick reduced enough so that he could withdraw and pulled the bunny down to the bed and curled around her back, his tail thrown over her as Judy held his arms around her with her own. For a time there was nothing else in the world save the two of them. There were no worries, there was no war, just the fox and bunny and the love that they shared.

The next thing that Nick knew was that he was batting his eyes open. The ticking of the wind up clock on the old nightstand showed that it was a little after eight-thirty, but that really wasn’t possible as he and Judy had gone to bed at a little before ten. Then it struck him that it was morning and he and Judy had slept the entire night without either moving. The slight change in his breathing from being asleep to being awake was enough to rouse Judy and she yawned happily before tilting her head up to kiss Nick’s chin.

“Good morning!” she said, rolling just enough to slip a paw around his neck, the other coming to rest on his chest. The kiss she gave was tender and sweet and returned just as affectionately. Her eyes regarded him with a deep warmth. “So what would you like to do today?”

The smile that pulled at Nick’s muzzle was genuine and full of his own feelings of affection. “Honestly? Staying here would be just fine.” His smile turned to a grin when Judy laughed and squeezed him for a moment. “That won’t work out, though, would it?”

“Not really.”

Nick nodded before settling into the simple joy of holding Judy close and gazing at her. “Is there a photographer or something in town?” he inquired after several blissful minutes.

Watching Judy’s ears tilt quizzically as she was laying down made the fox smile again. “I think Edgar Brittlefoot that runs the pharmacy has a small photography studio behind his shop. Why?”

“They maybe we should get up, get some coffee and breakfast, get dressed, get Dawn ready and head into town. I want a picture of you and Dawn to carry with me, and some of all three of us together. I want pictures of my family with me when I’m not with them and one of you and Dawn to keep in my plane.”

The bunny blinked as what Nick just said sank in past her sleep addled mind that was still reeling from their lovemaking the night before. “What?” she asked in a tremulous whisper.

Nick tightened his arms to snug Judy a little tighter against him. “When all of this started me and the others came over because what’s happening on the continent is just wrong. I guess we wanted to show the world that not all predators are like the ones of the Axis, you know? I didn’t expect to find someone like you. Hell, I never thought that I could feel this way about anyone. But now that I’ve found you, Judy, I…I know that there’s something that goes beyond doing what’s right. I’ve got something worth fighting for. But more importantly, I’ve got something worth coming back to.”

As he spoke the fox’s fingers of the paw that wasn’t holding her gently brushed the fur of the doe’s cheek and neck before tracing the edge of her ear. Had Nick the choice he could’ve laid there forever with the bunny in his arms.

“And we have Dawn,” the fox continued softly. “I think I really like being a parent. I like what we’ve got and I don’t want to lose this, or you or popcorn.”
Judy’s expression grew more and more delighted and she kissed the end of Nick’s nose before rolling over and leaning over to rummage through her nightstand. She shut the drawer with a thud of wood and turned back, sitting up while her paws held something tightly but kept it hidden from her lover. She lowered her eyes and took a deep breath, the swelling of her chest causing the fox’s eyes to take in her nude form in appreciation before cocking his head quizzically and returning his emerald eyes to her face.

“I made a couple of friends in flight school,” Judy began softly. “Vixens to be truthful. I learned a lot about some of the customs that foxes follow. I mean…that is…I guess it might be a bit different in your country, but…” Before her ears drooped behind her back they darkened with a blush that made its way to her nose, the little pink triangle twitching a little in a display of anxiety. Instead of speaking anymore, unsure of how to continue, she revealed the item in her paws, opening the lid of the small box to reveal a simple silver ring.

Nick sat up, his mouth falling open a little in astonishment, his eyes wide and stunned. “Are you asking to marry me, Carrots?”

Judy swallowed hard, unable to lift her head to look at the fox. “I…I know it’s awfully forward and…and we’re in the middle of a war. But I don’t want anyone else, Nick. I…I love you…”

When her lover’s paw slipped into her field of vision after several moments of silence she saw that it was splayed so that Judy could slip the band onto his middle finger. “Will just saying ‘yes’ be okay, or do you want a more involved answer?” Nick asked softly, his expression as gentle and tender as his voice.

The empty box fell from Judy’s paws as she grasped Nick’s and slipped the ring onto his finger, the feeling that suffused her heart surpassing every triumph that she’d previously experienced in her life. As the band slid to a stop, the fox twined his fingers with hers and lowered his head, Nick’s lips meeting Judy’s in a deep, languorous kiss. As she leaned back onto the bed, she pulled her mate down with her, wriggling in the most exultant joy as Nick covered her body with his own.

As they joined once more in a dance that was older than time itself, the bunny realized that for the first time in her life Judy understood what the word home meant and it was glorious.

Chapter End Notes

So, a little funny, a little naughty, a little racy, a touch romantic…I suppose a little bit of everything.

I will admit that I borrowed the idea of vixens asking the tods to marry them from Sophie Witch, something that makes a lot of sense when you figure that females very much control the acceptance or rejection of potential mates in wild foxes. So I figured it would be a novel thing to have Judy propose to Nick, trying to follow fox traditions. Thank Sophie Witch for that little twist! And being she's a great writer, go check her stuff out, it's absolutely worth it!
“Are you sure about this?” Nick inquired with a skeptical frown, his finger running about the collar of his uniform shirt as he swallowed hard.

Judy smiled as she touched his cheek, patting it in a placating but playful manner. “It’ll work! Trust us!”

The fox nodded after a moment, his paw being squeezed in a reassuring manner by the lamb that stood next to him. Nick glanced down at the beaming Dawn, her eyes large and excited behind her glasses. “It’ll work, Poppa! Trust Mamma. She knows what she’s doing!”

“All that’s needed is your signature. Once the clerk puts the stamp on it, no one can say anything otherwise,” Edward Sward commented as he and Daisy stood with the little group. “That and the clerk is an old hedgehog that’s been there since our parents came here,” the scarred rabbit chuckled. He nodded again without hesitation as Judy and Virgil turned and headed into the Bunnyburrow magistrate’s office. They reemerged twelve minutes later, Judy with a pawful of paper forms and a wide grin. “Here! Hurry up and put your name down! Oh! And make sure you specify your rank and that you’re at Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome!” She thrust the papers and a ballpoint pen towards her fox, all but bouncing on her feet. As soon as Nick filled out the line on each sheet and affixed his signature, the bunny snatched the pages back, kissed the fox and nuzzled Dawn before bounding back inside, a slightly winded Virgil following.

“Poppa?” Dawn whispered a little urgently. “You’re squeezin’ my fingers!”

Nick let go and knelt down, pulling the lamb into a hug. “Sorry, popcorn! I guess I’m a little nervous,” he told her with a chuckle.

“Don’t worry, Nick,” Daisy told the fox in her soft voice as she looked at the moment between him and the lamb with a knowing smile. “The hard part is falling in love. After that it’s all cake!”

Before Nick could reply, an ecstatic Judy near exploded from the magistrate’s office. The wood door swung open with enough force to hit the brass stop embedded in the step, the wood paneling and frosted glass rattling. The bunny launched herself at her mate, now also her husband, laughing as he spun to catch her, peppering his muzzle and face with kisses that were eagerly returned. “So, no problems?”

“None at all, Squadron Leader Wilde,” Virgil said with a wry smile and eyes that were full of warmth for his sister and the fox. “Mister Grubston didn’t even look at us. Seems the magistrate’s office has been inundated with marriage applications. Don’t even need to have a ceremony, but that’ll happen tonight anyway. Mom and Dad would have a fit if you didn’t share that with them.”

Dawn had moved half a step away and twisted her toes on the rough concrete of the sidewalk, one of the few places in Bunnyburrow that had such, and gave the two a hopeful look. “An’ whatta ‘bout me?” she inquired softly, breathing hard in worry and excitement.

Judy slipped down from her new husband’s embrace and pulled out one of the pages she held. “Here
it is, honey,” the doe said. “We’re your mommy and daddy, now.”

The lamb jerked her hooves up to her face, her jade green eyes tightening and tears began to flow as if a dam had burst and let out a soft bleating sob before launching herself at her new parents. Dawn only cried all the harder as she was brought into the circle of Nick and Judy’s embrace, leaning into the kisses that bunny and fox placed on her cheeks.

“There really wasn’t any trouble?” Daisy asked her brother as she and Edward moved closer to the other rabbit.

“None. With everything going on and all the orphans there isn’t as much hassle adopting as we thought there would be.” Virgil actually had to rub at his own eyes as he answered.

The display had garnered the attention of some of the Bunnyburrow denizens with business in town that slowed to step around the odd trio, many giving fox, rabbit and sheep curious or disdainful looks. It wasn’t until Mr. Hodges, the old goat that served as the local Air Warden stopped his bicycle on his daily rounds at the scene in front of the office, gurgling sounds of shock and disdain.

“Predators! Here in Bunnyburrow!” the Warden exclaimed in shock and fury. His hoof dipped towards the truncheon that was hung from the frame of his bicycle and was only stopped when Edward and Virgil moved in, the taller scarred rabbit stopping him be grabbing his arm.

“Mr. Hodges, you pluck that stick and it’ll be up your arse before your heart can beat,” the Sward said in a hard tone. “He’s wearing one of our uniforms and flies for Zootopia. In fact, he and his squadron mates saved more mammals than I can count at Bullkirk. You’ll show him some respect.”

The goat recoiled at the touch and rebuke though his eyes didn’t lose their heat. “He’s a fox! A predator! He’s one of them!” Hodges blatted his indignation. “A fox in Bunnyburrow! World’s gone barmy! He should be strung up!”

“You leave my Poppa alone!” Dawn exclaimed, her face still wet with her tears of joy, though her face had turned into a moue of anger that someone would say mean things about her Poppa. Pulling away she darted between Virgil and Edward, the kick she aimed connecting with the goat’s shin. “He’s a hero and better’n you, you mean old billy goat!”

Virgil pulled the lamb back with a silent chuckle as Nick, Judy and Daisy watched with stunned amazement at the little ewe’s vehemence. “Easy there, Dawn. You don’t want to break him!”

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“She’s right, though,” Edward said with a wicked grin. “Get on out of here, ya old billy goat.” He turned to the fox and bunny couple. “Wish we could bottle that up. The war’d be over by next week!”

Before either Nick or Judy could say anything Mr. Hodges pushed off, wincing slightly at his bruised shin as he pedaled away his head craning around to regard the group with distaste. They took Dawn in paw, Judy surprised, Nick with warm eyes. “Popcorn, you can’t go doing things like that. You have to use your head. Violence should always be a last resort and after you’ve tried to do your best to solve a problem peacefully. If you just hurt people it makes you a bully, okay?”

The lamb nodded, her head lowering in chagrin. “I’m sorry, Poppa.”

Nick looked at her before grinning and pulling the ewe close and holding her while sniffing. “But thank you for sticking up to him for me. That was very brave.”

“It’s ‘cause I love you, Poppa,” Dawn said as she hugged the fox tightly, unable to see the tear that rolled down his muzzle.
“Hey,” Edward said in a thick voice, clearing his throat of the lump that suddenly formed, his own situation not all that different than Nick’s. “Let’s go get an ice cream soda before you sit for pictures. My treat.”

The portraits and other photographs that had been taken were promised to be ready within a day. Mr. Brittlefoot, the pharmacist and owner of the small portrait studio, knowing that ensuring the mammals that were off fighting had pictures of their loved ones boosted morale and could be as important as any piece of equipment, and moved the unique family to the front of the que. It also helped that he was more than familiar with all of the rabbits in his store. “I’ll start developing them before I take lunch,” the rabbit said, one of the few denizens in the small town that had not a single prejudiced bone in his body. He smiled and passed Dawn a berry flavored lollipop before gesturing to a small shelf. “I don’t have too many, but there are a few frames and lockets over here you might want to look at. If you wanted to pick a few things out I’ll make sure that you get photos that will fit into them.”

Nick and Judy made a few selections and Dawn was thrilled to get a locket just like her new Mamma’s, Brittlefoot assuring them that they’d be ready by that evening and would deliver them to the Hopps farm. With that taken care of the group decided to have lunch in town before Nick stopped in to have a discussion with the father of Martin Pennyfur.

Judy walked into the large mercantile with Nick, Dawn between them. The appearance of the fox caused no small disruption with the predominantly rabbit shoppers who all paused in what they were doing, noses twitching, to watch the predator that had appeared in their midst with a doe and lamb. The front of the store had a large desk where a young buck with red and white fur and dressed in shirt and tie watched as Nick drew near, his ears falling a little more with every step the fox took towards him, his nose also beginning to twitch.

“Excuse me,” Nick began urbanely once he reached the desk. “I’d like to speak to Mr. Pennyfur.”

The young buck gulped loudly and opened his mouth to speak though it took a couple of tries for him to find his voice. “I-I’m Pe-Penyfur,” he stuttered. “M-may I help-p-p you?”

Nick raised a single eyebrow. “You don’t look old enough to be Martin’s father,” he pointed out.

“Ma-Martin?” the buck repeated. “He…he’s my brother…”

“Good for you,” Nick said with a smile then let it slide from his muzzle. “I want to speak to your father about Martin.” When the rabbit didn’t move the fox leaned a little further over the wood surface of the desk. “Now.”

The lapine nodded before scampering off, returning a few minutes later with and older buck who eyed the odd entourage with some trepidation. He stopped a couple of steps away from the fox and looked him up and down. It seemed as if Mr. Pennyfur felt a certain level of insulation from the world around him afforded to him by his success and was demonstrated by his demeanor. “I’m Thomas Pennyfur,” he began, trying not to let his lip curl in distaste. “You need to speak to me about my son, Martin?”

“Yes,” Nick began, standing fully upright and turning so that the rabbit would see that he was in uniform, his wings plainly in view now. “There was a bit of an altercation between your son and my daughter yesterday,” the fox began with a gesture towards Dawn.

Instead of showing any sort of concern over being in the presence of a predator, the proprietor of Pennyfur’s Mercantile bristled. “Are you the fox that laid paws on my son?” he asked loudly. “How
dare you!”

Nick actually leaned back slightly at the vitriol from the buck and felt Virgil, Edward and Daisy step closer behind him as Judy drew an indignant expression. The fox held up a paw to stay the others. “As a matter of fact I didn’t touch your son. My subordinate did after your son came onto Hopps property and began bullying my daughter in an attempt to instigate a fight.” He looked at the senior Pennyfur and narrowed his eyes while letting his lip curl up enough to show the tip of a glistening white fang. “You encourage your boys to pick fights with girls when they outnumber them five to two?” He smirked in derision. “Not the sort of thing one would expect in the upbringing of the son of such a prominent family. Or do you condone that sort of thing?”

“I don’t think th…I beg your pardon?” the rabbit said, indignant at first before the anger flowed out of his eyes and expression. “He did what?”

Judy brought Dawn forward and lifted her skirt just enough to show her scraped knees and then showed the buck her raw elbows. Thomas looked at the ewe. “Martin did this?” When Dawn nodded silently Pennyfur’s expression became apologetic. “That’s not how I raised him. That’s not how I raised any of my kits.” He turned to the other rabbit. “It seems some of my kits think that my success makes them better than others. Let’s see if I can’t teach them a lesson.”

“Father?” the rabbit that had greeted Nick and the others asked in trepidation.

Thomas looked at Judy, Daisy, Edward and Virgil. “I have a store to serve Bunnyburrow. Not the other way around. Has this happened before?” He watched as the Hopps and Swards nodded quietly. “And why was this never brought up to me before now?”

“We were told to swallow our pride as you’re the only one that can provide many of the materials that nearly all the farms here need and can’t get without extreme difficulty,” Judy answered with complete candor. “Especially with the war on.”

“Daniel,” Pennyfur began as he turned to his son. “Did you know about this?”

The young buck’s reaction of looking away as his ears lowered was all the answer his father needed.

“I see. Well, there’s going to be some changes here.” He pointed at his son. “You’re fired.” Thomas Pennyfur then looked at one of the clerks, a young Clay rabbit. “Morgan, you’re the new assistant.” He then turned to the group and smiled at Dawn. “And I believe that I’ll be taking an early day off so I can introduce my Martin to the woodshed. In the meantime, if you’d be so kind as to spread the word that I’ll have a number of openings for any mammal…and I mean any, that’s hard working and honest. And I’d like to know in the future if anymore of my children are misbehaving.”

Nick blinked in surprise, the outcome far from what he was expecting and it required a prompting from Judy before he extended his paw. “Well, thank you, Mr. Pennyfur. I…I admit I was expecting more of a…a fight, to be honest.”

The rabbit shook his head and took the paw. “Not from me,” Thomas said with a grin. “I’ve got a few family members in this as well. I’d be there with them myself if it weren’t for a dodgy knee from when I was young and impetuous myself. The world’s gone absolutely mental, but by the Gods and Goddesses of all rabbits, I’ll see to it that we support the families of those in uniform.” He leaned over and smiled again at Dawn. “And as you were the one that was wronged, why don’t you go pick out any dress you want, and maybe a toy. I think you deserve something nice for standing up to five naughty bunnies, eh?”

The lamb’s eyes grew wide a split second before she turned to Nick and Judy, suddenly excited.
“May I, Mamma? Poppa?”

“Mamma can go with you and help you pick something. It’s a gift, but being greedy isn’t good manners,” Nick said with a warm smile. He tweaked her ear gently in playful permission and watched as Judy led the lamb further into the store, Dawn skipping happily.

Thomas moved to stand beside the fox and watched the pair turn down an aisle, a look of wonder on his face. “Do you mind my asking how you wound up with such an interesting family?”

Nick snorted with wry amusement. “Well, it started this spring when I was shot down over the Hopps farm…”

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Dawn had found a nice dress in green that had small purple flowers embroidered around the hem, certainly not the most expensive, but one that the lamb had chosen because the colors reminded her of her parents’ eyes. As for a toy, Dawn had found a little Spitfire that she bleated happily about because it’s what Nick and Judy flew.

Putting on her new dress the ewe joined her family for the small wedding that was going to be performed in the yard for her new mother and father. That the Vicar who arrived to perform the formal portion was one of the Hopps close cousins, the rabbit that was several shades darker than Judy so that he looked almost a black as his frock was a jovial extension of her new family. Introduced as Liam Hopps, the cleric started when he discovered that his cousin’s husband was a fox and balked at first until Dawn and Belle promptly wrapped the buck around their fingers as well as Virgil describing the rescue that Nick and Ronnie had flown.

Liam listened to the tale and saw how Nick not only doted on the lamb but all of the Hopps kits and felt himself warming. Of course Edward, a rabbit he knew rather well, brought up his own experiences with Nick’s Red Tails and that ended any potential protests the cleric might have brought up.

In all it was a simple affair with a short exchange of vows before food and drink were made available and soon a very subdued continuation of the festivities of just a couple of days prior took place. At least the mood was festive until the sound of a motorcycle, a Norton in military green, pulled up and a badger in uniform got off and walked towards the small party.

“Beggin’ pardon,” the badger called with a tug to the brim of his wide brimmed Brodie helmet in deference to the assembled mammals. “Would this be the Hopps place?” His inflection indicated the badger to have come from the West End of Zootopia though his demeanor was quite pleasant.

“This is the Hopps farm,” Stu told the badger. “Can I help you with something? I’m Stu Hopps.”

“I was tol’ there’s a Squadron Leader Wilde, here? Dispatch fer ‘im, Sir.” The soldier reached into his canvas dispatch bag and brought out a sealed envelope.

Nick paused where he and Judy were holding paws and laughing with some of the other Hopps rabbits and bunnies, the smile fading from his muzzle. “I’m squadron Leader Wilde.”

“Blimey!” the badger chortled. “Never thought I’d hear tell of a fox in Bunnyburrah! I done seen it all now, Sir,” he admitted while passing over the missive then delivering a smart salute.

Nick returned the courtesy and looked at his name on the paper, his heart sinking a little. He paused to look at the young badger’s shoulder and took note of the stripes. “Why don’t you grab something to eat and drink, Corporal. It’s a long ride back.”
“You don’ mind, Sir? I can wait ‘til I get back to me post, Sir!” the badger said quickly.

“Nonsense,” Nick replied. “Come on. Food and drink aplenty, just nothing more than a cider and no liquor. You’re a soldier and should always show the mammals you meet your best, right?”

“Too right, Sir!” He took a step towards the offerings. “Beggin’ pardon ‘gain, Sir, but what’s the celebration ‘bout?”

“I just got married,” the fox answered as he tore open the envelope and pulled the message out.

“Well, now! Congratulations, Sir! Blessin’s to ya!”

Nick gave a wan smile and shooed the soldier over to the table before reading the page again. He was distracted when Judy slipped up beside him, her arm slipping around his waist.

“Nick?”

The fox looked down and gave his wife an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Carrots. I have to head back to the airfield tomorrow.”

“What? No! It’s not fair! You were promised a fortnight! You’ve not even had four days!” the bunny protested.

“Tell that to the Axis,” Nick quipped as he tucked the message into his pocket before taking the doe in his arms. “Right now. We have right now and tonight, Judy. And I’m going to make the most of it!”

What was fortunate was that before the sun finally set Mr. Brittlefoot arrived with the pictures for Nick, Judy and Dawn. He’d even taken one and put it in a small metal frame with a magnet for the fox’s Spitfire so his family could be with him when he flew.

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The next morning was a somber affair, both Judy and Dawn doing their best not to breakdown in front of the fox. Both Nick and Ronnie said goodbye to the rabbits they’d met, including several of the Swards. Stu and Bonnie insisted on hugging both, as did Daisy and several other does. Ronnie then made his way to the Austin 8 to give his friend a chance to say goodbye to his family.

“Hey, popcorn. Don’t you worry,” Nick told the teary lamb. “I’ll be back again before you know it! In fact, I’ll even see if I can take you to see my plane and meet some of the others. They’d all love you, you know.”

“I don’t wanna,” Dawn told him petulantly. “I want you to stay.” Her bottom lip, stuck out slightly in a pout, trembled with the breaking of her little heart. When he tried to give her a hug she backed up, looking resolutely at the ground.

With a sigh and sad shake of his head he turned to Judy and pulled her close. “I’m not going to say it. Don’t wanna jinx us.”

Judy smiled and squeezed her husband more tightly before nuzzling herself under the fox’s chin and tight against his chest. “Then we’ll just say ‘until next time’, right?”

“Right,” Nick agreed before lifting her in his arms so that he could kiss the bunny passionately, both ignoring some of the sounds from the young bunnies gathered around and the swooning noises from some of Judy’s teenage sisters who already entertained dreams and hopes of a romance like their
older sibling had.

They parted and Nick knelt down once more. “Can I have a hug at least, popcorn?” She turned away. With a pinched brow the fox pressed on. “I have to go, popcorn, but I want you to know that I love you. I never thought I’d ever be a daddy, but now that I am I can honestly say that I’ve never been happier in my entire life. I love you and your Mamma Judy with all of my heart.”

In response Dawn hid herself against Judy’s side as her shoulders shook silently. She did let out one soft sob when Nick tousled her head puff. When no other response was forthcoming Nick headed to the car, stopping with the door open to give everyone assembled a smile and jaunty wave before climbing in and starting the engine.

Dawn flinched as the engine fired to life and it wasn’t until the sound of tires crunching on gravel that the lay on the lane. When the sound of the car shifting into second gear reached her ears, Dawn spun and started running, tears flowing down her face to fall in her mad dash after Nick and landing on the dust and crushed rock. “Poppa!” she bleated piteously. “Stop! I love you too!” She ran harder, her little legs pumping furiously “POPPA!”

The car didn’t stop, though, and kept rolling away.

Dawn gave one last heaving sob before stopping and falling to her hooves and knees in the middle of the lane, head down and feeling almost as bad as she did that night in the city when her world crumbled in fire and thunder. So lost in her misery was she that she was completely unaware of the sound of another engine until a motorcycle skidded to a halt next to her and she looked up to see Virgil who pointed to the side car.

“C’mon, Dawn! Hop in! We’ll catch him so you can say goodbye!”

Dawn couldn’t move fast enough as she scrambled into the side car and got settled, doing her best to slip the goggles on that her uncle gave her. She found a place to put her hooves and held on tightly as Virgil twisted the accelerator. It almost felt like she was flying and the lamb reveled in the feeling, some part of her feeling that flying was the best way to get to her Poppa, the great flying fox!

In less than a mile they had caught up and Virgil pulled up along the side where Nick sat behind the wheel, Dawn waving emphatically as Nick turned to look at her, his expression one of surprise and joy, the fur under his eyes starting to darken. He hit the brakes enough to slow the car before finally coming to a stop, Virgil pulling up behind, though before the rabbit could say anything the lamb was already jumping out.

“I’m sorry, Poppa! I love you! I love an’ don’ want you to go, but you gotta to keep us all safe an I was bein’ selfish an’ I love you!” the lamb bleated pitifully as she latched onto the fox before he could even kneel.

“Oh, popcorn! I love you, too!” Nick told her as he openly cried, crushing the ewe to him gently before sucking in a quavering breath.

They held each other for several minutes before Dawn pulled back a little. She gave the fox a quizzical look before reaching up to touch the soaked fur under Nick’s eyes. “Why’re you crying, Poppa?”

“Because you make me so very happy and because I love you and your Mamma so much,” he told her before hugging her again.

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The airfield hadn’t changed at all and Nick looked around as he got out of the car. “Orders haven’t changed for you, Ronnie. Light duty, no flying. Go relax. I’m going to see what the Group Captain needed me to come back for.”

“You sure, Boss? I can tag along. That Dottie Hopps did a spot on job with my bandages. My leg doesn’t hurt all that much right now and—”

“No arguments today, all right?” Nick said with a sharp look at the other fox.

Ronnie nodded. Sure thing, Boss. Come on over when you’re done and I’ll have a beer waiting for you. My treat, of course!”

“Sure thing,” Nick replied, his expression softening as he grabbed his kit bag and headed for the Group Captain’s Office.

The building with the senior officer’s desk and small area for greeting visitors and important personages was cloudy with cigarette and pipe smoke, though it was the scent of the pipe tobacco that cause a small trill of alarm to speed up Nick’s pulse while his tail bristled. He set his kit bag down and stepped to the open door and stamped his feet before going to attention. Squadron Leader Wilde reporting for duty, Sir!” the fox said crisply as his paw snapped up in a proper Zootopian salute with the pads turned outwards.

“And there he is,” Group Captain Faulkner said with a nod and smile as he stood to return the salute. “Squadron Leader, may I introduce General Sionnach of the United Vulpine Territories. General, one of the finest pilots I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. You should—”

The Group Captain was ignored as the visiting officer stood, his pipe clenched in his teeth as he regarded the young fox over his own tapering snout. Milky yellow-green eyes regarded Nick before the General took another step closer. “You’re looking a bit rough, boy. A little haggard. Chasing too many vixens or out boozing it up with those reprobates you call friends?”

Nick glared at the visiting officer as he was being disparaged, though the sputtering of Group Captain Faulkner indicated the rabbit’s indignation. “Now see here! Rank notwithstanding, I’ll not have the pilots and mammals under my command spoken to in such a manner!”

Nick held up a paw. “It’s all right, Sir. I’ve come to expect this.” He turned to the General. “So, dad, how’s mom doing? She left you yet?”

Chapter End Notes

This one was a bit of a roller coaster, and fun to write, and boy, are there some shenanigans on the horizon!!!
Chapter 18

Chapter by Selaxes, Tom1380

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was going to be another fine day, that much was easy to tell, fine blue sky with wisps of puffy clouds crossing the great blue heavens without a care for what happened below. The only thing that broke the peace was the roar of far away engines of the war birds. The rangy rabbit stopped and looked up to see the distant specks in the distance. They were Hurricanes by the looks of them from where he stood so it wouldn’t be Nick’s lot.

It was strange now; Nick had gone back and Buck found that he was already missing his company and it had left many rabbits of the three tight knit clans rather sombre. The Hopps, Clays and Swards had grown very fond of the predators, well most anyway. Edward understood, though, like many of them did, that it was only a matter of time before they all had to go back to their duty. He was going to make sure to enjoy the his remaining days to the full while helping both Judy and her new beautiful little cloud of joy cheer up as much as he could. At the same time Edward would be making sure that he poured all the love he could into his Daisy and their two girls. Their plan for the day was to head out to the lake, let some of the kits have a swim and throw some stones. Now, however, he had a little job to do first.

It had been another rough night for him, but this time he awoke with Daisy by his side. Now just the sight of her grounded him brought his senses back and calmed him. He dreaded leaving her, but he kept that thought pushed away to worry about at another time. At that moment he had to enjoy the now and the bit of time they had. The last couple of days had by far been some of the best of his life even with everything else. To mark the moment of calm he now had new photos of him, Daisy and his two girls Edie and Ginny. Both of them holding a little bunny each while smiling as if the two little souls they held were the very essence of happiness. The second photo was one of him, Daisy the girls and last but not least Virgil, the three lifelong friends together again with Virgil holding both the now awake girls while sitting on a chair and both Edward and Daisy standing behind them. All the eyes overly bright and full of life, with nothing but the uniforms, scars and battered ears of both the male rabbits showing that there was a war on.

Edward was currently standing on a path that lead to the Clay farm, a blanket bundled under his arm. Last night’s nightmare had awoken both him and Daisy. After he had sought his mate and rested a paw on her to steady his spinning mind and found those eyes that broke the fog of panic they had talked.

He had told her a little of his dream and what had put so much fear into him. Ed had then told her what he had wanted to do. She listened to him spoken her thoughts then they had rested once more, this time he was spared any more bad dreams. When the sun had started to shine over the tree tops he had gotten up dressed in his civilian clothes, kissed his new mate on her forehead and then on the lips. A promise that he would see her after breakfast another kiss this time to his girls, he’d then stepped out into the dawn.

Not many bunnies were up at that time, he had seen a pawful, waving to each with a quick chat and a nod before walking on. But other than that, he was allowed some time to enjoy the lands he so loved, with all the sights sounds and smells of his youth. One of those sounds that was growing louder as he passed one of the Clay fields and was met with an excited twitch of ragged ears. It was a sound that brought back fond memories when he was a child, recollections that made Ed smile as he...
paused to listen.

It was the sound of hammer hitting anvil, the ring echoing over the fields and through the trees. The sound of the head of the Clay clan hard at work, he even in his younger days hadn’t been one to enjoy working the fields so he had taken to smith work which was something the Clays had always been known for.

Every generation going back a long way had had a smith. The present Clay patriarch had left the farming to the brothers, sisters, son and daughters to focus on keeping the valley in properly maintained tools and iron goods. Every mammal in the Burrows who knew what the meaning of quality was would only buy tools or any other ironmongery from the Clays. As he neared the forge Edward made a promise that after the war was over he would treat himself to a full set of tools from the Clays. If he was going to clear the forest the old axes in the Sward tool shed would only get him so far.

The forge was set away from the main portion of the Clay burrow with tree set in front of it. Edward walked the a gap in the hedgerow on the Sward side into a small holding with a small stone building set to one side. There he was, the short and stocky Alastair Clay, one of the of the most powerfully built rabbits Edward had ever known. It was a trait among the Clays, all of them hardy and very dependable with a great fondness for rugby.

Edward stood and watched transfixed with fascination as the rabbit turned the red hot glowing steel in his tongs, turning the stock into nothing more interesting than a horse shoe, but it didn’t take anything away from the excitement as the hammer struck and sent sparks in all directions. It was like a small burst of fireworks along with the satisfying ring of each powerful strike.

He knew from his childhood not to interrupt a mammal at work, even more so when it was a blacksmith as they dealt with dangerous elements that the slightest distraction could cause severe injuries. Ed had spent many hours as a kit watching the Clay rabbit work at his art. In fact many a Hopps and Sward kit found the work he did fascinating to watch. Alistair used to let the kits watch and would talk to them, but only as long as they stayed out of his way while he worked. When asked if the young rabbits were a bother he’d answer that he didn’t mind. Every now and then he would ask one of the watching kits to help with something, that would always be a moment of great excitement.

Now the much older Edward smiled as he noticed that nothing had changed; he still enjoyed watching the husky rabbit work his craft. Ed took a seat on a wooden bench where he’d perched as a kit and waited for Alistair to notice him. He had his back to him at that moment and Ed had been sure he wasn’t spotted yet, but to his surprise the deep voice spoke while he plunged his work back into the fire.

“One moment, son, and I’ll be with you.”

Alistair turned back to his anvil as the shoe came out of the glowing coals, striking the work until he appeared satisfied then dunked it into a bucket of water, a loud hiss and steam rising into the morning air.

“I tell you son, I’ve never been busier. All them horse soldiers need good shoes and the factories can’t keep up, plus those of them that want the very best won’t find it at no factory,” the old rabbit smiled showing a silver tooth. “They can only get the from ye old blacksmith.”

Alistair stepped up to Ed and held out his paw which Buck noticed for the first time was as scared, if not more so, than his own. He hesitated for a moment knowing the old rabbit’s love of tricks and pranks. One of those ‘old dad’ tricks that they always thought was funny.
He saw the mischievous sparkle in the older rabbit’s eyes, one that matched those of his forge, knowing he had no choice. Ed slapped his own right paw into the much larger one of master Clay. As expected for a rabbit of his line of work he had an immensely powerful grip and always liked to play games of mercy.

Ed squeezed as hard as he could while keeping his eyes unblinking off the grinning face of Alastair all the while, trying not to show the pain from his own paw as the crushing match continued.

“Come on, lad! Got to do be’er than that!”

Sergeant Edward Sward had a certain amount of pride to uphold and if this match had taken place after his training in tanks he imagined he could maybe beat the old rabbit, but he was still not right and knew he was fighting a losing battle. He kept it up as long as he could giving it all he had, one thing he did spot was the Alistair’s nose had begun to twitch as he spotted the old rabbit glancing at his own still nose. Buck’s eyes sparkled as he found a little more strength to put into his grip, but alas the blacksmith had more left and piled on the pressure.

“Aaahhh, ok…you win ,mercy!” he said laughing, getting his paw back and shaking it to get the blood back to it.

The old Clay rabbit laughed as well and slapped him on the shoulder, Edward thankful it had been his left and not his still healing right side.

“Next time we do that I’ll beat you,” he said and flexed his fingers noting that the old rabbit was looking at his marks.

Alistair didn’t break stride and let out a bark of laughter. “Right, lad. And you an’ yours are going to beat us at rugby, yeah?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Ed respected the other rabbit. Alistair was blunt, to the point but had a sort of no-nonsense tack, he knew when it wasn’t his place to pry. He was one you could trust with what you told him and that he’d keep it to himself. That was part of the reason Edward was there that early in the morning.

“So, lad what brings you to m’ forge at the crack of sparrows?” Alastair inquired while crossing his muscular arms.

Edward laid the bundle of rolled blanket down on the anvil.

“I brought a little something back with me. Something which I hope you could reform for me.” Ed felt his chest tighten a little a bit worried on how the old rabbit would react to what he was about to show him.

Would it offend him that he had even brought it to his forge, or even onto his lands? It was an ugly, horrible thing, but something which he had grown strangely attached to. It had saved his life and thus become something of a symbol of what he had been through. When Edward had gotten back, when he had still been in shock, not at all sound in mind much less body, he’d still unsure he was free that it all was too good to be true. Still twitching at every sound and the sight of a predator the Sward rabbit had held onto it like a talisman or a protective holy symbol. The friendly troops and officers had tried to take it away from him to which had caused some extremely aggressive, almost violent, reactions from Edward to the point he didn’t understand why and had let him keep the trophy.

The head of the Clay clan was now frowning slightly, sensing the young Sergeant’s worry. Alistair walked over uncrossing his arms and looked down at the old army blanket.
“Don’t worry if this isn’t something you want to look at,” Ed said now feeling this might have been a mistake. He pulled back the folds of the blanket keeping his paws as steady as he could. “I was hoping you could make this into something that a Sward and Hopps could carry with pride, give them something from home they could fight and defend themselves with”.

“Hells bells, Ed!” the old rabbit swore in shock.

There it was. The trench knife, the blade he had seen and done things too awful to speak about. It had the blood of countless rabbits as well as his own staining the blade. But it had also saved his life and had been a part of Edward finding his freedom. It held the Axis symbol that could be recognized at a quick glance and was loud and garish with an elaborate handle, knuckleduster hilt. The blade had words in Axis Teutonic which Ed couldn’t read but knew the meaning of etched into it.

The old rabbit took a step back from it like it was a snake or other loathsome creature, looking from the knife to Ed then around them making sure no one was about. His nose was twitching and, for the first time in Ed’s life that he could recall, he saw a flash of fear in Alistair Clay’s eyes.

He again looked at Ed, but this look was one of confusion and curiosity not to mention shock.

After a moment, the old rabbit stepped back up to his own anvil, eyeing the blade nervously.

Ed’s doubts reappeared and he felt foolish for bringing the foul weapon here, but the Clay rabbit was the only soul who could change it from what it was and had been, the only one the scarred soldier would trust with what he wanted to do with it.

Alastair slowly reached out to pick the blade up until Ed stopped him for a moment.

“Sir, you’re the only one I would trust with this, but I want to be honest with you. This knife has done things to rabbits and mammals I won’t speak of here. Terrible things. But it also saved my life.” He found as he watched the old rabbit looking at him with wide eyes that he suddenly didn’t feel as nervous as he thought he would. This was Alastair Clay, someone who he trusted. So as he spoke it was with a level voice.

“So if you don’t want to touch it please tell me and you will never see it again. But I know you can wash the evil off it and reform it into something a Zootopian rabbit could hold with the strength of home.”

The more he spoke and the more he saw Alastair calm. It was as if the conviction that had started to fill him passed to the Clay rabbit. Finally Alastair cleared his throat and regained himself helping Edward feel as if he’d made the right decision to approach to old blacksmith.

Alistair Clay picked up the large knife, something far too big for a rabbit to practically carry and looked it over, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “Never seen something so ugly in all my years”, he said holding it with well trained paws. “But the craftsmanship and quality is quite something lad, this would have cost a fortune”.

He then rattled off what the blade and hilt were made from, noting that the wrap around the grip was made from real leather. Edward now surprised as the other rabbit didn’t falter as he examined it.

“Could you make two rabbit sized blades from that? I want to give one to Virgil.”

The old rabbit looked at him again that curiosity written on his face.

“Edward, for you lad I’ll make sure you have a little bit of home and some Clay metal work to keep you and Virg safe.” He wrapped the knife back up and put it on his work bench away from prying
eyes. There was no fear of curious paws finding it. No one ever fiddled with anything on the smith’s
workbench.

Alistair turned back and rested his rump on the edge of his anvil as he plucked a pipe out of his
pocket under the heavy canvas apron he wore.

“They really put you two through it, didn’t they?” he asked looking at Edward closely. “I fear for my
sons, daughters and all the mammals of Zootopia…that more of them will go through what you boys
have”.

Ed sighed feeling that, other than Daisy and Virgil, that Master Clay was another rabbit he could talk
a little to. But it didn’t stop the snakes from waking up and start working his insides. “More reason
we need to stop them. We can’t let them do here what they’ve done to the poor souls over there.”

Ed looked over the tree tops to the south were the coast lay, and beyond that the demons of the Axis
army.

“Ed… I don’t want you to say anything you don’t want to…but what are they doing?”

Ed looked at him seeing the strain that every adult mammal in Zootopia held. The whispers of an
invasion had made it throughout the land, even to Bunnyburrow. The war was going on above their
very heads. Even though Alistair Clay was one of the strongest rabbits around he couldn’t hide the
fear they all held.

Ed swallowed glancing over to the blanket then back at Alistair. He reached up and removed his flat
cap and let his ears stand up. He then let his right ear fall forward a little so he could show off the
perfect round whole that had been punch into it.

“To them we are nothing more than a resource to be used. Labor…food…fur…” he let his ravaged
ear go to stand tall again.

Alistair Clay was scowling, a look of flabbergasted revulsion over his face.

“Fur?” he whispered in disgust.

“When I got free I was en route to be some high-ranking Axis officer’s supper.” Ed snorted darkly
before continuing. “Then Lucky Buck’s rabbit foot was going to sold to the highest bidder. A lot of
their soldiers carry rabbit’s feet for good luck…”

Edward made sure not to let his mind wander back to that point of the recent past, he was forcing it
to remain in the forge and concentrated on the Clay rabbit instead and not giving himself a chance to
remember. When that started to fail he thought of blue eyes and two very specific little baby bunnies
in a basket and their mother.

“Rabbit’s messiah…” the earth brown rabbit said running a paw over his ears.

“That’s why I’m going back to fight. I can’t let them turn the mammals I love into slaves, something
to be bought and sold.” Edward could feel the build of emotion as he spoke, unable to stop darker
thoughts from breaking through his defenses and harden his tone. Thoughts of revenge, of cannon
loaded with high explosive rounds blasting the Axis scum to oblivion filled him. A pat on his
shoulder made Ed jump a little and he snapped back to the present moment to find that Alastair was
looking at him with a gleam of pride. He hadn’t realized he had started to stare into the glowing
coals.

“Don’t worry, lad. With the rabbits of the Burrow out there fightin’ we can’t lose. Not to mention
those foxes in the air with heaven knows how many of our boys.” Another hard pat to his shoulder nearly made Ed’s legs buckle, the powerful rabbit turned to his work bench and set a paw on the blankets, he shot Ed one of his silver tooth grins.

Ed found himself returning the smile as the heat he’d felt growing in his heart cooled off.

“Give me a couple of days and I’ll give you something the huns won’t like at all.”

With his business concluded Ed bid Alistair Clay a good morning and headed back to the cottage that he and Daisy were staying in. The walk back was as nice as the one to the forge.

A day or two before and Ed wouldn’t have been able to talk about the things he’d seen or been a part of. Nor would he have been able to give Alistair the knife to rework. Being home, discovering what he really felt about Daisy had brought him around.

Perhaps home was the best place to heal, after all.

Ed passed by his family’s hold and on to the Hopps farm. He’d told Virgil he would meet him in the morning before they headed down to the lake. Again waving at the rabbits that were already into their chores he slipped around sheds and barns to where Virgil kept his motorcycle. Ed poked his nose into the barn, the open boxes and few scattered tools that told him Virgil had already been tinkering with it, though his best friend was nowhere to be seen. The only other place his best mate would be was the small tool shed.

So far they hadn’t spoken in depth about their experiences over the Channel, the matching holes in their ears said enough for the both of them, but Ed had felt at certain moments when it had just been the two of them that they both wanted to say more, though neither wanted to be the one to broach the subject.

Ed found that talking with Daisy had helped though he’d barely scratched the surface with her, not wanting to frighten the doe. She had the right to know but there were things that she wouldn’t understand…things that he didn’t want her to understand. He’d already told her of his crew in his few letters when they’d been fighting, so he’d informed her of their fate. Even Tim’s, but he hadn’t gone into any more details of other times yet. What he would have to tell her brought him more fear and pain then he could tolerate. But Virgil would know, he’d understand more. He’d been there.

The thing that Edward had really wanted to know was if they had ever been close to each other while being held as POWs. In his camp prisoners had come and gone as they were being moved around, various species being sent to different places. Had there ever been a moment when they could have helped each other or seen each other? He half hoped that where Virgil had been kept hadn’t been so bad as his camp, but he knew that was wishful thinking.

So far Virgil had seemed all right, but like Edward there was something in his eyes that lurked under the surface indicating there was more going on just like himself. He wanted to make sure his friend knew he was there for him. Ed now had Daisy to help him, and together they could also help Virgil. They were all suffering, but with three of them all together for the short time they had before they headed back off to war they could at least help soothe each other.

Edward smiled a little to himself as a thought entered his mind that Virgil did have his beloved motorcycle as well. Knowing just what that machine did for the other rabbit, that bike would go a long way in helping his buddy mend.

The tool shed was a small little wooden building with no windows, and as Edward rounded the side of the barn he spotted Virgil standing stock still in front of the open door. Ed had been about to call a
greeting but then noticed how still Virgil was. Eyes wide, fists clenched, nose twitching quickly and his breaths sallow and sharp. A rabbit caught in the spotlights reaction, a posture of total fear.

“Virg?”

He spoke softly not sure what had the rabbit so spooked but knew he had to be careful how he approached his friend as he could have a good guess what was happening having been fighting it himself since getting back.

“Virg? its Ed,” he said and rested a paw gentle on his shoulder.

Virgil jumped hopping away as if being burnt by one of master Clays glowing iron works.

“Fuck, Ed…don’t do that.”

The Sward rabbit would normally have joked about not letting Bonnie Hopps hear him using that word, but seeing how his lifelong friend was panting like he had run a mile and kept shooting furtive looks at the shed, now wasn’t the time.

“You okay?” Ed glanced at the dark interior of the shed.

“…yeah…just…yeah. I’m okay,” his friend said putting on a bright face that didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“What do you need out of there?” Ed asked smiling back, feeling his own heart starting to hammer as he watched his friend recover from what he had been going through.

“…er…the… the tool box.” Virgil was now looking anywhere but the shed.

He clapped the rabbit on the back and walked into the shed grabbing the tool box that sat on a shelf and walked back to where Virgil back waited, his friend falling into step beside him.

Ed let him recover in his own time, not wanting to push and knowing that he would want a little time to find his feet. Once they entered the barn Virgil seemed to be himself again.

“I thought I would push the bike up to the lake and do a bit of work on her while we’re there, maybe going for a spin after I get the plugs cleaned,” his voice was a little strained but he jogged up to the bike and gave it a loving pat on the tank.

“You can’t leave that thing alone, and don’t go and ruin it. I don’t need to be fixing that and the tractor ever other day,” Ed laughed as Virgil sat on it flicking the throttle back a couple of times.

“Nope, I need to make up for being away for so long, give her some love, don’t I baby,” he said cooing at the machine.

“Oh, Mother of Rabbits! is he talking to his motorbike again?” the voice of Daisy met their ears, both of them turning to see her, Judy, Dawn and an enthusiastic mob of young rabbit kits all looking at their older brother as if he were a little silly.

The Sun was now up and it was a happy jumble of chatter as they made their way up the well worn path on the way to the lake. Ed had come up with the idea of grabbing the rickety old paw drawn cart he had used when working at the forest so all the kits could jump in the back while he pulled.

It had been something Daisy hadn’t been so sure of as Edward was still recovering, but with a wink and his best ‘devil-may-care’ grin along with a group of excited kits pleading with the cutest eyes
they could muster, she had no choice but to relent. Ed had wanted to do a bit of excise like that and as it was mostly flat all the way to the lake it wouldn’t put too much strain on the scarred buck. In contrast Virgil was pushing his heavy motorbike down the track determined to get it there so he could work on it in the sun. Ed had managed to persuade the kits to call out encouragement to him.

“Come on you can do it, Virgil!” followed by, “Oh, no! He’s coming up to a tree root!” and, “How will he get over it?” and finally, “He’s done it!” with cheers springing up.

“Guys! He’s going for an overtake! What should I do?” Ed called to his team of youngsters in the back.

As Virgil pushed past all he gave his best friend a patently false scowl though all he could pant was a quiet, “I hate you,” with a sideways looked that made Edward burst out laughing.

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The two sisters, Judy and Daisy, were walking ahead talking quietly with Dawn sticking close to Judy. The lamb had declined to jump on the cart with the others and had been very quiet since Nick’s departure. All attempts so far had failed to get her to cheer up and that was one thing Edward wouldn’t stand for as he watched the trio ahead of him. At her age this was supposed to be a time of wonder and magic, where there only true responsibilities were the class room or occasional chore and the rest was free time.

None of this hampered by hormones you got in the years of being a teenager, none of this trying to be an adult with grown up concerns. It was all supposed to be fun and mystical and full of wonder. These were meant to be some of the most enjoyable years of a mammal’s life and ones you could always recall with joy and happiness. With everything going on around them and with what the young sheep had been through already she deserved more than most to have a happy childhood.

Edward and Virgil both had seen what was happening to kits that age across the water, what they were being forced to endure. They were coping with things that broke the strongest of adults, let alone young kits, calves, pups and cubs.

So today was going to be a day of fun, and he would get that little ewe smiling again.

“So, how you all doing back there?” Ed called back over his shoulder at the bunnies who were clambering around the kart as he pulled it, still heckling Virgil.

They all cheered merrily.

“Good, good! So, when we get to the Lake remember to stay near the bank and don’t swim out to far.” As he spoke all the bunnies listened for the most part, though there were a couple of quite sensible older kits who would help keep the young close, plus he would be keeping a close eye on all of them, along with the girls and Virgil.

“You see in the center of the lake lives the spirit who looks after it and doesn’t like to have little mammals go over into the deep bit and start splashing around. Only adults are allowed in that bit”, he said over his shoulder between his puffing breaths. “And do you know what he does to little kits that don’t listen and try to go in the deep end? He tells their mums that they aren’t allowed any pudding!” his voice grow darker and more dramatic.

Ed stopped pulling the cart and turned to the kits with a finger raised in the air as a warning.

“And do you know what else he does?” The rabbit looked at the youngsters in the cart with a grave expression and waited for them to shake their heads no, their eyes wide and noses twitching. “He
puts water in your ears, the worst wet willies ever! I mean, look at poor Virgil. When he was a kit he went into the deep part when he wasn’t supposed to and he’s never been the same since!”

The kits all gasped paws over mouths then went about giggling as Virgil went cross eye and stuck out his tongue.

Edward resumed pulling the cart while getting funny looks from the others while he grinned happily back. It was impossible not to be happy with the ones he loved all around him and going to one of the most beautiful spots in the Burrows.

And he’d been sure he had seen a shy little smile from Dawn as he had been talking so that only bolstered his mood.

The path the opened out on to the lake the crystal blue water and the sun dancing across its surface. The trees surrounding it were mostly old willows, each leaning out over the water as if reaching out for something. Every time he came here it always left him a little speechless for a moment with the beauty and peace it held. No wonder when he’d run that night he had brought himself here, some of his best memories were from this very place.

A sudden burst of excitement filled his body as he stopped and looked around. It was a child like exuberance that flared through his veins, starting at the tip of his toes and ended at his ears.

“We made it,” he called over his shoulder, then with some effort he had to try and keep the cart from collapsing as a scramble to get off took place on the back, the old wheels creaking and leaning over in protest.

Both Judy and Daisy laughed at the sight of a half dozen excited kits falling off the back of the cart and running at full tilt towards the water, clothes being thrown to the air until it was a stampeding heard of naked bunnies. They ran until they reach the bank then without stopping charging down the little pontoon dock for an aged rowboat then jumping with their powerful legs. Taking flight for that split second and soaring through the air until they splashed down into the lake, coming back giggling and laughing with unbridled joy.

Virgil had set up his bike on its stand with a bit of wood to counter the soft ground and watched with an easy smile across his face. Like both he and Edward, all the Hopps rabbits understood how precious this moment was with kits simply being kits.

But there was one little ewe hugging her new mother’s summer dress, still looking sad, watching the others play with Belle waving her over into the sun warmed water.

“Honey you sure you don’t want to play with the others?” Judy asked softly, kneeling down to speak to the little sheep who answered with a small shaking of the head and a tremble of the bottom lip.

“When’s Poppa coming back?” she asked in her small, quiet voice thick with a breathy sadness that was heart breaking.

Judy wasn’t sure how best to answer that question, particularly when she didn’t know the answer herself. “I don’t know honey, but he’s thinking of you,” the doe said, her own heart heavy missing Nick as much as her new adopted daughter.

“Hey there little one, you okay?” Ed bent down on his haunches to put him at Dawn's level, he looked up at Judy with a wink then back down at Dawn. “You miss Nick?” he asked her gently.

She nodded, a little tear disappearing into her wool. Edward felt his own heart weep for the little soul.
“Well if I know your daddy fox, he’ll be thinking about you and your mummy right now.” Edward smiled at her warmly. “He’s going to be thinking of you smiling and having fun with your new cousins and friends, and your dad is going to want you to be happy, and if you’re happy he’ll be happy too,” he said laying his paws on her tiny hooves.

Then the rabbit assumed a look of surprise.

“Oh...! What’s that?” Ed asked and gestured to her ear. “Oh, wow! Look what was behind you ear!” he said with all the enthusiasm of a 6 year old. He made it look as if he pulled a bright green boiled sweet from behind Dawn’s ear, the little lamb’s eyes lighting up in response. “I bet your daddy put it there for you.” He gave it to her and she held it close to her chest looking as if she’d just been given the greatest treasure in the world instead of a ten-for-a-penny candy.

“Dawn..? You coming for a swim?” Belle was now standing behind Ed looking hopeful.

Edward could see Dawn looking at the others having fun, then up at Judy who gave her a soft nudge.

“What about the spirit in the deep end?” she whispered.

Oops! Ed hadn’t meant to scare the lamb, but it was easy enough to fix.

“Well, if you’re worried I’ll tell you what we can do to make sure it’s happy! First go and find me the prettiest pebble you can find, you and Belle both, then come back,” he sat down on the bank as his right leg was beginning to hurt from squatting for so long, as Belle took Dawn’s hoof and the trotted off down the bank looking at stones.

“Thank you, Ed,” Judy told the rabbit as she sat down next to him and gave him a nudge.

“No problem. More than most she deserves to be happy,” he said watching them turning stones over.

“It’s hard to tell her what she wants and needs to hear when I miss Nick as must as she does.” She smiled when her sister’s mate grabbed her paw in a reassuring manner.

This time it was Daisy who spoke setting down her little basket with sleeping kits down and sitting on Judy’s other side. “I know how that feels. You just hold him close when and where it counts. You know he’ll be thinking of you, too.” She put an arm around her sister and giving her a squeeze in comfort.

After a moment the two young ones came back holding smooth stones.

“Ooo! They’re prefect!” Edward said as the bunny and lamb presented the pebbles they’d found and he looked at the stones carefully turning them over. “Oh, yes. He’ll be very happy with these! So, now you need to rub stones in your paws, like you’re keeping them warm,” he said showing them how to do it. “Good now cup them you paws, yeah that it”. The two of them stood in front of him looking excited. “Now, whisper to the stone that you want to swim, and you can even make a wish to, as you were so polite to ask to swim he might just grant it. Then all you have to do is throw the stone into the lake”.

Dawn’s eyes suddenly shone and she hurried to the water’s edge, closed her eyes holding her small pebble close to her mouth and whispered a wish that the adults heard as it carried on the wind. “I wish that poppa and momma and me can live happily ever after,” she paused for a moment then throw her stone with all her strength.

Ed heard Judy give a little sob that she disguised while he now found himself trying to fight off the
lump in his throat. What was it with children that could say things that got to your very heart? “Right! Now go and have a swim!” he called after them as they ran off down the pontoon.

It wasn’t a moment or two later when a gaggle of soaking wet rabbits ran back laughing hysterically, a young buck at the front almost black in color holding something in his paws.

Ed had wanted to go and sit with Daisy and his girls but the passel of kits weren’t about to leave him alone, and nor would he deny them their attention. “What’s going on there, Zack? You found something?”

“We found treasure!”

“Yeah a whole buncha coins!” a little doe named Sue almost screamed in joy. “There must be a whole pound!”

“Blimey, guys! That’s a lot to find! where did you get those?” Ed asked, surprised at their discovery.

“Under the pontoon,” Zack exclaimed as he opened his paws and showed him a paw fall of farthings and penny coins.

“Oh, wow,” he then looked over at Judy, Daisy and Virgil who were watching with mild interest he winked then bencked all the kits into a group huddle.

“Do you know how many sweets that’s worth”, he whispered loudly matching the kits excitement as their eyes lit up like spot lights.

“Now why does that look suspicious?” Judy asked as she raised an eyebrow.

“Because it’s Ed,” Virgil offered while grinning.

After more whispers from the older rabbit and kits, Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ got up, rolled his shoulders, cleared his throat and did the most over the top causal walk back towards to the adults, looking like anything but an adult himself. As he passed past the two does he nodded while touching his cap “Ladies.”

Then he got to Virgil who was chuckling at his antics and more the eager to join in.

Buck looked back at the now confused Judy and Daisy then put his head together with Virgil.

“Right, the kits want to do a deal but they need a runner, someone to make the drop and pick up,” Ed glanced over his shoulder winking at his mate.

“They do, huh? So what do I get out of it?” Virgil asked getting in on it instantly, even included crossed arms and a glance at the kits.

“A cut of the profits of...hmm, let’s say some boiled sweets, sugared daffodils, even some chocolate,” he opened his paw to revel the kids found treasure.

Virgil smiled and looked back over Ed’s shoulder at the gang of excited bunnies and Dawn and nodded.

“Deal,” he kicked his bike off its stand put the money in his pocket and swung his leg over. “Always wanted to be... what did Nick call it? A rum runner?”

“Sweets runner,” Ed corrected him with a snort before Virgil ruined the peace of the morning with a roar of his bike after kicking it into life. The engine blatted loudly, causing the kits to cover their ears,
though it didn’t diminish their grins and eager anticipation, and Virgil cast a look back with a wave before tearing off down the path then off down the road beyond that led to town.

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Margret Sward was peddling her old and very used bicycle down the unpaved lane, taking her time on the return leg a trip in town to grab some things for her father, Henry. He’d needed some things for around the farm and more parts for the old tractor, though the last was getting to be an almost daily thing. He’d asked her to go as she knew not only what the parts were called and looked like. Henry Sward would send the doe for bits but would never let her work on the decrepit machine. Never mind that she was second only to Edward when it came to mending machinery, having learned mechanical repair from her brother when they had been younger.

Doe’s weren’t supposed to get their paws dirty or oily with what was considered ‘buck’s work’. A doe turning a wrench just wasn’t lady like apparently, yet she loved everything mechanical. Some of it was thanks to the bike she was riding, albeit creaking and groaning with every rotation of the pedals and sprockets. It was source for constant rows with her parents. Maggie wanted to be out working on everything that was oily and greasy and pointedly not in the kitchens were her mother seemed to like to keep her. She loved her folks with all her heart and knew that they meant well, but she also knew that she was one of the oddballs in her family.

The old sheep saying of being the ‘black sheep’ fit her very well. Or it did apart from she wasn’t black in color but a rich wooden brown, nor a sheep.

In fact, Maggie was always jealous of a lot of her sisters and other does around the valley for their beautiful white blazes on the chests and chins where hers was a deep tan in color. She was envious of their lighter shades where she was dark toned and, to her way of thinking, looked drab. It was one of the reasons she didn’t dress like a lady either, looking much more like her brothers in trousers or, at that moment, dungarees with a head scarf keeping her long ears back. He preference of buck’s clothes another of her mother’s points of contention, plus she always snuck out to work the fields over working the kitchen.

Maggie’s colors had earned her the nickname ‘Muddy Maggie’, something Scott started and had stuck. Her other siblings had taking to calling her that in an affectionate way, but it still hurt a little. She always kept to herself as much as she could.

She did have one redeeming quality that her family enjoyed and that Maggie was a musical soul who loved to sing and had a lovely voice. She had kept a lot of bunnies dancing the night of the Finding Festival, about the only time anyone could get her in a dress. This suited her as she did love singing and it got her out of all the tail chasing other single bucks and does engaged in. Being ‘Muddy Maggie’ meant that many a time she had been left lonely in the past so had found a new way to enjoy the grand nights of celebration.

She was singing a tune even as she pedaled down the track, crooning happily to her creaky old bike and no one else in particular.

“Blitzkrieg baby you can’t bomb me, cause I’m pleading naturally, got my gun out can’t you see, Blitzkrieg you can’t…… oh bloody hell, that hurt!” Just as she was coming to the end of her first verse the pedal had snapped off her old bike. As she had slipped down she had caught her ankle on the sharp metal and cut herself.

She coasted her bike a few feet to the side of the road and looked at it, ignoring the pain in her ankle for the moment. Maggie wasn’t much fussed, definitely not a girly girl. Yeah, it looked like it could finally be the end of Old Creaky. She looked along the deserted road then down at her bike, a frown
creasing her brow.

“Piece of bloody rubbish,” she said under her breath a little heat pumping into her ears at the swear word, the bicycle leaving her almost three miles from home.

Well nothing for it, she picked up her basket with the rubber tube, spark plugs and a new air filter and started off down the road knowing there was a mighty long walk ahead. Maggie stopped and looked back at her old bike, this time a rather sad smile.

“Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye, Cheerio, here I go on my way. Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye, With a cheer, not a tear, make it gay.” She sang one of the new war songs as she walked away.”

One thing the war had brought was new music and Jazz, oh, how she loved the new music! She would often wander over to the Clay’s or the Hopps’ as those families had more than one wireless being a bit better off then the smaller Sward clan. Often she and some of the other does would listen enjoy the music.

Maggie sang as she walked, though it didn’t stop the sting reaching up her long, toned leg and as she glanced she saw that it must have been a little deeper then she had thought as there were little crimson drops following her in the dust. Again scowling at her luck, she reached up to her head scarf not wanting to use the swath of real silk to wrap around the cut. But as she pondered her next course of action she heard a distant roar. Like so many others in Bunnyburrow her ears fell as she looked up to the heavens thinking about predators from the Axis lands, bombers and fighters streaking the sky overhead. After another moment she realized it wasn’t a plane but something on the road. Turning to look back towards town she could just make out a motorbike kicking up the dirt and running at some speed.

The earth tone doe stepped off of the road a little more then heard the engine note change as the bike passed her own two wheeled machine and the rider looked down at the bike and the dust, then lifted his head back up to regard Maggie.

He pulled up and shut the engine down and pushed his goggles up on his head as his feet dropped to the dusty track. “Hey, Maggie. Are you okay?” Virgil asked a slightly concerned look on his face as he glanced down at the little sprinkles of dark red.

Virgil gave her a curious expression when she didn’t answer. The doe was too busy looking at his motorcycle and had even knelt down in a very unlady like manner to look at the now ticking engine, the expression on her face similar to what kits would get when eyeing a shoppe window full of toys or candy.

The rabbit laughed. “Mags? You okay?” Virgil inquired again, amusement coloring his tone.

“Hey, Virgil,” she replied rather distractedly, a half smile gracing her muzzle.

She had always drooled over Virgil’s bike, had always wanted to take it out or at the very least go for a ride. Maggie had even gone as far as sneaking out late at night to sit on it in the Hopps' barn and pretend to ride it when the rabbit had first got it. They’d never hung out together as she had been two litters younger than him and Edward. Granted that only made her about a year or so his junior but it had separated them. That hadn’t seemed to stop Daisy from landing Maggie’s brother even though she was four years younger. It just hadn’t really put her and Virgil in the same circle.

“Why are you bleeding?” he asked, kicking the stand down getting off and walking around to her.
“Oh, sorry. My old bike broke and I caught my ankle,” she said dismissing it pulling up her dungaree leg to show Virgil, again not very modest but she didn’t really think like other does.

Virgil sucked air through his teeth. “Ooo, Maggie. That’s rather nasty. Come here and sit on the bike.” He suddenly grabbed her by her paw and directed her to rest on the saddle.

A little surprised and embarrassed by the sudden concern and fretting Maggie reluctantly did as she was directed. “Oh, Virgil it’s not bad, just a silly scratch,” she said leaning on the bike, feeling warmth rising up her long ears. As the Hopps rabbit tended to her ankle Maggie couldn’t help but look down at the steering bars longingly. It was in such good condition for sitting months on end, but at the same time it was well used and the effect was wonderful.

Virgil knelt down and put her foot on his knee while he looked over her wound. Making sure that there wasn’t more than a treatable gouge the rabbit pulled his kerchief out of his pocket and tied it around her ankle. She only looked down when he tied it off and it pulled it a touch too tight.

“Ow!” Maggie exclaimed softly looking down at him.

He grinned at her with a sort of apologetic shrug. “Sorry,” he said before lowering her leg and standing back up.

Her eyes lingered on him, scanning his face and up to the tip of his ears where the perfect round hole stood out then back down to his face. He was still smiling at her.

“You like love this bike don’t you?”

“Umm” the doe blushed as if she had been caught with her paw in the sweet jar, though she had been caressing the teardrop shaped fuel tank.

He laughed again. “Come on, I’ll give you a lift back. I’m on a smuggling run and I need to get back to the lake,” he said jumping back on the bike and passing his own goggles to Maggie.

Though the answer wasn’t something she understood, Maggie almost dropped her basket and she couldn’t help but let out a small ‘Eeek!’ of excitement, the state of her ankle forgotten at the offer. She almost unbalanced Virgil as she jumped onto the back of the bike, kicking her own foot rests down, knowing exactly what to do. The doe looped her arm through her basket and the other around the buck who was a little taken aback by her confidence and lack of fear. Normally mammals would show some nervousness at getting on the back of the motorcycle.

If truth be told it was quite refreshing and he grinned over his shoulder at her.

“What do you mean about a smuggling run?” she called over the staccato roar of the machine as the rabbit kicked it into life.

Virgil laughed again as he set off much slower than he had been going when he’d encountered the Sward bunny.

“The kits needed a runner to grab sweets from town, and in turn I get a cut of the goodies!” he yelled back and grinned as the Harley accelerated smoothly down the road.

Mags couldn’t help but let the wind blow her ears she hadn’t put her head scarf back on. The rush of air felt amazing as they puttered past the fields and hedges though this wasn’t what she had in mind.

“I thought this thing was fast?” she said into Virgil’s damaged ear while leaning harder against his back. “Come on, sweet runner! You got to go faster than this,” she egged him on.
Virgil glanced back at her rather excited look, the daring twinkle in her eyes causing them to shine fetchingly and the manner that she pressed against him was rather nice. Though Maggie hadn’t realized she was doing it, the tone that she had used was as sweet and warm as honey, and Virgil thought that it was the sort of dulcet voice to woo a male into getting what she wanted. He felt heat rush into his ears at the way Maggie’s words had seemed to strike him to his very core.

“You holding on?” he finally managed.

Maggie tightened her grip on the rabbit in response, she then felt and heard him kick the bike down a gear then open up the throttle. A scream of sound and speed shot them forward like a bullet out of a gun. She cried out in surprise before letting go with a peel of laughter as adrenaline like she had never felt before burned through her veins.

She then looked over his shoulder seeing the trees and lane rush at them before speeding by in a blur of color.

“Come on faster, faster!” she shouted over the sound of the wind, engine and through her own laughter.

Virgil obliged, opening the throttle all the way as he tapped the shifter along the left of the gas tank into the next gear. He tucked down onto the bike, his own zeal of speed burning fierce. Never had he driven like this with a passenger, and never with them calling for him to go faster still.

He couldn’t keep the smile off his face as his eyes streamed with the wind.

This is what it meant to be alive! Too many times he’d been sure that something had been killed inside of him while he had been a POW, but the adrenaline and happy laughter from the doe behind him proved that he was still very much alive. The speed and excitement it brought was a drug he couldn’t get enough of.

He felt Maggie mimic his position, scooting down as much as she could, pressing her body into his so they could speed on faster still.

Neither rabbit had any idea on how fast they were going as Virgil was looking ahead concentrating on the road while Maggie was simply loving the moment. Never had she felt so free as now as they sped down the road that lead to their respective family’s farms.

It didn’t take long until the bike began to slow down, Virgil bleeding the speed off slowly until he pulled off the road and up and dirt track, until they appeared by the lake. A rush of wet and mostly naked kits charged up to the bike even before Virgil came to a stop then chased him across the grass until he came to a halt letting Maggie get off first.

The Bike’s engine was shut down, its loud galloping tempo turning into a gentle tinkling as it cooled down. Maggie had completely forgotten about her bleeding foot and still didn’t think about it as she couldn’t help but let out a giggle of utter glee, the fur on her head all swept back with the skin beneath tingling delightfully.

“I bring the spoils of our find!” Virgil announced to the gathered children untying the large paper bag that had been fastened to the back of the machine. “Now,” he said before passing over the sweets. “I’ll take my cut,” he took out two boiled sweets. “And Edward gets his share.”

He pulled out another two, struggling not to laugh as the kits faces were looking more horrified by the second as he took four candies out of the plentiful supply. He threw Ed his sweets.

“Now, a word of warning kits,” Virgil told them earnestly. “This is to be shared with all of you, so if
any one starts to make a fuss or they’re not given out evenly, I get all of them,” he warned looking down at them all with a raised eyebrow.

The kits and single lamb nodded their understanding with Zack, the oldest of the fluffle, taking the paper bag as if it was a holey relic and looking inside.

“Oh, my gosh! There’s loads!” he spluttered in utter shock before the herd of excited kits scampered away to sort their great bounty.

“Hey, Mags. You look like you had a good time,” Judy said smiling at the overly excited doe and fondly recalling her first flight and the fact she had the very same expression in the mirror.

The Sward doe could only nod while grinning widely. Her face took on a shocked look when Virgil calmly stepped up to Maggie and took her paw in his. “I think she might have had a good time. Maybe we’ll have to go for a little ride this afternoon to make sure.”

Maggie had to swallow before she found her voice, Virgil’s offer catching her completely off guard, though the thrill of anticipation set her to bouncing lightly on the ends of her feet, her expression exactly that of the kits just moments before with their sack of sugary swag. “Can we?” the bunny blurted out, her tail twitching furiously.

“Oy! Hopps,” Edward called with a raised eyebrow. “And just what are your intentions towards my sister, there?”

Virgil turned to his best mate and gave him a wink. “Oh, I’d say ‘bout the same as yours towards mine!” the rabbit laughed as he turned and straddled the motorcycle before helping Maggie on behind him. “And this way is so much more fun than with the sidecar!” he added before kicking the machine back into life.

Edward could only laugh as he sat back down, pulling Daisy and her kits closer to him. “I guess today’s going to be a pretty happy day, after all!”

A little bit more going on back at the homefront. And a new character! We'll be seeing more of Maggie later on, of that you may be sure!

This one sort of reminds me of a couple of times running courier duty back when I was in uniform. Unfortunately all we had were some little Kawasaki 150’s, but they got the job done.
"Mom! Telegraph delivery!" one of the not too young youngsters, trusted to answer the door, but not so well trained as to not yell, yelled out.

Bonnie Hopps rushed up from chores, a small wave of the littlest bunnies in her wake. She couldn't imagine whom it might be from. True there were several Hopps out in the world, off to university or doing their part for the war and all, but the extravagance of a telegram?

The delivery was via a rather young looking roe deer buck, undersize to his uniform and a bit uncertain, likely a new replacement, as the normal messenger was a military age mammal. He handed her an envelope, addressed to the Hopps family from the War Department. Then the deer waited for the older bunny to read the missive.

"Whatever could this be?" Bonnie thought as she opened it.

She read it, and read it again. Rubbed her brow and read it a third time.

The young Deer asked, "Is there a reply, Ma'am?"

She considered a moment, then, "No. No reply. But wait a moment."

She turned and whispered to one of not too small ones, who immediately scampered off.

"More males off to the war?"

"Yes, Ma'am. My brother volunteered just last week. So did Mr. Jakes, the fellow I'm filling in for." The youngster didn't appear to be happy about any of that.

Bonnie cocked her head querulously.

Seeing that, he explained. "I was going to go into the Ranger Scouts this year, but the local division got dispersed to help out the effort. Runners and assistants to the wardens and such. So there isn't anyone to teach new members. So all I have is school and this work."

The matronly rabbit smiled in sad sympathy. "The war has taken away too many innocent pleasures, like letting kids be kids." Then her tone got a tad grave, "Let's just hope it's over before it tries to take you too."

The Buck grimaced at that. "We get special telegrams, and they go in special black edged envelopes. Only Old Mr. Grainger delivers them, usually with the Reverend. Or we hold them until some soldiers come to deliver them."

They silently shared the tragic knowledge of what those were about.

Little Ben came back carefully carrying a jar. Taking it from him, Bonnie presented it to the messenger. "Money is a bit tight, least I offer a tip, but here's a something for you and your family. Plum jam from our own trees."
A bright child's smile lit up the young buck’s features. "Thank you so, Ma'am!" Then he loped off to his bicycle and off to the rest of his rounds.

Bonnie thought for a good long while, her small crowd of bunnies waiting expectantly for her to say anything. Finally an impatient youngster asked, "What is the letter, Mommy?"

Bonnie sighed. "Nothing you need worry about. I've got to do some things, so shoo."

She went to her bedroom and changed out of her work around the house clothes and into going into town clothes began packing a little over-night case. She hoped she didn't need such, but better to be prepared. She then went to the kitchen to put together some on-the-road food, mostly durable vegetables and a couple hard rolls. And to talk to Jessica, one of her older daughters.

Noticing the outfit, Jessica asked, "So. What's up Mom?"

"I've got to make a little over-night trip, and want to keep it as quiet as possible." Bonnie whispered. "I got a telegram, about Jonah."

"Jonah?" The younger doe made a face. Her mother showed her the telegram.

"Is that a mistake?"

"That's what I'm going to find out. Don't tell anyone. Not even your Father, least until I'm well away. I'll leave him a note."

"And if it is him?"

"Then we'll know."

Bonnie was prepared to walk all the way to the downtown portion of the 'Burrow, and had gotten a few miles on when she was offered a ride into town. It was one of the Clay's vans. They had gotten the commission to do the produce pick-ups among the local farmers and young Jimmy was driving a load into town.

"So where ya headed, Mrs. Hopps, ifin I can ask?"

"Some out of town family business." She returned politely, but with just enough edge to make it clear she was disinclined to talk about it.

And he was savvy enough to take the hint. Instead, he brought up the talk of the warrens. "Great Finding Festival this year, eh? With all the good news for you all and the Swards?"

To that, Bonnie was more cheerful. "Yes, to have Virgil and Edward, virtually back from the dead, then have Edward and Daisy find each other, finally."

"Yeah, I heard tell that she'd been sweet on him since day one. And glad that he's made the kits his own."

That thought still brought a little eye wet with joy, how well that had worked out. Then Bonnie remembered, "And how are you doing with Jackie Sward?"

The young Buck blushed deeply. "I'm hoping. But we did agree to get well through school. She wants some extra education, hoping for clerking or some such."

"And you?"
"The war." He looked despondent. "I can't see myself being much of a fighter, but I'm a good mechanic, and keeping things running can be as important as shooting."

"You're right there. My Judy tells me that to keep a couple dozen fighters in the air takes a hundred or more mammals on the ground, so you'd be in good company in that."

In short order they were in town and he was able to drop her off in front of the local train station. The train was just a tiny local puffer, little more than a trolley that connected the 'Burrow to the main line in Bellows Junction and the station was simply an alcove in the gas station/bus stop/taxi stand/mechanic's shop.

The ancient badger at the counter regarded the matronly rabbit with some sympathy, but, "Duckworth? Not the most direct destination, you'll need a couple connections. An' I'm required to ask, with the war and all, is this trip really necessary?"

Bonnie grimaced at that, more from the sore subject than anything else. She held out the telegram. The badger's face crumpled with old, tragic memories. "Oh, bless you dear. I lost mine in the First War." Then in a whispered conspiratorial voice, "I'm going to issue you a war travel pass, as it is business related to the war, even if only unofficially." She winked. "It will insure you get a seat and make your connections." She then explained the route and that, due to schedules, Bonnie would not be able to return all the way to the 'Burrow that night. Staying in Duckworth was likely the better option than over-nighting at one of the intermediate locations.

Once done with the plans, Bonnie pulled out her purse, she had raided her pin money savings, mostly small change, but enough to get her through the trip. The badger stayed her hand. "Not needed for this kind of pass. And right now it isn't like you'd be taking a seat from someone who needs it. Passenger traffic is a little off at the moment and the train still runs, empty or full." The aged female gripped Bonnie's paw in support, "Since you'll be in Duckworth overnight, you'll likely need every penny for your everythings."

Thanking the badger, Karen Bristletail by name, Bonnie noted she had at least half an hour before her departure. And with this unexpected windfall, she felt she needed to share.

There was a bakery just a block away and she selected a box full of small pastries, only flavored with honey, herbs and fruit rather than sugar and spices, and it all wasn't on the rationed list, yet. Such small treats didn't hurt the needs of war and kept life for the folks at home a bit less bleak.

Bringing it back to the station, she offered the box to all at paw, a couple additional waiting passengers, the badger, and the lads in the shop. And with some small talk, the remaining wait passed quickly.

Bonnie looked out over the 'Burrow as she stepped aboard. She hadn't gone any further than here in her adult life. Her only foray into the wider world was a childhood trip out to the coast, only half-remembered except for the miracle of all that water and scampering before the waves.

She settled in to a seat and half-considered the landscape. Though it was all new and interesting, she kept going back to the telegram and Jonah and matters of rabbit character.

Ancient lore had it that rabbits used to be small and easy prey for any beast with a sharp tooth. Consequently, they supposedly had large issues of tiny, hairless and rather helplessly fragile young to counter the predation. Of course, that wasn't the case anymore. They were more like their Hare cousins, a few, larger, fully furred kits, still largely helpless, unlike the all but ready to run leverets.
Then, too, some bunnies had other hare-like features, more athletic and sometimes a bit larger in general. A few also had hare-ish markings; her own Judy and a few others had the dark tips more typical to hares. And Judy in particular was a lot more bouncy than her siblings.

And that was even in light that though hares and rabbits seemed similar, they very definitely could not breed. Or had much in common with each other socially to test that.

Hares tended to be more independent, very much less communal, not necessarily anti-social loners, they just didn't need warren life and the fluffle like rabbits.

And that's where Jonah was such an oddity. He was a loner, very pointedly as he grew. Not only did he not seem to need the fluffle, he actively didn't want it. He never seemed to show affection, and didn't appear to need it, a point that broke his mother's heart. He wasn't a bad kit, but Bonnie was saddened how he was only dutiful in his roles in the warren and seemed unwilling to love or be loved.

Later, the isolated youngster became the cold young adult, more a sullen hired hand, all but a stranger, than a member of the family. He left in his mid-teens, not an unprecedented age to go out in the world, but made it clear he was done with the Hopps warren. That was more than fifteen years ago.

After the transfer at Bellows Junction to a proper train she allowed herself to properly look out over the changing landscape to break her chain of thought. The low rolling hills and larger fields of the 'Burrows had flattened out to older style patchwork plots surrounding tiny pocket villages. After the modest expanse of the Hopps acres, she shook her head in wonder at how anyone could make a go on those postage stamps.

Later, they approached a city, or at least the largest town she had ever seen in modern memory. Blackback was an old coal and iron town, drab little row houses and grimy factory buildings were the only view from the train. 'Dark, satanic mills' came to mind. She so hoped her kin who were now in the various war industries weren’t in such dreary looking circumstance as the sad grey creatures she saw from her window.

Then she saw that the war had visited here more directly. The train had to make a slow and awkward siding route, as crews were repairing bomb damage to the main switching yard. Beyond the track work, which appeared to be largely done, she saw how a few bombs had dropped among the row houses. There would be a progression of damage, broken windows evolved to cracked plaster and tousled roof tiles. Then more thorough stripping of plaster and lost roofs, then to crushed and collapsed structures. The final, and worst part was the gaps, craters, raw holes where homes and families once lay.

Bonnie whispered a little prayer at all that, then looking around, saw an old ewe doing her own version. They smiled and nodded before settling into their private reverie.

Duckworth was a fair size town, farms surrounded it for miles and a small factory hugged the switching yard. It had a proper train station and some small crowds milling about. About as much of a bustling metropolis as she was likely to tolerate. Asking for directions, she found that the local hospital was a fairly substantial structure, a regional medical center they called it, just a short walk away.

"So, you guys winning the war without me?" Jonny regarded the cluster of his fellow flyers. They stood around his bed, he still looking rather drawn after his ordeal. Getting a half-dozen machine gun
rounds through him had been bad enough, though luckily had hit nothing that couldn't be fixed or
grow back, but crashing his crate then left stuck in it overnight had further depleted his health and it
looked like he was going to be bed-ridden for a bit longer than originally expected.

"We've been getting by."

"Another ten down for the unit so far. Intel suggests we've been taking so many of them that they've
had to ease off for a while. It's half the reason we got the time off to be here."

"That and the filthy weather on the continent this week."

"It'll give Hopps time to recover and make himself a double ace."

"That's right, your last kills have been confirmed. Between the five shared and four solos, you're
now the unit's fourth ace."

"That's if I can get up and out before you win the war without me," Jonny commented.

"Yeah, I can see you've gotten an extension on this little vacation of yours." Clark peeked at Jonny's
chart that hung from the foot of his bed.

"I'd happily exchange the circumstances of my vacation with you if you really want it." Jonny chided
back. Admittedly, he had been too drugged or drowsy with fatigue to be very bored so far, but it was
refreshing to have his flight mates at hand.

"I heard about Porter, how's he doing?" He had gotten hit, but made it back to base before running
afoul of the perimeter fence.

There were some exchanged looks, "You know he got hit in the legs and butt, or, more technically,
in the hips. Along with some broken bones, there was nerve damage." Baker was the one explaining,
and he struggled to continue. "He might walk again, eventually, but never fly."

Jonny grimaced with that, his great joy anymore was the freedom of flight, and the notion of that
being taken away was not something he wanted to consider.

"And I got some more directly bad news for you, Hopps." Talbot the flight leader intoned, "Some
fool went and put you in for the Flying Cross, and a bigger fool approved it."

And at that, the whole crowd recoiled in mock dismay. It was one of the higher honors for an
aviator. The purely in-unit joke was that it should be more rightly be referred as the tombstone, both
for its design and that it tended to be issued posthumously.

But Talbot wasn't done. "Someone also mistook your recklessness for bravery and thought you
needed something to go with your FC, so you'll be getting a Medal of Valor too."

Before anyone could comment, Jonny huffed, "Damn it, every one of you should have a bucket of
these already." Getting the FC was simply his due as he saw it, he really was an outstanding pilot
and only his limited hours aloft so far had prevented him from an even higher score. But the MV, no.
His mates were the brave ones, risking their lives as they did. He was just doing his job.

His flight mates swarmed him with counter arguments. But, of course, Talbot had the last word.
"Well, I could see about having it rescinded."

"Oh, no. Having extra gilding in my files can't hurt my chances with the promotions board." Jonny
wasn't that ambitious, but extra rank made him more secure in his posting, and he was finally just
where he wanted to be.

The group collectively 'Oh-ho!' at that, and someone warned Talbot that he better watch out or Jonny would take his command.

"Running herd on you lot? He can have it!" the senior officer groaned in mock disgust.

And then everyone's attention went elsewhere.

There was the matronly doe at the door. Talbot asked, "Can we help you, ma'am?"

"I'm Bonnie Hopps, and I seem to be seeing my son."

All eyes then were on Jonny. He was trying to be neutral, but the flat back ears hinted that everyone needed to be elsewhere for a while.

"Mother." It was a flat address.

"I guess it's 'Jonny' now?" Bonnie tried to smile, then looked back to where his mates just left, and the smile was a bit more heartfelt. "Looks like you found a family after all."

The young buck grimaced. "We fly together."

"Damn it, Jonah! Can't you ever admit to some little joy? I saw you with them. Or was that just some act to cover a stone dead heart?"

They were both a bit taken aback by her outburst.

"What do you want, Mother?"

She knew how stubborn he could get. He would never acknowledge any positive feelings to her. Sadly, it wasn't out of spite or hate, just his sense that it was just none of her business by his reckoning.

"I got a telegram from the War Department about your being wounded and wanted to check to see if it was really you."

"Very well."

"Your brother Virgil and Edward Sward were captured at Bullkirk, and just recently escaped." She saw him react to that. "And Judith just finished training with the Angels Flight."

He almost smiled. "Little Juju an Angels pilot." Then after a moment, "Thank you, Mother." It was a dismissal.

"Good luck in your new life, and I am glad for you."

She found Talbot just outside. He must have heard everything. He ushered her well away from the room before speaking.

"I know Jonny can be a bit of cold fish at times, but as you surmised, he does have a home here with us. And he has a real passion for flying." He looked away a moment before continuing. "He has never talked about any family, but I suspected he had 'issues'."

"He was never a bad boy, just seemed so determined to be unlovable." Bonnie sighed.
"Well, rest assured we'll take care of him."

As he escorted her back down stairs, she had a thought. "Please tell his mates not to make a fuss about him and me. Call it private family business."

"Will do, Ma'am."

Chapter End Notes

Another addition from stevegallacci! I think I might not be alone in wanting to read more about his Hurricane squadron, and I must admit I like the thought of the group of rabbit pilots with Jonny Hopps and discovering what adventures they might have! After all, Mr. Gallacci is much better with the technical savvy than I am and he certainly knows his history!

Jonny Hopps is an intriguing character to me. And this is behavior that I've seen in rabbits, but I really do want to know more about him. It would surely be interesting to see what the reunion would be like if Judy ever delivered a Hurricane to his airfield and they encountered each other.

Maybe if we ask Mr. Gallacci real nice he'll toss us a little chapter like that, hey? ;)


Chapter 20

Chapter by Selaxes, stevegallacci

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Coming back to the warren after a morning chopping weeds had Stu Hopps feeling as if he’d accomplished something good for the day. True, what many regarded as weeds were simply the wrong plants in the wrong place, in this case, they were inedible encroaching on food, so had no place in the garden. Clopping into the mudroom, Stu yelled out. "Bonnie! Got tea and nibbles for your Old Mammal, and something to eat?" After the Finding Festival, everyone was still just a bit frisky, even if it was just in jest.

"Dad!" Jessica admonished, a bit embarrassed that her father and the grandfather of her kits could talk so. And something else. "Mom's gone, left for the day, at least."

"Bonnie's gone where?" The elder Rabbit was stunned. His Sweet Bonnie wouldn't do anything without consulting him. Not for permission or advice, but in the practical fact she was half of the head of the family and to leave the warren, and him, untethered like that, was unthinkable.

"She told me to give you this note too." Jessica held it like it was red hot or poisonous.

'Dearest Stuart,

I received a telegram from the War Department that a 'Jonny' Hopps was in hospital. It said he was an officer and pilot and was hurt in combat. It does not seem the sort of thing Jonah would do, but I have to find out. He's up in Duckworth, so I suspect I might have to over-night it.

I know how you feel about him, and much of that I share, that is why I didn't tell you I was going. But a Mother needs to know.

Ever my Love, Bonnie'

Jonah. What an ill-fated name for such an ill-fated boy. Stu didn't hate the boy, far from it. But the cold and distant lad had been a bitter twinge for his Sweet Bonnie. And that was galled him so. The utter lack of reciprocity to all her efforts to nurture the lad nettled something fierce. He watched her fret over the youngster's welfare and future and the lad's indifference to her concerns. He knew he couldn't make Jonah love, but Stuart had wanted him to at least acknowledge her efforts.

But he'd been gone now, what, fifteen years? Of all his regrets and disappointments, the enigma of how a son of his could turn out so 'off' was still at the top. That so many of his other offspring had done so well, been such a collective joy, made that contrast all the worse.

"When did she go?" Perhaps he could intercept her. Not to stop her, but to accompany her, or at least provide a word of encouragement, to give her strength for what must be an ordeal.

"Sorry, Dad," Jessica said with reluctance. "Mom wanted to make sure she got full away before you caught on."

Stu nodded. He could see that. In case he didn't approve. Of course he didn't approve, but this was the one time she might have underestimated him.
He looked to his daughter, gave her a little encouraging smile, "Got any tea for this old beast?"

Before she could answer, a yell from the front of the house. "Dad, there are some folks at the door."

Who could it be? No one was expected, midday, midweek would have any honest soul at work. Stu thought it easier to walk around the house rather than track dirt through it. There was a delivery van out front; he didn't recognize the name on it. And three mammals on the front porch, Sunday best working class clothes on unfamiliar beasts.

"Mister Hopps?" The small pig-like fellow with a funny accent approached, "Emil Vasquez, an' this is Jordan Kahn," Introducing a smallish and unfamiliar ungulate, "And Ahan Ohta." A springhaas, a rabbit-looking, but unrelated species. All had their caps in nervous paws and looked very contrite.

"We were workmates to your young Bartholomew Hopps, and - "

"What happened?" Stuart Hopps could be the most effusively emotional mammal, given even a modest provocation, but there were times when he needed to steel his passions, and his rising sense of dread brought a cold resolve in him.

The javalina struggled to speak, new tears formed in his stained face. "The shop has a lot of heavy machinery, big work pieces, an' we've been really busy, with war work an' all." His face twisted in dismay. "We're so sorry."

"Where is he?"

"We brought him home to you, sir."

The three scampered to the van and opened the back. A small chill fog slid out. "We got some dry ice to chill things down." There was a tarp-covered heap in the middle of the compartment. When it was pulled away there was a casket, with straw around it and some now empty buckets.

"It happened towards end of shift yesterday." The Springhaas took up the explanation. "We didn't want to send a telegram for that kind of news."

Stuart leapt into the vehicle and stood over the box. Though simple, the casket was of quality wood and well fitted. Part of his mind raged that he'd worry about such details at that moment, but another part recognized there was care and attention in that gesture.

"Sir. We cleaned him up and dressed him in his best he had with him, but - " All three avoided looking in Stuart's direction. Finally, Vasquez continued, "A Father should not have to see - "

No. He had to see his son one last time. He'd seen bad deaths in his many years on the farm, and in that measure, the poor boy was by no means the worst. But he was still struck by how small and sad the bunny looked in that box.

Stuart jumped down out of the van, and considered a moment, then gripped each beast's paws. "Thank you all for bring him home." And he began to break down, just a bit. But there was still more to do. He went back to the house, where any number of the youngest were anxiously watching the strangers and their Father's mysterious actions. He wanted to give them a reassuring smile, but couldn't. Though tears were beginning, he held firm.

He saw a couple of the older girls and young mothers of the clan and motioned them close. "They've brought Barty home." Between some gasps and grimaces, they realized they needed to get all the little ones away for the moment. There was also a flurry to get some of the older bucks back to the house as well.
In short order there were a goodly number of paws to bring Bart back to his home. The three strangers insisted on helping carry the casket, they hadn't known him long, but needed to do this one last thing for their work mate. He was brought to the main hall where other kin waited.

"You're welcome to stay for as long as you might." Stuart offered.

The three exchanged a sad glance, "Sorry, Sir, but we really got to get back, long drive and all to the city."

Stuart walked them back to their van, where Ohta brought out a travel bag. "His things." The springhaas reluctantly held it out. "There is an envelope inside too. A letter from us all. And his earnings."

The old rabbit kept the worst of the waterworks in check, but had to hug each of the beasts in turn before they left.

Back in the warren, there was a growing crowd of family around the casket. As most of the kits were still at school, it was adults and the youngest who were available at the moment. While the elders were silent in their vigil, the little ones fussed, sensing the sadness and unease in their parents.

Someone had found a photo of Bart, it was him as a younger kit in his football jersey, and laid it on top. Over the next hours garlands of flowers and candles joined it.

Stu sat off to the side, too stricken to cry aloud, tears streaming down his muzzle. Where was his Sweet Bonnie when he needed her most?

One of the lads had gone into town to find out when their mother might be coming back. That it was not possible for Bonnie to get back that night was greeted with varying levels of dismay in the warren. Worse for it was Stu, who had never been apart from his Sweet Bonnie a single night of their lives together. But he needed to be strong for the rest.

No one bothered with a proper dinner; just a few nibbles were laid out in the kitchen but had few takers. A couple of bottles were broken out, but were consumed in silent grief and to hide from the pain.

The next day, a couple of the lads drove the truck into town to wait for their mother, as well as take advantage of the trip to get a few things for the warren. Checking in at the station, they discovered that any traffic from the Duckworth area was going to be delayed. Damage to the tracks. To keep even that small bit of targeting intelligence away from the enemy, that it might be bomb damage and exactly where it happened was not revealed. But everyone knew there had been some raiding attacks, little more than harassment, to sow fear in the cowering herds, so the propaganda broadcasts claimed, in the area early last night so the delay was not a surprise.

They would have to come back later, perhaps later that night, but for now, there was some shopping to do. The word had gotten out about the death of young Bart, and there were heartfelt condolences. True, he was just one of any number of Hopps of his general age, not a stand out, but like most Hopps, an honest and reliable young lad. To have him die so young and pointlessly was a real tragedy.

When they got back to the warren, they passed on the news about their matriarch's expected delay. With much reluctance, it was agreed that they would have to do their final rites without her. There was just the beginnings of the terrible necessity to have the body dealt with, and the youngest were reacting the worse for it.
Due to scheduling complications, there was a special coming into the 'Burrows for those beasts who had been discommoded by damage and delays up the line. Bonnie was ever so anxious to get home, being away from family and her Stuart had been a terrible challenge, especially with the disappointment of her abbreviated visit with her wayward son. So much so that she was willing to waste good money on a taxi ride back to the warren.

She didn't recognize the driver, a hedgehog of indeterminate age and gender, who only opened the door and nodded to her instructions. The taxi was an antique steamer, kept pristine, and with wartime petrol rationing, kept very busy. Bonnie was too anxious to get home to attempt any small talk and the driver was too polite to comment on the latest family news.

Bart's death was now common knowledge throughout the county by now, and as the driver figured, that she had been away, it was likely she didn't know, and he was certainly not going risk breaking that kind of news to anyone.

Bonnie got to her front door without any reaction from the house, an unexpected situation. She entered to find only her brother, Bobby Greylop, waiting for her and a cold fear struck her.

"What happened?"

He grimaced, "It's your boy, Bart." Bobby was as taciturn as Bonny was ebullient, but he gave her a look and held his arms out for a hug. "His mates brought him back from the city yesterday afternoon. They wanted to wait for you, but the word from town was your train was going to be extra late. Everyone's out at the plot now."

Bonnie broke away, "I've got to go!"

Bobby nodded. He wasn't going to attend the funeral and instead watched the warren for the family. He had lost his mate a couple octades ago and had been a shattered soul since. He floated between the various kin and clans as a laborer, a welcome paw, but always reluctant to engage too closely with family or with even his erstwhile beloved littermates like Bonnie.

Bonnie found the family coming back from the grounds, the final resting place for the Hopps clan. There were tears and hugs, as she became the nucleus of a great fluffle. No need for words, just touches, strokes, embraces, a nuzzle or two, or a dozen, even a few ear tugs. Then she was alone, or nearly so. Another one of her brothers, and a couple or three of her oldest children stood well off, just within sight, but still wishing her privacy as she went on to the site.

There was her Stu, in his best suit, sitting on the ground, looking out at something, or someone, not there. She saw that there were other bunnies keeping a discreet vigil on him as well. Though she was quiet and behind him, his ears picked up to her. "Llow, Bonniemylove." He sighed.

She sat down beside him.

"Sorry I wasn't here."

"No. You hate these things so much." And it was true. Bonnie never got used to funerals. The cruel nature of an extended population of a species with a delicate constitution was that death was all too common, and for her, every one was as wounding and raw as the first. She survived them, endured them, but she never got used to them in any fashion.

Stu had always been more sanguine, in his youth, elements of his family had gone through a particularly awful bit of luck and he had buried more of his kin by his teens than most in a lifetime.
Any death still took a bite out of his heart, but those hard lessons in carrying on kept him going.

They pulled each other close, nuzzling each other to take in the scent they'd been missing for the last day.

After a rather long time of silent embrace, Stuart finally had to ask. "Was it him?"

"Oh, yes. And as - stubborn - as ever." She sighed. "But, he seems to have found a place for himself. He's a flying officer, a fighter pilot, and apparently very good at it."

"Well, he was never a good-for-nothing, just so -. So I ought to be relieved that he's found himself."

"And only took a war to do it."

"Virgil is rescued from the war, Jonah finds himself in the war, and now Bart -." Stuart grimaced, "But poor little Barty, it could have been any industrial accident."

Bonnie let go a small groan and Stuart pulled her close again. "I know, I know." He tried to soothe. "But it won't end. This war will take so many more before their time. Barbara and Judy are already in harm's way, though indirectly, and I know some of the other boys are talking about joining up now."

"We can only pray that it ends before -."

Chapter End Notes

And that's the tragedy of war. Not all lives were lost on the battlefield. Some were lost just trying to keep nations running, but that doesn't diminish what happened in any way at all. Without the efforts of so many, the soldiers on the lines, the sailors at sea and the pilots in the air wouldn't have had the support they needed, or a nation to fight for. There were no small contributions.

And well done, stevegallacci! You do have a knack for helping keep things in perspective!
"So, Dad, how's Mom doing? She left you yet?"

The General stiffened, his eyes narrowed at the younger tod, then considered the company. He then turned to Group Captain Faulkner. "My apologies, Group Captain. Just some family history between us," the visiting officer commented gruffly while glaring daggers at Squadron Leader Wilde.

"Yes, of course." the rabbit officer murmured, then turned to Nick. "The General has come over on a fact finding mission. Wants to see what we've learned about fighting the Axis. Strengths and weakness in equipment and operations, both on our side and what we've ascertained of theirs." He made a hopeful glance between the two foxes.

"And Command wants to show off how well you lads from the Territories have done while you've been here." He could not help but notice a little flicker, could it be disapproval, in the General's countenance. "In that, as I was about to say, Squadron Leader Wilde here has lead his fellows to very respectable performance, with one of the highest kill ratios in Fighter Command."

"Really?" Definitely some manner of something in the old fox's tone. The General again regarded his Son. "So, you finally got your head on right and took to the air."

"Wouldn't be anywhere else at the moment. Especially with what's at stake." Nick knew all too well his Father's notions of what the natural order was, as well as his general animus to Zootopia, born of family grievances centuries old. But his fervent hope was that such was more in the abstract, and that he would never embrace the madness in practice that prevailed on the continent.

Only a cold, "Of course," was the Territories officer's reply. Then he explained, "A Zootopian purchasing commission went to the United Vulpine Territories, shopping around for more aircraft. They had some requirements that piqued our interest, based on their practical experience." Then turning to the rabbit, "So much of our doctrine back in the UVTAAC has been based on theory and war games heretofore, so seeing how things weather the test of real combat is an important opportunity."

"Yes, the little proxy wars in Iberia, Far Asia, and Africa have been tests of some tactics, but a technical generation or more past already." The Group Captain was a long serving officer in the ZAF and been kept up to date on those earlier actions as they’d happened.

"Indeed. No biplanes need apply with speed pushing four hundred miles an hour, eh?" The General then turned to Nick. "So, how does it feel flying something a bit friskier than a Steerman?"

"Or a Curtiss Tomahawk." Nick reminded. "The Spitfire is everything the Tomahawk isn't for speed and maneuverability."

"The new Kittyhawks ought to address that."

"From what I've heard, they're not enough of a difference from the older Tomahawks. Bigger engines on a five year old base design isn't going to cut it anymore."
"Enough that the Zootopians were shopping around for some more of them."

"Well, something is better than nothing, and they still have some utility," Nick shrugged.

"That's what everyone thought, but Curtiss was too backed-up, so went to North Territories Aviation for license builds. And now NTA is trying to pitch a whole new design instead. Said that it would take into consideration all the latest combat experience as well as state of the art features." The General sniffed at that. "And that is no small part as to why I'm here."

"Well, this is where the action is." Nick looked over to his commander.

"Quite so. We are operating the newest machines, fresh from the factory. In fact we may have some new product arriving today. And those on the line have seen combat just within the last few days. Though, thankfully, there's been a bit of a lull, after the Axis largely gave up heavy daylight bombing raids for night attacks, then even those have largely tapered off for now. Intelligence suggests operational losses as well as general wear and tear has outstripped production for now, and they are holding off to regroup." The Group Captain looked out the window proudly at the line machines out on the grass.

"But we're still kept busy with harassment raids, single or just a few fast bombers running in low and fast, or even fighters with a single small bomb, just to let us know they're still thinking of us." He turned to the General, "Would you like to take a closer look?"

"Of operational machines, certainly. Special presentations have tarted up machines, either stripped down for unrealistic maximum performance or impossibly tidy things that have never even set wheels down on grass." He leaned over as though sharing a confidence, "And I could never help but wonder if some details might be added or absent for us foreign types."

The Group Captain tutted, "As I've been instructed, you'll get to see us very much as-is."

"Yes, Sir, I can assure you we won't be holding anything back." Nick snarked in addition.

It was a beautiful afternoon, clear and just a bit crisp, with the promise of cooler fall weather to come. There was a bit of late season grass coming in to offset the faded summer lawns to brighten things up as well. In contrast, aside from the colorful unit markings, the line of Spitfires seemed a bit drab in their matte finish camouflage

The General noted that. "I'm told that some units polish their birds?"

"Yes, they find they can eek out a few extra miles an hour with it."

"But, as combat success often depends on who sees who first, we're a bit concerned that the shine might flash some unwanted attention. We've spotted the occasional '109 by little more than the glint off of their flat-sided canopies a time or two and don't want to risk an equivalent ourselves."

The General admired the 'red tail' detail on the planes. "A distinctive detail for an all fox unit."

"Yes, at least that's how we started. But less than half of the original unit is still here. Now we're a mixed unit, local boys to cover the daylight ops and us vulpes and, eventually, a few small cats out of the Commonwealth for night ops."

The Group Captain added. "The Spitfire isn't the best for night ops, as standing patrols are the best bet for timely responses to raiding attacks, and it doesn't have a lot of endurance, but we do what we can. There are some units trying other types, and have other local nocturnals for crews."
They continued on, now among the aircraft scattered around the periphery of the field.

"Not exactly a tidy display."

"Though an attack on us isn't likely, we'd prefer to be in the habit of keeping the birds a bit dispersed. Draws less attention and is less an easy target for a strafing. While enemy intelligence may well know where everything is, a pilot in a cockpit still has to eyeball it to attack."

They went past a couple machines getting some servicing, then another getting a limited wipe down.

"You don't give them a thorough washing?"

"Not so much. Variation of the concern about being too shiny. Too much scrubbing doesn't do the paint much good, and I for one, don't like the idea of too many folk banging around my bird. Dings and dents at minimum, a crunched corner or even the risk of something important getting fouled or broken." Nick gestured with the end of his chin as ground crew mammals tended a couple of the planes that were on the ready-line. "But they do get wiped down where it counts, least old grime hide new problems. Easier to spot oozing oil or whatever sooner rather than later."

The Squadron Leader straightened with a pleasant twitch of his tail and the hint of a smile tugging at his mouth.

"And thinking about my bird."

There was Nick's Spitfire. Identical to the rest of the line, aside from the cluster of small Hackenkruetz below the windscreen and the small but colorful artwork on the engine cowl.

"Dreaming of My Angle? Cute, but an odd choice of mammal, unless you've gone prey chaser."

Both Nick and the Group Captain Rabbit restrained from reacting too obviously to the slur, but not so much that the General could not help but notice.

"What? You've...?" Then the older tod shook his head in disgust. "Is there nothing you won't do to disgrace your name and species?"

His actions were nearly mirrored in the two other officers' joint eye roll and headshakes of dismay. He was too far beyond the pale to even try to challenge at that point and the pair looked to each other in recognition and sympathy. Not that Nick didn't have a little something to go with it. "I suppose this would as good a time as any to mention my marriage to the young Lieutenant Hopps?

Taking a measured glance towards the General, the Group Captain beamed at the news. "Congratulations! Well done!" And pumped Nick's paws in obvious enthusiasm. He then considered. "But she's not likely to be with the batch coming in, if she was with you back at Bunnyburrow?"

"'Fraid not sir." Looking over to the now gob-smacked old fox. "But it would have been a treat to see her again so soon." There was just a touch of wicked glee in his grin.

"Well, when she does show up, we'll have to have a bit of reception for the two of you!" Faulkner exclaimed, though promptly sobered, "The war permitting, of course."

"Of course." Then Nick remembered another detail. "And I just remembered, I've already got a family with her too." Said with a very deliberately pregnant pause. "That little ewe from the bombing of Zootopia, little Dawn? Judy and I have adopted her. She's staying on the Hopps farm, loves it there away from the city and, hopefully, the war."
Though he was talking to his commander, Nick’s grin was more in his observation of the General's grimace of disapproval.

As it was clear that everyone had their full load of personal outrage for the moment, the Group Captain suggested, "General. Perhaps we should all retire for the afternoon? Other than the possible arrival of some new machines, as I mentioned before, I don't expect we'll have anything coming up until evening mess. Eighteen hundred hours."

And with a nudge and a look, it was clear that he meant that it was up to Nick to escort the General to his quarters.

After a few moments of silent walking back towards the barracks, the General spoke, only half so to Nick. "Is there really nothing you won't do to spite me?"

Nick stopped, then shook his head, a sad little chuckle escaped him. "You are the most amazing egotist I've ever met. Even after all this time, you really think I spend even a moment ever considering how I can stick it to Dad just one more time? That I can't make a move without considering how it will matter to you?"

He paused and looked at his elder, his paws out begging for an answer. "For all you never seemed to care one iota about my welfare, you must have been up at night with worry over what new perceived shame I could bring down upon you?" He let his paws drop and spun on his heel to trudge on.

Not entirely caring if the General was following him, Nick continued. "As for Judy, I met a brave, strong, and smart female, who only happened to be a bunny. And now we're married. Ya know, the way some tods are committed to a single mate? And as you just might guess, it isn't because I 'had to'. And adopting a ewe? She was the one we found in the rubble on the first night downtown Zootopia was bombed. Why her? She needed a loving family, not some warehouse full of other orphans and we could deliver. For her sake."

He then spun back around to look the General in the eye. "And I never once, then or thereafter had a single thought about you. Never a matter of making a point of being everything you were not as a husband or father. Never a thought as to how you might react."

Seeing the old tod about to say something, Nick waved his paws to stop him. "Basically, you're old business that I thought I was done with. So, let's get this job done. There's a war on and I don't want the UVT to be dragged in unprepared."

The General was fuming, his hackles up and tail poofed, flailing in rage, but he held his tongue, only nodding in curt acknowledgement.

"Thank you, Sir!" Nick knew that, whatever personal proclivities and passions his Father might exhibit or indulge, he was still a dedicated officer, keen to see his mission through, and Nick was fully prepared to deal with him as such. Mostly.

Then, as if to punctuate the situation, there was a roar of aero engines overhead.

"We're in luck, the new machines have arrived." Nick all but sighed in relief. "I can find you a more comfortable guide, for the rest of this."

The General squeezed the bridge of his muzzle and shook his head. "Whatever else we might be," He growled, "We both know our duty." And he eyed the younger officer. "I can trust you on that?"

"Yessir." And Nick flicked the barest gesture of a salute.
The General grunted at that, but was clearly keen on watching the batch of Spitfires circle overhead. And in that they were quite the sight. The powerful Merlin engines snarling as each passed overhead, not quite ready to slow down for final approach. After a few more circuits, the first dropped its landing gear and flaps in the downwind leg in preparation for landing.

"You'll get to meet our Angels, the female reserve flying officers. They do most of the proof and delivery flying for the service. And not just the fighters, bomber command and army co-ordination use them, too."

"Do a good job, do they?"

"From what I hear, just as well as the prewar male flyers, though you'd have to get the real numbers from Command. All 'attrition' there and in the training units is kept secret nowadays. I can only hope it isn't any worse than the rates back home?"

The General made a face at that. Training accidents and routine flying losses, especially for performance types, was kind of awful even in the best of times. Though the UVTAAC was not yet in a war footing, heightened tensions had seen a corresponding increase in 'attrition'.

They watched the first two land and were walking back to where the new machines were parking when they caught sight of the third. Only one main landing gear was down, and a second Spitfire was flying along side.

"Uh oh. These new machines are just that, and some functional flaws are still being worked out."

"She isn't going to try to land it like that?"

"Nope, likely give the bird a bounce, try to shake the gear down, in case its just a sticky up-lock or some such."

And the Spitfire in question did just that, ever so carefully bringing itself down to give the one gear a firm touchdown, perhaps a bit too firm with the poof of dirt and sod that was kicked up. It climbed back up and attempted to cycle the landing gear, only to have the one good strut not fully retract, and the faulty one still not come down with the next extension attempt.

"Oh shoot. She'll have to belly in after all."

There was a warning bell rung and a crash truck and ambulance pulled out to the edge of the field in anticipation.

"She'll come in on the far side of the field, a little short but it's okay to land on. And hasn't been mowed in a while."

The balky bird was coming back around, the one gear mostly up, the flaps not down, would make for a hotter landing, but less damage, and just as it turned into final, the engine stopped to spare it and the props from a hard ground strike as well. The belly-in tossed a lot of grass in the air, but no major bits of the plane came flying off nor was there any fire. They could just make out a figure climb out and wave as she got well away from the machine to the emergency crews that approached.

"Neatly done. Will your boys be able to fix it locally?"

"Depends. Needless to say the radiators are wrecked, but how much damage to the wings is the real tell. Then it would be off to the repair depot. Likely pinch the engine and a few other parts to have on hand for spares first. Supply doesn't like passing out any more hardware to the units than they think they need."
Then there were another pair of Spitfires still to land, as well as an Anson, a small twin-engine type, used to take the ferry pilots back to the factory field, and a warning flare as the next one came in off the downwind with the landing gear still up.

The General snorted. "Seems to be the universal lapse, those new-fangled landing gear."

Nick was almost visibly surprised; the older fox had made a joke, and an apt one at that. Retractable landing gear were now the common feature of any modern aircraft, yet failing to extend them for landing was still one of the most common mishaps in flight operations. So much so that there was a landing officer with a flare gun always ready to warn incoming pilots of the mistake.

The General continued, "I'll bet the pilot was distracted by the previous landing, too easy to miss a step."

Nick nodded in agreement. He had to grudgingly acknowledge that his Father did know his stuff. Distraction or other interruptions in procedures were all too common a source for those kind of things. Not like he ever got a wave off...

The pair got to the arrival point as the last of the aircraft taxied up and cut its engine. The cluster of pilots already out of their mounts, a goat, a raccoon, and two rabbits, no, one was a hare, approached the last Spitfire, where another rabbit was now disentangling herself from the cockpit. Even though a rabbit was as about as small a mammal that could reasonably function in the Spitfire's cockpit, it was still a tight fit, but as a point of pride, this particular rabbit was loath to open the side hatch to make her exit any easier.

Once clear of the cockpit, the Rabbit bounced down off the machine and up to Nick where she snapped into textbook attention. "Squadron Leader Scampington reporting, Sir!" Done with her usual flourish.

"Congratulations, Squadron Leader!" Nick returned her salute, then turned to introduce her to the General. "Squadron Leader Scampington, General Sionnach, Army Air Crops, United Vulpine Territories."

There was just a faintest flicker of something as the Doe snapped to. If he noticed, the General gave no sign, though his return salute was a bit perfunctory. "So, you girls are doing your part for the war effort, eh?"

"As much as we're allowed, sir. There have been requests for search and rescue duty for Coastal Command, but with the risk of contact with the enemy, that has been turned down." The small rabbit tended to be 'feisty' and her tone today had a little extra edge.

"All the better to keep you safe, no doubt. Can't have the fairer sex getting shot at and all that."

"No. Of course not." Then she pointed across the field at the sad Spitfire in the grass. "We get enough casualties with balky machines and bad weather. Half the 'girls' I started the program with are dead, no combat action, just routine 'attrition'. Isn't that what you call it?" She then snapped to a conspicuously stiff attention and sharp salute and a very clipped, "Sir!" Then not waiting for a return, she spun on her heel and was off to see to the disabled Spitfire and its despondent pilot who was standing by.

"She's very dedicated and defensive about her Angles. Had to fight to get her unit together and every incident only goes to fuel opposition." Nick explained. Then sighed. "And she isn't keen on Vulpine isolationism. Tends towards a 'if you're not for us...""
Then he noticed that the General wasn't really listening and instead was watching the angry swing of hips on the retreating bunny.

***************

Later, at mess, along with Nick, several of the other officers and the General had an informal round table about matters of operations and tactics.

"I suppose you Territorials are going to go ahead with your Flying Fortress notions. Great looking birds, but I have my doubts about them being able to defend themselves without escorts," one of the pilots down the table observed.

The General beamed as though showing a winning hand at cards. "The combination of speed and altitude, and up to a dozen fifty caliber machine guns in each ought to do the job. That and we're perfecting the kind of collective defensive formation flying needed to insure their success."

The Group Captain sighed at the arrogance of that. "For your sake, I hope you're right. We haven't seen anything like really effective self-defense on either side so far. So having escorting fighters has proven to be vital. The Axis bombers have certainly learned that lesson this last season."

The General waved off his concerns. "A small gaggle of slow bombers at moderate altitude at best, armed with only a few rifle calibre guns isn't much of a comparison." Concluding with an eye roll for how trifling the notion was.

Another pilot added. "But the Junkers in particular, their so-called 'schnellbomber', is hardly slow, nearly as fast as your advertised performance."

The General harrumphed, "We'll see if the time comes. Our planners are thinking in terms of bigger formations, at least a couple score, maybe even a hundred bombers at a time." Of course the Air Corps and its bombers will always get through, wasn't it obvious?

Nearly everyone there reacted to the statement and several collectively responded, "If?"

The old tod's confident smugness dropped away to a firm tone. "We're not in this, and I'm personally unenthusiastic about getting dragged into a purely European war. Especially as we have to look to the Pacific for our own potential troubles. Not that the Empire can truly challenge us, but the possibility of having to put them in their place is our primary concern."

That brought a chilling effect to the discussion for a moment.

Nick interjected, "Earlier, you seemed unimpressed with North Territories offer of a new design instead of the Kittyhawk?"

The General took a patronizing tone, "I'm not keen on our production capacity being distracted by some special limited production for foreign sales." Wasn't it obvious to the boy?

Nick continued. "But you have no problem with production of Air Corps rejects going to anyone with money in paw? Not like that production is going to hurt Air Corps procurement."

The General scowled at all that. Was the boy simply being obtuse? "A second source for the Kittyhawk couldn't hurt, so the NTA proposal is considered a distraction. But if you're referring to the various other types going to overseas sales, just good business. And just because they're not up to the requirements of the Air Corps doesn't mean they don't have any value, especially to some lesser air forces with limited prospects of actually seeing action."
The Group Captain and a couple other officers with some prior experience with what the UVT had offered up to Zootopia in the initial panic of war and the losses of the Zootopian Expeditionary Force on the continent, shared a look, but were too polite to comment.

There again was a pause.

"I noticed that your Spitfires have a large number of rifle calibre guns." The General was keen on changing the subject as well. "How well has that worked for you? I know the Messerschmitt has two or three 20 millimeter cannon in comparison."

"We throw a lot of lead, but it mostly just pokes a lot of holes, especially in the bombers," one of the other officers offered. "But if we can get a target at the point of convergence, it really tears things up."

"And some of the new machines are getting twelve guns instead of just eight," added another. "At least until we get new cannon-armed birds. They've been talking about it for a while and it can't come too soon."

"The Axis cannon are somewhat slow cycling and low muzzle velocity, at least initially, but we're beginning to see a variant with a new high explosive shell with a bit better reach. But our new Hispanos have a much better rate and range."

"And I heard they're working on a proper belt-fed system for it. No sixty-round drum and that obvious limit," piped in another. Both the Axis and Allied cannon had only an awkward snail drum so far.

"Yes, the Air Corps is settling in for more fifty cal Brownings." The General was in his element now. "And getting them out on the wings for the most part and out of the propeller arc. Though the Airacobra and Lightening also has the heavy cannon option. The thirty-seven millimeter bomber killer hasn't yet proved itself, and there is also the twenty millimeter option."

"Yes," Nick added. "Getting fifties on the Kittyhawk's wings was a smart move and long overdue." To which the General preened as though it was his idea.

And so it went, the conversation segueing to 'war stories', as much tall tales of flying daring-do and variations of 'any landing you can walk away from' as well as accounts of real combat. The General was rather keen on that, and pressed for as many details as could be recalled. Though Nick had any number of dramatic actions he could have contributed, he instead sat back and watched his father.

The old tod had his own adventures to add, he was an old yellow wing biplane pursuit pilot himself, but he was more interested in ingratiating himself with these combat veterans for what they could tell him about their actions. That and making them his allies in any petty game he may yet play while visiting. Nick had always thought of himself as a bit of charmer, but his father wielded his sociability like a black art. More than once the old schemer gave him a glance, a flash of smug victory that he could so weave his way into his son's territory.

Finally, Nick got up and bade his goodnights to all. Busy day and more to come, of course. But mainly he didn't want to make a scene. The General would be out of their fur in a day or so and couldn't do too much damage.

Chapter End Notes
So, a bit more on Nick's father! And well done by Mr. Gallacci!

This is going to be an interesting few chapters, I'm thinking!!! ;)

Chapter 22

Chapter by Selaxes, winerp

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Up in the East Midlands, a warm Sun rose to welcome a late summer’s morning, bathing everything in a soft bright blanket of light. Forests and fields became lustrous and shimmering while towns and industrial complexes sprung to life. A certain rabbit, however, found the star’s appearance more offending than comforting.

Batting his eyelids over his bleary eyes, trying to get them once again accustomed to the brightness, Danny Hopps groaned as he righted himself in his seat. He usually didn’t have problems being woken up at the crack of dawn, heck, having grown up in a farm and enlisted in the navy he was more used to having to get up to a firm shove or a blaring siren… Of course most days he could actually get something akin to *sleep*. Which, ironically, given the fact he basically lived in a rocking ship, Danny always found impossible when travelling by train. As he stretched, hearing noticeable and blessed pops from his back, he considered the predicament: first off, he had to try and sleep in a wooden bench, rather than an actual cot, and then there was the rocking, which was – for the most part – a smooth rolling motion in a ship, rather than the irregular and sharp bumpiness of a train ride.

He’d left Bunnyburrow the previous day, having been called out of leave as his ship’s refit and overhaul was being completed. Unfortunately, his position as the Petty Officer in charge of one of the dual purpose 4 inch mountings on the ship meant he had to be called in earlier than most of his fellow sailors: the anti-aircraft suite and its fire-control systems had been vastly improved, which meant their crews had to get reacquainted with them.

It all sounded really simple at first: “oh, just come in two weeks before everyone else.” And it would have been, if the Navy still used Ducksmouth as a base for their capital ships. However, the war had pushed the Admiralty to once again use Yakka Flow, all the way in the northern-most tip of the Zootopian islands, as their main base to avoid the probable air raids the Axis would send. That meant a three to four day train ride to get to the other side of the country, and as if having to cut a few precious days from his already rare home leaves wasn’t crappy enough, the timing of this particular call-back had really put a dent in Danny’s mood.

“They couldn’t have taken one or two more days calibrating the sights or something… Nooooo, they just *had* to call me back on the eve of the Finding Festival.” A little grown up fun was just what he needed at the moment.

Resting his head back on the seat, the disgruntled buck closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was tired, uncomfortable, cross and also hungry he just noticed. *Well at least I can take care of one of those issues,* Danny thought, as he got up and reached for the care package his ever-thoughtful mother had prepared. Taking a peek at its contents, he couldn’t suppress a smile from gracing his previous stern face, as the smell of fresh vegetables made its way out of the bag and into his nostrils. Searching around in the pile of greens, he picked two sizeable carrots and dug in, letting the sweet and earthy taste gradually soothe his otherwise displeased mood.

And as the first carrot quickly grew shorter, Danny managed to look at his situation a bit more rationally. Yes, not being able to visit home whenever he had leave sucked, and having to take a trip which lasted for several days to get there when he could was even worse. But he *could* actually go
home from time to time. And as far as he was concerned, any and all chances he got to do so were more than worth the many discomforts of the ride: home cooked meals, an ever-welcoming family, childhood friends. And even while he was on duty he still had it better than most in the Zootopian Armed Forces: sure his quarters were cramped, there was the rocking and they could get damp, but nine times out of ten he could count on a good night’s rest in his own bed. That together with the sometimes bland but consistent and recognizable mess food was far beyond anything Virgil described in his letters on the Army life…

He suddenly choked slightly on the first carrot’s top, though how much of it was because of the hardened piece of food and how much from the mere thought of his brother Danny couldn’t quite tell. He might have been serving, but he knew just as much as his parents about Virgil: they knew he’d been captured, but nothing beyond that.

It was strange, really, how even in a family which numbered in the hundreds, every single one of its members still held similar importance and received the same love from his kin. And they all truly missed their brother, son, nephew or son-in-law.

Danny looked down at the second carrot in his paws but decided against it. Shaking his head he put it back with the rest of the produce and got up to stretch his legs. He still had a day’s journey ahead before anything interesting happened, and he’d like to still be able to walk by then.

As dusk began enveloping the landscape around the train, Danny Hopps once again made his way back to his car and seat, though he didn’t return empty handed. And as he covered his hard bench with the thick blanket he’d managed to acquire, Danny thought back on how he’d gotten it.

During his frequent strolls up and down the composition, he’d found an older rabbit doe a few cars ahead of his, which had surprised him at first, since most rabbits didn’t care much for long travels or for leaving their land in general. In fact, he was pretty sure they were the only two rabbits in the train. The doe had noticed him first, beckoning him to join her with kind eyes and a tired expression, to which he gladly obliged (after all, anything that might ease the passage of time was welcome). Once the buck was seated and she’d introduced herself as Moira Leap, she immediately inquired as to what he was doing travelling – probably having shared his reasoning on rabbits and long journeys. She had noticed his uniform, yes, but there was only so much she could actually garner from the simple blue garments, so he regaled her with his position within the Navy, how his superior hearing as a lagomorph made him perfect for discovering and assessing airborne threats and redirecting AA fire as needed, and also how he and the rest of the crew had been given extended leave during their ship’s refit and overhaul, allowing him to finally make the journey from their Base to Bunnyburrow and his family.

Through it all the doe sat and listened, captivated by the descriptions of the odd naval action Danny added as examples, and when the young buck’s tale eventually ran its course, she merely smiled, patted his paws – which rested joined atop his knees – and expressed her thanks, for more than one reason.

“Well I have to say, young man, you’ve certainly made this bothersome trip just that little bit more tolerable. And you have my deepest gratitude for what you are doing, serving. There aren’t many of us bunnies who even think they can be useful, and you’ve gone and shown we are actually perfect for certain tasks!”

Danny smiled and nodded slightly in recognition. It was true that not many of their kind had volunteered, and the ‘cute little bunny’ argument had been a prevalent one, either as a genuine
concern for some, or as a lame excuse for others. Yet, he had found that, not only did all mammals eventually find a job they were perfectly suited for, the simple fact of the matter was that anyone could help, one way or another. And seeing brothers neighbors and simple strangers shying away from a fight which could very well come knocking on their very doors rather soon was both infuriating and disappointing.

“By the way son, from what you’ve told me you don’t really make these trips very often, do you?”

Looking up at the doe Danny sighed as he fell back on the seat, trying to squeeze a smidgen of comfort out of it.

“Yeah, this is only the second time now.”

“Well, I’ve been doing these for the past two years.” She smiled knowingly, reaching for her bag. “Living in Deer Brooke down south but having family in the hills up north makes it unavoidable really. It does mean I’ve learned one or two tricks, though.” Producing a fluffy blanket from her sac, she handed it to Danny. “Like always carrying a few large blankets: you can use them both to stay warm and as padding for the benches.”

Blinking in surprise, Danny looked at the fluffy object in his paws. Warmth wasn’t an issue (it was late summer after all), but bringing blankets to use as pillows was pure genius.

“Thank you ever so much, ma’am!”

She waved her hand dismissively and chuckled softly.

“Oh please, it’s the least I can do, given all your sacrifices for all of us.”

“But do you have enough for yo-“ He was cut off mid-sentence by an overpowering yawn. Snapping his mouth shut as quickly as possible, he brought up his hands to cover it in shame. “My apologies! That was crass of me.” Although Moira’s giggling, which was barely contained by her hand over her muzzle, told him she was far from offended.

“It seems you’d best go and put that to use, Mister Hopps.”

Still slightly embarrassed, Danny nodded and, wishing the doe a good night’s rest, quickly returned to his assigned seat.

And that’s where he sat, snuggled into the open blanket (so as to not end up overheating) and enjoying the decent comfort miles away from what he’d experienced the previous night. As such, it wasn’t long until sleep took him, as his breathing slowed to a resting pace and a comfortable smile adorned his muzzle.

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As he looked around his room in the Hopps family farm, Danny Hopps was at a loss as to how he’d wound up there, and even more so in regards to the whereabouts of his kin. He wasn’t particularly surprised not seeing anyone in the room itself, but the silence that reigned in a house with more than two hundred rabbits was strikingly eerie. That’s when he smelled something. A divine scent for the waking rabbit: freshly brewed coffee. Pushing open the door, Danny sniffed out into the corridor, finding that the scent didn’t lead to the kitchen as he would have thought, but rather out to the front door. And as he began making his way to the source of the inviting smell, he also thought he heard someone calling his name… Though he couldn’t place the voice, only recognizing it as familiar.

As he got closer to the front door leading out of the main building the voice grew louder and clearer, and Danny thought he could hear a playful edge about it… That and an odd accent.
The smell of coffee also got stronger and stronger, and the buck also became aware of another scent mixed in, a musk of some sort.

Gingerly stepping up to the threshold, he stopped for a few seconds, before gripping and turning the door knob as far as it would go. At that, he took a deep breath and yanked the door back, the daylight blinding him as it hit him square in his still sleepy eyes.

Opening his eyes again, Danny Hopps found he was once again on the train, and, as he let them refocus on the world in front of him, they also landed on a steaming thermos being hovered about his twitching nose by an amber furred and clawed paw. Following it and the arm to which it was attached, he soon found himself face to face with a mink grinning almost manically, with plenty of his sharper teeth showing.

Though that didn’t faze him in the slightest. Quite the opposite, in fact, as a wide smile of recognition began spreading through the buck’s features and he actually jumped up from his seat to hug the similarly sized predator.

“Willie! I was wondering when I would get here.”

Initially startled by the sudden and warm greeting, the mink had to take a few steps back when Danny landed on him, all the while steadying the thermos and returning the hug with his free arm.

Once the buck released him, Willie cleared his throat and brought his free hand up in a crisp salute, even if the not-so-regular smile never left his face, and spoke in his thick Ovish accent.

“Seamammal William O’Stoat reporting, sir!”

Rolling his eyes, Danny did return the formal greeting with a salute of his own, but quickly shook his head and dispelled the apparent seriousness of the situation. After all, William, or Willie, had been the buck’s best friend since boot camp – which they had completed together. There hadn’t even been any special trigger for their bond: they were just two mammals who had decided to face the horrors coming from the mainland head-on, and who’d found in each other anchors allowing them some grounding no matter how hectic things got. As luck would have it, they’d also ended up being selected for complimentary posts on the same ship, with Danny heading a gun mount and Willie being one of “ammo fetchers”, carting it from the magazines to the ready crew. With how long their stints at sea were, their comradery had only grown stronger.

“At ease… Save yourself for when someone who cares is watching.” Then, reconsidering, he pointed at the thermos still in the stoat’s hand. “Instead, how’s about you share some of that coffee.”

Looking at the metal container in question for a moment, he once again let his gaze settle on his superior, this time with a wilting almost pleading expression.

“But… then how’m I supposed to wake ye tomorrow when we get to port?”

Since the mink’s only true goal was to get a laugh at his rabbit friend’s expense, the raised eyebrow and frown which the latter sent him were enough for him to shrug and begin pouring the warm beverage into the thermos’ lid-cup. Handing it to Danny with a smile he produced a similar cup from his travel bag and repeated the process.

Once both had their fill of coffee, Danny returned to his blanketed seat and Willie took the one in front of him. They were silent for a minute, silently enjoying the warm drink and the relative peacefulness of the morning – while the train was still stationary at the station, of course. Neither of them, however, initially noticed the odd looks they’d been getting since Willie had gotten onto the
Yes, Zootopia featured a rather diverse society, but, unfortunately, that diversity wasn’t spread very evenly throughout the Isles. The fact was, predators were extremely scarce in the countryside and, well, Ovisland was, with the exception of a pawful of cities, all but entirely countryside. That meant any predator would inevitably catch some stares, but a prey and a predator treating each other like brothers? Now that made heads turn.

Fortunately, most of the stares were filled with mere curiosity, a few even growing mirthful at the humor on display, and all of those were quickly dispelled when rabbit and mink noticed the uncharacteristic silence around them an looked up. There were, however, some mammals whose gazes did not leave the pair, and, as the two friends found as they took notice of them, were filled with nothing but displeasure and indignation.

Looking at each other after assessing their surroundings, they simply shrugged, exchanging disappointed expressions. This wasn’t the first time they’d been subjected to public scrutiny of that kind and they were fully aware it wouldn’t be the last. But it still stung a bit to see good mammals unable to separate deviant and maddened creatures from those such as William and all of the others Danny had met both in the service and on leave.

Knowing it would be pointless to call anybody out, they chose to continue ignoring the few persistent onlookers, and, as the train once again lurched forward, beginning its final stint towards the northern coast of Zootopia, Willie broke the ice.

“So what should we expect after such a long refit? Usually they take three or four weeks, not two and half months.”

Looking up from his cup, the rabbit quickly scratched his chin in thought.

“From what I remember and given the description in the letter I got, they’ve added a bunch of experimental AA emplacements and—”

“Even more?!” The mink interrupted with wide eyes. “At this rate we might as well replace th’ fireworks on New Year’s Eve.”

Cracking a smile at the comparison, Danny quickly continued.

“Well I’d certainly prefer that over fighting a war.” William simply nodded solemnly at the thought. “They also upgraded the fire control for all of the guns on the ship. That’s probably why we were called so early.”

The mink suddenly seemed displeased, and, with a raised eyebrow, voiced his complaints.

“Oh, no no no! That’s why *you* were called in early. All I have to do is cart the damn shells you ask for from the magazine hatches and lifts back to our mount. So why was *my* leave also cut?”

Danny let a mischievous glint play about his hazel eyes as he pondered on an appropriate reply.

“You see my friend, with better target acquisition, we’ll be firing a whole lot more and a much earlier than we did so far, so we need to make sure those legs of yours haven’t gone soft…”

“Why ye little…”

Raising his paws in a placating manner, the grinning rabbit tried to contain the miffed mink. His fiery expression, however, told him he’d have to do more than that.

“I’m kidding, Willie! No one doubts your Ovish fitness. But we *will* be running drills, and it’d be
kind of pointless to do so with incomplete or temporary crews, don’tcha think?”

While he didn’t immediately return to his normal cheery self, Willie’s offence did simmer down, which in turn allowed him to speak in words other than insults and slurs.

“I suppose, though I’m still pissed at being called in like this. It’s not every day I get to come home in the evening guided by the smell of me mum’s figgish.” His expression grew dreamy at the mere thought of the fish delicacy, though it soon turned a bit sad as he once again addressed the buck smiling in front of him. “That being said, the train from Yaka Flow to home only takes a day… You have to spend three or four to get to Bunnyburrow, right?”

Naturally, their respective origins had been one of the first topics of discussion when the two met and their friendship blossomed, so William was well aware of the hardships Hopps had to go through just to be with his kin.

“Yep, and this time it was even worse…” The buck spat with barely concealed disappointment.

Seeing the curious expression on the mink beckoning him to continue, he sighed and merely uttered, “Finding Festival….”

“Oooh ye were looking to find yerself a pretty doe, I see…” The half-lidded and knowing eyes of the small predator met Danny’s, and after a moment he let go of his witty attitude and adopted a more caring one. “Aye, that’s gotta sting.”

Danny nodded slowly, just before shaking his head as if to clear any remaining melancholy.

“Well if it’s that bad how come the ship didn’t put in for a full overhaul rather than a refit?”

“You know as well as I do the only thing we have on the Axis Fleet right now is numbers: those battleships they managed to build right under our noses are more than a match for any capital ship we have in service right now. Not to mention all the commerce raiders they’d send out if we left even the tiniest gap for them to get to the Atlantic.”

William grew serious at the reminder, and a frown took over his features.

“You mean the Bismarcks?”

“Yes. Until the yards finish more of the newer King Lionheart V’s we are one of only a handful of ships which can realistically stand against them. The Admiralty can’t spare us for long enough for a full overhaul.”

At that point Willie balled his paws into fists, suddenly frustrated at the predicament.

“They might have, if Cervania hadn’t caved in and become a puppet for the Axis…”

The buck merely sighed. It wasn’t the first time they’d talked about it. Which wasn’t surprising really, since their last deployment had been to the Mediterranean, where the Zootopian Fleet had
ultimately been forced to fire on their previous allies to prevent the sizeable Cervanian Navy from falling into Axis paws.

After an ultimatum by Zootopia demanding that Cervania either turn over or demilitarize their ships was rejected, the fleet had opened fire on the moored ships, resulting in the sinking of Bretony, and causing critical damage to two of the other three battleships in port – Bullkirk and Richelieu – and to several escorting destroyers. When Stagsbourg – the final battleship in question – made a dash for the Mediterranean, the fleet had tried to pursue, only for one of the flagship’s turbine’s to conk out, as Danny had mentioned.

“Remember it was their government that decided to become a collaborator, not the country. You know as well as me how active the resistance has been.”

While Willie had to concede that point – after all, it seemed they’d actually started getting POWs back across the channel, which was no easy feat – the apparent betrayal of their former ally still left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Then why didn’t the crew rebel? Why did they shoot back instead of turning the ships over or continuing to fight *with* us?”

Danny sighed and looked out the window with a sorrowful expression.

“I don’t know, Willie. Sailor’s pride, perhaps. They most likely would have had the same reaction should the Axis had gone and directly asked them for their ships as we did. But I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

At that point both friends grew silent as they pondered on the subject. War could turn allies into liabilities and friends into enemies at the blink of an eye. And anyone claiming they could clearly see the end result of any given decision without a single doubt or uncertainty had probably never stepped paw in a battlefield.

Eventually though, the tenseness brought on by the topic began to ebb from both predator and prey alike, and they began warmly recalling moments from their respective home leaves.

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As the Sun began to dip behind the horizon, both Danny and Willie were quietly taking in the landscapes of northern Ovisland. Until the latter decided to shift slightly to get a better view, only to find his back vehemently complaining about his seating arrangements…

As he hissed in pain, gingerly rubbing at his sore kidneys, the buck took notice of his plight and got up to help him.

“Yeah, I felt that too.”

“Aye.” The mink was speaking between grit teeth. “But at least ye found something to use as a cushion…” He drawled, pointing at the blanket.

Looking at the item in question, realization dawned on the buck, as he slapped his own forehead.

“Quite a friend you have here… I completely forgot about that issue. Sorry Willie.” Then he recalled something. “Hey, maybe she’ll have one more that you can borrow!”

As his self-massage eased the pain on his back, the mink was able to look at his friend – who was already making his way to the next car in the composition – with an inquisitive look.
“Who? The blanket isn’t yours?”

As he made to follow Danny, he explained his acquaintance with Moira summarily, describing her rather progressive stance on rabbits and other smaller mammals joining in on the war effort and her timely lending of the fluffy cloth for his comfort.

“She said she carried ‘a few blankets’ with her, so maybe she still has one.”

“Now that’d be somethin’”

As they neared Moira’s seat Buck found her quietly reading a book of some description, and he managed to indeed spy an extra blanket under her travel bag. Willie, on the other hand, had to stay behind the buck, since a large package actually blocked off half the center corridor.

“Excuse me, Mrs Leap?” Danny called out.

Lifting a curious expression from her book, the doe’s face quickly featured a warm expression as she recognized the rabbit from the day before.

“Mr. Hopps, what a pleasure to see you again. And to what do I owe your return?”

“Well, a mate of mine who’s also heading for Yakka Flow joined me this morning, and since he’s as new to these trips as I am, we were wondering if you wouldn’t happen to have another blanket you’d be willing to lend to us.” Danny quickly and amicably explained the situation. Once he was finished, the doe couldn’t help but chuckle slightly.

“Ah, you young boys think you have it all figured out don’t you… Why of course I’ll lend your friend a blanket. On one condition.”

Both Danny and Willie’s eyebrows found themselves climbing their respective foreheads. What could the older doe have in store…

“I want to meet this friend of yours, to thank him as I did you.” She clarified with a wide smile.

At that point, Danny was positively beaming as he began introducing William. “Ah well, that’s easy. He’s right behind me!”

And at that the buck took two steps forward, revealing the smiling mink to Moira, both males waiting for the expected greeting and probable questions.

Instead, they were met with silence, which, as they found looking at the doe that sat between them, was accompanied by a dejected frown. With William growing confused, Danny took to asking the burning question, to which they both feared they knew the answer.

“Is something the matter, Ma’am?”

Not taking her eyes off of Willie, she elaborated. “Yes, I just didn’t expect your, *friend*, to be, well, *that*.” At that point her expression had shifted to one closer to disgust, as she simply nodded towards the small predator.

Willie visibly wilted at the scorn being directed at him. It wasn’t the first time he’d faced such harsh and uncalled for hostility, but when it came from someone who, up until that point, had appeared to be nothing but open and welcoming was a real slap in the face. Danny, on the other hand, was having trouble reining himself in.
“Pardon me, ma’am, but what’s that supposed to mean.”

Apparently the question offended her, as she quickly spun her head around to lock eyes with the buck, her frown not dissipating in the slightest.

“Oh please! Their kind wants nothing more than to slaughter the lot of us. And even putting that aside, they value power over anything else, that much I know. So if he’s not good enough for them, what good is he for us, hmm?”

At that point the entirety of the car’s occupants had their eyes glued to the argument that had broken out, though none dared to take a side, at least for the moment. Danny, on the other hand, was very close to losing it.

“Putting aside your small-mindedness for a moment, *ma’am*, I seem to remember you going to great lengths to agree with my point on how anyone could help.” He spat the memory of their last conversation out as if it was something foreign in his mouth he wanted to get rid of. That, however, made the doe almost livid with anger.

“Why, I never! Small-mindedness? How dare you?! Look at it!” She began violently gesturing towards Willie. “How can you live, let alone work and serve alongside something designed with killing in mind?”

William looked up at his friend, expecting to see either sadness or unbridled anger – maybe a mix of both – but instead found the buck’s face hardened with determination. Giving a polite bow and an *excuse me* to the doe, before walking up to him. As Moira became confused with the sudden change in the buck’s demeanor, he simply stopped next to the mink and put a paw on his shoulder.

“Wait here.”

Without another word Danny made his way back to their car, leaving William awkwardly standing in the middle of a an ever-worsening tense situation. Though he didn’t stay like that for long: in less than a minute, Danny was back with his own blanket.

The buck gave him a pat on the back but kept moving, stopping only when he was in front of the spiteful doe. As she was about to continue railing on him, however, he quickly cut her off with his own words.

“Ma’am, before you continue, let me remind you of something.”

The surprising audacity of the statement left Moira speechless, so Danny pressed on.

“There are predators driving, flying and sailing under the colors of Zootopia. There are predators taking up arms against their own kind when many of us, who are the most directly threatened, continue to jab our thumbs in our ears and pretend like everything is fine. They are not doing it because of fear, or incompetence, or even some reward, they are doing it because they believe in the ideals the free world is built on just as much if not more than any prey I’ve ever met.”

Danny’s speech had enthralled all of the mammals listening in the car, whether they felt like the doe or not, they just couldn’t look away.

“And if for some misguided reason you think that because they are different they are somehow untrustworthy, because you have dull teeth and claws while theirs are sharp that makes you somehow better and above them, then that’s your opinion and I can’t change that without infringing on the very ideals we’re fighting for. But I also refuse to be indebted or otherwise attached to you in any way, no matter how irrelevant.”
At that, he dropped the borrow blanket on the seat in front of the now distraught doe.

“Thank you, but I am in no way superior to my friend, and I refuse to be coddled because someone else thinks the opposite.”

Once again giving the doe a curt nod, he spun on his heels and joined a speechless William, gently leading him out of the car.

Before they got to the exit, however, a middle aged ram got up and blocked their path, a blank expression on his face. As he prepared himself for a more *active* form of disagreement, the larger mammal did something unexpected: he extended his hoof, and spoke.

“I would like to thank you *both* for your service, despite the inevitable hardships you undoubtedly face – both at sea and in your own country, unfortunately.”

With a surprised shock still evident on both their features both friend took their turns greeting the ram, until he eventually concluded.

“And I’d also like to thank this young buck for an exemplary show of friendship and gentlemammalship.”

With those final words, about two thirds of the car began clapping and cheering for the two sailors, with the rest of the travelers either unsure of what had just transpired or outright horrified by it. Though that didn’t matter for the rabbit and the mink, as they made their way back to their now bare and hard seats.

Once they were settled in, silence reigned for a few minutes, until Danny broke it first.

“That was something.”

“It sure was. Thank you, Danny.”

Turning to look at the mink, the buck smiled.

“You’ve got my back, I’ve got your back. Besides, it was refreshing to see mammals actually think like civilized beings for once.”

“Definitely.” The mink actually managed to crack a genuine smile. Quite a feat, all things considered.

“Well, now that we are blanket-less, we should probably try to get as much shut-eye as we can. Unpleasant as it may be,” The buck reminded.

Simply nodding in agreement, Willie sunk back in his seat, taking a few moments to find an acceptable position, while Danny did the same.

Eventually they were both settled in – or at least as well as they’d ever be – and slowly but surely dozed off into a rather peaceful slumber.

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It was a dreamless night for Danny Hopps, and as the first rays of the Sun came through the window and began illuminating his face, he came too as if leaving a soundless void. A very rickety void, but that was besides the point.

Looking around him as his eyes reacquainted themselves with the light and his surroundings, his
gaze eventually settled on the sleeping form of his best friend. The *loudly snoring* form of his best friend, to be more exact.

Chuckling to himself, the buck rolled his shoulders, trying to work out some of the nots that had formed overnight, and once again stared out of the window, trying to figure out where they were and how long it might take them to reach their final destination. Although what he saw made his eyes go wide.

Quickly nudging the mink in front of him with one of his feet he tried rousing his friend from his deep slumber. After a few unsuccessful attempts, a particularly firm nudge made the mink come too, as his head whipped around in confusion.

“Huh? Wha- Where are we?”

Danny snapped his fingers in front of him to garner his attention and then pointed out the window.

“We’re here.”

In fact, through the thick glass plane they could see the large almost lake-like body of water known as Yakka Flow, separating the mainland from a scattering of small islands to the north.

And moored at one of the many piers was their ship, in all of its towering glory: the jewel of the crown of the Zootopian Navy, the ZAN Hood.

Ovisland – Scotland

Stagsbourg – Strasbourg (in this case the battleship)

Bretony – Brittany (in this case the battleship Bretagne)

Bullkirk – Dunkirk (in this case the battleship)

All ship names derived from historical figures I kept unchanged with the exception of the George V/Lionheart V (couldn’t help myself)

Chapter End Notes

And this chapter is courtesy of Winerp! Another Hopps that has opted for service, though this one is in the Zootopian Navy! It's really rather exciting to see all the facets of the military and their contributions.

It also shows me that I need to get together with my fellow authors and get the names of countries and regions (in proper Zootopia fashion, of course!) down with a key so that you readers might follow what's what!

In the meantime, leave some comments for Winerp's contribution and give him some kudos! He's certainly earned them!!!
Chapter 23

Chapter by Selaxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip from Bunnyburrow had taken most of the day and continued on into the early evening, Pilot Officer Judy Hopps having to wait for trains that had schedules centered around the movement of materials and troops or relying on her own feet. It wasn’t until well after sundown that she made the females’ barracks at the airfield that she and the rest of the Angels squadron was assigned to. The farewells had been trying to say the least, the doe reluctant to leave her family and newly adopted daughter, but she, like so many others, had a duty to serve the whole of Zootopia. Poor Dawn had managed to rein in her emotions, though just barely, without the devastating display of abandonment that Nick had received when he’d been ordered back to Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome.

At least her parents had been supportive, though Judy was quite positive that their sympathies lay with the little ewe. She could at the very least get on with her task at paw knowing that Dawn and the rest of her younger siblings would be as safe as could be at the farm.

With a small grunt the bunny hoisted the bulk of her kit bag onto the bunk that was assigned to her, the other three females that shared the room nowhere to be seen. It hadn’t been a burden until the last mile that she walked, nor was it from the uniforms and ladies unmentionables inside, but the jars and packages of preserves and such that her mother had insisted the young rabbit take with her. There were pickled greens, honeyed carrots and plums along with a couple of smaller containers of jam. At least the other doe and two vixens she was roomed with would enjoy the treat.

Judy began to pull her uniforms from the canvas kitbag after divesting herself of the gasmask that was required issue and began to hang them up in the wardrobe that was hers, carefully unwrapping the goodies that had been placed inside. At least the beets had ridden well, she mused. If the top had loosed her uniforms would not only have been ruined but she’d have smelled like a pickle factory, though there was no denying the acidic and earthy taste that Judy adored. As a kit she would eat so many that even her teeth took on a slightly pink tinge from the brine.

As the bunny lifted the last of her grey-blue uniform articles, she paused, smiling at the one treasure that was uncovered. One half of the silvered frame held a portrait of Nick and Dawn, he with his easy smile, the lamb grinning with her slightly crooked lower teeth, but her eyes large and bright eyes behind her glasses as she sat between the fox and Judy. It was then that she noticed in the picture that her husband was looking at her with fathomless warmth and affection. The other half held just a picture of Nick looking heartbreakingly handsome in his uniform of an officer in the Zootopia Air Corps. As she sighed and let her fingers run over the glass covering the photograph, the touch hardly a substitute for the real thing, the bunny was brought out of her reverie by a soft whistle.

“If that’s what we’re flying for I’m glad I signed up!”

With a slight start Judy spun to find Pilot Officer Regina Maskers looking over her shoulder at the picture frame. “Damn it, Reggie,” Judy began with a sigh as she set the frame on the top shelf of her wardrobe. “Think you can let someone know you’re behind them before scaring the daylights out of them?” The last was added with a good-natured elbow to the other female’s arm and a shaky chuckle.

The raccoon only grinned as she assumed a girlish and winsome demeanor. “Just because you didn’t
hearn me say your name twice is no reason to get your little cottontail in a kink, love. Though I can see what’s got your attention. He is a handsome beast!” The other slipped past Judy and plucked the picture frame off the shelf. “So this is the fox that had you all aflutter, is it? And is that Dawn? Heavens, isn’t she just a precious little thing!”

“They’re both precious, and you stay away from my husband, Reggie,” the bunny half teased. Regina was one of the more experienced pilots of the squadron, though she was a terrible flirt. It was one of the things that made a number of other mammals ignore the fact that she was a predator with the business going on just the other side of the Channel.

“Husband?” the raccoon repeated, her expression brightening. “You went and got married?” When Judy only nodded while beaming, Regina sighed theatrically. “Can’t say that I’ve ever tried to entice a married bloke…well, not intentionally. I might have to make an exception this time around, though!”

Judy snorted and went back to emptying her kit bag, finding two little stick figure dolls that Dawn had learned to make from Ellie Sward after discovering that they were supposed to keep evil spirits and bad luck at bay. One was dressed and colored to look like Nick, the other like the bunny herself. They went onto the shelf next to the picture frame that she took back from the other auxiliary pilot.

“Go near my fox and you won’t get any of these,” Judy said as she held up a small jar of plum preserves and waggled them in emphasis. The expression on the raccoon’s face was too good, the other female almost salivating at the contents that bobbed in heavy syrup.

“Where did you get those?” Regina asked in a husky voice, a look of longing in her rich amber brown eyes. “Let me have one and I swear I’ll leave your fox alone!” She grew a sly expression as her friend started to unscrew the lid. “And for two I’ll tell you something that will make your tail fluff out and put a bounce in your step!” When the bunny only gave her a quizzical look the raccoon smiled. “Seems Eunice had to put the Spitfire she was in down on its belly when the gear didn’t cycle.” She held up her paws in a calming gesture. “She’s fine. It didn’t even muss her fur, but the radiator’s knackered and it bunged up the undercarriage something terrible. Crews also want to haul it back to the depot to go over the airframe. Not her fault at all, you know. But we just got word that you and I will take a replacement and a Master to Flavedeau because they need the bird.”

“Really?” Judy asked with a surge of anticipation.

“Absolutely,” Regina confirmed as she popped a plum into her maw and closed her eyes in absolute bliss as she chewed slowly, taking her time with the unexpected treat before continuing, another plum dripping slowly between her clawed, clever fingers. She tore her attention away from the sweetened fruit to look at her fellow pilot. “Think the hubby will be glad to see you?”

“No nearly as happy as I’ll be!” Judy admitted with a warm smile. “It’s only been three days and feels so much longer.”

The raccoon tried to slip away with the entire jar before the bunny caught her tail. “We need to be wheels up before oh-six hundred. The weather service says there’s a bit of a squall moving in and command wants the replacement Spitfire at Flavedeau as soon as we can possibly get there.” She pouted slightly as the second plum vanished with a moan of delight. “Isn’t that worth the rest of the jar?”

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Nick had given Judy one of his map and notebook pockets made of sturdy canvas that strapped to her leg and as she ran down her preflight checklist, her paw absentely stroked the rough, sturdy cloth. While she had the case that had been part of her issue, carrying something that had seen her fox through so many missions meant more to her than she could give voice to. Inside the weatherproof
pockets were a small magnetic compass, a map that was printed on silk and could be folded or rolled into an extremely small package, a small tube of matches, a pocketknife, a couple of pencils, compact slide rule and pack of chewing gum. He’d helped her put it together going by his own experiences and that meant the world to the bunny.

As she marked the last item, already having done a walk around of the Spitfire Mk II B Wing variant, the engine of the Miles coughed twice before catching and rapidly climbing to a steady roar, Judy glanced over and smiled. The rabbit doubted that there would ever come a time when the sound of high performance engines and the smell of petrol exhaust didn’t excite her. Regina seemed to feel the same even after months of ferrying aircraft to the various airfields and had the sort of smile that should have been reserved for the boudoir.

Her own checks complete, Judy ran through the start up procedure itself and set both fuel cock levers on with the throttle a half inch open and the mixture set to RICH. Her paws then set the airscrew speed control while making sure the propeller lever was fully forward and the radiator was open fully. Judy then activated the priming pump to begin fuel delivery to the primary pipes with four pumps for the cool morning air. She then switched the ignition to ON and pulled the primer pump handle out full. With all of the preparation, Judy wondered just how frustrating it would be if the engine didn’t turn over on the activation of the first cartridge and with her free paw crossed her fingers and feet in an old rabbit custom before pushing the starter button and giving a single stroke of the priming handle.

The sequence occurred as it was supposed to, the cartridge firing, the engine turning over and Judy began the process that would allow the engine to warm properly. She ran through the procedure for the propeller pitch and locked down the priming handle. The brakes were set to one hundred and twenty pounds per square inch, keeping the aircraft in place and in case of a mishap the canopy and side door were still in the half open position.

As the gauges climbed to their optimal levels for temperature, oil pressure and so on, Judy was surprised to see only a few minutes had passed, completely lost in the process of getting the Spitfire ready for flight. With a final look at her instruments and already prepping the flaps for takeoff position, the rabbit turned to her sister Angel and held her arm high with a ‘thumbs-up’ to signal that she was good for flight, getting the same signal in return.

Judy had given the entire jar of plums to the raccoon when Reggie had told her that she was going to let the bunny fly the Spitfire on their hour and a half flight in order to let the rabbit get more time in that particular plane. It was the least that Judy could do in way of thanks while the irascible masked female laughed and told her to consider it a small wedding present.

Releasing the brakes, Judy followed to the left and little behind of the Miles Master, both planes taxiing to the end of the runway and slid the canopy shut, her excitement spiking with the thought of once again taking to the sky. Unlike the airfields the Angels delivered aircraft to the depot had three strips of paved macadam and the run up to takeoff speed was surprisingly smooth. Judy had made a few field landings on turf, and oddly preferred that over tarmac.

She’d even talked to Nick about maybe finding an old biplane to play in after the war was over.

With the sound of the Merlin engine and rush of air over the plane, Judy lifted off into the morning sky, Regina in the Master almost wingtip to wingtip with her as if they’d choreographed the maneuver. Very aware of the reason that the pair were making the flight, Judy paid close attention to the sound of the plane and the indicators as the gear came up, feeling the tiny shudder as the wheels and struts locked into place in their places in the underside of the wings before glancing about. A pilot that failed to keep a sharp eye out was soon a dead pilot, and Judy scanned the sky that was
starting to grow lighter in the east, the horizon a smear of magenta, rose and orange with deep purple clouds.

As per agreement and orders from Air Command, neither Reggie or Judy used their radios and communicated with paw gestures. The raccoon brought them about in a gentle climbing orbit of the Angels’ field at the depot before angling them towards the general direction of Bunnyburrow, and just minutes by air from that, Nick’s post of Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome. It would be fun to see her home from the air, and the bunny sat back to enjoy the flight as much as she could, her amethyst eyes continuously flicking in a circuit of sky-instruments-sky.

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There was a smudge of clouds to the south and west, the weather front that had prompted the early morning flight, that Judy could see in the rearview mirror mounted into the canopy. The billowing columns were an angry, leaden gray and drank in the rays of the morning sun. From the way the front seemed to loom higher and higher, she and Reggie would be getting to Flavedeau just in time. With a slight shiver, imagining all sort of scenarios of getting caught in that sort of weather while in the air, Judy craned her head over her right shoulder for an actual look. Even at miles away the rabbit able to see the effect of the rain coming down as the ground and any details vanished in a hazy void.

Clucking her tongue in apprehension, Judy started to turn back forward when something caught her eye and her heart started to hammer rapidly in her chest. Whipping around she waved frantically to get Regina’s attention, even nudging the throttle forward to pull ahead of the Miles Master. When the raccoon noticed her, Judy pointed to the right with short, jerky movements, gestured to her own eyes, then held up her paw twice with the signal for fighters, ten of them, and then repeated it with the signal for bombers, six total.

Regina gulped hard, the sound lost in the engine roar and rush of air around the aircraft, though her eyes found the specks in the eastern sky, the sun just high enough so that light angled through the canopy glass of the far off aircraft almost like a beacon. The raccoon, being the senior between the two females, drew her paw over her throat and gestured down. In the Spitfire Judy nodded acknowledgement to the order. Even though both planes were loaded with a limited amount of live ammunition, the ferry pilots weren’t expected to engage in air-to-air combat, though it had happened twice before.

Following Regina, Judy upended one wing and began a shallow dive left, trading altitude for speed as they headed west. Both pilots kept casting glances back, praying that they’d gone unnoticed. Fortune wasn’t with either raccoon or rabbit, though, as the Bf-109’s peeled away from the Ju-88 bombers they were escorting and began pursuit.

Judy’s mouth went dry at the sight of the eight Axis fighters bearing down on her and her squadron mate. They’d been taught the most rudimentary of air combat tactics, most of what she knew in theory coming from listening to Nick, and Judy had no delusions that she would be able to stave off the oncoming assault on their own. As she glanced at the mirror mounted on the canopy frame, Judy saw four of the Messerschmitt escorts drawing closer. The yellow painted cowlings came into focus and she could swear, though it had to be a trick of her imagination, that the toothy, predatory grin of the pilot was quite visible.

When her radio blared to life it was enough to make Judy scream at the unexpected voice that filled her ears.

“Angel flight, Angel flight! Come right thirty two degrees and drop to an altitude of three thousand feet! We’ll show these animals how to treat a pair of ladies!”
The scream that Judy had given voice to turned into a choked sob of relief even as she followed directions. “Bless you, Nick!” the rabbit breathed as her eyes misted behind her goggles while focusing on the flight compass in the panel of the cockpit. A quick flick of her eyes to the starboard showed Regina following suit.

Before she could turn back, Judy watched as tracers walked from the tail up the fuselage, flecks of paint flying off as holes were punched through the thin skin. The rabbit didn’t have time to worry over her friend as tracers fired at her streaked past the canopy, the bright red glow of the rounds leaving phosphene afterimages whenever Judy blinked.

The Angels had been taught that if they came under fire to break either left or right to try and throw off pursuit, and to go in the opposite direction that their wingmate was on, so with a gulp and deep breath Judy pushed the throttle forward and hauled the yoke to the right while adding just a touch of rudder, tossing a look behind her.

There were two of them that stuck with her, the remaining pair peeling off to pursue Reggie. Unfortunately the raccoon only had a single .303 machine gun mounted on her aircraft, while Judy had a pair of the same and a Hispano 20 millimeter cannon per wing. Not that the greater number of guns or heavy cannon were much help with the enemy on her tail.

Another stream of tracers rained past as Judy juked the Spitfire left and right, first kicking one wingtip up, then reversing direction and following suit with the other in an effort to make herself as hard a target as possible by staying in motion. If the Axis pilots followed similar methods as the Zootopia squadrons, there were four or five regular projectiles between each ember like spark that sizzled past the rabbit, meaning there was a sky full of potential death raining down around her.

“Nick! I need help!” the bunny cried out over the radio, violating orders to maintain radio silence, but she felt, should she make it through the engagement, Judy might be forgiven for the lapse.

Instead of a reply in her ears, one of the Messerschmitts flashed tiny gouts of fire from the forward portion as rounds poured into its engine compartment, a belch of black smoke accompanying the small sparks and miniature explosions. Even as it began a lazy slew to the left and began to drop altitude, the ground already close, Judy saw the right wing buckle, sending the plane into a crazy spin and lazy roll before hitting the ground with a small accompanying fireball. There’d been no time for the pilot to leap clear, and Judy was of two minds about that. The Axis flyer was an invader and to be fought with every ounce of strength and righteous fury, but at the same time he’d been a flyer, like her, like Nick, and a small part of her mind that wasn’t jabbering with adrenaline wondered if in a different set of circumstances might all of them had been friends.

Where the Bf-109 had been a Spitfire shot by before pulling up beside Judy off her right wing and the bunny smiled when her fox…her husband…lifted his goggles and gave her a quick salute before tripping the throat microphone he wore.

“Not bad, Carrots. Keep on to Flavadeau. We’ll clean these mother lovers up and be down in time for tea!”

Judy couldn’t help but smile at Nick’s banter and was about to reply when motion on their combined Four O’ Clock got her attention. “Huns at the Four!” Judy cried. Before she could react herself, Nick poured the power on, pulling up and to the side.

As one of the Axis planes stayed with her fox, the other came in hard and heavy towards her, the flashes from the cowl mounted 7.92 millimeter machine guns flashing with gouts of yellow-white flame. Suddenly Judy was less afraid than she was angry. Flipping the plane up onto one wing, Judy made as if she were going to break hard left, the Axis pilot trying to anticipate the maneuver, before
reversing and yanking the plane so hard in a half roll and tight turn that crushed the rabbit down into
the seat. She’d heard that the Spitfire had a better turning radius than the Axis fighters, and damned if
it wasn’t true. Judy was already coming out of the turn well ahead of the Messerschmitt pilot, and
without even thinking about it, the bunny triggered the weapons her plane was equipped with. A hail
of .303 caliber rounds spat from the outermost machine guns while the two 20 millimeter cannon
only fired a few rounds each, the recoil easily felt through the entire airframe.

Instead of trying to slew her temporarily assigned Spitfire onto the enemy, Judy simply kept the
trigger on the yoke depressed, letting the Messerschmitt fly into the hailstorm of metal. Whether it
was the steady stream of .303 fire, or a lucky strike from one of the heavy 20 millimeter rounds, the
Axis fighter vanished in a ball of fire, the wings fluttering away from the conflagration like leaves
falling from a tree.

Judy heard a couple of small smacks from somewhere on the aircraft, debris from the Bf-109 striking
the skin, but not with enough force to be alarming. By the time Judy came down from the adrenaline,
her limbs shaking as if she were freezing, but feeling flushed and overly warm. The plane was at a
low enough altitude that Judy could disengage the oxygen mask she wore and gulped at the tepid air
that was filled with the scent of rabbit fear and…arousal?

It was almost like that time in Zootopia with Nick, the night the bombs fell.

Judy felt terrified and excited all at the same time.

She felt alive.

As she shook her head to clear it of the buzzing that had nothing to do with the Merlin power plant
or rush of thick air over the plane, Judy looked about. There were no Axis Bf-109’s, just a Mile
Master and a slew of Supermarine Spitfires with stylized ‘S’ shapes painted to look like fox tails. It
took another moment for Judy to realize that her husband had taken up position on her right wing
and smiled beatifically at him.

That was she smiled until she saw the art that was painted on the nose. It was unmistakably her in a
rather risqué bit of lingerie…and were those wings? Angel wings?

With the insides of her ears feeling as if she had spent too much time in the sun and couldn’t help the
slightly nervous giggle as she followed Squadron 13, the Red Tails, to their home at Flavadeau
Aerodrome.

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Despite wanting to get to his wife as quickly as possible, stunned less by the event that had just taken
place than discovering one of the ferry pilots was his very new bride, Nick couldn’t help but cast a
critical eye over the Spitfire that the rabbit had flown. The small dings were more cosmetic than
anything else, and a bit of paint seemed all that would be required before it would be ready for
service. Then the state of the plane was the last thing on his mind as he leapt to the trailing edge of
the wing to help his doe out of the cockpit. She was shaking, a fair indication of just what toll the bit
of a dust-up had taken on her, but she didn’t look quite like she was going into shock. It was
common enough reaction to a first engagement that one of the field medics was nearby with both a
thermal canister of tea and a flask of brandy, trusting that the Squadron Leader would know which
one was needed more.

“Easy, lover,” Nick whispered as he helped Judy down to the ground, catching her as her legs went
watery and extended the paw that that wasn’t supporting his wife out and signaled for the flask.
“Take a sip. No more than a sip,” the fox instructed with a concerned cast to his eyes as he helped
the rabbit doe by letting just a little of the brandy within touch her lips.
As Judy caught her breath and visibly steadied herself, Nick tossed a look at the Magister and Pawson helping that Angel pilot out. The second officer of the Red Tails motioned the medics forward and passed the raccoon off before trotting over to his superior. “Looks like Reggie’s Marconi took a stray round. She’s fine but there was a spark and a tiny fire that scalded her paw a bit. I asked the boys to run her over to Doc McSwiney and have him look at her.”

Judy jerked as the fox informed her and Nick of her friend’s status. “She’s going to be all right?”

Marion Pawson snorted as a large grin stretched his muzzle. “Are you kidding me? She asked if the O-Club was open yet and made a pass at the orderly. When Reggie doesn’t try to pick up a guy while getting a drink will be the day I worry. She’s a right tough raccoon.” The slightly larger fox looked from the rabbit to his superior. “And I think she’s going to want to be celebrating this evening.”

Judy gave the other fox a quizzical look as she pulled her flight cap off. “Celebration? After that how can anyone think of celebrating?” the rabbit asked as she pointed vaguely to the sky.

Nick chuckled and passed his wife off to Stella Scampington who had run out to ascertain the condition of her girls. As soon as she ensured that Regina and Judy were both well, albeit a bit shaken by the encounter, she gave the aircraft a once over from where she stood. “Well done, Pilot Officer Hopps,” the light colored doe said with a smile. “I take it that you’re going to claim this particular plane, Squadron Leader Wilde?”

Nick nodded as he handed Judy off and ran a paw along the flap of the wing. “Are you kidding? As far as I’m concerned Pilot Officer Wilde brought this one specifically for me.”

Stella’s ears flicked into a ‘Y’ of confusion. “Pilot Officer Wilde…?”

“Rutabegas!” Judy hissed as she shrugged her head down between her shoulders. “Ma’am, you were already gone when I returned. The personnel office has my change of status forms and copy of marriage…”

A smile tugged at Flight Leftenant Scampington’s muzzle causing her nose to twitch a little. “I’m sure that Squadron Leader Wilde can show me a copy if needs be.” The light expression melted away and Stella was once more all business. “Now then, as you were involved in the morning’s activities you and Reggie will sit in on the debriefing, and then I’ll want to speak to you both.” She turned and snapped a salute to Nick which was returned just as smartly. “Until later, Squadron Leader Wilde.”

The pair watched as Stella stepped away to finish a more detailed examination of the recently delivered plane, Judy’s arrival bringing Squadron Thirteen back up to full strength, though the newer Mk II B-Wing variant aircraft replacing the older A-Wing plane that Nick Wilde flew was key to giving the group greater overall firepower. His assessment would be crucial to the pilots of Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome a much needed boost in offensive capabilities.

As Nick placed a paw on Judy’s back to guide her to the debriefing room he paused and pointed at his Spitfire. “Hey, Fin! Think you can get that on that?” the red fox asked pointing at the nose art on his original fighter and pointing to the recently delivered aircraft.

The diminutive vulpine worked the ever present cigar stub around his muzzle, half his face dropping into a withering scowl as he flicked the brim of his cap so that it sat further atop his head. “What the hell kinda wrench jockey would I be if I couldn’t?” He plucked the stub and spat, having known the taller red fox for too many years to be intimidated by the disparity in rank. “Stupid question like that to ask me…” he growled in his deep voice. “Crack your shin with a wrench again, stupid
sunnuva…” Finnick grumbled as he walked away before yelling for the rest of the maintenance crew under him to begin inspections of both the new Spitfire and the Miles Master.

“Come on. We have tea and other things waiting,” Nick said as he gestured to the debriefing room. “And later on I’ll put in for a commendation for you and have the Group Captain sign off on it.”

“Commendation?” Judy asked with a start. “Why?”

Nick smiled, so much feeling and warmth in that simple expression. “Are you kidding? You got a kill today. You survived your first engagement and lived to put wheels on the grass. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, wife of mine, but that ain’t hardly nothin’!”

The bit of excitement was done with for the moment, and UVTAAC General Ethan Sionnach watched as his son walked off with the doe that was obviously the inspiration for the bit of artistic frippery on his plane. As if Nicholas’ abandonment of his homeland wasn’t insult enough, flying for the nation that had all but driven foxes from within its borders, he’d gone and sullied himself marrying prey, of all things. Granted, the bunny was easy on the eyes, but truth be told there was only one use that the General could see for the doe, and it certainly wasn’t in the cockpit of a fighter. She’d be better suited warming a bed.

With a deep breath to try and rein in his growing exasperation and anger, Ethan Sionnach turned for the pilots’ debrief, one paw fishing in is uniform pocket for one of his favored cheroot cigars. If there was one bit of consolation from this entire mission it was that Nicholas had adopted his mother’s maiden name and kept his actions from sullying the Sionnach family name.

Blowing a cloud of smoke out of his muzzle, the visiting officer from the United Vulpine Territories let his attention drift to the Spitfire that had just arrived. It was an impressive plane, perhaps not with the character that some of the aircraft being developed by UVT based groups, but with a certain appeal. Another appealing factor were these so called Angels. They would never be able to pilot aircraft as efficiently as a male, but there was something to be said for so many rather enticing lasses traipsing about.

Chapter End Notes

So Judy gets her first taste of combat, and actually lives to tell the tale.

To be honest the Mk II B-Wing variant Spitfire was very new at this point, and I think I might have vexed Mr. Gallacci by bringing it in a little earlier than what happened in actual history, though some of the documentation that I've located indicated that some squadrons were playing around with the more heavily armed Spitfire by summer of 1940. In the actual details and minutia I will defer to my mentor. We'll chalk up inaccuracies to creative license on my behalf! Besides, foxes and rabbits never flew Spits... ;)

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Having just done with her first aerial combat, Judy was taking a little while to get the jelly out of her legs. Having her fox and the supportive faces of her fellow Angels helped, but the brush with possible death and then killing another mammal was not subsiding quickly.

Judy had never done a debriefing before and the individual interview portion was as much questions from her as answers. The intelligence officer only grunted at most of them, explaining that he didn't want to give any answers that could color her recollection. The service had realized early on that leading questions and supportive answers could easily create false narratives that only muddled any possible intelligence information.

In the end, Judy had to admit that she really didn't notice all that much she could recollect. The whole engagement was over in only a few minutes, the actual combat in just seconds. Yellow nosed Messerschmitts, tracer fire, one machine folding up after being hit and another, the one she fired on, simply exploding, and a vague account of her maneuvers through it all.

"That's fine, Pilot Officer. Every other pilot that comes through either barely believed or recalled that he did anything or tries to narrate a novel-length tale of every second of the mission." He gave her an appraising last glance. "And congratulations on your first action. You Angels are proving yourselves to be more than just hack fliers after all." Judy forced a smile to the back-pawed compliment and made her way to the briefing room where Her Best Beloved rushed up to greet her. "How'd it go?"

Risking the gesture, Judy gripped her fox's paw. "The action was all kind of a whirlwind, so I don't think I had all that much I could say about anything that, I dunno, was of any real intelligence help." She tugged at her ear with her free paw. "And I guess I'm still a bit rattled."

"And hungry." Nick dramatically proffered a small paper bag. He'd learned about the grazing habits of rabbits and knew she'd been hours without so much as a nibble. "It will be a while until we're fully processed and you'll be starving after the flight time plus all the adventure."

Judy beamed at that. It was a little thing; even another rabbit might not think to do it. But her fox had done so. "You're a life-saver."

"And there is some fresh hot tea waiting for you at your desk, extra sugar." He gestured to the rows of former student desks, now work surfaces for pilots to take notes for briefings and debriefings.

Most of the flight was already there, writing up their individual after action reports or personal logs, though they paused and looked over at the now blushing bunny as she was lead to her own desk among these now veteran combat fliers. As she caught the eye of each, she got a supportive smile or nod for a job well done.

She hoped her husband would sit by her, but, as Squadron Leader, Nick stood by his senior officer to prompt or amend anything that was needed in the final debriefing.

Group Captain Faulkner walked through some basic points of the action, with an emphasis on what had and had not worked as far as engaging the enemy. Most of it was now well-practiced, though having the enemy somewhat distracted and focusing on the two Angels did provide a bit of tactical
advantage for the counter attack.

He then went on to ask about the new Spitfire. "So Officer Hopps, er, Wilde. Congratulations on that. So how was the new bird?" So intent on her answer, the unit entirely failed to process the bit of news in his comment, much to the temporary relief of Nick.

"Sir." Judy gulped just a bit. "I haven't had all that much combat maneuvering in either type, so I can't really say. I have fired the guns before, and felt the cannons as a distinct pounding recoil, rather than the buzzing hum of all the 303s." She looked around to see if that was a useful answer, and was gratified at the encouraging nods from the collected pilots.

"I do have a question though." And she had to pause to collect herself. "The Messerschmitt I shot. My initial burst of fire was short. We were both in a turn, but I was pulling in on him. I continued to fire and it passed through the stream. Then…just exploded." She shook her head and flailed her paws.

There were several knowing nods at that and Faulkner explained. "The Messerschmitt has a single fuel tank in a kind of 'L' shape below and behind the cockpit." He gestured with his paws. "I'd guess a cannon shell caught it just right and Poof! That's the big advantage of the cannon, the shells are mixed armor piercing and high explosive, so any hits are so much more destructive than the simple bullets of the 303's."

At that Judy was a bit shocked, less at the sudden fate of the enemy pilot than the fact that the Spitfire had its fuel tank directly in front of the cockpit and a direct hit to it didn't bear thinking about.

"And thinking of battle damage. Piper's crate has been a bullet magnet for the last time." Faulkner mock scolded. "This last go 'round got enough new damage in places that count that it's been surveyed as unfit. So you'll get Wilde's paw-me-down until more of the new cannon birds come in."

"Can I keep the artwork?" The young ram asked with glee.

Nick was about to object when Judy interjected in not entirely mock outrage. "I'll have you know that particular image is the sole property of my husband and is not to be passed around like some..." And she became very self-conscious at the gaping faces of all those male officers. There was a very quiet moment with attention shifting between the very embarrassed bunny and the now chagrinned Squadron Leader.

Group Captain Faulkner broke the silence. "Yes, our favorite fox has been holding out on us. And for that, he'll be buying the drinks at our informal reception tonight at mess." A hearty round of cheers that was then punctuated by the Group Captain calling the room back to order.

"There were some other superficial damage to Burrows' and Rufus' machines as well, just pin-pricks, so I'm told." Then with a nod to Squadron Leader Scampington. "The Master got some more substantial punctures, but ought to be repairable here. And I'm happy to say that Pilot Officer Maskers only got a little singe."

There were some additional discussions, in part news about more of the new heavier armed Spitfire coming to the unit.

Finally, the Group Captain closed the proceeding. "As you can tell by a glance out the window, our fair guests will be spending another night with us at the very least, and having the day to recover, are, of course, invited to tonight's festivities." And he then bowed to Squadron Leader Scampington, who curtsied in dramatic fashion in return.
"My officers will be delighted to attend." Later in the visiting officers quarters, the Angels crowded the new Mrs. Wilde.

"So, how was it?" was the collective question, intoned from innocent delight to a knowing leer.

Judy had still not entirely collected herself from the day’s action and now the infectious enthusiasm of their flight mates. "Well, I was honestly scared, I'll tell you."

To which she got varying incredulous or confused looks. "Okay, I know it was a bit sudden, but I can't see you begin scared to finally hitch up to your yummy fox." Maskers pointed out to a chorus of supportive asides from the rest.

"Huh?" Judy looked at them in complete befuddlement. Then, "Oh! You mean Nick and I!" She burst into a laugh. "Nick and I did the paperwork, you know, for Dawn's sake, and just a little family service." Everyone knew that bureaucracy was merciless in the face of 'misadventures'; no one used the other words, when it came to unofficial relationships. "No major production or anything. Very last minute."

That last was met with varying levels of disapproval. "And no proper honeymoon?" Darla Stone, the other bunny in the group asked innocently enough, but was answered by several snickers from others.

"Oh, I think our Judy cheated just a bit, and already got that out of the way." Said no one in particular, to which Judy blushed massively.

Then it became a whirlwind of description of her trip home, the festival, her reunion with her brother, Virgil, her sister, Daisy, finally properly finding Edward Sward, and then her having an instant family of her own with Nick and Dawn.

As the telling wound down Stella became Squadron Leader Scampington, "Now that's cleared up, I want you to describe your combat action, and how it compares to what we've been trained for."

"Oh." Judy struggled to shift gears for a second. "Yeah, that." She then repeated the as instructed maneuvers and how they played out in the real thing, concluding, "The first flick does work, but thereafter, I think we're going to need some real combat training. I got lucky in getting into a simple turning maneuver with the Messerschmitt. But if he had done anything else, or if another joined in, I honestly don't know what I could have done."

"And the shoot down?"

"In the moment, I was too scared, then angry, to think too much more about it beyond just him or me." Judy grimaced, "And I'm okay with it being him." She then sighed. "But having his crate just explode like that, getting so thoroughly killed in just a split second. Makes you think."

There were thoughtful looks all around for a moment before Regina broke the mood. "Girls! We got us some Red Tails to party with tonight, remember?"

"Uhm? How much of what kind of party is this going to be?" Jenny Gruff, the young goat and newest member of the Angels asked cautiously. She been told some tales in the short time she'd been with the unit, and was a bit intimidated.

Stella attempted to set her straight while giving the rest a bit of the stink eye. "Despite likely tales of abandon and debauchery, those blokes are youngsters like you." That brought out some derisive snorts as she had only a couple or three years on the rest. "And are likely a bit homesick and lonely, not so much for some tickle and bump, but just being around a friendly female face and being able to"
forget the war for a few hours."

"That's right," faux pouted Regina. "They're all too much Officers and Gentlebeasts to get too forward. So you're likely only going to get some nervous attempts at close dancing." And she rolled her eyes in dramatic despair.

"Not that it ever deterred the likes o' ye." Sniped Cynthia Murray, the other raccoon in the flight. Regina gave her a raspberry in return.

"Yes," Stella in her Squadron Leader voice again. "Technically, there should not be any untoward activity between fellow officers." Eyeing Regina and Karen Leaps, the hare the other notorious flirt in the flight. "And though the Group Captain can be pretty understanding, he has that Vulpy General on his paws right now, so we'd better not cause a scene." The last was said with a bit more authority than friendly admonishment.

Darla piped up. "But what about our newlyweds? Surely they can ...?"

"I suspect, beyond a single celebratory smooch, that Nick and I will have to demonstrate the appropriate conduct of Zootopian officers, at least in public." And she gave a saucy little wiggle and giggle, a bit surprising even to herself in her bold implication, and to the collective hoots and cheers from her comrades.

Chapter End Notes

A great after action by stevegallacci! I can honestly say that often first engagements leave a person in a bit of a daze afterwards, and Judy should be no different. It's one thing to think that you're prepared for combat, but the actuality is a completely different matter, and no one knows how they'll respond until it's done and over with.

Sometimes just surviving is enough.
Bailey Hopps looked up with a start, his amber-gold eyes widening as his nose twitched a bit. Had he not been so concerned at being caught his ears might have snapped down along his back instead of perking straight up to detect possible discovery. When the door to his father’s study stayed closed, he clicked the paw held torch back on and returned to his search. It took what subjectively felt like hours before he found the document he wanted, though in reality only a few minutes had passed. When it came to important papers his parents demonstrated that it wasn’t just their fields that were kept in almost immaculate order.

Transferring his find to the paw that held the light, Bailey closed the drawer of the filing cabinet, his teeth grinding together at the sound of wood on wood, his imagination making it far louder than it was in truth, but positive that it was enough to wake his parents. If his mother or father learned of what he was doing there would surely be hell to pay. Once he’d covered the signs that he was in his parents’ files, the young buck moved to the desk, setting the paper on the surface as he tucked the torch between his shoulder and jaw and looked the page over.

For the whole day certain words that Bailey had overheard kept spinning around the inside of his head.

He knew that eavesdropping was a bad habit, but in all fairness he’d already been in the storage shed working on the rings that hung from a rafter attached to one of the roof beams. He still had Animalympic aspirations, even though the war had caused the games that year to be cancelled, there was always hope for the next set of Summer Games. Unless the fight with the Axis still raged. Then again, the way things were going, the next Animalympics might be predator only. But he still worked out much like he did at St. Lapinous School for the Arts, his Uncle Victor having gotten him in, until the bombing of Zootopia closed it. For that alone Bailey would have wanted to give the preds in the Axis what for.

Still, his brother Virgil had only inflamed his anger as he paused at the door to the shed, unable to go in, shaking with a fear that was almost palpable until Ed Sward showed up and the whole story of the older Hopps’ came tumbling out. Within minutes Bailey heard the tale of both rabbits as he hid in the loft, tears streaming down his own face at what he listened to.

Words like stammlager, the term for a prison camp, and tierfarm, or animal farm, burned into his brain like a hot brand. He listened with his paw clamped over his muzzle as Virgil talked about the hutch he was locked into without space enough to sit or stand or lay down properly. He fought against the shame for his brother about having to relieve himself through a filthy hole in the floorboards. And when Virgil talked about the black uniformed troopers coming by five or six times a day to force feed him and other prisoners some sort of gruel to fatten them up he felt rage. It explained why Virgil had trouble eating his morning porridge and get a bit panicky and wild-eyed in very tight spaces, a very un-rabbit like fear.

Bailey shuddered when Virgil talked about how the guards would tell him that he would make a fine plate of hasenpfeffer, some sort of roasted rabbit dish and laugh as they poked him to see how fat he was getting.
It was enough so that by the time Ed told his story Bailey lay curled on his side, weeping silently, a knuckle between his teeth to keep them from chattering and from crying aloud. This was waited all of Zootopia if they lost. And the whole of the world...

Then Ed spoke of the re-education camp that he’d seen, the place where preds that stood out against the Axis were taken, and the things that were being done to species traitors. Ed talked of seeing piles of dead pred kits that were part of some sort of experiments on forced selective breeding, their little bodies literally being pitchforked into crematoriums, how predator prisoners were exposed to environmental extremes without clothing or shelter, or were being starved to the point they had to feed on their own dead, and those were just the things that the scarred rabbit had seen from his train car before being taken to Stammlager Tierfarm Zwölf, or Animal Farm Prison Camp Twelve.

By the time they left, Bailey’s horror had began to turn into something else, and when his mother called her numerous children in for supper, Bailey was well in the throes of simmering anger. He looked around the supper tables, at his brothers and sisters, easily transposing their faces on the scenes that he’d heard tell of that day. He saw Belle and Dawn and Rose or Calvin and Gerry being force fed for whatever hasenpfeffer was. He saw Daisy and her kits as slaves, or even Barbara and Judy. Then there was her new husband who would be put into re-education…

When he finally turned in for the night, Bailey knew what he had to do. He listened and waited for his brothers in the same room to drift off to sleep, then waited another hour to be sure. He dressed quickly after slipping out of his bed, and then bundled up a couple of shirts, another pair of trousers and some fresh knickers, tying it all in a small blanket that he wrapped in a slightly larger one. Bailey paused as he opened the door, ears straining as he listened for footsteps outside the room. When that also proved to be empty he padded rapidly to his father’s study.

With his birth papers in paw, Bailey carefully wrote a note of permission before affixing a very convincing facsimile of Stu Hopps’ signature to the note, copied diligently from the older rabbit’s farm ledger. He looked at his work carefully before tucking the letter into the breast pocket of his shirt and then looked about to ensure that there was nothing overt out of place, then set the letter that he wrote to tell his parents where he was going in a place where it wouldn’t be discovered for a day or so and stood.

Tucking the electric torch into his back pocket the young rabbit went to the door and paused, an ear against the wood, but heard nothing and opened it, stepping out and closing up the study and turning to leave.

It took all of his self control not to scream when he found a very sleepy but curious Belle and Dawn looking up at him as they returned from the privy.

“Bailey?” Belle asked. “Whatcha doin’ in dad’s study?” the little doe asked as the lamb with her rubbed at eyes that even without her glasses were a bit large.

“Never you mind, Belle,” he said with a gentle smile as his heart rate returned to something almost normal. “Get on to bed with you two, all right?”

The bunny nodded as Dawn stifled a yawn. Then both gasped as Bailey pulled the two into an almost fierce embrace, the buck feeling a momentary pang. What he was going to do was going to be for them as much as anybody, and as he held them, the lamb having easily integrated into the Hopps household. She might as well have been born in the warren as readily as she fit in with the rabbit family.

“Bailey?” Belle asked in confusion as she heard her older brother sniffle and a slight tremor run through him. “Is something the matter?”
The rabbit shook his head and pulled back enough to smile at the pair. “Nothing, Belle. Get to bed now. Oh, and remember that I love you, okay?”

The little doe nodded, her expression still quizzical, but did as she was told while leading the ewe back to the room they shared with several sisters.

With a sigh Bailey stood and picked up his small bundle. He had a few shillings in his pocket for potential expenses and a short detour the kitchen would give him ample nibbles for the trip. His feet were silent as he made his way to the Hopps’ larder and storage bins and he filled a small cloth sack with all manner of vegetables that could be eaten raw and traveled well. Carrots and a couple of lovely turnips with their white and purple bulbs, a couple of pawfuls of greens from the same, some apples that the Swards had given them and a yam or two would tide him over on his trip, even if it took a couple of days. It was a pity that he wouldn’t be able to take some of the other fruits from the season, though he did snag two perfect peaches to eat on his walk into town.

The moon and stars were out, though the pearly orb was close to the western horizon and wouldn’t provide light for much longer, though once his feet found the lane, the pale dusty track was easily seen, even in the gloom to rabbit eyes that functioned better in daylight. Bailey did turn at one point to look back at the house one last time and felt his throat tighten before turning away and resolutely began walking.

If mammals could leave school at fourteen to work, Bailey saw no reason why he couldn’t join the Army, even though he was only sixteen. Even if there was resistance, he had the note, albeit forged, and his birth documents. He might not be like his brother, or a tank ace like Ed, not even remotely pilot material like Johnny and Judy or a sailor like Danny, but he wanted to help because there was just too much at stake. Even if he wound up as a field cook it would be something, and that was what mattered. Just doing his part to make sure others that could fight had the necessary support.

In spite of the pang of leaving home, Bailey couldn’t help but stand a little taller, his shoulders back and his head high as he felt in his heart that this was the right thing to do.

*******************

Virgil walked in from the weather that was starting to turn sour with clouds of leaden grey piling up from the east and wondered if it would be enough to keep the Axis out of the skies of Zootopia. It had been a good morning so far, tinkering on his motorcycle with Maggie who was walking alongside him, her paw in his. He’d felt better after talking about his time in the stammlager with Ed, almost as if a weight had been lifted from both shoulders and heart.

Until he walked into the upper kitchen of the Hopps farmhouse and found his parents distraught and the weight seemed to settle back. He wondered if something else had happened, like the loss of Barty, or possibly worse. Judging from the look on his mother’s face, it was just as bad.

“What’s going on, Mom?”

Bonnie simply let her head fall forward onto her crossed arms and shook with tears while a despondent Stu held a piece of stenographer’s paper to the younger rabbit. With a feeling of dread Virgil took the page and read it twice as the import of the words sank in.

“That stupid, brave, idiotic little git!” Virgil spat under his breath, his fingers tightening on the paw that he held as he turned to look at Maggie. “The little shit’s one of the smartest rabbits out of our family, and he’s done about the stupidest thing possible!”

It was a testament to the moment that neither Bonnie nor Stu called their older son down for his
language. Maggie simply peeked down at the paper before gasping and her free paw went to her muzzle. “He ran off? To join the Army? Oh, no…”

Virgil shook his head as he dropped the note on the table. “I’ll head into town and see if I can catch him. I’ll haul him back if I can.”

Stu simply nodded as he tried to console his wife while keeping his own emotions in check.

“You go on ahead,” Maggie said with a partially self conscious nuzzle to the rabbit buck’s cheek fur, the doe still acclimating to being in a relationship where she didn’t have to pretend to be a ‘proper doe’ and could be herself in flannel shirt and dungarees. “I’ll let Ed and Daisy know.”

Virgil nodded, gracing the rabbit with muted brown fur a kiss before running to the barn where his bike was. At least he didn’t have to worry about a stall like had happened the other evening while he and Maggie had been out riding, the carburetor was properly cleaned, the tank and fuel lines had been flushed and cleaned and the filters replaced while there was also a batch of fresh oil in it. It fired up on a single kick and Virgil slipped his old aviator’s goggles down over his eyes as he shot towards the lane. As he turned the back wheel slipped a touch and the rabbit expertly wrestled the machine back on track and twisted the throttle with a vengeance.

********************

The local guard was comprised of a few grey-muzzles; mammals that had served years before in the Great War, and stayed on as defense auxiliaries as part of the Home Guard. It was up to them to ensure potential recruits were sent on to the proper stations to be evaluated. The senior officer of the Bunnyburrow Home Guard was one Captain Clayton Oliver Bracefoot. As an artillery officer in the previous war he considered himself an experienced veteran though the prospect of being too old for service in the present conflict did rankle a bit.

Instead he was relegated to his home town, the only subordinates a few aged reprobates that would have found a difficult time in his company back in the Great War. They were slovenly, mostly pensioners and between the lot of them only the Captain himself had anything remotely resembling a proper firearm and uniform. At least when they drilled each morning he looked professional despite most of his subordinates showing up in their church best and various farm implements or, if they had them, perhaps a shotgun or two.

The morning hadn’t been too trying, and reports on the wireless from ZBC had reports of potential weather rolling in, which Captain Bracefoot thought would be good. Might keep those Axis savages out of the skies. Heavens knew their lads in the air were carrying their fair share. If during the Great War someone had said aeroplanes would be such a vital tool Clayton would have laughed at them. Soldiers and ships were the keys to winning a war, though with what had been going on this past year even the aged mountain hare had to admit that some of these new fangled contraptions had their uses. Though it by no means excused the lack of fighting spirit from some of these boys that he’d been seeing as of late. Then again, the new military was even letting females take over various roles such as flying. What was the world coming to when females were allowed to function in a job that they were obviously unsuited for?

Just as the mountain hare lifted his tea, properly strong, the right amount of milk and sugar, the door to the Home Guard office slammed rudely open, a disheveled rabbit standing in the doorway with a slightly wild eyed expression.

“I beg your pardon!” Clayton Oliver Bracefoot roared indignantly, more upset about the sudden noise almost causing him to slosh tea on his well kept uniform.
The military portion in Virgil Hopps makeup caused him to flinch for a fraction of a second before noting the HG armband. Too many of the older generation of veterans were more than happy to give their opinions on what the most recent generations were doing wrong in facing the Huns. The concept of Blitzkrieg was lost on them or the way that modern mechanized and airborne forces could move rapidly across distances that used to take weeks in a matter of days.

And they were damn quick to point out that, ‘Back in their day…’

“Sorry for the interruption, Captain,” Virgil said as he rode down the urge to haul the stocky mountain hare to his feet and shake him as the direct recruitment officer for the valley. “Did you have a young rabbit come through this morning, a Bailey Hopps?”

The hare set his tea down, the cup clinking sharply on the saucer. Clayton sat up, leaning forward as his muddy brown eyes narrowed. “You’re that Virgil Hopps fellow, aren’t you?” the Home Guard officer inquired with another curl to his lip. “Should think after the way your lot fared at Bullkirk you’d be appreciative of any helping paw you all could get.”

Virgil couldn’t help the surge of rage that took him at those words. His paws balled up so tightly that the joints of his knuckles popped even as the rabbit ground his teeth fighting back the impulse to tell the pompous Home Guard officer that it was a different conflict than the Great War. It wasn’t just conflicting ideologies but a literal struggle against those that were almost religiously bent on subjugating all prey the world over. His nostrils flaring as his nose twitched in anger, Virgil drew in a deep breath, held it and let it out slowly before speaking. As it was, his voice was flat and cold as winter ice.

“All I want to know was if my brother came through,” Virgil said. “Did you send him to the recruitment processing office?”

“Of course I did,” Clayton said as he plucked half a scone out of the wax paper it had been wrapped in. “He and a few other lads left on the first train yesterday morning.” The hare nibbled a little bit of one corner and nodded. “Looked to be in high spirits. If things go well I see them making a good show of it against those ruffians on the continent. Reminds me of some of the mammals in my first unit. Decent, respectable lads, each and everyone. Far from officer material, of course, but good solid mammals. In fact I recall one rabbit, from Lapinmoore I believe, quiet fellow that—”

The sound of the door slamming yanked the Home Guard Captain out of his recollections and he frowned at the retreating rabbit through the glass.

“Rude blaggards, those Hopps. Wouldn’t have made it back in our unit, would they Earburton?” Bracefoot inquired with a petulant tone at the Home Guard rabbit that was his orderly for the day. “Right arrogant gits, don’t you think?”

The elderly buck snorted as he was roused from his doze and automatically reached for the pot of tea mumbling incoherently as he tipped the spout over the Captain’s cup.

“Yes, sir,” Clayton confirmed with a nod. “No discipline whatsoever. No backbone, either. Need some good officers to show them how to act in a proper military manner. Of course those Swards and Clays aren’t much better, but the Hopps.” Clayton picked up his swagger stick and pointed it out the glass of the door where Virgil was mounting his motorcycle. “Not a proper family at all. That one a trouble maker, that one doe of theirs…why I heard that she was galavanting with a fox. A fox, Earburton! Of all things…” He picked up the freshened tea. “Something about her adopting a lamb or some such instead of finding herself a proper rabbit husband.”

The aged buck muttered something that was once again unintelligible before sitting back down and
leaning on one paw, his muddy brown eyes fluttering closed.

“World’s absolutely mad, I tell you, Earburton. And these youngsters…no respect for their elders, eh?”

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“Yesterday?” Bonnie Hopps said as she looked at her son, one paw grasping the fingers of her husband where he rested his own on her shoulder. “But he’s not old enough!”

Virgil looked from his parents to Ed who stood with Daisy, a knowing and sad look in his eyes. “They won’t check too hard about his age, mom. The way things are going they’ll take anyone that looks able bodied and won’t think twice about it.”

“But he’s sixteen!” Bonnie wailed while shaking her head.

Virgil slid his paws across the table and took his mother’s, wrapping them with a gentle firmness. “It doesn’t matter. He’s healthy and willing, and he’ll get some preferential treatment for being a volunteer instead of a conscript.” He sighed. “I’ll see who I can talk to, but we don’t even know if he gave his real name. The thing is, there won’t be a lot that we can do.”

Chapter End Notes

You know, I can't help recycling my OC's that I really love. Once it's up you can check out some of Bailey's other exploits in 'Sounds of the Heart', and the Robert Escher's take on what comes after in 'Heart of the Dream'.

And yeah, I hate to say it, but it wasn't unheard of for some volunteers to lie about their age to join up. Hell, my Dad did it during WWII. And there's a couple of stories out there about 16 and 17 year olds that got some rather serious commendations for their actions.

Pretty amazing stuff!

We'll certainly be seeing more of Bailey and his exploits, and it might become it's own stand alone spinoff. At least that's what I'm planning! ;)

The informal reception that night had been a whirlwind delight, but Judy found that she needed a bit of a breather and stepped out of the Officer's mess. It wasn't just the non-stop raucous music and dance, and perhaps a glass or two more than she ought, but that way too many of the mammals smoked like chimneys.

Tobacco wasn't a thing back home, and uncommon on the broader 'Burrow. A few of the oldsters did the occasional pipe or cigar, and a few 'rough' types sported cigarettes, but it was still a rare thing for most folk. But inside it seemed like nearly everyone had lit up with some version of the nasty weed, especially the congratulatory cigars that had been passed out. Now Judy needed to get the stench out of her runny nose and stinging eyes. And, apparently her fur. She seemed to reek with it as she shook herself.

At least it was a cool fresh night, the rain had stopped, as had the worst of the wind, and so refreshing, but awfully dark, no moon and careful blackout discipline left only the vaguest hints of shadows. So she started a bit when she heard but couldn't really see someone approaching.

"Hello?"

"Evening, Ma'am!" And a heavily filtered lamp revealed a saluting Margay, a private, in full guard duty kit.

"Oh! I'm supposed to as well." Judy fumbled to sort herself out to salute in return. "Sorry, I'm all still too new at all the military stuff. Can I help you?"

"Here to report to the Officer of the Watch, Leftenant McClain. Was told he had popped in on the mess." And it was clear he was a bit curious about the sound of merry making inside.

"Should you, or should I...?" Judy wanted to be helpful, but still wasn't sure about all the separation of ranks and related conduct that was demanded.

"Best I wait out here." He explained, hoisting his rifle a fraction to emphasize that he'd be a bit out of place inside. "I'll be right back." And Judy rushed back inside, bracing as she did to the burst of light and sound therein. She found McClain quickly enough, who was a bit dismayed at being found, as he was trying to chat up Jenny Gruff. For her part, Jenny mouthed a silent 'thank you' as he left. But her still gleeful expression suggested that she was still keen on some male company.

Judy mirthfully shook her head. But being back in the mess meant more exposure to all the smoke, and she could feel her eyes burn a bit more. Maybe go back outside and have her Fox seek her out. He had certainly found her often enough in the dark, such naughty thoughts.

And where was Mr. Wilde?

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"I'm beginning to appreciate the full extent of your, ah, lack of enthusiasm, for the General." Group Captain Faulkner confided. "I haven't seen such an unctuous performance since the last elections."
"Yes. He is always the consummate politician. That's how he was able to make and retain his colonel's rank back in the peacetime Air Corps." Nick humphed. "That and he really does know the technology. Yet at the same time, he's also totally bound to whatever the doctrinal orthodoxy of the day is. Or at least until he can tell which way the wind might blow on that, and be the first on the new bandwagon and denounce the previous position."

"Ah. The bit about the bombers?"

"That too. But it's all the rest that the armchair generals force on us. Tactic 'A' isn't perfect, so instead of improving it or accepting less than perfect, we then go to tactic 'B' which we haven't been using because we know it doesn't work. But it's 'supposed' to work, so say the theorists. And when it doesn't, they'll say we didn't do it right."

Faulkner hummed with that. He had gone through some of the same thing in the opening moves of the war. And it wasn't just tactics. While the Spitfire was an unquestionably brilliant fighter, the ZAC was also burdened with any number of aircraft that were conceived for a now lethally naive version of what modern aerial combat was really about. "Well, he'll be out of our fur in another day. Now that we have a 'B' wing on hand, we can do a little show and tell, and send him on his way."

"And thinking of which, where did he go?"

"Well, any number of the rest have also stepped out." Faulkner observed.

Nick gave a little knowing smirk at that. These parties could go several ways, and tonight looked like it was a variation of 'frisky'. Then a flicker of concern. "Oh dear. I hope he hasn't beguiled one of the Angels."

Faulkner cocked an ear. "Anything to be actually worried about?"

"Don't know, but the thought of him and any female…” Nick made a face of distaste.

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Judy had to smile just a bit. Standing off at the corner of the mess building, she could hear various individuals come and go, even if she couldn't see anyone in the dark. Some were alone, at least for the moment, others in pairs, and none of them going back to the officer's or guest's quarters. She had to suspect there were any number of little private places around the aerodrome, providing the night watch didn't find, or at least didn't interfere with what might be going on therein. On some other night, she might entertain similar thoughts with her fox, but after all the activity of the day...

Her fox. Her husband. She began to think about how much had changed in her life.

A year ago, she was a farmer's daughter, with no more thoughts or prospects for being anything other than a farmer's wife some day.

Now she was a Pilot Officer in the ZAC. And she had killed an enemy pilot in aerial combat today. And married a fox just days ago. And adopted poor, sweet Dawn.

Such a whirlwind of change. In an instant, she had a career and a family. And a cause. And it only took a terrible war to do it.

Then she thought about the night watch again, and by extension, the rest of the enlisted troops. Here she and her comrades were partying it up and the 'lesser orders' were back in their barracks.

Back in the 'Burrow, matters of class were not overt, everyone had their place, their role, but it was
all just a matter individual circumstance.

Now that she was an Officer, she was, by law, elevated over others, more rights, more privileges, all because of her title, and that struck her as more than a bit unfair. Or at least, not something she felt she really deserved.

All that drinking had made her a bit moody, and she should be enjoying her opportunities. Especially in that she could die tomorrow. Her taste of combat was actually the least likely risk, compared to all the routine hazards of aviation. Wartime just put an extra edge on things.

"There you are!"

Judy flinched with Nick’s sudden appearance behind her.

As soon as her husband’s paws gently gripped her shoulders, Judy relaxed into the contact. “Are you okay?”

The bunny nodded and sagged for a moment into the support of her fox. “I think the day’s events are catching up with me,” she answered, turning within the confines of Nick’s touch. “That and far too much smoke in the mess.”

“It can get a bit thick,” he agreed with a chuckle. Even though both had promised to keep a proper bearing as befitting officers, they did allow themselves the luxury of holding paws and ambled around the outside of the officers’ mess. “Do you want to talk about today? It helps sometimes.”

Judy shook her head before letting out a sigh. “To be honest? No. I just want to be close to you right now.” She looked up with the ghost of a smile. “Walk me back to my quarters?” The relief when Nick only nodded caused Judy to sag a little as exhaustion seemed to settle in her very bones.

They walked the rest of the way in silence until they made it to the building with rooms set for visitors. The last thing Judy wanted to do was leave the comfort of her fox. And though she knew she might be able to get away with some overnight snuggle with him, especially after a day like today, there were duties and responsibilities for the both of them.

"Argh. I want to be with you so bad." Judy groaned, her face pressed to his chest. Upon hearing his subtly provocative humm, she mock slugged him. "Not for that, not after today, but just the comfort of you being close. Except for that one night in the city, romantized near death experiences are not my cup of tea."

Nick looked down to his wife and cupped her face. "I know." He pressed his face to hers, not for a kiss, but just to feel, to smell, to hear her breath, her pulse, her life. They held that pose for a good long while, then, with a sigh, Nick broke it with a quick peck on Judy's nose. He nodded to approaching footfalls and discreetly sniffed. "Well, as I am supposed to be the very model of a modern Zootopian Officer and Gentlebeast, and you the proper Officer's Wife, as well as an Officer in your own right, we'll need to set the example for our wayward charges." And then called out to the now failed attempt at stealth. "Isn't that right, Pilot Officer Murray?"

"Arh! Sorry 'bout that, Sir!" And the raccoon stepped out of the gloom. "Was hopin' ta not interrupt." "Or to eavesdrop?" Judy teased. Murray snerked at that. "Peepin' at old married couples? Hardly. Not with all the other action out and about." She waved out with a slightly tipsy flourish. "But I am done for the night, Mr. and Mrs. Wilde, and a good night to you." She attempted a salute and slightly dizzy about face and then to quarters.

Nick and Judy shared a look. "Old married couple?" Judy demanded.
"Well, we have seemed to slipped into a level of familiarity that, I suppose, is usually reserved for longer relationships." And Nick touched Judy's face again. "So, Granny Wilde, you'd better get your beauty sleep."

"Careful, my already half-way to decrepitude old Todd," said in a little girly squeak as she hopped up give him a quick peck before making a show of bouncing off like a kit.

Judy was delighted to hear his hearty laugh as she went inside. Murray was slouching off in the common area and gave her a wink as she passed through.

The quarters were a bit basic, but as officers, she had a shared cubbyhole of bedroom with one of the other Angels, Darla Stone, one of the other rabbits in the unit. Judy was a bit surprised to find Darla already in, and more so that she was in a state, pacing the tiny room. "What's up?" Judy was not sure what to make of her agitation.

"Males!" the doe snarled, now clearly very angry.

"Oh no, did...?"

"Never got beyond grabbing my arm, but he was pretty obvious he wasn't going to take no for an answer."

"So, what happened?"

"I should have known better. Why else would a senior officer pay any attention to the likes of me?" she said in angry reproach.

"No!" Judy snapped. "You are a fine young Doe and an active duty Pilot Officer of the Zootopian Air Corps! And equal company to anyone!"

"And a dumb Bunny to so obviously sweet-talked!" Judy couldn't help but think of her own sister who had too easily fallen for some honeyed words. But a question remained. "So, who was it?"

Darla grimaced and pulled on an ear, reluctant to say. Accusations of untoward conduct could be an ordeal for the accuser as much or more than for the accused. But she finally admitted, "The Vulpy General."

"Oh, ouch." Judy winced. Nick had ever so tersely mentioned that General Sionnach was his father, heavy with the implication of hostile estrangement. "Are you going to...?"

"That depends. Only if he wants to press charges against me." Seeing Judy's confusion, "I hurt him. Our paw-to-paw training, you know."

"What did you do?"

"The hop and kick-off." A maneuver that took advantage of a rabbit's powerful leaping ability to deliver a blow as well as a way to get well clear of an attacker. "I may have broken his, ah, bone."

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"I notice that the General is missing from morning mess." Nick rather archly observed to his Commander.

"Yes, said he was indisposed and begged off any activity for the day."

"I'll bet."
"Anything I need know about?"

"Only that the Angels' personal combat training is as good as their flying skills."

"Ah! Is this going to be an incident?"

"Only if the General pursues it, and I don't think that's likely. Judy said that the Angel in question did not suffer beyond exposure to rude conduct. However, I'd recommend you talk to Squadron Leader Scampington about the importance of international relations and all that. And post a guard."

Scampington had a fiercely protective maternal streak for 'her girls', especially in the face of opposition or worse from the old school male officer corps. That this was not the first time that an officer had made assumptions was bad enough, but the General's isolationist views were already a sore subject for her.

"I don't think that will be necessary, though I would suppose he will remain in quarters until the Angels depart this morning."

"If he knows what's good for him." Nick mused, then alert to the crowd now entering the mess, 
"'Scuse me, sir."

Faulkner smiled. "Yes, Nick. See to your wife while you can," and watched his Squadron Leader trot over to usher in the Angels, with special attention to his special bunny. Such an unlikely pair, but how well suited they seemed together. By the Doe, what miracles...

***************

"Permission to enter?"

"Permission granted!"

"Come to gloat, Boy?" General Sionnach lay back in a large chair, in just a robe, a damp towel draped over his lower belly. His tail briefly lashed upon seeing the younger Fox.

"Hardly that." Nick stood straight in his best official mode. "Merely an official inquiry as to your plans or interests. Your brief for observation and inspection was rather open ended, both in time and scope. So, the Group Captain was curious as to when or if you would be interested or available for any further demonstrations."

The General eyed his errant son. The Boy did clean up well enough, even in the foreign uniform. And if the tales told were even half true, he was now an exemplary combat pilot and respected leader of his unit. But what a unit, grinders and vermin along with Vulpine expatriates.

They were ignoring centuries old injustice against their own, those grinders and lesser orders had driven out his ancestors, yet now begged for defense against an assertive nation of their own class.

While he had some small curiosity to see more of the new version Spitfire, his current condition left his mood even less tolerant of all the petty affronts that he already had to endure.

"No. I think I've seen quite enough. A day to recuperate and I'll be ready to head back to the city and then home." He gave that last a bit of emphasis, but saw no reaction in the Boy. "So That's that. Gone over to them, body and soul."

Nick rubbed his ring. "Not exactly what I planned. Didn't expect to find a family in the middle of a war and all that."
"Family." The elder fox scoffed. "What of your real family? Your blood? Your class? Your country?" He rose, stiffly, tossing the towel aside and pulling his robe tight, all the better to gesticulate at the disloyal dog. "You're not one of them, not really. You have no stake in this foreign war, at least nothing that really counts."

"Nothing that really counts? In the face of monstrous atrocity, this should be every mammal's cause."

"Spare me the artificial outrage. This isn't the first war and images of babies on bayonets."

"No. It is not." And Nick thought back at the horrors recounted by his own brother-in-law. "It is impossibly worse."

"So you say. And maybe they deserve whatever they get."

Nick stopped, froze at those words. He then collected himself. In the face of that, and him, any argument would be pointless. With only a curt nod, he about faced and left.

The elder todd sniffed. That last bit, a short sharp shock, as they say, didn't seem to do anything useful. But no matter. It was clear that he no longer had a son, and the loss was as much relief as regret.

Now, in his enforced idlement, he might as well begin drafting his report. These Zootopians were putting up a brave front, and they had displayed some ingenuity in their defense technologies, but the advanced designs and natural superiority of their opponents left little doubt to him who the victors would be.

But that was not his primary concern. The Army Air Corps was, at the moment, behind in both numbers and quality of first class types. The Warhawks coming on line were only a stopgap until the truly new types were available. Increased firepower as well as performance were also points to address.

Not that he expected direct conflict with Europe. Those alarmists back home talking about a wider war, even an intercontinental war, were ignoring the natural relationship enjoyed by those on both sides of the ocean. That and the folly of challenging the industrial might of the United Territories.

The Empire was a different matter and his real concern. Not that they could ever persevere, but that they would even challenge the natural order of things would mean an expensive reassertion of influence in that part of the world. Simple numbers would solve that problem, as they would only be able to field poor copies of second-rate types. A quick slap down would be enough.

In the end, time, likely some years, if ever, and the cushion of broad oceans would mean that his country could afford to develop and build the best without the threat of direct attack and resulting pressure of expedient compromise.

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"So?"

"The General said he was done with things here and would be prepared to leave for the city tomorrow."

"Is there anything more?" The Group Captain gave his officer a knowing look. Nick was attempting to remain cool, but his poofed brush and faint sour tang of rage betrayed him.

"The General made it clear as to his sympathies, and he is no friend of Zootopia."
"Enough to be a security issue?"

"No. But he isn't likely going to be an honest partner going forward."

"There's something more?"

"He is my father. And as well as I thought I knew him, he surprised me with his enduring hate regarding the Expulsion." Nick rubbed his muzzle and sighed. "The family had holdings back in the day, some kind of petty lord. Losing all that to the 'lesser orders' and being reduced to the lowest of commoner in a foreign land has been the angry drum beat for generations."

Nick looked out the window of Faulkner’s office at the morning activity out on the airfield as the older rabbit slipped a cigarette out of a silver case and removed the matching lighter, tapping the end a couple of times on the flat of the metal carrier.

"I think, or hope, he's still just an old school species-based classist, and not really buying into the Axis version of pred/prey relations. But with an ocean and limited ties between them and the realities here, it's still too easy to dismiss it all as not their problem."

Group Captain Faulkner put the gold tipped end in his muzzle and lit the other with a practiced flick of the lighter. “Well, there’s not much help for things now. We’ll continue doing what we do, and pray that saner mammals with foresight prevail.” The rabbit spun his office chair and glanced out the window as well, the faintest tic of the corners of his mouth vanishing as he watched his subordinate’s ears perk and his tail jerk side to side. “Now, why don’t you go wish the Angels fair skies, Squadron Leader. Dismissed.”

Nick nodded and threw the Group Captain a smart salute before turning on his heel and exiting the office.

Outside the sun was a paw’s width over the trees on the far eastern edge of the airfield, the cool, moist air absorbing the moderate warmth as much as it did the normal clamor of mechanics and flight crews working, the puttering of generators and trucks shuffling supplies. The modest layer of fog that had covered the ground though didn’t go higher than a foot or two was all but gone. Even the birdsong was muted. There was nothing foreboding about the quiet. It was simply one of those peaceful mornings that were too few and far between.

Nick ignored the chilly dampness that soaked into the fur of his toes and into the heel of his leggings from the dew soaked grass. The Angels were gathered around the door to the mess finishing up cups of tea or coffee. No few giggled softly at the fox’s approach and batted their eyes at the Squadron Leader while their own superior officer smiled around her own cup of tea.

“Off with you,” Stella Scamplington said to Judy with a flicking motion of her paw. “We’re wheels up in ten minutes, though, so don’t dally too long.” She then cast a shrewd eye at the Squadron Leader. “Minimal mussing of my pilot as possible, Sir?” the doe asked in good natured exasperation.

“I promise,” Nick answered, holding up his right paw in a scout’s salute. Without waiting a moment longer, he pulled Judy back into the mess hall and once they were inside spun the doe about, his arms wrapping tightly around her as he pulled his wife up and against him, his muzzle finding hers in a passionate kiss that left both a little breathless when they parted. “Maybe we should have chucked military bearing out the window last night. I have no idea when we’ll see each other again.”

Judy couldn’t help but nod in partial agreement, though she was still working on regaining her bearings. “It won’t be that long,” she assured her fox. “At least I hope not.”
“But we both have our duties,” Nick told her, almost as if reading his wife’s mind. “As soon as I find some time I’ll come see you. Maybe I can give you a little bit of a honeymoon until I can take you on a proper one.”

“Can we go to Bunnyburrow instead? I don’t like leaving Dawn for so long, and it will really make her happy if we could visit.”

Nick nodded. “You know, that’s not a bad idea,” he began until the sound of one of the Avro Anson’s engines firing up reached their ears. “Damn it. That was a quick ten minutes.”

Before Judy could even nod agreement her husband was once more kissing her and it was enough to make her eyes flutter shut as she gave in to the contact before finding her feet once more on the floor. It wasn’t until she blinked the morning sun out of her eyes did she realize that Nick was leading her outside to her fellow Angels.

“You be safe and remember I love you, Pilot Officer Wilde,” Nick whispered in her ear as she shuffled into the mix of prey and predator females.

Even as she was taken in paw and guided to one of the pair of twin engine planes, Judy whipped about with enough speed to cause her garrison cap to slip, a paw reaching up automatically to keep it in place between her ears. “I love you. Stay safe a fly high!” she called over the growing roar of the rotary engines. When Nick smiled a fraction of a moment before snapping to attention and saluting it was enough to cause a proud tightening in the rabbit’s breast that didn’t subside until well after they landed back at the Angels’ home field.

Chapter End Notes

And stevegallacci has the follow-up to the previous chapter and the brief reunion of Nick and Judy! Plus we get a little more about Nick’s father....whooo, boy!

Don't forget to comment and let my awesome co-authors know what you think. We all thrive on the feedback and words from our most excellent readers!!! :D
“Bearing: three-one-zero! Elevation: six-zero!” Sitting on his elevated perch inside the semi-enclosed gun shield, Danny Hopps relayed the rough gunnery parameters he’d received through intercom to the crew under his command.

“Aye sir, three-one-zero, six-zero.” The gunner – a bright furred ocelot – repeated, as he cranked the hydraulically driven emplacement towards the indicated coordinates. As the gun neared the desired position, a targeting indicator lit up in the feline’s sights: the refined targeting solution provided by the ship’s mechanical calculator. As he proceeded to adjust the battery accordingly, he also informed the rabbit sitting above and behind him. “Target!”

“H-E, pre-set fuze. Load!”

At the order a raccoon and a hare unlocked the twin guns’ breeches, sliding the respective blocks down and opening the weapons’ chambers. A split second later a pair of identically looking ponies were each pushing a full cartridge into each of the open breaches. Their hooves were barely out of the chambers when the two smaller mammals operating the breech blocks slammed them back up, shouting in unison, “Up!”

“Hold!” As he awaited the final command, Danny could hear the other heavy AA crews mimicking his own, and it was with some pride he realized his was still the fastest on their side of the ship. He didn’t get to savor the realization however, as one word overpowered all other sounds in his earpieces.

“Fire!”

Immediately the entire emplacement was shook by a thundering crack as the twin 4-inchers spewed fire, several similar detonations sounding from around them as the other guns on their side also unloaded at their common target.

Pulling a lever to his right, the Hopps rabbit swung open a trap door on top of the gun shield as his seat automatically elevated, making his upper torso protrude from the newly opened hole. Bringing up his binoculars, the rabbit quickly found his target, just in time to see the dozen of shells that had been fired explode in its close vicinity. There were some sparks on its fuselage, a spit of flame, and the unmanned glider began plummeting towards the sea as its tail section broke off.

Just as he fist pumped slightly, an order came through the ship’s comms, which Danny immediately relayed to his crew as he lowered his seat back into the emplacement. “Stand down. Open the guns for inspection.” Then, after a breath, “Well done, boys.”

All the mammals present visibly relaxed, a few sighs even being heard, as the crew had been at this for the better part of the last half-hour. The raccoon and hare slid the breeches opened as commanded and, as the remaining cordite fumes gently poured out in a wispy cascade, the guns’ crew began to huddle closer together.

They’d departed from Yakka Flow the previous day and, once it was clear the patchwork done on the ship’s turbines would hold, the priority had immediately shifted to anti-aircraft practice. It was
still early in the morning, and the dual-purpose emplacements would be the focus of the training until the noon bell, with the recently added UP launchers being tested some time afterwards.

For the training, a few of the older Britstol Blenheims of the ZAC’s Coastal Command had towed a number of gliders into position to simulate incoming enemy craft, some being engaged at altitude while others had been released just high enough so they wouldn’t immediately crash, in order to replicate different attack formations and types.

With the last glider of the group destroyed, the crew had about half an hour of breathing room before the Blenheims returned with another training wave. And they’d been instructed to use that time to exchange feedback with the engineers still on board and amongst themselves, in order to make sure all the additions, modifications and improvements to the AA suite were working as intended.

Danny was about to speak, but was cut off by one of the ponies, who was addressing the raccoon in front of him.

“Cooper, I swear on my mum, if you catch my hooves on the breech I’ll throw you so far overboard they’ll have to turn us around to pick you up!” Huffing in annoyance the equine took a step forward, looking down on the small predator that was the focus of his ire.

“Same goes for you, Skipson!” the other pony was quick to add looking at the hare next to the raccoon.

The two smaller mammals were slightly caught off guard, at first, before quickly looking at each other with knowing grins, at which point Cooper began snickering and Skipson couldn’t hold back a bark of laughter.

“Oh please! If anything your hooves would break the guns… Last thing I want is having to explain to the armourer why there are big hoof shaped wholes in our breeches,” the hare countered.

That was bound to seriously rile up the loaders so Danny chose to intervene before things got out of paw, even if he was holding back his own bought of laughter.

“Alright, alright, as you were.”

Hopping off his chair he hung his earpieces on a hook under the seat’s bottom and exited through the back of the gun shield, scanning the deck for his best friend. Spotting the mink securing his ammo trolley next to the hoist that accessed the ship’s magazines he hollered him over. “O’Stoat, get over here!”

Turning his head, the small predator saw his friend and superior beckoning him and began making his way back to their emplacement.

In the meantime, Danny had gone back into the metal box and was calling out to his feline gunner. “Furrow, report.”

The ocelot smoothly slid from his seat and saluted smartly before speaking.

“Sir. The new targeting pointer lit up as expected and allowed me to track the target as instructed in the new manuals.” Throughout the description the small feline kept his gaze trained forward, a picture of prefect seamammal discipline.

Nodding, the rabbit prodded a bit further.

“Good, good... But how did it feel? Remember, in the heat of battle we won’t have time for
manuals.”

The question broke the cat’s discipline slightly, with him giving a little shimmy before looking at his superior with an uncomfortable expression.

“Well, it’s not that bad, sir. But it does feel a bit odd, following the little orange cross around rather than the actual target.”

“Yes, I can see that being the case. Well, that’s why we’re having this training cruise.” Before he could add anything, however, Willie was standing behind him on the gun shield’s entrance holding his paw up in a salute. “Sir.”

Turning around, Danny couldn’t help but smile.

“Ah, Willie, just in time. Were there any differences on your end?”

The mink shook his head. “No sir, it’s pretty much the same as far as my job is concerned. Most changes happ’ned below decks, with the new fuze setting trays.”

Danny nodded, satisfied, and was about to turn his attention back to the guns, but he noticed a slight hesitation on William’s part, as if his friend were considering adding some odd detail.

“Is there something else?”

“Well…” The mink scratched his head, looking at nothing in particular but clearly in deep thought. "There’s this concern I have…”

Eager to hear his crew-mammal’s worries, Danny once again turned to fully face him and motioned for him to continue.

“They’ve been adding a lot of AA emplacements over Ol’Mighty’s carrer, but the ammo hoists and distributors haven’t followed suite,” he explained, pointing towards his secured cart. “I mean, we have one of the original emplacements, with its own ammo lifts, but the one aft of us, for example, is just fed directly from the magazine… And with how long that can take there’s always more shells lying around and the magazine can get exposed if the blast doors aren’t shut properly.”

That was indeed a worthy concern. During training, it’d been hammered into their minds that fire at sea was one of the biggest threats to a ship’s survival, since it could affect just about any part of the vessel. Not to mention preventing it wasn’t quite as simple as adding another slab of steel to the armor belt. And one of the biggest risks a fire would pose would be the ammunition for any of the ship’s weaponry cooking off or – even worse – detonating all together in the magazines. There was, of course, a layered protection system to prevent such a catastrophe from happening, including fire retardant materials, sprinklers and fire brigades on stand-by. However, if the bulkheads leading to the magazines were left open… well, there wouldn’t be much anyone could do should a fire start within the ship or near an access to the magazines.

While the guns’ crew under Danny’s command muttered some concerns amongst themselves, the rabbit in question walked past Willie, putting a paw on his shoulder in the process, and, with a nod went to the emplacement’s entrance.

“I’ll let the engineers know.”

Poking his head out of the gun shield, the rabbit looked around for a bit, partly taking in the bustling activity on the ship’s decks and partly scanning the rivers of mammals going past looking for a technician. Once he located one he waved him over.
Once the mammal was in front of him, Danny conveyed their concerns, noticing with some relieved satisfaction how the deer buck in front of him flashed a worried stare before stamping it down and assuring the rabbit he’d pass on the information.

Afterwards, and since the engineer was already there, he took the opportunity to check the gun’s breeches and laying mechanisms, making sure they were holding up as expected. Once he was satisfied the cervine saluted and left.

With him gone and the mandatory checks completed, all that was left to do for Danny and his crew was to stand at attention waiting for the next training wave to arrive.

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After close to a dozen simulated attacks, including a couple where the gun crews were instructed to act independently, as if the main fire control center had either been knocked out or the communication with it was interrupted, the noon bell had rung and most of the crew had quickly retreated back into the mess for lunch.

The compartment in question was vast, with it needing to house a third of the crew at a time – some four hundred mammals per meal. It sported a deeper section on one end in order to accommodate the few elephants, rhinos and other larger build mammals that helped man the heaviest of the ship’s machinery. This “deep end” as it was referred by most onboard allowed said mammals to not only eat together with their fellow shipmates but also to actually speak with them at eye level, contributing to the general sense of togetherness and camaraderie typical within a navy ship.

Closer to the kitchens, however, was where Danny was finishing off his vegetable soup, enjoying the actually distinguishable vegetables if a bit disappointed by their generally duller flavor. Putting his spoon down, the rabbit looked up and around him, with the mammals under his command all sitting together near the end of one of the many long metal tables present in the room.

Willie was – rather appropriately – to his right, polishing off his serving of sardine stew. To his left, Danny had his gunner: Preston Furrow. The ocelot was slightly older than the rest of the rabbit’s gun crew, having been aboard the Hood since its first major overhaul some six years before the outbreak of the war. He was of southern continent descent, though his family had been in the Zootpian Isles for a few generations now. Opposite to them sat the pair of loaders and breach operators. The two ponies were the Shetly brothers, Bryce and Calum. They came from Ovisland, much like Willie, though they were from further inland, closer to its southern borders. They only met the rest of the crew when they were posted, though they’d enlisted more or less at the same time as Danny and most of the others. Finally there were Miles Cooper and Roger Skipson, the breach operators, who’d enlisted, trained and now served together, much to their delight. They came from Zootopia itself and had known each other since kit-hood, having elected to stick together for as long as they could.

“So, are you lot looking forward to this afternoon’s special show?”

Pulling a stray fish-bone from his mouth, William was the first to reply.

“Like I told’ya in the train; we’re more fireworks show than ship now.”

Cooper, always quick to share his thoughts, chimed in next.

“Hey, so long as they do their job and make life easier for the rest of us that’s fine by me. They could shoot confetti for all I care.”

“That would be quite unbecoming of a Navy vessel. I hope they’re not too flamboyant in their
operation.” Furrow had always been the more traditional of the bunch, and given the emphasis the Zootopian Navy put on presentation before the war, his position was hardly surprising.

“Oh sure, like that matters in a fight.” Bryce suddenly interjected, followed by his brother. “Yeah, if presentation were that important then the huns woulda’ won the first war with those spiky helmets.”

While the feline gunner seemed rather offended by the joke, the rest of the mammals in the group couldn’t help but to laugh a bit at his expense.

They were, however, suddenly cut off by the loud and metallic voice from the ship’s PA system.

“Anti-aircraft test will commence in thirty minutes. All hands, action stations.”

A sort of controlled chaos immediately swept over the mess hall, with all of its occupants quickly getting up and dashing for the exits closest to their respective posts with the purposeful certainty that comes from hundreds of drills and rehearsals. On the way to their stations ready-lockers were emptied and their flash-protecting garments were equipped on the run.

Less than sixty seconds later all of the Hood’s crewmammals were at their posts, expecting the weapons testing soon to begin but alert and ready for any unpredicted eventuality.

Danny was on his erected perch, scanning the sky above the horizon while listening for any orders coming through his head piece. The wind had also picked up, whistling through the gaps in the ship’s outer frame and covering most of the crew with a thin but comprehensive layer of salty moisture. In the mean time, the mammals in charge of the brand new anti-aircraft emplacements made final verifications and went through checklists, making sure the weapons were fire-ready.

The Hopps rabbit had been summarily briefed on the principles and basic operation of those new gadgets during the in-port part of their training. The Navy referred to them as Unrotated Projectile Launchers – UP’s for short. They’d installed five of them on the ship, with one on each side of the conning tower, another two aft and to the sides of the funnels and a final one perched atop the B turret (second one from the front). The system itself functioned a lot like a set of portable barrage balloons: each UP block was made up of twenty one hundred and eighty millimeter rocket launchers; each rocket would propel a long wire into the air with a parachute at the top and a small contact mine at the bottom, meaning that not only would a plane flying through the wires become tangled in them, the mine would also eventually be pulled up to it and detonate. That was the theory anyway.

Danny didn’t have much time to dwell on it further, however, as information suddenly started coming from his headpiece.

“Formation spotted, bearing two-eight-five, at six thousand feet. Range fifteen miles.”

Bringing up his binoculars, the rabbit scanned the general direction indicated by the ship’s spotters, quickly finding the specs in question. While waiting for confirmation on their identity however, he followed procedure by shouting two simple words into the casemate.

“Stand by!”

As a couple tense minutes went by the specs became clearer, and just as Danny was starting to make out that each one was actually two planes flying in tandem the confirmation came from the spotters.

“Formation identified: friendlies.”

Relaying the message to the mammals beneath him, he could hear a collective sigh of relief, while the information was updated.
“Training party confirmed: six Blenheims and their gliders. All U-P crews make ready.”

While shouting, running and general mechanical noises could be heard from the launcher to the right and above their emplacement, Danny kept his vision trained on the bombers. He watched as they dropped altitude to around five thousand feet and then, some four miles from the Hood, released their gliders, immediately diving some more and turning about to get clear the area. The gliders themselves began their gentle descent, though they managed to maintain the two rough triangle formations their tows had imparted onto them.

As their distance closed to less than two miles Danny noticed how all of the running had ceased around the UP launcher closest to him, the sound being replaced in his ears by a series of shouts of readiness. He tensed up expecting the fire order at any moment, but had his concentration suddenly broken for a split second as a stronger gust of wind blew a fair amount of sea spray in his face. Bringing up a paw to wipe at his eyes the rabbit nearly jumped out of his gun shield as the launchers erupted almost in unison with the order to open fire.

They sounded like either out of tune bag pipes or pipe organs, really loud pipe organs. Whipping his head around, Danny managed to catch the last few rockets being launched, as they left a large puff of dark smoke under the launcher unit and popped out the other end trailing their bright yellow exhaust and a much lighter line of smoke. They quickly gained altitude and eventually popped open, releasing their wired payload. All twenty rockets were fired at once so that, taking into account their relative inaccuracy, the sheer number of them in the air would create a sort of irregular curtain in front of the aircraft.

By the time all rockets had reached their target height they were about half a mile away from the ship, and directly in front of the oncoming gliders.

As the first formation went through the mess of cables the first two gliders snagged a couple each and were thrown off course by the added drag and weight, one banking hard left while the other started to slowly drift right and eventually had its wing ripped off as the mine reached its root. The crew cheered.

The third glider, however, kept its course steady through the mess of wires and actually passed unscathed, eventually flying over the hood and ditching further along on its starboard side. This tempered the crew’s enthusiasm, and all eyes quickly turned to the second set of gliders.

When the second formation approached the snare, everyone held their breath and a few crossed their digits, but while the lead glider was snagged up and began a rather steep dive, also losing a wing just before hitting the water, the two trailing aircraft once again flew through the defenses and landing close to the first glider that’d made it.

While there were sounds of disappointment echoing through the vessel followed by the inevitable gossip, the UP crews themselves kept as professional as they could, beginning the reloading and weapon servicing procedures with grim expressions adorning their faces.

“Well that was a bit underwhelming,” a voice piped up behind Danny’s gun emplacement.

Lowering his seat and tuning around to face the mammal in question, the rabbit found William at the shield’s entrance, his muzzle curved into a pout.

“Yeah, what happened?” This time it was Cooper voicing his concerns.

With a sigh, Danny brought his paw up and scratched his head through his anti-flash balaclava, lifting his cap in the process.
“Furrow can correct me if my assessment is wrong, but I’m guessing the gliders that got through did so because the ones in front of them cleared a corridor of sorts. I mean, even with five launchers we can only really do one layer of wires if we want it big enough to cover the ship.”

Turning to face the ocelot gunner he found him slowly nodding.

“You are correct, sir. After one pass there would inevitably be gaps in that layer. Not to mention real pilots might be able to exploit smaller openings.”

That got the rest of the gun crew groaning: with the emphasis the Axis was putting on their air force, the UP launchers had been devised as a way to balance the odds without massive refits for every single capital ship. Clearly, however, it was not quite the solution they were looking for.

Seeing the spirits of the mammals under his command taking a dive, Danny stepped in.

“Hey now! This was just the first training session we had. We’ll be practicing for best part of the week, so I’m sure we’ll come up with something to improve their performance. I mean, they’re not perfect, but we can’t just –”

“INCOMING!”

The shout had come from both Danny’s earpieces and the ship’s PA system, and as mammals relayed the warning throughout the crew everyone ducked for whatever cover was available without a second’s hesitation.

The Hopps rabbit quickly toggled his seat and its hatch, quickly dropping down into the gun shield with a metallic clang. At the same time, William had swung himself into the emplacement, bringing the door with him and closing it in the process.

They all sat tense and expecting a sound or sensation of something hitting the ship, but for a few seconds nothing happened.

Then suddenly there were two small explosions and Danny’s crew could hear debris showering their gun shield and falling into the ocean.

The held steady for a few more seconds, until eventually a word came through the rabbit’s earphones.

“Clear!”

Nodding to William, the mink carefully opened the door, checking to make sure there were no hazards in its way, after which he motioned his commanding officer over.

Poking his head out of the emplacement Danny found the deck surrounding it covered in shards of glass and the odd scrap of metal. But before he could ponder for too long where they’d come from and what had just happened, he felt William pulling at his sleeve.

Turning to his friend with a quizzical expression, he found the small predator pointing up at the ship’s bridge with a defeated expression. Following his gaze, Danny’s own expression morphed into a mix of fear and annoyance as he found what had caught William’s attention.

Several windows on the bridge’s middle level had been shattered, including their frames, and further up a part of the command deck’s roof was torn up like a half-opened can of fish. But while the damage was concerning, given how vital the area was for the ship, what really struck a chord with Danny was the cause for it: tangled in the mangled frames of both the blown off windows and the
deck roof were two of the UP projectiles’ cables, with their parachutes still attached at the top acting like kites in the wind.

As more of the crew gathered to gawk at the damaged superstructure, William got closer to his still reeling lapine friend and whispered in his ear.

“Still feel like defending those glorified fireworks launchers?”

A/N
This chapter turned out a bit shorter than I initially planned, mostly because it’s a first attempt at action writing from me and I’d like to test the waters with it. That also means feedback is doubly appreciated here, so that I know what to keep the same and what to change and improve.

Other than that, here we have the UP launchers and their failed promises… And I was actually rather tame in my description of their failure to impress, since a similar scenario to the one in this chapter happened with Winston Churchill in the audience. Though it gets even funnier since he was actually one of the weapon’s biggest proponents!

Another rather embarrassing point is the little argument regarding the Navy’s presentation. See, before the Second World War and largely due to the Navy’s role as little more than a force of diplomacy and deterrence, promotions and prizes were actually awarded based on ship appearance rather than its combat effectiveness. Talk about setting your priorities straight.

Chapter End Notes

And, OH MY G**!!! A fantastic chapter by Winerp!!! Give him a round of applause...or comment because on the internet, no one can hear you clap...

This incredible writer has taught me a few things about the ships that were used in WWII, that’s for sure. And the UP wasn’t the only odd weapon that was developed during the war. So many odd ideas, a few with merit, some that were utter disasters, and many that were just completely insane, were used. I think that, as much as anything else, indicates how desperate a time it was for everyone involved.

So, I need to know, Winerp needs to know...do we ask him to do his own spinoff like Tom1380 has with Lucky Buck? I know where my vote is! This needs must become a thing!!!! :D
Alastair Clay was fussing with his after dinner pipe as he sat at the little kitchen table. While there were any number of other more obvious places throughout the warren for him to relax, he was loath to leave his wife, his darling Agatha, of so many years, alone to do the dishes. Not that she was alone, with several kits on hand to help, but in earlier years it had been just the two of them together, and the notion of abandoning her to 'female's work' while he relaxed was alien to his notions of husbandly duties.

Not that he was allowed to do anything nowadays. 'Fumbling old fool' was the mildest reproach he got for so much as collecting a plate or fetching something from the pantry. For all his mastery at the forge, what little skill he might have had in the kitchen in years past had fled long ago, but he so enjoyed being among the hustle of a warm kitchen with his best beloved to chat with. Not that he said much to his wife's non-stop narration of the day's events in the warren.

That included the management of the Clay's fortunes. Though not the largest family or grandest spread in the 'Burrows, they were among the more prosperous. While Alastair had his forge and reputation as a master smith, it was his family's octades of shrewd business dealings that had afforded them several vehicles and machinery that had made them more efficient, as well as helping their neighbors. Now, with the war, they had the commission for collection and deliveries for the service.

As the chores were winding down and the youngsters released from their duties, one of his sons, Jimmy, approached. He was still youthfully scrawny, not yet filled out to the stumps that was the typical Clay build, but he was already doing well at the forge or with a spanner. Or maybe he'd take after his Mother's side? He was already a half-head taller than his father. But her blood's issue were also rabbits that demanded respect.

"Dad." Said in a tone that promised trouble. Had the fool boy done something? He was sweet on that Sward girl, and there were several 'aftermaths' of the finding festival.

"Been thinking about the war." And at that, Alastair's blood ran cold. He warily nodded for his kit to continue. His Agatha paused, a half-dried pot in her paws. She didn't turn; she didn't dare to show her stricken face.

"I've been thinking. I'm not much for soldiering." and he gestured to himself, hardly an image of martial prowess. "But I'm good with machinery, so figure I could be a support troop or something."

While a part of him agreed with the notion, Alastair also thought of his discussion with poor young Edward Sward, and the dread that any of his issue would have to face anything like what that tattered buck had already endured.

"What you might want and the needs of the service might mean something more direct." He warned.

"I know." The boy met his gaze with a level of solemnity far beyond his years. "Bailey Hopps just ran off, though he's under age. And a couple of the Swards are talking about joining up." Wringing his paws, Jimmy continued. "I'm not a fool, Dad. This isn't some adventure and I'm not joining just because some friends are. This is a sacrifice. One that every family will have to make."
Agatha gasped and withheld a sob. The old buck grimaced with that as much as at the boy's declaration. He couldn't disagree, but was still loath to risk his blood to the fates. He rose from his chair and embraced his son, taking a deep draw of his scent. Then to be joined by his Agatha. It was a ritual the young buck shared with the rest of the family over the next days, as scent held strongest in memory.

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However, things were a bit different when he went to visit the Sward warren. It was the loutish Scott, Jackie's older brother, who answered the door. "Oh, it's you. Sniffing around, eh?"

Jimmy just sighed. The larger rabbit was a bit of a bully, but he was also lazy and soft, at least to the assessment of the apprentice smith, so was not the least intimidating to him. "Come to say good bye to Jackie."

"Given up on her?" Scott sneered.

"Going to join up." And the breadth and depth of the implications of that was not lost on the older rabbit.

"Get et!" He snapped and attempted to slam the door shut. But Jimmy's paw stopped it with a thump and he easily pushed the door and the bigger bunny aside.

"Hello the house! Jimmy Clay here!" While pointedly ignoring Scott, Jimmy was too polite to go beyond the threshold. His call brought a few other Swards up, including the matriarch, Claire, who gave Scott a disapproving glance as he slunk away.

"Come to call on anyone in particular, Master James?" She said in mild jest, then halted when she saw Jimmy's reaction. "More to let you all know of my intentions of joining up." He said joylessly. "You've been special to me and I had to come over..."

Claire flashed through a range of emotions. Her Edward, thought dead and then saved, yet going back to the fray. And now Mikey and Joe... "Oh, James, are you sure?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Trying for the Air Corps, likely a mechanic."

"You heard that Michael and Joseph just left for the Army, you missed them by a day." Like many mothers, Claire could be strong when she needed to, but there was no hiding the worry. No tears today though. The young buck likely had too many already. Poor Agatha Clay, what must she be going through? After a sad pause. "Jackie ought to be at the Tri-Burrows library."

"I need to leave, and would rather be a faint and fading memory if I don't come back." He struggled to keep a firm face.

Claire attempted to pull free, he couldn't leave like that, but she was surprised that he was willing to grip all the firmer in her attempt. Finally, she went limp. "You Clays are a hard hearted folk, Young James." He looked away, his eyes wet. "Thank you for everything." Was all he could say as he all but fled. Claire watched him go through tears. She knew why he did what he did. There was a tragic bravery in that gesture and she dreaded what her daughter was about to face.

Jackie, never Jacqueline, had been a plain young Doe, studious and hard working, never a trouble, but never a stand out. That she'd caught young James' eye and they seemed well suited for each other had been a relief to Claire. Both were rather sober youngsters, not joyless, just restrained, and their relationship had brought out a bit of exuberance in them that was a treat to watch.
"Jimmy? What?" Jackie started up from the volume she was scrutinizing at the sight of the buck across the table from her. He looked stricken, had something happened?

"I've decided." The young buck's solemn bombshell was not unexpected, but the doe recoiled in dread.

"I thought, I hoped..." She gasped.

"I know. But I figured I could be through training over the winter and be ready for - whatever - come spring."

Though her face and paws were clenched and tears were beginning, Jackie's tone was trying to be light, "James, always the practical one." Then with a resigned sigh, she slumped in surrender. "Mike and Joey just left for the army, if you haven't already heard."

"Yeah, your Mom said."

Of course, how else would he know to find her. "Still the Air Corps? If so, I heard that David Hopps is going there too."

"Really? I didn't know." Jimmy didn't keep up on the various families' news all that much. "Wonder if we'll meet up?"

"Jimmy!" Jackie gave him a stern look.

The young Buck ducked his head. He knew he was avoiding the immediate matter. "I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. But I have my duty."

Jackie made a face. She knew what he meant about duty. But she didn't have to like it.

"Jackie. I so wanted a life together with you. But now I want you let me go." He shivered in the beginning of a fear hunch.

"Let you go?" She had her own fear reaction.

"I can't promise you anything. Hope doesn't have much weight against chance or fate." He struggled. The young doe hurumphed at that. "And what if your fate is to come back to me?"

"Then I will. That I CAN promise." That brightened them both ever so. Jackie reached out towards Jimmy's paws, but he drew away. "I'm sorry. But you have to be able to forget me in time." The last little more than a choked whisper.

"I don't want to forget you! I'd even take your kit now if I were...!" She flared. And in that, all the sober, rational discussions they had had in the weeks before were dashed in the moment.

"NO!" Jimmy wailed as he folded in on himself to sob into his paws. He'd tried to be so strong so far, but it was all too much. As much as he dreaded such for her sake, he didn't avoid her supporting embrace. After a time, the sobbing eased off, and he gasped, more to himself, "I don't want to die. Killed in a damned war."

Jackie wanted so hard to tell him not to go, save himself, stay with her. But a little of those same sober words came back to her. Instead, she just held him. Even in the moment of grief, they were together.
And another son of Bunnyburrow heads off to war, and another fabulous chapter by stevegallacci!!!

Yes, the chapter is a little short, but I have an idea what’s coming, and I don’t think you readers will be disappointed!

On a separate note I’m happy to sort of be back! I was in one of the areas hit pretty hard by the windstorms that shellacked the Eastern seaboard of the US and my area was pounded something fierce. Internet is still a random thing, electricity is fluctuating as the grid is repaired, so...

A bit of a happier note is that the family is safe, the house is intact, and no one I know was seriously hurt.

Anyhoo, more to come and stay tuned!!!! :D
Sergeant Hiram Fenster had his ground crews trained so well that they could swarm a Spitfire and have the ammunition for the .303 caliber machine guns completely reloaded and all weapons charged in three and a half minutes. His crews could also top off the petrol tanks in twelve minutes. The turnaround was vital, especially as of late. It seemed as if the Axis were throwing everything at Zootopia and 13 Squadron, as well as every other flight group along or near the coast line, were flying six and seven combat sorties a day. Sometimes more and very seldom less. As it stood, the diminutive desert fox was shouting at his underlings as Nick hopped out of his plane, others of the squadron lined up and being tended to as well. The Hurricane bunnies that were in the next airfield in their area of coverage took the present share of the fight while the Red Tails rearmed and refueled.

It was the same story all up and down the coast that looked out over the Channel and both planes and pilots were pushed to their limits.

At any other time Nick would have dead-lined not only aircraft as being unserviceable, but pilots as well.

Finnick snapped directions and orders to the mammals tending to the Squadron Leader’s aircraft, a great deal of swearing thrown in as well, before giving each point of maintenance a once-over. They’d learned the hard way that the Hispano 20mm cannon tended to jam with the angle they were canted in the wings, but the desert fox had talked to a counterpart at another airfield and devised a modified feed tray for the heavy rounds, the rather simple fix coming from a can and pair of tin snips. Then there had been the discovery, a frightening one as it had happened during a dust up, that at higher altitudes the guns would freeze. Fin had taken some liberties with directing excess heat from the radiator and a flap of canvas doped over the ejection port had rectified that problem that he’d learned from the counterpart that had helped with the tin can fix. Since the little adjustments were added the guns had worked decently for the most part.

There was no time for propriety or modesty as Nick relieved himself on the grass before closing his trousers and turning about long enough to slug down a mug of lukewarm black coffee. He glanced down the line and saw that the crews were finishing up with the A-wing Spitfires of the squadron, only the red fox’s taking longer with the new weapons. There was still a bit of a learning curve that needed to be honed with the Hispano cannon.

It did give Nick a chance to talk to one of the most improved pilots of the unit and he approached the young pilot who was looking as wilted and tired as Nick felt. “You’re doing much better, Reginald. Just remember to ease up on the guns,” Nick told Pilot Officer Harette, the buck having served his grounding punishment and learning to function better as a pilot and member of the Red Tails.

Like one of the other rabbits in the squadron, Reginald had taken to tying a red bandana to his belt. The raccoons and skunks of the outfit had dyed their tail tips with varying results, but as the rabbits had much less in the way of caudal appendages than the other pilots, the trend of tying a streamer or flag to their backsides became a way of showing solidarity and fighting spirit.

“Short bursts, and a little less level flying. You got four kills today already and I want to see you
become an ace, okay? I put those wings back on your uniforms because you earned them and I
couldn’t be prouder to have you in the squadron.” Nick waited for the rabbit to reply then dropped a
paw on the slightly smaller mammal’s shoulder. “Your father would be very proud of you, Reggie.
Damn proud.”

PO Harette stood a little straighter though there was a flash of pain in his eyes. The Harecourt home
in Zootopia had taken a direct hit during a bombing raid days before, and while there were others to
carry on the bloodline, Reginald was feeling the loss of his mother and father rather keenly. “I’ll do
my best, Sir!” the rabbit replied with only the slightest quaver to his voice.

“I know you will,” Nick said with a slight squeeze of his paw. “Let’s get back to it and show them
Zootopia won’t roll over, yeah?”

“Too right, Sir!”

Nick nodded and smiled as he turned the lapin towards his Spit and gave him a good-natured shove
before turning for his own plane.

Just as Nick clambered onto the wing and swung his leg into the cockpit the warning sirens of
Flavideau Aerodrome began to wail mournfully and caused those that weren’t directly involved in
preparing the planes or their pilots to scatter, some slapping Brodie helmets on and dashing to
defensive positions and machinegun nests ringed by sandbags.

“Get ‘em up! Go! Go! GO!” Nick bellowed both out of his open cockpit and over the radio that he
hastily jacked into. With paws that were deceptively steady, the young Squadron Leader ran through
the hot start procedure, the propeller kicking up to speed with a blast of bluish exhaust that reeked of
rich petrol.

Within moments the air was alive with the growling of Rolls Royce Merlin engines and the planes
began to roll to the stretch that had been completely denuded of grass by so many planes taking off
and landing repeatedly. As soon as the wheels of his plane left the battered turf Nick tripped the
hydraulics that would retract the landing struts and then reached back and slid the canopy shut. Even
as he’d taxied and set up for takeoff Nick had spotted the black specks in the southern sky, Bf 109’s
tussling with Hurricanes, trails of black smoke from aircraft of both sides marring the blue heavens.

“Pawson second group, Todd third group, group one on me,” Nick ordered as he took a moment to
touch the photo of Judy and Dawn, both seeming to look at him with affection and utmost trust that
he wouldn’t let the enemy close to them. The planes maneuvered into their respective groups, Nick
leading the way and began as steep a climb as he could without sacrificing too much speed.

Not for the first time Nicholas Wilde looked round at the squadron and thought that it was both a
terrible and beautiful sight.

The Hurricanes were holding their own, a testament to the skills of the pilots, but they were reaching
the end of their fuel and ammunition. So it was that Nick dropped in next to one that was sticking
with a Messerschmitt that bore a number of kill markers. A glance to the pilot in the Hurricane
revealed a rabbit who smiled and nodded when Nick pointed at the enemy fighter and then at himself
before flicking a quick thumbs-up. With the passing of the torch, the red fox took the pursuit position
as the bunny peeled off and waited the fraction of the second required to get the Bf-109 dead in his
sights before triggering a burst of twenty millimeter death.

Before, when he had been flying an A-wing variant Spit, Nick would have pecked away with the
rifle caliber guns in his wings. Such wasn’t needed with the new cannon and all it took was a couple
of rounds. The port cannon sheared almost half of the Messerschmitt’s left wing off, throwing the
entire enemy plane into a wild roll and descent while one of the rounds from the starboard gun struck
the fuselage aft of the cockpit and tore forward. Before Nick could yank his aircraft out of the
potential rain of debris the forward section erupted with hot oil, smearing everything after the exhaust
ports before bursting into flame.

There was a surge of adrenaline, and while Nick reveled in the victory against an enemy pilot, he
wished it could be a less lethal test of flying skill. Pitching downward and rolling awkwardly, the Bf-
109 was on an irreversible arc towards the farmland below, but the red fox was silently praying that
the pilot could get out, his muzzle moving slightly in a repeated, “C’mon…c’monc’monc’mon! Get
out of there!”

All of it was to no avail as the plane impacted hard with the field that was laying fallow for the
season, the Messerschmitt hitting hard enough that the resulting fireball was contained by the crater
that also held most of the aircraft. No doubt there would be a few souls picking over it before
authorities could make it to the plane, looking for souvenirs like carrion birds. It was one of the more
disgusting aspects of war as far as the fox was concerned.

Radio chatter was kept to a minimum and by the time the remaining two Axis fighters broke off it
was close enough to sundown that the fighting was done for the day. Gathering back into formation,
Nick saw that the Red Tails were down three aircraft and ordered the remaining flyers to call in.
Pawson was forced to belly land his Spitfire, the fox still alive according to Jamie Morgan who saw
the squadron’s second in command get out of his plane before trotting across the field in case of fire.
Jeremy Ringburton, a young raccoon from Elkmondon had bought it, as had Nolan Lapsmith, a
nineteen year old rabbit from the city.

Just as Nick was getting ready to call for him, Reginald Harette piped in over the wireless.

“Sir? I think I might have trouble getting back to the field,” the rabbit said, his voice tight and
pinched.

“Where are you at, Reggie?” Nick asked as he began to survey the air around and below the
squadron before catching sight of the rabbit’s plane. “Never mind. I see you. We’ll form up around
you, okay?”

“Yes, Sir,” the reply came, the words a touch slurred.

Nick called to the rest of 13 Squadron and they all formed up around and above the Spitfire flown by
Harette.

There were substantial holes in the right wing and stabilizer, but what worried the fox officer the
most was the elongated perforation that ran from just below the canopy to the engine cowling. The
Spit wasn’t throwing oil, but that was about the only good thing Nick could think of. The interior of
the canopy was peppered with spots of bright crimson that the fox could see from several yards away
and the face of the rabbit inside looked pink.

“I…I don’t think…Sir? I can’t make a proper turn…” Harette sounded as if he were in shock and
maybe the first hints of pain.

“Don’t give up on me,” Nick said, trying to project confidence in the rabbit and his ability to get
back to the field. Fortunately they weren’t all that far from Flavideau. “Todd, get the boys back and
down. I’ll stay with Harette.” He waited until the rest of 13 Squadron peeled off while staying
alongside his subordinate.

Reginald Harette had had a rough start with 13, but Nick demonstrated that while he was a hard
officer he was also fair in the treatment of those in his command. Most of it stemmed from leading by example, and once proper penance had been served, the young rabbit buck going so far as treating the others in the group to little luxuries like a case of scotch, a few kegs of hardy brown ale and the like as way of an apology. The brash rabbit then showed his Squadron Leader that he could follow orders, Nick had kept his promise and sewn the pilot’s wings back on all his uniforms himself. He’d also been there for young Reginald after the death of his parents.

With so much invested in the promising young pilot, Nick wasn’t going to leave Harecourt on his own. “Alright, Reggie, are you able to turn at all?”

Across the distance of a few yards could see the rabbit roll his head as he tried to focus. “I…I can get her to go right, Sir…” Reginald said, his voice shaky even over the normal distortion of the wireless unit in his aircraft.

“Not a problem. We just take a nice, slow left turn back to the field. We’ll be coming in from the southeast, so when we finish the turn I want you to go ahead and drop your landing gear just in case there’s something mucked up. Can you do that?”

In the other Spitfire the rabbit nodded and held up a paw with a thumbs-up sign. Before he acknowledged over the radio there was the sound of rapid panting indicating the young pilot was in severe distress. The turn seemed to take far longer than the couple of minutes it actually required, and Nick only had a moment of relief when the wheels came down on the other plane, Harette adding flaps and a bit of power. However, it was at that point the Merlin engine on the stricken Spitfire began to cough and misfire intermittently. He watched as the other plane dropped several feet after clearing the tree line, Nick using the radio and a stern tone to keep the young buck focused. Harette tried to comply, but the landing was rough to say the least and bounced from wheel to wheel with jarring impacts that slapped the lapine pilot around in the confines of the cockpit.

It reached the point that Nick had to veer off, nearing stall speed, and added throttle to the engine before looping back around for his own approach to the field, anxious to get down and ascertain the condition of his subordinate.

Once down the red fox taxied as close as he could to Harette’s plane, the ambulance from the airfield’s small hospital bouncing across the field as ground crew ran as fast as they could to reach the rabbit. Slamming the canopy open and stripping his chute and other unnecessary equipment as he clambered out, then as soon as his feet were on the browning turf, Nick sprinted to the damaged plane and hurt pilot.

Harette had the wherewithal to open the canopy, but it looked as if that act had taken the last of the young pilot’s reserves and it was all he could do to turn his head to the left as Nick scrambled onto the wing. “…made it…sir…” he managed to get out before he slumped forward, his eyes rolling upwards before they closed.

As Nick looked into the cockpit he felt a surge of shock and horror. It was clear that getting his plane turned and down was nothing short of a miracle. Harette’s left leg was completely mangled, everything below the knee lying on the floor of the cockpit. The young buck had been able to wrap the leg strap of his chute around the stump, but there was still a disturbing amount of blood all over the interior. The round that had punched through the fuselage had struck the young officer’s leg, taking it off, before bouncing out and through the rear of the engine compartment. Not that Reginald Harette was all that big to begin with, the lack of his left leg made him even lighter and it was hardly any effort at all to lift his unconscious form out and jump to the ground.

“Don’t you die on me, Reggie. That’s an order!” Nick hollered as he set the limp buck down and made sure the improvised tourniquet was tight enough. He then did the only thing he could think of
and held the unconscious rabbit’s paw until the field medics arrived and set to work, doing everything they could to get the young flyer to Dr. McSwiney as rapidly as possible.

Ronnie Todd steered his friend away from following the ambulance once the stricken rabbit was loaded up and towards the field car and got Nick into the seat before heading towards the building that served for briefings, map room and, at better times, an improvised cinema. “You can’t do anything until we hear from the Doc, Nick,” the kit fox advised. “Might as well grab a drink and call it a night. We’ll be back at it tomorrow, you know.”

“Yeah,” Nick agreed as he shook himself out of his dark reverie and looked at his blood covered paws. “A drink sounds good.” He nodded at one of his oldest friends and gestured to the improvised bar as the passed by it. “Have one for me after debrief. I’m going to clean up before talking to the guys. Then when we’re finished and call it a day I’m going to rack out once I give Group Captain Faulkner my report.”

Ronnie watched the other fox turn tiredly for the staff offices of the airfield after gathering together his parachute and other equipment while Finnick’s crews got the planes hauled back to the ready line and began the process of inspecting and readying the fighters for the next mission.

Debrief for the exhausted flyers was carried out quickly, no one having the wherewithal to joke and jape after all was said and done. The reports had been filed and letters written for the families of pilots that had been injured and Nick lay in his cot, his eyes filled with a sad sort of dullness as his paws held the picture frame with him, Judy and Dawn. He and his wife were kept busy, and although she was stopping by Cecil Flavideau Aerodrome almost once every three days delivering aircraft or parts needed to keep 13 Squadron flying, he’d seen her only in glimpses, long enough for a blown kiss or wave and little else.

The Axis was throwing too much at them lately, and the attrition rates of pilots and planes was daunting. Granted, the Axis Luftwaffe was losing nearly ten planes to every Zootopia aircraft they brought down, but Nick wondered how long they could maintain that sort of thing. Zootopia, until the UVT finally joined or some miracle happened, couldn’t sustain the protracted air engagement. It was simple math, and the Axis had numbers on their side. That was even counting the exiles from the countries and territories that had been overrun in the blitzkrieg sweep of the Axis war machine.

There just weren’t enough bodies to fill the planes that the ZAC had.

So Judy was kept busy, he and his were near the end of their endurance…

Nick just hoped that Dawn was happy and safe as well as the rest of his new extended family and prayed for their safety. It was surely a sign of how dire the situation was as Nick was far from being a spiritual mammal, though the situation seemed to warrant a couple of prayers.

It seemed that Nick had just closed his eyes, pushing his thoughts, worries and emotions into the back of his mind when the sirens began their low build up to a keening wail. Before he was even aware of rolling out of his bed the fox had pulled on clothing and was out the door with his kit. Legs weak with fatigue carried him and the other pilots of 13 Squadron to their planes, determination countering the bone-aching weariness as they readied for another dust up in the gloomy night skies over the beleaguered nation of Zootopia.

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Judy yawned widely as she finished cleaning herself and began to work at her toe claws with a small set of clippers while chewing on a mint flavored stick. Pilot Officer Regina Maskers had been transferred to flight school as an instructor, one of the few ways that command could keep the
experienced raccoon in the cockpit and doing what she was best at. The bit of a scuffle that Judy and Regina had encountered delivering two new Spitfires to Cecil Flavideau Aerodrome had seriously rattled the raccoon. So much so that the formerly notorious flirt hardly looked at anyone when talking to them, opting instead to keep to herself.

Nick had said in a letter that it sometimes happened to the best pilots and it was nothing to be ashamed of.

Judy had tried to bolster the raccoon that had become her friend, though it was to no avail and so Regina had been transferred. Squadron Leader Scampington had assured the rest of her pilots that if PO Maskers wished to return that she would see to it, but for now it was a rear echelon posting for the young female.

Having the modest room all to herself was a little depressing for Judy as she put her nail clippers away and grabbed a brush specifically for her feet. Rabbits needed to be around others for socializing, contact being rather important for general physical and mental health. Perhaps, she thought to herself, trading with one of her fellow pilots and rooming with some of the other bunnies wouldn’t be a bad idea. Particularly as she was also wanting to be with her husband. Being around others would help ease that pang. Regina would have been good for company and she’d also been a good listener.

As she worked on the fur of her lower legs before moving to her feet, Judy thought about all of the flying they’d been doing as of late delivering aircraft. It wasn’t enough that pilots were dying every day along with civilians, now they were losing mammals from exhaustion and nerves. It was, to put it as simply as possible, dreadful, though the rabbit knew she was doing everything she could to help out, it seemed like it just wasn’t enough.

The brush felt good on her toes, but Judy wished that she were being tended to by Nick. He had a way of turning even the simplest of grooming into something sensual and wholly satisfying. Before her thoughts could delve further into the times spent with her fox, the sirens for the depot airfield began to build up to a high wail. Without even thinking about it Judy snagged the dark blue flight suit that she’d laid out for the next morning and the small canvas satchel that went with her everywhere. Nick had helped her put it together when he’d gifted her his old map case and notebook. Inside were things that they’d gathered as a sort of survival kit including candy bars that were made from oats, nuts and honey, matches, a small torch, or flashlight as he called it, and a revolver chambered for .22 ammunition. It wasn’t much, but Judy had to admit that she did feel better with it than without, recalling the encounter with the Axis pilot that had found her in her family’s barn.

The depot barracks had a solid basement with even deeper bombproofs that had been added recently, and that’s where Judy headed with other females of the Air Transport Auxiliary. Her fellow Angels looked more annoyed than afraid, the sounds of sirens and heading below ground becoming something of a regular occurrence even though the depot was well camouflaged and away from the city, and from the air didn’t look like a valuable target.

“You know, just once I’d like to be able to enjoy a good and proper evening reading than having to drag my tail down here,” Lucy Gambolton muttered as she sat cross legged on one of the many cots that had been brought down to the shelter.

“And if you read something other than that smutty romance you might actually be missing something,” a vixen with the other females pointed out with a wicked grin.

The doe regarded her friend with a sour glare. “I can’t help it if I’m a bunny with healthy appetites. Right, Judy?” Lucy asked trying to get a little sympathy and support.
Shaking her head and holding up her paws in an effort to stay out of the teasing, Judy sat down on the cot while tucking her bag underneath the metal frame. “I’m staying out of this one,” she said firmly.

Before the others could delve further into teasing each other one of the girls that functioned as an orderly for the depot as a whole and the Angels in particular came skipping up. “Beg pardon for the intrusion, ma’ams,” the red squirrel told the pilots, “But Squadron Leader Scampington wanted me to introduce your newest pilot. Ladies, Pilot Officer Riverwood, ma’am, these are Pilot Officers Gambolton, Whisktail, Hopps and Furgood.” As nods and smiles were exchanged, the squirrel stepped closer to Judy and pulled out a stack of envelopes from her satchel that also held a gasmask and other sundries. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get these to you earlier, ma’am,” she told the doe. “I was on my way when Pilot Officer Riverwood arrived and then the sirens, you know.”

Judy smiled as she accepted her post and took the stack of letters in one paw while tousling the head of the girl with the other. “Becky, will you just call us by name? You’re too damn proper sometimes and it’s enough to make my teeth itch!”

Rebecca Longtail shrugged in on herself and giggled aloud before trying to resume what she considered a proper demeanor, the fifteen year old worked very hard to be grown up which made her a little too serious at times. The young squirrel had been assigned to the ATA as part of voluntary service seeing she was too young to join the military or defense ministry in any official capacity, but like other young mammals all over the beleaguered country, was old enough to act as an orderly and message runner, something that was much more important to the pilots than it sounded.

As the squirrel joined the other pilots, a tin cup of tea pressed into her paws from an electric kettle, Judy flipped through the stack of letters. There were two from Nick that she devoured immediately, almost in tears at the end of each and yearned to hold the fox more than ever before. The second one also held a small photograph of Squadron Leader Wilde standing at the nose of his aircraft, the rather risqué bit of art depicting Judy in black lingerie. That the image was in color was a treat, and the doe felt her heart beat a touch faster at the fun-loving gleam in the fox’s emerald eyes and the devil-may-care grin on his elegant muzzle.

Judy was so enraptured in the photograph and letter from her husband that she was oblivious to the vibrations that rumbled through the underground shelter and sifted dust down that swirled and eddied around the metal shades of the overhead bulbs.

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Red tracers flitted past the canopy of Squadron Leader Wilde’s fighter like demonic fireflies that streamed towards him from the Axis bomber in a vain attempt to ward the Spitfire off or destroy it. The efforts of the predator gunner were in vain, though. Nick saw the destruction of Zootopia in his mind every time he went up to protect the nation that he’d chosen to fight for, the piles of burning ruble, the flames, and the cries of the survivors. He heard Dawn’s saddened bleating, smelled the blood that had turned her snowy wool red and saw the look of questioning in her jade colored eyes that vied with the loss of her family.

Tightening his grip on the control yoke, Nick’s thumb hovered for a moment over the trigger before pressing it for all he was worth as the Junkers Ju-88 slid into the prime position for a kill. Recoil from the new Hispano cannon could be felt through the airframe as twenty millimeter rounds erupted from their muzzles, and he depended on the weapons being synchronized properly to tell where the heavy shells struck. Nick had ordered that all of his weapons be free of tracer rounds, that little detail having given him and many of the other pilots an advantage lately, all of the Red Tails scoring more downed aircraft than before.
The lack of tracers hindered the enemy gunner from homing in on the Spitfire, and Nick passed through the rain of bullets unscathed, however the same couldn’t be said of the Junkers as sparks flew from the fuselage penetrations of the heavy cannon shells, each one causing additional damage with metal fragments from the air frame bouncing around like little knives. Nick kept the fire up for a count of five as he began to veer off, the change raking the fire from the main body to the wing where one of the twenty millimeter projectiles struck the engine. The damage was catastrophic and the entire nacelle erupted in bright orange flames with thin borders of blue as both oil and petrol ignited in a blowtorch like conflagration.

A moment later Nick watched as the fire spread, the wing buckling from the combination of heat, velocity and wind that buffeted the bomber. The loss of the lifting surface threw the Junkers into a slow spiral that grew faster and tighter as the plane lost altitude, the fire spreading as the bomber plummeted from the sky.

There had been no parachutes, but that bothered Nick far less than it should have as he banked hard to the next Junker Ju-88.

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Damn that fox, Judy thought as she drank in the picture for several moments; he never failed, even in a photo, to get her bothered in rather naughty and wholly enjoyable way. The Rabbit’s Messiah help Nick when she saw him next.

The next envelope in the stack was from Dawn and it was a delight to see how much her writing had improved! The missive was less about goings-on at the Hopps’ burrow and more about how the lamb missed her adopted parents, and was chock full of well wishes and love before delving into the tale of learning how to bake from her new grandmother. ‘Gramma Bonnie’ was teaching her a number of recipes that had been favorites of the Hopps clan and the ewe was excited to show off her new skills. At the bottom of the page was a drawing the lamb had made of herself, Judy and Nick, all of them smiling with Dawn’s adopted parents holding her hooves and each smiling with a cluster of flowers at their feet.

Getting to the last letter, Judy read it and re-read it several times as the deep thumping from the world above grew louder and more noticeable, her pulse jumping, but for completely different reasons as she learned about her little brother’s departure for Army service. It wasn’t until a particularly strong blast caused the lights to flicker that the bunny pulled herself out of her reverie only to find the other girls under their cots and scrambled to join them, scooping up the letters as she moved.

“What the bloody hell, Judy?” Lucy exclaimed as she shifted a little closer to the other doe, her first and most immediate need being contact with another rabbit. “You going deaf? We’ve been yelling at you and you didn’t hear us!”

Judy shook her head. “Sorry. Just found out that my brother went and volunteered,” she offered in a subdued tone as another thump shook the very floor of the bombproof shelter.

“Good on him, eh?” the new pilot, Rebecca said from under the opposite bunk.

Judy shot the newcomer a hard glare. “No. Not good. He’s only sixteen, the little idiot!” She shook her head. “Sorry. I just got one brother back from Bullkirk, and now another is running away to join this mess,” she explained. “Mother of Bunnies I pray he doesn’t do something stupid and volunteer for the line,” Judy muttered as she buried her face in her arms.

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Dawn looked out the window with eyes that were wide open in worry and looked at the criss-crossing beams from searchlights that were miles away. Every so often the ground to the north lit up a little or there was a small spark in the night sky. When another presence came up behind her the little lamb couldn’t help the little bleat of terror that escaped her mouth before she clamped her hooves over her lips.

“Don’t you worry none, Dawn,” Virgil said as he looked out the window as well, the room completely dark as the ARP had come through almost an hour prior to give blackout warnings. “That’s too far away to threaten us. No where near the city, either. Looks like they’re catching hell from our boys.”

Dawn felt her eyes start to burn slightly as her breathing sped up. “Do…do you think Poppa’s up there?” she asked in a high whisper.

The tall rabbit looked down for a moment, ready to tell the young lamb something to placate her, but she deserved something more than just empty words and after a moment he nodded. “You know he is,” Virgil told the ewe softly as he put a paw on her shoulder and knelt down next to her. “Nick and Judy…your Poppa and Mamma, are going to do everything they can to turn those savages back. They want to make sure you’re safe and will do everything that they can to make that happen.”

With a sigh Dawn nodded, though it did nothing to abate the worry. “They’re really brave. I don’t think that I can be that brave.”

Before Virgil could say anything Bonnie stepped forward and guided the lamb away from the window. “But you have already been that brave, Dawn,” the matronly rabbit said with a smile. “Now, don’t you worry about what’s happening out there. Your parents are some of the best pilots Zootopia has and you know that as long as you have hope and believe in them coming back that they will feel that and know you’re thinking of them. And you keep writing letters, too. That means all the world to them. And maybe tomorrow we can bake up some goodies to send them. I’ll teach you how to make your Mamma’s favorite biscuits, and we’ll make something for your Poppa I know he’ll love.”

Virgil watched as his mother took Dawn out of the room and to the lower levels of the burrow that were sturdy enough to withstand more than a few bombs should it come down to it, the young buck admiring how his mother could hide her own worry so easily while reassuring the little ewe. As far as the rabbit was concerned what was happening in the far off skies was yet further proof that he was making the right decision in rejoining the fight.

Dawn said nothing as she was led to the lower levels, absently tugging at the neck of her jumper. It wasn’t until Gramma Bonnie said something that she realized that her discomfort had been noticed.

“Is everything all right, sweetie?”

The lamb shrugged. “Mother…my other mother…she would shear my wool at the end of summer. Not as close as springtime, but it gets too fluffy.” As Dawn tried adjusting her clothes an idea struck and she gasped a little. “Gramma Bonnie? Do you know how to knit an’ make things?”

“Yes,” the doe said with a smile. “Do you want to learn?”

Dawn nodded emphatically. “An’…can we use my wool? I know that a lotta other sheeps are using their wool for the war an’ if I use mine to make stuff for Poppa an’ Mamma that would be the same, right?”

Bonnie nodded as she directed the lamb into the room that she shared with Belle and several other
young bunnies. Nearly all of them were in nightgowns and ready to go to bed, oblivious to the fight that was raging in the skies well away from Bunnyburrow. Belle, however, could tell that there was something bothering her best friend who was also her niece by adoption, but that was too weird to think too hard on as the little doe though of her more like a sister. They never talked about the war where some of the others could hear, and normally waited until the rest of the does in the room fell asleep. It was something made easier as the two had beds right next to each other.

“Tell you what, we’ll try to get you sheared tomorrow after lunch. Does that sound good?” Bonnie asked with a warm smile as she tucked her other girls in before going to Belle and Dawn and getting them settled in for the night. “You’ll have to be patient with me, though. I’ve never done that before.”

Dawn nodded as the doe gave and received a kiss goodnight from Belle before doing the same to the lamb and departed with one last look at the children before turning off the light and closing the door.

As was fairly standard, as soon as the other bunnies drifted off Belle slipped out of her bed and over to the one Dawn was in and found the lamb waiting. The other bunnies would eventually do the same over the course of the night so it wasn’t out of the norm for a little bed hopping. They curled up under the blankets and whispered long into the night, the ewe telling the doe about what she saw out the window before breaking down at how much she missed Nick and Judy, Belle doing what she could to comfort her best friend before both eventually drifted off to sleep.

Belle had to admit to herself as she yawned widely that Dawn was handling the absence of her parents much better than the bunny would if her mum and dad had to go fight. She idly stroked the lamb’s ear as she drifted into the embrace of slumber. Smiling at the small, soft, “Baahaa,” Dawn sounded with as she nestled into her pillow.

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Nick tapped the fuel gauge and made the mental calculation that he would run completely out of fuel about four miles out from Cecil Flavideau. At least there wouldn’t be much of a risk of fire. His ammunition had run dry with the last bomber that was now a smoldering hole in some poor farmer’s field, and no petrol meant that if his gear didn’t come down and he had to belly land that there was little chance of turning into a fireball.

“Jaimie,” the Squadron Leader called to his subordinate. “Get the squadron down and out of the way. I’m going to throttle back and save what little I have left in the tank.”

To the right of his commanding officer’s plane, Jaimie Morgan dipped his wings back and forth before answering over the wireless. “You got it, Boss. I’m going to follow you in. I’ve still got…oh, maybe eight gallons, so you’re stuck with me.”

Nick shook his head and ground his teeth in frustration. The Morgan twins were great pilots, but when they wanted both could be absolutely stubborn to the point of lunacy. Still, there was a small part of the red fox that felt a little better at having someone with him even though there was nothing that the other vulpine could do if the situation went sideways. There really wasn’t anything more to say and Nick simply kept watch on the skies between noting landmarks as he headed towards their home field.

Dropping the speed of his Spitfire helped Nick squeeze out every possible drop from his fuel tank and the gauge reached and sat at zero for several minutes before the first misfire occurred. Fortunately at that point the field was only a couple of miles away and the fox was relieved to see that pilots and ground crew were in the last stages of clearing the field. As he dipped a little lower, Nick frowned when the Merlin engine gave one final, fitful cough and died.
“Okay, Jaimie. I’m dry. I’ll see you down,” Nick said as he toggled the radio switch and pushed his goggles up and out of the way. If he landed hard it was best to get the goggles out of the way if he bunged up and wound up in the trees or flipping the plane so his eyes didn’t catch glass. Fortunately the hand crank for the carriage hydraulics worked properly, and Nick pumped the actuator with determination, feeling the struts lock into place well before the ground of the strip met the rubber of his wheels. Just before the wheels took the weight of the Spitfire, the fox tripped the releases and slid the canopy back just in case he needed to make a rapid exit from the cockpit.

Once more Nick Wilde’s luck held out and as the fighter rolled to a stop, ground crew and vehicles heading towards him with haste, he let out a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding out in an explosive exhalation and chuckled tiredly. Slumping back against the flight seat, he plucked the picture of Judy and Dawn from its place of honor on his instrument panel. “See?” he said softly as his finger gently touched the pair of smiling faces. “You two will always get me home safe. My own personal angels.”

By the time Jaimie Morgan and others reached the Spitfire it was to find a sleeping Nick, the photograph of his family pressed to his chest and a soft, warm smile on his muzzle.

Chapter End Notes

And it's on the way back! A little larger chapter than normal at nearly 7000 words, so that should make a few of you happy.

I wanted to try and get a segment in showing how different things were going on at the same time, different scenarios for the characters and how they were coping with the situation of war and constant threat. Maybe not the best rendition, but it's been a while since I was here in this story.

And time is a little strained at the moment with family things that are taking up a portion of my time and having to learn new things, so...

And PO Harette has redeemed himself, but is it too late? Well, we'll see, won't we? (Sorry, I goofed on the name and mistakenly had him named Harecourt. My bad!)

Now, before anyone says anything, no. Dawn and Belle are not developing a relationship beyond being family, so get that out of your minds. They're kids and trying to deal with the horror of war, and both are species that are notorious for needing social contact. It's a comfort and support thing, so, yeah.

Anyhoo, drop by and leave me a word or two!
Pilot was dead. That last burst of gunfire had all but torn out the port side of the cockpit and most of the Heinkel's 'greenhouse' was now only open framework, the glazing smashed. What was left of Pilot was still strapped into his seat. Thankfully he was not entangled in any of the controls. Further, the Heinkel was a fairly sedate flying machine and wasn't going anywhere untoward right away. Karl grabbed at the flying wheel, swinging around it around to the emergency pilot's assistant position and took on the role.

Karl had, up until that moment, been the navigator and bombardier in the Heinkel, and had gotten only rudimentary instruction on this alternate task. He could fly the bomber in a basic fashion, the control column seemed to be fully functional, and though he didn't have access to the rudder pedals, he did have the trimming controls so could make some input.

The throttles and some other controls would have been largely out of reach, on the other side of Pilot, but that was no longer an issue, as they had joined Pilot into bullet-riddled ruin. But Karl wasn't all that worried about those details. Where was the verdamnt Enemy and how was he going to avoid his attentions in what was now a near ten ton glider?

No sign of the Zootopian Hurricane.

"Auw! Anyone see the Jagd?" No response from Funker or Gunner was hopeful just an intercom failure. "Pilot is gone, but I've got things for now." As the seconds added up, he could begin to think about what to do next. There was still some altitude for parachuting, at least for the guys in back, if they were still alive. But Karl wasn't sure about how long the Heinkel would stay something akin to straight and level if he let go of the controls. The autopilot was gone as well. Without power, he figured he had a few minutes of glide, maybe more if he eased off the modest dive angle, but he was wary about stalling or otherwise losing control.

And where was that Hurricane?

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"That's got him!" Cheered Rourke as he saw his Squadron mate pull away from the Hun Bomber. It was still going straight and level, but the engines were out, just trailing a wisp of white, fuel or coolant draining away. The streamlined glass nose, part of the signature of the shapely Heinkel bomber, was now just an outline in frames. The pilot must have gotten hacked, and the rest aboard might well be too with all the lead through the machine.

"An even ten for you, Hopps," called out Talbot. "Going to finish him?"

"What's the point? Well-chewed and on the way down, just wastes bullets at this point."

"Yeah. But someone follow him down to report the crash site. Who's out?"

Unfortunately, though everyone was out of ammunition, or nearly so, they were also nearly out of fuel, at least with a margin to get back to base. Finally, Talbot made the decision. "Hopps, as it’s yours for score, you can follow it. There are a couple field options on the way back if you need to
land short. Hardy, you still have some rounds left for his wing mammal."

The two pilots waved at each other and took up positions behind the stricken bomber. As it was gliding so slowly, they were loath to match and not be able to quickly reaccelerate if needed, the two fighters swung back and forth in wide, easy S-turns, keeping their eyes on the skies and not getting too close if the crew might take one last shot at them.

If it hadn't been another bloody day of war, three bombers destroyed out of a raiding force of eight and one of their fellows forced to take to the 'chute, it was a beautiful day to be in the air. The fall afternoon sky was bright blue and the landscape, still a couple thousand meters below, was green and gold in a patchwork of farm and forest.

Hopps loved the air, high and clean and clear. And there was a thrill, like the swoop of a child's swing, but it just kept going and going. But as much as he reveled in it, he kept his eyes open for any threat. They were just in range of Messerschmitts, though the enemy fighters couldn't afford to be prowling, they might be coming off escort or a harassment raid and might take a quick shot before having to head home on the last of their fuel.

Glancing down, Hopps began to recognize the landscape, Deerbrook County. They'd be passing by his home ground, the Tri-burrows, were he to ever think of it in such a fashion. But at the moment, he was more concerned with where the bomber might want to put down. The County seat was straight ahead, and even without bombs, the Heinkel could make a big hole in the middle of things. Hardy was thinking the same thing and the pair of them pulled away from the bomber to get into a better shooting position, just in case.

Whoever was aboard the bomber must have noticed things too, as it banked away from the town. It still had plenty of altitude as well and made no sign of diving into anything. At least yet. Seeing that little consideration, Hopps decided he had to see who was flying. Getting right up had the risk of being fired upon, and slowing down enough to match speed meant being unable to quick evade if needed, but Hopps was piqued.

Getting in close, he could properly see the innumerable rifle calibre bullet holes from his guns that had raked the port side of the larger plane. And the smashed glazing of the clear nose of the thing. It appeared that the pilot was dead, or at least slumped in his seat. As he understood it, the bombardier had some level of flight control and there was a figure sitting beside him, lower, or smaller, gripping the controls. With all their flight gear on, it was hard to tell what species they were, perhaps some kind of canid, there were longish muzzles.

The bombardier/pilot glanced over at him and waved.

Hopps waved back then pointed down. The enemy pilot gave a paw wave that sure looked like "where?"

Where indeed?

There were larger fields to the west, or at least lower walls and fewer stands of trees, as well as somewhat leveler ground. And not too many little towns to threaten. Hopps gestured to the enemy pilot. He might not want to turn, south and east was the shortest way home if he still had engines. At the rate he was losing altitude, he wasn't going to even get out of the county.

Perhaps he understood and began a slow and careful banking turn. Shortly, the loss of altitude demanded a choice, and a nice wide field, looked freshly mowed, looked about right. The Heinkel took a slightly steeper angle, aiming towards the field, but in doing so picked up a little speed, which meant a little extra lift and it wasn't going to touch down yet. So it floated over the field and looked
like it was going on to the next, if the line of trees allowed.

The next field was smaller and less even, and if the bomber didn't stop, had a stone wall and rather
dense bit of woods beyond to deal with. Having finally lost enough speed to settle into a landing, the
plane now had no field to land on. Hopps could tell the pilot must have panicked by trying a last little
hop over the trees. A mistake, as he both didn't clear the trees and lost too much speed in the effort.
The Heinkel was still in the air when it finally decided it wasn't going to fly anymore.

The bomber clipped the treetops that bordered the field before thumping down hard and then
slithering across the field and coming up against the stone wall at the far side. Karl disconnected
himself from the plane, though paused to listen for any tell-tales of fire, or more importantly, any
word from Funker and Gunner in back. He made his way aft between the vertical bomb cells,
grateful they were empty with all the bullet holes now in them. And there were the two. The impact
of the landing had tossed them to the bulkhead, but only as lifeless bodies. The splatter of blood and
pattern of bullet holes through the aircraft's skin made it clear that they had caught the full fury of the
attack.

There were standing instructions that their machine was not to fall into enemy paws in anything like
intact condition. Perhaps he could burn the thing, once he got his crewmates out. But judging from
all the damage, the fuselage now had some odd twists and bends that shouldn't be there, there might
not be all that much of value left in it.

First things first. Getting a way out.

Normal entry and exit was through the now crushed belly gunner's position. Gunner must have
gotten up and out for some reason, had he been wounded, or had been assisting Funker? Either way,
he had not been down there, which wasn't there at all anymore.

While an able body could climb out via the top gun position, trying to haul anyone that way would
be practically impossible.

Reaching back to the cockpit area, Karl regarded the pilot's overhead hatch. Normally, due to the
often compromised view out through all the inconveniently reflective glass during take off or
landing, the pilot could slide open the hatch and elevate his seat, turning the modern wargraft a
temporary open cockpit aeroplane, complete with a little extended windshield.

Now, it was the only easy way out of the Heinkel. If he could manage to work around the gory mess
that had been his Pilot. Fortunately, it slid open easily enough and while sitting on the edge, he could
reach down and pull at the body.

Of course, the pilot had to be a particularly large Wolf and Karl a slight Fox. But with some effort,
and the fact a percent of the Pilot's mass was draining out to the cockpit floor, he got him up and out.
Dragging him some distance off from the plane, Karl opened his parachute and spread it out to use it
as a shroud.

Then back to recover the rest.

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The couple of trucks had a crew of local lads to use their combined efforts to more easily harvest
those fields ready to go. There were a few full on mechanical harvesters in the county, but not
enough for everyone to use before the weather closed in. And there was a level of pride in that the
lads could collectively give the machines a run for their money with their hand tools. There was
enough daylight left for one more field, if the drivers could manage a little more speed, but were
loath to kick up more dust or jostle their passengers too much.

"Hey! Look at that!" One of the lads, Jack Blackback shouted and pointed. And there were a pair of Hurricanes purring along, low overhead. And it seemed like they were waggling their wings at them, to which everyone cheered and waved. Then they turned, no, circled even, waggling their wings again and heading more or less back the way they came, then a couple miles on, circled and waggled again. There was just enough swell and stands of trees to hide whatever was their focus of attention.

"What the world?" Someone asked, and then Jeffy Hopps shouted, "They want us to go there! Maybe someone parachuted or something?"

Instantly there was collective agreement and the two trucks surged on to see what was up. Dust and bruises be damned. The pair of Hurricanes passed over them one last time with another wing waggle and were then off.

Coming up to a fork, they saw a mouse signal. Like a small shielded traffic light, the mice who lived out in those parts could give notice for a pick up. In years past it might have been a sign or semaphore flag, but some of the folks had gotten fancy. Instead of the simply lit lamp, this one was blinking, three times, pause, three times, a simplified SOS.

The fork was in about the right direction, so on they went. Shortly, beyond a small wood and up against a wall at the edge of a field, lay an enemy plane.

Not as big as they expected. Rather slender, with somewhat organic lines to it. In dark greens, made even darker in the afternoon shadow of the trees, though the stark black and white national markings made it all too clear who it belonged to. There was a mass of cloth laid out nearby with a body on it.

As the crowd was focused on the sight, it took a moment to notice the several mice on the edge of the field trying to get their attention. "There's a Hun up and about! A fox! He's inside the plane again!" came the tiny shouts.

The more than a dozen mammals piled out of the trucks, various implements in paw, and warily advanced. Taking a closer look at the poor beast on the parachute, there were some mixed reactions to the sight. The slain creature was the very image of the "big, bad wolf" and wore the uniform of an unthinkably cruel enemy. But he was also torn and bloody, and his terribly toothsome gape was in a face twisted in pain.

But the real attention was still on the downed aircraft and the clatter of someone inside. They could see the innumerable holes in the side and could only imagine what could have happened to anyone inside.

Jock, the big, though still rather young badger felt he needed to take the lead and rapped on the side of the fuselage. "Oy! You in there, will ya be comin' out?"

The clattering stopped and a face briefly appeared in a side window. A Fox! Some more clatter and he appeared again up above at a machine gun station. Everyone froze in shock at the sudden prospect of being mowed down were they stood. But the Fox did some fiddling with the gun and a double can magazine fell off the side and a moment later the machine gun itself slid down and clattered to the ground.

There was a silent exchange of looks in how the collected mammals had just dodged literal bullets and understood the gesture of disarmed surrender. No one let go their scythes and pitchforks, but they did let them relax their ready pose.
Guessing that the fox would exit from the cockpit area, if the trail of blood and worse from the one body was any indication, most of the crowd clustered up there while a few circled the plane to examine the rest of it.

Jeffy and Don Hopps, and one of the Sward rabbits, Bobby, were bold enough to climb up to the cockpit and Jeffy even went inside. After all the time with Judy's fox and dealing with a real enemy flyer before, he was feeling particularly bold. All the blood in the cockpit was a bit much, but he concentrated on what might the fox be doing in back. Even though the smell was getting to him, Jeffy went back through the narrow passage aft and found the fox sorting out a pair of bodies. Two more of his flying mates, no doubt. This fox didn't look like Nick at all, much darker and a bit leaner, if that was even possible, with dark eyes to match. His flying suit, all of the them wore a one-piece coverall, was zipped open to show a rather tidy formal uniform underneath. There was a lot of blood on all of it. The Fox was briefly surprised at the appearance of a little bunny, but then gestured that he would need help pulling the body of his comrade out.

"Hey you guys! The rest of the crew got hacked and the fox wants to bring them out!" Jeffy called out.

"Okay then," and Don cautiously climbed inside, more from the splattered gore than the prospect of being in close proximity to an enemy fox. Bobby followed, but just to inside the cockpit, he was not keen on getting deeper inside, though who could say if it was the sense of danger or the ghastly reek.

Once Don was back aft with Jeffy, it was clear that the fox would hoist his crewmate, another wolf, by the shoulders and the two rabbits would get his feet. They were slow and careful. Things were a bit slippery and nasty. The pair didn't want to think of what was drooling out of the coverall legs, but were prepared to brave it out.

Once they were in the cockpit, Bobby saw that he could help by sitting up on the open top hatch and hoist the body up, those Swards were always a lot stronger than they looked. Then, instead of having the body ignobly slide off to flop on the ground, there were many paws ready to lower it.

The fox nodded in approval, then wobbled just a bit. Jeffy and Don looked to him. "Are you wounded?" Don asked. There was so much blood splashed around that he couldn't tell if any of it was his own. The Fox cocked his head, did he understand? Maybe, as he waved the concern off. After taking a little breather, went back to take care of the last casualty.

It was another fox, but one of the smaller species, a kit fox, like Flight Officer Tod, Nick's fellow pilot who they'd met back at the Finding Festival. The fox seemed to be getting more weary, as although this body was smaller, he had more trouble lifting it.

Because he was so small, Jeffy chose to take his feet alone. The fox smiled at that and gave an appreciative nod. Getting him up and out was also simplified. Then when it came time for the fox to get out, he clearly needed help. The rabbits exchanged a look, as it was obvious that the enemy vulpine was in a bad way.

Once out of the aircraft, the fox indicated he needed to stop. He leaned back against the bomber's fuselage and slid down to a sitting position. It was only then that the Rabbits noticed his blood soaked gaiters and feet and a drool coming out of his trouser legs.

"Oh pellets! He's hit!" Don gasped and approached the fox, who, seeing his concern, waved him off. While he didn't say anything, his expression seemed to be that of resignation. He reached inside his coverall and drew out a pay book that he then tucked into an outside pocket for easier access. He then began to shiver a bit and zipped his coveralls back up and wrapped his arms about himself. A few others came to see what was up with the fox.
A couple showed real sympathy for a dying mammal, regardless of status. Most everyone else kept their distance, unenthusiastic in witnessing a death in progress.

A few were more harsh. "Glad to see the end of those damned biters." Archie grumbled, to a couple supporting nods.

"Well, you'll have your wish soon enough!" snapped Bobby. But he understood the sentiment. He'd been on paw when the previous Enemy Flyer had staggered though the farm and had half-wished his Dad had shot the cat. But then as now, the enemy had been reduced to a weak and harmless wretch and he was never really a kick-'em-when-they're-down kind of beast.

While a few stood by the death vigil, one of the drivers offered to go back to town and alert the authorities, as they didn't know of anyone with a 'phone in the neighborhood. It took a little while for the fox to gasp out one last breath, and then he was carried over to lie by his comrades.

As it was getting towards dark, a few of the fellows scrounged some windfall from the woods and started a fire on the edge of the field. Everyone stood around the fire as it got dark, with not much to say. It was a clear night, with a bit of a chill then with the sun down, and would be pleasant enough expect that there was the occasional whiff from the bodies and the wreck.

"Hell of a day."

"Yep."

"Still have to get to the Saunders crop."

"Yep."

"Hope we don't get any more like that."

"Yep."

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Pellets. Fuel was getting low enough that looking for an alternate landing was now a necessity. Getting home on fumes or even deadstick could earn more than a cross word from the CO, even though it was a secret point of pride among many of the pilots. But pranging one's crate short of the field was a Very Bad Thing and Hopps was not one to dare that risk. But where to land? There was an option that brought a sadly wry smile.

"Hardy. What do you think about checking out those Red Tail Spitfires? Over."

"Aren't they a bit out of the way? Over."

"Still closer than home, and the only place that isn't a training or bomber field. Over"

While any operation would have fuel, any other service specific to the Merlin-powered plane might not be readily available. Then inter-unit rivalries, outside the heat of battle, could be very much a thing. Hopps for one was in no mood for the hazing that might come with the bomber crowd or the hero worship from the flying cadets.

Hopps radioed the base of choice, who was more than happy to play host to the pram-pushers. Hopps didn't mind the slight. Spitfires were all glory, but the Hurricanes were the ones taking the enemy bombers in greater numbers, even if the press was slow to acknowledge them. Not too soon, with petrol gauges close to pegged, there was Cecil Flavideau Aerodrome, little different than his
home field. A few more buildings above ground perhaps, and more extensive trench works and ack-ack. They were a bit closer to the coast and could expect more chances of attack. The pattern of dirt patches and fresh young grass attested to earlier bombings. A threat his unit had yet to face.

Upon landing, they were directed to park next to the line of Spitfires, a mixed batch of gun and cannon-armed machines, all with the dramatic red tail decoration.

There was a bit of crowd on paw to welcome them as they disentangled themselves from their mounts. "Like you'd never seen a Hurricane before?" Hopps quipped.

The ground crew beast who was assisting him countered, "Seeing fossils like you and your crates is a bit of an event."

Hopps gave the mammal, a ram, an appraising look. The old beast couldn't be a day younger than fifty. "And an old coot like you is calling me a fossil?" he called out in mock accusation.

"Ha!" he snorted back. "After all these cubs and kits, anyone with their horns in a curl is positively ancient. Besides, if I may say, you look like you've got a touch of decrepitude."

Hopps grumbled at that. "Got a few rounds in me a while back. Still stings a little." A bit of an understatement. He'd managed to bluff his way back to flight status only by taking advantage of the gullibility of the new young Doctor assigned to the unit.

"Besides, we have to welcome our stalwart second line." Announced one of the flying officers, a fox, who had overheard the conversation. "You've been catching everyone we've been missing. Congratulations on getting in on those raiders today."

"Never enough though. And they had already dropped their load by the time we got to them." Hopps said with a bitter edge. "I'm Hopps." presenting a paw, "And this young ragamuffin is my wing beast of the moment, Hardy" gesturing to the rather fuzzy brown and white patched bunny that was coming over with his own little crowd of onlookers.

"Hopps, eh?" the fox said with a bit of a grin, "No relation to a certain headstrong doe, eh?"

Hopps cocked his head, and with a bit of a grin of his own. "You don't look like the kind of head case that would get entangled with the likes of her. Brother?"

"I'm afraid I am that cracked." And Nick Wilde shook the rabbit's paw with renewed enthusiasm. Then announced to everyone, "This is my Brother-in-Law, another air-crazy Hopps." And after some brief paw shakes all around, asked in a more formal tone. "I'm a bit surprised to see you up so soon, ya know. But, how was it?"

"We got three Heinkels down, a couple more smoking but still going. One of ours had to bail, wing tank fire, but he ought to be okay." Hopps reported. "We had split our formation so had only five of us for the job." He then snuffed, "I'm fine. Just a little gimpy at times."

"The last one was Hopps', his tenth kill," added Hardy.

Hopps made a little face at that. "You guys helped, as always."

"Nah, you were the one to get him. We were all pretty much dry by then so could only feint to keep the gunners distracted. That one bellied in, looked like it was still one piece when we left it for some locals to deal with."

"Oh really?" Wilde was piqued.
Hardy added. "Yeah, just this side of Deerbrook County, where it flattens out a bit more."

Nick gave Hopps a second look. That was the Tri-burrows neighborhood and Hopps was clearly not going to comment.

Judy had mentioned a little about her elder brother, the moody and distant Jonah, who had left the warren when she was still just a kit. That he was a flyer at all was a surprise to the whole family when they received the notice that he'd been injured in combat. Then the terse meeting when Bonnie had gone to visit her wayward Son. Later 'Jonny' Hopps had sent the briefest of a note to Judy, congratulating her on earning her wings.

"Do you want to 'phone your base? Let them know you're okay. Even see if you can overnight if you'd like? We'd be delighted to have you." Nick offered. More than hospitality was in that. He could tell that Hopps was more than just a tad gimpy, and was at the moment rather marginal for more flying today.

Hardy looked hopeful, but Hopps made a little face. "Rather be back to our post. Be ready for action all the sooner. Those biters are likely to take advantage of the last good weather for now."

The collected Red Tails nodded in support. With the threat of fall rains, enemy attacks were spottier, making the most of clear skies. Nick wasn't so eager to get him on his way.

"Well, as it will take a few." And Nick gestured to the ground troops, "We can, at least offer you a cuppa and nibble, eh?"

Hopps snarked, "Zootopia is clearly rubbing on you. Though that is the worst accent over your UT twang."

"Accent? Whadeveh cood ya mean?" was returned in the worst comedic seaboard slur, which brought a general guffaw from the crowd.

"So, who do we have here?" In a very clipped City tone, Group Captain Faulkner had finally made his appearance.

Hopps and Hardy snapped to and the others straightened up for their commander. "Flight Officers Hardy and Hopps, recovering from a combat sortie, Sir!"

"Ran dry after some hostiles, I'd wager." The senior officer returned the salute and offered a paw. "We'll get you topped off, and re-armed if you'd like."

"Yes sir, and thank you, yes." Hopps returned.

"Very good. And a bit of a family reunion here, eh?" Faulkner suspected this was Judy's Brother, but didn't know the details, and before Hopps could react, Nick interceded.

"Hopps and Hardy ought to report their action, some more Heinkels downed." Said with a flurry of covert paw and facial signals that made absolutely no sense to anyone.

Faulkner was sharp enough to recognize the indecipherable deflection and took it even further. Glancing back at Hopps' Hurricane, he noticed the double row of small Hakenkreutz besides the cockpit. "Another successful defender of our beleaguered lands." He then proceeded to give the machine a little walk around.

"See you've gotten into a few proper scrapes as well." Pointing at the several doped patches on the wings and fuselage, and the generally worn look of the whole of the plane.
"She keeps going, even with some cannon fire." Hopps pointed to a larger patch in the lower rear fuselage. "But still can't stand more than a few hits of the big stuff." He made a face. "And this is my second mount. Lost the first one when I got plugged." And he gestured to his slight limp.

"And thinking of big stuff." Hardy chirped, "I see you guys are getting the new cannon," and gestured to the Spitfires nearby.

"Yes indeed. And when they work, or still have ammo in them, they make a real difference," one of the other Red Tail Pilots offered.

Seeing Hopps' and Hardy's curious expression, he continued. "The feed is only a sixty round drum, which doesn't always like hard maneuvering."

The pair nodded in understanding. The heat of battle didn't always allow for counting one's rounds.

Someone else observed, "Wish we had ammo counters like in the Messerschmitt."

"That would make life easier."

"Having cannon on our birds would sure help us, too." Hardy mused.

"All in good time," reassured Faulkner. "And I'm told the effort to get belt-fed cannon is well under way."

Hopps and Hardy were clearly curious to see the new Spitfires and the crowd tagged along for the show and tell. As luck had it, it was Wilde's mount that they came to. Since they had approached from the starboard side, a certain detail was not revealed, and it became clear that while Wilde was not keen on having such shown, his squadron mates were becoming all too obvious.

Hopps was all about ogling the details of the plane, but Hardy was noticing the little unspoken drama among the other pilots. "So, what have you got going on?" They ushered him over to view the port side, much to Wilde's visible distress. And there it was, the embellishment of "Dreaming of My Angel". Hardy's eye widened with glee, but he wasn't going to spoil it for Hopps.

Finally, Hopps broke out of his reverie and came around to see what everyone was up to. Then he stopped dead in his tracks, gawking at the artwork. A credible likeness of Judy, in an impossibly skimpy bit of lingerie and angel wings. He chocked his head, his ears twitching in a semaphore whirl of emotions.

And then he laughed, a full braying guffaw that doubled him over. Hardy recoiled a bit at that, Hopps never laughed. He also never gasped and fell over and squeaked in pain.

"Hopps! You alright?" Hardy stood over his fellow officer, ready to give a paw, but nothing beyond that to allow him his dignity in case it was just a little stumble. But Hopps was in clear distress. "Is it your injuries?" Hardy knelt beside him, then glanced up at the alarmed crowd. "He caught some lead a while back. Said he was okay, aside from a little limp."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit more spent than I thought." Hopps was clearly not ready to get up yet. Glancing at the nose art again, he let go a pain-chocked chuckle. "Gah, JuJu, you'll be the death of me yet." He then looked to Wilde, "Alright then, I guess we'll be your over-night guests after all."

Wilde and Hardy gave Hopps a little hoist and he stood, mostly steadily, between them. "It's not so bad, really. Mostly just don't have my stamina back. Too much bed rest was worse than the injuries," Hopps attempted to reassure. There was a knowing exchange of looks among the pilots. Any number of them had, at one time or another, insisted they were fit for flight duty while ill or fatigued.
"But you have got to tell me how you met Judy, now Flight Officer Wilde." And he shook his head in good-natured incredulity.

"Well, it's a long story, and we'll have plenty of time for the telling, eh?" Wilde looked over to the Group Captain who gave a supportive nod.

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**Later on, fighters escorting bombers over enemy territory would have a similar dilemma, as they could not dare to throttle back and conserve fuel, so weaved around to keep their speed up which compromised their escort range.**

**The frame and fabric fuselage of the Hurricane was a bit more forgiving of exploding shells compared to the Spitfire. The Hurricane's skin could be rather dramatically rent, but while the underlying structure remained intact, all was good. The all-metal Spitfire used its skin as part of the structure, so any notable damage to it risked the airframe's strength.***

**Ammo counters were standard on Axis types from the beginning, and became ubiquitous in just a couple years.**

Chapter End Notes

And chapter 30 goes to Stevegallacci!!!! I liked this one a lot! If you want to know about aircraft, Steve is definitely the go-to for information and his knowledge is vast! His notes at the end were informative as well and I learned a thing or two myself, but then my area of expertise tends more towards small arms and swords or other bits of cutlery!
Grooming in war time

Chapter by stevegallacci

Chapter Summary

This was originally written very early on as an aside to Selaxes’ Red Tails and Wilde Skies. I started playing with an idea of an all rabbit Hurricane unit, and then began to think of more grooming content. Of course, back in the day, our males were stoic, enduring types who didn't need all that warm and fuzzy cuddle and groom. Or at least would never admit to it.

A knock on the Sgt. Major's door. The old hare took off his glasses, only really needed them to process paperwork. What was it about the army marching on its stomach? Nowadays it seemed to march on a highway paved in foolscap.

"Enter!"

In stomped an old raccoon, in an old cut uniform, night warden armband. These old codgers could be comical, playing soldier, but they were a true help in padding out the ranks for non-essential duties.

"Night Warden Hutchison, reportin'!" There was crispness in his presentation, not just playing soldier, then the Hare saw the ribbons on his tunic. There were only three, and not at all flashy, especially as they were as vintage as the tunic. He rose to attention in the presence of a Zootopia Cross holder. Only one in a score was not awarded posthumously.

"Please Sgt Major, I'm just an old 'coon still doin' my part." The raccoon glanced around warily.

"Of course." The Hare gestured for an at ease that the raccoon recognized, as he recognized the Hare's old campaign ribbons as a fellow veteran. "What's up?"

"I'm not sure, Sgt Major." He looked a bit embarrassed, "Its the Bunnies, in their barracks."

"oh?"

"I'm new to the unit and I've never served with you rabbits before, so I don't know all your habits." The Hare made a little face, but let him continue. "Down in the bomb-proofs, I found that they had pulled some of the mattresses off the bunks and were all sleeping in a pile."

While there were typical mid-size mammal housing for all the members of the unit erected, the rabbit population had converted simple slit trenches into elaborate re-enforced warrens and more often than not preferred the slightly cramped and sometimes dampish accommodations.

The Sgt. Major smiled at that. "As they are Bunnies, not Hares," And the Raccoon caught the emphasis, "They are more used to a more communal life style. After a tough day, they'll want, eh, need the mutual comfort of each other to be able to settle down."

"The unit did a lot of flying today, we got seven Junkers, a new record for us, but we lost two of our own, and all the lads were awfully down about it."
While the dozen or so pilots of the squadron did the actual fighting, and dying, they were the investment of the hundred odd support troops that kept them going. Each victory was a point of pride for everyone that had contributed, but each loss was a bite out of the collective heart of the unit.

"Ah, cuddlers. I half-wondered about that, but didn't know how the unit handled such. Back in my day, every unit had to handle it differently with each species." The Raccoon thought of the sometimes rather awkward situations of an officer with one expectation having to deal with very different requirements of those of another species under him.

"Yes, we tolerate cuddlers here now, and individual groomers too, no squad level by-the-numbers brush and stroke." The Hare and Raccoon smiled at that. At one point early on, regulations were drafted for formal one-size-fits-all group grooming, to avoid unseemly individual conduct, of course, and the breadth and depth of that failure was still taught as a how not to at the academy.

"It there anything else, Hutchison?" The Sgt. Major stepped out from behind his desk, his cane part of his souvenir of the first War.

The Raccoon had previously recognized his ribbons and nodded to the cane, "From the Peninsula?"

"Long range artillery. Never got to the front, kept on getting pounded and patched, have enough metal in me still for a scrap drive. But they let me stay in, likely figure all a sergeant needs is a good pair of lungs. You?"

"With the 74th." Nothing more be said. The 74th was one of the first regiments to discover that a stout heart and steady hand was no match for machine gun fire on the modern battlefield. It was only that the enemy had not perfected their use of that terrible tool that the 74th's story was not simply ignominious slaughter, as so many later units would suffer.

"Next time in town, the first pint's on me." The Hare offered his paw.

The Raccoon gripped it with enthusiasm, "Only if I get the next." And winked.

Then the Sgt. Major paused, "With all the talk of grooming, can you recommend a local honest groomer? I'm not about to order one of my Privates to give me a once over and I can only do so much for myself."

A chuckle to that, "Yeah, that wouldn't do. Down in Black Brook, the Barbershop on the main road does a great job, but you have to ask. With all the troops in the area now, they don't want to become overwhelmed, so don't advertise. Quality versus quantity, ya know."

And they parted ways.

The Sgt. Major regarded the night-cloaked aerodrome. He hoped his officers were able to find some level of comfort, as the troops seemed to have. This all Lago unit had its advantages; certainly the logistics were simple enough.

As a Hare, he wasn't as desperate for the kind of collective cuddle as his rabbity charges, but there was still something to be said for a shared bed-warming and a little scratch. But his long time companion was history now, and he felt he was getting too old to try to find a new special someone. Dating at his age, not hardly.

The CO was likely still up; he didn't envy that position, but suspected he could stand a little interruption. Especially writing those letters. He had a flask of particularly vile rotgut that would be all too appropriate for a night like this. The CO's good stuff was better spend on happier times.
"Sir?" the Sgt. Major peeked in after a polite little knock.

"No rest, eh?" The CO was an almost comical white ball of fluff that belied an able administrator and one-time ace pilot. "Come on in Sgt. Major, and share your woe on this dark and stormy night." He enjoyed his little theatrics, and it was a welcome change from the dried up stick of a martinet that had been his previous commander.

"Our new night warden has discovered the fluffles down in the warrens."

"Oh, has he." the Officer wanted to laugh, but in light of the likely day's need, could only sigh. "How are the troops?"

"Okay. But I came more for your sake." He flourished the flask.

"Ah, sweet oblivion."

"Sweet would not be a word I'd use for this particular 'medicinal' treatment." But he held the flask back, "You don't have anything left that you need to be comos mentis for, do you?"

The little Rabbit sighed heartfeltly and held up two fat envelopes. "My blood duty is done."

The Sgt. Major nodded and handed the vile potion over and the CO took a long pull. He made a particularly awful face, but to his credit, didn't choke on it. "Petrol? Was that petrol in the 'flavoring'?"

"I dare not ask. All I know is that I wasn't blind or dead the next day, so it can't be too bad." He took a sip as well, though wasn't going to indulge too much. He still had to walk back to his barracks afterwards. "To our fallen."

The CO took it back and did another pull, "To our fallen."
Chapter 32

Chapter by Selaxes, Tom1380

Chapter Notes

So, Tom1380 sent me this over the Holidays! It looks like he got a serious attack of creativity and he apologizes for such a long chapter!

Personally I've never had a problem with long chapter!!!!

The main dining hall in the Sward warren was quiet, and not too surprising that time of the morning. As always, Edward “Lucky Buck” Sward was up far too early to be considered normal, even for farmers, but his nights were far too often mixed with the good and the bad. So much so that once it jolted him awake and he looked to the clock and saw it was a half reasonable time it was just better to get up. His choice was all to save waking his beautiful, vibrant mate who slept by his side. He would lay there and watch her for a while each morning, gazing at her in peaceful slumber was the only way Ed ever wanted to start his day. After admiring the way the white splash of her front would blend into the yellow fur of her body and how her whiskers would twitch as she slept he would then do the same with Edelle and Virginia.

His little girls...so like their mother! They were dazzling little gems, peaceful and sleeping. Sometimes they held each other's little paws or arms, or the pair bundled up in a bit of bunny pile. This was all to memorise their features so he could always call upon it when he thought about them.

How he had landed on his feet coming home to his family as well as finding a completely new one was something that the rabbit was still getting used to. It was a source of joy and delight to Ed and he thanked the Rabbit’s Messiah for the blessings.

After indulging in his new routine Ed dressed quietly, smiling at the sleeping bunnies once more before stepping to a door that led into the cellar. It was more than a cool, dry storage space and another innocuous door on the far wall led to a tunnel that connected the cottage with the rest of the Sward warren. It wasn’t feasible to build spread out, and rabbits enjoyed the security of the earth, so they built down. It was something that was helping other mammals of Zootopia with proper bomb shelters.

Down the stairs he went and emerged into the main portion and dining hall, for there was something on his mind. The night before Clare Sward, mother of the clan had made vegetable pasties. A divine pastry with diced onions, carrots, turnip, parsnip, potato, greens with a lentil gravy. This had gone down rather well with Edward gulping down a slightly obscene amount which had delighted both his mother, and Daisy for that matter. Both does had noticed that Edward’s eating habits were somewhat off since his return. The rabbit would start his meals off fine but would soon say he was full and clear away his plate straight away while not looking at anyone. He also dismissed comments that he was too thin. But last night had been the first night Edward had honestly eaten his fill and then a little more to help him catch up.

Those little pockets of veggie joy were still very much on his mind as he crossed the silent hall and into the kitchen, helping himself to some pressed juice along with two pastries. By the time he sat at
the table, he indeed looked to be a smug bear that had gotten all the honey. Picking up the cold treat, a quick sniff filling his nose with the aroma that was still heavenly after sitting for a night, Ed was about to take a bit when someone cleared their throat behind him making the rabbit jump so hard his arse left the seat.

“Guilty conscience, Ed?” his old buck’s voice asked from the gloom with a hearty chuckle.

“Bloody dens, dad,” it was all he could to catch his breath and that was before he realised that he had half crushed the pasty in his paw.

“Well, now that you’ve pelleted your breaches, do you care to explain why your half hitching food in the wee hours of the morning?” the older rabbit added still smiling at his son. He got to his own feet and walked over to share the table Edward was at sitting down in front of him with his own mug in his paws.

All Edward could do was squirm while feeling like a kit again, almost as if he’d been caught red pawed in the sweetie jar. So he busied himself with licking the lentil gravy off his fingers that had spilt from his crushed pastry. The sight of his son, commander of the enormous thing that had left deep ruts in his yard, looking so abashed and guilty made Henry let go with a good deep laugh, one that got right into his belly. He couldn't help but pat Ed’s shoulder, gesturing for him to have his stolen goods.

Shaking his head, Ed took a bite out of his treat and offered the second to his dad who paused for a moment before taking it and tucking in himself.

“Sorry. Couldn't help my self. These are just great. I’m surprised mum could make these with the rationing,” Edward said, happy to see his father joining in. Can’t be in trouble if his old buck was eating them as well.

“Vegetables aren’t rationed as bad as other things, and as we grow most things, I think we can spare some for our selves. Some families, like us, the Hopps and Clays, are working together on community gardens and everyone gets their share so its fine.”

“Are you drinking coffee?” the younger Sward caught the fragrance as his father took a sip.

“Yeah. That fox, Nick Wilde was it, told me to give it a go. Think that cunning devil is onto something.” Henry was speaking in good jest as he raised his mug as if to toast the flyer who was a ways away, hopefully enjoying a brew himself if he wasn’t still abed.

It was Ed’s turn to chuckle at his dad's new outlook towards predators as he raised his own glass of juice and clinked it on his dad's mug.

“To Red Tails,” Ed said his dad nodding his agreement before taking a sip and humming his approval. However, the old rabbit shoulders slumped a little, and his eyes looked off into another time and place as he swallowed his newfound pleasure and the rich taste it left, couldn't entirely take what was ailing him with it.

“You alright?”

His dad looked at him with a rather heavy air about him, as he now leaned over his mug and turned it slowly in his burly paws.

“I wish I could say that I was, but your old dad is just feeling his age and the times,” he said doing his best to put on a brave face.
But as Edward looked at him closer his words of ‘old dad’ suddenly seemed to true. Henry's fur colour did hide a lot of his grey hairs thanks to his many flecks and shades to his coat, but now the odd hair was now turning into paler patches with his whiskers starting to grow longer. It was clear that, indeed, age was catching up to the old farmer. Even his ears were droopy and lacked their usual luster and crispness.

An unconscious change was going on in Ed's mind as he watched his father struggle with himself. He was looking at his dad with a calm concern waiting for the old rabbit to start talking when he was ready. This was something he hadn't done too much of since his time with Tim and the rest of his crew. Back when things had gotten a little much for one of his lads, it was his job to keep them as happy and together help each one as the stress became too much and right now his dad needed just that.

“This damn war,” Herny finally said, a bitter tone serrating his words. “Just like last time but worse as now I have to watch my sons and daughters, my own blood and my neighbours’ kits get dragged into it,” the dam had let go, and now his dad was talking, letting it out.

“We are such a small warren, that's why me and your mother got so angry when you signed, another reason we have tried everything we can to stop your siblings following but I know there is no stopping it”. His father looked around the hall trying everything to hide his emotions that were now on the surface, but it was clear that the dining hall found him no place to hide as the signs of his family were all around him.

“I'm no fool. This will take more of my family and friends away before its done with.” Henry took another sip of his coffee not looking up at Ed, not wanting to feel his weak moment by seeing his son regard him with sadness or pity, who was listening to him quietly. He didn't want to break in front of his son, the very thought of more of his children being eaten by the monster that was this war was. Back in the last war complete warrens had been wiped out like many other mammals, so many souls it had consumed in insatiable and voracious hunger. Henry shuddered as he downed the last of his coffee without tasting it this time.

“Then there is all this talk of this invasion that could come at any moment, the planes dropping bombs over our heads… One hit the Old Oak farm on the other side of the county.” he stopped letting out another sigh, his voice shaking this time.

“It's not going to get easier any time soon, and it will probably get worse before it gets better, but we are far from beaten, dad.” Edward reach over and placed a scarred paw on his father's forearm giving it a small squeeze.

“To invade us will take a lot. Every day we dig in deeper, and that's not even talking about what's going on in the air. They’ll have to take our boys down first, and I promise you they are far from losing that fight”.

The zeal that those planes put into Edward were evident as his eyes took on a fiery edge, an intensity that Henry wasn't sure he liked seeing in his son, but at the same time left him in awe.

“We got a lot going for us, we are an island which we have defended for centuries. You wait. When we get our second round we will show them what for and if they're foolish enough to invade we will make them bleed for every inch.”

This time he smiled a little while slapping his father's shoulder. His dad blinked with a look of surprise crossing his face. That fire in his son’s eyes, a mixture of fury and hunger, made the old rabbit's blood run cold as it was somehow predatory. But at the same time, it was fierce energy that Ed was not holding but giving, his posture and smile open and guileless and willing his dad to join in
his battle cry. Though it scared Henry to the core to see this coming from his boy, he couldn't help but let it send his own spirit soaring on high.

“Now I’ve had my breakfast I need a proper cup of tea and so do you. Can’t believe I have found you drinking coffee of all things,” he said winking at his old buck before getting up and wandering off to the kitchen. A decent brew could go a long way to improve morale. Heavens knew it had gotten Ed’s crew morale up many times back over the Channel.

“As we aren’t really pinching rations this morning I think a small helping of sugar wouldn’t hurt,” Ed called back to his dad who was still taken aback by his son who had left an overgrown boy and returned a somewhat ghostly image of his son. Then turned back into boy who would switch to something strong and sure when it was needed.

It was the first time he had seen his son behave like this, talking to him like he would usually talk to his own children. It almost felt as if Edward was the head of the warren they sat in. Of course, his Edward had become a father himself taking on Daisy and her kits, and it was showing. An overwhelming sense of pride hit the head of the Sward clan, so much so that he was swallowing a lump in his throat and had to clear his own voice to stop himself getting too emotional. He was glad that Edward was in the kitchen while he managed to pull it together. Edward returned bearing two fresh cups of tea setting them carefully down in front of his dad before taking his seat once more.

As Henry looked over his son, his eyes travelling over his scarred face then to his ears that were held down as usual, but could see the shorter one behind his son’s head, the scarred cheek and the mutilated ear a stark show of what was going on and what was to come. Then to his son's eyes which were looking back, clearly knowing what his father had been taking stock of, but still full of burning intensity. No matter how his son changed he would always be his boy, like all his children, they would all remain kits to his eyes.

“So you got any ideas what you and Daisy want to do for your wedding?” Henry asked feeling lighter in spirit and again laughed as Edward suddenly look as if he had just remembered, the fire changing in an instant turning back into an overgrown, mischievous kit that Henry was more use to seeing.

“You know…I haven't,” he laughed along with his dad scratching his head.

“I think we’ve just been enjoying each others company while we can, things are happening a bit fast.”

“I bet you have,” his father chuckled. “You’ll break your mother's heart if you don't let her enjoy a wedding. She wants to fuss over you two and can't wait to make your mate her daughter-in-law, make it official. About damn time, too, if you ask me.”

Henry pulled back with his tea in both paws.

He shook his head at his son “Took you long enough to notice that doe, boy”.

“I know. But she punched me in the face and then it kind of hit home.” Edward laughed again still getting over the fact he had wasted so much time and opportunities in the past. ‘Curse me for a fool,’ were words he kept saying to himself.

But the wedding, now that was a thought. He knew his father was right and his mother would flog him if he didn't give her the chance to enjoy a proper wedding. Clare had been a little sad that Nick and Judy hadn't had the time to do the more traditional marriage as she’d taken quite the shine to the young couple. It had been a lovely ceremony, the smaller and simpler moment making it that much
more important in so many ways. It had, however, given the Sward matriarch certain notions.

Then there was Daisy, herself. As a young doe she had spoken of a perfect wedding, a grand affair with gowns and a sumptuous feast, dancing and all manner of frippary, but now he knew that wasn't her goal. As he pondered on it, Ed found he would have to give her as much as she had dreamed of as he could, and as the thought danced across his mind, he could help but feel a need to provide everything he could for her and the girls.

“I think I have some ideas, though, so don't worry. Just tell mum it'll be after the fair and make sure she spoils Daisy the best she can leading up to the day.”

“Sure thing Edward,” his dad laughed.

It was a comfortable silence that followed, both males thinking over the days to come. It was then another thought entered Edward’s mind.

Back when he’d been a POW he'd met a rabbit from Cervania, a kind caring soul, one that Ed had formed a bond with not unlike a father and son. He had learnt that before the war this rabbit had been a tailor and when he had told him the name of the tailors he had owned. Edward had been shocked to know it well as it had been a brand one could buy in Zootopia as well. A tailor that specialised in rabbits and horses of all things but would tailor for anyone still. The suits that the business turned out were known for being of very high quality and famous from around Europe.

“Dad, your wedding suit?” he asked pointing with his scared paw while still holding his teacup.

“What was the tailor's name, the brand”.

His dad frowned thinking. “I haven't looked at that suit in a long time. It's still in the cupboard” Let’s see,” Henry said and pulled an ear down to rub the tip between two fingers as he thought. “Um… Oh! Cifolapu. Now they are some of the best suits you can find for rabbits, was imported from Cervania, got that from Zootopia most expensive thing I owned back then,” his dad chuckled.

“All my best mates and myself put money in to buy it, your mother couldn't take her eyes off me”.

Edward just listened to his dad reminisce about his bachelor party that Stu, Alister and some other friends around the burrows took Henry out on. He’d heard the story before about how he had returned in rather a sorry state two days before his wedding day. Well, his wife-to-be’s sister had found him naked trying to climb a tree to retrieve his clothes that Stu and Alister still denied to this day throwing up there.

That suit had been made by the tailor shop that an old rabbit that had been in the tierfarm started. Ed owed a great deal to the one he’d met and wherever he was now resting he hoped that the gentle lapin had found a bit of peace. That old Cervanian rabbit had taught him a great deal and saved him more times than Ed could count and were it not for his gentle bearing and kindness, ‘Lucky Buck’ doubted he'd have made it home.

“Forget the war for a moment, could I be so bold and ask if I could marry my mate in the same suit?”

The request brought Henry Sward up short.

“I thought it might be nice to get married in something other than my military dress uniform,” Edward said, interrupting his dad talking about the trouble he had gotten into the day following his last oorah as a bachelor rabbit. Despite being stopped from reliving one of the stories from his
younger days Henry's face broke into a big grin his eyes lighting up, and grabbed his son's paw.

“Of course you can lad, it would be...” He got interrupted again as Edward quickly stood, leaning over the table to give his father a one armed hug. “Er...if it means this much to you...” the older rabbit said at the unexpected display of affection from his son.

“I'll tell you why someday,” Ed's voice cracked a little as a rush of emotion washed over him. Being able to wear a Cifolapu suit, one that might have passed through the paws of the rabbit he owed so much more then his father could ever imagine.

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“Lieutenant Antlerbee seems like a really nice stag. He really did bring something special to the finding festival.” Maggie had to shout a little to be heard by the others over the sound of the wind and engine as they drove down the road towards town.

The back of the small truck that had been sent to collect them was rather noisy and a little uncomfortable, but nothing the four of them couldn’t deal with.

Daisy gripped the basket in her paws a little tighter as the driver dodged a pothole in the road and held onto Ed with her other arm. The grin on Ed’s face grew a little bigger as he pulled her into him a little more, his own arm around her as well.

“Yeah, it did make an extraordinary night that much more!” Daisy added while gazing into Edward’s eyes as he looked back at her finding her breath been taken as it always did when he looking into those confident and sparkling eyes.

“He can talk, that deer. Got to say he can sing as well when he thinks no one can hear him,” Ed added looking back over at Mags and chuckling.

“Really? Might have to get him to sing me a tune.” Maggie looked surprised to hear the stag could sing.

“Good luck with that, he near jumped out from under his antlers when I caught him once. I warn you though, you may see a different side of him. He’ll be in his element setting up. I don’t dare cross him when he’s in full swing.” Edward wasn’t joking on the last part either. The stag took his role as seriously as any officer should and his was the art of propaganda raising morale of civilians and soldiers alike. Painting a rosy picture when all around them things were anything but. The young deer was a master at his task and a charmer who knew how to be liked and how to run a show.

“You did hear the rumours though, right?” Virgil asked his own arm around his Maggie as well, not just to hold her close but to giver her a little padding between her shoulders and the wooden slats on along the bed of the truck.

All three of them frowned at Virgil's mischievous smile which only grew at the quizzical looks directed at him.

“Well, you lot saw Joanna Clay making eyes at Dan that night, even sawing away at that old fiddle she couldn't keep her eyes off him. Took a real liking to Dan, she did. Well, word goes down the tunnel that she didn’t go back to her dorm in the Clay warren that night.”

A loud chorus of ‘ooo’s’ at that bit of news filled the back of the truck.

“And it seems she paid a little visit to our Dan Antlerbee in his barn,” Virgil continued, grinning at the perfectly timed collective gasp before they all shared a laugh together. Before the young Hopps buck could add more the air was filled with multiple questions and comments.
“Sly stag.”

“You think anything happened? How would that even work?” A knowing look and set of paws was offered up to guess a size, followed by another and a couple of shrugs.

“Do you think they're like horses?”

Virgil had to put up his paws at that to slow them down all the while wiping tears of mirth out of his eyes. “Now, I’m quite sure nothing happened. Apparently when Joanna resurfaced she looked a little blue and told one of her litter mates that nothing happened. Said that they’re going to be penpals, though.”

Ed snorted. “Cute.”

“Oh, we can have some fun with this I think,” Daisy spoke up for the first time upon hearing this news, the three others turned to look and see a very familiar look on her face.

The sunny yellow doe looked just like she had when all of them were kits; one that could only mean trouble and generally led to a grand plan of the highest order of mischief. Normally the results would mean the boys got the belt or a solid paddling, but at the end results would win the day with some sort of bounty or adventure. For Mags it was something new and caused a sense of excitement to charge her own system while Ed and Virgil eyes both light up upon seeing the old call to mayhem.

They spent a while discussing the plan for Dan for most of the drive. Both the driver and his companion, an older Hopps cousin named Calvin and his wife Eunice, who could only wonder what the four bunnies were up to. By the time they pulled their heads apart they were all sniggering, quite pleased with their scheme.

“On other news, me and Virgil are heading up to airfield this evening,” Maggie said looking rather excited about the trip.

“Really? Damn. You guys are going to have to fit a second sidecar for us if you're doing that.” Edward looked to Mags then to Virgil who returned a deadpan expression.

“No. Not happening.”

Daisy snorted at Virgil's face and Ed’s mock look of crushing disappointment.

“That sounds like so much fun, Mags. Are you singing for them?” Daisy inquired while sharing Maggie’s excitement.

“Yup! We’re riding up there to give them some entertainment for the boys and hauling a load of goodies, too.”

“Make sure to take up some of our cider,” Ed added.

“Dad’s already bottled some up for us to take,” Mags beamed. “And Mister Hopps has some of the ale that Nick fellow liked so much.” The bunny wriggled happily and nestled against her beau.

“Can’t wait to see those Spitfires up close! Do you think they’ll let me check out the engines?” the three of them couldn’t help but feed off of Maggie's enthusiasm as she repeated about what she had heard about the planes from radio newsreels and various newspapers.

“So Maggie what you going to wear?” Daisy managed to ask while the other doe paused to draw breath.
“Not sure yet. I guess I’ll have to wear a dress.” Maggie didn’t look all that thrilled at the prospect.

“The pilots will thank you for it if you did.”

“Watch out, Virg. Daisy’s trying to get Mags hooked up with a pilot,” Ed warned his friend who just grinned back.

“I’m not worried. It’ll be a long walk home if she takes a fancy to one. Anyway, I’ll be there to watch and enjoy as well,” he winked. “I’ll be the one wolf whistling. Maybe even a little snogging to show who her buck is.” They all laughed at that, even more so when Mags thumped him playfully.

The truck pulled into town and instead of heading to the main high street near the station they turned off to where the village green was, a vast expanse of grass that was ringed by houses a pub and a few other little shops and buildings. Usually a quiet place and sedate part of Bunnyburrow proper where you could walk, have a picnic or stop off at one of the shops, it was anything but at the moment. Stands where being erected, large tents were being set up, all of them angled with a small stage as the apex. A mix of Dan Antlerbee’s troop and a few of the more helpful town’s folk were getting things ready for the rally and speech that would accompany the autumn fair.

The four rabbits jumped out of the back of the truck, Edward helping Daisy with the kits while Mags shoved Virgil out playfully. They all had to pause for a moment to take in the change to the green. With the addition of the stage it really was looking to be a good end of the season to-do, all things considered.

Maybe the war and the spirit of pulling together, keeping calm and carrying on as the saying went was making the mammals work that little bit extra to make the fair special with the little they had to use.

Edward had to chuckle at the strange contrast at play on the green. Bunnyburrow fairs had a number of contests; everything from best grown vegetables, to cakes, flowers even a choir contest from the different churches dotted around the burrows would soon take place. And there to one side rested the tank, proud and properly intimidating, looking very out of place. Or perhaps not so much with the propaganda posters on doors and walls or shop windows and sandbags around the doors of the small town hall. Then there were the recruiting stands being set up nearby for the various services and the different volunteer corps among them. Ed guessed there would be many more names added to the recruiters’ lists by the time the fair was finished.

“Look there. The old billy McGill looks like he’s about to cry,” Virgil said as he pointed with his chin and ears over at the pavilion that sat on the side of the green. The others turned to see an old goat with curled horns, his wife holding on to his shoulders to keep him from bothering the workers. He was the captain of the local cricket club and the green doubled up as there cricket ground. From his expression and the way his ears were flicking back it was easy to tell that he saw the work as well as the ruts the tank had churned into the turf as something along the lines of sacrilege.

“Oh, dear. He does appear to be taking the fouling of his pitch rather hard,” Daisy said, concern lacing her voice as she frowned.

“The pitch will live, I’m sure. The Clay's won't mind, might give them a chance to make it worse and play some rugby on it later;” Virgil offered with a wicked grin. “Anyway, its all your fault, ‘Lucky Buck’. Your tank’s the one that’s done the most damage,” the rabbit added with a chuckle pointing at the fresh furrows.
“Nothing a bit of work can’t fix,” Ed coughed a little. To be honest, the old goat was a nice sort of fellow apart from taking his sport of choice so seriously. It seemed to be more of a religion. “There is a war on you know,” he put on his best impression of the voice from the newsreels.

“Got to make sacrifices and all that.”

McGill wasn’t the only mammal to be taking the destruction of the green badly, several of the town elders also lamenting the bit of rough and tumble the Matilda had done to the turf of the green. But for the most part, residents of the Burrows that were about passing by or watching the activity appeared down right excited. As usual, there was a gaggle of young ones staring at the tank. That alone was enough to make Ed grin widely.

“Kids always love the tank. And it looks like the mechanics are doing their best to keep them getting on,” the scarred rabbit said with a chortle.

“Good luck with that!” Mags added. “I’m getting on that thing again in a moment,” she laughed watching the engineers trying to shoo away a horde of eager young mammals.

It looked like the recruitment drive was already starting to pay off by the looks of things. They could see some males their own age speaking to representatives of the different services even while they were setting up their booths, a couple signing the dotted line with stunned sergeants looking on. Also, the home guard had a table out not on the green but to one side, the volunteer service that did so much to keep the Island of Zootopia safe. They could see mammals too young to sign up speaking with the older members. Ed could see the appeal to those in their teens; a lot of fun and adventure, the chance to hold a rifle and do their part.

The only problem was at the moment not many even had rifles, or those that the could field were decades old. Zootopia was dangerously low on arms and supplies that after outfitting the army and the other services, there was next to nothing to spare. Ed suddenly found as he watched the youths a strange bittersweet surge of emotion in his chest. He felt a mixture of pride that a pawful were already signing up to defend their homeland, though that was tempered with worry for those boys and what they would face when the time came to continue the fight. It was the same thing he felt learning Bailey had run off to sign up.

The country needed all young males to stand up and do their part for what was to come, but at the same time, they shouldn’t have to. Ed believed the lads talking to the different officers and NCO’s should be thinking about jobs and making a living, of dances and family, mates and lovers…not this. It was going to get much harder for the families of the Burrows and the rest of the country, that was for sure. How many of the young males he was looking at that very moment would make it through, it didn’t bear thinking about.

As he watched two young teenagers wander away from the Home Guard table, Ed spotted the mountain hare in command of the Bunnyburrow Home Guard unit, Captain Clayton Oliver Bracefoot.

Ed’s thoughts changed into something much less warm and cheery than the weather that was gracing them with one of the last warm days of the year. A frosty, sour feeling in his gut had taken hold as the scarred veteran of Bullkirk saw how the pudgy officer was acting. Old Clayton wasn’t speaking with the rest of his lads, nor those showing interest in those trying to join the Home Guard, and the hare sat apart from his group. Perched in his chair and looking unbearably pompous with cold hard anger in his eyes and a sneer of distaste twisting his face, the Guard Captain glared across the green while sipping from an unadorned cup of tea. Ed followed his gaze and found the subject of his ire. Helping set up field tents for their own recruiting drive a few boys in field uniforms with dun colored
equipment belts and canvas leggings moved with practiced ease, efficiently erecting the large tent. In their number, though, were a few predators that Bracefoot eyed with open animosity.

Ed tutted to himself as the cold twinge of irritation turned into downright anger. He was getting right sick to the buckteeth with how mammals were looking at predators of any shape and size with disdain when they were in just as much danger as anyone. He found his fist balling and with what Virgil had said Clayton’s response had been when his best mate had gone looking for his younger brother and now looked down his upturned nose at preds that wore the uniforms of Zootopia. Ed couldn’t help but start towards the HG officer, ready to give him an education, but as the red mist began to descend Virgil’s paw on his shoulder stopped him.

“That one isn’t worth the effort,” Virgil was looking at Ed, a smile and a wink joining his words. “You’d do better shouting at rock.” He patted him on the shoulder while Ed let out a sigh knowing his friend was, indeed, right. Turning to look at the girls he could see them talking happily about what was going on around them, looking forward to the festival and glancing down he could see two sets of ears up and little paws moving as Ginny and Edie watched him over the rim of the basket. Now was not the time.

“You know you’ll go far, you will,” Ed tossed back at Virgil half in jest before stepping to the basket and picked up Virginia before passing her to the rabbit that had inspired her name.

As soon as his paws touched the little bunny all the angst just dissipated like fog in the morning sun. The scarred rabbit smiled as Virgil looked a bit frightened to have something so fragile passed to him, though it was easy to see that the tiny doe had nearly the same effect on her uncle. Ed then picked up Edelle, laying her in the crook of his arm while looking down at his little bun. He couldn’t say they were that fragile now, both he and Daisy had been delighted and somewhat alarmed that morning to find the two buns taking their first steps out of their little basket on very wobbly legs. It was normal for the first steps to be on all fours and watching that particular milestone had been such a joy to the proud parents.

Daisy paused in her conversation with Maggie, the warmest of smiles gracing her muzzle as both bucks now stood talking to the kittens while pointing things out and joking. Both little bunnies looked around with large blue eyes and making all kind of noises, blowing bubbles and giggling as their father and uncle spoke to the both of them.

Maggie stood by Daisy and looped their arms together while pulling her soon to be sister-in-law close as she could see her blue eyes starting to shine with tears as they took in both boys she’d grown up with and her own kits. Ed and Virgil kept the small buns in almost perpetual chirping laughter by pretending to steal their ears and noses and playing games with the girls. Maggie knew what was keeping Daisy so close to tears all the time as the two doe’s had found a real bond with each other in the last few weeks, spending time together when the boys had been working during the day.

Mags had listened to Daisy as she’d spoken her heart one morning, her deepest and darkest fears spilling forth while they had been in the kitchen of the cottage just after they had sent both males off for the day. Daisy had stood by the stable style front door with the top open for the fresh morning air for some time while Maggie had been making a fuss of the girls. Then the sunshine yellow doe had broken down in tears before sliding down the door with her head in her arms.

The sudden outburst had caught Maggie unaware and it was astonishing to the Sward doe who did what she could to calm and comfort her friend. Daisy eventually came out of her bout of crying and over fresh cups of tea told the brown and mottled doe her fears of Ed and Virgil returning to the military, of not coming home and wondering if she would have to lose both of them a second time. It was a startling revelation for the normally chipper bunny was always full of smiles and warm support.
for Maggie’s brother, but then after that confession she could see the stark fear and dread in Daisy’s blue eyes when she thought no one was looking.

It brought a new perspective to Maggie that she really hadn’t contemplated until that tumultuous morning.

Up until then it had all been a wonderful whirlwind of new young love, Virgil and her going out on the bike all over the burrows, having fun in all kinds of places, talking long after the sun went down, singing and being truly happy. No buck she had ever known was as alive as Virgil Hopps, the zeal for living to the fullest, speed and excitement that he embraced so enthusiastically had awoken in herself. When they had talked on a hilltop with a picnic blanket full of nicked goodies around them not once had he said he had expectations of how Maggie should act or were her place should be. Not once did he say no you shouldn't ride, or shouldn’t want to work on cars, bikes or trucks. Not once had he told her she belonged in the kitchen. If anything Virgil had only encouraged her love for all these new things. On top of that he was showing her so much more that it felt like being woken up, truly arriving as the bunny she was meant to be.

All of these had happened so fast that the thought of him leaving to battle had never even crossed Maggie’s mind. To be honest, she had forgotten the war was even going on for the most part. Then hearing Daisy sob about her fears and suddenly it had hit her with sickening force. Together they had found strength and something that brought them even closer together. That morning after they had both recovered they had talked about it, even as hard as it was. Together they knew they could go on, they had to, but together they could remain bright and cheerful for their rabbits, and both knew there would be other wives and sweethearts that would need the same support. All together they could stay strong, it didn’t stop it hurting though. As both does watched Edward and Virgil they couldn’t help but hurt a little inside. For Daisy it wasn’t sad tears that were threatening to spill, but happy. Watching him with the girls never ceased to make her heart to swell and see Virgil doing the same it was just a little too much.

Now as they watched Ed and Virgil pointing out things to Ginny and Edie the yellow furred doe made a soft sound that fortunately didn’t carry past her and Maggie.

Daisy sniffed and smiled at Mags. “Sorry. Being silly again.”

“No you’re not. It’s so sickly sweet its making my eyes water as well,” Mags joked.

“Looks like your future buns won’t have anything to worry about,” Daisy said fondly to the brown doe who went a little wide eyed as the insides of her ears lit up like beacons with the blush.

“Oh, not yet! I still have bikes to ride before any of that, plus I have your girls to fuss over,” Mags said swatting Daisy on the arm as the other doe giggled at her reaction.

This was something else they had talking about. Mags loved Virgil with all her heart and wanted to grow old with that buck, but she wasn’t ready for kits just yet. She did want a family one day once the war was over and everyone was home, that would be when she would become a mother unless the fates decided something else for her, of course, then she would be more than happy with the blessing.

“Well, the way you two are getting to it I think you might need to jump on those bikes rather quick,” Daisy added with a sly grin of her own, much more like her old self, a somewhat suggestive glint to her eyes. “I must say I am losing track who is riding who, between you two and the motorcycle it's hard to tell.”

“Daisy!!! Shhh!” without the kits in the basket Daisy was able to dodge Maggie’s next swat, their
antics making both bucks turn around to look.

“Look, mummy’s getting herself in trouble already. I want you to be no different, you hear? We all have a reputation to keep,” Ed said putting the girls together.

Virgil laughed watching Mags now trying to grab Daisy who was saying something they couldn’t quite hear from where they stood, though it must have been interesting as the other had ears that turned an even darker shade of rose that spread all the way to her nose. It was rather amusing though some passing mammals were staring at the rather unseemly show of silliness from the two while Edward and Virgil laughed with them. Mags frantically tried to get Daisy to be quiet about something.

Out of the corner of Virgil's eye he spotted the antlers and tall figure of Lieutenant Antlerbee striding toward them. “Oh, hey! It’s Dan,” he said nudging Ed.

“Oh…buck balls,” Ed said his smile growing a little as he turned to acknowledge the stag only for it to slip from his face as the stag bore down on them. He quickly fumbled with Edelle trying to swap her over in his arms so he could salute appropriately.

“Sergeant Sward, you are late!” came the stern voice of the Lieutenant, not something the others were used to. It was enough to make the girls stop their little game, and both males stand to attention though only Edward was in uniform.

“Sir,” Ed said snapping to. It was rare for Dan to be this severe, but when it came time for the show he would click into full rank and take it very seriously.

“I sent word to make sure you arrived on time. I have a tight timetable as it is and I need you to go through your lines and make sure you know how you’re coming on stage.” It appeared he hadn’t even noticed the baby bunny in his arms nor even the others standing by him he was so intent on scolding Edward. “That damn air warden has been wearing my antlers down to stubs, not to mention the bloody hare running the local HG, and it appears I’m now organizing the whole fair, and I find you enjoying the v-”

A shriek of young laughter and delight came from Ed’s arms making the deer stop dead in his tracks. Little waving arms appeared as Edelle reached out wanting to see the deer and his antlers most likely. Then Dan seemed to notice the others around him, and his face lightened at the sight of them all.

“By the prince of the forest…” he looked to each baby rabbit then to Daisy and back to Edward. “I really didn’t get to meet them at your festival.” His irritation was forgotten as the great deer got down to one knee like he’d done to Edward’s father as so not to make his antlers a danger to anyone so he could look at the kits closer. “Oh, my! They’re so cu…er…they’re …” the Stag faltered not quite catching his mistake in time.

He glanced to Daisy first, an apologetic cast to his eyes and ears, before returning his attention to his temporary subordinate, but instead of getting offended Edward smiled back happy not to be getting told off anymore. If anything found the stag’s reaction to his girls quite touching.

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“Don’t worry, Dan. I’ll let you say it if you stop telling my mate off,” Daisy said, her most charming smile in place though her eyes held a challenge which the deer spotted. They all noticed him swallow hard and had to suppress urges to laugh at the larger mammal’s sudden discomfort.

“My apologies for that. It’s has been a rather interesting and trying time, to say the least. Small towns always seem to be such hard work. But truly I must say your girls are…so cute!” Antlerbee exclaimed looking a little chagrined as he said the last word in a hushed tone.
“Yes, they are, aren’t they?” Daisy said standing by Ed who beamed at all three of his girls.

“May I?” Dan asked gesturing to hold one of the bunnies to both Ed’s and Daisy’s surprise.

“Of course. Just be gentle with them. They’re a good deal smaller than your fawns and they can’t walk on four straight away, Sir,” Edward said passing the larger mammal his kit. To Dan’s credit he handled her with a tenderness Ed wouldn’t have expected from the stag.

“Yes, I’m not a fool, Buck, I know these little ones can’t walk that quickly. Be thankful for that! My sister’s fawn…soon as his tail hit dirt he was off!” he chortled softly. Then with a warm smile he lowered his great head to Edelle. The little bunny reached out in response at the strange mammal and touched his nose before grabbing each nostril and pulling.

“Oh! Dan I’m sorry, Edelle! That’s not how a young lady behaves!” Daisy stepped forward to take her bun back, but Dan merely chuckled.

“It’s quite alright. Not the first time, nor will it be the last.” He then lowered his head a little more as it was clear the little doe wanted to touch the strange sticks that stuck out of the big thing’s head.

Virgil passed Virginia back to Daisy as they all observed the rather endearing interaction from such a large mammal with something so small. Dan moved gently so that his potentially lethal antlers never endangered the little bunny, even going as far to tickle her belly with one point.

“Well now who knew you were so good with little rabbits. Fancy helping out around the warren?” Maggie inquired with a chuckle.

“I don’t think so, Miss Maggie. I think I can only handle so many.”

The deer then swapped for Virginia, passing Edelle back to Daisy to which the bun promptly began to fuss. Virginia was a little gentler in her exploration of the strange creature, content in patting his nose and rubbing the fur of the front of his head which she seemed to like doing. She very much enjoyed the tummy tickle with the antlers promptly kicking and laughing. After that, he passed the bunny back as well and got back to his hooves, once more towering over the group.

“You are indeed a Lucky Buck, Sergeant.” The Lieutenant turned to Daisy and nodded respectfully to the doe before glancing at the others. “Now I must be the bad guy and take your mate and friend away from you all for at least a while.”

“Oh, Lieutenant. I must ask you a question before you go, though,” Daisy said as she finally calmed the kits back down. She looked at the deer, a slight steel cast to her blue eyes, and a small crease to her brow.

Dan suddenly looked to suddenly be on the back foot, spotting the doe’s change in tone and posture as the rabbit ears were more erect her stance more assertive.

“Umm, yes, Mrs. Sward?” the stag replied somewhat warily.

It took every ounce of will for Daisy not to smile at him addressing her as ‘Mrs.’ Sward, while Ed who was now out of Dan’s line of sight could only beam smugly until Virgil gave him a swift elbow to the ribs.

“What are your intentions with our friend Joanna Clay? Our families look out for each other, Lieutenant, even more so in these hard times,” Daisy informed the stag.

Dan’s ears dropped back and he raised his hooves up to placate the suddenly truculent doe. He even
glanced over at Edward who had by this time set his face, his arms crossed looking as menacing as he could. Virgil and Maggie also advanced providing a unified front. Edward couldn’t help but feel that he was pushing his luck as what he was doing now could be considered downright insubordinate. Still, it was too much fun to let the chance pass in making the massive mammal tremble.

“Now see hear all of you. Nothing happened between myself and Miss Clay. She came over to the barn I was staying.” Eyebrows around him rose at that. “Hey, we talked for a long time, and I think she did want to take things further, but I declined her offer as kindly as I could.” More sceptic faces and the Stag was now rather put out.

“What she's not good enough for you, Dan? I thought you were an opened minded mammal,” Mags said crossing her arms.

“That’s not very kind of you, Dan. She really had an eye on you at the finding festival,” Virgil added. “She thought she might have found the one with you.”

“Now really, she is a beautiful young lady and will make another delighted to be with her, but I’m a Stag for starters, and these things wouldn’t work! We discussed her…eh, thoughts on me, and she understood. We decided to stay in contact. I also gave her my sister's address as she is also a keen violinist as well.”

He stood there looking around at them all pleadingly until all four rabbits smiled in unison.

“Well, Lieutenant, it looks like Edward was right about you! Now, I think Mags and I have some things to purchase. Why don’t you boys run along and have fun,” she said dismissing a corporal, sergeant and a lieutenant as if they were small kits again.

Dan looked a little dumbfounded for a moment seeing the rather wicked smiles around him and the giggles from the girls as they left before realizing that they had been playing with him he turned to look at Edward, his snort with nostrils flared was enough to get Virgil moving.

“Yes, and I need to sort something out myself, sir's.” Virgil chuckled at the look on Edward’s face that pleaded not to be left alone with the deer.

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As they all moved off, Daisy tossed a glance back at the somewhat cross stag bearing down on Edward. She chuckled as she knew that Edward wouldn’t have expected to deal with Dan after their little plan, but she couldn’t help but feel a bit cruel at playing with the officer’s good and gentle nature. “You know I all, Dan is a rather sensitive heart under all that proper bearing and such. We should find him someone,” she said to Mags who looked back then at Daisy.

“Hey now, you want to roll in the hay with him as well? That’s not really fair to my brother,” the brown and dun hued doe teased. “Oh! You little mink, you want them both do you?” Mags then feigned a dramatic gasp, “…at the same time!”

“Maggie! You’re a right wicked doe! Must be Virgil’s doing,” Daisy muttered with a pout

Mags laughed while skipping away sticking her tongue out.

“You do know what you have started now, don’t you?” Daisy warned with a grin as she absently tucked the kits into the basket as they were still a little squirmy after meeting Dan. “But no, I was thinking about Eleanor.”
“Eleanor, of course!” Maggie agreed thought about their friend who also enjoyed music and singing herself, performing together at school and church a couple of times.

“That’s definitely an idea to nibble on. But anyway we need to find something for the boys! Come on!” Mags grabbed Daisy by the free paw and led her forward towards the village shops that sat off the edge of the green.

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It didn’t take long for Virgil to sort out what he needed to get done so he was back by the tank watching Lieutenant Dan putting Ed through his paces, what side of the stage to enter telling him how he should smile and wave, where to look and how to speak. Ed had to then go over his lines with the deer and at one point going so far as to ask his superior why he was doing this as he had now done it so many times he now said it in his sleep. All it took was an angry snort from the stag and Ed started going through his lines once more with a somewhat sour look on his muzzle. After an hour or so it seemed that Dan was satisfied that everything was perfect with Ed’s side of things and dismissed the now fairly stressed out rabbit.

“So, you sure that you’ve got it all down, Ed? You’re not going to trip over your feet while walking up the stairs?” Virgil asked while putting on his best stern voice and making a convincing impression of the stag conducting his show.

“Oh, boil your tail,” Ed groused, taking off his beret and scratching his head. “I did tell you he has a different side of to him. Dan doesn’t normally get this wound up, but I think some ranks are coming and he wants it to go right.” The scarred rabbit reset his beret and frowned. “And our teasing hasn’t left him in the best mood.”

“Well, I’m sure it will go right,” Virgil quipped in an attempt to bolster his best mate. “You’re just nervous at this being your hometown. After all, be all of us watching you and waiting for you to mess up.”

Ed laughed. “Yeah, a little. I don’t like it that’s for sure, but I have gotten used to it at least. Tell you, I can’t wait ’til this is all over and I can get back into a tank again. It’s a damn sight far simpler than this. I don’t like all the fuss, and there are more deserving mammals than I worthy of the attention.”

“I get it. I wouldn’t much like it, myself. You couldn’t give me enough to get me up there. But it’s important if it gets mammals’ blood up and into this fight. We need them after all. And the support of the ones back home,” he patted his friend on the back before adding. “Don’t forget you did ask to do this”.

“Yeah,” Edward paused for a few heartbeats his eyes glazing thinking about the reasons behind why he’d asked to do it. “…nearly done now though,” he said turning to his friend and smiling again.

The two friends began moving towards the steel monster that sat on the green next to the stage.

“So you wanted to have a look at this thing?” Ed asked with a nod at the tank. “Right, Virg. Let me introduce you to the A9 Cruiser Mk1.”

“Yeah, you can show me the inside.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

Ed looked to his friend as the other rabbit clambered onto the bow of the tank, his paw touching the barrel of the two pounder cannon. Like himself, Virgil was forever changed by what they had witnessed and been through, one of his friend’s new fears was of dark, tight spaces. All thanks to
being locked into something the Axis had called a hutch. It was an old term that had been dead until now. These hutches ranged from barracks with low ceilings keeping those inside on all fours, all the way down to what Virgil had been a resident of. A tiny space which was only big enough to have a rabbit on all fours but not even wide enough to allow the occupant to turn or stretch out. Only a grate in the floor to relieve yourself through. The hutch door had a hole barely wide enough for a rabbit to put his or her head through to drink out of a water trough that ran down the length of those feeding boxes.

Then came the force feeding, funnels that was shoved down your throat to feed prisoners to ensure they got fat.

This was where Virgil had found himself, and thanks to that experience he couldn’t even bring himself to enter such spaces, so the interior of a tank was the last place Ed would have thought his friend would want to go. When Virg had asked him to show him the tank he had thought he’d meant the outside and to talk about it.

He hadn’t expected the Hopps rabbit to get in it.

“I’m not sure you’ll like the inside mate, nothing to really see,” Ed said putting on a laugh, trying his best not to belabour the point.

But as Edward followed Virgil climbing on to the front, he watched as his best mate looked down the open hatch into the darkness. He saw the other rabbit stiffen as his pupils contracted as adrenaline and fear flooded his system. But before Edward could even begin to offer a word of comfort, he saw Virgil scowl. Then between one heartbeat and the next the other rabbit dropped himself down the hatch.

“Virgil,” Ed called out in alarm, scrambling up onto the turret and slipping down into the tank himself.

Virgil was crouched on the turret floor panting hard as if he’d been running. His eyes were screwed shut with both ears in his fists as the panic started to dig in. Edward quickly dropped down in front of him folding the gunner’s seat out the way to try and make as much room as he could to place himself before Virgil. Thanks to their small size there was enough room for him to be in front of his buddy.

“Easy. I’m here, mate,” Ed said softly putting his paws on each of Virgil’s shoulders. “You’re not there. You’re here with me, in the Burrows, in a tank. My tank.”

Virgil’s breathing was getting fast and more panicked as he let out a snarl. Ed knew what he was going through, he could almost feel it radiating out from the sand colored rabbit. He could feel the fear and the fight as Virgil was doing everything to battle it all back.

Buck quickly let go of his friend’s shoulders and squeezed down into the driver’s position, reaching for the master switch he flicked it then turned the interior lights on, a pawful of small bulbs lighting up the interior a little more.

“…close…close the hatch. I…I don’t want…them to hear…” Virgil hissed between breaths.

It sounded like he had just been dunked in frigid water. Ed hesitated for a moment knowing with the last main hatch such they would be cut off completely but he did as he was asked, not before giving the lead mechanic the thumbs up and a quick forced smile as so he would know they were inside and not to come over interrupting.

“You…are…NOT going…to beat…ME!” Virgil growled, his eyes still concealed by the twisting of
his own ears. Again Ed got down in front of him putting his paws on his shoulders.

“Virgil look at me, open your eyes and look at me.”

After a gentle squeeze of his paw Virgil looked at him, Edward smiling back but looking at him square in the eyes.

“You’re here with me. Not there. Breathe with me.” He spoke with a robust calm voice taking a deep slow inhale, before doing the same on the exhale.

This was only the second time he had been inside a tank with another since he’d gotten back. The first time was when he had moved the tank for one of the shows and he had found he couldn’t do it at the time with the mechanic that was part of Lieutenant Antlerbee’s team. Not the mechanic’s fault, but he wasn’t Buck’s crewmates, and it had been too much. This time, though, it was Virgil in there with him. Despite the other rabbit being in a panic it was his best friend and he was just like one of his crew, one of his mates. He was his brother and having him there didn’t bother him, it gave him strength. It gave Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward the fortitude he needed to get both of them through the moment.

After a couple of attempts Virgil followed suit, keeping his eyes locked on to Ed’s and after some minutes his breathing started to ease off joining with Buck’s.

“Relax. We’re behind Zootopian armoured steel and we’re in the Burrows. Not even our old maths teacher can get us here!” he joked getting a strained chuckle from Virgil who was regaining his composure.

The invoking of Mr. Flinthoof, the teacher that had been the bane of their youth also elicited the ghost of a smile from Virgil and a sound that might have been an attempt to laugh.

Now that he had his breathing under control it was just a matter of getting his thrashing heart back in order. Virgil was getting right sick of these moments of panic he was suffering. It had been so infuriating not even being able to walk into the tool shed, or a moment’s panic down in the Hopps’ warren entering a dark room. Even looking into the larder.

While Virgil had looked down into the tank from the open hatch his heart had started to race but he’d silently shouted in his own head to stifle the fear before he had jumped down, using his anger to override that moment of terror. Then as soon as his feet had touched the metal floor, it had sparked something that memory of the hutch’s grate under his feet, the cold iron becoming as painful as if winter had frosted it.

That cold metal with the dark had set it all off again. It had been like being lost in a sea of icy black fear and had begun to crush him as he sank into its depths. All thoughts of summer days in the Burrows, of being back in Zootopia, in a Zootopian tank had drowned within the dark memories that threatened to swallow him. Virgil had then been back in that box his, throat torn and raw, his insides painful as he was stuffed with the gruel the Axis had poured into him with a funnel and hose, his muscles stiff cramped with pain.

That’s when he had twisted on his own ears, trying to pull himself out of the nightmare of memories. It had been something he hadn’t done since being in that box. For a moment Virgil thought he was in danger of losing his mind until Ed had jumped down and pulled him back out. It was his voice and touch that had become the lifeline to pull him up and out, breaking the curse that had a hold of him.

“Do you need to talk about it?” Ed asked him to which Virgil grimaced.

“No. We’ve talked enough about that place. Now…” he forced a smile. “Tell me about this thing,”
he said his breathing still a little fast but in control.

Ed smiled back seeing his friend being somewhat himself and making him feel instantly better. After all, he was in a place he knew all too well.

“Tell you? No, no. I’m not going to tell you anything. I’m going to show you,” he replied with a grin that said that they were more than likely going to get into some sort of trouble, but behind that there was something Virgil hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t anger but an intensity of purpose.

But there was something more, something darker was this Buck showing himself.

He watched as Ed moved towards the driver’s position and slipped into the seat.

Edward craned his head back over his shoulder. “So, Corporal Hopps from signals, as you are the master of the radio, grab the headsets and set it to intercom. We’ll give Dan’s team a fright!” He then put on his own headset and fired up the six cylinder petrol engine.

The din inside the tank was deafening but thanks to the padded earphones of the headsets Virgil was able to hear Buck talk.

“So, where you are now would be the loader and radio operator’s position,” Buck then moved back out of the driver's position, from the inside it became evident why the armoured crew mammals were made up of smaller species as it made getting around the interior far easier. And it was clear to see Buck had some practice in the art.

“So I’m not going to insult you by telling you about the radio,” Buck said with a grin as he claimed his usual position of the tank commander. He pointed out where the ammo bins were kept down by the deck before he demonstrated how to load a round into the two pounder gun.

“It’s straightforward. Pull the lever down on the right paw side, this will open the breach.”

Virgil did as instructed, feeling a bit unsure whether they should be doing this in a tank parked on the green in the middle of town but it was far too enticing not to give it ago.

“Now, if you had a round you would put it up the spout and it would close, but for now push that release there and keep your paw clear.” The scarred rabbit pointed to a small manual switch below the leveller, and hitting it made the breach slam shut.

Virgil sat in the gunner’s position resting his shoulder into the padded mount, with that and the weight being so balanced meant he could move the elevation with his body weight. Looking through the gun sight, he could see he was aimed at the church spire and couldn’t help but chuckle to himself.

“Now you pull the safety down and pull the trigger on that handle there,” Buck pointed out, and as he did so, the breach clicked loudly dry firing he turned to grin at Buck who was smiling back.

They then moved over to the driver's position flanked by the two machine gun turrets. It was interesting going through each station all the while Virgil was in his normal everyday clothes and Ed was behind him in fall uniform. Each time they swapped stations Ed talked through his microphone showing him where things were stored and how things worked. Just as it got to the point of putting the tank in gear it looked like the engineering team’s nerves had worn out. Standing in front of the tank the lead mechanic demanded the tank be shut down, all to the disappointment of the gathered kits which were watching the war machine, hoping to see it move.

Laughing Buck told Virgil to shut the engine down and once the rumbling had died Virg removed his headphones and sat in the driver's position looking around and committing things to memory while Ed sat in the commander's position. He felt as he were still vibrating in time with the powerful
engine coupled with adrenaline that stemmed from excitement and not fear.

“So what you make of it now that you’ve had the grand tour?”

Virgil moved back to the loader’s point and sat down on the turret floor again. Ed’s grand tour had calmed him down, but it had also busied his mind as he catalogued the new smells of metal, oil and grease. All of it was enough to let him know he wasn’t in a hutch.

“Yeah…I think I could get used to this,” he said looking around then up at Ed who tilted his head a little.

“You fancy becoming a tanker?” Ed chuckled. “Trust me, it’s not as nice as this. We’re missing some bodies and the smell…though saying that, it doesn't feel quite home without the reek of unwashed mammals as well as some piss in brass,” he continued still laughing.

“Handed over my transfer papers over today. I'm joining you,” Virgil grinned.

The expression faded as Ed face lost his mirth and grew almost terrified, the other rabbit's eyes focusing on a time and place that only ‘Lucky Buck’ could see.

Virgil stared as that distant look twisted in Ed's eyes as he winced as if in pain before his rich brown eyes hardened like cold steel.

“No,” he said quietly turning away to look at the turret side wall, the rabbit who had just helped him recover had been the grounding he needed and suddenly felt like he had just turned on him and seemed to be crumbling in front of as he put a paw to his chest. In the still quite of the tank Virgil heard the soft tinkling of metal tags.

“No I’m not having you in these steel boxes,” his scarred paw closing tighter still on his breast pocket.

It was Virgil's turn to scowl back, angry at the reaction. He had expected Ed to be happy about having the chance to have his buddy in the tank. When he’d talked about this idea to Maggie and Daisy they had both jumped at the idea. He’d asked them both not to say anything as he was still finding out if it could be done. The girls had been thrilled at the idea of the two bucks sticking together this time, going out to face the dangers side by side able to watch each other’s back.

“No,” Ed said again more to himself as he made to get out of the tank. Virgil was faster and snagged Ed’s foot pulling him back down into the tank, making his friend slip and turn his livid eyes to the other rabbit.

“Listen, I’m not going out there again without covering you. You need me and I need you,” he said, both of them now squaring off on the turret floor.

Buck pushed the two pounder gun breach up to give them more room as he glared back at his lifelong friend. He shoved it so hard that the gun hit the stops with a loud thunk.

“No! You listen! If you think I’m going to watch you get hurt…if you think that I’m going to see you burn in one of these things…” Buck could see it all over again but this time it was Virgil. The flames burning flesh and fur, then it was a mutilated face, a body half its normal weight. NO! He wouldn’t allow his friend to face these dangers, he wouldn’t take responsibility for his brother's life. How could he carry that weight when he was worried he couldn't take it on with complete strangers.

“The girls,” Virgil began, but Ed cut him off.
“Yeah? What about the girls? What happens if we get hit? What happens if we both…” He found he couldn’t finish his throat closed at the very thought of what could happen at that. It was Buck’s turn to breathe hard as a very real panic was starting to steal his mind.

“Don’t you think I know the risks? Don’t you think I haven’t seen what can happen to these things? I’ve seen it up close as well.” Virgil spoke pulling at his own calmness as he saw what was making Ed so scared, it was clear but there was a sense in it. “I’ve made the mistake of looking inside a knocked out tank, Ed. I know what can happen.” He’d done just that, looking into the open hatch of a knocked out Axis tank. His hopes had been for a Lugar as a prize, but all he had gotten was nightmares of the sad souls that had met their end inside their armoured home.

“Listen, I spoke to the girls, they like the idea of us being together. And don’t you think our chances will only be better if we stick together. It’s what we do, us rabbits. Think about it.” The roles had reversed and now it was Virgil’s paw on Ed’s shoulder.

“You know Daisy will feel so much better knowing we are looking after each other. I’m not sure I can go back out there, but I know I can if we stick together. And I know it’s the same for you.”

Buck could feel his initial anger dissipate as he considered what the other rabbit said and knew Virg was talking sense though the risks would be huge for what was about to come, whatever that might be. It wasn’t the thought of losing his life that scared him the most, but his grip on himself and who he was. Each time he had thought about going back before coming home there’d been nothing but a savage want for some sort of reckless and bloody revenge. That hadn’t bothered him then. But since being home with his family those dark thoughts only brought him a cold feeling that he was turning into something he wasn’t. That animal that they had made, that monster that he had to become to survive…

Or was it something worse than that? Just the by product of what he had seen, what he’d done and lost, and for the crew he had lost.

If he had Virgil with him, the one rabbit he trusted more than any other only save his mate, he knew he could not only survive the war, but by the end of it he might just still be Edward James Sward.

Without warning he grabbed his brother and pulled him into a hug, safe out of sight in the tank this show of friendship and fraternal love for Virgil went unjudged. Two broken souls finding strength and hope in each other, not unlike what he’d done that morning with his father.

“Umm…you can let go of me whenever you’re ready, Ed,” Virgil said patting him on the back, silently wanting to take a breath with the air that was squeezed out of him.

“With us together, mate, ain’t nothing going to be able to stop us,” Ed spoke with a tight throat.

Virgil laughed with a wash of relief as Edward calmed down. He couldn’t help but playfully slap him in the side of the face good naturedly.

“Sure…Sir,” he said with a wink before pointing at the hatch. “Can we jump out now, I think I’m about done with being in here”
wicker basket. He couldn't help but smile seeing a small bundle wrapped in cloth with a small daisy tucked under the string. A little gift from his mate, of course, and upon a sniff he chuckled. It was something sweet with am, maybe a tart if he was still lucky.

After getting back from town that morning the girls had headed off to the cottage to get to their chores leaving Ed and Virgil to head out to the fields. Today it had been tending the Sward land where rabbits with scythes were cutting while others did what Virgil and Edward were doing, binding and placing the corn in piles. Corn was a good crop to be growing for the war effort as it kept for a good amount of time and had many uses. One of those was being done while they worked with both Ed and Virgil chewing and sucking on the stalks of the crop, a good to keep their teeth in order. That was something that until recently both of them had taken for granted. While they had been POWS and escaping, such chews had been hard to come by, if at all, so their front teeth had grown overly long, which was never a good thing for their kind.

A sound danced across the breeze made him take his cap off and raise his ears to their full height, the one with torn edges twitching a bit as he homed in on the ruckus. Shrill bouts of laughter and giggles with calls and shouts mixed together, the din of youngsters at play. Putting his cap back on and tucking the ears back low again he put on a jog towards the sound of youthful fun. Curious, he wanted to find out what all the fun was about. Jumping over a small flint wall then almost falling as he skidded down a bank to an old fenced yard, its wood very ancient and weathered, the posts wobbled in the earth, the cross beams were rotten and weak. Creeping about the fence were brambles, the blackberries long since picked. Inside the ground was covered with soft turf and perfect for playing on. As he reached the fence, he could hear the quick pattering of small feet on the soil.

Ed couldn't help but be surprised as he saw the game the kits were playing, one he had played a lot when he had been of that tender age. ‘Wild Tag’ it was the same as regular tag, but instead of running around as one normally would the youngsters ran around on all fours like the animals of old. It was a game that only the young kits played and was something that adults found a little uncomfortable as it was considered not very proper and a bit too primitive. However it was understandable as all kits made the first steps on all fours. It seemed like all children played it, well those with the room. Town and city kits weren't so lucky as Ed found out talking with Tim who'd grown up in the city.

The closest Edward had come to this had been back in the tier farm camp and the guards making some of the other prisoners run on all fours as they ‘raced’ their favorites, harrying the inmates with clubs and kicks, their laughter taunting the different prey mammals. Seeing all the bunnies tearing around on all fours did make his heart jolt and stomach churn as it took him back to that dark time, but this time it lasted for a fleeting moment as he processed what he was seeing. As he watched, he saw Dawn the lamb charging after Belle both laughing and just as she got to the bunny she hopped straight up in the air, Dawn sliding under her. Then Belle darted off giggling madly as Dawn, not put out at all, caught up with a young buck while touching him and screaming, “IT!” The buck then tore off after another, this one a Clay bunny with an interesting brindle fur pattern.

Ed leaned on a fence post and forgot the sudden darkness and instead basked in seeing something innocent and just…good. So profound was the emotions of rightness that welled in him that the scarred rabbit had to duck his head to clear the moisture that had started to fill his eyes.

There had been a young rabbit that he’d helped in the camp, Ed making sure that he told the kit his real name with instructions that if he ever made it to Zootopia that there would be a place with him in the Sward burrow. To be honest, though, Edward wasn’t sure if he saved the boy, or the young rabbit had saved him.
Perhaps it was even a little bit of both.

“ED!”

The rangy buck looked up at the sudden shout and saw an annoyed Ellie looking cross at him, little paws on her hips as she tried her best to emulate their mother’s notorious scowl.

“Why’re you spying on us?”

He could see that some of the kits were embarrassed by being caught playing the game.

Ed put on his best over the top feign of shock at the very idea of him spying, hiding behind his kittish wont to cause mischief and to hide the fact that tears had started to form.

“Me? I would never spy. I just heard all that fun going on and wanted to see what was happening.” Edward smiled at the throng seeing them starting to relax a bit, getting back down into a sitting position cross legged or kneeling in the dust eager to start playing again, but not in front of an adult. That just wouldn’t do.

“Hmmm…ok, then.” Belle still didn’t look convinced but seemed somewhat satisfied by his answer, plus it didn’t hurt that she could see the glint in his eye that often meant more fun was incoming.

“You want to play, Edward?” Dawn asked, bounding up to where he stood. She was still moving on all fours bouncing with every step just like a lamb should having the time of her life.

“Not sure its a game I should play,” he blurted it out with a nervous laugh. The flashes of the last time he played that game. Last time he had a very hungry predator on his tail. Dawn looked a bit sad at his response her ears drooping along with her expression, he couldn't help but curse himself for not thinking of a better way to decline the offer. He reached over the fence and tousled the puff of wool atop her head.

“Don't worry, Dawn. Adults can’t play this game anyway, they’re rubbish at it and get all embarrassed,” Ellie said with a smarmy grin as she and Belle Hopps joined the ewe.

Ed knew his little sister was playing him, knowing what buttons to hit to get him to yield, the challenge being thrown down. Ellie would be a cunning doe when she got older he could tell. Then again the same could be said of Belle and Dawn, though the lamb’s weapons were far more subtle. As soon as she had said the words and seen the disappointment in Dawn’s large jade colored eyes Edward knew he’d lost.

The scarred rabbit didn't care, and as he looked up seeing the kits start to charge around on all fours, he couldn’t help but feel the pull to join in the fun. A quick glance over his shoulder was all he needed to make sure that no other adult was watching and with one smooth jump he was over the fence, his feet landing almost silently on the soft soil.

Dawn’s eyes light up like gems in sunlight as the kits cheered. Putting down the parcel of food and taking off his waistcoat Ed squatted down so the underside of his tail was touching the brown grass. It was strange to be back in this posture but as the kits laughed and giggled at him sitting like that he found that no horrid memories flooded back. If anything it just felt familiar, something he was now use to. The snakes didn't start writing in his stomach, just a childlike excitement started to fill his chest.

That was until he went to take his flat cap off his head and stopped a sudden note of anxiety forming.

“Ed what's the matter?”
It was the lamb again, her large eyes looking up at him still sparking but also laced with concern, her ears set out in confusion and her head cocked. She was an adorable little ewe.

“Err…just…” he faltered under her quizzical gaze, completely lost on how to explain his reason for stalling or to describe how he felt about his scars and ears. The other kits had all chosen that particular moment to stop to look at the adult getting ready to join them. To Ed it seemed like they regarded him with a bit of timid caution.

“Are you embarrassed by your ears?”

Did the lamb see through him that easily?

He couldn’t help being impressed with her observation, particularly at her age. Maybe it was Nick and Judy rubbing off on her, or perhaps what she had been through had matured her a little bit more than the young kits around them.

He considered brushing it aside and making up an excuse like he usually would but he found that he had never been very good at lying to young kits, not ever, and even more so now. Excuses simply faded away as bright eyes filled with sympathy gazed at him. Edward knew at that moment that her adopted father would have a devil of a time resisting the little ewe. Funny that their eyes were almost the same shade of green, he thought.

“Um…they’re very important to rabbits…like your wool really, or your poppa’s tail. And when they look like mine mammals don’t always say nice things,” he said smiling at her.

“Can I see them?” she asked raising up a hoof.

Ed swallowed hard, feeling somewhat unsure about the request. He was, indeed, very conscious of the state his long ears were in and what it told those around them. On top of that, a rabbit's ears were quite often an intimate thing which only those most trusted would touch. Just a couple of mammals had touched his ears since he was back, the doctors at the hospital where he recovered, his mother, and Daisy. Dawn meant no harm and was only asking out of concern for him so he removed his flat cap and flicked his ears in front of him so the lamb could inspect them without trouble.

She ran her hoofed fingers down his mutilated right ear feeling the torn edges and the round perforation from his tag. Her face was creased in a small frown a look of disquiet while understanding of how much it must have hurt. She then took the left ear gently which had fared much better than its twin, with only light scars and one large nick taken out of it about halfway up.

“Why do they say mean things?” Dawn didn’t look up as she asked her next question still looking at his ears and stroking them gently.

“Well, mammals think that you might be nasty or dangerous and you can’t be trusted. Even scary, or a criminal.”

“But you're not any of those things,” her frown grew deeper and a look of anger on her face at hearing what it meant for a lapin to have damaged ears like he did.

“Well, I think it’s stupid! I think you shouldn’t hide them at all because it shows everyone that you’re not afraid of bullies and you are brave for standing up to them. You’re tough like my poppa and mom and me.” She looked up at him, a confidence and resolve showing through Edward hadn’t seen up until now and it struck him dumb for a moment.

Dawn then lifted the leg of the scruffy dungarees that had been given to her so she could play without getting her nicer dresses dirty. And there on her shin was a small scar of her own, a result of
the bombing of Zootopia and a sign of her hardships.

“My poppa told me it shows that we were brave, and I think he’s right.” The young lamb then took his cap and gently put it on top of the parcel of food smiling before trotting off to where Belle stood to wait for the next round to begin.

Ed was glued to the spot his mind somewhat reeling from Dawn’s words. The young could say and see things in a completely different light, unmuddled by life and its complications, able to deliver a truth so clearly and purely in a way that hit home like no other. He glanced at his cap then back to the kits that were waiting for him. That was another beautiful thing about children; their ability, once they understood something, could accept anyone and anything and adapt like no adult ever could.

So with a quick shake of the head, he raised his ears and lowered his paws to the earth digging his fingers in testing it and started to move forward. He could hear one of the kits whispering how adults would be bad at running around on all fours and how silly it looked. Sadly for them they had no idea how much practice he’d had. Ed stretched his legs out behind him feeling them pop and loosen up, making sure to demonstrate how natural it came to him, even going as far to scratch the side of his chin with his back foot. A peeling chorus of laughter sprang up at that.

“So, I’ll be ‘it’ first,” he said with a grin, and for the first time since his return, he had his ears up with others apart from Daisy, Virginia and Edelle. Dawn was right. It was time to show that he wouldn’t let naysayers and the bastards on the other side of the Channel keep them hidden.

“This is going to be sooo easy!” came a call in the throng of bunnies.

Edward grinned and lowed a little pushing his back legs down making sure he would have grip. Kits were fast and could turn at the drop of a hat, but he would have a longer stride so it would be a fairly equal challenge.

“Ready…steady… GO!” and they were off.

They all tore around the fenced in yard sending up great towers of dust and dirt and stems of dry autumn grass. Screams of laughter and surprise as Edward proved within a heartbeat that he knew how to run at full tilt as a ‘wild’ rabbit. In no time at all Ed reached out and tapped Zack shouting “IT!” He then charged off to make sure he didn’t get caught straight away. They all darted around jumping, diving, bounding, rolling and almost dancing together in their mad game of fun. It was in that moment when Belle was sprinting after Ed that he felt that something that had been teasing him since his return.

The feeling was one of unfettered freedom, of a joy in the moment, and with a thrill that set his heart racing, the darkness that always lurked below the surface completely slipped away and Edward gave himself over to a return to a simpler state of mind that he remembered from his own youth. Grinning madly, he let himself have fun and shed the worries of an adult with a bark of laughter.

He was running down the middle of the enclosure after just dodging a young buck when Dawn came out of know where head butting him straight in the gut sending him sprawling.

“IT!” she bleated before darting away.

The soft puff of wool on the little ewe’s head softened the blow of her at full charge, something Ed was quite grateful for. He couldn’t help but laugh as he rolled to his feet. It was his turn again and it took a moment to get over the shock that he’d just been rammed by a sheep and was a little astonished as the small ewe hit with enough force that a rugby player would be envious of.
Turning, Ed sighted in on Ellie. He bounded after her but she held her ground and just as he was about to touch her she hopped straight up and over him. He skidded to a stop turning around in surprise at her move not expecting that at all. She had bounded right over him, then she skipped off laughing with the others. That trick seemed to be one of their favorites. It was clear to Edward that all the kits around him were having the time of their lives like when they had all been down by the lake, and that’s precisely what he wanted for them. For them having a grown-up playing there kits’ game made it all that more exciting.

Ed hopped up this time spinning in the air and as he landed, he stood there making a big show of picking who to chase next his bum high in the air tail quivering. He would twitch, pretending to dive in one direction causing the circle bunnies and single lamb to scream and giggle. He then started thumping his foot down on the dirt, an old rabbit trait of warning other wild rabbits of danger, but here it was more of a drum roll which all the others joined in on. With them all together it made for quite a nosie and completely masked the sound of heavier paws falls sprinting up to them.

All the air was pushed from Edward’s lungs as he was sent flying across the yard by a buff coloured rocket. The kits all laughing anew, cheered the arrival of Virgil who stood on all fours like the rest of them with his paws on the winded Edward looking more like a predator that had caught his supper.

“Can't believe you were all having fun without me and skiving off work,” he added slapping Ed gently, making him groan trying to draw in air.

“What…I didn’t have time to come get you,” Ed added finally managed to gasp out, his paws up in a show of surrender.

Virgil pulled his mate back to his feet and paws, and the older rabbits looked around at their young charges before Virgil clapped his paws together to get everyone's attention.

“Right! A change of game, I say we play a game of Zootopian Bulldog,” A peel of happy shouts and applause from the kits was enough to show all were in agreement. Zootopian Bulldog being a much rougher game where you had the bulldog in the middle, and the others had to run from each end of the yard to the other, anyone caught was then a catcher as well. The winner was the last left running from each end of the field to the other. It was always a load of fun and to play it the wild way meant even more giggles.

“Me and Ed be the Bulldogs now let's see what you got,” Virgil challenged then gave Ed a nod and a wink, both of them getting low ready to move, and again both of them thumping their powerful feet on the dry turf, the signal to start would be when they both stopped.

As always the game was a hoot to play with both larger rabbits charging around the yard as the younger ones dodged, dived, rolled to one side or the other or tried their ploy of leaping straight up and over. The kits proved to be more than capable of giving the two older rabbits the slip with tricks, hops and jumps that shocked both Virgil and Edward multiple times.

And to top it all off it was the young lamb who was the last one left winning the game. With a spectacular jump she used Virgil’s head as a launch point to get over him sending Virgil face first into the dirt. Dawn had been beside herself with glee at winning with both Ellie and Belle running up and hugging all three of them ecstatic. Both Ed and Virg sat down to catch their breath, each covered in mud while the latter spat out great clumps of sere grass and stems. They sat there taking in the scene of youthful abandonment. Neither one could help but laugh when they caught each other's eye, both knowing what the other was thinking, how amazing it was to be alive and around kits that had not a single worry and lived completely in the now.

“AGAIN, AGAIN!” came the chant.
The two adult bucks, far from done themselves, got back up and stood at the end this time, with Dawn, Ellie and Belle starting the next round. Virgil was just as much in love with the feeling of being completely lost in the moment as he jumped clean over Belle who had set her eyes on him instantly, even being cheeky enough to do a roll as he hit the earth again.

“Show off,” Ed shoulder nudged him as he skiddled to a stop making it to the fence sending bits of turf flying.

“Got to teach them how its done.”

And this is how it went on for some time, until hunger for missing lunch made both Virgil and Ed sit out the next round, leaning against the old fence posts they finally got to open there food parcel and have their lunch.

“Can't believe it I sent you off for food and came over to try and find where you where and here you are playing wild tag of all things,” Virgil said past a mouthful of scone. “At first I was going to kick your arse but then realized how much fun that looked”, he added.

“Yeah, who knew how much fun that would be! We need to get Daisy and Mags in on this,”

Edward chuckled at the thought but suddenly realized that both girls would more than likely both be well up for it.

“No need to ask, you know they would play,” Virgil confirming Ed's thoughts as they both laughed together sharing the idea.

Ed couldn’t help but dream of the day he and Dasiy could play this very game with the girls and any other kits of there own. It was such a flash thought that he suddenly felt that lump form again making it hard to swallow the next mouthful of bread. It was very real what they said about rabbits being emotional he just realised. Perhaps even moreso with the sudden plunge into madness the world had taken.

“Oh, brilliant! Jam tarts!” Edward excaimed pulling out two pastries and passing one to Virgil. “Courtesy of your dear sister. She can cook,” Ed said before taking bite from his treat, chewing it slowly, his face stricken with pure bliss. “Oh…that’s heaven, that is.”

Virgil, his own mouth full, quickly saw what Ed was getting all worked up about. The sweet explosion of taste from the fantastic jam was followed by the pastry base that just finished it off so well. “To your mate,” he said holding up the half he had left.

“To your sister,” Edward joined in raising his own.

Dawn, Belle and Ellie joined the pair of adults having a break, talking happily of their morning’s fun. The trio was even bold enough to ask for some of the bucks’ treats which they allowed this once.

“So, you and Mags all set for your trip this afternoon,” Ed asked between mouthfuls of lunch.

“Yep. Mags is getting things sorted now. Saying that, I think I should make my way back. She should have the packages ready to go,” Virgil checked his wristwatch then glanced at the kits. “You lot as well. I know there are chores that need to be done in the warren, so come on.”

They all started to make their way back, some kits heading off to there own warrens, Clays going one way, Hopps and Swards going the other.

Many waves and words were traded both ways before the youngsters parted ways taking well worn paths.
“Are you guys going to stay at the airfield? It’ll be late when you finish,” Ed asked slightly distracted as he was looking back behind them. Dawn, Belle and Ellie all had their heads together, a powerful sense of Déjà vu making him think of himself Daisy and Virgil looking exactly the same way before getting into trouble and causing youthful mayhem.

“Not sure. We’ll see what happens. If worst comes to worst there’s a small inn near the train depot a couple of miles from the field. Either way, I don’t mind riding back at night. I know these roads like the back of my paw, got my blackout light cover so it’ll be fine.” Virgil looked back to see what his best mate was looking at. “Funny watching it from the outside,” he chuckled.

The bike was packed the side bags bulging with goodies as well as a basket tied to the back of the sidecar while the little compartment was filled with different sundries, mostly preserved fruits and vegetables. Virgil couldn’t say he was thrilled with the extra weight it was putting on his machine, but there was no help for it. The Hopps matriarch had been rather adamant about the inclusion of certain things, plus a few special items for Nick and Ronnie Todd. It had been a miracle that he had gotten it all on the bike, particularly with Belle and Ellie picking that moment to become royal pains in the tail and asking him questions and pinching things out of the bags.

“So you two have a great time and be careful,” Clare was fretting over Mags who was doing a credible job at not getting annoyed with her mum.

“Don’t worry, Clare. I’ll ride easy,” he said with a smile. That little bit certainly came out the way he intended as the Sward matriarch’s eyes widened a bit and his own mother cast Virgil a warning look. It was a bit difficult to had the twitching at the corners of her mouth, though.

A loud, “HA!” came from the door way to the cottage were Edward and Daisy stood holding Virginia and Edelle, both grinning at Virgil's glare.

“How many miles do you give them before they pull over to roll in the grass?” Ed whispered under his breath to his mate.

Daisy chuckled “Oh, two…maybe three at the most.”

They all waved as the bike was fired up sending birds to the skies with the loud roar of the pipes. Mags jumped on the pillion seat instead of the sidecar, wrapping her arms around Virgil who trundled off down the track. A few moments later his promise of an easy ride was somewhat ruined by the growling roar of the bike as he gunned it up the road.

“Any other buck and I would be worried sick,” Daisy added looking around as a sudden thought struck her. “Hmm. I’m surprised Dawn isn’t about to wave them off. I thought she’d want to give them something for Nick and Judy.”

“I’m guessing she’s getting herself into trouble with Belle and Ellie. I saw them whispering earlier, and Virg told me they’d been bothering him while he had been helping Mags load the bike up, so don’t worry,” Edward said nudging his mate with his shoulder in an affectionate rub. “How about I help you get dinner started or do you want to descend into the Sward warren to eat with the hoarde again?”

Daisy pondered it for a moment her a spark to her eyes.

“Why don’t we cook supper up here in the cottage and enjoy an evening together. Let’s see how many hours we can last after these two go to bed before we roll into bed ourselves.” She wiggled her
tail at him as she walked back into the cottage, the display making Ed's knees go weak.

Mags held tightly onto Virgil as he sped down the road, they had been out on the bike every day nearly since he had picked her up on the side of the road. They had gone back for her bicycle repaired and breathed some new life into Old Creaky then passed it down to one of her younger sisters. Mags was done with that old thing now, there was no doubt about that.

The doe was getting to know the roads around the burrows now, Virgil had taken her everywhere he could and the doe had discovered so many new places in her own back garden that she'd been unaware of. Virgil even showed her some rather amazing beautiful spots hidden piece of paradise were they could be together for as long as they wanted without no one finding them. She tightened her grip as Virgil rolled off the throttle a touch for a particular lousy bit of road that was coming up. As they hit the rough patch the heavy back bounced under them. nothing to worry about apart from a muffled “Ouch!” sounded from the sidecar.

Both Mags and Virgil looked down at the engine then into the sidecar at the same time, then at each other. As they came to a stop on the side of the road, Virgil pushed his goggles up.

“Belle, I swear if that’s you…” he shook his head as Maggie pulled back a blanket that was covering the side car’s seat.

It wasn’t Belle but Dawn, still in her scruffy dungarees holding onto a brown paper package tied with brown string.

“Dawn, what in the blazes are you doing in there hun?” Maggie spoke first, Virgil’s surprise keeping him quite for a moment.

The ewe looked very abashed and guilty as she sat up from her hiding place, her bottom lip starting to quiver.

“Dawn, what you thinking?” Virgil said now wondering if they were going to be late if they turned back, already at the halfway point to Cecil Flavideau Aerodrome, plus he would have to face Clare after he had listened to Mags calls for speed and blasted it up the road just after promising he wouldn’t.

“I…I made some things for mummy and poppa…I wanted to surprise them,” her big green eyes filled with tears behind her glasses making them seem even larger ond more soulful than normal.

“Oh, honey, don’t get upset!” Mags heart just melted there and then as she got off the bike to comfort the little ewe.

Virgil could tell these weren’t don’t tell me off tears. He’d seen more than enough of those and tried them in his days as a young kit far to many times to not see the signs. These were genuine, plus they all knew how much Dawn missed her new parents. After losing her family so recently life had been unfair for the little thing.

Maggie climbed into the sidecar pulling Dawn onto her lap as the lamb began to cry.

“Come on. Let's get this one to her daddy,” Maggie said with a smile as she tousled Dawn’s head wool followed by a warm hug. “We can find a way to get a message to the warren, plus we’re on a mission of morale, right? What could boost a fox’s spirits more than this little thing?” she gave the ewe another squeeze.
Just at that moment a flight of fighters passed overhead, their engines growling and filling the air with the snarl of Merlin engines that were felt as well as heard. On the undersides of the wings were the roundles of the Zootopia Air Corps. That they were heading in the same direction as the trio was something Virgil took as a sign. Nevermind that being more than halfway to the field would scrap the trip entirely.

“I can’t say no to that.” Firing the bike back up and replacing his goggles Virgil nodded at a shocked Dawn. “Don’t worry, Dawn. I got you to your dad once, and I’ll do it again.” With that they were off down the road.

Chapter End Notes

Well, looks like Dawn is going on a little trip. Now to see how that pans out in the next chapter, huh?

I think the biggest issue with this was Tom1380 uses the UK version of Word while I have the US...and there are times they don't like each other at all!
Jeffy Hopps was feeling pretty puffed when he headed home the next evening after the Enemy Bomber adventure. He'd dared go in to the wreck with its surviving enemy Fox. Then helped bring out his dead comrades, a task that would be beyond the stomach of most folk. Finally, he stood by the poor dying fellow, the least he could do for anyone, friend or foe.

All things that would test many grown mammals, yet he'd managed it as a young teen. True it wasn't as bold, no, foolhardy as his older brother Bailey, still under age but run off to the War. No, he wasn't up to that yet, but with so many other males going off, he had a notion that he might be able to take on responsibilities normally left to his elders.

But for now, he was heading home ahead of his brother Don, so had first bragging rights for all that happened. "Dad! You hear about the Axis bomber that landed over in Kavandish's field?" Jeffy gushed as he burst through the door of the Hopps warren.

Stuart Hopps gave his son a rather hard look. "Yes. I did." In a rather atypically stern tone. "The Spitzer Brothers were at the seed and feed this morning and told me all about it."

Jeffy was a bit crestfallen about not being the first to tell the full tale, but was more confused at his Father's disapproving meme. He also noticed none of the younger kits were underfoot, a bad sign.

"They told me about how you went in and helped that poor dying fellow. " And there was a glimmer of sympathy and pride in that. "But they also told me about they all but pissed themselves when the flyer started to paw around the machine gun." And in that he saw the fear in his Father's eyes.

"You've seen the notices about not approaching enemy flyers. How they might put up a fight." The elder Hopps flailed his arms in agitation. "And this morning, I was reading about a couple enemy flyers down over near Oxford who shot at a crowd of onlookers before getting into a gun fight with some home guards. They killed at least six and hurt more than a score." He then looked to his young Son, his face and ears a tempest of emotions, "Then I heard about you young fools..."

"You're right, Dad." Jeffy cringed a bit from the news, and how terrified he'd been when the Fox first went for the machine gun.

"That being said, I am proud of you for what you did. There was more than bravery in it."

"Thanks, Dad."

"So. How are you doing?" And in that, the youngster saw the deeper meaning in his Father's question.
Jeffy sighed. "I'd seen, ah, bodies, ya know. And folks dying. Uncle Karl and all." He fidgeted. "But to carry a dead mammal, his blood on my paws. Then watch someone who knows he's dying right there." He had to pause. Those previous deaths had been lingering passings, brought on by age and illness. This was the first time he had actually seen a death due to violence, a body torn and bleeding out before him.

"Yeah. It can change ya." and Stu glanced away with memories of the kind of mayhem heavy equipment had wrought on small bodies. Though Bart was a still fresh memory, it was older recollections, of trying to draw out a still breathing mangle that had moments before been his Brother, and other things, that brought out a shuddering sigh. The elder Buck gripped the youth by his shoulders to look at him square, "Jeffery Abraham." He began. "There is no shame in showing your feelings about anything, and nothing you can not bring to me or your Mother." Stu then drew Jeffy into an intense hug. "We will always love and support you, especially when you need us."

"Of course, Dad." As Jeffy pulled away to wipe a bit of tear away. He then noticed his Mother standing in a doorway, nodding her agreement. Then, to break the mood, she announced. "Come get some tea and we've got a letter from Davey to share." And with that, several of the little ones came out to be among the elders and get some honeyed tea and hear again the words of their adventuring kin.

"Dear all. Sorry to not write earlier, but they keep one awfully busy in the first days here. I'm told that it's on purpose to keep one off balance and not let a moment go by to get homesick or some such. The first days were just shorting us out, and in that grouped all us Lagos together. Medical checks are easier with only one type to work through. Then tests. Some reading, math, and general aptitude. I got some additional tests, mechanical and technical stuff. Hopefully for a mechanic's position. Here's hoping. We also got all kinds of physical exercise. I think it was more for a winnowing process. A lot of us were farm folk and could keep up well enough, though there some townies that were a bit hard pressed and got slated for "remedial conditioning". Then there were a few poor fellows with infirmities brought out by the effort. One was an older Buck. Most of us were youngsters about my age, but there were a few up to Dad's age. But this one was even older, and though he was in pretty good shape otherwise, just couldn't run for more than a moment. Took it really hard that he had to be let go. Saw Jimmy Clay. Because there are so many mammals here, he was in another lago group. Doesn't look like we'll be training together. Didn't realize how big an effort the recruitment was. It looks like there's more folk here than the whole of the Tri-Burrows. Added bit. We've been sorted to our proper basic training units. Very interesting that it's a mixed group, "Class C" size mammals of my general size, but carns too. Some cats and small foxes, all from the commonwealth, a couple otters, a "Fisher", or so he calls himself. A kind of big weasel, came over from the UVT. So far all we've done is some basic instruction in military rules and such, and lots of marching. The plan seems to be that everyone is going to be trained in basic soldiering regardless of what their final specialty will be. While I miss everyone, I'm doing all right. Food is bland but plentiful. Don't mind the carns with their food, mainly bugs and birds. The fish can get a bit high though. I think I can get through the next six weeks or so before specialty training. Still don't know what the service has in mind, but I'm up for it I guess. David Lee Hopps."

"That sounds not too bad. Certainly nothing like the horror stories Virgil said." Jeffy harrumphed. "Yes." His Father explained. "He reassured Dave that he was just telling tales." And he shook his head at how his scamp of a son had left the family in a state with his initial message of woe. And how Soldier's Aid and the Red Cross had gotten an earful. Following letters quickly clarified the situation, though it was the original that stuck in the minds of many of the youngsters.

"But we haven't heard anything from Bailey yet?"
"No. And Virgil suggested that he didn't want to let us know exactly were he was, least we try to get him back."

"And no new letters from Danny, though the impression was that he was awfully busy with the work on his ship." Bonny sighed. "What a shame, being called back just before the finding festival and all that came with it."

"Wonder how everyone else is doing? With so many youngsters all going off at that same time, there ought to be a rash of mail back by now."

Elsewhere There was a big blackberry hedge that made a natural barrier along the far edge of the Sward family holding. A family of Rats had taken up residence in the bramble, and with some help with the Swards, larger paws and all, made some small income harvesting and processing the fruit in season. They had also been granted planting space for some rows of sunflowers for their own use.

Jackie Sward found herself among the sad end of season stalks. Most of the heads of the giant flowers were long ago harvested, but a few tardy blossoms still hung limp on the half-wilted plants. Staggered plantings could take advantage of good early or late weather for an extended harvest. But there were always a few that were too late to fill out properly before the end of the growing season.

There was a touch of forlorn hope in them, and she was curious to see if there was any last minute salvage. Not that she could really tell. The things were twice her height and more and she was more about being quiet and away from everyone.

"'Ello, Miss." Or almost. There was a Rat atop one of the blossoms, who doffed his hat to the Doe below. "Checkin' out the bitter ends, eh?"

"Sort of, I guess. They're so wonderful in their full glory, but seem a bit sad when they can't make it."

"Aye. Not filled out enough to make the effort, but we check anyway." And he hung over the edge to dislodge a seed. "Yeah, They aren't moldin' or anything, but they're done for the season." And he dropped it down for her to examine. The husk was soft and it didn't feel like there was much of anything inside. Splitting it open only confirmed that.

"Yeah. But we'll leave them up. Birds or some poor small thing might find a nibble, an' we'd never begrudge that."

The Rat scampered down the stalk to come to eye level with Jackie. She really didn't know the Rats as individuals, as it was some of her sisters that dealt with them for the most part. Suspecting that, he introduced himself. "Call me Geoff, Miss. And you ought to be one o' the Sward Does, eh?"

"Yes, Jackie." And she tried to give him a bit of a smile.

"Ah, the academician."

Jackie made a sad little huff at that, knowing that they likely didn't describe her in such terms. A detail the Rat noticed. "They just don' appreciate your wanting to better yourself. But you keep on. Even we rats have some ambitions. I got two going to university. Goin' for degrees. And no small number off to the war effort." Said with particular pride.

"Oh?" Jackie couldn't imagine what the small folk could be doing.

"Yeah!" He gave her a gotcha look. "You're surprised, and don't deny it. No one thinks much of us, if they give us any thought at all. But I've got kin in the war industries. Sure, one is just a wirepuller,
but a couple are doing precision instruments. And my own sons in the Army." And with that a little fretful glance to his otherwise prideful explanation. "A couple in the Signal Corps and another couple with the engineers." And that brought a clear hitch in his demeanor. Seeing her lack of understanding, he explained. "Combat engineers do all that's needed for the rest to advance. Buildin' or repairin' bridges, clearin' obstacles." And a pained pause. "Clearing mines and booby-trap. And, as often as not, under fire. True, they're not in the fight yet, but when it comes, they'll be in the thick of it."

"Yes." Jackie observed with her own touch of dread. "My Brother Edward is going back into it. Even after all that happened to him."

"Aye. Everyone's heard about him and the Hopps Lad. And now all the others who are joinin' up. A couple other Brothers of yours, I heard." He gave her a bit of a look. "Forgive me for askin', but I'd wager you're out here lamentin' more than the failed end of our crop? Is it them?"

"That too." Jackie wrung her paws. "My - mate..." There it was. She said it. As much as the two of them had very rationally understood that they shouldn't commit to a future with a war on, in their last moments together, they had also realized they were intensely in love with each other. Though unconsummated, they were as bound as any couple could be. "He went and joined up. With the Air Corps. He hopes to be a mechanic, one of the Clay boys."

Geoff jovially snorted at that. "A Clay Buck in service? Then those biters don' have a chance. I saw how those lads did in the finals last season. Deerbrook still has three healin' from that last match."

Jackie had to laugh at that. Though her Jimmy wasn't on the team, he was well regarded in his own right. Recovering from that, "But I worry for him. He's afraid he won't come back and that I'll be left alone." With a little sob. She clenched her paws to her mouth, as though admitting that was a betrayal that should not have been uttered.

"Oh Miss. You have to live with hope." The Rat waved her close. "Live and make your life choices as though there was never any doubt as to the outcome. Holdin' yourself back only deprives you the joy of the moment." He got a hold of one of her paws. "Anyone can loose their best beloved at any moment, war or no war, just fate giving you a cruel twist." He wasn't going to mention that he was already twice a widower.

Jackie had to smile at that. He had so succinctly put into words what her family had been unable to articulate. "Thank you, sir." And she ever so carefully put her paw on his.

He in turn patted her paws. "You take care of yourself, for your sake, of course, and as much for him."

"Of course." and they parted ways.

Jackie had James' letter with her. She wasn't going to read it again, as she already remembered every word. But to keep that small thing close was precious to her. It was a short note, just a simple assurance that he was doing well in his first weeks of training. And that he thought of her everyday. While she was comforted by that, his absence still ached. And as much as she tried not to begrudge her sister's good fortune in having her beloved here with her, the contrast did hurt. And in that, she now tended to withdraw from the family.

And thinking of that, where should she go? Maybe back to the warren. She seemed to recall that Maggie was going off on an adventure for the day, and perhaps beyond. So she wouldn't have that issue. Well, there were chores to do that could be done in isolation. Thank goodness there were always those of an age to keep the youngest ones occupied. No. That wasn't right to think so. To
avoid the little ones was going too far. Over-indulgent wallowing in her despair was not a thing a proper Sward Doe should be doing, especially at the expense of the welfare of the kits. The little ones were the one responsibility that even the worthless Scott wouldn't shirk. And in thinking of that, she made a sad little smile of realization.

Duty could be such a cruel and demanding thing. But if James could stick his neck out for the war, then she could do her part for him on the home front. She still didn't like it though. She clutched at the note in her pocket with a renewed resolve and vowed to soldier on for her family.
Nick lifted the cup to his muzzle and sipped the coffee within, wincing at the burnt, bitter flavor and heat as he looked out from the doorway of the briefing room to the planes that were lined up neatly, ready to go at a moment’s notice. Their respective pilots lounged in chairs or bits of cloth laid out on the ground so that the last sunlight of the season could be enjoyed. At a small table just a few yards away the Morgan twins, Jamie and Alex, were in a rather animated game of gin rummy with a raccoon that had been sent to replace Pilot Officer Reginald Harette and another mammal. Jimmy McBandis was one of the younger flyers at nineteen, and had yet to lose his enthusiasm. Every few seconds the young pilot would look up from the cards in his paws to scan the skies, breaking the rhythm of the others.

“There’s nothing up there, Jimmy,” Alex said tiredly, not even glancing up from his cards.

The red fox’s twin nodded. “They’ll let us know if something comes over the Channel in plenty of time.” Jamie reordered his cards, a slight frown of disgust pulling at the corners of his mouth with the run he’d been dealt. “What do you guys call them? ‘Boffins’? They’re getting pretty good with that radar stuff. So relax. You putting my tail in a kink with all that looking around.”

Nick watched with a slight frown as the raccoon’s tail twitched in barely contained anxiousness. Not that the Squadron Leader could blame his latest replacement. The sudden lull in combat had the entire unit off kilter. The last sortie had been odd to say the least. 13 Squadron had found themselves assisting a group of Hurricane jockeys with a small flight of Ju-88 bombers and their Messerschmitt escorts, only the Hurricanes had already dispatched the Axis planes, the only one left from the fray being a Bf-109 that was limping back towards Cervania trailing smoke and steadily losing altitude.

“You are late, friend fox!” a rough voice came over the wireless as one of the Hurricanes pulled up alongside Nick, scant feet separating their wingtips. “There are no more enemies to be had!”

“I see that,” Nick replied flatly over the radio as other Hurricanes formed up, a few rather reluctantly, their pilots obviously wanting to pursue the one remaining Axis aircraft. The red fox looked over the numbers on the fuselage of the nearest plane. “Squadron Leader Anatol Sosnovsky, correct? You’re the group of pilots from Vilkland. 525 Squadron, right?”

Nick had heard of the fighter group of Vilkland mammals, the pilots having fled after their country fell to Axis invasion. Since their inception they had thrown the ZAC into a tizzy with their aggressive pack style tactics and tenacious fighting. Nick had even adopted a few of their strategies with his own unit, shortening the convergence of 13 Squadron’s guns from six hundred meters to two hundred. The Vilkish preferred to get right on a target before unleashing devastating fire. Although several of the pilots were wolves, they looked to be a bit smaller than most lupines, though still cramped in the cockpits of the Hawker Hurricanes. There were also boar and one or two prey mammals from what Nick could tell. The deep, growling voice of the 525 Squadron Leader brought him back to the moment.

“Yes! A pleasure it is to meet you, friend fox! And you are the Red Tails! It is good to fly with you. Maybe one day we can hunt enemies together, eh, mtodszy brat? That would be most agreeable!” The bark of laughter was harsh and grating, but there was genuine feeling behind it as the wolf in the
plane next to Nick threw a jaunty salute before diving and peeling off to the north, his squadron following suit.

“Fair skies, Anatol,” Nick called back, smiling slightly when the wolf dipped his wings side to side in acknowledgement. Looking about one more time, the fox gave the order for his boys to form up and head back to Cecil Flavedeu Aerodrome after Fighter Command relayed that there was nothing more in the air.

That had been four days ago, and since then, not a single squadron had gotten the call to take to the air to repulse enemy planes intruding on Zootopia or the even the Channel. After the intense past sorties, the calm was disturbing and Nick watched as his pilots had a hard time letting their guard down. Maintaining one’s edge was fine, but there was a very fine line between that and snapping.

The sound of a lighter being opened with the striker wheel sparking against a flint before being closed again drew Nick’s attention away from assessing his pilots’ general wellbeing and he turned to find Group Captain Faulkner blowing a cloud of cigarette blue smoke into the air above his ears. “How are the lads, Nick?” the black and grey rabbit inquired as he stepped next to the fox and regarded the lounging flyers and their planes.

Had someone told Rupert Faulkner two years ago that he would be commanding not just a group of predators, but also citizens from the United Vulpine Territories he would have recommended the help of a doctor. Strange times made for strange alliances, though, and after watching them in action, Rupert wouldn’t trade his foxes and their now mixed group for any other in the whole of the Zootopian Air Corps. These volunteers had done the impossible and were some of the most dedicated pilots Faulkner had ever had the honor of serving with.

“I think the unexpected quiet has them bothered, Sir,” Nick answered honestly. “When I was in school there was a bully that would randomly choose who he was going to thump on. Brute of a buffalo who hated preds in the worst way. One day he decided that I was going to be his favorite punching bag. I never knew when he was going to strike and spent a lot of days worrying for nothing, and then when I let my guard down, pow. This sort of feels like that.”

The rabbit nodded as he drew long and deep on his smoke. “So, what happened to that bully?”

The smirk that tugged at Nick’s mouth was quite smug. “I learned that I was smarter than he was. I made sure to goad him into clocking me in front of the principal. After that I never had to worry about him again.”

The snort of laughter from the rabbit was a slight deviation from his normal reserved behavior. Well done, Nicholas. Well done.” He tapped his foot on the floor of the briefing room, the thump of his toe pads sounding a little louder on the floorboards with the emptiness. It was as uncharacteristic a display of agitation as the laugh of amusement had been. “Waiting is never easy. It was like that in the Great War. Day after day of going up, engaging with the enemy, perhaps stopping a zeppelin and between those a day or two of quiet and peace that made one question if there was even a war still going on. It continued like that until the Armistice.”

The red fox frowned. Before he could reply to the rabbit the Group Captain’s orderly ran up and saluted before leaning forward and whispering in Faulkner’s ear.

“Thank you, corporal. Nick, it seems that there’s a delivery here for you, so if you wouldn’t mind waiting a moment,” Faulkner stated as he gestured with his cigarette to a ‘Tilly’ that was heading from the main road that ran past the aerodrome.
Tilly was the nickname given to any utility vehicle in the different services. In this case it was a truck in ZAC blue that had an open bed, the canvas top removed to accommodate Sergeant Bruington, the bear almost looking comical in the back with the Tilly’s obviously overloaded suspension. Nick’s eyes narrowed as he saw what the truck was leading, and frowned slightly at the odd smile on his brother-in-law’s face, the shy grin the doe beside him had on.

“Oh…hell…” Nick grunted.

It was the puff of white wool and large green eyes that regarded the fox behind a pair of goggles that knocked the proverbial ground out from under Nick’s feet. Before either the Tilly or the motorcycle had come to a full stop, Dawn launched herself from the sidecar and ran as fast as she could for the fox, leaping up even as her adopted father knelt, her arms wrapping around his neck while Nick held her close and a little tighter than he normally would.

“Poppa!” the lamb bleated, her eyes misty with happiness as she nuzzled the side of his head.

The commotion drew the attention of the rest of the squadron and they either craned their heads around to watch the little reunion or stood to get a better view. Nick was too busy and distracted to note that the motorcycle had been cut off or the approach of Virgil Hopps and the doe that had accompanied him.

“What are you doing here, Popcorn?” the fox asked as he pulled back a bit to look into the lamb’s eyes.

Twisting her hoof into the thin smattering of grass Dawn began to explain. “I…I heard Uncle Virgil say he was comin’ to the airfield an’ I wanted…I mean…an’ then Belle an’ Ellie helped me hide in the sidecar…” The ewe stood up straight knowing that it wouldn’t do any good to try and fib her way out of potential trouble and opted, wisely, for the truth. “I…I miss you an’ Mamma,” she said simply. When her eyes wandered around a little she saw the other pilots of the squadron looking at her with interest and a black and grey furred rabbit that had a flat expression and eyes as hard as glass.

“So, this is the lamb that you adopted,” Faulkner said flatly as he looked down at Dawn. “Well, with such an important visitor, I suppose I’d better inform the kitchen that we should have a special supper prepared this evening. Wouldn’t you agree, young Miss?”

Dawn blinked in surprise, her features brightening at the wink and slight quirk of the rabbit’s mouth. Falling back into the lessons that had been drilled into her from her life before the bombs had landed on Zootopia at a small private school that she’d attended with her brother, Dawn placed one foot behind her with her hooves a little out to the sides and gave a little curtsy to the dark furred buck.

“Thank you, Sir,” she replied softly.

It wasn’t the response that he was expecting and Faulkner nodded in surprise. “Squadron Leader, I think that as soon as you’re done with your little reunion that you may want to establish lodgings for our guests.” When Nick acknowledged his superior’s suggestion the Group Captain turned for his office, ensuring he was out of view of the others before letting the smile he’d been suppressing pull his muzzle into an expression of pure amusement. Of course he’d known about the arrival of Virgil Hopps, gifts from the farm that Nick’s in-laws had sent being preapproved. Nothing occurred at Cecil Flavedeau Aerodrome that he wasn’t aware of. And it looked like the distraction was just the thing to help temper the strained pilots of 13 Squadron.

Attempting to deflect the potential trouble Dawn could be in, Virgil stepped forward and watched as Nick gave his adopted daughter one more hug before standing, taking the lamb’s hoof in his paw.
“I think Dawn, Belle and Ellie have been listening to too many of the stories from me and Ed,” the young buck said as he rubbed the back of his neck in chagrin. “Belle and Ellie kept me distracted while Dawn hid in the sidecar. I didn’t even know she was with us until we were just a few miles away.” Virgil shrugged. “I’m the one that should get chewed out, not Dawn.”

Raising an eyebrow as his only response for several moments, Nick finally smiled. “It’s okay, Virg. Things like this help me keep my perspective.” He chuckled softly and gave Dawn’s hoof a little squeeze. “I’d have done the same but this group of reprobates needs a lot of looking after.” Not content to just hold his daughter’s hoof, Nick scooped the lamb up and set her in the crook of his left arm, giving her ear a little tickle and grinning at the giggle that it brought. “Well, let’s introduce you to the squadron and then I’ll show you around. I want to make sure you know where the shelters are, just in case, then I’ll show you where the guest quarters are.”

“Shelters?” Dawn asked as she lowered her head, her eyes growing even wider.

“It’s okay, Popcorn,” Nick assured her. “We’ll know long before any thing gets near us. It’s just the smart thing to do. And some rabbits just over in the next village helped build them, so you know they’re good, right?” He glanced at the doe that was several different shades of brown with speckled markings that faded towards the tips of her ears. “And I think I remember you at the Finding Festival, but I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Nick, this is Maggie Sward, but you can call her Mags,” Virgil said brightly. “Mags, this is Judy’s husband, Squadron Leader Nick Wilde.”

“A pleasure, sir,” Maggie told him with her paw extended.

“Yes it is,” the fox quipped. “Now, what’s this about? Not that I’m against visitors, but it’s a bit unexpected.”

“Heh! Mum thought we should bring you an emergency delivery of goodies from the Burrows. Dad also made sure to send some of his brew.”

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The whole of 13 Squadron was more than enthusiastic about the supplies that Virgil had brought and the mess hall cooks actually did the different preserves, jars of vegetables and such justice. Dawn became the darling of the squadron, after dinner the phonograph being wound up so that nearly all of the pilots got a chance to dance with the lamb or even a turn or two with Maggie before she took up station at the head of the officers’ table to sing for the assorted mammals that made up the unit, those mechanics and soldiers not on duty welcomed as well for the bit of entertainment.

Mags started with ‘How High the Moon’, the entirety of the mammals in the mess hall watching entranced as the rabbit kept up with the record as it spun merrily, then ran through ‘Down the Road a Piece’, adding a little bit of a dance step to it with the lively piano segment. Even Dawn was enraptured with the bunny’s singing, bouncing in her seat next to her poppa until Nick nudged her and gestured to a bit of an open floor and danced with the lamb, Dawn laughing happily as the other pilots began clapping in time. When Dawn had trouble keeping up Nick simply picked her up and swung her around much to the ewe’s delight. The final bit that Maggie sung was ‘Run, Rabbit, Run’, a song that was popular in Bunny Burrow and other farming communities, making fun of the Axis bombing attempts and claiming successes that had been debunked.

Dawn was in a state of absolute joy as she sat next to Nick and sang along with the doe. It had been such an exciting day once she’d learned that she was in a minimum of trouble and her Poppa had missed her just as much. At least that night she wouldn’t have to worry about the nightmares that had
been plaguing her since that night of watching the air battle from the window in the Hopps’ house. Since that night she’d woken up with images of the night the bombs fell on Zootopia and she lost her parents and brother that mixed with ones of her Poppa in a burning plane. Each time she was there and fought to get the bubble of the canopy open but couldn’t, watching in impotent horror as the fox burned alive. From there she would turn to find her Mamma Judy looking at her with accusation and disappointment.

When she woke it was always on the verge of bleating out in terror, her hooves clamped over her mouth as her little heart pounded madly in her chest.

Fortunately Uncle Ed and Uncle Virgil had seen the signs of her nighttime distress and began talking to her, their intervention helping a great deal, but not completely, and when Dawn had heard about the trip to the airfield had counted on her closest conspirators to help her hide in the sidecar. She just had to see her Poppa with her own eyes.

“She’s really good, isn’t she?” Nick asked as he leaned close to the lamb.

“The best!” Dawn replied. “I wish I could sing as good as Miss Maggie.”

The red fox nodded. “You know what else is good about her singing? It’s great for dancing. C’mon. Let’s go get out on the floor.”

The ewe’s eyes widened. “B-but I d-d-don’t know how to d-dance!” she whispered in wide eyed fear of embarrassing herself.

“Then it’s time to learn,” Nick replied softly. “No one is born good at anything, Popcorn. We learn by doing. Besides, I’m the boss. No one will laugh at you, I promise.”

Reluctantly Dawn gave in and let her adopted father lead her out to the floor, taking her hooves in his paw and began coaching her on how to place her feet, how and where to move. Within minutes the jaunty song that Maggie was singing and the music came together with what her Poppa was showing her and Dawn began to loosen up, discovering that there really wasn’t anything to it. Soon she threw her head back and began laughing as Nick spun her about, his feet a blur as he hopped and kicked in time to the music and singing. When the song ended Dawn’s ears and nose flushed pinkly with the whistles and clapping from the other mammals who were cheering them on.

Dawn tried to head back to her seat when Ronnie Tod, the fox that she’d met after Virgil’s rescue stepped up with a grin. Dawn liked the kit fox, particularly after his intervention in the encounter with Martin Pennyfur.

“You know, it’s not fair to run off without letting some of us have a dance or two. If it’s okay with your dad, that is.” Ronnie gave her a little bow and held out his paw and smiled warmly. “Especially now that my leg’s all better.”

With an anticipatory gleam to her grass green eyes, Dawn looked to Nick who shrugged. “It’s up to you, Popcorn. But only if you want to.” The last was grunted out as the lamb threw her arms around her adopted father for a tight squeeze before accepting the proffered paw of the kit fox who walked with her to the middle of the mess hall floor.

Other members of 13 Squadron nodded and cheered as the pair cut a proverbial rug before lining up to dance with their Squadron Leader’s new daughter, Dawn easily becoming what the others would call ‘The Darling of 13’.

Nick watched with a smile as Dawn wrapped each one of his pilot’s around her little finger simply
by being herself and stepped over to the open door for a bit of cooler air, Virgil already there, the rabbit holding out a glass flask. “Some of Dad’s berry brandy,” the buck said with a grin.

“Oh, that’s good,” Nick breathed as the flavor lingered on his tongue and filled his nose. “So, the two of you look pretty serious,” the fox commented with a nod to the doe who was happily breaking into another song as Dawn changed up partners, each one of the pilots adding to her burgeoning knowledge of dance steps.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Virgil said with a coy grin. “She’s one of the few I’ll trust with my bike.”

Nick snorted. “Well, that is serious!”

Virgil nodded with a boyish smile on his muzzle as he regarded his sweetheart at the front of the mess hall. “Yeah, it’s pretty serious.”

The fox glanced over at his brother-in-law with a curious expression. “Looks like you’re getting better with the tight spaces,” Nick observed.

“A bit. Ed helped out. It’s good to talk with someone that was there, you know? Someone that understands. I think that I’m ready to get back into it, though. I put in for a transfer to armor with Ed. I don’t think Mags or Daisy are all that tickled with it, but they understand. And I can’t sit this out.”

Nick nodded in understanding. Before he could articulate a response a bleat of high laughter pulled his attention back to the mess hall and he saw Alex Morgan spinning Dawn up in the air, his paws around her tiny waist as the lamb held her arms out like wings. He set her down after a couple more revolutions, the fox a little winded but smiling. Dawn, her eyes sparkling merrily as she panted for breath, bound across the wood floor, leaping at the last moment to be caught by Nick.

“Dance with me again, Poppa!”

Nick glanced around finding that Virgil had slipped away. The young rabbit still had a hell of a time being inside, and didn’t like showing the effect that his time as a prisoner had on him. With a shrug and turning back to the lamb, Nick headed back out to the middle of the floor as Maggie broke into ‘Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye’. Sure thing, Popcorn,” Nick said with a wide smile.

As a slower song it was easy to waltz about with the little ewe and Dawn held on to her adopted father tightly as the moved about. When Mags sang the last note, the music ending softly, Dawn looked up with a smile. “Thank you, Poppa,” she said with a smile that turned into a yawn.

“Anytime, sweetie. But I think it might be time to think about calling it a night. You’ve had an adventure today.” When the lamb only nodded in acquiescence Nick couldn’t help but smile as he led her back to their places at the table, getting her situated for a bit of a sit down before putting her to bed for the night.

The reappearance of Group Captain Faulkner walking alongside a slightly smug looking Virgil caused Nick to quirk and ear and eyebrow at his in-law, and Nick’s curiosity was rewarded a moment later. “Well, lads, I think that we owe a round of applause and gratitude for Miss Sward bringing a bit of a joy to us, don’t you?”

The pilots and enlisted alike broke into hearty clapping and whistles, Maggie Sward’s ears bursting into a flare of pink blushing as she lifted her paws to her muzzle. Sure, most mammals appreciated her singing, but this made her feel almost like she was a celebrity like the singers Fiona Grazer or Ginny Fields. Resisting the urge to hide, not that there were a lot of options, the doe gave her appreciative audience a little bow and curtsy before padding towards Virgil with a nervous giggle.
“Yes, thank you very much Miss Sward,” Rupert continued with a friendly smile. “And thank you, Corporal, for the delights that we’ve enjoyed tonight. Hopefully when all this is done over with I can get to Bunnyburrow and meet your father and get some more of that fantastic ale of his. I do like a good bitter.” Even as he turned back to the squadron, Rupert Faulkner’s face slipped back into that sort of paternal seriousness that he often wore, what he considered his professional face. “That being said, there has been a request posed, one that Command has deemed acceptable to generate continued support amongst the various mammals of our region.”

All eyes were on Faulkner as the rabbit slipped his silver cigarette case from inside his uniform jacket and opened it, using the process as a means of drawing out the building anticipation amongst the flyers. Rupert glanced at the members of 13 Squadron from under the brim of his cap as he put the end into his muzzle and lit it with a lighter that went with the case. It was a testament that none of the young pilots or enlisted personnel balked apart from a little fidgeting.

“Nicholas, there is a rather large recruitment drive that is accompanying the yearly fair at Bunnyburrow. It’s been requested that the lads and you provide a flyover and some simple maneuvers at ten hundred hours Mean Time. Afterwards I’m authorizing two days of leave for you and two pilots of your choice as you will partake in the recruiting efforts of the ZAC and other branches by talking to the good mammals attending. I believe you mentioned your father-in-law having a field that would prove more than adequate for a trio of Spits, yes?” The rabbit waited for Nick’s reply before continuing. “Excellent. I’ll also send Sergeant Finster along as well to help tend to your planes with a contingent of mechanics. I’ve been assured that there are ample accommodations. As such that means you and your lads need to be wheels up no later than oh nine forty to form up and for the flight. Clear heads are highly recommended, gentlemammals.”

The last was added with a knowing glance at one of the younger replacements that was lifting his third tankard of ale up, the young rabbit taking the hint and setting the drink down with a little push as he wiped his muzzle with the back of a paw. “Right, Sir,” the young buck mumbled in chagrin.

Faulkner nodded to Nick who was a little astonished that the Group Captain, and also Fighter Command, had so readily agreed to the fly-by demonstration, not to mention an unexpected furlough for Nick and two others. “I’ll leave it to you, Squadron Leader,” Rupert said before nodding at the others in the mess hall. “Gentlemammals.”

“Well, you can take me off whatever list you’re putting together,” Pilot Officer Todd said quietly as he leaned towards Nick from where he sat. “I’ve seen Bunnyburrow and it wouldn’t be fair to some of the others.” He smiled wryly. “Besides, someone needs to keep an eye on the leftover rabble.”

Nick snorted. “Well, you are next in line.” He adjusted a suddenly tired Dawn who yawned once more and drew her legs up while resting her head on her father’s chest, blinking her large eyes slowly as they started to grow heavy. “I think we’ll draw cards at morning muster. Does that sound fair to you?”

Ronnie smiled. “Sure. Now I think you need to get that one to bed, Nick. She’s about tuckered out.”

With a smile and nuzzle to her head puff of wool, Nick cradled the dozing lamb. “I think you’re right.” He did pause to look at the rest of the squadron. “Muster is oh six hundred, boys. Get some sleep. We’ll figure out who gets to head to the Burrows after the demonstration in the morning.” Standing up with Dawn in his arms, Nick stepped up to Maggie Sward. “Thanks for that. I think that you did more to lift spirits tonight than anything else possible. And for getting this one to me safely.”

Mags smiled with a shy dip of her head but caught the warmth and love that the red fox regarded his adopted child. She started slightly when Virgil joined them, his paw hesitating for a moment as he lifted it. Nick’s gentle smile turned into a grin and he shifted Dawn a little to grasp the buck’s wrist
before pulling on it until Virgil’s fingers wrapped with Maggie’s. “You aren’t in uniform, Virg. You get a pass on certain rules regarding what would be considered ‘proper behavior’.”

Little more was said before Nick called on one of the newer pilots to convey his brother-in-law and the brown hued doe to the guest quarters and reminded his pilots that the next day was just as important as any other day that found them flying a mission and headed off with Dawn to his own quarters. Just as he opened the door Dawn roused and blinked at the harsh yellow light that came from the overhead bulb.

“You only got one bed, Poppa,” the lamb pointed out.

“That’s true,” Nick said as he set the small ewe on the edge of the mattress and set about getting a washcloth, basin of water and bar of soap. “Fortunately I learned a little trick just in case little lambs show up unexpectedly.” When Dawn looked away, dropping her gaze to the floor, Nick set a kettle on the wood stove that was hot with a fire that his orderly for the day had started earlier and stepped to the bed before kneeling down. “Hey, I’m not mad, Popcorn. I was surprised, and a little worried because this is an airfield so that means we can come under attack. I don’t think that’s something to worry about tonight, though,” he added with a tap to the ewe’s nose to alleviate the sudden worry that Dawn showed. “We haven’t seen any enemy planes around here for almost a week.”

“It’s ‘cause they know you an’ Mamma’s flying,” the lamb said with complete conviction. She then let her adopted father clean her ears and then hooves once the water was warm enough. Then she watched as the fox stepped to a chest and pulled out an undershirt before getting a second one and a pair of pajama bottoms. “What’s that for, Poppa?”

“Well, you can’t sleep in your clothes, and I can’t sleep in just my knickers with you here tonight. Why don’t you go step into the water closet and change, I’ll change out here and then we’ll get your bed set up.”

Doing as she was told, Dawn went into the attached privy and got undressed before putting the large shirt on. It would suffice as a nightie and she folded up her dungarees and blouse, knocking on the door and getting the all clear from Nick before stepping out. She found that he’d pulled out part of the chest-of-drawers and set it up next to his bed, lining it with blankets and sheets, the thing made for mammals larger than both of them. A spare pillow was all set for the lamb as well.

“What you think? Not bad, huh?” Nick inquired with a satisfied expression at his handiwork.

“It’s almost like the trundle bed Belle and I share!” Dawn said happily, letting the fox tuck her in. “Poppa?” she began as Nick ensured she had enough blankets. “Am I going back to Bunnyburrow tomorrow?”

“Yup. But you won’t be riding back with Virgil and Mags,” Nick said softly as he took the lamb’s glasses and set them on the small nightstand next to his bed. “Didn’t you hear what the Group Captain said?”

“Not really. I was getting sleepy.”

Nick smiled down at the ewe. “Well, I don’t want to ruin the surprise, but I think you’ll like tomorrow.”

The morning air was cool and crisp so that every time Dawn exhaled she could see her breath. She was bundled up in the field jacket that her Poppa had gotten from the supply shed sized for small
mammals and shrugged down into it as she cradled a cup of tea in her hooves. It was working well with the toast and plum jam that Gramma Bonnie had sent with her Uncle Virgil to keep her from getting too chilled. The brew wasn’t as good as what she got at home, but at least it had enough sugar in it to cut the bitterness.

She kicked her feet back and forth as her Poppa went through the fly-by that he planned and listened with a sense of excitement that had nothing to do with watching the airplanes that would make an appearance at the Bunnyburrow county fair. Dawn’s exuberance was that Poppa Nick was wearing the items that had been made with the lamb’s own wool that he now wore. The mittens and leggings could be pulled over to fully cover fingers and toes and with colder weather on the way and the short scarf that was tucked around the fox’s neck wouldn’t impede his looking around while flying. She was sure that it would keep her adopted father warm. Of course, the misting of his eyes had set Dawn to crying, but it was in absolute joy that her little present was so appreciated.

Then the assembled pilots stood and gathered around Nick, and Dawn stood on her chair to see what was happening.

All of the pilots drew a card from the deck that Ronnie Todd held out, the kit fox setting the deck down while Nick had them hold them up. “Jacks are wild, guys,” Nick said with a grin. “McBandis and Gambolborough, you’re with me and lucky winners of a two day-one night stay with my in-laws,” the red fox told a raccoon and mountain hare respectively. “You’ll be treated to good food, the comforts of home and probably some attention of the female persuasion. All I ask is that you remember this is my family and treat them accordingly and don’t do anything to embarrass the squadron, right?”

There was some good natured ribbing from the other pilots, a few disappointed that they hadn’t drawn the lucky cards, then a mass exodus as each pilot went to inspect their plane for the coming flight. Dawn blinked her large eyes as Nick stepped up to her and held out his paw. “Am I gonna ride in the truck with the mechanics?” the lamb inquired as she let him take the mug and put it on the table with other dishes for the mess hall to reclaim.

“You would if you hadn’t taken so long at breakfast,” Nick answered with a sigh and shake of his head. “They left about an hour ago, Popcorn.”

“But…but how am I gonna get home, Poppa?” the ewe asked, suddenly nervous that she might be in trouble, and thereby get Nick in trouble as well.

Instead of answering immediately, Nick took the lamb’s hoof and led her outside the debriefing room and pointed to the first Spitfire on the line, the morning sun causing the lightly frosted grass to sparkle with a luminous haze. Just in front of the cockpit was the nose art with winged Judy. “Well, I was thinking I’d take you home in that.”

Dawn gasped and her little tail began twitching furiously as her ears flicked in excitement. “Truly? We get to fly in your airplane?!” Then she looked at the small door below the canopy where little Axis symbols were lined up in two full rows and a partial, the hated sigils of the enemy causing Dawn to tilt her head in curiosity. “Poppa? Why do you have those marks on your airplane?” she asked with a twist of distaste to her mouth.

The look that flashed through Nick’s eyes was slightly sad before he schooled his expression into something a bit more neutral. “They indicate how many enemy planes I’ve shot down.”

Though young, the lamb wasn’t ignorant of the cost of war and tightened her hold on her adopted father’s paw. “You don’t like fighting, do you, Poppa.”
It wasn’t really a question, but more of an observation, and Nick felt a small surge of pride at the little lamb’s ability to see the truth in various matters, even though he wished that were otherwise and she could have held on to a bit more of her innocence a little longer. “No, Popcorn, I don’t like fighting.”

Dawn was silent for a few moments before nodding. “Maybe they will stop and learn we can be friends.”

Nick gave her a smile. “Here’s hoping. Now, first things first. We have to do an inspection of the plane before takeoff, what we call a walk-around.”

Nick walked the plane with Dawn in tow, showing her what to look for, what to test, how to tell if the parts that moved felt good or were a potential problem, how things that shouldn’t move needed to be solid feeling, and potential leaks for the engine landing struts and so on. Then, once in the cockpit, the fox ran through the start up procedure and let Dawn activate the first of two modified shotgun cartridges used to initiate the firing process for the Merlin engine.

It turned over the first try, and Dawn fought the startled jump the loud bang elicited, then the shiver of anticipation as the powerful engine settled into a steady series of contained explosions of air and petrol within the cylinders. She whipped her head around, lower lip between her teeth as her eyes sparkled in absolute glee.

Nick gave her a thumbs-up and had to shout to be heard, unable to link the flight cap she wore to the plane’s radio. “We need to let the oil warm up, then when everyone else is also up to temp we’ll take off!” His chuckle at Dawn’s enthusiastic nod was inaudible over the roar of the idling engine. It only took a short while before down the line the pilots of 13 Squadron signaled to the Squadron Leader that they were ready to go. Nick adjusted how Dawn sat on his lap, the ewe strapped onto the harness of his parachute, and thus secured fairly well to the straps of the cockpit seat. He’d instructed her to simply go limp and not panic if they had to bail out for any reason, and to let him handle any potential emergencies.

It was impossible to tell that the lamb was trembling in anticipation as they taxied to the end of the field before Nick pushed the throttle open, the roar building to a crescendo as the wheels bounced a little over the browned grass and dirt of the aerodrome’s primary strip. Then the tail lifted followed by the sudden surge upwards that seemed to leave the ewe’s stomach below them and she bleated in delight, her hooves grasping the fabric of her borrowed flight coat. It was impossible for Dawn to keep from swiveling her head to look around as the cold wind suddenly ceased as her Poppa slid the canopy closed.

“We’re on our way Popcorn! Think you can handle some serious flying?” the fox shouted over the sound of the engine and wind rushing over the aircraft. When Dawn nodded vigorously Nick laughed and gave his lamb a one armed hug and nuzzle. “Here, grab the yoke with your right hoof, but don’t press that. No need to fire the guns, okay?”

The world looked so different from the air and Dawn loved every moment of it. Riding in the tank that Uncle Edward was in charge of had been fun, but this was thrilling beyond compare. Each slight movement of the yoke caused the plane to respond with unbelievable agility and the lamb felt her blood singing in her veins. It was no wonder her Mamma and Poppa were pilots. To soar among the clouds within the bright, crisp sky was like a dream come true and the speed was even more exhilarating than what Uncle Virgil could coax out of his motorcycle. Then, before she thought it possible Poppa tapped her on the shoulder and pointed out of the canopy as his other paw took the
yoke over her hoof.

“Look there! That’s Bunnyburrow!” Nick said next to her ear.

“Everything looks so small!” Dawn gushed. “Like a bunch of dollhouses and little toys!”

“It truly does!” the fox agreed. “We’re going to begin our little show. Are you ready?”

Dawn nodded and took a deep breath as she barely heard her Poppa speak into the radio that was part of the oxygen mask that he had on but wasn’t wearing, the plane not being high enough to need the oxygen it would convey.

The decreasing speed was almost tangible, most of the indication that the fox had throttled back coming from the change in the noise from the Merlin engine. With wide-eyed awe Dawn watched as the main formation of 13 Squadron pulled ahead in formation and dropped altitude, forming up in a staggered chevron and flew towards the grounds where the fair was in full swing, the various mammals in attendance looking like little specks against the tents and pavilions and sere grass of the town green.

“Okay! I think that got their attention!” Nick said over the radio but also loud enough for the ewe to hear. “McBandis, Gambolborough, time for you to follow the leader. Just like training, right? Form up and stay with me.”

Dawn didn’t hear the replies from the other pilots that had won the card draw to see who would be staying with her Poppa at the Hopps warren, but that mattered little to the young sheep as her adopted father added throttle to the powerful engine and pushed the nose of the plane down so that they were aimed at the very heart of the fair. Then, just a scant hundred feet off the ground, Nick pushed the throttle wide open before pulling up, the fighter clawing into the sky with a deep roar.

Had she been able to see the crowd Dawn would have seen some mammals scrambling every which way while others flattened themselves on the ground, hugging their bodies as tightly as possible to the brown turf while a few others stood straighter and pointed at the warbirds with wide grins and heaving chests, completely excited and enthralled by the ‘sneak attack’ the trio of planes pulled.

One mammal wasn’t so lucky, the sudden blast of Rolls Royce engines catching him so completely off guard that he crashed his bicycle into a low stone wall. APW Hodges pulled himself out of the tumble of his bike shaking and livid, his helmet askew as he lifted a clenched hoof and shook it in impotent rage at the wheeling and rolling fighters. “Thrice damned foxes!” the old goat spat, his shins and elbows less bruised than his ego.

Even had she been aware of the Air Warden’s plight, Dawn wouldn’t have cared less. She was in a world of adrenaline and unabashed delight as her Poppa guided his fighter through a loop, letting the Spitfire have some level flying as the other two pilots caught up and reformed to the right, angling diagonally back as they trailed their Squadron Leader. The loop had been so much fun, less like the plane was moving and more like the world was orbiting them.

Nick then dropped the left wingtip and rocketed towards the grounds of the fair once more, the rest of 13 Squadron wheeling away from yet another lazy pass. This time Nick flew even lower once leveling out, dipping each wing in salutations before peeling away to the left in a sharp turn. Below on the fairgrounds the mammals that were now enraptured by the flying spectacle and less afraid felt the stirring of the air and could smell the exhaust of the three Spitfires that were sowing just what they could do and watched in awe as the fighters each performed several precise rolls.

After four more passes Nick called a halt to the show. “Okay, 13. I think that proved our point. Head back to Cecil and I will see you all in a day or so.”
Dawn gasped when her Poppa leaned his head next to hers so she could catch the farewells that were directed to her by the other pilots, the acceptance by the mammals that flew with Nick warming her all the way to her soul. She turned with a wide smile and saw Nick wink before he sat back up and angled the fighter towards the Hopps farm, circling once to inspect the field that they would be putting down on.

“Okay, Popcorn. Now it’s time for your first landing. Ready?”

Chapter End Notes

So, a little bit lighter chapter, a bit of fun, some drumming up more support for the war effort. I read somewhere that a British woman who was a girl at the time of the war used to get terribly excited about seeing Spitfires, Hurricanes and the like flying over her village and how everyone would stop what they were doing to watch the planes go by, the feeling of pride and reassurance that they imparted, and there were some efforts by the Ministry of Defense to encourage enlistment and so on for the war effort, so I figured a little artistic license would be okay here.

Besides, it was fun! That and how can one go wrong with a father-daughter dance?

Now then... The Vilkland pilots of 525 Squadron are my take on the actual 303 Squadron made of Polish pilots that escaped the German advance. They were not only phenomenal pilots, they knew first hand what England faced and performed their duty with dedication and ferocity that was astonishing, racking up a stunning number of kills and mission successes. Their tactics did indeed influence some standard RAF practices, their Hurricanes bearing astonishing numbers of kill markers. So, Vilkland is my analog to Poland and those brave men. The character of Squadron Leader Anatol Sosnovsky is an original character and his creator is Naeserah, and we will certainly be seeing more of him and his wolves, boars and other Vilkland pilots and their exploits!!!

Until next time friends, fair skies!
“Come on, then. What do you want to do first everyone? We have so much to pick from,” Daisy was speaking to the large group that they were with at the harvest fair. As the families were so large it was quite normal for them all to split up into smaller groups and this practice had changed today when they arrived and the fluffle contained Hopps, Sward and Clay rabbits.

Ed was just waving a good buy to Virgil and Maggie’s group, the two having got back that morning. Virgil, like him, was in full army uniform, which seemed to help get some of the kits in line. Despite that the situation was still something akin to chaos with kits excited over games, other mammals in uniform representing other branches, and an air of levity due to the lack of Axis activity as of late. Mags was already looking rather stressed trying to herd her younger siblings while Virgil gave a thumbs up back to Ed while whispering something in a young Clay bucks ear. The only reason for that must mean Virg was starting trouble already.

It was busy and seemed that everyone from the county had made their way into town to enjoy the day out, the overall mood almost to a pre-war state. The weather couldn’t have been more perfect for the occasion either, warm weather, clear skies and a gentle breeze giving the attendees one of the last glorious days of the year. The sand bags and posters around town now had the company of bunting and flags while all manner of decorations gave the event a truly positive air.

Ed was currently keeping one eye on the kits in their group which included Ellie and Belle. Of course this meant that he had a pawful with just them being there. However, they were a little quieter than normal with their part in Dawn’s grand adventure to the airfield coming out. Needless to say the associated family mothers weren’t all that impressed with the kits’ complicity in the escape and meant for the moment the girls were on their very best behavior. This wasn’t something to hedge one's bets on, though. It was almost guaranteed that when Dawn got back the trio were going to be just as bad as Virgil, Daisy and himself.

‘Lucky Buck’ had to hide his grin several times when the kits had been up to no good he would shoot them a wink behind their mothers’ backs. How long their current good behaviour was going to last would be interesting, and bets had already been placed. His other eye was on Ginny and Edie. The kits had grown so fast they were quickly getting bored of their basket and had to be watched constantly as they seemed to want to explore everything. In a couple of weeks it would be time to get nanny tethers if they came into town to keep them from bolting off. Ed had the basket in his paws at that very moment and both little does’ heads were looking this way and that, ears twisting at all the sounds around them and their noses twitching madly at the smells that were wafting over the crowd with the food stands that were nearby and currently that was there destination.

“So, we have roasted vegetables along with walnuts. No, Sarah, we are not having sweets until later,” Daisy explained and informed her group as one of the young Clay kits was looking hopefully at one of the stands offering more sweet treats and penny candies.

Within a few minutes Ed and his mate had the young bunnies situated with little wraps of chips or roasted vegetables to compliment the lunches that they’d brought with them. Not only was letting the kits overindulge on fair food ill advised, it was expensive, and with the present climate it was also impractical. Despite that small limitation to the festivities it seemed as if everyone was enjoying
themselves as mammals wondered from stall to stall looking at things to buy or things made for trade.

Daisy found a wide brim straw hat, then moved on to knitted kit clothes and had a great time diving into the different secondpaw mini jumpers, trousers, hats and things for winter as it was coming in. She kept running her paws over different cloths feeling the softness with a bright smile on her muzzle. Ed couldn’t help but beam at her seeing her so happy showing different things and talking about which ones were prettier or what would match best with girls’ fur colour. The twins now had new knitted cardigans and hats for the winter one with little holes in for there small ears and the other with knitted rabbit ears warmers.

Then it was wondering past the farmer's stands were competitions for best and biggest vegetables vied along with largest yields for the war effort were going on in pitched battles. Apart from the nattering that was in full swing parceled out with lots of gossip and drama, Edward was also aware of the usual attempts of skullduggery that accompanied such events. Some of the contentions between various farmers went back generations and the scarred veteran chuckled as he watched an old rabbit getting batted away from an elderly doe’s prized turnips. Ed couldn’t help but snort in amusement as the old doe drove off her antagonist with well placed jabs of her walking stick while the buck protested his innocence.

Closer to the center of the green near the stage Ed would be taking shortly and the tank that he’d brought sitting off to the side with the mechanics keeping curious kits from it. Music was being played as a smooth looking hare crooned a few of the more popular tunes that were making the rounds. Lined ic gentle curves before the stage were chairs from the church hall all laid out in front of him with an area for dancing set out in front of that. Despite the music and mammals appreciating the hare’s smooth baritone no one was dancing yet, though that would most likely come later in the day after Ed’s speech and when the crowd had it’s fill of all the mammals in uniform.

On the other side of the small stage school age kits were preparing for some sort of performance. A young buck was showing his brass by juggling with other young rabbits who tossed additional balls into the mix.

“Looks like something we would have done,” Daisy said watching the group of friends as they showed off.

“Always trying to be the center of attention, weren’t we?” Ed quipped with a smile that told Daisy he was looking back at those days as well.

“Yeah, I think maybe we should have tried juggling,” Diasy said thoughtfully an exaggerated expression of contemplation.

“It would certainly have made a much better distraction for the sweets then we used to do.”

The great show of Zootopian spirit of keep calm and carry on was on fine display as all mammals involved were looking to be having a great time, or as best they could. However, as they reached the recruitment stands Ed's good mood began to falter. Although there were decent sized groups talking to the various mammals representing the armed forces, many of them shied away from the few predators that stood about in the uniforms of the different services. Ed watched a group of bunnies speed up past a weasel and looked at him in outright disgust. To his credit the young mustelid didn’t pay the passing bigots any attention, but Ed spotted the young male’s tail slumping onto the ground.

For the most part, the predators were putting on a good show at not letting those around them get to them. But like the weasel, Ed could see the hurt plan as day. It even seemed to be stopping some males stepping to the booths as they eyed the predators warily.
Ed couldn’t stop his anger as his blood got up with the behaviour of most of the prey mammals. It was something that he and Virgil had gotten over during training, and once they began to talk to the predators in their platoon they discovered that there wasn’t all that much difference between them. Then Ed had listened as a few of the larger preds had talked about the way they were treated in some of the towns and smaller villages. Not even Zootopia was free of prejudice despite the number of different mammals that called the growing city home. They often claimed that they were accustomed to it, but Ed never believed them, and now to see mates in uniform being snubbed pulled his fur in the absolutely wrong direction.

As he watched the predators trying to maintain a professional bearing a rather young vixen in smart dress caught his eye for the simple fact that she was immune to the disdain from many of the prey mammals and carried herself with pride. She was with a kit that was obviously her daughter, the youngster looking around with wide eyes as her ears twitched and turned to every sound. The mother kept looking over at him and her ears slightly back and a pained cast her eyes. She looked familiar to Ed who was sure he’d seen her before. She was clearly a kit fox like Nick’s pilot, Ronnie Todd, and was hardly bigger than the rabbits around her. She bent down and said something to her daughter who also looked over at him. As she did Ed’s heart seemed to suddenly turn to lead as recollection began to set in. His unease increased as the vixen began to head towards him, hesitantly at first before straightening her back, her shoulders set and her tail held off the ground.

“Ed, what’s wrong?” Daisy inquired quietly, sensing Ed’s sudden change in demeanor she rested her soft paw on his arm and gave it a light squeeze. The touch was enough to draw Ed's eyes to her blue ones.

Daisy watched as her beloved’s nose twitched and his eyes widened, a look that was more of a warning and something she hadn’t seen since his last true night terror when he had fled to the lake. She moved closer to him, unsure what was bothering Ed. As for the buck he found that having Daisy there was always enough to help him keep his head, and as the vixen spoke the doe’s presence was enough for him to hold fast.

“I’m sorry to intrude, but may I be so bold as ask you a question?”

Both Edward and Daisy now looked to the kit fox and her child who now stood in front of them while keeping a respectable distance.

“Are you…are you Edward Sward?” Her ears were slightly back showing some trepidation, but her tail was held off the ground. The vixen’s eyes were full of a deep sadness that even her polite smile couldn’t quell, but her voice was strong and sure. “My name is Valerie Tipping. I think you served with my husband.”

There was the name Ed had been expecting but hoping he wouldn’t hear.

The vixen the mate and dearest love of Kevin Tipping, one of the most stalwart and dependable of Ed’s crew when they’d been fighting in Cervania with the Zootopia Expeditionary Force. Valerie had written to Kevin almost constantly and even penning letters to the rest of the crew and they wrote back in turn when they could. She’d become part of the family within the tank, like a distant relative they all shared. It was something that had started far back as training when they first came together as a crew. Before long it became common practice to ask Kevin about what Val was getting up to, the normally reserved kit fox more than happy to tell them what was going on back home with his family.

Ed glanced down to find the kit looking back at him shy and subdued. Kevin had gone on about his daughter, Penelope, even though she preferred Penny, and it had been easy to tell that she was the brightest point of Kevin’s life next to his wife. The painfully shy demeanor was completely at odds.
with the Penny they’d heard about, Kevin describing her as an almost dangerously inquisitive little kit who would be forever talking about everything and anything and to anyone. They had all found Kevin's stories about her rather funny like there local milkmale who had been followed by Penny on his rounds while being asked a tirade of questions. It turned out the milkmale had delivered the chattering kit back to their front door almost in a panic and begging for peace and quiet.

Edward couldn't begin to form words, caught completely flatfooted at this turn of events, and his mouth worked silently like a fish out of water. All the guilt he held for the decisions that cost his crew the ultimate price rose to the surface. He had made the promise to get them through the fighting and he had failed not just Kevin, but Jeremy and Tim as well.

Valerie smiled sadly at them both she also sensing the scarred rabbit’s unease.

“Sorry. I'm Kevin Tipping’s wife, one of Edwards old crew,” Valerie said looking at Daisy and holding out her paw, giving Edward more time to collect himself she looked at Daisy then down at the girls in the basket then back at Edward.

Daisy suddenly realised who this vixen was as she knew of all of Edwards crew all too well from what Ed had told her since being back, not to mention the scarce letters Ed had sent while he had been away.

Valerie smile grew as she took in the small fluffle in front of her easily smelling the link between all of them. “Kevin never mentioned a doe that had caught your attention, Sergeant. Is this a new development?” A warmth spread through the vixen’s eyes and chased the sort of lingering sadness from her features.

Daisy looked to Edward who was regarding the ground and only glancing back to fox. She looped an arm through Ed’s and smiled cheerfully.

“We grew up together. When he came home I wouldn’t let him go until we came to an understanding. And I’ve heard of Kevin and you from Ed. It's wonderful to meet you, though something of a surprise,” Daisy said smiling back at the Vixen.

“Yes, I'm sorry for the shock. I wasn’t expecting to bump into him so soon, either.” Valerie sniffed a little once more and got her emotions under control. “As for my presence it’s because I was assigned to Bunnyburrow to help organise the girls coming in from the cities to help work the farms and I had to meet Ed if I got the chance.” She looked over at Edward seeing his scarred and damaged ears. “I was a bit shocked to see him in the pictures at one of his rallies. Kevin spoke so highly of Edward, but I didn’t know that any of his crew made it from Bullkirk.”

Ed barely heard what the two of them were saying. His thoughts had been pulled back to Kevin, the kit fox who'd been such a key member of the crew. As the oldest and most emotionally mature mammal out of all of them, the one always looking out for the rest and Ed’s main support, Corporal Tipping had been the backbone of the tank and its crew. They had all learned their roles together and taught each other to be the best they could be. Ed had become a commander by chance. At first the idea of taking on such responsibility had been almost too much to shoulder. If it hadn’t been for the likes of his crew, and Kevin in particular, Ed doubted he would have turned into the soldier that he’d become. Something about that fox he had been a soul that would inspire those around him to do and be more. When one’s resolve, or confidence wavered, he would be there with a smile and a few choice words. Ed always use to say that he should be the one in charge which Kevin would always turn down with a chuckle and something like, “You want to see me lose my head put me in charge of something. You should have seen me when Penny was born.”

Then all that goodness disappeared in raging hellfire.
It had all come down to his choice his decision to hold the position a little longer. Once they’d lost their troop leader and they had pulled back from the line after the Spitfires had saved their pelts he should have pulled them back to the coast. Why had he stayed? What madness had been going through his head that day? The decision had cost too much, and those who’d paid dearest were now gone or standing in front of him.

“Mrs. Tipping...er...Valerie...”

The girls stopped talking and turned to look at Ed. Daisy’s ears fell seeing the look in her mate’s eyes. Ed had to say something. He knew that Valerie deserved words that he couldn’t give and more, but what could he ever say to put right what he’d done?

“I...It’s my fault. Kevin...I’m so-”

It was the vixen’s turn to interrupt. Valerie moved half a step closer and drew up straight, her eyes becoming a stern. “Sergeant. If you’re about to apologize, don’t. I won’t hear it. My Kevin knew the risks as well as me. You did your best with what you had in front of you, I’m sure. You have nothing to apologise for.”

Valerie spoke in a tone that left no room for Ed to maneuver. Much like a firm but fair teacher who was laying down the rule of a classroom.

“The last word I got from my Kevin left no doubt in my mind that he not only thought highly of you but trusted you. He knew what was being asked of him was bigger than himself and knew what that could mean. And for that I’m so proud of my husband.” Valerie dashed a tear from her eye before it could even form.

Then her futures softened as she looked at the two rabbits in front of her and smiled as Penny hugged her, one tiny paw wrapped in the thick brush of her mother’s tail. Ed’s throat now had a painful lump that he couldn’t swallow down. He couldn’t think of anything to say to Val who was scratching her daughter behind the ear to comfort her. She looked back at Edward her gentle smile still playing her features.

“We are so proud of him,” she corrected herself. “So no apologies, Sergeant Sward.”

Edward looked down at Penny not sure what to feel. One part of him still felt that guilt and it would always be there, but the fact that Kevin’s mate didn’t blame him, didn’t hold him responsible and, if anything, wanted to make sure that he stopped hurting himself over it.

The little kit also didn’t appear to blame Edward she was looking up at her mother clearly concerned for her. Kevin had also read letters written to them from Penny and then written back from all of them so the kit fox’s family all had almost been an extended family to the rest of them. As such, and because it was part of who and what he was, Edward felt a certain amount of responsibility to the little vixen. He crouched down to be on her eye level and attempted his best possible smile. Unfortunately Ed was still fighting the dry lump in his throat and the little fox spoke before he could.

“Are you ok, Lucky?” she asked him.

Edward couldn’t help be smile at that. Lucky. That was a new one.

“I...I will be,” he replied, his voice rather tight.

“Don’t be sad. Mummy said today isn’t a day to be sad.”

Ed nodded unable to answer her in a way that would explain things to the little kit. He did, however,
reach to her ear still doing his best to hold his smile. “You have something behind your ear.” As he pulled his paw back he flicked out a small coin. “Oh, look at that! A penny for a Penny,” he said giving it to her.

The small vixen’s eyes lit up in astonished delight as she looked up at her mother asking if she could take it to which Valerie nodded.

“Wow! Thank you, Lucky!”

“You’re very welcome, Penny.” His diversion had worked, if only for that quick moment.

“Can I ask you something, Lucky?” Penny inquired looking back to Edward.

The rabbit nodded silently, wary at the suddenly open expression in the kit’s wide, honest eyes.

“Was my Daddy brave?”

Ed swallowed the question making the lump return with an almost painful intensity. “Very brave, he…he was the heart of our group,” he said back now feeling a sting to his eyes once he found his voice again.

She seemed to look back at the shiny coin in her paws, a small, sad smile on her muzzle as the little kit remembered her father. Again she looked back at Ed she seemed to see his pain and without hesitation she wrapped her arms around Ed neck and gave him a hug. Penny stayed like that for several long moments before she moved back, though she kept her gaze riveted on Edward’s eyes.

“Was it quick? Did it hurt?” Penny spoke it quietly so her mother wouldn’t hear.

But Edward heard.

Ed strangled a sob that he managed to disguise as a small cough. It was an innocent question a kit would ask, meant with no malice, but only concern for her late daddy. Ed felt like he had been punched in the gut harder than he’d ever been hit in his life. He closed his eyes and put a paw over them for a moment as a flash of a burning memory along with the scents and sounds that would never escape him ravaged his thoughts. He was such a lousy liar, and especially hated lying to kits, but how could he tell her what her father’s last moments were? Opening his eyes once more he looked back at her seeing that she waited unflinchingly.

“It was. He didn’t feel a thing.”

He saw her let out a breath in relief and her smile returned before she hugged him again. Edward couldn’t help but let out another small quite sob, the lie had taken everything he had to say.

“Don’t be sad, Lucky. Remember, it’s not a day to be sad. Mummy and I are moving to Bunnyburrow and she says it’s a good place with lots of good mammals!” Penny patted him on the back and he just nodded.

The girls watched him, his own mate and Valerie looking on. The small group completely oblivious to the crowd that was gathering in the green getting ready to listen to the little rally and Sergeant Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward’s final speaking engagement. They didn’t see the stares from the attendees or hear the mutters that disappeared on the breeze as predator and prey had such a touching meeting. It was Ed who let go first ruffling Pennys ears and looking to Daisy and Valerie.

“I…need to get to the stage I think,” he said with his best attempt of being normal. “Find a good spot,” he said giving Daisy a quick hug with a chinning and a kiss to each of his girls. “Wish me
Ed strode away as quickly as he felt safe doing and trying to avoid making a bigger scene. It only took mere moments to get behind the stage and then behind two of Dan’s equipment trucks without pausing. Hopping into the canvas covered back of one the rabbit ensured no one was about before he let the dam burst.

It was all too much with a paw over his mouth he let his feeling spill for a moment, his shoulders shaking as he let the guilt and pain run its course. Daisy had told him to not hold it back if he could help it and now wasn’t the time to keep it in or it just might break him. Such was the impact such a small kit could have.

Catching his breath and slowly calming down after a few minutes alone, Ed busied himself with making sure he was presentable for the gathering crowd. He also needed time to process his unexpected meeting with Valerie and Penny, but with his last show coming up he couldn’t afford the distraction and pushed it as far down as he could for the moment. It wouldn’t be long, and he would be standing in front of his home town.

The rabbit had expected a bout of nerves, but surprisingly he felt angry. Too many in his home town were bigoted against predators. Perhaps not all, but far too many for his tastes. They didn’t understand it was all just fear of the unknown anyone that lived in the bigger towns and cities were mostly over all this nonsense and the mammals of Zootopia were of a different cloth than the ones causing a ruckus over on the other side of the Channel. All this trouble had brought out the best and worst in a lot of mammals.

This was the distraction he played on himself, and for the now it was enough.

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Dan checked his watch as they stood behind the curtain of the stage. The crowd had started to gather on time and were all sitting or standing on the grass infront of the stage talking happily by the sound of it.

“You alright, Edward?” the deer inquired as he looked down at him a frown between his antlers and absently adjusted his tie and collar.

“Yeah. Just had a bit of a shock, but I’m good,” Ed answered distractedly as looked up and smiled. It was his show smile and Dan saw through it.

“Well one more to go and it’s all done,” Dan added peaking back out from behind the screen he knew not to pry now that he had gotten to know the rabbit so well.

“Swell. The ranks are here it looks like,” Ed saw the stag swallow at his observation and tilted his head. It was unusual to see the nerves coming from the PR officer for a change.

“So, you know your lines?” This was more like the show mammal Dan normally portrayed as the stag shook himself nervously.

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

“Got your notes?”

“Yes, Lieutenant,”

“Your uniform looks best I've ever seen it! I’ll have to thank you mate for that.”
“That you will, Lieutenant.” This time Ed did smile as Dan looked down at him again noting his tone.

“I think I’m going to miss working with you.”

Ed snorted with a genuine smile accompanying the slightly rude sound. “I’m sure you can't wait to get back behind the typewriter. Besides, there’ll be other mammals for you to parade out. Blokes a damn sight more deserving of attention than me.”

Dan appeared to ignore him as he made good his uniform and stepped out and launched into his traditional introduction, except with a bit of a home town twist. Ed let it go on into the background as he checked his watch. Virgil had asked him to make sure he finished at a specific time and had been about as forceful on the point as Ed had ever seen him.

“Your very own Sergeant Edward ‘Lucky Buck’ Sward!”

Edward stepped out, his show face on as he smiled and waved to the assembled mammals, feeling more uncomfortable than he’d normally have been with faces he knew and recognized in front of him.

The cheer had been bigger than he’d expected, or received so far on the tour, but he caught a quick glimpse of his family making the most of noise. He kept his eyes above the crowd best he could trying to making sure not to catch anyone’s eyes just like Dan had trained him. This way as he swept back and forth over the crowd it would look to the attendees that Ed had made contact with them, giving the address a more personal feeling to it, waving a little as he strode confidently to the podium, he bounded up the small steps that had been set out for him.

Ed took out his notes, now tired and curled at the corners from use, out from his breast pocket along with a hankichef that Daisy had gifted him, it was blue and made of a soft flannel she had made herself. He had laid it on the top of the podium unfolding it carefully and sliding out the tags that were wrapped inside, the four pieces of metal that once made up two tags, a symbol to remind him why he put himself in front of the crowd and what he was building support for. He looked back to the mass of mammals. It did take long to spot those who meant most to him, friends, family new and old, neighbors, and his fellow service mammals, both male and female.

Valerie and Daisy were standing together, the rest of the Swards, Hopps and Clays gathered in a fluffle that stood out like a beacon. It was his own little guiding star that always brought him home and would continue to do so. then there were the sunny little faces of his and Daisy’s girls and he watched as they gazed about the crowd in awe. Even from his quick glance he could also spot Penny looking shy and Belle and Elle already standing next to her trying to coax the interesting little kit fox into talking with them.

As he let his eyes rove over the mass of mammals he saw the divide in the crowd many of the prey keeping well away from the predators that were dotted among them. The large predators that had arrived to man the recruitment stands were given an even wider berth. He glanced down at his cards and the tags that were shinning in the sun; #446 and #444. Tim and so many others had already died. Two of his crew were predators and the price they had paid for fighting for the freedom of Zootopia had been the ultimate, all to stop an ideology that said one group was better than another, different. In front of him now he saw a similar kind of judgment. An ancient, out of date fear of the difference in others that he could stomach no longer.

The crowd had now gone quiet and were waiting for him to speak, he could see Dan smile start to falter and his head cocked a little to the side wondering why he had stalled. Ed knew what the divide could mean to zootopia it could make them collapse from the inside out and hurt so many. He had born witness to what this kind of thinking created how it could twist a mammal and turn them
dark. How could he stand there and talk about the issue but dance around its core. Ask for help but ignore what was staring him in the face. After everything that had happened this was something he wouldn’t back down from. He owed those he had left behind owed it to the Vixsen in the crowed and the one back over the channel that saved him and the prey and predators of the resistance that got him home. He owed a debt to Kevin and Jeremy he would never be able to repay but this would be a dam good start and might be real reason he asked to do these rallies in the first place. But would going at it do more harm than good he was there to build support not preach. He heard a small cough from Dan behind him.

He looked up and smiled at the crowed chuckling with a slight shiver of apprehension.

“Sorry,” Ed said with a soft laugh that the microphone picked up. “Never been this nervous before. I see so many faces I know looking back at me.” He received an amused reaction from the crowd that helped to ground his spinning thoughts and took a breath before holding up his cards, ready to speak falling into autopilot.

Edward took one last breath to begin but again paused as he saw Valerie looking back at him. She was smiling back at him, her face full of trust. Trust and belief...in him. And as he blinked he could see that she was now holding one of his girls with Daisy holding the other. Next to them Virgil and Mags had their arms around each other also waiting, both of them giving him a cheeky grins while holding up their paws in wide V’s. V for Victory.

Then there was Daisy, the centre of his world in every sense of the word. That group of mammals were what kept him strong.

His rich brown eyes found the blues of his mate. She was frowning at him slightly, clearly concerned, but as he as they seemed to gaze into each other’s soul he saw her frown disappear and a smile spread over her beautiful face. No words were needed to convey that Daisy understood what was bothering him. She nodded, her chin lifting defiantly and eyes sparkling in the sun and that was all he needed.

Yet again she was the force that was behind him, supported Ed, gave him the fortitude that he needed. He cleared his throat a bit as the crowed were now frowned at each other, unsure what the delay was. Ed flicked his cards down back on the podium in front of him and grinned at every one, his spirits climbing.

“I normally read off these cards as it helps me keep my place. You lot have known me long enough to know what I’m like.” Again another laugh and the crowed relaxed, a few rabbits and other mammals in the know nodding and snorting in understanding. Ed didn’t fail to notice one mammal in particular tensed, Lieutenant Antlerbee was absolutely petrified ‘Lucky Buck’ was going well off script.

“But today I would like to talk to you from the heart, you are friends and family. This is my home town and you deserve different, I think.”

Dan stepped up to him with his back to the crowd and hoof covering the gleaming metal of the microphone. “What are you doing? Stay on script!” he whispered glancing at the soldiers that were watching, he had said that some higher ranking mammals were there. A quick glance past the stag showed a small number of staff officers looking at the stage with stern expressions.

“Trust me, Dan. I know what I’m doing, These are my kith and kin. And if they get upset then blame me...tell them I threatened you,” he whispered back, the sly grin he shot the stag very much a reflection of his younger, and somewhat rambunctious, youth shinning though. Dan paused then stepped away going back into his position at the edge of the stage behind the curtain while he wrung
his hooves in apprehension.

“My friends, I want to talk to you about what I have learned these past couple of years and what I see now looking down at the people a care most about.” Ed was talking to the entire throng, not looking at just his friends and family, but kept his eyes scanning the faces looking up at the stage, showing them that he was referring to them all.

“Let me tell you what we are fighting. This isn’t a battle against predators like I know many of you believe. This isn’t a fight against a nation. No. this is a fight against an evil idea. There are a group of mammals on the other side of the Channel that believe they are superior. This is a fight against a sick ideology that has consumed their souls. And it isn’t just prey that’s suffering. Anyone that dares to question their…their New Order are imprisoned, tortured, ripped from their loved ones and whole families torn apart.

“I know this better than many as I’ve been a prisoner of this group. I’ve lived at their mercy, seen what they are doing this very moment to mammals like us. I’ve seen the evil they’ve done in Cervania, what they have in store for us and Zootopia, and finally the rest of the world if we don’t stop them.” Ed paused for a moment as a breath of wind blew past over the heads of the audience like a collected gasp all the faces had lost their smiles and expressions of shocked curiosity on their faces settled.

The rabbit reached up and pulled his beret off his head and placed it next to the tags in front of him, letting his ears stand tall showing the crowd the tattered remains of his ears that he suddenly felt proud of and to bring his words as close to home as he could. A tiny piece of the horror brought to the Burrows. The words Dawn had said to him reverberated through him and it was this that quelled any anxiety at showing the crowd his injuries and scars. She said that his injuries showed his bravery and resolve. This was bigger than his fears.

This was everything, and in that moment the conviction in his heart was as important and strong as the day he first went over to fight with the Zootopia Expeditionary Force. The same determination first time they went into combat, and the day the held the line to cover the retreat of their brothers in uniform.

“If we don’t pull together,” he added to the previous sentence is sentence pouring his own feelings into what he told his fellow Bunnyburrowians.

“I stand up here now and I see a Zootopia that is divided. I see an ‘Us’,’” he rested a paw on his chest.

“And a ‘Them’.’” Ed gestured at the preds, many in uniform, that stood mostly alone or in small groups. He could see the look on their faces, much like Dan, were all thinking that he had lost his mind.

All he could think was, ‘stay with me.’

“I can’t emphasize the danger this puts Zootopia in and how foolish it is. These are predators that are going out every day to fight! Every day they go out and risk their lives to protect us all of us. They see the evil over the channel for what it is. And you stand away from these heroes? No, my friends! We are all better than this!

“You might ask me how how I can still stand here and defend the predators that stand with me after what I’ve been through.” he touched one ear, holding the worst one out for the crowd. “How I can call them my brothers, how I would fight by their sides and live with them as my neighbors and family. This is because we are not fighting predators at all. We are fighting a sick philosophy, a
group of mammals that believe they are better than everyone else. We’re standing shoulder to shoulder against a darkness this world hasn’t seen since before we could use fire.

“I’ve fought alongside predators that believe like I do, that this group must be stopped. I’ve watched those same predators die fighting for our freedom, all of ours, and our nation. I was even saved by predators I had never known, saved by Axis predators that are putting themselves in unimaginable dangers to fight back because, like us, they believe that this is all madness and this horror must be stopped!

“We, now more than ever before, need to stand as one as a country that doesn’t look upon a group and tar them with the same brush. I ask you look at yourselves, see the mammals that you have made sure not to stand beside, they are all in Zootopian uniforms! They are from our own cities and town and villages, all fighting risking their lives for your freedom and to stop that evil over there from dragging us all down!”

Ed was starting to see his words taking effect, was starting to see the mammals in front of him look at each other some becoming decidedly uncomfortable at being called out, others muttering to one another.

“Don’t you understand that this divide is what the enemy wants? They want us to turn on each other as this will make us weaker. But if we stand together, if we work together, we can defeat this evil! We can push them back, keep on pushing until there are no more places to run, push them from the this good earth for good! So I asked you…No. I don’t ask. I beg you! Let’s stand as one! Rabbit and Fox, Wolf and Sheep, Stoat and Mouse, Lion and Zebra, Cheetah and Impala, Deer and Badger! Let’s all species unite and fight ast our light on this darkness so that they will not drag us back into the time of savages! Let’s show them that we will not turn on our own allies, our own citizens and let’s show them what it means when you start a fight with a nation that stands together, paw in paw and says NO! You will NOT defeat US because we are ZOOTOPIA!”

He turned looked at the mammals before him, the ones on the edge and in the booths for recruiting, and finally the officers that had come to watch the speech.

“And now I want you to look at these fine mammals and notice that they’re from all walks of life. Predator and prey, some are large and powerful, some are like me and a bit on the scrawny side, but we all heard the call and put on the uniform for something bigger than any one of us. They’re made up of many shapes and sizes, come from all over the country and they are all heroes that I’m proud to serve with. Predator and prey. Horns and claws, fur and wool. We’re all different, but we’re all Zootopians!”

More nods and the beginnings of cheers and shouts began to sound at each pause. It was working! Ed could feel it, and as he spoke his voice grew stronger and sure and he leaned forward, as if speaking directly to each mammal in attendance. He needed them to understand what he was trying to say, to get what he was trying to tell them. It was then that Ed caught a familiar buzz from his bared and erect ears.

The crowd jerked their collective heads to look upward suddenly, eyes wide as arms pointed skyward as fingers pointed to the white smeared azure heavens. Ed’s fur on the back of his neck stood on end as he heard the droning buzz turn into a deep, throaty growl, a sound that he loved so much and meant, to him at least, salvation. The Spitfires were arranged in a staggered chevron that zipped overhead before one-by-one they pulled up and away, the Zootopian roundels on the wings showing up in stark contrast against the white underneath that glowed as they tipped up towards the autumn sun.

It was enough to set Ed to grinning with a fierce conviction as he turned back to the fair crowd who
were now a mix of anxiety and excitement and kits gibbered in glee. Even a number of the mammals in uniform had stepped out from their booths to watch the warplanes fly over in the thick snarl of Merlin engines.

“I now ask you for your help as we here cannot defeat this evil by ourselves and all of you can play a part,” Ed continued as the planes drew far enough away to enable his words to be heard over their powerful engines. “Each one of you here can make all the difference in the world, whether it’s by buying war bonds help fund this fight, working the factories, working the fields or simply doing the smallest things to help save resources. Or you can join the home guard or stand by the sides of the brave mammals you see all around! We need able lads for our armored forces our fierce infantry, our brave souls of the navy or those like the ones that just flew over!” As he said it the fighter planes came in for another pass around the town of Bunnyburrow, but this turned out to be a distraction as three planes miraculously appeared, so low that they were on par with the steeple of the Bunnyburrow Abbey.

Kits shouted and pointed with fingers in ears and mouths wide in awe, mammals ducked and jumped as they were low enough to blow hats off heads and the sound of the Merlins now so loud that they were felt as well as heard.

Even that took Ed by surprise and he swore loudly. Luckily his heated expletives went unheard, but his follow-up woop and wild waving of his beret set the course for the crowd. Remembering himself just in time as the crowd, their blood up with less fear than excitement now began to clap and make a genuinely appreciative cacophony and Ed settled his beret back on as he spotted a very smug Virgil in his own uniform, and a beaming Mags looking on, both highly entertained at Ed’s kit like excitement and gave him a big wink. Clearly this had been the reason for the timing being so important and why Virgil had kept surreptitiously tapping his watch and holding up steadily decreasing number of fingers.

“Let's show the Axis what happens when you try and send the world we’ve built together back to the savage age! Let’s show them what true strength is and make this world a better place for our children and the generations to come!”

He finished his chest heaving with emotion thanks to the arrival of the planes of 13 Squadron and Ed now felt like he couldn’t fail in getting his point across to the rabbits and mammals he’d grown up with, to get the throng to understand what he was trying to say.

Apparently he’d succeeded.

No sooner did he wave once more and take a step away from the podium than nearly every mammal capable of walking and speech bolted for the recruitment booths.

The planes reformed and made a few more orbits, the trio of Spits that had come in so low that the petrol exhaust from their engines still filled the green, Ed was sure that the ground crews would have to clean twigs and straws from their bellies. They continued to circle as he stepped down from the stage, a grin pulling at his muzzle. Then just before turning off the pilots pulled a series of three rolls each, their naturally aspirated engines sputtering momentarily as the planes inverted and then fired right back up as soon as gravity pulled fuel into the carburetors.

“Did you know about…well…that?!?” Dan sputtered with a hoof outstretched to the distant aircraft.

Ed shook his head, his rich amber brown eyes finding the specks against distant clouds as the three that had begun to drop out in the direction of home, smiling as he’d caught a glimpse of a fox in the cockpit and a bit of white fluff of the lead Spitfire. “I surely didn’t, Lieutenant,” Lucky Buck said with a grin before placing his right paw up, his left over his heart. “Rabbit messiah’s truth.”
The stag regarded the scarred sergeant before shaking his head and stepping away. “Best show we’ve done yet, I swear…”

Ed smiled as he turned and stepped off the stage and back to Daisy and the girls, Valerie and Penelope Tipping with her, and Virgil with his arm around Maggie. "You know," Edward said as he accepted a chinning from his mate, "I think Dan was right. Best show we've done yet!"

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know... It's been a while! But, a good chapter from Tom1380, right? And I am working on the next. Time has been a bit of a precious commodity as of late, so I do apologize for having seemed to vanish. We aren't done, but it may be a bit slower ride, okay?

End Notes

So, there we go. The re-re-debut of Red Tails and Wilde Skies.

Before we go any further, someone asked why I was disrespecting veterans in general, and the Tuskegee Airmen who became the USAAC 332nd Fighter Group and 477th Bombardment Group, also known as Red Tails, the first African American fighter and bomber groups.

First, I not only respect all vets, I also served, which means I actually wore a uniform and got, as the saying goes, my 'ass in the grass'. I was Airborne Infantry, specifically the 101st Airborne Division. Someone wants to say that I'm disrespecting vets had better have worn a uniform themselves, got an honorable discharge, and then we'll discuss things over a beer. Playing Call of Duty in mommy and daddy's basement while stuffing your gob full of tater chips doesn't count.

Second, Nick's squadron is based on the American Eagle volunteer squadrons that flew for the RAF before the US even entered the war. The reason I called them 'Red Tails' is because they're all foxes and have...*GASP!*...red tails. Literally.

It's a story. It's meant to entertain and it's fun. Take it as that, 'kay?

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