### Zootopia: Sleepless Nights

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### Zootopia: Sleepless Nights

**by** [BearlyThereUpstairs](https://www.archiveofourown.org/users/BearlyThereUpstairs)

**Summary**

Just how hard is it for Nick and Judy to pick up the pieces after Bellwether's attempts to derail the great city of hope, Zootopia? A stolen kiss, dancing in the dark after the Gazelle concert leads to more for Judy and Nick, but the secret life and history of Nicholas Wilde may put their growing love and attraction to the test. It doesn't help that a new power is rising in the shadows left by Bellwether's arrest, turning the criminal underworld upside down- or that this mysterious new player seems to have her sights set on destroying a certain fox's last chance at happiness with his new "partner," even if she has to burn down the whole city to get at him.
1.A.~ Scenes from last night, part 1

((Timeline: Morning after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia... and an epic after-party back at ZPD Precinct 1, City Center.))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “Ivy Levan - I Don't Wanna Wake Up”.

{Scene: Definitely “not” Judy's apartment...}

Judy Hopps awoke to the sound of her heart jack-hammering in her ears, and it wasn't hard to figure out why: This wasn't her apartment, this wasn't her bed, and... *Sweet Cheese and Crackers!* These weren't even her clothes! Unchecked fear now shoved her eyes wide open, followed shortly by the scent-processing part of her brain clicking into action: Cinnamon-sweet and whiskey sour notes filled her sensitive nose, underlined with a heady male musk with undertones of the city streets after it rained. Something about the scent was so familiar, even comforting in a strange way, dancing on the edge of her mind, but the memory faded away whenever she reached out to take its hand.

Even through bleary, uncooperative eyes, she could see that the button up shirt she wore was made for an animal several sizes larger than your average bunny. Her little pink nose wrinkled in terrible certainty as she drew in another quick sniff: Literally everything about the bed, the apartment, and even the shirt that hung down to her knees- it all reeked of a small male wolf or maybe a very large dog. She was in some Canine's bed, absolutely covered in his scent from head to toe, and... wearing... only her underwear underneath...

Slowly, her velvet soft paw slid under her “borrowed” shirt. *I remember wearing a bra when I went to the concert... and the after-party!* “Oh, Peas and Carrots! The after-party! Gazelle talked the Chief into hosting it at the ZPD after hours!” And just like that, the memories started trickling in, like random strangers in a perp walk. The impromptu press conference in the duty room, complete with flashing cameras. Her elephant colleague, Francine trying to hide the fact that she'd been crying in the ladies room. Gazelle crowd-surfing on top of the officer's raised riot shields, while singing a new song, just for her two biggest fans, Chief Bogo and Benjamin Clawhauser. Clawhauser talking her into trying something called a mimosa. How many of those sweet, subtly alcoholic drinks had she had? She'd lost track somewhere after the conga line....

“Clawhauser! Three words, fat cat: cheetah-skin rug!” Ugh, her poor ears did not like all the shouting. Shouting was very bad for her health, that's what Nick had told her about hangovers as they danced cheek-to-cheek. “Nick, I am so scared...” Wait! Why was she dancing with her partner in the ZPD evidence room? Why were they together... alone? Why were neither of them wearing a shirt? Why did the thought of him make her smile, even as it made her heart want to leap out of her chest like she'd just finished running the ZPD cross country marathon?

She could still remember her partner cupping her cheek, looking worriedly into her eyes, but the room kept spinning. Why did her face feel so... warm? Was she crying happy tears or sad? Nick was trying to warn her about something, whispering softly so only she heard his concern, as his hot breath in her ears made shivers run up and down the doe's spine. “Carrots, you gotta listen to me... tomorrow might be a lot rougher than you're expecting, but you'll get us through it. You always do, Fluff.”

That was when she did it: her muscles moving on auto-pilot, Judy remembered reaching up to cup his handsome whiskers in her tiny paws. Her heart was hammering in her ears then, her stomach swirling with fear, confusion, and affection beyond words at hearing him calling them an “us.” Confusion spread over her fox's face as she softly whispered his name in the dark. Judy closed the
distance between them, brushing her trembling lips against Nick's for a few heartbeats. “You always... take such good care of me... make me feel so... SAFE!” Then, her nervous stomach revolted and she threw up all over his shoes.

“Oh... Judy! What. Did. You. Do. Last. Night?!!?” Each word was punctuated by the ZPD's only rabbit officer drumming her head against the bed's only pillow with a dull, ear-flopping thud. The dull thud of her head hitting the pillow was soon overshadowed by the pitter-patter of rain drops slowly assaulting the big bay window that dominated the stranger's bedroom, bringing the doe's keen detective mind back to focus on the situation at paw.

“Okay, Judy, you helped bring down two mayors and stopped Bellwether from turning Zootopia's fearful prey population against their predator neighbors.... you CAN find your bra, your gear, and your pants!” Judy grimaced, inwardly cursing the chubby cheetah one more time, “Then, you just slip away before anybody sees you like this! And, maybe murder a Cheetah for help ruin your relationship with Nick...” If only her gung-ho little pep talk could convince the rabbit, herself. Right now, the thought of taking the “walk of shame” her older sisters used to tease her about felt like a death sentence for everything she'd tried to accomplish since coming to Zootopia.

Then she saw it, sitting coyly on the window ledge, right next to her duty belt and her handcuffs: the key to Bellwether's mad schemes. Six radiant purple petals surrounding a golden core, creating an unassuming beauty to mask the savage effect that it induced when eaten or absorbed through the skin. Night Howlers, (Midnicampum holicithias, as her family called them) were the stuff of Judy's nightmares and there were two prime specimens sitting in a ZPD evidence bag right before her eyes. The recently restored Mayor Lionheart may still be lobbying Zootopia's city council to make Night Howlers a controlled substance, but stealing anything in an evidence bag was a class-three felony!

“Nick! Where are you when I need my partner?” A cold, leaden weight settled into her stomach as Judy slipped out of the comfy covers to stand beside the pretty purple flowers. Did he... would Nick ask Bogo to be re-assigned? Over one little kiss? A part of the rabbit's heart broke at the idea, “No, whatever this is, I'll make it up to him! I have to make this right!” Judy put her hind paw down, she would not lose her partner -not over one little mistake- even if that meant begging him to stay.

Over the six months since Nick got admitted to the ZPD Academy, she'd come to realize that nobody could fill the fox's place in her heart. Against all odds, the former street hustler had become an irreplaceable part of the doe's life, beyond even helping her stop Bellwether from ripping the city apart. The case may have saved her dream of being a cop, but Nick had saved her life in more ways than one: he'd opened her eyes to so much about the city she loved, showed her how much more she still had to learn about mammals (both good and bad), and even risked his life standing up to both Bogo and Bellwether to protect her.

Judy had to admit, though the whole thing had begun with her hustling the former street hustler, blackmailing him a little even, things between her and Nick had grown into something wonderfully new and different. It scared her a little how much she had missed her fox during the six months while he was away at the ZPD academy. She didn't even know when she'd started thinking of Officer Wilde as hers, but the possessive feeling was undeniable. She may have had her new adoptive family at the ZPD, all wonderful, seasoned cops like Fangmeyer and Francine, but her new partner Nick held a special place in her life, now.

“Maybe even a special place in my heart?” The distraught doe turned slowly, catching sight of her trembling reflection in the room's only mirror. Fresh “raccoon circles” hung under her eyes, belying the idea that the city's protectors slept any more peacefully than its villains did. “No rest for the Wicked, right, Judy? What a joke! Bellwether almost dropped this city into a civil war of prey versus predators, and -by all accounts- she sleeps like a baby!” The terrible unfairness of her chosen
profession almost swallowed up the doe, but then her eyes drifted down to the shirt that she'd borrowed from her “host” tonight.

“Oh, sweet cheese and crackers, Judy! WHAT DID YOU DO LAST NIGHT?!?” This wasn't a stranger's apartment, it wasn't a stranger's bedroom or even a stranger's shirt! This was Nick's lucky shirt- the same grass green Pawaiian button-up that he wore during their first meeting on the missing mammal's case! It even had another “Junior ZPD Officer” sticker tacked to the shirt pocket. Where did he even get one of those? He must have snuck one out of my desk at the precinct when he came to visit. But that would mean he had forgiven me, even before going away to the Academy!

Judy felt a bittersweet tear roll down her cheek at the memory of him tearing the original off after that gods-awful press conference, of her fox walking away from her in disgust when she let her father's prejudice against vicious predators come rolling out of her mouth.

“Nick, stop it! You're not one of 'them'.

“Oh, so there's a 'THEM' now?!”

“You know what I mean! You're not that kind of predator.

“The kind that needs to be muzzled? The kind that makes you believe that you need to carry around fox repellent? Yeah, don't think I didn't notice that little item on the first time we met. So I-let me ask you a question; Are you AFRAID of me?!!?”

Judy had felt her heart breaking for the first time as Nick walked away from her, knowing that -in that moment, at least- that she didn't trust him... that she *had* feared him. She'd been afraid of the one mammal who'd had her back since day one, who'd waded through savage jaguars and criminal sheep, risked getting iced by Mr. Big, and even butted heads with an intimidating cape buffalo like Chief Bogo, just to save her dream of being a police officer. Nick had been there by her side for the whole crazy ride, helping rescue Emit Otterton and the other missing mammals and, when it finally came time to show Zootopia how far her wonderful fox had come, Judy had let her fear of her first press conference overshadow her good judgment. She'd unfairly painted the city's predators, and especially Nick, as “Public Enemy Number One!”

“...I really am just a dumb bunny!

Her heart happily broke again when Nick forgave her, pulling her into an emotionally exhausted hug, sobbing on his chest as she halfheartedly reached for the recording carrot pen in his outstretched paw. She didn't even notice when she accidentally tread on his fluffy fox tail until he stopped playfully dangling the pen just out of her reach and patiently told her to shift her feet. She silently promised -right then and there- that she would always do everything she could to show Nick just how much she trusted her partner, her fox. And last night, she'd blown it big time, with just one kiss!

“Oh, you bunnies, so emotional!”

Judy brushed one soft paw pad down the buttons of Nick's favorite Pawaiian shirt, admiring her reflection in the mirror. The doe had been beside herself in panic only moments before, but something about standing in Nick's bedroom and being wrapped in her fox's favorite shirt was as comforting as getting a bowl of her mother's special, homemade carrot stew in the mail.

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“You know you love me.”

“Do I know that? Yes, yes I do!”
Remembering their little exchange in the squad car yesterday morning meant more to her than Nick could ever know, even if the moment was cut short by Nick’s buddy Flash from the DMV tearing through Savannah Central in his new sports car. Just thinking of the smile that crossed her partner’s handsome muzzle when she admitted her affection for the fox made a warm glow spread through Judy from her head all the way down to her toes. The “how?” and the “why?” didn’t matter so much for a moment; she was in Nick’s bedroom, wrapped in his favorite shirt, (and his cinnamon-sweet scent!) so she couldn’t be that mad with her behavior last night, right? “You don’t give a girl your favorite shirt and ask her to spend the night if you’re really mad at her- even if she’s your partner? ...Right?”

But why did Nick, of all mammals, have a ZPD evidence bag full of Night Howlers sitting on his window sill? Judy saw a small slip of paper pinned down by the evidence bag, a handwritten note that all but called her name. Judy just shook her head at her fox’s playful tone in the note:

“Alright, Fluff. Just in case you wake up before I get back, there are 3 things that you need to know:

1.) You’re safe, partner. I made sure of that, so you can go back to bed if you want. Nobody will begrudge you a little more sleep after the kind of week we’ve been having.

2.) Since we both know you won’t take my advice on #1, you should know that YOU dressed yourself. No Fox was involved in the selection of or changing of clothing at any time. (Sad fox face emoji.)

3.) I live in kind of a rough neighborhood, so if you’re feeling embarrassed enough to make a run for it, you may want to steal some pants out of the hamper before you try streaking back to the station.

Sincerely,
Slick Nick

Nope, not too mad at me to be the same frustrating, thoughtful fox that he always shows... only to me. Judy felt her muzzle slowly curl into a wistful smile. The world may never see it, but her fox was a much better mammal with her than he ever gave himself credit for. Nick could have (should have) easily slipped away from Bellwether and her ram goons in the Natural History Museum, but he-risked his life to stay by her side. His ridiculous plan to sucker the former mayor into a recorded confession must have come straight out of the Saturday morning cartoons that her fox still obsessed over, but they had made the whole crazy thing work. Partners from the very start...

Even now, she could still feel his strong paw wrapped around her back as they closed the trap on Bellwether, one simple touch whispering so many things that went unspoken in her life until that very moment: unconditional support, undivided affection, and a need for control that she barely understood. No, Judy... for losing control, to not be in control of every carrot-picking moment of your life! She wanted to pretend that her part in the performance had all been a game, a way to take control of an impossible situation, but Nick's performance as a “savage” fox had been so convincing that it almost scared her. But then, Judy felt how gently her fox's teeth had clamped down around the soft fur around her throat, and something deeper, darker awoke deep inside the bunny.

Judy wanted desperately to stay professional, to examine the flowers (or heck, any other part of the room!) but her eyes betrayed her, moving to survey Nick's bed one more time. Silk sheets that matched his brilliant green eyes! Four rails standing like masts over an ancient galleon, with one plush comforter for a sail! It was almost enough to seduce her back into a well-deserved nap, safe in
the comforting scent of her fox... but then she saw the claw marks on the headboard, and all those feelings of sex and safety flew away.

"I want you to remember this moment the next time you think you will ever be anything more than just a stupid, carrot-farming, dumb bunny!"

That horrible day at the Bunnyburrow county fair came running back to the forefront of Judy's mind as she touched the three thin scars on her left cheek. The last time she had surrendered control of the situation, Gideon Gray had permanently scarred her, even if he'd apologized later and the fur on her cheek helped cover up the worst of it. Gideon and Nick were both foxes, and foxes were predators with exactly the kind of sharp claws and teeth that used to eat her species. So, why didn't the heavy claw marks in his headboard make Judy want to run screaming from the affection that she felt for her partner? Why did staring at the painfully deep gashes in the wood make her want to pull her fox into her arms and soothe his broken heart, even though those same clawed paws could tear her apart?

“Never let them see that they get to you...”

Oh, Judy, you should have taken his advice. You are so... royally screwed! You can't tell him, he'll just feel cornered and panic. You gotta' approach this gently, explore things slowly -as partners, first- or he's gonna take off running and your heart's just gonna break in two. Would... would really Nick ask to be put with another partner? Romantic relationships weren't exactly forbidden by ZPD procedures, unless one member of the relationship was the other's commanding officer, but Nick and Judy were both equal in rank. True, they were under a lot more scrutiny since the missing mammals case, but her fox loved skirting the rules. Panic, dread, and a deep, forlorn longing were already sending her heart into overdrive, as the unmistakable blush of young love started rolling up her body when Judy thought of her fox's hustler's smile curling across his handsome muzzle. A definitely dark tingle followed in its wake, carrying with it a strange new fire that burned in her core and got her drunk on the memory of just how good those silk sheets felt on the bare fur of her thighs. That's not helping, Judy!

I have to tell him, he's going to see this written all over my face whenever I look into his eyes... those mischievous, soulful, sexy emerald eyes. She inwardly cursed the strong reproductive drive for which her species was so infamous. The millions-strong-and growing population sign outside of Bunnyburrow was a practical joke put up by the town elders to tease tourists, but Judy couldn't deny stealing the occasional look at her fox as they patrolled, wondering what Nick's kits would look like. Lately, she had even started wondering what his kits with her might look like. Could a rabbit and a fox even have kits? She already knew her partner would be a wonderful, doting father from the joyful way he played with all of the young kits that came seeking their autographs, and the thought just stirred her heart up all the more. Sweet cheese and crackers, Judy! That's REALLY not helping!

The doe found herself looking down at her feet as the blush spread from her fuzzy little tail all the way up to her long, sensitive ears. I have to tell him, just... not all at once. Would... Could Nick feel the same way for her, in return? They'd spent almost every waking moment since his graduation from the ZPD academy together, either on patrol or watching cheesy movies at her place, but Nick had never taken her to see his apartment until last night. And she'd been in no condition to remember most of the night after her embarrassingly drunken attempt to steal a quick kiss from her shirtless fox. She still couldn't remember why they didn't have their shirts on when it happened, but seeing him in the bare fur for the first time would forever be one of her most treasured memories of her first year in Zootopia.

Judy stepped forward to run one trembling paw over the deep scratches, remembering sadly when they'd found their first clues to Emmitt Otterton's disappearance in the back of Mr. Big's limousine. Something in her ZPD training warned her that this wasn't just a simple scratch made in the throes of
a little passionate love-making between consenting mammals. Like in Otterton's case, the arc of the claw marks was too erratic, too... savage to be anything less than a cry for help. As she got closer, she could also smell the faint coppery odor of blood, mixed with sweat, and then furiously buried under bleach sometime later. *This was what I smelt in my dreams, what woke me up in such a state.*

She followed the scent lower, down the headboard until her soft paws touched something cold and metallic securely anchored to the bed's heavy wooden frame. It took both of Judy's trembling paws to dig the metal cuff and chain free, but she knew what it was after just one glance: the same heavy duty type of paw cuffs that she'd used to stop Mr. Manchas from going savage on Nick during the missing mammal case! This one definitely wasn't issued by the ZPD, though, as the chain looked strong enough to hold an elephant. A cold weight settled into Judy's stomach as she brought her nose close enough to the strange device for one tentative sniff: Nick's cinnamon sweet scent was there, too, mixed with that bitter coppery tang that only comes from blood. *Oh, Nick! What else have you been hiding from me?*

Judy didn't have long to ponder this latest, painful discovery, as her sensitive hearing picked up the heavy sound of footsteps coming close to the apartment's front door, followed by the jangling of many keys. Her fox was finally coming home and they had so much to talk about! Judy all but fell out of Nick's bed in her excitement to see her fox again, but she did stop just long enough to push the strange metal cuff back into its hiding place between the bed and the wall, first. *One discussion at a time. No need to rush things but, there's no reason to let him think he wasn't being terribly missed, either, right? Boys like being missed.*

With a lot more confidence showing than she felt at the moment, Judy steeled herself to walk out into the living room and greet her partner, minus her pants. His Pawaiian shirt covered most of what she had to display in the first place, as it came to just above her knees, but she'd seen enough cheesy movies with her fox to know that male mammals (and especially predators) liked the sight of a female wearing just their shirts. *You can do this, Judy. He's already seen you shirtless, even danced with you cheek-to-cheek. You CAN do this. Just open the door and say something slick, just like Nick! The thought made her smile, even though her paw on the door knob was noticeably trembling.*

“Certainly took you long enough, Slick! Get lost on your way home?” Judy flung the door open, sliding a soft paw to her hip in one easy motion as she lay against the door frame like a *femme fatale* in one of Nick's cheesy spy movies. She was sure that this was the perfect move to snag the attention of her beloved fox. Problem was, the small, deep-voiced fennec fox looking up at her with confusion written all over his muzzle wasn't her fox. It didn't help that her surprise guest's diminutive stature put him all but nose level to her knees, where *everything* was on display.

“Oh-ho-ho, Nicky-boy, you got some 'splaining to do!” Finnick chuckled with in a malevolent baritone as Judy slammed the bedroom door shut behind her frantically twitching tail. *Oh no, no, nooooo! ...Maybe he didn't have enough time to recognize me? Judy sank to the floor, knowing that there was no way things could get any worse tonight.*

“And a good morning to you, too, Officer Hopps!” She was wrong; So very, very wrong.
1.B.~ Scenes from last night, part 2

((Timeline: Still the morning after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “(Welcome to my) Dark Side” by Bishop Briggs.]

[Scene: 20 minutes prior. Outside Nick's apartment.]

Wilde, you idiot, what did you do last night?!? Downstairs, the ZPD’s first fox officer (and former con mammal) sat on the steps outside of his apartment building in the gently falling rain, trying to marshal his failing courage to face Judy again. Unlike his partner, Nicholas P. Wilde had no problems remembering how things had gotten out of paw in the evidence room, “Tell you what, Fluff- since we’re stuck here tonight, let's make things interesting. The party may be raging upstairs, but that doesn't mean that we can't have a little fun down here. Have you ever played Truth or Dare?”

It started so innocently, it honestly did: the fox teasing his partner as he always did, trying to make Zootopia’s little “energizer” bunny blush or guffaw while they were waiting for Clawhauser to get back with replacements for their shirts that he'd ruined after one too many mimosas and a rowdy incident in the ZPD conga line. Why did you just have to tease the bunny, Wilde?

“Nick, we're not kits slinking away from the high school prom, here. We have a serious job to do tonight. Bogo wants us to guard the evidence room... even if we are doing it like this.” She motioned to their absolute lack of shirts, half-embarrassed and half-apologetic. “Ha-ha-ha, if my mother saw me like this, Nick, we'd be soooo flipping dead!” Despite her best attempts to hide behind her deteriorating professional demeanor, Judy was already hitting that giggly stage that girls got when they’ve had just a few too many drinks. When he was still conning mammals out of their hard-earned cash, this would have been the start of what Nick and his crew called the 'golden window of opportunity' where common sense and self-control took a hike.

She's so cute when she laughs, no-... beyond cute. Beautiful...

“...And we're doing serious work, here, but we have to stay awake to do it, right? So... is my partner, the unstoppable super bunny cop -Judith Laverne Hopps- turning chicken tonight? What will the papers say?” It didn’t help the fox's own dwindling supply of self-control that teasing this particular bunny felt so insanely good after she'd conned him into becoming her partner on the force, (to say nothing of blackmailing him into helping her crack the missing mammals case in the first place.) He expected her to groan in gentle reproach of the fox's admittedly lame attempts to paint his bunny partner into a corner, but Judy just smiled that beautiful self-assured smile that made his heart skip a beat whenever he saw it. Gotcha, hook, line and sinker, Carrots!

“If I did, you'd just try and eat me, you goofball. Don't think I haven't seen how you've been sucking down those canine happy meals since you got back from the Academy, Slick!” Even standing there covering her modest chest with both paws, Judy still managed to channel every school teacher the fox had ever known scolding a naughty kit after class, but Nick wasn't fooled. The unconscious twitch of her velvet soft ears gave away the doe's building excitement every time. It was a “tell” that he'd warn her about if he could ever get the straight-as-an-arrow bunny cop into one of his after hours poker games, but for now, it was fun watching her pretend to stop and think about it. “Okay, then, but I'm going first...” Nick pretended to be surprised, but it wasn't the former street hustler's best performance.

“Nick, will you... Nicholas Wilde, I dare you to dance with me...” Nick didn’t have to feign shock this time. The tell-tale twitch of her ears didn't match the soft catch in his partner's voice. Neither did
the soft blush that crept up the inner folds of her long ears. “C'mon, Slick, my arms are getting tired here. Just dance with me so I don't die of embarrassment, already!” Her voice sounded a lot more confident (and irritated!) than she looked, but Nick still pulled his partner into a warm embrace, fighting like the devil to keep his eyes and paws in all the respectable places.

They swayed like teenagers at their first spring formal, but for the life of him, Nicholas couldn't feel awkward with Judy in his arms, even given the height difference that put her face just above his heart. It just felt so right with the bunny swaying in his arms, and it had been so painfully long since anybody had gotten close enough—since he had let anyone get close enough. “Not exactly how the game works, but I'll let you have a pass since you're new to the game, Carrots. Truth or dare, little bunny?”

“Hmmm? Oh! Um, truth, I suppose.” Judy's bashful amethyst eyes twinkled sleepily as she swayed in his arms, but Nick didn't mind. It had been a very long time since he'd been so happy to have anyone's paws on his fur, and the doe's blunt nails felt good as they ran innocent circuits his up and down his forearms. It must have been a long time since anybody had held the doe close, because she swayed slower and slower, her eyes drifting slowly down his bare chest as a broad dreamy smile breaking out across her sleepy muzzle.

“My eyes are up here, Fluff.” the fox chided his new partner, making that faint trace of a blush return to her ears. “What would you have done if Finnick didn't tell you where to find me when you came back from Bunnyburrow?” Judy's eyes shot up like amethyst fireworks to search the fox's face for a moment before Nick watched clouds of pale uncertainty cover up the face of the most self-assured bunny that he'd ever met. *I'd have died, brokenhearted.* The doe muttered something so quiet that Nick missed it over the sudden uptake in her breath. Judy was almost hyperventilating for a moment, but then that same self-assured smile came back to her face. “I'd have tracked you down, Slick—believe it.”

“Your turn, Fluff. Truth or Dare ...” He could still feel the ghostly memory of her beautiful, long ears, resting like warm, velvety ribbons on his shoulder as they swayed to a music that only the fox and his bunny could hear. Her breath had rippled across his fur in strange soft sighs, half contented to be so comfortable in his paws and half lamenting something left unspoken between them in that stolen moment: a tantalizing secret just out of reach. Even now, he could almost feel the whisper of Judy's paw sliding around his back, pulling the fox closer so she could lean her beautiful face back into the ruffled winter fur of his chest.

Then he heard the unstoppable bunny in his life come crashing back to the surface, “Tell me the truth: how the heck is Nickolas P. Wilde still single? I mean, you're sweet when you want to be, you're easily the most charming -and frustrating- mammal that I have ever met, you literally helped me save the city from tearing itself apart under Bellwether, and you fill out your uniform nicely after all that work you put in... at the Academy...” She'd rabbit punch him later for mentioning it, but Judy just looked so darned CUTE when she got all flustered: a rosy pink blush creeping up to her cheeks as the doe realized what she had just said aloud. *Where was that recording carrot pen when he needed it?*

Nick had tried for gallant honesty, but ended up sounding like a kit bragging about winning his first spelling bee, “Well, the *truth* is that foxes mate for life, Carrots, and I did have more than a few offers when I was about to ship out to the Academy...” Judy wasn't the only one whose tongue had been loosened by the alcohol that had flowed like water at the party upstairs, but Nick could swear that her shy eyes glistened in the dark with a profound disappointment. “But, if I'm being 100% honest here, none of them had what I've been looking for in partner- not for a night, and certainly not for a life time.” And just like that, a single happy, hopeful tear ran down the doe's beautiful cheek.
“Your turn, Slick...” That's when Judy had started to softly nuzzle her muzzle deeper into the fluffy depths of the fox's winter coat, rubbing her soft silver cheeks against the rougher orange and cream fur of his chest. If a vixen had been cuddled so close to his chest, Nick would have known what the intimate gesture meant—claiming a potential mate by leaving your scent all over their fur was a pretty significant step in most fox mating rituals, just one step shy of actually consummating the physical act, itself. However, Judy was a bunny above all else, and bunnies had a reputation for being more physically intimate with one another, even letting such gestures develop into public displays of open affection between friends and colleagues. I just don't know how to read you any more, Fluff. You gotta' tell me what you want from this situation from 'us...' if there is ever going to be an 'us.'

Nor had Nick had been so far gone as to not see the way her beautiful amethyst eyes glistened, half-lidded, in the dark, or to miss hearing the way her words were slightly slurred as her headlong debut into social drinking took its inevitable toll. He'd been ready to help the tipsy bunny sit out the next 'dance,' to be the gentle mammal that she secretly inspired him to try to be, but Judy was far too stubborn to give up that easily. “C'mon, partner, we g-gotta' stay awake for this-s s-stakeout. Ask me something, already, Slick!”

“Well, why get off a winner mid-race? Why hasn't some lucky, brave buck swept you off of your feet, Officer Hopps?” Teasing his favorite bunny had become second nature to the former street hustler, but the question had been weighing on his mind since he shipped out for the Academy. “You've gotta be the most famous bunny in the city after the Bellwether thing, right? You're strong enough to take down rhinos in the ring, but you start stuttering any time a buck your age starts chatting you up. What is up with that?” Not for the first time tonight, Nick's mouth had run faster than his brain could keep up, and (looking back) he should have just hit the brakes right there. Unfortunately, his sense of self-preservation was as pickled as his liver at the moment. “I mean, you've got the most amazing amethyst eyes, a killer smile, and you're so flipping CUTE when you blush!”

And how did that work out for you, Wilde? Nick just shook his head ruefully, as he reluctantly climbed the apartment steps. Judy had rabbit punched his shoulder hard enough to leave a sinister bruise and pouted for several seconds when he called her the dreaded C-word, but Nick could see the pleasant surprise that his words had brought about in the bunny's abnormally shy demeanor. She held him closer, their fur matting wherever her cheek rested on his chest, her eyes locked on their feet except to steal the occasional questioning glance in Nick's direction. The bravest bunny in all Zootopia couldn't meet her partner's gaze, and it confused the fox mightily.

“They've tried, Nick. Even before Bellwether and the missing mammals case, my folks were sending bucks my way by the dozens, just hoping one of them would spark my interest, I guess...” Judy plowed headlong into her heartfelt confession like she was chasing Duke Weaselton through the 'Little Rodentia' all over again. “And after we cracked the case, they just started to show up at work, or 'accidentally' bump into me when I went out to the movies, the grocery store, practically everywhere. It was a nightmare, honestly.” Nick's smile vanished in an instant, and this time, it was his paws that hugged the trembling doe tighter to his side. Oh, Fluff. I had no idea. “And if they weren't showing up in person, they sent flowers, candy, even text messages with some pretty lurid proposals... I finally had to talk Francine into walking me home for the first few weeks that you were at the Academy.”

Even as he finally dragged his exhausted carcass up the final steps to his floor, Nick could still remember the way his heart broke at hearing of his bunny's romantic struggles for the first time. His voice had almost cracked under the strain of finding out she'd been so mistreated by the city she loved, “Fluff... Judy, I am so sorry. If I had known, I would have been on the first train back into the city. Even that slave driving polar bear, Major Friedkin wouldn't have said no, if she knew half of what was going on here at home.” This time, it was Nick's paw that caressed the bunny's soft cheek,
reassuringly. Hearing him call this “home” made the doe smile, even through the sad memories of those first few weeks.

“Which is precisely why Bogo and I decided to keep it a secret, Slick! You needed to graduate from the Academy before we could start working together, remember?” Judy finally found the courage to look up into his eyes, “I... we needed you here, Nick. Zootopia hasn't been the same since you left...” He might not have been an official member of the ZPD for more than a week, but Nick had been a hustler for two decades, and he could hear the terrified rabbit switching mental gears. She's afraid to tell me that she... needed me? The bravest bunny in the city... needed someone like me?

“I-I-I mean, Chief Bogo and Mr. Big are still trying to pick up the pieces after the mass panic that Bellwether started, but they're really got a tiger by the tail. Predator. Prey. Everybody's still at each other's throats, even back at the precinct. It's been... awful.” It hurt his pride a little that his partner was trying to hide something so obviously personal from him, but Nick knew that the headlong approach was only going to make things worse, so he waited for his partner to worry about everybody else before she took care of herself. That had been Judy's way since the first day that they met, and it was just one of the many, many things he admired about the doe. Silly rabbit... tricks are for kits...

“Yeah, things got pretty heated at the Academy, too. Predators versus prey, prey versus predators, it was a royal mess. I don't think that all the damage that Bellwether did is something that the city is just going to forget and forgive.” The former street hustler felt his own heartbeat drumming in his head, so he knew that lying to the doe with her ear on his chest would be useless. Time to mammal up, Wilde. “That was why I worked so hard at the Academy- I knew that I had to get back home as soon as I could... I had to keep you safe, Judy.” Happy tears streaked down her trembling cheeks.

“Nick, you always... take such good care of me... make me feel so... SAFE!” Last night had been quite the wild ride, all puns aside, but nothing compared to that one perfect, absolutely unexpected moment when the doe's sinfully soft lips met his. The fox's fingers trembled a little at the vivid memory of her lips leaving one chaste kiss that burned forever just behind his weary eyes, trapping the former hustler half-way between heaven of her tender, accepting touch and the hell of it going away seconds later. Wilde, you idiot, what did you do last night? You went and fell in love with somebody so far out of your reach that she might as well be the moon, itself!

That's when he heard today's Judy shriek in what could only be a massive case of embarrassment and alarm. Why did I ever think that just this one thing would go smoothly, today? Because you, Nicholas Wilde, are an impossible optimist, yes you are! And Zootopia hates an optimist. Fuming inwardly, Nick was still fumbling for his apartment key outside the apartment's front door when he heard the crash of his bedroom door slamming, followed by the deep-voiced chuckle of his childhood friend, adopted brother and occasional partner in crime.

“And a good morning to you, too, Officer Hopps!” As much as the older fox loved his little brother, Finnick, there were days that Nick could strangle the small fox for his crude sense of humor, particularly where Judy was involved. Today was quickly shaping up to be one of those days. Meeting a very hungover Chief Bogo behind the precinct's motor pool at this ungodly early hour had been bad enough, even if Nick hadn't drank the poor cape buffalo under the table the night before. Add in all the stress of keeping their meeting a secret from the rest of the precinct and rushing back against downtown traffic to check on Judy and it was enough to make a fox's fur fall out from frustration, alone. The heartbreaking sound of Judy shrieking in embarrassment and then slamming the bedroom door was rapidly pushing Nick's poor nocturnal brain into the merciless realm of migraines. And the hardest part of his day was just beginning: facing his partner in the sober light of day after they shared one drunken kiss the night before might just be the most daunting prospect the young fox had ever faced, and that was including almost being “iced” by Mr. Big on two separate
Never let them see that they get to you... who are you trying to fool, Wilde- her or yourself? She's had your number since that first day with the carrot pen! Twenty years on the street, hustling from sun up to sun down, had left Nicholas with a robust arsenal full of tricks and strategies for separating mammals from their hard-earned cash, but the fiery little bunny had a way off throwing a wrench into even his best laid plans. And last night's impromptu kiss had been one doozy of a wrench, even if it had only lasted a few glorious seconds before the “unstoppable” Judy Hopps had painted both of their shoes in recycled booze.

Stupid jammed door lock- should have had the super look at that weeks ago! But that would means you would have had to start actually paying rent to live here, wouldn't it, Wilde? It had to be something in her big, beautiful amethyst eyes that short-circuited every brain cell in Nick's head last night. Just seeing the panic in her eyes had made him want to kiss away all her fears when she cupped his muzzle in her trembling paws. But Judy, being the braver mammal by far, had crossed the final distance between them and jump-started the fox's broken heart with one tentative brush of those sensuously soft lips against his. Nick just shook his head, trying to dislodge the memory of that one stolen kiss in the evidence locker, even as a love crazy smile spread from one end of his tired muzzle to the other. That was Judy all over: brave, trust-worthy, and self-confident one minute, and yet still so vulnerable and naive in her way that spoke to a fox's baser instincts... Not helping, Wilde!

“Now, you kits play nice or I'm going to turn this apartment around and head home!” As the door finally (begrudgingly) swung open, Nick turned on his best TV-sitcom dad voice, fully ready to scold them both, his dad disguise complete with a wagging finger and a furrowed brow. It would have been an award-winning performance if they gave out awards to former street hustlers for trying to appear confident when they felt anything but, but Nick never got the chance.

“NICK!” Upon hearing her partner's voice, Judy bolted from her hiding place in the bedroom so suddenly that the bedroom door slamming open caught Finnick right in the face with just enough force to leave the poor fennec's head spinning. CRACK! “Where have you been? What's the deal with the flowers- why did you take those horrible things out of the evidence locker? What were you thinking?!?” Faster than Flash could speed through downtown traffic, the rabbit was across the small kitchen with both of her paws wrapped around Nick's waist in a vicious bunny hug. “You scared me half to death, Slick!”

“Um, Carrots? You may have just given my little brother a concussion...” With one gentle paw between her sensitive ears, Nick turned the doe's attention back towards the wounded fennec as his eyes rolled back into his thick skull. And, just like that, Nick's little brother and occasional partner in crime -literally one of the toughest little mammals that Nick had ever met- walked a brief, meandering circle to nowhere special before his legs flopped up into the air. If the whole thing wasn't so cartoonishly overacted, Nick might have been worried about his little brother's mental health, but you don't work with somebody for two decades and not recognize when they're pulling your hind paw.

“Ohhhhh... Oh no, Finnick, I am soooo sorry! Is he... Nick, is he going to be okay?” As Judy all but leapt to the poor fennec's side, Nick had to keep up the 'worried family member' facade. Normally, this would have been Hustler 101, but Nick's attention kept slipping down to the sight of the doe's fluffy little tail flicking nervously in the air. Try as he might, after last night's kiss, the former hustler couldn't rip his eyes away from the mouth-watering sight of his partner bent over the poor fennec, facing away from him, wearing nothing but her underwear and his favorite shirt. Get a grip on that libido, Wilde, or you're going to ruin the good thing you got going on here. Again, the fox heard caution knocking on his door, but nobody was home to answer it- every inch of him was dumbstruck, looking at the doe's long, hot pursuit-toned legs rising up to meet that perfect little ball
of fluff that she called a tail.

“I think that I remember them suggesting mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in these situations when I was taking the advanced field medicine class in the Academy...” Trained by years on the street, Nick’s mouth moved on its own accord, as the rest of him silently stalked that fluffy little tail. *So fluffy! She'd never let me get this close in person!* Somewhere deep inside the primitive, savage part of his brain, Nick knew what this was: a fox hunting an unsuspecting bunny, staying upwind and silent, even as his mouth watered and his long, sharp teeth stretched his smile to into a predatory horizon. But, it wasn't rabbit meat that sang to the savage in his blood, making the former hustler lick his chops. Well, not exactly “meat,” so much as flesh, Wilde. “*Eating a bunny*” may still be part of the equation, if she found herself so inclined, or if she stays so... reclined for very much longer.

“Wait... how is mouth-to-mouth supposed to help with... a concussion?” Judy's pretty amethyst eyes blinked in confusion, her muzzle locked in orbit mere inches above the mock unconscious fennec. “...And since when did you take any of the advanced classes at the Academy, Slick?” It wasn't until the exact second that the confused bunny turned her pretty face to look over her shoulder at the nearly love-savage Fox, that Nick was able to plaster his trademark smirk back in place. What would she have seen in my eyes if I weren't wearing these sunglasses? Everything, and that's exactly what it would ruin if she knew the truth, Wilde.

**“We hustled you... We hustled you good, Cottontail!”** And, as usual, Nick's little brother had to ruin everything by rolling side to side on the kitchen floor as the waves of raucous laughter spilled out of him. **“Oh you should have seen your face! Oh, help me- oh, please, save me, Officer Toot-toot!”** And the more confused and alarmed that the bunny looked at being so easily duped, the louder the fennec laughed, until he was reduced to a gasping puddle of fur and frustration on the kitchen floor.

“Okay, lil brother, you're milking it. Besides, I think the good officer here is thinking of all sorts of creative uses for a fox taser right now...” Just as Judy was about to protest that she would never do such a thing, she caught her sly fox winking at her and went strangely quiet, only now realizing the 'position' that her kneeling over the fennec had put her in, “...and I'd rather not have the smell of burnt fox hair all over my kitchen.” It didn't help that Nick's errant paw brushed down her spine in an effort to “assist” her attempts to hide the beautiful view to which he had just had a front row seat.

“So, Finnick, I got you all set for tonight: Flash has kindly agreed to take care of your parking tickets, the 'boot' has been removed from your precious van, and there's even a full tank of premium gas thrown in by your new friends at the ZPD.” Standing this close to the blushing bunny, Nick was sure to make every word out his mouth ring with confidence, if only as a last ditch effort to cover up the pounding sound of his own heart in his ears. And bunnies have VERY good hearing too, don't they, Wilde? Hell, even Finnick could probably hear your heart jack-hammering in your chest right now. “The question, little brother, is whether you held up your end of the bargain?”

“*Oh, you think you're the only one who knows *everybody* now, huh, Nick?”* All play-acting aside, Finnick looked up, his feelings distinctly hurt by the older fox. **“You have been hanging out with the fuzz for too long... forgotten your manners, even. That ain't how Marian- I mean, Mom raised you, Red.”** Not for the first time, Nick wondered for a moment which of the Wilde boys was better at hiding behind their masks when things took an ugly turn. Finnick handed him the small scrap of paper like it was a grenade without a pin, and for all Nick knew, that was exactly what he'd asked his brother for. **“The last known address and 'burner' cell number of one Douglas 'Doug' Ramses, chemist and hit-mammal to the rich and insane.”**
“You sure about this, fox? These people that he's hooked up with, they ain't all 'civilized' like Mr. Big, and they ain't exactly the (cough) ...forgiving sort.” Nick had never been more terrified in his entire life, but he still took the paper from his former partner in crime. For her? Yes. Yes, I am. Judy’s eyes grew big a saucers, looking from one fox to the other in mute understanding: Nick was now risking everything -his safety and hers, even his relationship with his own adopted brother- to find Doug, the last piece to Bellwether's mad schemes to make Zootopia tear itself apart. To her surprise, it was Nick's turn to stare at his feet, rather than meet her searching eyes.

“Yeah, a lot of people will sleep better when that ram's stuffed into the cell right next to Bellwether's, myself included.” Nick knelt down to lift his little brother to his chest, tears building in the corner of the former hustler's eyes. “Thanks, buddy. I shouldn't have asked this of you, but I'm glad that you came through for me. I really am grateful, Finnick. I know that this couldn't have been easy to come across...” Judy sat there, confused by the way things were spinning out of control. What was her partner thinking? And why were there Night Howler flowers sitting in the next room?

“You kiss me, I'm gonna bite your face off.” Finnick's gravel-voiced warning cut through the joy in the room like a knife, causing Nick to take a step back from his former partner. He actually means it this time, doesn't he? “Look, you wanna impress your new girlfriend here and lock that asshole, Doug away? Fine. That mess he and Mayor Muttonchops tried to pull? That shit would have hurt a lot of good mammals I know, predators and prey alike.” The fennec's tiny fists gripped the front of Nick's Pawaiian shirt tightly, dragging older fox's muzzle scant inches from his own, and his voice lost every ounce of warmth. “But that don't mean that you and me are square, Red- not by a damned sight. You burned up your last favors with me here, and I got a feeling that when they come for you- not if, but WHEN they come- they ain't coming looking for your ass first.”

“He wouldn't let that happen, Finnick...” Judy's voice sounded a lot more confident than the older fox felt, but Nick found himself touched by her support, no matter how her lower lip quivered with uncertainty. “...You're all the family he's got left.” The former con-mammal tried to reach out to his brother, but the fennec just turned his back and went to gather his few possessions from the apartment. Finnick didn't even look back over his shoulder until he leapt up to tear open the apartment's stubborn front door.

“Best of luck with your new life, Officer Wilde... I think you're going to need it.” Nick was still reaching for the door when it slammed in his face, but a part of him knew that his little brother was never coming back again. And just like that, even with Judy by his side, Nicholas Wilde was left cold and alone in the world all over again.
1.C.~ Scenes from last night, part 3

((Timeline: Later in the morning after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “I Found...” by Amber Run.]

{Scene: 2 hours later, inside Judy’s shiny new squad car.}

“We may as well turn the car around, Fluff. We’re not going to find Finnick unless he wants to be found, and right now, that just isn’t going to happen.” There is nothing worse in this world than watching somebody that you love slowly implode, drawing themselves inward until all that’s left on display is the empty husk of a once beautiful soul. And right now, Judy was watching her beloved fox sink further and further into himself as he halfheartedly scanned the alleyways of the Nocturnal district for his little brother’s distinctive van. It confused and alarmed the gung-ho little doe to see the sad acceptance fill her fox’s every breath as he looked out at the city streets they patrolled, seeing everything and nothing at all. He’s like a ghost of the fox I used to know without Finnick around... just like that day I ‘found’ him under the bridge...

“You know, Nick, we could put out an All-Points-Bulletin if you want...” Judy was surprised at just how quickly her by-the-book attitude faltered after last night, but watching Nick slip away an inch at a time was breaking the bunny’s heart, too. “It wouldn’t be too far of a stretch, if we told Bogo he was a ‘confidential informant’ on the missing mammals case, right?” She even reached for the cruiser’s radio receiver on the dash, but Nick’s soft paw wrapped hers a few inches above the receiver.

“No, Carrots... he’d hate me for that even more.” The fox’s touch was gentle enough, but in his distracted state, Nick forgot to hold his claws all the way in. For a full second Judy marveled at the electric thrill of feeling those claws trace along the sensitive fur at her wrist, holding her attention fast even as her heart rate skyrocketed. “Living on the streets, hustling mammals the way we did, there’s nothing lower than a rat: a ‘confidential informant’ to the cops. That’s something even Duke Weaselton wouldn’t stoop to, unless we gave him no other choice, like we did with Mr. Big.” That’s when Nick pulled his paw from hers, leaving the bittersweet ghost of his touch lingering on her sensitive fur.

“And that’s what you asked Finnick to do last night, to help us find Bellwether’s chemist slash hit-mammal, Doug?” The question was out of Judy’s mouth before her brain even registered the devastating effect it might have on her already-sinking partner. Instead of throwing the drowning mammal a life preserver, professional curiosity had just led the doe to throw the fox an anchor. Looking at the ashen, crest-fallen way her fox turned to look out the cruiser window, Judy immediately regretted saying word one about the missing canine. For a few heart-breaking seconds, her fox went back to staring out the window, the occasional tear streaming down his usually happy cheeks.

“I didn’t ask him, Fluff...” Nick’s favorite aviator sunglasses fell onto the cruiser floor board as her fox buried his tear-streaked face in his hands and shuddered, silently. “I-I begged him to break the one unbreakable rule of the life we live... the life I used to live.” After a near-miss with an angry giraffe’s RV, Judy was finally able to pull off the road and into the empty parking lot of an automated car wash. Taking his paw back in hers, Judy wasn’t as surprised by the fox’s weak attempt to pull his paw away as she was by the all-too-visible shudder that ran up his bare forearm at her gentle, comforting touch.

“He’ll come around, Slick. Just give him a little time, and you’ll both be back to painting Chief
Bogo's horns pink while he sleeps and running circles around dumb bunnies like me...” Judy's breath caught in her throat as her partner finally turned his tired emerald eyes up to meet her amethyst ones. Even in the dim light for which the Nocturnal District was infamous, the doe could see a terrifying maze of bloodshot capillaries stretching out in every direction from his pretty green irises. Her sharp sense of hearing as a rabbit heard the thundering of his desperate heart drumming deep in the depths of her fox as her fingers slid up to Nick's cheeks, forcing him to not look away again.

“Oh, Nick! How long has it been since you got any real sleep?” The doe's curious fingers drew the corners of her fox's mouth aside to reveal the sharp teeth that had fascinated her since their little hustle in the Natural History Museum. *Run, before the savage fox EATS us!!!* Deep inside her, Judy heard the screams of the primitive, fearful part of her rabbit brain that ran on instincts older than Zootopia itself, but that part was overruled by an almost maternal urge to smother his pain in her comforting embrace. *He's not 'savage,' just exhausted from caring the weight of the whole city on his back. Oh Nick, what else have you been hiding from me? “I know that the Academy can be especially rough on nocturnal mammals, but you should have told me...”*

“It wasn't the Academy, Carrots. Not that Major Friedkin didn't try to kill me those first few weeks with those ten mile hikes at 5 in the morning... that polar bear's a born sadist, I'm telling you.” Judy had seen Nick deflect questions with humor before, but she'd never seen the terror radiating behind his eyes as she stroked his muzzle reassuringly, never actually heard his heart jack-hammering in his chest like she did at this moment. *He's so worn down that his nerves are shot... His thick winter fur looks like it's about ready to fall out in patches. He's trying to hide so much from me right now that he literally can't keep it all inside... My beautiful, broken fox... Just let it come out. “I mean... what well-adjusted mammal likes running the confidence course every morning at the break of dawn?”*

“Nick, please don't lie to me... How long has it been?” Her paws slipped around to gently pull the heart-broken fox's head to rest on her modest chest, stroking behind his ears like her mother used to do for her whenever a younger Judy had had a bad dream. Her efforts were rewarded with a deep, rumbling purr that seemed to ripple like honey beneath the fox's neck fur, but Nick held his silence for a few, lonely seconds more.

“Since... before Bellwether...” Nick was far too big to be pulled into her lap, no matter how much the doe wanted to do just that in this stolen moment, but he did wrap his long arms around the driver's seat and squeeze the dumbstruck doe in a sloppy, apologetic hug. As warm as the sudden gesture made her cheeks burn, Judy wasn't a rabbit to let herself be distracted by a little embarrassment. Nick had found *that* out at the Mystic Springs Oasis, when her sneaky fox had dragged the unsuspecting doe to her first and -sweet cheese and crackers!- she hoped her only visit to the nudist mammal community hidden, therein. Nor was she surprised that her fox had taken advantage of her sudden flustered state to hide his face in her lap, so the doe couldn't see him at his most vulnerable.

“Nick... how long before Bellwether?” Stroking the base of his ears continued, but Judy could feel a dreadful weight settle in the pit of her stomach. *Do the math, Judy: we solved the “missing mammals” case 8 months ago, so... Nick's lived off the grid for a while, gallivanting around town with Finnick in a van that has 'probable cause' written all over it, no doubt. Slowly, she turned the fox's muzzle up to meet her gentle caress, scratching a sensitive spot just under his chin. *In all that time, he had to catch sleep wherever and whenever he could, right? Ooh, boy did the fox like that spot being scratched, if his heavily wagging back paw was any indication! I mean, even a nocturnal mammal like Nick couldn't go more than a few months without a full night's sleep...*

“It's just been a few years, Carrots... It's not that big of a deal, I promise.” *Wait... did he just say “years?” Judy's paws stopped mid-scratch, barely resisting the urge to strangle the dumb fox resting his head in her lap. *YEARS?!? As in the plural of one year: two years, three... four, maybe? Oddly enough, her 'drowning' fox had just used the same anchor she'd tossed him to pull his bunny partner*
under the water with him, and her brain was quickly running out of oxygen. Surprisingly strong fingers for a bunny gripped the poor fox's muzzle and turned him the rest of the way to look into Judy's eyes.

"You. Have. GOT. To. Take. Better. Care. Of. Yourself. Nick." The frustrated doe punctuated each word with a trembling shake of her partner's handsome muzzle, before stopping to smooth down his ruffled whiskers with her thumbs. "How the heck did you get through the Academy without sleeping, Slick? The 'confidence course' there is brutal enough, but the class load is just ruthless, for carrot's sake!" Breathe in, breathe out, Judy- just like Major Friedkin taught you. Nick's smart enough to take care of himself... most of the time. It's got to be another one of his silly jokes... right?

"I may have dozed off in a few of the more long-winded classes, but I read an awful lot to make up for it; Studied night and day, just like a certain heroic rabbit that will continue to go unnamed..." Though his words now came out in Nick's normal con-mammal drawl, the fox in her lap was anything but restive, turning his body this way or that to get comfortable in their odd position. "I even made a few friends along the way, too... two of which ended up being co-valedictorians, if you can believe it." Judy watched in terrible fascination as her fox breathed in the doe's frightened scent with a hungry look in his eyes and a slow, languid lick of his thick tongue across those dangerously sharp canine teeth. That's the same look he gave you after you stole the kiss last night, Judy: The dangerous kind of look that screams, "Tread carefully: Savage fox on the premises."

Nick must have been thinking about the same kiss, because his next words came out halfway between a foxy purr and a deep, possessive growl, "Oh, Judy! You always... take such good care of me... make me feel so... SAFE!" As the panicked doe watched her partner twist and roll over, his beautiful emerald eyes filled with something as far removed from exhaustion as the missing mammals had been from civilized. A burning heat rolled across her thighs as Nick's hot breath scorched her work pants before the handsome fox in her life sat up, breathing in heavy gasps as his agitated paws kneaded the cruiser's dash.

"Sorry, Carrots. Old Mother Winter plays absolute hell with a fox’s emotions this time of year. I'll be good! ...I just have to sit... over here for a moment.” Each word came calmer than the last, but the doe could see the red crescent moons carved into Nick's palms as the claws she'd been so fond of a few moments ago took their toll on his flesh. To the doe’s surprise, Nick had joined her in mimicking Major Friedkin's meditative breathing, but his breathing came out deeper, more primal than she'd ever heard from the fox before. There's something almost... savage about him right now, something so naked and raw: Every instinct in my head screams me to run away, but my heart begs me to stay... for Nick. My fox needs me right now...

“You know what, Slick? Last night is still kind of a blur for me, and I might just need some help straightening everything out...” Judy reached out one tentative paw to scratch that special spot just under her partner's chin. Remembering his heart-breaking story about his time with the Junior Ranger Scouts, Judy decided it was time to start some happier memories with her fox. “Do you know of any 'brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy' foxes who might help out a damsel in distress?” Normally, Judy hated playing the “damsel in distress” card- the liberated doe in her found it demeaning in just about every way- but seeing the playful smirk return to her fox’s muzzle was worth the hit to her ego, just this once. Was it really so wrong of me to enjoy the fact that it was somebody else's foot drumming uncontrollably on the cruiser's floorboards this time?

“Alright, alright!” It was clear to anybody watching that Nick's self-control was a rapidly sinking ship, and Judy had just lobbed a fresh salvo of emotional cannonballs at his last remaining sail, but the fox managed to pull himself just out of her reach. “Tell you what, Carrots. This is an automated car wash, and wouldn't you know it? We just happen to have a cop car that needs washing.” They both knew he was reaching for an excuse, since Judy kept her shiny new squad car cleaner than any
other cruiser on the force, but she let her fox think he was being clever. “So, here's what you and I are gonna do: we're going to drive into that tunnel of suds, and while the brushes and fans are going, you can ask me any embarrassing little thing about last night that you want...”

Just as Judy was about to interject something about the sheer volume of questions that she had about last night, the doe felt one sharp fox claw resting on her soft lips. “...But, when the car wash is done, I get to ask you one very important question. And Carrots, when you answer that question, I will be very upset if you try to play the innocent little farm girl or otherwise mislead your poor city fox. Now, do we have a deal?” Just as the removal of that one sharp claw had sent an electric thrill across her lips, Nick's ominous offer of the “deal” sent a sudden chill down the bunny's spine.

Slowly, the anxious doe pondered her options: Judy hadn't risen to the illustrious ranks of the Zootopia Police Department by shrinking from a challenge, but she also knew a Nicholas Wilde hustle when she heard it. And her fox certainly had an ulterior motive, after last night. *He's trying so hard to control this situation...but he's just as addicted to this new game of ours, as I am. Oh, sweet cheese and crackers, Nick, what are we getting ourselves into??* Judy's fingers gripped the front of Nick's favorite Pawaiian shirt, pulling him close enough for her to look sideways into his dazzling emerald eyes, searching for some clue as to the fox's true motives. *He's not bluffing, or joking any more... this is something new, even to him.*

As she pulled the cruiser up to the starting line for the automated car wash a few seconds later, Judy made her decision. “On one condition, Slick: You don't lie to me, ever again.” Now it was her turn to silence her fox's witty retort, not with a velvet soft finger against his lips, but with an iron stare from her pretty amethyst eyes. “I don't mind the occasional joke, even at my expense, you know that. But you start lying to me, again, and... and we're through.” The last two words tasted bitter on her tongue, like stakeout coffee left to cool too long in the cruiser's cup holder, but she drank it anyways. Nick needed to know how worried he'd made her by keeping so many secrets, so she put her hind paw down.

“You want to know all of my secrets now, little rabbit?” Again, she saw something savage flicker behind her partner's eyes that belied the playful purr of the fox's voice: some dark need was driving this new game of theirs, but she had to play by his rules if she wanted to find out more. *And you do want to find out more, don't you, Judy?More about how you got under those green silk sheets. More about why his scent scares the daylights out of you one second and makes you feel so safe the next? More about how those sharp claws and those long, scary teeth would feel on your skin again... SOOO NOT HELPING YOURSELF HERE, JUDY! “You don't know what you're asking for here, not now...”* Again, she felt the fox's hot breath in her ear, promising the doe new temptations every second.

“I told you earlier, Nick: I am not afraid of you.” It took all the doe's willpower to keep her nose from Trembling as the heady scent of male fox filled their tiny cruiser, rushing over her and through her just like it had back at Nick's apartment. She wasn't lying to her partner, not entirely: she no longer harbored any concerns that her fox would ever knowingly hurt her or let her come to harm-stepping up to defend her from Bogo and Bellwether had put that fear to rest. But, somehow, the former street hustler had become one of the most important mammals in the doe's life, and the way she'd come to physically crave his touch in the last 24 hours had shaken Judy's world down to the core. And, try as she might, Judy couldn't blame this sudden attraction on alcohol any more- she was stone, cold sober and she could still feel his rough lips on hers, still thrill to the memory of his claws gently caressing her fur.

“Not being 'afraid of me' and 'wanting to know everything about me' are two completely different things, Carrot, particularly to a fox, and especially during this time of year. We play things a lot closer to the chest than you bunnies...” Nick's voice had regained the same mix of grief and self-
doubt that had made her heart almost break when he told her about his betrayal at the hands of the other Junior Ranger Scouts. Just as she was about to roll down the window for a breath of fresh air, Judy was amazed to find that the scent dissipated almost as quickly as it had first filled the small cruiser. He's able to physically conceal his scent? Just like that? As a bunny that had to wear scent neutralizer every day of her adult life, this one little discovery boggled the doe's mind on so many levels. She really knew so very little about her fox, and that was going to change right now!

Paws gripping the steering wheel so tight that she thought her silver fur might turn white, Judy cast a sidelong glance at her partner, “I-I want to know everything about you, Nick, starting with last night. I really do...” The poor doe almost bit a hole in her bottom lip when the clamps of the automated wash grabbed the cruiser's front wheels and started to slowly pull them inside. Choosing her words very carefully to avoid hurting her fox's feelings, Judy was rewarded by a sly wink from Nick as he put his sunglasses back into his pocket, “But first, I have to ask you why you have an evidence bag full of Night Howlers sitting on your dresser.”

“You know what? I think you just might make a good cop some day.” He teased her, mercilessly some times, but there was an undercurrent of admiration in the former street hustler's voice today. Judy just shrugged: the doe was born to be a cop, and nothing could change that- not even walking hand in hand through an emotional mind field with her fox. “It all started a few weeks after I got to the Academy. I was looking through some old books in a secluded part of the library, desperately trying to hide from Major Friedkin after light's out, and I found out something about the flowers that we missed in the original investigation. I couldn't call you because of the Academy's blackout regulations on calling friends and family, so I called Bogo, who was pretty far from wanting to be my friend at the time...”

“What... you think I'm going to believe a FOX?!?!” Judy winced, remembering the shameful way her fox had been treated by the chief of police during the missing mammals case. “Never let them see that they get to you” may have been the fox's motto, but deep down, Judy knew that Nick felt every condescending word and suspicious glance that followed in the fox's wake. His relationship with the stern cape buffalo had thawed slightly faster than most glaciers after Nick had applied to the Academy, but the fox's penchant for playing practical jokes at the precinct was quickly wearing out the larger mammal's patience. That the seasoned police officer couldn't actually prove that Nick was the culprit was only making things worse.

“Anyways, Chief Buffalo-butt must be mellowing in his old age, because he actually thanked me for the tip. Turns out, Bogo thinks it might just be what we need to finally bring Doug in, if a certain super fox and his new bunny sidekick play their cards right... Oooof!” Judy's fist collided with her partner's chest playfully at the whole 'sidekick' line, but she was genuinely proud of her new partner for uncovering a new lead on the cold case. Maybe his time at the Academy wasn't a complete waste...

“Wait, you were so bored at the Academy that you, my self professed 'street hustler extraordinaire,' read a book on flowers? Who are you and what have you done with the original Nicholas Wilde?” Nick chuckled a bit at her intended barb, but Judy could see the spark of pride glimmering in the emerald darkness of her fox's eyes. He only seems to smile when either Finnick or I am around these days... and now, I'm all that he has left. She tried to keep the playful smile on her muzzle from slipping, but her fox noticed the effort it took, even if he didn't say anything this time.

“That's former 'street hustler extraordinaire,' thank you very much. Some-bunny told me I had to clean up my act if I wanted to be her partner, some day. And I didn't read one, Carrots... I read seven.” Judy's jaw almost hit the floor. Seven?! Why on earth would my partner- one of the laziest mammals... check that, most exhausted mammals that I've ever met read SEVEN books on Night Howlers? Judy looked up to see her fox eyeing with a sly wink, “To be completely honest, though:
Bogo may have mentioned something about your family being big on the subject of 'plant husbandry' and I know that your dad has a whole arsenal of anti-fox weaponry at home. So, I thought showing a little interest in the family business might be good for my health... if we ever bump into them, that is.”

“You... you want to meet my family?” Judy felt the first stirring of butterflies deep down in her stomach, watching Nick go from smooth operator to ‘nervous kit’ in just a few seconds. He knows how important to me my family is, and my fox wants them to like him. And he started studying up to impress them six months ago, when he was already swamped with classwork at the Academy! It was easily the sneakiest, most underhanded, most romantic thing that anybody had ever done for the doe, and Judy's eyes were tearing up just thinking about her fox's commitment to impressing her family.

“Maybe someday, Fluff... When you're ready, and I've remembered to pack my pitchfork-proof vest!” Nick's paw brushed against her palm in what was supposed to be a comforting gesture, but Judy's small fingers wrapped around his larger wrist, silently begging him to stay. Even through the curtain of her happy tears, the doe could see the surprise pass across her fox's face, followed by simple acceptance. Sometimes, a simple touch can become a universal language, answering a multitude of unspoken prayers without a sound. Right now, the bunny behind the wheel was thanking Nick for coming into her life, for opening up to her, for accepting her just as she was learning to accept her fox. Oh, you rabbits... so emotional. Oh, Nick, my sweet, incredibly romantic fox, you have no idea. “Go ahead, Carrots, ask me another one?”

“Why was Francine crying at the after party and why did she try to cover it up when I spoke to her after the press release?” Judy had always tried to look after others, and seeing one of the strongest female officers in the ZPD trying to hide her “melting” mascara had hurt the little bunny's heart. The fact that Francine wouldn't or couldn't let her be there for the elephant the way that her colleague had been there emotionally for Judy hurt the doe's heart even worse.

“Even if I knew, I still couldn't tell you, Carrots. It's simply not my secret to share.” Nick shrugged his shoulders, apologizing to the little bunny, “Given all her years on the force, though, and her amazing left hook -if Officer McHorn's stories on the subject are to be believed- I'd say it's probably either a family matter or a romantic one, maybe both. What else could bring down somebody so strong?” The deeply sympathetic tone in the fox's voice stirred an identical chord in Judy, as did the simple circle that her partner's clawed finger traced upon the sensitive fur of her palm. So says the voice of experience, partner. You're not fooling anybody, here, Slick. “Next?”

Judy's next question made a blush run up from the doe's cheeks up the insides of her long, sensitive ears. “Where did our shirts go and -sweet cheese and crackers, Nick!- why were we dancing alone and half-naked in the evidence room?” Any other time, Nick would have made some quip about it making her look “cute” when she went all shy country bunny, but today, her fox carefully laced his much larger fingers with hers and patiently waited until the doe could look back up to meet his bottomless emerald eyes. He's been waiting for me to ask about that or the Kiss, this whole time! Judy's surprise at being expertly played by her partner only deepened the fiery blush that consumed the doe.

“Well, Carrots, that's kind of a long story. You see, Bogo snuck us down to the evidence room to keep track of those same Night Howlers that you saw on my dresser.” The constant, comforting presence of her fox's paw on hers kept Judy from imploding from embarrassment, but it also stirred up something much further south than her heart at the moment. Now, she had an all-together new reason to be blushing.

“Seems he thought that some shiftless soul might use all the noise from the party as cover to do a little late night 'shopping' in the evidence room, so he put his most gung-ho bunny and his 'prime
suspect' to work guarding the shop.” Judy covered her mouth with her free paw, half to cover her surprise at the Chief's continuing distrust of her fox and half to cover the gentle purr that was building deep in her chest the longer that Nick's soft fingers ran circles across her sensitive skin. *My fox is very talented with his fingers. Hooo, boy. Breathe in, breathe out, little bunny. “But Bogo wasn't sly enough to slip past the precinct's favorite gossip and big, fluffy welcoming committee all rolled into one...”*

“Benjamin Clawhauser!” The name was out of Judy's mouth before the bunny could stop herself. ZPD's resident cheetah was infamous for spreading office gossip, for his absolute worship of the pop star, Gazelle, and for giving unsolicited romantic advice for all the world to hear. The 'flabby tabby,' as he was affectionately known among the precinct's daytime regulars, was surprisingly stealthy for a 'big-boned' jungle cat- and relentless when his curiosity was peaked. *He must have followed us down below, but does that mean he saw... us?*

“Got it right on the first try, there, Fluff. Anyways, Bogo had to, er, accidentally elbow our beloved cheetah in his bread basket before Clawhauser could let loose that ear-splitting squeal that he's infamous for.” Possessing one of the sharpest sets of hearing on the force, Judy was painfully aware of how loud the cheetah could squeal when he got over-excited. Judy had also grown up with sugar-mad cheerleaders who could take lessons from the cheetah on being cheerful. “Turns out, old Chief Buffalo-butt underestimated the number of mimosas that you and our cheerful cheetah mascot had been sucking down, because our beloved Benjamin rained down -er, well let's call it 'recycled'- orange juice and champagne all over you and me, and you drenched the chief in more of the same about two seconds later.” They both shuddered at the resurfacing memory. “And I'll tell you something- the little emergency eye wash station there in the evidence room is a far cry from an actual shower. Took us forever to scrub the gunk out of our fur and our shirts were just a lost cause.”

Judy held out one restraining paw, trying to keep her anxious stomach from reliving that particular memory again. Sometimes, ignorance truly was bliss. “While you were busy getting the er, “gunk” out of your fur and Benjamin was busy cleaning up the mess, I asked Bogo to go find us some replacement shirts out of the Vice Squad lockers.” Nick was reclining in his seat, hind paws on the dash, just to tweak his partner a bit as her fox continued his lurid story telling, “I think he probably got waylaid by Gazelle on the way back for a selfie party, which, if I'm being completely honest, I may have had a less than innocent paw in setting that up earlier in the night.”

“You knew Gazelle before the concert?” The former street hustler's smirk said it all: *Carrots, I know everybody.* To Judy's surprise, his dexterous fingers roamed absentmindedly from her wrist up to her elbow, reveling in the softness of the bunny's silver fur as her fox stared out the window. Nick was playing at being distracted, but Judy could see his emerald eyes reflected in the window as he watched her shiver in reaction to his touch.

“I knew a fox high up in her entourage, Carrots." Nick gently corrected the bunny, "She owed me a favor, so I planted the seed of an idea, hoping Gazelle would be as keen to meet her two biggest fans as they were to meet her.” Mouth agape, the doe saw her fox shrug, as if this level of hustling came as easily to him as breathing, and for all she knew it did. It was a little hard for the doe to concentrate on her next question with her fox petting her fur in sinfully slow circles with his thumb. “Almost out of time here, Fluff.”

“Nick! W-Why w-were w-we dancing in the evidence room?” The hypnotic feel of his strong fingers caressing her bare fur made Judy audibly gasp, which only emboldened her fox to keep up his tortuously slow explanation. *He's stalling, trying to draw this all out until the wash is over... or I'm a puddle on the floor of this cruiser. The question is why... Oh Nick, that feels sooo good! THINK, JUDY, THINK. She was pretty sure the blush extended all the way down to her toes by now, but watching the way her fox began to sniff the air around her in deep, heady breaths told Judy
that a little blush the least of her worries, right now.

“I may have talked you into a game of Truth or Dare while we were waiting for Bogo to come rescue us, but you -my brave little bunny- you asked me to dance.” The intense weight of Nick’s reflected gaze fell on her, running over and through the young doe like a stampeding rhino. I made the first move, I kissed Nick, and then I threw up all over his shoes. I. AM. SUCH. A. DUMB. BUNNY! Judy wanted to run and hide from her embarrassment, just like every rabbit instinct in her head had been screaming for the past few hours. She wanted to find a nice deep hole somewhere in the wilderness far from Zootopia and hide there for the next 99 years, or however long it took for foxes to forget the romantic advances of pushy little bunnies. But Nick’s soothing touch kept bringing her back: back to those bottomless emerald eyes, back to the soothing purr of his words, and back to the burning desire inspired by that one perfect kiss.

Gripping the steering wheel so hard that it cracked her knuckles on her free paw, Judy turned to look at her fox, seeing him for the first time in a new light: He's not my fox, not really, not yet, but -Oh, Mama, forgive me!- I desperately want him to be! Nick wasn't the only one breathing heavy in the stifling city heat right now, and Judy could already tell that she was not alone in her walk down the road paved with good intentions. She couldn't force herself to care; Judy just wanted to keep her fox company along the way. “Ask me, Nick... please?”

“Want to try that first kiss one more time, just to make sure we get it right?” Nick's smile spread to truly predatory dimensions, flashing the sharp canine teeth that he was always so careful to hide around the bunny, but Judy felt the opposite of afraid at the sight. She'd felt his teeth and claws before, seen Nick at his most feral, even been threatened by the fox after their fallout at the press conference, but Judy was done being scared by her fox. She was tired of dreaming of him at night, of wondering what those sharp teeth and claws would feel like again on her bare fur, of suppressing her natural curiosity about the fox's feelings in return. Her fox needed her, and she needed him right back: it really was as simple as that.

Judy spun the cruiser in a tight circle, burning rubber from the brand new tires, doing a truly impressive “doughnut” in the car wash parking lot. “Um.... Carrots?!?” Nick's panicked voice bouncing around the inside of her new police cruiser was just icing on the carrot cake. In less than a second, the cruiser was back into position at the entrance to the automated car wash, with one very confused fox hanging onto the emergency handle above his seat. “Are all bunnies bad drivers, or just you?” Hah, that will teach Nick to side seat drive! Judy just smirked at her unsuspecting fox, unbuttoning her seat belt with eager paws, as the automated claws pulled the cruiser back into the tunnel of suds.

“Sorry, Slick. Looks like they missed a spot!” Turns out a bunny can go savage, after all.
2. A.~ The Trouble with Sharks...

((Timeline: Just after Midnight, The Night of the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that inspired this scene: “Meet Me On The Battlefield” by SVRCINA.]

{Scene: After hours in the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill, Tundratown District.}

Tucked away in a remote corner of the Tundratown district, the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill was never going to win any of Zootopia's awards for the best location, the friendliest service, or the fairest prices for a good meal. Nor was the cracked vinyl siding that stretched across its storefront entirely successful at hiding the building's former history as a reinforced bunker left over from the city's industrial revolution, decades past. As a matter of fact, the squat, old concrete building was about as enticing to the average passerby as a “lumpy, under-cooked potato with barbed wire liberally sprinkled on top” according to the only restaurant reviewer brave enough to step through the club's heavy steel doors. Only a single blue, flickering neon sign hung haphazardly from the roof, advertising its existence at all, and even that could barely be seen by the single, dog-legged road that fed into the cul-de-sac parking lot at the front of the building.

Nestled at the foot of one of the District's main cooling towers, the Ice Sickle catered to only the most winter-hardened predators: the polar bears, arctic shrews, and winter wolves that called Tundratown their home. Coupled with the ominous logo of a block of ice with a heavy farm blade stuck into it that hung over the massive steel doors that faced the Ice Sickle's tiny parking lot, these facts left little room for doubt that this remote building catered primarily to the dockworkers and industrial laborers that had recently crossed over from the Old World. Of course, none of this was a careless oversight by the bar's current management. In a district dotted with treasured “hole in the wall” dining experiences, the whole building was carefully designed to give the odd passerby one unmistakable message: “Go Away.”

And that was exactly what Koslov wanted to tell the “civilized” world that surrounded the polar bear on every side: that this one spot was his kingdom, and his alone. Civilization, by Zootopian standards, could just as well sink back under the ice, taking with it with its raising of two-faced prey like Bellwether over the rank and file of their predator neighbors. Twenty four dreadful summers had come and gone since the polar bear had first stepped off the boat from the Old World, and for the life of him, the polar bear could not imagine a more backwards society. Strength, honor, ruthless ambition, and the respect that they brought to a mammal and his clan- these things had no place in a modern city like Zootopia: cash and comfort was all that mattered to these “civilized” prey.

Every day, breaking his back working the same docks and shipping yards as the poor mammals in the bar below his office window, a younger Koslov had learned first hand the all-too “predatory” nature of the prey that welcomed his kind to Zootopia. From the bison who worked the dockworkers well into the night without paying them a cent in overtime to the pig slumlord who threatened to call immigration every time somebody complained about the lack of reliable heaters and the broken toilets- there was no one in this city who didn't cheat them. There was nobody to turn to in Tundratown but Mr. Big; nobody that the Prey feared more than the ruthless arctic shrew, and it didn't take long working for the gangster for the polar bear long to turn the tables on his former employers. Koslov had been amazed how quickly these “compassionate” business mammals turned into sniveling cowards when you dangled them off the roof of the businesses that they thought they'd never sell.
A predator born for the icy waters that flowed through Tundratown, the original Mr. Big knew a
talent for ruthlessness when he saw it in a mammal, and how to reward that talent when it was
exercised with integrity and restraint. Towering above even the largest of his ursine cousins, Koslov
stood out among the Don's other minions, the polar bear's immense size coming in handy for the
family's more ruthless enterprises, as did his penchant for terse silence. Over the years, the tight-
lipped Koslov would face police interrogation many times in the old Don's service, but he passed
through these difficult moments with the patience of an Old World stoic, seldom noticing the smaller
prey that swarmed around his feet. Over time, even the mightiest elephants within the ZPD ranks had
learned to keep a respectful distance from the polar bear, as more than once, he'd had to wrest their
paws from his jacket sleeves, twisting until the thick bones in their wrists had begun to pop. It had
actually become something of a favored pastime for the aging polar bear.

By the time the current Mr. Big had risen to take the business out of his ailing grandfather's paws,
Koslov had risen to be the Don's right paw mammal, guarding the family that helped the immense
predator find his calling in this strange new city. Koslov had chosen and trained each member of the
current Mr. Big's polar bear entourage by paw, ensuring that the Don's family's safety was never in
question. After a drunk driver took the original Francesca, Mr. Big's beloved wife and Fru Fru's
sainted mother, from this world twelve years ago, Koslov started taking no chances in the family's
defense, often working their security detail himself at public venues like last night's Gazelle concert.
It was the least Koslov could do for the family that had pulled him out of the circle of poverty and
abuse that awaited newcomers to the warehouses and docks of Tundratown.

And yet, as thankful as the polar bear was for his adoption into the Big family's inner circle, Koslov's
doubts about moving to this new city still gnawed at the polar bear. Looking down at the
dockworkers that whiled their lonely nights away in the bar below his bulletproof window, Koslov
felt their loneliness settling into his bones. Though the black wool sweater and heavy gold chains that
he wore tonight cost more than these poor mammals would make in a year, the polar bear felt no
more confidence in his future than he did the day he'd first stepped off the boat all those years ago. 
What future can there be when I have with no one to share it with?

“Mr. Koslov... sir? Do we have a deal?” The over-eager voice of the boar whose body odor
currently befouled his office sanctuary snapped the polar bear's thoughts back to the here and now,
but Koslov's icy gaze never left the greasy pig's reflection in the glass. “The girl, you see, she's a
talented singer, a real diamond in the rough, but she needs some one to -how do you say- show her
the way things work in this city.” In his short time running the club for Mr. Big, Koslov had already
heard this same sales pitch dozens of times, and they all ended in the same self-serving way. “And I
can promise you, sir, the young lady will be ever so -heh- 'grateful' for any help that you can
provide.” Ah, there it is: the hook. Shall we see what poor fish he has left dangling as bait in dark?

Koslov grunted his assent, but deep inside his dead eyed stare, a smarter adversary would have seen
the subtle shift from mere boredom to actual disdain. By the glazed doughnut look in the pig's eager
little eyes, and the cheap velvet tracksuit that he had squeezed his fat carcass into, Koslov had
already decided that such intelligence was not the boar's strong suit. There was a reason that the Ice
Sickle was far from the first stop on the road to stardom in Zootopia: it was a place where careers
ended, where dreams died by degrees, usually at the bottom of a glass of vodka -the last refuge of the
broken-hearted. Only the foolish and the truly desperate would come here looking to start over, but
Koslov was willing to sell the girl's “agent” enough proverbial rope to hang himself with.

As the pig in the cheap velvet track suit shuffled his way toward the door, Koslov took one last look
into his own reflection in the office's mirrored glass. He couldn't remember a time when there weren't
dark circles hanging under his eyes like so much baggage. He could barely remember the last time he
had heard himself laugh openly, but then again, that had been back in the good old days when the
Don's favorite fox, little “Nicky” Wilde was still in tight with Mr. Big and the crew. He missed the
fox’s crazy stories, the animated way he took on each new role or silly voice, but a betrayal— even something as childish and transparent as this “skunk butt rug” swindle— these things had a way of ending friendships... permanently. These days, there was precious little left to laugh about. Oddly enough, thinking of the whole mess now made a small, nostalgic smile curl Koslov's lips, just a little. *Oh, my funny little fox, where would you be if dear Fru Fru had not defended you? Just one more 'pawp sickle' drifting among the masses under Mr. Big’s mansion.*

And now, the former street hustler was on his way to becoming an honest-to-God cop with the ZPD, saved from Mr. Big's wrath a second time by another soft-hearted young woman- the rabbit Judy Hopps, who was rapidly becoming a strange new member of the Don's family. Some mammals really did have Lady Luck by the tail, but Koslov knew that luck always had a way of running out when you need it most. Despite Hopps’ new status as “godmother” to the Don’s first granddaughter, and her continued efforts to rebuild the bridges that Wilde had burned with the old mobster, Koslov still worried that one day the old Mr. Big would return to say the two last words many mammals ever heard, “Ice ‘em!” The polar bear took no pleasure in the thought, it was just the way things worked in this new city. *Some sins, they cannot be forgotten, Nicky, even among family... especially not in this family.*

The sudden attack of nostalgia had neither kept Koslov from noticing the greasy little pig’s return, nor distracted the polar bear from sizing up the young alpine fox who followed, trembling in her agent's wake. The pretty young vixen that stood in the middle of his office suite wasn't shivering just because she was cold. So fresh off the boat that he could still smell the salty tang of the sea on her silver and white winter coat, the vixen stood between the two mammals that would decide her fate, her soft brown eyes glued to the floor, her little heart no doubt racing with the fear of putting her fate into the hands of a complete stranger. She was still so starved from the journey, her trembling frame worn so thin that one of the gangster's paws could have wrapped around her waist with room to spare. A child wearing her mother's clothes that hung about her trembling shoulders like a noose: the soft brown peasant blouse was almost as threadbare as the sandalwood brown eyes that rose to meet his gaze.

“Well, then... I'll just wait outside while you two get -heh- acquainted.” The boar slicked back his long hair into a greasy little rat tail with all the panache and swagger of a used car sales-mammal about to meet his quota for the week. “Mind your manners here, girl. “Uncle” Koslov, here, is an important member of the financial community here, and you will make him feel welcome. Is that perfectly clear?” His question came out as little more than a feral growl, but the meaning was clear: Her participation in whatever dreadful designs that the polar bear might have in mind was going to be enthusiastic, if not actually voluntary, or there would be the devil to pay. Koslov's disdain for the greasy little pig was rapidly blossoming into a hatred as cold as the bitter winds that wrapped Tundratown in perpetual winter, but the polar bear's smile never wavered until the door closed with his latest 'guest' outside.

“Well, now that tedious unpleasantness is over and done with,” Koslov walked to the door slowly, never looking the young vixen in the eye until he'd pulled the door's several deadbolts into place. “Would you care for something to eat or drink?” The polar bear's question came out as soft and sweet as imported silk, but he was far from surprised to hear the young vixen audibly gulp in response. The girl's trembling paws rose slowly to untie the strands of her blouse that, on an older female of the breed, might have held more of a robust bussom in check. Again, her trembling brown eyes fixed on the floor, her trembling paws moving with a slow, grim sort of certainty, but this time Koslov was just fast enough in crossing the room to catch them in his own before the vixen's modest endowments came into view. *One thing I will never miss about the Old World: pimps with delusions of grandeur.*

“I don't understand... the boar, he said that nothing in Zootopia was free...” The terror in the young
vixen's eyes didn't quite match the confusion that lit up her face when she looked up at the giant polar bear holding both of her paws in one of his. “And I don't have any other way to pay... my way...” Towering over her diminutive frame, Koslov could easily have shredded her like an old newspaper with his free paw, but instead, that paw gently lifted her muzzle as he knelt down to her eye level. Taking care to cover his fangs as he smiled, so as not to spook the young vixen into actually running away, Koslov looked deep into her bottomless brown eyes. *She thinks I mean to eat her? As if an hors d'oeuvre such as this could ever satisfy my hunger?*

“He was not wrong, but...” The polar bear let her cheek slip from his paw. “No matter how exotic the caviar, no matter how expensive the champagne, little one, it's no fun going to a party with a gun to your head... Do you understand these things I say?” Unsurprisingly, the young vixen slowly turned her head from side to side, but Koslov was delighted to see the first seeds of hope growing in her pretty little brown eyes. Her shivering had slowed, no doubt aided by the warmth of his heavy paw covering hers, but the vixen came from a people and a place that taught her to be wary of happy endings and handsome strangers, especially when they came uninvited into your life.

“I-I-I don't know what caviar tastes like... and I've only heard of champagne. A-Are they nice?” The innocent curiosity behind the vixen's question may have made Koslov subtract a few years from his already young estimate of the fox's true age, but it also warmed his frozen heart just a bit. *For once, the pig did not lie- she is a diamond in the rough.* Like a daughter that never expected her father to return home from the War, the vixen nuzzled gently against the back of Koslov's paw, clearly uncertain if his kindness was real, or just a happy delusion brought on by so many days at sea. It also made the polar bear's heart ache for children that he might never have.

Even kneeling as he was and smiling gently, the sight of the immense polar bear shrugging his broad shoulders made the young fox's eyes widen with a small hint of unspoken fear. “Caviar tastes exactly like what it is: fish eggs on toast. As for champagne, that is just grape juice pretending to be vodka. They are only as nice as the company you find yourself in; which is why I generally only enjoy them at weddings.” It was only after the vixen took a deep, calming breath that Koslov again took to his feet, walking the slow circle back around his desk to sit facing her. “Would you like to try them some day? I could be arrange it so you accompany to the next such event...”

The vixen sitting before him took one nervous look at the door her “agent” was impatiently waiting behind, before turning an inquisitive eye toward the gangster that still frightened her, despite his icy calm demeanor. “I didn't come to this country to make a living by lifting my tail for monsters like that pig and his friends. I can sing, I can serve drinks, I can do anything if you just show me how... Please, uncle Koslov, be kind: give me the chance to show you that I can be a good investment?”

“What is your name, my brave little fox?” This time, she didn't so much as flinch when the polar bear smiled, his predatory teeth on full display. Koslov opened a bottle of vodka older than she was, carefully pouring a fair dose of the potent, clear liquor into two crystal tumblers, one roughly fox-sized and the other bigger around than the vixen's skull. With one clawed finger, he pushed her glass to the edge of his desk, just out of the vixen's reach. His other colossal paw then wrapped around the larger glass, effortlessly squeezing until cracks streaked across the crystal's surface- and the terrifying implications of the gesture were not lost on his guest. *This “playtime” is a luxury you no longer have, little fish.* The gangster's smile disappeared like wild
flowers under the first snowfalls back home.

“Anastasia...” Koslov's thick accent drew out the word like he was addressing a member of the royal court, rather than a poor vixen so fresh off the boat that her winter coat practically shined under the florescent lights of his office. “Before you try to lie to me again, little fox, you should know that I was born about twenty miles up the road from the same crappy little villages that shove pretty vixens like you into that arms of 'talent scouts' like him.” The polar bear drank down the contents of his cracked glass in one gulp, unfazed by the tiny slivers of broken crystal that chased the expensive vodka down his throat. “They came to my village, too, looking for soldiers like my brothers and me to fight in the last days of their Great War., and we were even younger then than you are now...”

“So, 'little princess'... what's your real name?” The horrible truth of how easily her lies had fallen apart left the young vixen staring at her host in terrible fascination as the gangster set his battered glass right by her pristine one. Nobody came back from the Great Wars that ripped apart the Old World, nobody but battered old mammals and a few crippled youth, carrying the cauterized memories of the horrors they had seen- horrors that would chase them into an early grave, if they were lucky. And yet, before her sat an exception to the terrible rule: a survivor that had not only survived, but flourished, never returning home to survey the cannon's grim results, first hand.

“U-Ulyana... But they do call me Anna, sir!” Without even knowing it, the young vixen had drawn herself off of the couch and into a nearly perfect salute. She was too terrified to notice how out of place the odd gesture of respect seemed in a nightclub owner's office, but it at least brought back the polar bear's smile for a moment. Her paws trembled as he passed her her small glass, but the vixen had made it this far, crossing an ocean and dealing with the grubby paws of her agent going places they would never be welcome, so she had to see this meeting through to the end. She tried to down the entirety of the glass of vodka like her polar bear host had, but only managed to make herself cough violently about half way through, which made the massive polar bear smile far more openly at her continued discomfort.

“Well, my little 'Anna,' you have made me smile when I had almost forgotten how, so I am going to offer you one last chance. Tell me what you really want from your 'kind' uncle Koslov... or get the hell out of my office.” This time, when the vixen looked towards the door her 'agent' was waiting behind, there was nothing but hatred for the greasy little pig in the her eyes. But when she turned those bottomless brown eyes back to the gangster in the room, there was an odd mixture of hope and steel reflected in her gaze. Weighing her options, Anna took one deep breath and tried the one tactic that seemed to work with the intimidating gangster who held her life dangling from his claws: the unvarnished truth.

This time, when she spoke, there was no trace of fear in those bottomless brown eyes, “I want to be free from the likes of him, never to be touched like that again unless I'm the one doing the touching.” Koslov watched a revolted shudder pass over and through the vixen at the thought, but she soldiered on, determined as the stormy sea. “I want to be warm and safe, to sing for you, and anybody else who will listen! And I want to send dollars home to my family and have them get more than a few pennies from thieving middle-mammals like him!” And then the sea broke against the shore- Koslov's understanding smile never wavering as her exhaustion and fear robbed the young vixen of whatever reserves of conviction that she had left. This time, she drained the small crystal tumbler in her paw without so much as a trembling whisker. It's like looking in the mirror and seeing my own talk with the original Mr. Big all those years ago... “Please... Uncle Koslov, will you help me?”

“Cash and comfort come easily enough in this new city, but freedom? My dear, this we may have to work on together...” Koslov knew that it was cruel to make the young vixen wait after confessing to him her heart's desires, but she had no way of knowing that the door her 'agent' stood behind was both incredibly sound-proofed and locked to prevent the swine from interrupting her 'interview.' The
polar bear pretended to mull the idea over, weighing her future in his immense paws, as he opened up a small cabinet under the desk to reveal a small hot plate and a battered old frying pan. To add to her growing sense of confusion, he punched a small intercom button on his desk and asked the confused kitchen staff to send up sliced bread, sliced tomatoes, a head of lettuce, and something called “mayonnaise.”

“The club's jukebox is broken...” His cryptic answer only left more confusion for the vixen in its wake, but Anna held on to the tiniest sliver of her dwindling hope, “...If you can sing, we may not have to replace it, which would be expensive because I put someone's face through the glass when I caught him talking to the police...” Koslov let the full impact of his words sink in before continuing, watching as fresh tears of joy streaked down the vixen's cheeks. *What good is a story, if there is no happy ending?* “If you cannot sing, then maybe you wait tables? Is less glamorous, less profitable, and contact is longer... but you could start either here next week, if you wanted...”

“Yes!” Anna all but leapt across the desk, wrapping both of her arms around the polar bear's expansive chest, trying to hug the gangster with all of her strength. “Whatever you need me to do, I can do.” It proved a futile gesture when the polar bear stood up, taking the vixen with him up into the air, easily carrying her added weight with one careful paw placed chastely under her ample bottom as to not crush her tail in the process. The vixen's enthusiasm died somewhat when the polar bear put her back into her seat, however gently, and began the slow walk toward the door where her agent stood waiting. His smile was gone again, replaced by that same calculating look that had been on the polar bear's face when she first entered the room. She also noticed him making the conscious effort not to scrub clean the area where her silver fur had gotten all over his expensive wool sweater, but Koslov nodded his massive muzzle towards the pig behind the door when he caught Anna staring, confused.

“Go down and tell my young nephew, the bear behind the bar, that you are going to be joining our family as my guest for a few months while we get these things settled. He will then ask you for your drink order, and you will tell him the code word- Amaretto.” The gangster spoke with the flat certainty of his words being both heard and obeyed while the vixen was a guest under his roof, much less an employee of the family. “Any other answer, and you will wake up in the back of a squad car, headed right back to the docks. Is this crystal clear to you, my new little niece?” Koslov's clawed finger touched his massive skull just behind his ear and then rotated that clawed finger around to the other side of his massive muzzle, just to emphasize his final point with a terminal certainty. “This will also be the word that tells you if I was really the one to send a mammal to talk to you, so keep it secret and keep yourself safe. Speak to no one outside the family about what you see and hear here.”

“So the girl, did she -er- convince you to give her the job?” Inside the gangster's office, the boar was sweating bullets, suddenly understanding the subtle terror of being locked in the room with a massive polar bear with a reputation for violence and unpredictability. Like the vixen he 'represented' in this new city, the swine had pinned many of his hopes on her getting the job. Unfortunately, unlike Anna, he had not impressed the polar bear in the room with either his honesty or his native intelligence. Koslov's displeasure showed in every click of the polar bear's claws against the surface...
of his desk as his left paw rolled one knuckle against the other in one impatient little wave after
another. His right paw was busy, slowly laying out the bread and vegetables on plates that looked
ridiculously small next to the massive polar bear.

“When I went off to the Great Wars, they taught us to enjoy the small delicacies of life so far from
one's home.” Koslov watched the slow smile of understanding cross the boar's ugly face, revealing a
gaudy row of gold fillings as that smile widened. “Luxuries that would never have occurred to the
boy I was when I left home became commonplace, even enjoyable on the field of battle.” The little
swine even licked his chops, looking from the assorted vegetables and bread and back to the gangster
in confusion. ‘There are times, in this terribly 'civilised' little city that I miss the simple pleasures that
I found there…” The greasy little swine thinks he just won the lottery- poor deluded fool.

“Take this buffet for example, all the ingredients are here for a soldier's ration of my favorite war-
time treat, minus one.” Koslov stood beside the desk with a showman's flourish, turning on the small
little hot plate and placing the pan on the burner with the practiced air of a street magician about to
pull his buxom rabbit assistant out of his hat. “It just needs to heat up a little before we begin…” The
polar bear watched as the pig sitting opposite of him actually salivated, eyeing the assembled
vegetables with an appraising eye. *He's not smart enough to figure out what the missing ingredient
is, or to ask why I would ever need to pan fry the rest of this lot*

“Whatever you need, Mr. Koslov, sir- I can probably find it if you just give me a few minutes. I got
friends who can find you anything you need in this city, you just say the word!” Greed and terrified
cautions had battled briefly across the pig's greasy features, but greed had easily overpowered the
middle-mammal's sense of self-preservation. In a way, Koslov felt that he should pity the smaller
creature for his dire misunderstanding of the situation, but the vixen's words had burned out whatever
dim lights of compassion and sympathy that might still flicker in the gangster's frozen heart.

“Oh, I already had everything I needed the moment that you stepped back through that door, my dear
little swine. After all, you can't really make a BLT without a little **bacon**, now can you?” The smile
dropped from the greasy little pig’s muzzle quicker than supporters after a politician loses the race for
re-election. Now, his beady little eyes traveled from the polar bear standing so dreadfully close to
him to the door with its many locks and back again, his feeble mind making its last desperate
calculations. As if reading his thoughts, Koslov purred, “Oh, please... Please, do run- I haven't
chased down a greased pig since I was just a cub!”

“I just agreed to bring the girl here. That's what I do: I find the gullible ones overseas and I bring
them to the city. She never said anything about pissing off a damned polar bear!” In his desperation
to get away, the overwrought young pig reached for the closest possible weapon that he could find to
swing bodily at the immense predator, completely missing the lattice work of fine cracks that ran
through the heavy crystal tumbler in his sweaty hooves. It wasn't until Koslov's immense fist
enveloped both of his hooves and began to slowly squeeze that the magnitude of this mistake was
made apparent to the trembling boar. The crystal cup exploded into a shower of sharp glass inside his
hooves, as both the pig and the glass finally surrendered to the gangster's overwhelming advantage
when it came to brute strength. As the pig's scream dwindled down to a bloody, soul-crushing
whimper, Koslov brought his smiling muzzle mere inches from the swine's snout, close enough to
whisper.

“Nothing in Zootopia comes for free. Isn't that what you told the little girl you flung into my arms
like she was just another fish for the grill downstairs?” Koslov bodily drug the swine to look out over
the bar room below his office, the pig's trembling face smudging a long streak across the bullet-proof
glass that ran the entire length of the office's south wall. “One last chance, little piggy: one last
chance for you to get out of this office, out of this city, and never come back! Or, I can always get
back to making this a lunch meeting and- after I skipped breakfast this evening- I know which option
I'd prefer.” It didn't take the young swine very long to make his choice, which only confirmed Koslov's already low opinion of the mammal's intelligence.

“W-What do you w-want m-me to do... K-Koslov... S-sir?” Fresh tears trickled down the pig's greasy cheeks as the polar bear's vice-like grip tightened on the scruff of his neck, but he managed to keep from screaming out. That much made Koslov think that sparing the little runt's life wasn't a complete waste of potential bacon. Still, the polar bear had a role to play, as the Don's vengeful hand, and he would play it ruthlessly and efficiently to the very end. Besides, he had a sinking feeling deep down in his stomach about why the poor fool had been sent his way.

“Squeal for me, little piggy! Show me who hated you enough to put you into my path without so much as a warning. I promise you this: they do not have your best interests at heart and their suffering will make yours look like a cub's birthday party!” It was only in that last moment that Koslov's long claw brushed against the small listening device sown into the collar of the swine's jacket Hearing the device's barely audible squeak only confirmed his suspicions at the last possible second, as the swine in his grasp was only too happy to betray his employer for a chance to get away from the mad polar bear with his claws literally wrapped around the pig's throat.

“There- the cat sitting there with her freaky bear bodyguard! She's sitting right there by the end of the bar! She paid me to do it!” Koslov was already kicking himself for not noticing the snow leopardess sooner: she was even dressed to stand out from her arctic environment. The feline's ample hourglass figure was poured into a set of those desert camouflage “feaux” fatigues that fell in and out of fashion in Sahara Square every few years, but she wore them with the disdain of someone who had worn the real thing for many years. She wore her close cropped hair in a loose wave that cascaded down to cover her left eye, no doubt dyed purple in a failed effort to cover the subtle criss-cross of claw marks that crested her cheek, but it wasn't that long since she'd worn a military braid. He could still see the way the braid had once pressed down the ridge line just above her left ear, marking her as a former Old World infantryman. Like never forgets like, little girl.

Even as Koslov's eyes tried to focus on the large cat in question, seeing the snow leopard's gently rolling, silver and black coat for the first time, his eyes were torn to the immense brown bear sitting at her side. He'd never seen a non-polar bear quite so large, nor one with the thin white tufts of hair that stood out like stop lights among the long brown drag ways that dominated the rest of the substantial real estate that this strange bear occupied. In his own way, the bear was almost like a photo negative of the snow leopard with her overflowing pattern of spots, only the photo had been blown entirely out of proportion to the smaller feline. He had to stand 7 feet tall at just the shoulder, and could easily have stood four feet wide at his thinnest point. The murderous smile on the bear's battered maw reminded Koslov of his father's own gruesome visage for the first time in a dozen years, the very thought sending a cold shiver up the polar bear's spine.

But it wasn't the bear's immense size and bizarre coloration that drew the gangster's eye away from his prey, it was the immense, gold toothed bear skull that he had laid upon the bar when Koslov's nephew had started walking Anna out to his car. “You dare???” Even without the intercom in, Koslov's growl could be heard in the bar below. Just the sight of the familiar, macabre fetish sitting out in the open had the gangster's sharp teeth aching to tear into the interloper's fleshy neck, the little piglet in his fist all but forgotten in his sudden, blinding rage. That was when Koslov heard the transceiver sown into the pig's collar click on, followed by a female feline's voice utter the last words that he thought he would ever hear in the civilized city of Zootopia, “The King is dead; Long live the King...” Seconds later, the entire south wall of his office erupted into an unholy cloud of scorched glass and chemical fire, and the greasy little pig became the least of Koslov's problems.
2. B.~ Here's looking at you, kit...

((Timeline: Just after Midnight, The Night of the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: Caro Emerald, “The Lipstick On His Collar.” ]

{Scene: The Ice Sickle Bar and Grill, Downstairs.}

Koslov's nephew, Jacob was already polishing the bar downstairs when the tiny vixen came skipping downstairs from his uncle's office, a hopeful smile plastered to her pretty face. By itself, this sudden outburst of hope was unusual enough for the dimly-lit club, but the fact that she made a beeline for his part of the bar so close to closing time had the young polar bear puzzled. Most of the bar's traditional clientele preferred to sip their daily brews from the comfort of their shadowy tables at the corners of the room. Those who knew about either the young polar bear's parentage or his blood relation to the boss upstairs were usually only too happy to give Jacob a wide berth while they waited for their drinks.

But there she was, a vixen far too young to get past the bouncer outside a more reputable club, sitting at the far end of his bar like it was her new home away from home. The sight proved too tempting a mystery for the young polar bear to resist a little prying, despite his uncle's clear instructions to the contrary. “And what has you in such a good mood tonight, miss...?”

Well, that went about as smooth as a slip-and-slide on a gravel driveway. The young polar bear tried to imitate the suave saloon kings of his favorite detective films, but his casual barman's pitch fell several yards short of the mark: when it came to playing it smooth, the leading mammals of the old black and white days of cinema stood alone.

“Anast- I mean, Anna. My friends call me Anna.” The petite young vixen standing across the bar from Jacob looked like she hadn't eaten more than a morsel in days, but she'd walked right past the bowl of salted peanuts at the end of the bar with all the composure of a queen walking among the common folk. Then she drew closer to the young polar bear, like a conspirator in the park in some old spy film, trying desperately to not be overheard by the oblivious tourists passing them by. It wasn't until Jacob decided to play along, leaning his heavy frame on the polished surface of the bar, that he could smell the salty sea air that still clung to her winter coat. The dress that hung about her shoulders smelled more like moth balls, a stale relic most likely rescued from a thrift store, but as a young male living on a shoe-string budget, Jacob knew better than to turn his nose up at another mammal's thrift.

“And are we going to become friends tonight?” This time, the young polar bear managed to hide his growing curiosity under a thin layer of professional indifference- it wasn't smooth, but it was a vast improvement over his earlier fumble of the ice-breaker. Still, the look of barely subdued terror that crossed the vixen's eyes made Jacob reconsider his approach. *Yep, she just got done talking to uncle Koslov. Poor thing is still petrified around polar bears, you idiot- try not to give her a heart attack.* He was delighted when she actually took and daintily shook his outstretched paw of friendship.

“I certainly hope so, Mister...” The vixen jumped a little at the gentle heat of his paw on hers, but she still managed an optimistic smile at how gentle he was with her smaller paw. Her small paws felt chilly against Jacob's fur, but the chill never made it's way into her pretty brown eyes. It almost made Jacob feel a little guilty for prying into her business with his uncle, but he was now genuinely curious as to what circumstances had brought such a pretty face into such a gloomy place as the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill. The vixen looked young enough to still be worrying about kissing some young todd at...
her high school prom, not hanging around with gangsters like uncle Koslov and his 'associates.' But then again, it hadn't been too many years since the young polar bear had earned his high school diploma, either.

“No 'misters' here, just Jacob- but it's 'Yakob' whenever my uncle is around. He's kind of crazy about the Old World traditions that way. My dad's a bit more modern, so they butt heads over the whole thing. And everything else, come to think about it...” The young polar bear almost blushed under all that white fur, but he could already see what Koslov had liked about the young vixen. She had an innocent way about her, despite the tough front she was trying to put up, like the so-called “frails” in his old detective movies: an iron willed woman wrapped up in a pretty lace bow- it had a way of getting under your fur and not letting go. *Trouble with a capital “T”* this one. *Where was Phillip Meowrloewe when you needed him?* “So, what brings you here in such a good mood, Miss Anna?”

“Well, 'Yakob' your uncle says I am going to be joining your family for a few months while we sort some things out with my singing contract. 'Adopted,' that is the Zootopian word, no?” This time, Jacob was happy for the heavy white coloration to his fur- it kept the pretty young vixen from seeing the way that shock had all the blood draining away from his face. *Uncle Koslov was “adopting” another fox into the family? After the whole mess with Wilde and the skunk butt rug thing?!? The old bear must finally have snapped!* To Jacob's credit, the young polar bear's smile never wavered enough for her to see, but it took considerably more effort to keep his sharp teeth covered while he did it.

“Yes, I think that is the Zootopian word for it. 'Hired' might actually work, too. But are you sure you want to work here?” He extended one colossal paw to show her the dark corners of the room and the furtive animals who drank away their blues there, even at this time of night. In a room full of shady characters swimming in his uncle's longer, darker shadow, her smile stood out like a twinkling star in the endless black. “You know, these aren’t exactly the nicest of folks to work for, even on a good night...” That might have been the understatement of the night, but the smile Jacob saw on her face turned so sweetly patronizing that the young polar bear found himself at a loss for words. *She may look like an innocent school kit, but she's about the farthest thing from it, you dummy!* Then the vixen's smile dropped, as she saw something or some one reflected in the mirror behind the bar.

“I have... worked with worse...” The shrug that she flashed Jacob was supposed to come off as a gesture of casual confidence, but you didn't have to be a detective to see that the confidence didn't match the hurt look that passed behind her pretty brown eyes. “I believe that there was some mention of a drink?” The young polar bear desperately wanted to look over her shoulder to see who or what had so obviously rattled the young vixen, but she took his paw in hers, her claws gently raking over his skin in distracting little circles. *There's something- no someone- near the that broken down jukebox in the corner that she doesn't want me to see. Something dangerous enough for her to take my paw, begging me to what? Protect her? Get her out of the bar, maybe?* Jacob was many things, but a complete idiot was not among them. Something about the whole situation smelled bad, like fish cooking on the grill that somebody had forgotten until it was burnt to a sad, little crisp.

“That's right! What can I get for you, my new friend?” The young polar bear smiled on cue, playing the love-smitten fool that always showed up at just the right time to get himself offed in the movies, just another body left in the *femme fatale's* wake. *Philip Meowrloewe had it right: never trust a smiling damsels in distress!* His free paw subtly slipped behind his back, brushing the bear-sized tranquilizer pistol that was tucked into the small of his back- as much a part of his work uniform as the bartender's apron that he wore every night. Jacob had never felt so grateful for his uncle's paranoid sense of responsibility for the younger bear's safety. He'd never had to shoot a woman before, of any species, but Jacob hoped like hell that the young vixen wasn't about to become the young polar bear's first.
“Well, what I would really like is some... Amaretto.” The key word dropped of her lips soft as a whispered prayer, but the bartender's eyes rose in silent alarm. This time, there was no mistaking the shock and terror written all over Jacob's young face. *I know the old bear's getting nostalgic for the old days, but... that was Wilde's code word! Every handler on the don's payroll knows not to use that one!* Already, the vixen on the other side of the bar was trying to hold his shaking paw down to the bar's polished surface, desperately trying to mask the young polar bear's attempts to draw his paw back from hers in panic. “And Jacob- honey bear? I would *really* like to get that drink to go!”

The gentle brush of her claws against his skin cut through whatever armor Jacob may have been able to erect around his trembling heart. It forced the young polar bear to breathe in her scent, *(Lilacs? She smells of lilacs, forgotten summer winds, and cheery blossoms?)* to really see the terrified young vixen that was trying to save his life, even if it was merely a means of prolonging her own. As quickly as the panic had come, it faded away like music in the background when a diva begins to sing, replaced with the terrible certainty that whatever the vixen had gotten them both mixed up in was bigger than either of them could handle alone. He didn't miss the way that she'd subtly mixed up the way she said his name, or the gentle, seductive purr of her voice when she called him her “honey bear”... these were clues that even a clueless young cub could easily find- bread crumbs along the path. But the amateur detective in Jacob's heart knew that obvious clues usually ended up being the deadliest of signs. It didn't hurt that the shadow of whoever she was trying to keep him from seeing stretched halfway down the bar, even in this dim lighting. “Yeah, I can arrange that. Besides, I should have closed this bar down twenty minutes ago... Right, boys?”

As a chorus of disgruntled growls echoed from the corners of the room when he mentioned closing down the bar for the night, but Jacob merely whistled and pointed his thumb to the hand-painted sign that hung over the bar: “*Any complaints can be taken up with the Management. (But leave the name and phone # of your next of kin, first.*)*” It only took him a few heartbeats to gather his hat and coat, but even as he left the bartender's apron on the bar, Jacob was careful to keep his tranquilizer pistol concealed behind his back. Part of the young polar bear hoped that he wouldn't need to use it tonight, but the rest of him was just a few inches short of terrified that it wouldn't be enough when he did. *Get out the door, call the old man, get him to check on uncle Koslov, then get the girl somewhere safe, and hope I am just blowing things out of proportion. Again. “C'mon, sweetie, my car is parked right out front.”*

It didn't take a whole lot of convincing for the terrified vixen to accept Jacob's protective arm around her shoulder, but it did leave the young polar bear wondering if she knew about the gun hidden in his belt. *Sloppy detectives don't live long in this business, kid. But sometimes, trusting a dame is just one more mistake you've gotta' make.* Looking down into her genuinely grateful brown eyes was almost distracting enough that he didn't see the square military-style duffle bag that someone had rested against the bar by her stool. *Almost, but not quite.* Nor did he miss the fact that the bag came with the letters “M202” printed in faded letters on the side, or that the young feline sitting beside it wore actual combat boots- not some thrift store throw-backs like Anna's pumps. Jacob didn't recognize the numbers, but if he'd learned anything from watching old war movies, it was that the more innocent something sounded in military-ese, the more dangerous it usually ended up being for everybody involved. *So much for blowing things out of proportion. Must. Move. FASTER!*

The very second that the young polar bear heard the bar's heavy steel front door slam shut behind them, Jacob threw the young vixen over his shoulder and started the heavy jog back to his beat-up, old Cat-illac El Dorado. Dropping her unceremoniously in the back seat made the antique upholstery groan in complaint, but the young fox knew enough about the gravity of their current predicament to not cry out when he started digging with one massive in the glove compartment. *Please be okay, please be okay.* She just sat there, eyes wide as saucers when, instead of a weapon, the young polar bear pulled out a hidden radio receiver, already keying the “talk” button as he turned to look back to take one last look at the doors to the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill.
“T2 Dispatch, Precinct East...” The voice of the female moose on the other end of the radio started off in a staccato, unhurried squawk that carried poorly through the car's antique speakers, but Jacob knew that it wouldn't last. His father's idea of an “indiscreet” undercover vehicle left a lot to be desired, but it was nice to drive to drive around in a relic from the old days of private eyes and gangster dolls. “Wait a minute! Your RF ID tag isn't popping up in our records- who the hell is this?” If the moose was very lucky, she might only be put on suspension for stalling Jacob this long, but he doubted that his father would be even that forgiving. This was exactly the kind of worst case scenario that his dad had warned him about when he started working for the gangster, upstairs: If Koslov was trading in the military hardware, right under Mr. Big's nose, then his uncle had finally gotten tired of the entire Big family and had decided to take them off the map. And if he wasn't the one buying all that hardware, Jacob shuddered at the thought, then the whole city was about to go to war!

“Dispatch, I don't have time for twenty questions, right now. Get a hold of my father, Commander Andreyevich -yes, your boss.” Jacob was already buckling himself into the driver's seat and trying to crank the El Dorado's difficult ignition system back to life. “Drag him away from whatever or whoever he's doing and tell him that Jacob is in on the line and that we're all about to be knee deep in shit if he doesn't get to his brother's bar right now!” The car turned over about as willingly as a gangster goes to confession, but the young polar bear managed to coax it back to life by pushing the gas pedal all the way down to the floor. “Tell him that Jacob said the word 'Drawbridge!' You get that? DRAWBRIDGE!”

Jacob was still backing the El Dorado away from the front doors of the club when the first explosions rippled through the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill, cracking the building's concrete shell and warping the heavy steel doors that were supposed to keep the club safe. The shock wave from the second explosion a few seconds later tore the heavy steel doors from their moorings and hurled them across the small parking lot like an furious cub throwing his bath toys out of the tub. As one of the doors slammed into the El Dorado's engine block, Jacob was still shielding Anna in the back seat with one hand and desperately trying to steer with the other. Both proved to be futile gestures, as the antique vehicle flipped end over end, thrown back by the same blast that had all but destroyed his uncle's club.

Laying upside down on the pavement, it was only the fact that the old car's steel chassis absorbed most of the shock from the blast that kept its two occupants alive when their getaway vehicle tumbled to the edge of one of the nearby ice pools. Miraculously, the old radio receiver was still working when Jacob's father's voice came on the air, “Jacob, what the hell is going on down there?!? JACOB! Do you need me to send help?!?” Unfortunately, the upper body of the young polar bear behind the wheel had taken almost as much punishment as his vehicle, so Jacob was in no position to do much more than gurgle his response. But a gentle fox paw from the back seat wrapped around his much larger thumb and pressed down the “Talk” button on the receiver.

“I think you may want to send everything that you've got.” Anna's trembling voice matched the clumsy, shell-shocked way that she climbed between the seats to wrap the young polar bear's arm around her shoulders again. Under different circumstances, if the car had been right-side up, they might have been mistaken for two lovers out on a winter's drive, chasing the moonlight, but the warmth of her kind eyes on his still put a smile on Jacob's battered face. The drowsy, amateur detective-turned bartender in him pulled his fox femme fatale closer to his side and all that Jacob could think as the stars started to fade to black was, Philip Meowrlowe, eat your heart out.

* ~ * ~ *
The sound of sirens in the distance briefly pulled Jacob back to his senses, which was a tragedy unto itself. Every part of him above the seat belt line hurt—thick shards of antique windshield glass stood out from his fur like spikes on a cactus and smoke from the burning bar filled the young polar bear’s lungs, making him cough and shake. But the hardest part about waking up, was waking up alone. Weakly, his paw sought for the fox at his side, but it was in vain. Idiot! She heard the sirens, too. Girl's probably half-way back to the docks, by now, if she has any sense. Still, it hurt the young polar bear a lot deeper than he was willing to admit, the loss of her cool paws on his skin. He'd just been getting used to the way that their scents mingled, forming something new and all-together enticingly exotic when she was lying under his arm. Maybe I'm just getting woozy from inhaling all of this smoke, but a bear can dream, right? I could certainly think of worse ways to “check out” than with a pretty young girl in my paws.

He was still smiling foolishly at the thought when he saw those same combat boots come walking crisply through the fire. Following right behind her were two immense bear feet, with fur as brown as a chestnut tree, but speckled with strange white spots, and the sound of something heavy being dragged through the ice and snow of the parking lot. Jacob had never seen a dead body in person before, but he'd seen dozens on TV and in movies, and the limp way that the immense bear's burden flopped and twisted against the ground left him with little doubt that was what he was witnessing today. There was a gurgling noise, off and on, but he'd heard that dead body's do all sorts of weird things to mimic life. If only he could closer, Jacob thought he might be able to identify the poor polar bear that they'd dragged out of the bar...

“Oh dear! Is the 'mighty' Koslov still alive?” Despite the mocking tone of the bear's question, Jacob couldn't find it in his heart to hope against hope that his senses had lied to him. Not even uncle Koslov could have survived that explosion. Who the hell are you monsters to be mocking the dead?!? To his dismay, the young polar bear watched as the immense bear lifted the body effortlessly from the ground and turned toward the frozen lake, beyond. He was expecting the cat in the combat boots to run and hide from such a monster, like Anna had, but those boots all but danced around the body. There was no doubt in his mind that she'd done the right thing now: Running away seemed the smart play, even if he didn't get very far, for all his efforts. An despite the broiling hatred that he felt for this strange bear and his cat, he could not include the fair vixen in that hatred. She was just another moth caught up in this blazing inferno we called life.

Then he heard the feline speak, and Jacob had another reason to hate her, above all else. “Yes, my love, he certainly does. It would appear that old soldiers don't die so easily. Feed him to the cold waters; maybe they'll be kind enough to take him all the way home.” Then Jacob heard the soul-crushing sound of something heavy hitting the water, only to sink beneath its icy surface. The cat was still dancing, twirling a slow loop around the last bear left standing, “The King is dead; Long live the new King!” And just like his uncle, Jacob slipped back under the cold waters for a second time, put there by a woman he should never have trusted. Somehow, this whole thing “dying” hurts a lot more than it looks like it did in the movies.

Jacob's last thoughts turned back to Anna, as the lights dimmed, She smells of lilacs, the stormy sea... and hope. She calls me “Honey bear” when she's holding my paw. Mammals have lived for less...
2. C.~ Détente in the Dark...

((Timeline: 2AM, The Night of the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: Leonard Cohen, “Everybody Knows.”]

[Scene: Outside (what used to be) The Ice Sickle Bar and Grill.]

Seeing Mr. Big's entourage pile out of the gangster's limousine outside the smoldering ruins of one of his clubs was a terrifying sight, even to the seasoned officers of the Tundratown police department. Not a word was said as the six large polar bears in matching tuxedos stepped over the scene security tape that kept the gawking public away from the smoldering crime scene. Even the brave mammals from the Zootopian fire department's search and rescue teams cut a wide path around the grim messenger's of the Don's displeasure, carrying what few survivors from the fire who could be found to the ambulances parked outside the tape. They looked so much like pall bearers at a funeral that several of the more superstitious officers of the Tundratown ZPD crossed themselves at the entourage's determined march through the smoking husk that had once been the Ice Sickle's front door.

Inside the club's cracked concrete facade, where the bar had been half-eaten by the fire, sat the precinct's chief, Sergei Andreyevich- holding his son's bartender's apron in two immense paws and just barely resisting the urge to tear the rest of the bar into kindling with his bare paws. The immense polar bear who led the entourage sat down beside the Sergei with all the ceremonial deference as he would sink into a pew at church, while the other five turned their backs on the conversation with military precision, forming a private wall of formidable muscle around the chief, isolating the grieving father from the rest of his troops. The gesture was not lost on his men, who hurried about their inspection of the bar's smoldering remains at double time, with nobody saying a word outside the circle.

Inside the circle, the polar bear leading the entourage bowed his sympathetically toward Sergei, in recognition of his respect for the grieving father's predicament. Then he set two immense paws on the bar, only to reveal the dapper little arctic shrew, Mr. Big, himself, as he reverentially set down the head of Tundratown's criminal underworld onto the bar's polished surface and took his place behind the bar. The whole movement was so coolly professional that Sergei almost missed the warmth of the tiny shrew's consoling touch upon his clenched paws. For a mammal that was shorter than the police chief’s outstretched claws, there was surprisingly little fear in the Don's sympathetic paw as it rested comfortingly, on his, but Sergei's anger was not so easily dispelled, his paws still trembling whenever the grieving polar bear looked down at his son's apron. *You did this to him, old man. Nobody else.*

“Your son... the paramedics, they say that he will live, yes?” The shrew's heavy Old World accent did not disguise his genuine interest in the chief's answer, nor the did it hide the deep depth of paternal sympathy that the gangster felt for the polar bear's pain. He too had lost people that he had loved with every ounce of his tiny being, and would move the heavens, themselves to keep even his rival from feeling such pain, himself. Losing Francesca, Fru Fru's mother, had torn a hole right through the center of the gangster's heart, and he could well imagine the larger mammal's struggle with not being able to protect those that he loved. It was one of life's hardest lessons, and it came like a thief in the night to steal back all the joy that had once been yours, laying low even the bravest of souls. Sergei merely nodded, gruffly, but he did not pull his paw away from the Don's tiny, consoling touch.
“How long did you know that he was my son?” A thousand things were running through the polar bears mind right now- evidence collecting, shift details, his inevitable talk with the doctors about the damage to his son’s battered face- but for the life of him, Sergei couldn't focus on anything past the smoky scent of his son's apron and the strange way that it glistened in the moonlight that poured in from the holes where the cheap ceiling over the bar was already collapsing. All around him, officers who had been off-duty or on crowd control all night at the Gazelle concert were now pulling extra shifts, sifting through the mountains of debris, looking for survivors and some clue as to why this whole mess had to happen in the first place. There had to be easier ways than this to kill a mammal, even Koslov. Why did they have to get a good kid like Jacob caught up in the mix, too? The thought made his blood boil; he should have protected his kit from all of this carnage somehow, but Jacob was a good kid- he had wanted to help.

“From the beginning, of course...” Mr. Big nodded at the tuxedoed polar bear behind the bar, who pulled a bottle of expensive vodka from the bar's sole remaining top shelf and casually began to fill up two bear-sized glasses. “Your brother, Koslov and I, we had few secrets between us after all of these years. And young Yakov? He was a good kit; a job bar-tending seemed the least that we could do for such an enterprising young cub...” The arctic shrew merely shrugged off Sergei's questioning glance as he stepped between the waiting glasses upon the bar and back into the other polar bear's waiting paws. “Koslov was starting to miss his brother after all of these years, so why not hire his nephew? Besides, what harm can one more ZPD spy really do, when the Truce was still on?”

That last sentence brought the grieving polar bear's mind back from the precipice of sorrow, and fixed his thoughts on the terrible uncertainty of the future, “The Truce between your family and the ZPD... is it still on?” Most of the officers now on staff with the Tundratown ZPD were too young to remember the dark days before the ZPD and Mr. Big's grandfather had first sat down to hammer out their Truce, to work paw in paw to rid the city of the gunrunners and their assault weapons. The streets of the old city had run red with the blood of cops, criminals and civilians, alike and nobody- not even the mayor, himself- had been above the gunrunners' violent retribution. Sergei could still remember the sight of Mayor Lionheart's predecessor being carried off with two dozen smoking holes drilled through the rhino's thick frame. Such a war coming back to the city's streets was every older officer's nightmare.

“That depends entirely on you, Captain Andreyevich.” Mr. Big's small, unworried voice carried in the smokey darkness of the moonlit bar, never rising above the fatherly tone of a fireside chat, but the polar bear shivered as he listened, all the same. “Find your brother- my son!- Koslov, and bring him home to us. Then, find the mammals responsible for all of this carnage, and bring them to me. Find them both soon, or I will do it for you. And I promise... you will not like the severity of my methods!” Just as the tuxedoed polar bear was about to lift him past the chief of the Tundratown ZPD's eye line, Mr. Big held up a restraining paw, and all movement in their little circle stopped. Several of the polar bears on the Don's entourage even held their breaths, lest they interrupt the pair's conversation.

It was Sergei who broke the tense silence first, as the Don's patience seemed endless tonight, but it was clearly only a facade to cover the terrible things to come if the polar bear failed. “It will be hard to run a proper investigation here in Tundratown with all of the spies that you have inserted into my department... sir. I might have to farm some of the work out to officers from other districts- ones that I know that we can both rely upon to do the job right.” He expected the Don to balk at the proposal, to offer some kind of counter-offer that the grieving father could not refuse. That was Mr. Big's modus operandi- the way he usually did business, but these were far from ordinary times.

“You are right, of course, and I would be only too happy to put a name or two forward, myself, if it would help you during this difficult time, Sergei. You should have some satisfaction in this, as well...
for the injury done to your family as well as mine.” The gangster's face broke from its stoic demeanor, revealing one last time the deep sympathy that ran beneath. He too, had tried to be a father to the missing polar bear, Koslov, in his own way. His own regret made the old gangster breathe out a sigh of frustration, “Bring my son back to me, find out who has hurt both of our families tonight, and I will gladly provide you the name of every one of your officers that I have on my payroll. I will even release the family members of whichever of your officers finds me the ones responsible from their debts to me, no questions asked.”

If Sergei had been shocked by the Don’s small, sympathetic paw resting warmly upon his earlier in their conversation, the older polar bear was dumbstruck now. Such generosity was unheard of in the city's criminal underworld, much less between bitter rivals like the mob boss standing before him and the chief of police. They were likely talking about several- if not tens of- thousands of dollars in those same officers' gambling debts alone! Shaking his head as if waking from a dream, Sergei stared in open-mouthed confusion at the small arctic shrew who threw such a big shadow over the city. It has to be some kind of trick, but who am I to turn down such a magnanimous offer? Absentmindedly, Sergei had already picked up one of the glasses before him and drained half of its alcoholic contents in a single, surprised gulp. Ten years of the bear being back “on the wagon” died such an easy death.

Mr. Big merely shrugged, offhandedly, “I can always buy more cops. Your brother, Koslov? His kind of loyalty has always meant the world to my family and I want him back. Capisce?” Nearby, there were the first signs of a struggle between one of the larger bull elephants under Sergei's command and one of the younger polar bears that made up Mr. Big's entourage, but neither the mob boss, nor the police captain wanted to break eye contact just yet. They were so close to an unprecedented “meeting of the minds” that neither wanted to look away, lest their growing sense of professional and personal understanding crumble. “Yes, Sir.” Sergei said it and meant it this time, without reservation. Just how close had Koslov grown to the Don in all of these years? The Don was all about family, that was no secret, even all the way back at Precinct-East.

“Sir! I mean, Sirs!” The bull elephant was now being physically restrained by three of thee Don's entourage, but with a snap of his small fingers, Mr. Big had the polar bears part their “curtain” of privacy enough to allow the larger officer through. For his part, Sergei looked apologetically toward the Don, wondering what could be so important that his junior officer thought that now would be the right time to interrupt the conversation of two of Tundratown's most influential mammals.

“Sirs,” the elated elephant was positively bubbling over with excitement, a rare sight amongst this dreary gathering of cops and criminals, “They're pulling another survivor from the river- a polar bear, this time!” Sergei shrugged his massive shoulders, trained by many years of serving the public not to get his hopes up, and looked at Mr. Big, confused the hopeful gleam that was growing in the arctic shrew's beady little eyes. Koslov had to have a half-dozen polar bears working for him in the kitchens, alone- with easily another dozen or two mixed in among the bar's regular patrons. The odds were still not in his brother's favor, so why was the Don positively aglow with this sudden infusion of hope? “The paramedics say that they've never seen a polar bear this large or had this much trouble sedating one!”

And just like that, Sergei's world did a somersault: surely even an ornery, old infantry-mammal like Koslov could not have survived both the fire and the freezing chill of the nearby river, could he? This time, the police chief gave the order, before charging through the crowd, with the Don and his entourage silently following in the polar bear's frantic wake. “Everybody move!”
Even before setting his hind paws out into the frozen parking lot, Sergei could tell that something had gone horribly, horribly wrong. A feral growl split the early morning silence, as one burly winter wolf in ZPD blues went sailing through the air, only to collide viscerally with the armored side of one of the ambulances. His partner, a petite female lynx looked ridiculously small as she held onto the rampaging polar bear's thick neck for dear life, her metallic baton wedged firmly between his gnashing teeth. Nearby, a terrified elk paramedic was trying to jab a third thick needle full of sedative into the rampaging bear, but he couldn't get a clear shot at the polar bear's exposed backside with the feline riding him like a twister of blue on white. Sergei had to look twice at the carnage that surrounded the brave lynx and the savage polar bear to clear the disbelief from his eyes. That was Koslov, try as he might to deny kinship with the stampeding terror standing over a half dozen unconscious bodies in blue- but even Sergei had never seen his brother acting so... savage!

Beside him, Sergei heard the Don's entourage gasp as the same surprise rolled through them. Only the arctic shrew looked unfazed by the chaos rolling through the bar's parking lot. His beady little eyes measured the situation in an appraising way, like he was looking at a real estate portfolio and deciding whether to invest, and deciding it just wasn't worth the risk in the end, “How could one little flower cause so much misery?” Then Mr. Big gave a small, disapproving shake of his head. “Chief- Sergei, if I might offer you a little advice? Those fancy, new tranquilizer pistols that your officers use don't seem to be very effective, perhaps it's time for my boys to step in with something a little more... potent? I promise that we will try to preserve as much of him if we can.”

Dumbfounded, the polar bear found himself at a complete lack for words, watching as his last standing officer was thrown screaming into the icy water that had almost claimed his brother's battered body. Those are my officers- men and women whose lives depend on me- but that... that is no longer the bear I knew and loved. Somewhere deep inside him, some civilized part of him just broke, and suddenly the one growling his head off wasn't Koslov any more, but Sergei, as the chief of Tundratown's ZPD barreled towards his brother at a full tilt. Forgive me, my brother. With all the strength that the officer could muster, Sergei wrapped two massive paws around his brother's waist and spun him around until the top of the raging bear's head collided with the frozen concrete at their feet with a bone-jarring crunch.

For a full second, nobody dared move or breathe, they were all so terrified that Sergei might have just snapped his brother's back – including the polar bear, himself. Then they saw the naked bear's foot tremble and relax, as the Don's right hand bear let out an exhausted sigh, slowly collapsing into his brother's arms with a sleepy grimace on his face. For just a moment, he reminded Sergei of nothing more than his son, Jacob as a sullen baby, protesting to all who would listen that he just didn't feel tired, even as he swayed back and forth under the growing weight of two drooping eyelids. “Sleep, little one, and maybe when you wake, we'll have hot cocoa by the fireplace, yes?” Fresh tears streaked down his muzzle at the memory, but Sergei held his brother tightly to his chest, brushing the blood from his furry face, with a brother's gentle paw.

“Can't sleep yet, Papa... Have to find Wilde... Get that fox... In terrible... dangrrrrrr...” And just like that, the strongest bear the Don had ever met, started bawling in the parking lot of his brother's burned down bar, holding a gangster to his chest as the paramedics did their work. If anybody asked, it was the smoke getting into Mr. Big's eyes that made them water so, but he doubted that anybody was paying an old mob boss much attention, given the circumstances. Mr. Manchas was already bringing the limousine around- he and his other sons would take Koslov to the hospital to be with the bear's nephew, and Mr. Big doubted very much that anyone would argue if he held the grief-stricken police chief's paw the whole way there.
3. A.- The Green Eyed Monster

((Timeline: Midday, day after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that inspired this scene: “Dark Times” by The Weeknd.]

[Scene: Back outside of the automated car-wash. Nocturnal District]

“Ohhhhh, Nick…” If Judy thought that their first (sober) kiss was amazing, the second and third ones blew her little bunny mind. Even in the suddenly cramped confines of her new police cruiser, Nick had a way of bending his long, supple neck to work around their differences in height that kept her guessing which way his lips might wander after her fox planted another deliciously warm kiss on her lips. Now, she had lost count somewhere around their twentieth kiss, when his claws had begun gently tracing the sensitive rims of her long ears. Her soft, completely unexpected squeak at his subtle invasion of a bunny's second most intimate space had only emboldened the fox to explore that sensitive spot with two careful, but curiously strong paws, massaging her inner ear with his thumbs while his fingers caressed the outer, furry layer of her ears with delicious, slow passes of his clawed paws.

“Don't... stop...” The sensual, excited purr that rippled through Judy's all-too-willing lips had her foot thumping excitedly on the cruiser floor... and her partner stopping everything to look at her with those two perfect, emerald eyes. No, they weren't perfectly green anymore- the change had happened so gradually that Judy had almost missed it- the eyes that looked so hungrily into her own had flecks of gold in them, like stars fixed in a strange, green sky. As she watched the confusion war with something far less civilized in her partner's hungry eyes, Judy was amazed to see fresh, new stars slowly filling that green space with the fox's every labored, lusty breath. Pretty. Alarming. Alarming pretty when he looks at me like this. What's one more mystery among so many others, my sweet fox?

“You might want to clarify that last one, there, Officer Hopps. Inquiring minds want to know... should I stop or should I keep going?” Judy was still staring into his beautiful green-gold eyes when she felt her fox's warm paw drifting down to caress her cheek, his thumb running a short circuit between the base of her sensitive ears down to her soft lips. She must have come out of her lover’s fog a bit too slowly, because she saw the worried return to her partner's face when his thumb brushed over the small claw marks on her left cheek. She'd managed to keep that scar hidden from the world for years, but Nick had stumbled upon her secret in less than ten minutes of heavy petting. Oh, no no! He's going to think it's his fault somehow, and pull away again. “Nick, it's not what you think...”

She had expected him to pull away from her, but Nick placed two soft kisses over the old injury, whispering something so soft and sweet that even her ultra-sensitive rabbit ears didn't pick it up. Never. Again. Then she saw something in Nick's eyes that scared the brave little rabbit a little: the little gold flecks circling his deep green eyes were now solid streaks of gold that pulsed in time with her fox's heavy breathing as Nick fought to control his growing temper. “Somebody hurt you when you were younger, hurt you so deeply that you've hidden this from all of us... even from me...” With every word, Judy felt a little bit more of the warmth sucked out of the room, felt something savage and coppery invade his scent as it washed over her in cold, almost suffocating waves.

“Tell me his name?” Her fox wasn't angry with her, just the opposite: Nick was beyond angry with whoever had hurt his friend, his partner... maybe, even his mate? The happy thought snuck up on Judy as her mind raced with conflicting emotions, swimming between the second-hand terror of what might happen should Nick ever meet Gideon Gray in person, and -to her utter mortification- the dark delight of seeing her fox already being so consumed by his need to protect her. The combination was
as detrimental to her self-control as it had been to his, but the response it evoked deep down inside Judy had nothing to do with her urge to fight or take flight. What should have terrified her instead felt absolutely thrilling, like when Nick stopped kissing the doe just long enough to nibble on her bottom lip with those delightfully sharp fangs of his.

“Not gonna happen, Slick. It was a long time ago, when we were just kids, and he's really turned over a new leaf since then.” Her paw found the button to automatically roll down the cruiser's windows and started the less than subtle process of letting a little fresh air into the vehicle, “So, let's just take a nice, deep breath and calm back down, okay?” The more worked up Nick got, the deeper that coppery tang invaded his normally sweet scent, and it told Judy that there was definitely something wrong with her fox, today. Something had put the fox in her life on edge today, and Judy was beginning to suspect it might just be her. Then she remembered his earlier jokes about this being an especially hard time of year for a young fox and the last puzzle piece slid firmly into place.

“Nick, how close are we to the foxes' mating season?” Inwardly, Judy kicked herself for not paying more attention in her cross species culture classes as a young doe- not that it would have helped much. Her teachers didn't go into much detail on Canines, in general, but foxes were almost enigmatic in their refusal to share anything but the most rudimentary facts about this entirely private side of their life as a species. Even now, she felt Nick pull away from her at the question, but he didn't try to escape the cruiser, entirely, so Judy figured that they'd at least made a little headway in the Trust part of their burgeoning relationship.

“Slowly, painfully slowly, he's deciding whether he can trust me. I don't blame him, after seeing how shamefully foxes are treated, even by the ZPD. C'mon partner, you can trust me.

“We've been 'in-season' for the last two weeks, Carrots. But 'the Strut,' the high water mark of our mating season won't be upon us for another couple of days. After that, all bets are off.” She could tell that there were entire encyclopedias full of details that Nick wasn't ready to share about his people and their secrets, but it touched the doe's heart that Nick was still willing to share something so obviously private with her. The trouble was, Judy's curiosity was already peaked, and it had a way of running off with all of her good sense when it came to “investigating” a walking mystery like her new partner. Next to her curiosity about what it would be like to some day kiss her fox, the urge to 'peek' behind the carefully constructed mask that her fox hid behind every day was the single most driving desire in her heart since she'd graduated a valedictorian of the ZPD Academy and joined Chief Bogo's cadre of elite officers in the City Center District.

Unfortunately, her enthusiasm often got her into more trouble than she'd ever bargained for, and today was proving to be no exception to the rule. “C'mon, Slick, there is no way that a handsome todd like you has been walking around all 'lonesome' for the last two weeks smack dab in the middle of mating season!” Judy saw the nervous smile slip from Nick's face and it took away any shred of joyful teasing from her own. She'd never imagined just how alone Nick must have felt, even as the former con-mammal who knew 'everybody' in the city- when nobody seemed to know him, in return. Judy could still feel the claw marks in his headboard, still feel the weight of that chain in her paws.

“You promise to keep my secrets, Carrots? Even the really ugly ones?” The painfully shy look that crossed over her fox's face made the doe's heart ache for Nick, but there was something as jagged as broken glass mixed up behind those seemingly innocent words. Somebody used his trust before, used him to hurt somebody else, maybe even hurt him... Oh Nick, my dear, sweet fox, what did they do to you? Judy pulled his larger paw into her lap with one soft paw, the other slowly rising to cup his handsome muzzle, each stroking gently, reassuringly, even as her heart broke at the wounded look in his eyes. “It's been years since I went to a proper Strut, much less trusted somebody enough to bring them home... Not until you, Judy.”
“Oh, Nick...” The naked way that her fox stared into Judy's eyes had nothing and everything to do with sex, all at the same time, and it broke her heart thinking of how she had ever feared her fox, not when she had so much power to hurt him, even accidentally. *It all comes down to trust, in the end, and what you do with that trust.* Nick might be able to turn her into a proper puddle of hormonal little bunny with the touch of his clawed paw upon her long, sensitive ears or by kissing her neck with those wickedly talented lips of his, but Judy could break his fragile trust in her- in them- with just a careless word. “We'll go slow as you want, partner... Nick- you’re worth the wait.”

Five little words and Nick's handsome face lit up like a kit at Christmas. Judy's fox pulled her into his lap to kiss the doe's face over and over again, with lips as soft as a butterfly's wings. It was six kinds of terrifying to have that kind of power over another mammal, and Judy was quietly praying that she was up to the task of earning that profound a level of trust. It was also intoxicating to find somebody who already seemed so devoted to standing by her side, through all the Bellwethers and the Bogos that the world wanted to throw into Judy's way. “Fluff, you have no idea how good it feels to hear somebody -especially you- say that!”

Nick let out a soft, contented little sigh that ruffled her fur with his hot breath, but Judy's mind was miles away. In his eagerness to pull her into his lap, Nick had forgotten that there were animals who could see them, even in the nocturnal district, even at this hour of the afternoon. She watched them as they walked by, predator and prey, alike, pretending to mind their own business. It was the unwritten rule of the Nocturnal district, she supposed, that nobody ever saw anything, but everybody knew everything that went unspoken. It was the reason that the ZPD had such difficulty patrolling the Nocturnal district, even though it sat back to back with Bogo and the Central Precinct's most dedicated officers- officers like her. Of course, it was also the reason that criminals like Mr. Big, (and even ex-criminals like her beloved fox) found such an easy home, here. Here, at least, was one spot in all of Zootopia where an illicit affair between a predator and a prey might go – well, not unnoticed- but at least ignored by their neighbors. The idea of living here with Nick was slowly growing on her, the more that Judy felt the “savage” way that her fox needed her. *One big talk at a time, Judy. Nick's still a little raw right now- and you are not scaring him away!*

That's when she felt one of those dexterous fox paws slip down the small of her back to rest provocatively on her fluffy little tail. *Why do they always go for the bunny's tail? Why do predators always obsess about my tail?* She remembered how over-joyed Nick had been to touch a sheep's wool when they went to see Bellwether at city hall, and just shook her head in disbelief at the boyish way Nick had reacted to the sheep's soft wool. Surely this had to fall in the same category of soft things that Nick just couldn’t resist touching? *What are you up to, Nick?* Then Judy felt Nick's claws find purchase on the very sensitive fur there at the base of her spine, and all thoughts of the former assistant-mayor-turned-criminal-mastermind melted out her ear, along with the rest of Judy's lust addled brain. *Oh sweet cheese and crackers! So, that is what the claws are good for?!? Good to know...*

“Sorry, Fluff. Just couldn't help myself...” Judy hated that the removal of his claws from her delicate skin made the doe whimper like a lovesick kit, but there was absolutely no denying the pleading note in her voice when Nick pulled his deft digits away from her soft tail. Nor could she deny the fact that the sweet scents in the car were no longer entirely coming from her fox, if the gentle squish of her thighs on his was any indication. That fox was *way* too good with his hands to be an innocent bystander in all of this, but she could no longer think of herself as an unwilling partner to his crimes. “Judy, did I hurt...”

“Nicholas Wilde, if the next words out of your mouth are ’did you hurt me?’ then I swear that I will throw you into the backseat and leave you locked in there until nightfall!” Judy had to put her hind paw down on this or her fox -and Nick was definitely becoming her fox, if Judy had anything to say about it- would be second-guessing himself all night. “Listen, Nick... I will *tell* you if you ever hurt
me.” Her fingers wrapped around the back of her partner's neck pulling him closer, so that she could look her fox right in the eye. “But, partner, I know you well enough to tell you that you would never willingly hurt me. So build a bridge and get over it, Slick. I'm not letting you beat yourself up over this, any more.”

Even as her little pep talk was working its way through the former con-mammal's thick skull, Judy traced the fine latticework of old scars that ran just under Nick's thick neck fur, her nose trembling at the coppery tang of old wounds and fresh blood that she found there. “Which reminds me, Slick…” Nick's anger comes at a cost, Judy. Take care of him, and he'll take care of you... Part of her already knew what the chain around his bedpost was for, even if the idea scared her: Nick trusted himself least of all. She didn't need to know why or even guess at what lead him down such a dark path, but the brave little bunny in her would be darned if he was going to walk that path alone, anymore. “You need to sleep -and I need a shower- before whatever super-secret mission you and Bogo have cooked up for us tonight!”

“Oh it's not much of a secret, Fluff.” Nick was already diving back behind his con-mammal, “nothing gets to me” mask, but he did spare the bunny in his life one last, serious look, Something in Judy's stomach flipped over like pancakes on the grill, looking at the compassionate, worried look in her partner's eyes. Why was he so worried about telling me this earlier? Finally, her fox disappeared behind one of Nick's trademarked shoulder shrugs while straightening his tie, a smug gesture that usually comforted her and infuriated the bunny in equal measure. Today, it just got on her last nerve, but the worried look that still hung in his eyes told her this was a bigger deal for her fox than he was letting on, “We're just going to pay Dawn Bellwether a little midnight visit.”

And just like that, they were back in the evidence room, dancing nearly naked, her cheek to Nick's chest. She was trembling from her ears all the way down to her feet at the thought of being locked into a tiny room with the former mayor and current criminal mastermind that had almost killed both her and Nick in the Natural History Museum. Nick was scared too, even if he thought he could hide the terror in his eyes from the bunny who knew him best. She could still hear her partner trying to give a suddenly very sober bunny a little pep talk of his own, “Carrots, you gotta listen to me... tomorrow might be a lot rougher than you're expecting, but you'll get us through it. You always do, Fluff.” Sweet cheese and crackers, she didn't believe his kind words any more on the second round than she did hearing them the first time... but for Nick, -her sweet, damaged fox- Judy could pretend to be brave one more time. This time, when she kissed him, it was Judy holding onto her fox for dear life.

* ~ * ~ *

Dropping Nick off outside his apartment-alone- had been one of the hardest decisions that Judy had ever had to make. She wanted desperately to follow him up that long flight of stairs, to physically make sure that her fox would go to bed and sleep like he deserved to, but part of the doe needed to take a moment to herself. Sure, there was a wicked little voice in her blood that wanted to wear them both out, physically, but Judy needed a moment to recharge her rapidly dwindling supply of self-control if she was going to face a monster in sheep's clothing like Bellwether, tonight.

Judy had never told Nick, or even Chief Bogo, but she'd had nightmares every night for weeks after their “savage”little performance in the Natural History Museum. Not that Nick would have gone truly savage and tried to hurt her, but that one of Bellwether's burly ram henchmen would have found her in some dark alley and beaten the poor police woman like a pinata. It wasn't until most of
those henchmen were sharing cells in the same prison as Bellwether that Judy had taken her first easy
breath in months. And now, we're going on a little field trip to pay the queen of those monsters a little
unofficial visit. What could ever go wrong with locking yourself in a small, confined space with a
monster like that?

Judy just had to hope that Nick and Chief Bogo knew what they were doing. After all, this was
Zootopia- monsters didn't just jump out at you from the shadows on a nice, sunny day like this! Judy
let herself smile a small, self-confident smile as she walked up the small steps to the front of her
apartment building. Things are finally looking up for me and Nick! And then she felt the weight of a
heavy bear paw coming out of the shadows behind her to rest on the poor doe's shoulder. “Judy!
Officer Hopps, can we talk for a moment?” It was all the poor bunny could do not to scream and go
for the small tranquilizer pistol in the holster on her hip.

And today was finally starting to go so well...
((Timeline: Mid-afternoon, day after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that inspired this scene: “Whose Side Are You On?” by Ruelle.]

{Scene: The steps outside of Judy's apartment building, then the diner across the street}

Judy's paws wrapped around the heavy white paw resting on her shoulder and twisted, rolling forward into a cruel arc, but she knew that things were not going to go her way when the bear simply lifted the bunny off her feet with a resigned sigh. “At ease, farm girl. Or have you forgotten who taught you that little maneuver?” Ears drooping in sudden realization, Zootopia's first bunny cop could barely hide her embarrassment when Judy turned to look into the face of her favorite instructor with a sheepish grin. This new “romantic” thing with Nick must have really spun her brain around in circles if she couldn't hear a six foot tall polar bear standing right behind her. Then again, as Judy had found out in the advanced paw-to-paw combat drills, the ruthless Major Friedkin could be disturbingly light on her feet when she wanted to.

“Lyudmila?” Judy stared up into the Major's scowling face for a moment before remembering her manners, “I meant ‘Major’... NO! I meant to say Lucy! What brings you to the city today... Lucy?” It took every bit of the rabbit's ZPD training not to hide her furiously blushing face behind her ears like a kit caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Judy knew that the ZPD’s most feared polar bear instructor was sensitive about her first name, which was why it remained a secret to most of the cadets, even to this day. The only reason that Judy knew her secret was that she had been tasked with helping deliver the mail to the various teachers at the Academy for a few days after a rather nasty fall from the rain forest obstacle course had pulled one of the rabbit's hamstrings the week after midterms. The humbling injury had given the poor rabbit a new perspective on the much-feared instructor and Major Friedkin had gone out of her way to look out after the brave little rabbit ever since.

Major Friedkin chuckled maternally as she set the bunny's feet back onto the ground, but she made a point of emphasizing the fact that she- at least- could still remember what names to call her friend and former student when they were in public together, “Well, Judy, I thought it was high time I paid my favorite little bunny a visit to see how the valedictorian is getting along with her new partner, a certain rambunctious young fox?” Now, Judy had an all-together new reason to blush, but she hid it behind a deep, long-suffering groan. Truth is, we'll be getting along just fine, if I can keep his hot little paws off of my tail for a few more days. At least Major Friedkin found Judy's melodramatic little act amusing, and her booming laughter was a rare reward all unto itself for the exhausted little rabbit.

“Oh sweet cheese and crackers...” Judy's paw covered her eyes just enough for her to look up - mortified- between her fingers at the bemused bear, “Just how bad was Nick when he was at the Academy?” This only drew another full bellied laugh from the polar bear as she drew the anxious rabbit to her side, but this time, the detective in Judy heard it: there was a forced note in the Major's laughter this time- her question had snagged on some secret that Major Friedkin wanted brushed under the rug. And Judy would bet her badge that half-spoken “secret” had Nick's name written all over it.

“Oh, I think he left a few of the columns still standing, hun, have no fear!” Ribbing the rabbit gently
with her furry elbow, the Major tried valiantly to keep up the act, but it fell flat on Judy's sensitive ears. Major Friedkin was a bear of many talents- but keeping a poker face under cross examination would never be chief among them. Judy had spent too many nights watching cheesy movies with a genuine, (albeit reformed) con-mammal to fall for a cheap imitation, even from a woman that she genuinely looked up to as a friend and mentor. Ever since their run-in with Bellwether, where Judy had almost unwittingly handed the suitcase full of evidence against Doug Ramses over to the mastermind behind his city-wide rampage, the young doe had been working on reading the secret “tells” that each mammal gives off when they are lying, and the Major had more than a few. The big polar bear's smile didn't match up the the worrisome bags that hung around her eyes, or the way that her normally robust fur had begun to lose its healthy sheen. That kind of weight loss only came when somebody was either not sleeping, or eating regularly- but why would such a normally healthy polar bear suddenly quit eating or sleeping?

It hurt Judy's heart to catch her former mentor and current idol caught up in such obvious turmoil, almost as much as watching the polar bear struggle with herself made her feel sorry for the normally out-spoken Major. “Major- Lucy, you know that you can tell me anything... right? This isn't really just a social call... is it?” Apparently the answer to that question was going to have to wait until after the bear in question scented the air, tracing the sweet smell of baking pies to the diner across the street. With her sensitive ears pressed tightly to the Major's side, Judy had no trouble hearing Major Friedkin's stomach starting to rumble, impatiently. Judy had never seen the female polar bear so clearly torn about whether to speak her mind. In the end, the Major's grumbling stomach cast the tie-breaking vote.

“C'mon, farm girl! I think that kind of question would go a lot better with a few slices of pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on the side, don't you?”

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By the time the Major was digging into her second helping of pie, Judy's worn out nerves were on the verge of collapse, but the polar bear held out one restraining finger until the cute caribou waitress was back out of earshot. “Blame your mother, Bonnie- she's the one who got me hooked on strawberry rhubarb pie the week after you graduated. The confusing bit is that I can't seem to find one half as sweet inside the city though...” Judy's smile returned at the mention of the Hopps family matriarch, despite herself. She should have guessed that her mother would take advantage of the Major's sweet tooth, but using Gideon Gray's legendary pies was just playing dirty. No doubt, her father was already plying the Academy stewards with offers of “farm fresh produce for less than you spend going to the grocery store.” Word had it that the only sales pitch that her dad had practiced more was when he had asked Bonnie's father for his blessing on their impending marriage.

“Tell you a little secret, Lucy?” Judy reached out a comforting paw to touch the Major's free hand, “Most bakers use a lot of sugar to cover up the rhubarb's sour bite, but Gideon Grey prides himself on using only fresh honey. He also picks out fresh ingredients from my family's farm every other day. That way, everything stays tart, healthy, and sweeter than anything you'd find in the city.” Judy shrugged, but it was clear that she was quite proud of her family and wanted to help them prosper, if she could. More importantly, sharing even such a simple secret meant that Judy considered the Major to be a trusted friend, almost family, herself. It wasn't exactly fair for Judy to leverage that friendship at a time like this, but she honestly wanted to help the conflicted bear unload her troubles.

“Clever bunny...” Major Friedkin took her outstretched paw for a moment, accepting the comfort that
she found there. Then the Major pushed her plate of pie *a la mode* aside, straightened her back with a vertebra-popping crack, and looked down at the bunny opposite her with a critical eye, clearly making her mind up as how she was going to proceed through a thorny private dilemma. “I can already see that Wilde's been a corrupting influence on you...” The polar bear's smile was oddly maternal when she talked about her favorite foxy class clown. “But we're still going to go through this by the numbers. That okay with you, Officer Hopps?” There's the no-nonsense bear that all the cadets grew to love and fear at 5am- all she needs now is a bucket of ice water to wake the late sleepers!

“Yes, ma'am!” Judy's mood did such an abrupt upturn at seeing the Major acting like her old self again that the rabbit's foot almost started thumping against the diner floor. Only her relative lack of height and the fact that they were sitting in a bear sized booth saved Judy from further embarrassment of looking like a hyperactive kit getting to try on “big bunny” clothes for the first time. *Peas and carrots, Judy- you're going to have to switch to decaffeinated carrot juice if this keeps up!* Her heart was already racing with both the pleasure of finding out more about her fox's time at the Academy and the fearful suspicion that Lucy's visit didn't bode well for her favorite fox. 

“Question one: Officer Hopps, did you -at any time- have private communication with Cadet Wilde while he was a student at the Academy?” The polar bear's voice turned so cold and professional that Judy felt like her extended paw of friendship might come back with frostbite, but there was a kindness in the Major's eyes that carried her through the initial shock. There was no animosity between the two women, so why was Major Friedkin distancing herself from her favorite bunny graduate? The answer came to Judy just as suddenly as the realization had earlier today that she and Nick were going to be far more than just partners or friends... *She's trying to protect Nick from something, even though the rules say she should punish him for whatever he stands accused of doing. But what could he have done two weeks after graduation- and why does she want to help him so badly that she's losing sleep and not eating right?*

“No, ma'am. I know that cadets are not permitted contact with friends or family, unless there's a dire medical emergency.” Judy picked her words very carefully, closing off the deep well of sympathy she felt for the fox being so far from home, so completely alone. *I desperately wanted to call him, send a letter, anything to tell him that all the brutal physical training, all the soul-crushing hours spent studying in the library when your eyelids weighed a ton each- it would all be worth it come Graduation Day. "Chief Bogo said it had something to do with keeping the 'playing field' level between the first timers and the 'legacy' cadets, whose families have had multiple generations graduate into the ZPD...”*

“You don't believe Bogo?” The polar bear's words cut deeply to the heart of the matter. Did she trust that the Chief had her back, and that of every other officer under his command? Most days, Judy wouldn't hesitate to answer loudly in the affirmative, but the cadets weren't cops yet- and she didn't know just how far the cape buffalo's dedication went for those who had yet to graduate. The bunny wanted to believe that he would try to shield troubled cadets like Wilde, but very few mammals got to know the stoic buffalo well enough to know for sure.

“No, I don't believe the company line.” Judy folded her hands in silent frustration. She needed a shower, but what she really wanted was time to mentally regroup before matching wits with her former instructor. It didn't help that the wolf couple sitting in the booth across from them took one whiff of agitated bunny and then asked to be seated as far away from her as they could. “With all due respect, Major, the math just doesn't add up: for the first timers to be on even footing with the legacy cadets, they'd have to have a cop in the family who molded them in the ZPD’s image from the moment they could walk and talk. Anything else just feels like you're punishing the already-isolated 'first timers' for being born into the wrong family...”
“Okay, at ease, farm girl. Nobody’s on trial here.” Yet. “Question two: Did you—or anybody that you know—provide advance access to the final exam materials to Nicholas Wilde or any other cadet?” Judy’s long ears shot up in alarm, even as the doe felt seething anger begin to boil inside her stomach. They think he CHEATED to graduate? They think I had to help him? Just how stupid, how blind, how absolutely IGNORANT can you mammals be?! Judy crossed her arms over her modest chest, completely unwilling to meet the polar bear’s apologetic gaze. “Hopp... Judy, I’m sorry, but I have to ask the questions so we can get your denial on record. I don’t really think Wilde...” They may just be procedural questions for the Major, but they were a slap in the face to everything that Judy had accomplished since coming to Zootopia. They want to find something, ANYTHING they can use to screw up Nick's entrance into the ZPD- but why are they so desperate? Is it because he's a fox- or is there something else going on here?

“Fine.” Judy squared her shoulders and stared hard into the Major's eyes. Judy hated being so cold to her former mentor, but she was just done with people jumping on the ‘we hate foxes' bandwagon—from her dad’s country rabbit prejudices all the way down to Chief Bogo's attitude during the missing mammals case. “No, I did not in any way help 'the fox' to graduate, since that's clearly the tiny little part who Nicholas Wilde is that you're all sooo concerned about!” Nick helped save this city; he's smart, loyal, and kind- and he darned well deserves better than this! “You know, it wouldn't be so darned hard to make this world a better place if people could just get over what species a mammal is and just try to see the good in them!”

Leaning back in her booth for the first time since they entered the diner, Major Friedkin shook her head in disbelief before offering the bunny sitting across from her a wry smile, “Cadet Wilde said much the same thing when he first got to the Academy, Judy- and often repeated it, as the weeks went by.” Absentmindedly, the polar bear chased a melting glop of ice cream around her plate with her fork. “Even when the cadets turned on each other over the whole Bellwether thing, he was there in the thick of it, telling everybody how it was only for the actions of a certain ‘prey' that he had the chance to be there today. He said that you helped him turn his life around... believed in him when he didn't even believe in himself. You would have been so proud of him, Judy.” That explains the lack of sleep, the dull sheen of the Major's fur- it was hard enough to turn raw cadets into cops without prey turning against predator and vice versa. Judy had never been so proud of her fox, but she sensed that Nick had made himself a few enemies playing the peacemaker.

“Yeah, Nick told me earlier today that things got a little... heated during his time at the Academy, but that still doesn't explain why you're sitting there asking me questions about Nick.” Now, it was Major Friedkin's turn to squirm in her seat, obviously caught between her natural urge to be frank when talking with her students about difficult subjects and the responsibility of her station as a teacher. Ohhhhh, somehow I think you just hit on the understatement of the year, Judy. Just how bad could things get at a school... a school full of hormonal mammals with access to live firearms. Oh sweet cheese and crackers! “I take it that my new partner may have undersold that last bit.” Judy stretched one trembling paw to rest it comfortingly upon the Major's own, giving herself a few seconds before asking the hardest question one mammal could ask another, “Was anybody hurt?”

“Not officially... and not seriously, thank God.” Major Friedkin took a deep, hard breath and let it all out, one step from outright crying in the back booth of the 24-hour diner across from Judy's apartment. “There were a few more injuries than last year on the obstacle course, and one of the elephant students took a tumble down the dormitory steps, but there were a dozen witnesses that said that one came down to cadet clumsiness.” The way that the polar bear emphasized the words “that one” left a heavy knot in Judy’s stomach. Which means there were other 'accidents' where nobody saw who started things. Good grief! “You know how competitive things can get around midterms and final exams... this class felt different somehow: meaner, maybe... and a lot more volatile. This thing with Bellwether has us all chasing our tails right now.” If there was any room left on Major Friedkin's side of the booth, Judy would have gladly slid in beside her former mentor and hugged the
downhearted polar bear, onlookers be darned.

“I won't lie to you, Judy. Things were pretty bad there, right from the start.” Major Friedkin ordered them both a hot cup of coffee- black for her and one with cream and two sugars for the 'uncivilized country bunny' sitting across from her- before pushing her plate back with a dismissive grimace. Nice as the pie was here, Bonnie Hoppes had truly spoiled her in the weeks after Judy graduated. “The first few weeks, it was all about the first timers 'proving themselves' to the legacy students. Typical stuff, you know- throwing themselves into the obstacle course with a little too much enthusiasm, but nobody was really getting hurt...” Judy’s gut told her that things were about to stray pretty far from normal, and the coffee wasn't helping her raw nerves one bit.

“Then came 'murder month'... you know, the four weeks before midterms when the physical training gets pushed into overdrive, and the classwork turns into one long slog, uphill?” Major Friedkin sipped the boiling brew in her coffee cup, never really tasting it, but glad for the warmth it provided. “That's when everything started going wrong... cadets started really getting hurt, tempers flared across the predator/prey divide and 'accidents' just started popping up all over the place.” Judy gently took the Major's free paw in hers, offering what little comfort she could. “Then, on the night before midterms, some one decided to spray paint, 'Bellwether was right about you' over the entrance to the predator dorms... and Wilde about snapped.”

“W-What did he do?” Judy's voice sounded tiny and far away, even to her ears, but the note of fearful concern for her new partner was not lost on the polar bear sitting across from her in the booth. Major Friedkin took a long, appraising look into the bunny's eyes, and she liked the kindness that she saw there. Judy felt like she was going to be sick with worry, but she ordered a slice of carrot cake to deflect the Major's inevitable question about her relationship with Nick outside of work. Still working that one out for ourselves, at the moment. Thanks, all the same.

“He scurried up the wall with the first bucket of paint the fox could find and redid the whole thing in this completely hideous shade of neon green, but the damage was done.” Major Friedkin took a long, slow sip of her coffee, weighing her words, carefully, before she spoke again. “After midterms, he just started disappearing, bit by bit. At first, it was just from Doctor Lapin's class- but they’d never really gotten along to start with, so nobody complained, as long as his grades kept up and he didn't miss physical training. But then he started to slip away from the other cadets every night, just before lights out.” Judy's eyes widened, her long ears drooping in terrible sympathy.

Every graduate of the ZPD academy had had similar thoughts of escaping the non-stop presence of the other cadets, from time to time. “It took me two weeks to find the little 'hidey-hole' that he'd made for himself in the back of the library behind some heavy shelving, but by then he had a little company.” Judy shook herself out of her fearful haze- it was good that somebody had kept her fox from being completely alone, even if it did make her a little jealous that some one else was comforting Nick instead of her. Major Friedkin his her understanding smirk behind her coffee cup. “He was tutoring other cadets, Hoppes- get your mind out of the gutter.” Judy's cheeks flushed with just how close to the mark the Major's accusation had hit. Don't ever let them see that they get to you. Harder than it sounds, Slick.

“The crazy thing is that Cadet Wilde's little 'cram sessions' seemed to smooth things out between the predators and the prey cadets a little. Bit by bit, the 'accidents' started to stop, and there were even a few times when the two sides came together in their limited personal time to do something wonderfully unexpected.” Major Friedkin took one last, long sip from her coffee cup, before shaking her massive head, ruefully. “Of course, in the case of repainting the entire dorm entrance hall, I think it was more like kindness born out of self-defense. That neon green thing was just unspeakably hideous...” She brushed off Judy's numb attempts to pay for their impromptu meal when the check came to their table. “And then Wilde just had to muck things up by leading the walk-outs from
Doctor Lapin's class…”

Judy's jaw almost hit the floor, as she stared at the bear sitting across from her like the Major had just grown another head, right in front of the stunned doe's eyes. “What walk-outs?” Judy whispered the question, but she saw Major Friedkin shake awake violently from her unpleasant little walk down memory lane. Just like that all the progress that Judy had made in getting her former mentor to open up to her just faded away. Clearly, there were things that the Major just couldn't tell her about, not yet, and Judy had just stepped right over that line. The weight had fallen back onto the Major's shoulders and there wasn't anything Judy could do to lessen it, no matter how much the two clearly cared for one another.

“Forget I said anything about that, Hopps. As a personal favor to me, please?” This time the polar bear reached out for Judy's paw, holding it like it was a life preserver and she was about to slip back under the water's edge. It was all Judy could do to nod her head as she took the Major's immense paw into both of hers, petting the bear's fur like she was one of the rabbit's many younger sisters. Some gestures were universal and it didn't take long for the teary eyed bear to break into a small, contented smile. “You should call your mother more often, farm girl- it's obvious that she misses talking with you. At least get her to stop buttering me up with such yummy pies.”

Judy shook her head in equal parts amusement and disbelief. *She's run completely out of steam, but she's still trying to change the subject. No wonder she likes Wilde so much- they're so alike in so many wonderful ways.* “One disaster at a time, Lucy. One disaster at a time.”
3. C.~ Whiskey Tango Foxtrot?

((Timeline: Late afternoon, day after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that inspired this scene: “Paint it, Black” (cover) by Ciara. ]

[Scene: Back at Nick's apartment, Nocturnal District]

Emotionally exhausted as she was, Judy took the steep stairs up to Nick’s apartment two at a time, her heart riding heavy in her chest. The friendly “chat” she’d tried to have with Major Friedkin had devolved into an interrogation of sorts, with their friendship hanging by a thread afterwards. Liberated doe though she was at heart, Judy needed somebody to hold her and tell her that things would be alright, even when she had every reason to suspect otherwise. The bunny needed someone to help her sew up the parts of her world that were unraveling faster than Judy could move to hold them together. She needed her partner- her fox- to wrap her up in his strong arms, again... and for the awfulness of the world to retreat to the far horizon every time Nick kisses my lips.

What she got was the terrible shock of finding Nick's apartment door torn half-way off its hinges, with no lights on in the apartment. Inside, she heard the barely perceptible sound of some one breathing in jagged little puffs, a slow, steady dripping sound, and the sounds of shards of glass being swept aside. Following both sounds deeper into the darkness, Judy crept across the apartment's threshold, trying desperately to remember the layout of Nick's living room from her brief visit this morning. Unfortunately for Judy, this morning was still a jumble of conflicting emotions, raised voices, and terribly confused feelings. “N-Nick? Are you in here, somewhere?”

From somewhere further in, she heard the huffing stop, followed by an exhausted chuckle. “The fox that you are looking for is not here right now, but if you’d like to leave a message? Please, wait for the beep.” Judy's heart leapt in the darkness. He's alive, he's here, and he's still a smart ass. Things can't be that bad, right, Judy? She stumbled over something in the dark, but kept rushing toward that beautiful voice. You had yourself all worked up for nothing! Then Judy felt a large, strong paw grip her wrist and hold her fast in the darkness. “Freeze, rabbit!” Nick all but hissed directly into her ear. “Gotta be a flashlight in here somewhere...” Her fur was hot and wet where he had briefly held her wrist, but Judy was still too nervous to think about what it meant.

“Nick, what the heck is going on?” Judy was frozen in the darkness, wishing she could trade her excellent hearing for a fox's superior night vision. The smell of blood was so strong that the doe could taste it coppery-sweet on her tongue, and it made her nose tremble with the urge to run deep and fast, to hide from whatever caused the smell. Part of her worried that she'd caught her fox satiating some horrible predator hunger with living flesh, but a larger part of her knew that the smell could only be coming from Nick, himself. Nick, what the heck happened in here? That's when Judy heard a distinct clicking sound, and the room in front of her was bathed by the weak glow of a flashlight.

Not two inches from her face, waiting in the dark, stood the jagged remnants of Nick's kitchen table. Had she kept rushing towards Nick's voice in the dark, she would have impaled herself on one of its splintered legs, as someone much bigger than a bunny had torn the table literally in half and thrown it out into the living room. Under the sweep of the flashlight, Judy could see that the couch had been flipped over, it's cushions thrown in every direction. There were strange red dots that seemed to wander across the gray carpet in drunken little lines leading toward the kitchen and back to the bedroom, each red dot seeming to jump into the next until they pooled at her feet. She could still hear the soft dripping sound somewhere nearby, but they weren't anywhere near a sink.

Then the flashlight swept over two large fox feet and a fluffy fox tail that Judy would know
anywhere, and the young rabbit's heart skipped a beat. She could still hear the faint dripping sound, but it faded into the background when she felt Nick's soft paw caressing her cheek. “BEEP.” Somehow, amidst all the confusion and terror, that warm, wet paw on her cheek gave the doe a brief moment of reprieve - a small second of joy that stretched on into forever. “Tough day at work, Fluff?” You can say that again, Slick.

The flashlight wavered again, sweeping the room again, but it never went above waist height for her fox. Nick... what are you trying to hide from me? Judy made an estimated guess, given the location of Nick's tail and reached up to wrap her arm around Nick's ribs to try to pull her fox closer to her, but all she got was the feel of wet bandages and a hurt yipping sound as Nick drew back from her in obvious pain. Falling over with a heavy thud, Judy would forever remember the last thing that she saw before the flashlight went spinning out into the dark: Two golden eyes, flecked with shards of emerald green, staring back at her in terror as Nick scrambled back into the darkness.

“Nick, partner- please, tell me what's wrong?” The scent of blood made more sense now, and it made Judy's own blood freeze in her veins. Somebody hurt him, badly. And somehow I just made it worse. Kicking herself would have to wait, Judy decided right then and there that she was going to help her partner. She just had to corner him first, so that he didn't bolt for the open front door. With the way her world had come unglued in the last 24 hours, Judy didn't find the idea of a fox running away from a bunny all that funny. “C'mon, Slick. It's your bunny; I'm here to help. I won't do anything else to hurt you.... you just have to trust me on this one, partner.” This time, Judy picked up the flashlight out from under the couch where it had landed, and brought it up to her own face. Her fox needed to see how much Judy had missed him, and how sorry she was for hurting him, even accidentally. He needed to know that somebody still cared.

Somewhere deeper into the kitchen, she heard Nick chuckle, even as each new breath seemed to come harder than the last. “My... bunny, huh?” Her fox's voice was a shade deeper, his breathing a lot heavier than Judy had ever heard from her partner before, but he was still there, moving somewhere in the dark. Judy could hear him searching for something in the wreckage of the kitchen, turning things over one paw-full at a time. Judy felt her heart skip another beat when she saw the small orange carrot pen clutched in his paw when her fox returned to the living room. Slowly, she brought the flashlight up to expose the clumsily applied bandages that were wrapped around Nick's ribs, shuddering slightly when she saw a fresh, bunny-sized paw print painted in red on his right side. “A fox could get used to hearing that...”

“Oh, Nick!” Judy's breath quickened when she saw a fresh green shimmer in her fox's eyes, but it didn't distract her from the way the entire left half of his handsome face looked swollen and bruised. Somebody had worked Nick over like they were crushing gravel down to sand, and Judy was furious, gripping the weak flashlight so hard the plastic sheath was cracking. Her fox was trying to keep a brave face on, to smile through the pain as he spit blood into the kitchen sink, but Judy could tell it hurt him to breathe right now, because every time he tried, the gold flecks in his green eyes pulsed into tight little bands. “Who did this to you, Nick? C'mon, partner, you know everybody in this town.”

“He didn't leave a business card, Fluff. Not... Not that you could find it in all this carnage, if he did...” Nick ran his face under the hot water, but it couldn't wash away the shame and pain that the doe saw, running behind his handsome green eyes. Either he really doesn't know who did this to him, or just doesn't want me to know. Either way, Judy, you're in for one heck of a long night. “Just kept asking me where I was last night. Asked pretty hard, towards the end.” Her fox dried off his muzzle with a worn kitchen towel before tossing the bloody rag into the trash with an air of disgust. Don't push your luck right now, Judy. Don't interrogate him; Nick will talk when he's ready. “Guess he didn't like any of my answers, huh?”
“Are you sure you didn’t sell the guy a skunk butt rug, back in the day?” Inwardly, the bunny cursed her inability to let sleeping foxes lie, but it earned her a small, nostalgic chuckle from her partner, so it was worth the horrible joke. The thought of Mr. Big sending one of the bruisers from his entourage to come “tenderize” her new partner for some perceived insult to his family or for sharing some forbidden secret about the arctic shrew’s criminal operations weighed heavily upon the doe’s conscience. It was part of the reason that Judy usually steered clear of asking any questions about Nick’s time in the gangster’s employ. Could Gerald—I mean Mr. Big—really have ordered all of this chaos? Yes. Would he bother, when we’d worked so hard to finally rebuild the bridges Nick burned between the two of them? Judy couldn’t begin to guess at the answer to that question. Under the flickering beam of her flashlight, Judy could finally walk safely into the kitchen and turn one of Nick’s chairs right-side up. “Nick, please... Sit down for a second and rest. I'll help you clean up everything else in the morning.”

“I think you might... have a good idea there, Fluff.” Nick half-slid down, half-fell into the sturdy wooden chair she’d offered him. Nick’s eyes heavy-lidded with six kinds of exhaustion, but his paws pulled her into slowly around the chair to stand before him. Half in and half out of the shadows, her fox wrapped Judy’s tiny waist in his arms and squeezed her tenderly, as he rested his weary head on her shoulder. It wasn’t quite a hug, given their differences in height, but Judy’s cheeks burned all the same. Some part of her loved the gentle way that Nick held her, the soft touch of his strong paws as they pulled her in closer, the way he always made it seem like she filled his shadowy world with a little hope and light. Just when she thought she couldn’t love the poor fox any deeper than she already did, Nick surprised her one more time, “Carrots, I am so... sorry for worrying you, tonight. I honestly... didn't see this one coming.”

The doe’s heart broke a little at hearing Nick’s sudden apology -and feeling the hot tears that slowly trickled down her back. Instinctively, her arms came up to wrap themselves tenderly around the broken fox’s muzzle and to gently pull his handsome muzzle to her lips, as she first kissed his forehead, then his unbruised cheek, and finally his hot lips, thrilling to the strange sensation of his whiskers dancing down her cheek. “This isn’t your fault, Slick.” And if I ever find out who did this to you, they’ll never see the inside of a jail cell. The emergency room? Maybe. Judy felt Nick come alive in her arms, his tentative paws lifting her small frame up into his lap with a gentle paw under her sensitive tail.

There was no teasing exploration in his touch, no sexual undertone to his warm, soft lips on her throat—which saddened the young doe to no end- only the physical need to lose himself in her adoring touch and to breathe in her comforting scent. Nick took ages, simply huffing in her sweet scent and sighing in her arms, as her fur matted with hers, his cinnamon sweet scent wrapping around them both, as her fox held her against his battered chest. And yet, Judy thrilled to every touch of his clawed paws upon her fur, the powerful feel of her fox effortlessly lifting her smaller frame off of the floor and into his warm, waiting embrace. Being gentle with her came so easily to Nick that Judy almost missed the underlying growl that roiled like distant thunder just under the surface of each pleased sigh. She loved the way his claws danced across her blue uniform, never tearing at the dream that she had worked so very hard to achieve. “Stay with me, Judy- just until the sun comes up?”

Judy simply nodded, an emotionally-charged lump in her throat, “W-What do you want me to tell Bogo... about us postponing our little field trip to the prison?” The doe regretted asking the question immediately, as the shame returned to darken her fox’s face, his eyes looking anywhere else but at Judy’s face. Easy there, partner. I've got your back, just like always. We can- and we will- get through this. Together. Just lean on me. I can take it. “Nick, it's going to be alright. Just stay with me, partner.” Try as she might, Judy could not forgive whoever had stolen her fox's pride, but she had an idea how to bring it back. It took more than a little maneuvering in their current position, but Judy managed to brush her sensitive tail against one of his paws, the short little ball of fluff reigniting
his joyful adoration of small, sinfully fluffy objects.

**SOOOO FLUFFY!** She could almost hear his thoughts as Nick's eyes lit up for a second with less than innocent thoughts. Then reality came crashing back down around their shoulders, and his smile dimmed a few thousand watts, “Anything but the truth, please... we’ll talk to him after the morning briefing tomorrow -once we’ve figured out how much to tell him about what's going on.” His claws briefly toyed with her fluffy tail, but Judy could tell that her fox's heart wasn't really in it, tonight. There was a pensive, thoughtful expression written all over Nick's face, something that she could tell was eating him up inside. “Chief Bogo's not our problem tonight... Carrots, can I borrow your cell phone for a moment?”

Dumbfounded by the sudden change in their conversation's direction, Judy set her cell phone down on the table beside Nick, but she was delightedly surprised when her fox refused to put her out of his lap. “With your superior hearing, I won't even have to use the speakerphone for you to listen in, but Carrots- you have to promise me that whatever you hear tonight stays between us. No cops, not even Bogo, okay?” Judy nodded, kissing his unbruised cheek with tears in her eyes. 

Just this once, just for you, my sweet fox.

With one paw, Nick scrolled down through her Contacts list until he found Fru Fru's new number and hit the “Call” button. With the other, clawed paw, Nick caressed the base of her ears in what was quickly becoming Judy's favorite gesture of trust and sensual bliss. As the phone started working on establishing a connection, Nick took the opportunity to kiss Judy's lips warmly. “Trust me, Carrots, it's all going to be alright, okay?”

Judy was too stunned by the sudden heat in his kiss to answer before the voice of the Don's only daughter came on the phone, “Judy, honey, now's not a good time...” As Nick's free paw caressed her small sensitive little bunny tail, Judy bit her bottom lip to keep from moaning with her friend on the phone. The doe knew that Nick had been good at multitasking before he went off to the Academy, but it just wasn't fair how easily his talented paws could leave her in a bunny-sized puddle of melting, frustrated hormones. Then, Nick brought one sensual claw in a devilishly slow arc around the sensitive interior rim of her left ear and the blushing bunny learned a whole new definition for the words “playing dirty.”

“Even for the only fox you've ever had a crush on?” Nick's voice came out in a teasing, velvety purr, even as he rolled his eyes comically for Judy to see. *He is absolutely, and irredeemably, SHAMELESS!* The recently married young shrew on the other end of the phone exploded into a relentless giggle fit. Her fox winked at Judy, conspiratorially, before silently mouthing the words, “Not. One. Word.” It wouldn't be too long before the Don would be a kindly old grandfather in his own right, but Judy suspected he'd send Nick to an icy grave if Mr. Big heard Nick talking to his only daughter that way.

“Nicky... you were always such a bad boy!” Judy could hear the sisterly affection in Fru Fru's voice, but she had no doubt that the young shrew was telling the truth about a younger Nicholas Wilde. Listening to their lighthearted banter, Judy couldn't imagine that her foxy new partner had ever been anything but a handful as a young todd, even in an unorthodox family like the Don's.“How did you get Judy's phone? ...Wait! I remember those sticky little fingers of yours. Nicky, you go apologize to the nice bunny for lifting her phone, right this second!” The expectant mother-to-be was already flexing her 'mom' voice, but Fru Fru's continued laughter broke the illusion. “Oh, Nicky, honey- now really isn't the best time... Daddy's back to being his old self tonight... if he hears us talking like this, he's going to be mad...” The Don's daughter let that last word dangle over the fox's head like a sword until she was certain that Nick fully understood her warning.

Judy watched a hard lump forming in Nick's throat as he chewed her words, digesting every possible nuance of what went said and unsaid by the Don's normally talkative daughter. When he finally spoke, Judy saw how much each word cost the poor fox that held his bunny so tenderly. His
normally green eyes swam with rings of gold that glistened in the darkness between them. *He doesn't want to hurt her, but Nick's going to do it, anyways- just like he did with Finnick, and even with me, after the press conference...* "Franchesca... please. Please put your father on the line." Even without her superior sense of hearing, the doe couldn't miss the painful way that all the wind was knocked out of little Fru Fru, "I-I wouldn't have called if it wasn't important."

"You're the only one who still calls me that..." Judy's heart broke to hear the normally effervescent little shrew crying as she put the phone down and walked away. She could see fresh tears threatening to fall from the corners of Nick's eyes, as well. But still, Nick smiled at her like she was the last mammal in the world tonight, clearly trying to comfort his partner, even as the fox held one clawed finger to her lips. When the Don's voice came on the line after a few tense seconds, Judy could feel the warmth leaving the room in one big gush. It was like Tundratown's icy fist had reached through the phone line and wrapped around the doe's fearful heart, "Nicholas, why did you make my daughter cry?"

Judy could see the same fear rolling through Nick- his pupils dilated until all she could see were two bottomless black circles swallowing up the green and gold, his paws trembled, even where they held her close, and the lump in his throat made his voice dry and raspy when he finally found the words to speak. "W-Why did a polar bear break down my door two weeks after I graduated from the police academy and tap dance on my face? I thought we'd agreed to leave the past in the past... sir." *He's trying to be so brave, but Nick- you have to be careful here. Gerald- Mr. Big- isn't somebody you want to push- not if his daughter was telling the truth about tonight. I've kept my end of that bargain- I've been deaf, dumb, and blind about my life before the Academy. But tonight, that bear was asking me questions I didn't have the answers to- hurting me as he asked questions about Koslov... and you."

Mr. Big let out a mile-long sigh, like all the anger was being squeezed out of him by something heavier, something sadder than any mammal should have to carry alone. When he finally spoke, the Don's words were not warm- but they tried to be kind, "Nicholas- my son- whoever this bear was, he was no messenger of mine. What has passed between us, I cannot forget... but I am trying very hard to forgive." This time, it was Judy who was teary up, as she held Nick's free paw in hers. *All that hard work between you two is finally starting to paying off, Slick! What made you think I would do such a thing to you, my wayward son?"

"Before tonight, I would have bet my life that only two mammals in the whole world knew where I lived... my little brother Finnick -who would have just beat me up himself, trust me- and Koslov with his little black book." Nick shook his handsome muzzle in exhaustion, regretting the motion almost immediately, as the bruised side of his face scrunched up in pain. By now, Nick's eyes were more gold than green, and looking into the pain that she saw there hurt the bunny's heart. "I must be slipping after being out of the Game for so long. Obviously, whoever that bear was, he must have scrambled what few brains I had left." Judy was amazed to finally see her fox finally surrendering to the exhaustion that had chased him for the last 24 hours. "I wasn't thinking straight... Please tell Fru Fru I how sorry I am for upsetting her tonight."

"You can tell her yourself, Nicholas, when you bring young Judith by the house this weekend. I assume that that's her I can hear holding her breath in the background?" Judy's surprise only doubled when she heard her fox begin to laugh, ruefully. *"Nick" may be out of the Game, but the Don still plays it well enough for two! "Nicholas, my son, you are a mammal of many talents, but lying to me has never been one of them. I don't see why you continue to try, when you know the consequences..."* Judy watched the joy drain from Nick's face at the memory, but the Don seemed only too happy to continue on, leaving the unspoken threat looming over the fox's head. "Personally, I like the good influence that Judy has been on your life- and I think that you may return the favor some day..." Just before he hung up the phone, Judy could swear that she heard the Don smiling
triumphantly for painting the former con-mammal at her side into a proverbial corner. “But, Nicholas, you're a cop, now - and there are still things I don't talk about over the phone, especially with the cops.”
4. A.~ Promises in the Dark ... (NSFW at all)

4. A.~ Promises in the Dark ... (NSFW)

((Timeline: Midnight, the day after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “Breathe” by Fleurie, “How It's Done” by Maren Morris.]

{Scene: Back at Nick's apartment, Nocturnal District}

It took Judy more than an hour to clean and re-wrap her partner's wounded side, the water gushing from the sponge in her paws in a cascade of fat, rose-colored drops. Every so often, when she wound the wrapping a little too tightly around his battered ribs or accidentally touched his bruised cheek, Nick would shy away from her touch or make some small, defeated 'yipping' sound deep down in his chest. But every time, just when Judy would try to pull back her paw to survey the damage, she found that her fox's fingers would wrap around her smaller wrist, pulling the doe's paw back to his side. Stay... oh God, please don't leave me like this, Carrots! Even long after the water had lost any trace of warmth, and there were no more bandages left in the cruiser's paltry first aid kit, Nick held her paws to his side, something lost looking up at her from within his beautiful green eyes, even as the golden flecks that hung there threatened to swell up into those painful, almost savage rings.

Judy raised one tentative paw to his bruised cheek, amazed by the way that Nick's body was already starting to heal what had been a savage bruise just hours before. By morning, they might even be able to hide some of Nick's injuries by carefully brushing his thick winter coat over the worst of the bruises, but the swelling of her fox's ribs and the raspy way that he breathed might linger for days to come. They couldn't keep this a secret from Chief Bogo any more than Nick could keep the terror out of his voice when he confronted Mr. Big. Not for the first time, Judy wished that she could steal her fox away to some far off land, but Nick had always kept one foot firmly in the Don's criminal underworld, even as he tried to rush toward his bunny with the other. The thought of her fox's past coming back to haunt him was something that he and Judy had talked about before, but tonight had been the first time that the doe had been afraid- truly afraid- that Nick's past might actually get him killed some day.

The thought sent fresh chills up Judy's spine- followed by a burning, righteous indignation that lit the bunny up from her toes to the tips of her long, sensitive ears. We just started kissing, for Carrot's sake! And yet, somehow, the attraction that had started with an idle fantasy while her fox was away at the Academy was rapidly eclipsing anything she'd ever felt for the bucks back home in Bunnyburrow. Something about the gentle way that Nick held her in his paws when those hot, incredibly soft fox lips danced across hers left Judy's head spinning for hours, even when she wasn't daydreaming about the sinfully delicious way that her fox's sharp teeth had felt against the tender flesh where the doe's throat met her shoulder. Just thinking about that day at the Natural History Museum made the burning bunny blush in a hundred ways that only a cold shower could cure, however temporarily...

As if reading her thoughts, Nick made to follow his bunny into the shower, his handsome muzzle twisting into a confused frown when Judy's outstretched paw gently stopped him at the tub's edge. “I love your enthusiasm, Slick, but we can't get those bandages wet... not yet, anyways.” When Judy looked into the confused fox's eyes, she saw Nick's very physical need to be near her warring for a moment with her partner's imminently practical side. Nick wasn't disappointed when he slowly turned to walk out the bathroom door, not really, but Judy stopped him briefly to steal one last kiss for the night, all the same.
Some things just couldn't be translated for a broken heart, but -heaven help her- Judy was trying to get through to the battered fox. The frustrated doe wanted Nick to join her in the shower almost as much as the tod wanted to be there, with nothing between their exploring fingers and the undiscovered wonder of their lover's bodies but a thin, slippery layer of soap bubbles. But-and it was a big “but”- Judy had promised to take things slow, to show her fox that he meant more to her than just a one night stand, no matter how much the bunny's body natural urges might fight her every step of the way. Can this shower get any colder? Maybe set it to “Winter in Tundratown,” while we're at it?!!

Judy turned to ask Nick a question about the night's sleeping arrangements -given the absolutely ruined state of the apartment's living room- but the former street hustler had already slipped out of the bathroom without so much as a whispered syllable between them. Judy felt a strange sense of panic clutching at her heart when she discovered his sudden absence, wondering for the second time tonight if she'd made some kind of 'rookie girlfriend' mistake. Given her fox's fragile state when Judy had barged into the apartment tonight, her thoughts turned immediately to Nick bolting out the broken front door, but -even over the steady downpour of Nick's shower- her ears told her that he was still nearby, moving things around just outside the bathroom door. Maybe he went to go get me a clean towel? A small, rebellious part of the normally straight-laced doe wanted to step out of the shower au naturale as her fox came back in, just to see her fox's jaw hit the floor one more time tonight. Maybe Major Friedkin was right about you already being a bad influence on me, huh, Slick?

That was the moment that Judy smelled smoke and heard Nick yip painfully from the other room. The panicked doe almost fell sideways, scrambling when she tried to get out of the shower, as the tub had been made for a mammal much bigger than a bunny. “Nick?!” Wrapping Nick's torn shirt around her midsection, the panicked doe was out the bathroom door and running like her tail was on fire and her ears were catching. It wasn't until she was already halfway down the hallway that Judy saw the trail of lit candles guiding her way back into the fox's living room, or noticed the sweet smell of freshly cut citrus that wafted towards her sensitive nose from the kitchen. That's where she saw Nick holding his thumb to his lips and cursing his rotten luck tonight, a half-sliced orange still spinning in place on his counter top. Oddly enough, when her fox saw Judy standing there, his mouth did drop open in silent awe at the beautiful bunny standing in front of him, but it was followed by the mother of all smirks lighting up his handsome face.

“You know what, Carrots? A fox could get used to the sight of you standing there, wearing nothing but my shirt...” There it was, the snide, teasing voice of her partner- just what Judy longed to hear after such a long, miserable day. Somehow, it warmed Judy's heart to see the return of the fox who tormented his partner daily with awful puns, and even worse jokes. “...but I am pretty sure we can find you something more substantial to hide behind, if you want?” Confronted with the ravenous gaze of her fox and the self-conscious way that Nick kept licking his lips as he openly ogled the wet bunny, Judy stopped to do the mental arithmetic: Shredded... white silk shirt... divided by soaking wet bunny... fresh out of a icy cold shower. Oh sweet cheese and crackers, Judy! You got your wish-now Nick's seen practically everything! The doe was torn between the instinct to turn tail and run, and the childish urge to pull her long ears down to cover the fiery blush that even now crept up her cheeks, making her nose twitch in utter embarrassment. At least, Nick likes what he saw, ...right?

Judy was surprised to feel her partner's gentle paws wrapping a long, fluffy kitchen towel around her shoulders as he brought her into an equally fluffy hug. Oh you bunnies, so emotional... Again, Judy got lost in her fox's cinnamon sweet smell, but this time she could smell something darker, altogether male lurking just under her partner's day-to-day scent: the musky, potent smell of a fox tormented by his winter heat. It should have scared the young doe, to feel the clawed paws of a predator brushing her fur dry, to be so surrounded by that earthy, unfamiliar smell, but this was Nick... her fox. And right now, her fox was being a perfect gentle mammal with his hands, even
though every part of him clearly wanted to throw the towel aside, pin her back against the kitchen counter, and to *really* run his fingers through her fur. *Oh, cold shower, why have you abandoned me in my hour of... NEED?*

Nick's handsome face was only a few inches from hers when the unmistakably sweet scent of aroused bunny hit his sensitive nose, curling his lips into a completely predatory smile, even as his eyes shut in a moment of blissful concentration. This time, the fox’s heavy breathing had nothing to do with his bandaged ribs. “Ohhhh, you are... *DEFINITELY* not playing fair with your poor fox tonight, Fluff.” Sharp fox claws dug into the counter top on either side of the doe's hips, fighting to control the uncontrollable urge to grab her borrowed shirt and finish ripping it to shreds. A mouth full of sharp teeth designed to hurt little bunnies snapped closed mere inches from the bunny's sensitive ears, but Judy was done running from her feelings about Nick. His breath came out in jagged little puffs, even as Nick's nose buried itself in her collarbone. “Judy... you should be running.”

Even as the hackles on the back of the fox's neck rose into majestic, terrifying ridges of solid, agitated muscle, Judy couldn't find it in her to be afraid of Nick, anymore. “Nick, I'm never running away from you or this thing between us, ever again. Let me see your eyes, please?” Even as the doe stared up into two bottomless gold eyes, the scent of aroused bunny flooded the comfortable confines of Nick's small kitchen. Even Judy had to admit it- Nick was right: she should have been running, running from him, running towards the one door that still locked in his apartment- the bedroom. But then, she felt Nick's hot, sinfully soft lips kissing their way down her collarbone and the doe wanted to take his hand and run to the bedroom for an entirely different reason. As each kiss grew deeper, Judy felt more and more of his sharp teeth brushing the sensitive skin under her silvery fur, drawing her own breath out in jagged little gasps. Behind her back, the doe could feel every shameful wag of her little button tail as it brushed against the counter. “Nick...” She whispered his name like a forgotten prayer. “...Let me see all of you- the good and the bad? I can take it, I promise...”

“Carrots- Judy...” Nick's voice sounded so far away, even as her fox's tongue licked against her collarbone in a languid circle, “You shouldn't... be here... I can't control myself like this.” Judy felt herself being lifted up so gently by clawed paws, the very same clawed paws that had carved deep furrows into the counter top where she now sat, her fluffy little tail wagging shamelessly. Nick's own tail moved like it had a will of its own, thrashing back and forth one moment, only to coil itself possessively around her leg the next. Everything about her fox wanted to touch her, hold her, caress her in some way- to make her his mate- but still she saw the fox struggling for control over his primal urges, struggling to pull away from her, even as the bunny reached out to pull her fox even closer. He's worried about hurting me, even as battered as I found him tonight- Nick's worried about hurting ME. That's gonna' stop right flipping now!

“Nick... I trust you.” Judy's paws shot up to hold her fox's handsome face, lifting his conflicted eyes to meet her confident gaze. “Not just as my partner, not just as my friend, not just as a woman trusts her... whatever we are right now. I. Trust. You.” Every word from the frustrated rabbit hit her fox right in the heart, chipping away at the emotional barriers that Nick had built up over a lifetime of being kicked around by a city without pity. Still, Judy knew that Nick wouldn't believe her words if she didn't follow them up with action- living on the streets, he'd traded on empty promises for too long to ever recognize the real thing. So, the young doe did the only thing she could think of to drive her point home: Judy pulled the tattered shirt up and off of her shoulders, tossing it right back into her fox's surprised face, before she took off running back towards the apartment's only bedroom.

“Catch me if you can, Slick!”

* ~ * ~ *
By the time that Judy was rounding the corner into the bedroom, she could already hear a growling, nearly savage fox charging after her on all four paws, his sharp claws digging into the floor to push him forward faster and faster. That was when the young doe made the same mistake that had doomed countless of her prehistoric bunny ancestors- Judy turned back to look over her shoulder at the fox chasing her, and was overtaken almost immediately. Nick's clawed paws wrapped up Judy into his strong arms and then unceremoniously dumped his frustrated, naked bunny onto the bed. Standing at the foot of his bed, towering shirtless over her, Judy saw something savage glinting in the darkness behind Nick's golden eyes- some unspoken need that was still hidden from her, even now.

It chilled and excited the young doe to see the control that her fox exercised over taut muscles as Nick deftly leapt onto the bed, his clawed paws landing on either side of her face. Yeah, he definitely liked what he saw. Judy thought she had steeled herself for just about anything, but she wasn't ready for the heady rush of feeling those same clawed fingers gently brush down her shoulders only to grip her wrists and lift them high over her ears. That this possessive gesture brought Nick's sharp teeth mere inches from her trembling nose only made Judy's intoxicating need for her fox spike into the stratosphere. This fact was not lost on Nick, given the way that he kept sniffing the air around her, drowning himself in her sweet scent, “Time to decide, little bunny: do you wanna' stay the night, or run back home?”

“C-Carrots!” Even as Nick's chiding voice purred in her ear, Judy's blood thrilled to the sound of silk sheets slowly ripping under the weight of Nick's claws as his lips and -Oh, God, his teeth/- began to caress her long, sensitive ears, looking for the right spot to make her melt again. Stay. And then he found it- Oh sweet cheese and crackers! Nick's teeth found the most sensitive part of his rabbit's outer ear- a nub just above her hair line- and bit down gently, but firmly. STAY! The result was one squealing, sensually overwhelmed rabbit with her hands held firmly above her head, and her long legs kicking in all directions at once. Oh God, please... PLEASE LET ME STAY! Unable to put what she was feeling into words, the young doe wrapped her hind paws around Nick's waist, squeezing his hips as Judy locked her ankles around the fox's belt loops.

There was no mistaking the look of outright carnal delight dancing in her pretty purple eyes tonight, nor the downright sadistic glee that Nick took in pulling back as far as those long, strong legs would allow to look down on his bunny and growl, possessively before he spoke again, “Only two rules to this little game, tonight, Fluff.” Grappled as they were, Nick used his superior flexibility like a weapon, kissing a fiery trail down the blushing bunny's outer ear until he found the sensitive skin just above her collarbone and gave it one sultry, slow lick with his rough tongue. Then, her fox locked his sweet golden eyes on hers as he spoke, “Rule one: 'All is fair in love and war.' Nothing is forbidden, nothing is judged- everything is on the table until one or both of us decide it's not. That includes stopping right now if anything makes you uncomfortable...” Though her fox's lust had dropped his voice to a gravelly whisper, Judy had no trouble hearing his words as they carried in the darkness of Nick's bedroom. It didn't hurt that he whispered the last bit directly into her sensitive ears, a note of true, loving concern in his voice.

Hearing that single, sweet note of concerned kindness resonating in her fox's voice gave Judy the strength to find her own voice for the first time since they'd entered the fox's bedroom, “Nick, you keep making it sound like there's nothing I could do that you would be uncomfortable with... Why is that?” For the first time since he'd picked her up and carried the young doe into his bed, Judy saw a shadow of doubt loom over her handsome fox's face. Because somebody already did that- somebody hurt him in a room just like this. It's written all over his face, Judy. Before Nick could pull completely away from her and disappear back behind his mask of charming indifference, the doe reached her lips up to plant three kisses on his handsome face- one on each cheek, followed by the deepest, hardest kiss to his hot lips that Judy could manage in their awkward position. Her efforts
were rewarded by a smiling, love-drunk expression on the surprised face of her sweet fox, “Never mind... Only a dumb bunny would ask such a dumb question to ruin the mood at a time like this... You trust me, Nick- I get it. What's the Second Rule, Slick?”

Judy saw a grateful tear trickle down her fox's cheek, before Nick's trademark smirk returned to glisten in the candlelight reflected from the hallway. Her fox's clawed paws closed tighter against Judy's wrists pulling the young doe's body taught, as he pushed down with more of his long torso, sandwiching her naked body between the warmth of his feverish orange and cream fur and the cool embrace of his green silk bed sheets. “Rule Two: 'Ask and you shall receive.' Even like this, stretched to your breaking point, you still hold all the power in the world. When you say 'stop' we stop, when you say 'go'.” Nick's voice broke off into a dark chuckle that made Judy's fur shiver in a thousand wicked ways.

Nick's version of trust is... intoxicating, to say the least. Talk about handing a starving country girl the keys to the candy shop! The world of physical and psychological possibilities that lurked beyond her fox's delicious proposal made Judy's head spin, even as he whispered once more into her ear hot enough to make her want to thump her foot, even given their bodies' unique position at the moment. **But, what's the...** Nick's voice, breathing hot and heavy in her ear spooked Judy out of her inner debate. “But the catch, Carrots, is that you have to tell me what you want- or nothing is getting done tonight.” The thought of coming so close, -of completely exposing her body and even herself to her fox- and going away empty handed... it made Judy's heart hurt just to consider walking back out that door. But Nick wasn't threatening to withhold anything from his bunny, or to walk away from the wonderful, crazy thing that they had started last night with a stolen kiss in the dark. He's letting me set the pace, just like he did back in the cruiser. **Nick wants me to stay...to choose to stay and be myself- my fox wants it more than he's probably wanted anything in his whole life.** Judy felt a tear streak down her own cheek, never realizing why or when she had started to cry in the first place.

Looking up into Nick's perfect eyes, seeing the intoxicating mixture of longing and trust there, Judy's decision was made before the words ever left her lips. “Nick, please...” Judy grabbed the fox's paws and slowly brought them down her sides, thrilling to his gentle touch as it caressed every inch of her outer thighs with his claws, before bringing them back up to rest on her modest chest. “Please put your paws all over my body tonight.” From the ecstatic sigh that left Nick's throat, she could tell that her message was finally falling on receptive ears. “Let me feel your claws on every inch of my fur, yes- even my tail, you wonderful goofball- until I beg you to stop.” From the way her fox's tail had started to happily thrash against the bedpost, Judy had no doubt in the fox's relationship to other canines.

Completely unafraid for the first time in her young life, Judy squeezed her fox's waist to drive the urgent need behind her request home, “Kiss me with those hot lips and run those beautiful, sharp teeth of yours across my skin again until everything and everyone outside this room just goes away: No more Mr. big, no more Bogo, no more Bellwether, no more Major Friedkin, no more Academy- I want it them all to go away, for it to just be 'us' tonight.” Judy saw the fiery desire rolling behind her fox's beautiful, golden eyes, answering the fire she felt building in her own trembling thighs, and she wished that she could wrap herself up around the loving warmth she found in her fox's fur- to say nothing of the thick, hard length of Nick's shaft that had started to poke at her thighs through his pants. Some day soon, she planned to enjoy that too, but for tonight... this was all that she wanted in the whole wide world. “And Slick, please don't make me sleep alone again tonight?”

Nick curled his flexible body above hers, until the fox's hot lips met Judy's in one perfect, patient kiss. “Whatever you want, Judy... I'm all yours, sweetheart.” And as her fox's talented paws began to caress her sensitive skin though her silvery fur, Judy knew that he meant each and every word.
Looking up at the splendidly sensual tableau of naked, trusting bunny laid out before him on the bed, Nick felt like a guilty sinner looking up into the face of heavenly salvation—his very own angel of love, her open arms beckoning to him. How can she trust me so easily, after all the awful things I've done, all the mean, jealous things that I said to her when we met? Nick's paws met the simple perfection of the doe's modest chest, caressing the sensitive nipples that he found there like she was a heavenly mirage, ready to disappear at a moment's notice. She had to know that taking her to see Flash wasn't the fastest way to run that plate, that I would have gladly run away back at Mr. Big's mansion... if he'd given me half the chance. Something about the way her back arched when the doe called his name brought back that night when Mr. Manchas went full-on savage, chasing them both halfway across the Rain Forest District. She risked her life to save mine, when all I wanted to do was run away and hide back under that miserable bridge! Even imagining his life now without the headstrong doe made Nick's stomach twist into shameful knots... Not without Judy. Never again.

Nick's every breath was filled with Judy's sweet scent, as the doe had slowly filled every part of the former street hustler's mind with the urge to do better like Judy—no, to actually be better... for his bunny. And when you had the chance to run away, to leave her there with Bellwether and her goons, even with Judy begging you to go... that was why you stayed, wasn't it, fox? What had started out as an innocent string of kisses on her sensitive stomach was slowly heading south, but Judy was too distracted by Nick's claws caressing her sides to notice her fox's ulterior motives. You wanted to protect the bunny who never gave up on a mammal, even a shift, unreliable con-mammal like you. The honey sweet scent of aroused country bunny was getting hard to ignore by the second, as were the staccato moans that slipped from Judy's normally chaste lips. Faith like that should be rewarded, don't you think? Nick's predatory smile glistened in the dark, as he planted one last innocent kiss just below the bunny's defenseless belly button, before his two clawed paws took those sensitive nipples in paw and twisted—mmm, delicious!—just... so!

Nick was rewarded with the sound of his angel praying in one long, drawn out plea to the powers above, while a devilish grin played across the fox's lips. Talented though his paws were, and as divine as the sensitive young doe felt in his arms, there was an irresistible question that had been preying on the fox's imagination since the first time that he'd smelled his bunny partner earlier today at the car wash, “Just what does a rabbit in season taste like when she's done... marinating?” As Judy cooed and swore under her breath at every twist of her those delightfully sensitive nibs on her modest chest, Nick dipped his sensitive neck lower, angling his longer muzzle toward the object of his carnal curiosity—the delightful delta where Judy's trembling thighs met. “Oh. My. God. Nick- you are too good at that, partner!” Bunny, you ain't seen nothing yet! Nick should have felt guilty for what came next, but Judy had asked him to kiss her until the world melted away— it was partly her fault for forgetting to limit the fox as to the ‘where?’ and the ‘how?’ Turns out, a well-educated fox can be plenty dangerous to an unsuspecting little bunny with his pants still on.

“OH. F-F-F-FUDGE!” Only, the word wasn't exactly “fudge” that came screaming through the young country bunny's lips in delightful agony when Nick's rough tongue found that most sensitive part on an agitated bunny's body and gave it one long, luxurious lick! Making Judy break from her usual “country curses” was almost victory enough for the city fox, but he wanted to press his tongue deeper, to drown with her sweet scent on his tongue, as Judy gripped the bed sheets in each trembling bunny fist and bucked her hips like she'd been struck by lightning. Nick's clawed paws gripped the doe's hips tightly before slowly forcing them wider, lifting his bunny until her long, strong legs rested on his shoulders, freeing the fox to delve deeper with every rough lick of his long, thick tongue.
“Wicked, wicked, E-E-VIL fox... No! Don't you DARE stop!” They were both chasing that lightning, as the over-stimulated bunny shuddered and shook atop his shoulders, and Nick knew it. Even locked behind the unforgiving confines of his work pants, his painfully swollen sheath ached to feel the hot little bunny's sweet flesh wrap around him, and the taste of her delicious heat was sending the winter-ravaged fox's own body into overdrive. If he didn't push her over that final precipice, Nick knew that there would be nothing to stop him from tearing his way out of those pants and breaking his promise to Judy tonight - and that would be something the fox would never forgive himself for, no matter how sweetly Judy called his name when she cursed. So, Nick had to do the next best thing: he gave Judy just what she'd been asking for. As his sharp teeth dug menacingly around the aroused little bunny's inner thighs, the fox took one strong paw and roughly gripped the scruff of Judy's neck while his other clawed paw closed around her sensitive little tail - and squeezed!

“Oh sweet, holy SHEEP!” That was the second time that Nick heard his delighted bunny curse - really curse - as her heavenly body erupted in a wave of fresh, intoxicatingly sweet heat that scorched the fox's tongue, even as he dutifully lapped up every little drop of melting bunny. It would be a memory that the fox would treasure for the rest of his life - all twelve seconds of it, if he judged the fiery look in his bunny's eyes right. But then his bunny kissed her fox's lips, her sweet scent rolling over them both, her smaller tongue rolling over his in Nick's mouth, brushing fearlessly against his sharp canine teeth. “Nick... we gotta get that mouth of yours registered as a deadly weapon.” Her smaller, curiously strong paws gripped the back of Nick's neck, holding him close enough for the fox to feel every heated word that fell from her angelically soft lips.

“You scared me half to death, there at the end, Slick...” Judy bit her lip in an embarrassed, almost bashful way as her paws brushed his whiskers, lovingly. “Can we do it again?”
4. B.~ Picking up the pieces...

4. B.~ Picking up the pieces...

((Timeline: Dawn, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “Human” by Rag'n'Bone Man, (Morgan James Cover).]

{Scene: Back at Nick's apartment, Nocturnal District}

Judy woke up in a warm, sticky cocoon of matted fur and aching leg muscles, but feeling her fox's strong arms wrapped around her made it all worthwhile. Even before she opened her eyes to greet the sunlight that crept quietly through the cracks in Nick's blinds, Judy could feel her fox -and he was definitely her fox, now!- beginning to stir behind her. Nick's grip on the bunny tightened almost imperceptibly at first, followed by his fluffy tail slowly climbing up her body to tickle her chin. Try as she might, the young doe couldn't help feeling just a little jealous for how expressive the fox could be with his long tail, when all Judy had was a little ball of fluff that wagged shamelessly when she got a certain kind of excited. Well, at least Nick likes playing with little fluffy things, right? Happy memories from last night came back in a flood of vivid imagery as Judy thought about the fox's claws caressing her little tail. It was just hot enough to make her squirm, even as Nick's strong embrace turned into a gentle, loving hug, “Morning, Fluff. Sleep well?”

“Not a bit.” Judy lied, hiding the giddy smile on her lips as she wrapped her paws around the fox's fluffy tail and breathed in his cinnamon sweet smell one more time. “Somebody kept nibbling on my ears. Any idea who the culprit might be?” Nick's only reply was to tighten his grip on the little bunny as he buried his muzzle into the space between her sensitive ears, breathing hot and heavy little sighs of contentment. Her fox's fluffy tail flattened out into a makeshift blanket in the doe's small paws, covered her modesty in its fluffy warmth, even as Nick angled the very tip to caress her cheek. Is every part of him double-jointed or something? Soooo not fair! The doe wanted so badly to stay there in Nick's strong arms, surrounded by the warmth of her fox's luxurious winter coat forever, but a deep rumbling in her tiny bladder was threatening to betray the bunny in her happiest moment. “Oof! Slick, I hate to ask, but which way is the- um...”

Nick chuckled at the country doe's inability to say the word “bathroom” without sounding so completely flabbergasted. “Just follow the trail of candles from last night, Carrots. I'll get to work picking up the mess in the living room and kitchen... though I will probably need your help with the couch, my little energizer bunny.” The fox chuckled again when he felt the embarrassed blush creeping up his bunny's cheeks and into her long, sensitive ears. Can we do it again? Judy would have died of mortification right there on the spot if she hadn't needed to go pee so badly. Instead, the doe did the one thing she knew that her fox could not resist: she brushed her little cotton ball of a tail against Nick's lap before bolting for the door. Teasing is a two-way street, Slick! And Judy got her revenge on the boastful fox when she heard Nick growl in pure, unbridled frustration as something that should have been sleeping woke to poke painfully against the confines of his boxers. All's fair in love and war, right?

More than a few bittersweet minutes later, Judy was sitting in the fox's bathroom, working the kinks out of the muscles in her thighs in a tub full of deliciously warm, soapy water. Sitting chest deep in the healing waters, Judy couldn't help thinking over the wild turn that her life had taken since she took Nick to go see Gazelle perform. Funny enough, her fox -God, how she liked thinking of Nick as hers!- hadn't seemed half as interested in the nearly naked diva dancing on stage with four very buff tigers as he had in his little bunny partner wearing her casual “day off” clothes. Given their kiss in the...
evidence room and the strictly taboo nature of their little “game” last night, Judy would have thought that the public display of prey tempting predator was right up the fox's alley. That was when the obvious difference struck Judy and she couldn't stop smiling like a love-struck fool, *Me. Nick went to the show to see me, not Gazelle... he only started dancing when I made him, and he only started smiling when I looked up into his eyes... Sly fox!*

The doe could hear her phone ringing in the next room, but for the life of her, Judy was just not ready to leave the tub's deliciously warm embrace. Growing up, she had to fight tooth and nail with her many, many brothers and sisters for a minute alone in the family's communal showers. Moving to the city may have cut down her competition to mere double digits, but she was still a very small bunny living in a world made for elephants and tigers. Stealing a few moments alone in Nick's hippo-sized tub was the only time she'd felt truly comfortable being alone since the finding out that the “closed off” showers on the Academy's third floor were made for mammals almost her size. *This is heaven, sweet soapy heaven for a lovesick country girl -and just the right size for a certain fox and his new bunny girlfriend to share, huh, Judy?* Judy let out one long suffering sigh – this having a boyfriend thing was going to be murder on the bunny's dwindling supply of self control, she just knew it!

And the bunny's infamous libido wasn't the most daunting challenge set before the young couple, either. The difference in the two mammals' relative sizes was going to take more than a little getting used to. Nick may have been careful with his delicious teeth when he bit down on her tender skin, but her rather electric response to the deed had all but pulled a hamstring in both of her legs. It had been pure madness to go back for seconds, but Judy wasn't exactly known for backing down from a challenge- particularly when the rewards were so sweet! *And he did say I could ask for anything that I wanted!* Judy was still thinking of innocent (and not so innocent!) ways of thanking her fox for his self control last night when there came a gentle knock at the door.

“Um, Carrots? We may have something of a situation out here...” She couldn't help but chuckle as the fox walked into the bathroom in his boxer shorts, with one paw chastely covering his eyes and the other held firmly behind his back, “I picked up your phone by mistake... you know, thinking it might be Bogo calling us in?” He was holding her phone out to her for a full second before Judy's addled brain kicked in to fill in the blanks. *Mom’s ring tone! Sweet cheese and crackers, Nick... you didn't actually... answer a video call without putting some pants on, first?!?* “Tell your mom I said I was sorry... again? I think she may actually have had something called a 'conniption fit' when I tried to apologize the first time?” *Oh God... please, please tell me that he didn't have her on video chat?!?*

“JUDITH. LAVERNE. HOPPS! You get your fuzzy little tail on this phone call this instant!” *No. Such. Luck. Sorry, Slick... no matter how hot it gets in this apartment, you are keeping your pants on tonight.* Nick almost dropped her phone into the tub beside his bunny before beating a quick, blind retreat out the bathroom door, and Judy couldn't really blame him. To the world outside their family circle, Bonnie Hopps was about as sweet and mild-mannered a bunny as ever walked the rustic streets of Bunnyburrow. Inside the family circle, the Hopps matriarch kept a family of over three hundred young bunnies -and her bewildered father, sometimes- hopping with military precision. It wasn't until Judy had grown into thoughts of having her own family some day that she finally saw that her mother’s “iron doe” act was a just that –an act– a last ditch effort to control the chaos brought on by an exponentially growing family. The family warren that she ruled with unquestionable authority had been built to shelter about half the current number of bunny babies that currently swelled her childhood home to its rafters. That was part of the reason that Judy had petitioned the academy for admittance the very first second that she was old enough: there just wasn't room for another grown bunny in the house.

There were times that Judy wished she had half the older doe's conviction and her courage, but today was not going to be one of those happy mother-daughter days, she could already feel it. “Mom, take
a deep breath. I am going to get out of this lovely bath tub, which I had just been enjoying in complete privacy before you called.” Judy let her words sink in a moment before baiting her mother further. “Then you and I can have our usual shouting match, okay?” Judy shouldn't have wound her mother up like that. Their verbal sparring was a habit that had been born of teenage frustrations, growing up among the multitudes of other young bunnies in the warren, each of them fighting for her mother's attention. But somehow, Judy just couldn't shake the habit, even when the two does were relatively alone on the telephone. Judy flipped the ‘MUTE’ button on her phone before setting it down on the edge of the nearby sink, taking a few precious seconds to gather up what shreds of composure she still had left this morning. She could almost feel her mother's foot thumping in agitation while Bonnie waited back in Bunnyburrow, but there were just a few things that Judy wasn't ready to share with her mother just yet -and Nick leaving paw marks on her fluffy little tail was at the top of that list.

“Now, I know that you don’t have a lot of time before the little ones get up from their nap, Mom, so I'll just cover the basics...” Judy began brushing down the sensitive fur on her ears as she steered their conversation down its usual track. “Yes, I know that the city can be a dangerous place, especially after that mess Bellwether started. Yes, I am being safe. No, I will not be moving back to Bunnyburrow any time soon.” On the other end of the line, Judy could hear her mother's teeth grinding in frustration, but it was an integral part of their verbal sparring to get the basics out of the way before the older doe was dragged away by her maternal duties. Still, the teenager in her couldn't resist the urge to make things sound just as bored and monotone as she felt. They'd been stuck in this stalemate for the past three months, and the friction was starting to make the younger doe grind her own teeth whenever her mom called, “Yes, I know that you worry about me finding a suitable young buck out in the city...”

The younger doe knew the routine by heart, so she was thrown off her game when Bonnie's agitated voice cut across the phone line, “Oh ENOUGH of that already, Judy! You DO know that you're on a video call and I can actually see you rolling your eyes, right?” Judy's ears fell in embarrassment as her mother's words sank in --she was going to have to come up with something truly awful to “thank” her fox for accepting this call in his boxers. “Now, Judy, I know that you and I have had our differences of opinion, lately...” Understatement of the year, there, mom. “But you are still my daughter, and I am still your mother. So... would you like to tell me why you are naked as a jaybird in some strange fox's apartment first thing this morning?” Yep, it's gonna' have to be something truly awful, Slick: switching your coffee to decaf, maybe or karaoke with Clawhauser? No, Judy –that's too cruel!

“First of all, I don't usually take baths with my clothes on.” Now it was Bonnie's turn to roll her eyes--a mother knows when her daughter isn't being completely honest with them. After raising over 300 kits, it had become a survival mechanism for the older doe. “Second of all, Nick isn't just some strange fox, mom...” Judy smiled just a bit too widely at that to be completely innocent, but the younger doe hoped that her mother was still too miffed at her to see it. Lots of runners up in the “understatement of the year” category here, today! “He's my friend and my partner, now that he's graduated from the Academy. He's also one of the kindest, bravest, and most dependable mammals that I have ever met, paws down.” The growing emotional divide between Bonnie and her daughter since she'd run off to join the ZPD hadn't made Judy's retreat from the city in professional and personal disgrace any less humiliating. If anything, being unable to talk to her parents after she'd vilified Nick and the other predators in the city had only driven the younger doe further into the arms of depression at the time. “He's been looking out for me since the first day I came to Zootopia, mama... and I can't wait for you and dad to meet him some day.” Judy watched her mother smooth down her own ears, the older doe clearly making a concerted effort to hide her terror at the thought of meeting a city fox -any city fox- even one that her daughter had been praising for the last few months.
“Judith.. Judy, are you sure that that's safe?” Like her husband, Bonnie was proud to be a country bunny: the farm fresh soil of Bunnyburrow had settled into their bones, filling the robust couple with the love of farming, of watching all things grow, but it also left them with a stubborn streak a country mile wide and an inborn fear of all things predator- especially foxes. Another thing we had in common, until I really got to know Nick. It was a fear born of suspicion and misunderstanding between the Hopps clan and Gideon Grey's family that went back generations in the otherwise peaceful hills of her hometown; a fear that was all but cemented for Bonnie and Stew when a younger Judy had returned from the fair with fresh fox claw marks on her cheek.

“I know what your father and I said about Gideon Grey turning over a new leaf but Nick... Well, he is a city fox, after all.” Her parents' recent decision to partner their farm with Gideon Grey's bakery was a monumental step forward in healing the rift between their families, but Judy could tell that her mother wasn't as optimistic as Stew when it came to their new partnership's long-term chances for success. Judy's father was quicker to anger and quicker to forgive than Bonnie, but Judy knew that her mother's temper burned slower and longer under her calm facade, making the Hopps matriarch a holy terror when somebody hurt those that she loved- it was another trait that the Hopps does shared. The only reason that Gideon Gray wasn't in jail -or under it, if Stew had had his way- after he'd attacked Judy was the fact that they'd both been minors at the time.

Try as she might to bury it under a thin veneer of professionalism, Judy had inherited her mother's temper, so she understood just how hard her mother was working to rebuild the emotional bridges between them. Where they always ran into trouble was in the older doe's distrust for all things urban, especially when it came to Zootopia's predator populace. Where Bonnie saw only reason to worry for her daughter's safety, Judy saw the city as a vibrant place, filled with wonderful mammals of all types, each one trying their best to get along, even after the fearful turmoil that Bellwether had inflicted upon the city. Judy had never told her mother, but the prospect of leaving Zootopia- of moving back out to the countryside “some day”- was growing more remote by the second, even before she had started kissing Nick. Even before she'd fallen under the spell of a certain handsome fox, Judy had fallen in love with the city and she was going to fight like hell to keep it –and Nick– safe.

“Mom, we've been over this. Raising a family there on the farm was your dream, mine has always been right here... in Zootopia.” Judy's gaze turned towards her fox, even though she could hear him hard at work sweeping up the mess in the living room. More than I ever knew... “I'm not giving this up for anything, mama. I've worked too hard to get where I am right now...” Part of Judy knew why her mother worried so –Bellwether's arrest hadn't undone all the evil things the little ewe had brought out into the light. Zootopia's prey were still terrified of the “savage” predators coming back to their city, and being all the way back in Bunnyburrow didn't protect her family from that fear. Bonnie had sacrificed nearly everything to protect her family over the years, but now Judy was out on her own in the big city –and that was a terribly exposed place for a lone bunny to be. Knowing all of this didn't make it any easier for Judy to watch her mother's heart breaking at the thought of losing her headstrong daughter. It's why she keeps sending those awful bucks my way, so I won't be lonely in the big, scary city... if you only knew the truth, mama. You would be thanking Nick for sacrificing everything to look out for me.

“Mom, I need you to do me a favor... but you're not going to like it.” Judy pushed every ounce of impatience out of her voice, trying to reach out to her mother for a truce, but dreading what she was about to confide in the older doe. “I know that you're just trying to help, but I need you to back off with the List...” Judy saw her mother take a breath, preparing to argue that it wasn't natural for a bunny to live alone so far from home. The younger doe knew the script to this little part of their argument by heart, but she had to make her mother see that the older doe's obsession with finding a mate for her daughter wasn't helping things, so Judy decided to lay all their dirty laundry out on the line, “Listen, mama... you know that buck that you gave my number to last month, Johnny
Judy watched her mother's ears droop, a slow pout crossing her pleasant face. *Mom's no fool, Judy... she knows when she's been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.* The younger doe held up a restraining paw when her mother started to defend her intentions. "I *know* that you were just trying to help me meet somebody here, what with the crazy hours I work and everything, but mama... he's got a warrant out for him in Dearbrooke county for stalking and harassing another doe...." Again, Judy watched as her mother's ears dropped defensively. *Clearly there's been some kinda' mistake, Judy... his father says he's a good buck, from a good family. He would never...* Sadly, Judy knew this part by heart, too: her mother was too trusting by half when it came to screening her prospective suitors, and it wasn't the first time that Judy had to give one of these bucks the brush off after checking into their past.

"Maybe it's all some horrible mistake, but mama... He knows where I live! He's followed me home from work half a dozen times now --and he's not the first to cross that line." Nick's secrets were rapidly becoming her secrets, but Judy just couldn't keep lying to her mother about how she felt. She needed her mother to be excited for her, if they were ever to start healing the growing rift between a headstrong mother and her equally stubborn daughter. "That's why I decided to grab a bath at Nick's place, mama. It's safer that way, for now..." Judy also needed to dam up the steady stream of young bucks her mother had sent to pursue her romantically, or Nick might think that he had to physically fight for her love -and in his current mental state, that could end up badly for everybody involved. "I need you to stop sending bucks my way before I have to arrest somebody." And wouldn't you just love explaining *that* one to Chief Bogo at the morning meeting? "*Officer Hopps, did your date start out in handcuffs, or was this just his lucky night?*

Judy devoutly hoped that the next words out of her mouth were a good idea, but she honestly didn't see any other way to break through to her mother, "Besides... I've kinda met somebody on my own, and things are starting to get pretty serious, so I don't want to spook him, right now." Judy could already see dreams of little bunnies by the dozens crossing her mother's mind, but Bonnie looked unsure as to how to process the sudden change in her daughter's romantic circumstances. *We're too used to yelling at one another; I don't know what to say either, mama. Just tell me that you aren't mad at me, that you'll support my decision, even if its not to the kind of mammal that you and papa had pictured?* "So, will you please quit sending bucks my way for a little while? I don't want him to think I'm that kind of girl!"

"O-of course, Judith- I mean, Judy! But, honey-bunny, why didn't you say something, earlier? Who is he? What's his family like? Has your partner Nick met him, already?" Judy knew that it was now or never --she had to retake control of the conversation before her mother actually buried the younger doe in 101 questions about this mysterious new "buck" in her life. Now, the young doe in her felt bad about skirting the truth with her mother, but some things needed to be eased into slowly, and her parents finding out that Judy was getting intimately "acquainted" with a certain fox was definitely on the top of that list. Judy could already hear her fox's voice in the back of her mind, coaching her through this tight spot, *Despite what a lot of people think, the secret to running a good con is not in the lying, but in never saying anything that is actually untrue- it's like painting a canvas in different shades of gray.*

"Nick introduced us, actually." Judy smiled, self-consciously. *In a manner of speaking, he did a lot more than that last night.* "Okay, I don't think he has a lot of family, but I met his little brother when I first came to the city and they are incredibly close." Even when they fight... Judy scrunched up her nose, the effort of keeping her ears from drooping at the thought of Nick and Finnick's fight yesterday morning from overpowering the young doe: How much of it had been about her and Nick and how much of it had really been about Nick becoming a cop? "I know that he worries about his big brother being alone out here, the same way that you and dad worry about me being a cop in the
city.” Judy let out a long-suffering sigh, smiling at the thought of her mother and Finnick being in the same boat, even if they worked on completely opposite sides of the law. “I get the feeling that he's been alone out here for a lot longer than I have, and that the city hasn't... that Zootopia hasn't always been kind to him and his little brother.”

“But what about his parents, Judy? Where are they in all of this?” Trust my mom to stumble onto the one question that I have been dreading asking Nick since that first kiss in the evidence locker room. Judy fought the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose, shaking her head in disbelief: Bonnie might never make a good beat cop, but she would make an amazing interrogator if she ever left the comforts of the family farm. The younger doe was starting to see why keeping up the con-mammal's friendly facade had already started planting gray hairs in Nick's temples: lying without actually lying was incredibly hard work! Judy peeked out of the bathroom door to admire her fox's fluffy tail and backside as Nick worked hard to dislodge something from the wreckage that had once been his sofa. Good! He's out of earshot.

“I don't think that that's a happy story, there, mama. I don't know all the details yet, but I get the picture that his dad wasn't there for a lot of his childhood.” Judy watched the horror on her mother's face give way to true empathy; one of the reasons that Bonnie had so loved having so many kits was because her own mother had only ever been able to have one litter, and most of them hadn't grown up warm in the shadow of Judy's grandfather's memory. The last war with the Old World had taken twice as many prey as it took predators on both sides, and some of Bunnyburrow's bravest mammals never got to come back home. “Whatever happened must have been pretty bad, because he never talks about it- I mean never- and he talks to me about pretty much everything.”

Judy tried to put into words things that she was only beginning to understand about her poor fox, and it painted a pretty rough picture of his childhood years. “When he does talk about his mother, it's always full of love and admiration, but it's also always in the past tense, so I don't really know what is going on, there...” Judy had never seen her mother's ears droop like they did when she took in that last bit. Maybe Nick and Finnick have more in common with my family than I thought? “Listen, mom... I'm pretty tired and I have to go to work in a few minutes. Maybe we can talk more about this this weekend, if you'd like? That is... if you don't have any other pressing questions for your exhausted daughter this morning?”

Judy was somewhat surprised to see her mother nibble her bottom lip like a school girl trying to summon up the courage to ask her crush out to the winter formal, “Just one more question... if it's not too much to ask, sweetie?” This had to be one doozie of a question to make her mother get so nervous that she was literally shaking with the trepidation of asking her daughter, “This whole 'having a bath all to yourself' thing... what's it like?” Judy snorted out a quick barking laughter, despite her best efforts to maintain a straight face. God bless a country bunny with a big heart –Mama, I love you!

“Like swimming in warm biscuits and honey, mama... Absolute heaven.”

* ~ * ~ *

By the time that the young doe had signed off of her call with her mother, Judy's smile was positively beaming. What had she been so afraid of? Bonnie was an easy-going enough doe, and her mom just wanted Judy to be happy and safe in the city... or back in Bunnyburrow, if the younger doe was being completely honest with herself. So what if the older doe was still a little bit suspicious of her daughter being naked in the apartment of a certain city fox? She hadn't actually lied when she told her mother about the fox's good qualities, and planting a few seeds of understanding now would pay
off big come harvest time when she and Nick decided to make their relationship public knowledge, right? Judy was still looking around for her fox when she saw Nick standing still as a statue in front of the TV in his living room. Only his tail was moving, whipping back and forth in what the love-struck doe mistook for a happy wag.

“I think we dodged a bullet there, Slick!” Judy all but tackled her fox from behind, her paws wrapping around her partner's waist, but she was confused by the lack of reaction from the normally sensitive fox. It wasn't until Judy circled around her fox's agitated tail to actually look Nick in the face that she saw the wide, staring eyes, the lips pulled back into almost a feral snarl, or the agitated twitch that curled his whiskers. Something is definitely wrong here. C'mon, partner. The phone call thing wasn't that bad... I wasn't really going to make you sing karaoke with Clawhauser... What's going on? Judy's eyes followed the fox's blank stare back to the news mammal on television, even as her fox began to absentmindedly stroke the soft, sensitive fur of her long ears. The TV was still on mute, so it couldn't be anything the nicely dressed caribou was saying, and she had never heard Nick say anything against a prey animal since his traumatic childhood incident with the Junior Ranger Scouts. Something else had caught her fox completely off-guard, and Judy could tell that his petting of the nearly naked bunny in his arms was as much about comforting himself as it was about touching her.

Then Judy saw the headline marching back across the bottom of Nick's TV screen and felt the fox in her arms stiffen, a small, panicked, keening sound stuck deep in his throat: “Gas fire destroys Ice Sickle Bar and Grill in Tundratown. Cause unknown, ZPD investigating scene. No casualties reported as yet. More details at 5.” In her short time in the city, Judy had seen dozens of similar headlines, small tragedies that didn't amount to much in the grand scheme of things, (unless you were caught in one) but this one had Nick spooked so bad that her normally hot and bothered fox had gone cold and stiff in her arms, shaking his head in horror and disbelief, like a little kit who'd stayed up way too late to watch the scary movie and was now trying to chase away a nightmare.

“We gotta' go talk to Bogo...” Nick's eyes finally came down to meet hers and Judy could see the panic hiding behind her fox's calm voice, just as easily as she could read the concern that had been behind her mother's prying phone call just minutes before. Judy wasn't fooled when Nick's paws stopped petting her ears to dive playfully down her back: she could still hear her fox's heart jack hammering in his chest, no matter how skilled the former hustler was in hiding his emotional state behind a mask of casual indifference. Talk to your bunny here, partner. I can take it. Judy reached one steadying paw up to lovingly cup her fox's cheek before drawing Nick into a chaste kiss, wanting for all the world to be able to take some of this burden off of the fox's shoulders. Definitely going to be a day for decaf, there, Slick!

“Sure, partner, whatever you say...”
4. C. Sins of Our Fathers, Part 1

((Timeline: Just after dawn, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene: “Bad Blood” by Welshly Arms.]

{Scene: Back in Judy's new squad car, stuck in traffic, leaving the Nocturnal District}

Nick didn't feel much like talking an hour later, but watching his bunny partner's ears droop in seething frustration made the fox's tail twitch in sympathy. Morning traffic so close to the vaunted City Center was always a tangled up nightmare of “hurry up and wait,” but the bunny sitting silently beside him wasn't used to the crooked little backstreets that crisscrossed the Nocturnal district or the stifling heat of several hundred motorists of all sizes going nowhere fast. Judy couldn't even use the siren, because they weren't officially scheduled to be at work today. Normally, Nick would have been delighted to show the country bunny some secret path through the busy city's backstreets (known only to cleverest of city foxes, of course) that would have dropped them both off nearer to the precinct. But today -after he botched the phone call from Judy's mom- the last thing Nick felt was clever. Even before the sun had risen over the decaying brown brick buildings that lined the district, Nick had retreated behind the familiar protection of his beloved Aviator shades, but it was no use hiding how miserable he felt right now. She's already seen behind the mask, fox... she knows that you're broken inside: damaged goods, like everything else in this crummy part of the city. It didn't help the fox's sinking self-confidence to see the usually confident bunny throw the occasional worried sideways glance at him, her soft lips curled up into a silent smile that was half pity and half frustrated bunny. “Penny for your thoughts, Slick?”

When Judy finally summoned the courage to break the awkward silence in the cruiser, it didn't take Nick long to carefully take her free paw in his, holding his claws in so they wouldn't hurt the sweet, sympathetic little doe, but the fox's shades stayed on. For some reason, even after their passionate encounter last night, Nick found it harder and harder to meet the bunny's gaze directly. Well, it was wonderful while it lasted. All that's left now, is counting the minutes until she walks right back out that door... or asks Bogo for another partner. Looking out the cruiser's passenger side window would have been easier, but Nick lost himself in those perfect purple eyes, even as the worst bits of his heartsick nature came screaming to the surface, “Not sure that they'd be worth that much right now, Fluff. Guess I kinda blew the whole 'making a good first impression thing' with your folks, huh?” The smile that crossed Nick's lips tasted like a lie, even as Judy's face lit up in response -just another halfhearted con from a washed up con-mammal. Looking at the battered Night Howlers resting in the backseat, Nick began to wonder what part of his life wasn't a lie anymore. Then Nick caught sight of the beautiful bunny behind the wheel staring at him, a sheepish grin on her face and the fox had his answer. Judy, even after she blackmailed me, drug me half way across the city to track down Bellwether's goons, and almost got us iced by Mr. Big -it's always been her.

“Oh, come on, Slick! It wasn't the end of the world for my mother to see you in your boxers... we just have to be more careful from here on out!” Judy's smile turned cryptic as Nick went back to looking out the window, his shades covering the tears building up in the corners of the fox's eyes as Nick's paw began massaging her palm with relieved little strokes of his thumb. Judy was still avoiding looking at the flowers in the backseat, too. Nick couldn't blame her, honestly -he'd had the Academy fiasco to distract him, but he knew that she still had nightmares about Bellwether's goons and their last stand in the Natural History museum. There was so much that Nick wanted to tell Judy about his past, about how much last night meant to him, and about how much she meant to him, even
before the kiss that changed his life. “From here on out!” That sounds like heaven to me, Fluff,... but I've been proven wrong before. Nick didn't have to fake the smile this time, as his longer fingers laced carefully through Judy's, a fresh, ecstatic tear streaking down his cheek. “Will you... Can you tell me why that news story was such a big deal? Nick, I've never seen you get so shaken up -it scared me, and not in a good way like last night... well, the end of last night, anyways.”

The thought of his last night with the bunny stretched the fox's smile to lascivious heights, even as the harsh realities of their situation had Nick pulling down his shades to let his partner see the weight of every word the fox spoke, “Judy, what do you know about Zootopia before the Truce?” Judy's long ears shot up at the fox using her given name, a fresh look of worry crossing her pretty muzzle as she tried to get over the new, serious Nick who was still holding her paw in public. There was nothing playful in her partner's touch right now, not a hint of teasing in the fox's voice as he turned to smile at her, his face as vulnerable and hopeful as a tourist on their first day in the big city. The change from Nick's usually guarded, almost cynical, demeanor was striking to the young bunny, as was the far away look that her fox had in his eyes. Silly rabbit, tricks are for kits.

“Not much, Slick. Even the history books at the Academy don't like to talk about it, but we all know that things back then weren't very pretty...” Judy scanned the cars around her, watching as the Nocturnal District's unlucky few day shift workers applied their makeup in the their rear view mirrors or drank that second cup of coffee to get them through another relentlessly sunny morning. “Sometime after the War, the city council decided to make importing alcohol from the Old World illegal. Gangsters like Mr. Big, they didn't like that very much, so they started importing guns, instead.” Nobody seemed to notice that the line of cars wasn't moving any faster than a baby could crawl. “Things got bloody -and I mean really bloody- there for a bit... but after the mayor got gunned down, a few of the gangsters called for a truce with the cops to stem the tide of violence.” There were city buses all over the other districts and a brisk sky tram that connected the Rain Forest District with Sahara Square and Tundratown, but the city planners seemed to forget about everyone living here in the Nocturnal District. “The police and the gangsters worked together to rid the city of the gun runners, but it was a long, bloody, uphill fight. After that, Zootopia got a new mayor and importing alcohol got legalized again...” The predators here, they were just used to being late to work or taking two hours to get across the city they should be able to walk across in half the time. “What's all of that got to do with the Ice Sickle bar and grill burning down?” Something about that made her feel sorry for them all, to be so used to coming in dead last on Zootopia's list of priorities -it was like the whole district was paying the price for some terrible, communal sin.

Why was Nick not surprised that his favorite bunny knew her adoptive city's history better than most of the locals did? The former street hustler could just see a younger Judy pestering some poor country librarian every week for yet another book about the fabled city of Zootopia: “where every mammal has multitudinous opportunities to be whatever they want to be!” It was almost a shame to open the naive little country bunny's eyes to the ugly truth behind such pretty lies, but right now, Nick would risk just about anything to keep Judy safe... even if that meant upsetting the notoriously volatile Mr. Big and the other big players in Zootopia's oldest game, “There was only one of the old mob bosses who was willing to sit down with the cops, Carrots -the youngest mob boss to take control of a major house in the history of this city... and you're the godmother to his future granddaughter, Judy.”

The former con-mammal tried to not take it personally when Judy pulled her paw out of his... she was having a rough morning, after all, and today's unvarnished history lesson wasn't about to get any kinder on the poor little bunny. Nick watched the shock roll through Judy's beautiful amethyst eyes, laughing a little to himself as the shell-shocked little bunny almost ran into the back bumper of a drowsing hippo's Land Rover. It's one thing to suspect that the kindly old shrew in his snazzy little tuxedo might be a ruthless mobster, but it's another thing entirely to know, isn't it, Hopps? Welcome to the Family, sweetie. “The only mob boss in Zootopia that survived the Truce was Mr. Big; when
the cops turned their backs, the Don used the gun runners as an excuse to wipe every other major house off the city map.” Judy's wide-eyed stare did nothing but draw a sympathetic shrug from her new partner. If the beautiful little bunny gripped the cruiser's steering wheel any harder, she was going to rip the thing right off of its pedestal.

“Even if that's true...” Nick swallowed his pain at having Judy doubt the sincerity of her fox's story. *You asked me not to lie to you, anymore, Carrots. You made me promise...* “What does that have to do with the Ice Sickle burning down?” Nick looked longingly at the automated car wash that they'd visited yesterday, as it passed slowly by his side of the cruiser. Every word out of the fox's mouth felt like a betrayal of his old life, another piece of the old Nick put onto the altar of his new love, but Judy was worth the risk and the pain. It only took one curiously gentle touch from the bunny's soft paw upon his cheek to turn Nick back to face his partner. *She has to know how dangerous this is... and not just for me, this time.* “What do we need to race halfway across the city to tell Bogo on our day off, Slick?” With her free paw, Judy gestured to the kindly old moose with a walker who Nick was certain had already lapped the gridlocked police cruiser on his leisurely walk around the block. *Twice.*

“Well, Carrots, what would you say if I told you that the Ice Sickle used to be a major hub of Mr. Big's illegal import/export business -one that was watched over by none other than the Don's right hand mammal: Koslov, the big polar bear who almost iced us during the Otterton case?” Judy gulped at the memory of a young rookie cop -fresh out of the Academy- threatening the Don, in his own house, surrounded by his loyal entourage of leg breaking polar bears, with backup from her fellow ZPD officers nowhere in sight. It had not been the bunny's smartest moment, but even back then, Judy wasn't going to let go of her dreams of being a real cop, no matter how stacked the deck was against her. Looking over at Nick, her face softened even as her faltering smile betrayed the very real fear of what another confrontation with Mr. Big might cost her. This time, Judy reached over to take her fox's paw and give it a gentle, apologetic squeeze. Up ahead, Nick's keen eyes spotted a break in the gridlock, which he signaled to the bunny by tipping his muzzle in its direction, and releasing her paw so the distracted bunny wouldn't miss this rarest of opportunities on their early morning commute.

Even as Judy began muscling the small police cruiser past the giraffe's broken down RV that had bottle-necked traffic out of the Nocturnal District in the first place, she could hear the reluctance creeping back into Nick's voice as he continued, “Add that to the fact that the old bunker that Koslov used to house his bar was made out of the same fire retardant concrete that survived bombing runs during the worst of the War and you can rule out 'accidental causes' for that fire, Fluff.” This time, Judy couldn't take her eyes off the sudden uptick in traffic in front of them, but Nick could hear the rabbit start to hyperventilate, slightly. *So, she starts breathing faster when she gets excited in all kinds of situations, huh? Better file that useful little fact away for later use, huh, Wilde?* “I mean, you could soak that building in a giant tub of gasoline and light it all with a roadside flare and you wouldn't even scorch the paint. That's why Koslov picked that location...”

*Sweet cheese and crackers!* Swearing under her breath, Judy swerved the cruiser just in time to avoid a reckless little mongoose that came whizzing by on his moped, a stack of delivery pizzas strapped to the back as he sped in-between a dozen angry commuters, riding the yellow lane dividers like he was running on a tight rope. Nick could see the rabbit's shoulders tense up, preparing for the chase that always thrilled the police mammal in her blood, but the fox put a restraining paw on her hand as she reached towards the button to wake up the cruiser's flashing sirens. A second later, Judy met her partner's sympathetic gaze with her own sheepish grin, even before he silently mimed the precinct captain's name: BOGO. *Some things are more important than the chase, Judy. Don't worry- I'm sure that we'll get him next time, partner.*

With a reluctant huff, the young bunny turned away from the sure collar of a juvenile street menace.
and started the long journey to Precinct 1 in the heart of the city, “You're right, Nick... we gotta' go talk to Bogo.”

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By the time that Judy and Nick had safely tucked the Night Howlers in Judy's locker and struggled up the stairs to Bogo's office, Judy was starting to have second thoughts about telling the Chief everything that Nick had just confided in her. The cape buffalo had never exactly warmed up to having the ZPD's only fox (and a former street hustler, no less!) on his duty roster in the first place, if Judy was any judge of the Chief's temper. Even on his best days, Chief Bogo could be downright ornery, even for a cape buffalo working in a building full of big egos and even bigger tempers. Nick hadn't exactly made the Chief's job of managing so many competitive animals any easier when the fox started pulling practical jokes on the stalwart cape buffalo on his first day fresh out of the Academy. Every morning, when the growling settled to a dull roar in the ZPD bull pen, there was Nick with another quip or awful pun to ruin any chance of the Chief actually staying in a good mood. Some days, you're more trouble than you're worth, Slick! Then again, Judy had to admit, Nick had a way of growing on a mammal- his slow burning, insufferable smugness giving way to a genuine need to help out other mammals, even while the fox was doing his level best to frustrate them to their wits' end. If it had worked so well on her, then maybe -just maybe- there was hope for peace between her fox and their boss? Here's hoping, Hopps!

Just as Judy raised her small paw to knock on the chief's door, she heard a most unusual sound booming from within the Chief's office and -even with Nick's fluffy chest firmly wedged into her back- it froze the little bunny in her tracks: Bogo was actually laughing, and he wasn't alone! “Oh, come on now! Wilde didn't... he couldn't have! Not pink!” Judy didn't need a bunny's long, sensitive ears to match the deep, almost gravelly chuckle that followed to the voice of her former teacher at the academy. Judy had just had coffee and pie with the Major Friedkin the afternoon before, and there was no mistaking the polar bear's laughter for anybody else, “How did you find out?” Bogo's own laughter seemed like it was echoing from the dark depths of a coal mine or an abandoned well, rather than across the office that the Chief kept as tidy as a military barracks ready for inspection at any moment.

“I was so obsessed with not being late to the morning briefing that I completely missed the surprised look on everybody's faces when I walked in. It wasn't until I saw my reflection in that insufferable fox's shades that I knew that I'd been had!” Judy and Nick both winced when Bogo's massive fist hammered the top of his desk, but Major Friedkin's laughter erupted even louder a second later, sparing the bunny a moment to glare menacingly at her new partner. She'd only found out about the fox painting his new boss's horns in neon pink nail polish a few seconds before Bogo burst into the bull pen when Nick had whispered his little secret into her ear. To say that the little bunny was mortified by her new partner's cheeky prank on his second official day on Bogo's team was putting things mildly, at best. Nick just smirked, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly as the little bunny fumed, but Bogo's laughter cut them both short, “Oh, I would have wrung his little red neck if I could have just proved that Wilde was the one behind the whole mess, but it did teach me not to leave my office door unlocked when I take a nap!”

“Oh, I know exactly what you mean! Wilde pulled the same Roo-Dini crap when he was at the Academy, but we could never actually pin anything on him...” Judy's elbow found a soft spot in Nick's gut a moment later, and was rewarded by a winded fox coughing, but she was considerate enough to avoid his bruised ribs. She could actually hear Major Friedkin wheeze as the polar bear
tried to catch her breath in between guffaws. “Take Murder Month, for example... There I was, running the cadets through their paces for the mid-term physical trials. I mean, I even skipped breakfast so I could get those poor kits hopping when the sun came up, and I didn't stop running them all through drills in batches until sunset!” A cold shiver ran down Judy's spine at the memory of her own struggles to keep up with the larger mammals on the academy's daunting obstacle course, “So when I finally called it quits for the night, I was hungry enough to eat one of the cadet's bunks, but the kitchen was closed for the night- locks on the fridge doors, cabinets and all!”

“So there I was, about to 'stop and frisk' one of the vending machines within an inch of its life, when I see that somebody has left the lights on in my office all day...” Oh no, he DIDN'T... Oh who are you trying to kid, Judy?!? You know he couldn't resist the challenge of messing with Friedkin's head during exams! From the self-satisfied smirk on Nick's handsome face, Judy knew she had the proud culprit standing right behind her, with his paws resting right beside hers on Bogo's office door. “So, I burst through the door to my own office, thinking I might have just caught some poor cadet trying to get a sneak peek at the exam questions for the next day's midterms, and what do I find, sitting in a warming dish on my desk, instead?” The bass in Bogo's rumbling chuckle overshadowed Nick's own laughter in baritone, hiding the fox's presence from the intimidating mammals, even as he planted one quick, stolen kiss at the junction where Judy's long ears parted. Sly fox! Insufferable is right! "Fresh Moss-cow Cod pan-sautéed with shallots, mushrooms and cream sauce, just like my mother used to make every winter! And the worst part is that I kept the sly fox right where I could keep an eye on him the whole day... He even volunteered to stay late to help me clean up the obstacle course!”

Of course he did... what better way is there to establish an alibi than to hide in plain sight? Judy's blunt claws gave her fox's sensitive chin a quick, affectionate scratch when she noticed nobody looking their way. You did good, partner... really good. You may just avoid karaoke with Clawhauser tonight, at this rate! Judy could almost see the Chief's face turning slightly green at the thought of the polar bear eating meat; She'd felt the same way the first time that Nick had ordered a fried chicken sandwich with her in the car, but it was part of the “bad” that came along with the good sides of being friends with a predator. “How was it?” Way to go, Chief! Nice and supportive. Judy smiled to herself, reminiscing a little about last night as the gentle warmth of Nick's winter coat tickled the tops of her ears. Noticing soooo many good things about certain predators this morning!

“Like the finest lemongrass and alfalfa salad you ever ate, Chief. With all the juicy trimmings!” Judy's own stomach growled happily at the thought, even as she heard the phone on Bogo's desk begin to ring. How long had it been since the young doe had stopped to grab a bite to eat -and why was carrot cake the only thing that came to mind? Nick's hot breath in her ear was distracting the bunny from listening in to the Chief's side of the phone conversation the way that she wanted to, but only because it left a melted pile of happy gray goo where Judy's brain used to be. How is it that we just started kissing and he's already so danged good at making me melt? Soooo not fair, my sweet, devious little fox! Again, Judy heard Bogo's laughter shook the Chief's small office, “Oh, are they now? No, don't worry... I've been looking forward to this all morning!”

Judy was still looking quizzically over her shoulder at the handsome new fox in her life, when the door to Bogo's office swung inward, dumping both the bunny and her fox at the feet of a very amused cape buffalo, “Why, Officer Hopps... Cadet Wilde! By. All. Means... Come on in! We've just been talking about you!” Wait...what did he mean by “Cadet Wilde?” Despite the jovial edge to Bogo's words, Judy couldn't help feeling a little like a little worm wriggling on a very big hook, with her partner along for the watery ride to come. Slumped over on top of the bunny, his feet still dangling in the hallway outside of Bogo's office, Nick looked just as lost as Judy felt. Let's face it, partner- we've just been had!
((Timeline: Mid-Morning, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music that helped inspire this scene:‘Lowlife’ by X-Ambassadors, ‘That's Life’ (Cover) by Shawn James.]

{Scene: Inside Bogo's Office, ZPD Precinct 1, City Center.}

"Why, Officer Hopps... Cadet Wilde! By. All. Means... Come on in! We've just been talking about you!” Nick felt something give under his bandages as he fell on top of Judy, barely covering the painful yip that followed with a heavy cough. He could already feel something wet and warm trickling down his side, and for once, the fox was thankful that the heavy blue fabric of his work shirt concealed a multitude of stains. Major Friedkin was too busy guffawing at the spectacle of two young officers being hauled out onto the Chief's rug to notice the look of genuine fear and concern that flashed behind the bunny's eyes as she called out her partner's name, but Bogo was not so easily duped. Some of Zootopia's most hardened criminals had broken under the Chief's piercing, unrelenting stare; the cape buffalo had a way of silently looming above his prisoner until even the capebuffalo's shadow seemed to weigh a few hundred pounds. And right now, Nick felt every ounce of that scrutiny seeping into his bones, as the fox carefully extracted his innocent paw from its accidental resting place: the fluffy tail of one Officer Judith Hopps. Feeling paternal, there, Chief? If you only knew...

"Why did you say... 'Cadet' Wilde, sir?” Even Judy's whispering boomed in the sudden silence of the Chief's small office after the polar bear's laughter faded. Nick helped his lovely bunny partner to her feet, his paws kept in all the proper places this time, but the former con mammal watched the wheels in the Chief's suspicious mind begin to spin, calculating and measuring the behavior of the mammals in the office. It was the same way that Mr. Big used to look at the mixed up young fox running with his leg-breakers -part professional disbelief and part paternal concern- and the striking similarity between the two powerful mammals was enough to shake Nick to the core. Still... It's better to have all his attention on me, than to put Judy in the harsh spotlight.

"I'm sorry, Fluff, this one's on me.” Nick stepped to the center of the room, keeping his gaze on the small red stain on the Chief's rug that was slowly growing under the fox's right foot. “You see, my graduation from the academy is being challenged by one of the professors, there... Dr. Lapin, I presume?” From the way that all the humor drained from Major Friedkin's face, Nick knew he'd stumbled on the secret reason for today's meeting... even though, it wasn't much of a secret, judging from the way that Chief Bogo rolled his eyes and Judy twisted up her little bunny brow in confusion. “So... Just how badly does Professor 'Cottontail' want my career as 'the first fox on the ZPD payroll' dead and buried?” Nick didn't even have to look at the horror on Judy's face -and the shame on Major Friedkin's averted glance- to know his answer: pretty damned badly, apparently.

Making a big show out of straightening the two towers of paperwork on his desk, Chief Bogo looked up with an exhausted air before the weary cape buffalo sat down with a heavy thump, reciting the list of charges almost from memory, “He's claiming that you broke the Academy's protocol against making outside calls on several occasions, that you lead an open revolt among the school's predator population, that you threatened an instructor on two separate occasions, and that you physically broke into his office to find the answer key for the final exam on the following day.” Nick's bittersweet smile only grew as the last of the charges against him were read, his eyes closed as
he remembered the playful smile that had been on Judy's face just this morning. "I believe he's throwing the book at you, Wilde. Or, did I miss something?" Even if this little meeting went off without a hitch, the fox doubted that he'd be seeing that gorgeous smile any time soon.

"No... I think we got about as much out of that crotchety, old hare as we're going to get, Chief." Nick tried to fight the urge to not look his bunny in the eye, to pull back behind the mask of casual indifference that had served him so well during the fox's con-mammal days, but the beautiful bunny at Nick's side had truly broken something inside the fox's heart during the Missing Mammals case - and again last night: He cared again, for the first time in years, and that meant Nick couldn't just turn away from somebody who was hurting, any more. Especially not Judy... not my brave, beautiful little bunny. With a deep sigh, Nick turned to face the confused, tearful eyes of the bunny that he loved, his voice as raw as the pain he saw on Judy's sweet face, "Just like we agreed, sir..." I'm so sorry, Fluff- if there was any other way...

As one, the two female officers in the room turned to look at the cape buffalo in the room, even as Bogo calmly continued his interrogation of the fox, “And are you prepared to refute any of these charges, Cadet Wilde?” Please, please let this work... let Judy know how hard I tried to do the right thing, here. While Major Friedkin growled something bitter under her breath about skinning a certain “double-dealing” cape buffalo alive, Judy's gaze fell to the carpet, only to widen in sudden understanding when she saw the small red stain slowly growing under Nick's right foot. For the first time in his life, Nicholas Wilde stood at full attention, perfectly mirroring the ramrod straight posture of the bunny he'd secretly admired, even before applying to the Academy. Even the slow trickle of blood down his side didn't seem to hurt as much when he was looking at the concern on Judy's face. This time, there was no waver in the fox's voice, no attempt to look anywhere else but right into Judy's beautiful eyes as Nick growled out his response from behind clenched teeth.

“Every. Single. One. Sir!” It was still there, if only for a moment... Nick saw the briefest flash of trust reflected when Judy met his gaze, and that was all that the fox needed to start trusting himself, again. Major Friedkin looked like she wanted to peel the horns off of the smug cape buffalo sitting behind the Chief's desk for his duplicity, but Nick couldn't care less. The two behemoths could tear apart Chief Bogo's office -and each other, for that matter. Nothing would make the injured fox happier than walking off into the sunset holding Judy's loving paw in his. Nick dropped his voice to the soft, rumbling purr that Judy had so loved the night before, making sure that only his bunny caught the double meaning in what her partner said next, “And I will happily do just that, if you'll let me.”

Judy bit her lip, wide bunny eyes traveling down from the fox's pleading stare to the wound on his side and back up again, concern plainly written all over her face as Judy nodded her head towards the office door. Trust me, Carrots, let me stay a little bit longer... please? I'll tell you everything you want to know, if I can just get you alone. It took all the young bunny had to swallow the growing lump in her throat, but Judy nodded, trusting her partner this one last time. Sitting behind his steepled hooves, nostrils flaring at the scent of fresh blood, Chief Bogo looked down at the trembling fox and the bunny who clearly wanted to run to her injured partner's side, “Enlighten us... Officer Wilde.”

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“It all started three weeks into training, when I nearly got squashed by an elephant named Herbert Hoofstedder on the Academy obstacle course. I knew that it wasn't gonna be easy being a predator surrounded by nervous prey after the Bellwether incident, but I never thought that a couple of rhinos would drop two tons of clumsy elephant on top of my head. The only thing that kept me from
turning into a flat, foxy pancake was Herbert's trunk- at the last moment, the big lug does a push up with one of his hands still wrapped up in the ropes, overhead. Hey, Silke! Get our little 'celebrity' out of here before he becomes road pizza, will ya?!? This ain't as easy as I make it look! I was still in shock when a small hand started pulling me out from under the inverted elephant, but I'll never forget the face of my rescuer: Susanne Silke, Emmitt Otterton's starstruck little niece.”

“Hoofstedder and Silke were as different as night and day: Susanne was a shy, svelte little bookworm of a girl, never looking up when she spoke to people, if you could get her to speak at all. Are-Are you really the fox that helped Officer Hopps save Zootopia? At first, I thought that she only joined the academy so she could meet her hero some day: the same bunny who rescued her uncle Emmitt and all the other missing mammals. Herbert was a huge hothead with two state wrestling championships under his belt, but the guy barely graduated high school without throwing one of his teachers off the school roof. I'm told that they met on the train to the Academy, -each of them hiding from the crowd in their own way- Silke hiding up in the rafters with her books and Hoofstedder growling at anybody who came too close to him. Susanne loved anything analytical that tested the otter's clever little mind, but she'd never lifted anything heavier than an encyclopedia in her whole life; Herbert had a hard time reading the sports page, much less plowing through the dense books at the academy, but he'd never backed down from a fight in his entire life. I've never seen such a mismatched pair in my life, but somehow they kept each other going when things with the other cadets got ugly, and honestly -I wouldn't have made it through the first two months without them.”

“With Herbert watching my back on the obstacle course, and Susanne helping me study after lights out, I was making good on a lot of promises -mostly the ones about keeping my nose clean and not making waves in class. I'd even started tutoring some of the other cadets who were falling behind in class: predator and prey, legacy cadets and the new bloods, alike -everybody was just starting to get along: All of us against the establishment... Heh, Mom would be so proud! But that all changed during 'Murder Month' when some idiot decided to spray paint, 'Bellwether was right about you!' in letters three feet high on the small ledge over the predator dorms. Even though he was prey, Hoofstedder wanted to tear somebody's head off for propping up that psychotic little lamb as a role model. The soft-hearted Silke was beside herself, trying to understand why somebody would do such a thing. I understood all too well, after meeting the 'real' Dawn Bellwether.” Fear always works... And I'll dart every predator in Zootopia to keep it that way!

“I knew word of the vandalism would get out, as would my attempt to cover up what had been written there, but I really couldn't go back to hiding from the truth: a lot of good mammals were going to get hurt over this. Herbert, grab that crazy fox before he breaks his neck! So, I did what I knew Judy would have done in my place- I charged headfirst into the problem, with a bucket full of paint in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. Nick, what were you thinking?!? They'll blame you for writing that! Then, I did what I should have done in the first place: I called the cops -well, one cop in particular: Chief Bogo. You see, the Chief slipped me his private cell number when I first got accepted to the Academy, just in case an emergency came up. I'm sorry, Major Friedkin; I called Chief Bogo because it seemed like things at the Academy were rapidly spinning out of your control, but I never called Carrots -I mean Officer Hopps! And I never talked about anything that would be on the exams with anybody outside of the Academy. I'm guessing that the same janitor that I bribed to 'misplace' his phone on a few occasions wasn't above selling me out to Dr. Lapin, as well...”

“As far as leading the predator walk-out of Dr. Lapin's class, that one's on the good doctor. Every day, the crotchety old hare would hand down another “useful insight” into the predator mindset, but he either seriously misread his audience or he doesn't care any more. I mean, how many times can you listen to a bunny telling all the predators in the class that the higher crime rates among 'our kind' can be linked back to 'less cranial capacity remaining for logical thought after the species' ancestors specialized in enhanced sensory data'? After all, who can blame a fox for his deceit, his frantic scramble to steal his daily bread... he's too thickheaded to see that there is any other way to survive.
Or that exclusively prey communities tend to be more tightly-knit due to an 'increased fear of invasion by outside forces'... I mean, does he really think that predators are too dumb to know that we're not welcome among the prey in Zootopia? Where does he want us all to go... Bunnyburrow? Podunk? All the way back to the Old World?!? I was just the first to get fed up listening to all of his speciest crap..."

“Personally, the thought of threatening a teacher, -much less doing so twice- didn't even cross my mind until after I saw Dr. Lapin's 13 page final exam... but I did have a run-in with Officer McHorn that might be worth mentioning before we get around to filing formal charges. You see, McHorn took over the combat training from Officer Rhinowitz after midterms and things took a rather unfortunate turn when Silke stepped into the ring. Silke's not good with change, or with meeting new people under stressful situations... and things got out of hand pretty quickly. You gotta work harder than that, little otter, or some day they'll be carrying you home in a long, wooden box. HIT. ME. ALREADY! I took exception to something personal that McHorn said when he was trying to push Silke into being on the offensive in the ring, and when my turn came, I made him regret saying it. Oh God, Wilde, I didn’t... I couldn’t... I swear that I didn’t know! I gotta go try to make this right- which way did she go?!? The thing is, if McHorn felt threatened by what I said in the boxing ring, or by getting his tail handed to him by a raw recruit, then he’d have filed charges, himself, by now. Barring that, it just sounds like Dr. Lapin's just trying to pad the case against me, so you'll be ready to tar and feather me for cheating on the final exam.”

Nick took a brief moment to hobble over to the conflicted polar bear, taking her massive paw into both of his before he dropped the final emotional bombshell on the poor Major, “Which is precisely what I want you to do, Major Friedkin. I want... no, I need you and the rest of the Academy brass to come after me like you're convinced that I cheated every step of the way and you just couldn't prove it until now. I need Dr. Lapin to believe that he's already won all of you over, before the graduate board even hears the charges against me: it's the only way that we're going to stop him before he hurts a lot of people who I care about. You don't know Dr. Lapin the way that I came to know him at the Academy, Major... Look, I did some awful things before I came to the ZPD Academy, things that I am haunted by to this day, things that I am still trying to make amends for as I start my new life, but I've never played the trusted public servant while I vindictively hurt the people who trust me. Dr. Lapin does it every day -and he does it with a calm heart and an easy smile. I can't tell you the specifics because the Chief's investigation is ongoing, but I can tell you that Dr. Lapin was the reason why I agreed to play the sacrificial victim in this whole, ugly song and dance... I wanted to protect the people that I care about. Lucy, will you please help me do that for just a little bit longer?”

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Chief Bogo spared one silent moment to watch the shell-shocked bunny in the room as Officer Hopps carefully deposited her new partner back into the chair next to hers, scooting just a little bit closer so the doe could lay one supportive paw on the fox's shoulder. The Chief had to admit, when the conflicted young fox had first called the bleary-eyed Chief in the dead of the night, Bogo had wondered if Nicholas Wilde was “mammal” enough to pull off such a delicate set-up: to bait one of the ZPD’s senior civilian experts into overplaying his hand, while not actually breaking any of the Academy’s hard and fast rules. Seeing the almost broken way that his newest officer leaned upon Judy Hopps, Bogo had to concede that he might have pushed the fox too far, too fast to get a dangerous mammal out of the Academy's upper ranks before another batch of impressionable recruits fell under his sway.
Of course, Chief Bogo knew about the tod's previous life as a con-mammal - every cadet went through a rigorous background check before they were even considered for the Academy. Nick's 'second chance' at a new life by joining the Academy and Officer Hopps' return to active duty were the only conditions of Lionheart's return to his throne in City Hall upon which Chief Bogo had never wavered. But it was another thing entirely to see Wilde's defiant little performance unfold over the past few months, as he baited the old hare day in and day out, only to perform nightly surveillance on the villainous professor long after the rest of the Academy had hurried off to bed. The poor fox's uphill battle was just beginning with winning back Major Friedkin, and there were so many, many things that could still go wrong with all of this cloak-and-dagger business - and so very little that even the Chief could do to protect the young fox if it all came apart at the seams - but Wilde had been adamant on pushing forward on the Dr. Lapin case. Something that Nicholas Wilde had seen at the Academy had harrowed the tod so deeply that he was left with no other choice but to pursue Lapin at all costs. Additional attempts to pry the reason for Wilde's determination had only been met with a thousand yard stare, and the terse fox's default deflection, “A cop should look after his partner, don't you think?”

A deep, chest rattling growl from the polar bear sitting across from him redirected Bogo's gaze back to Major Friedkin, where it belonged, “Marcus- what in the furry hell were you thinking?!? You used a troubled cadet to spy on one of my teachers at the Academy - a hare that I have considered a good friend for over a decade? And now, you want my help to set Dr. Lapin up, using one of my best student's careers as bait, and you won't even tell me why?!” If Major Friedkin had been merely upset when the charges were read, the sound of her claws digging into the armrests of her chair told Bogo that the polar bear’s anger was quickly approaching critical mass. The fact that Major Friedkin physically towered over Bogo, even when the cape buffalo wasn't sitting behind her desk, did nothing to make her angry pacing any less terrifying now, “Wilde was a cadet under my roof and under my protection!”

The madder that the Major got, the more exhausted Chief Bogo felt... and the more precariously Wilde seemed to lean on his partner. Could there really be more going on between the pair than Wilde alluded to during his months at the Academy? Definitely a new fox in the ZPD hen house today, but at what cost, Officer Hopps? Either way, it was well passed the time to end this little charade, for better or worse, “I was thinking about putting an end to this, for starters...” Bogo stood up from behind his desk, removing a large laptop from a locked drawer and handing it delicately to the angry polar bear that loomed over him, only to wince when the laptop’s speakers relayed a very throaty moan from an over-dramatic canine actress, followed by a very predatory male lion’s growl. “Captivating Cadets Dot Com, Lyudmila: the site is already pulled up and almost ready for business, and they've apparently added a soundtrack now. How... nice.” If Major Friedkin weren't already a polar bear, all the blood leaving her embarrassed face would have left it an ashy white. As it was, she settled for staring wide-eyed at the males in the room, “The picture quality is not the best, which I understand is a blessing in disguise for delaying the website's commercial launch, but I believe you'll recognize the ZPD logo on the young lady’s swimsuits, as well as on the inside of the pool in the more... (COUGH) ‘candid’ shots?”

“But... But, I know these girls! Some of them haven't been to the Academy for years!” Open-mouthed, Major Friedkin poured over the still photos of each young cadet swimming in her fur-tight swimsuit - and more than a few swimming with no suit at all. Reaching around the staggered polar bear, Chief Bogo tapped one of the laptop’s arrow keys and another part of the Academy came into view: the communal showers. “Dr. Lapin is a mammal of science, a wonderful colleague and my friend! He wouldn't take any part in something as... sickening as this!” More videos of naked cadets were advertised, all caught in compromising positions in bathrooms and shower stalls all over the academy, their private bits tastefully hidden behind a pay-per-view wall. To the Major's abject horror, her own robust frame was among those advertised as “Too hot to miss, too naughty to resist!”
Her massive paws shook with the effort to not smash the laptop into a million little pieces, set it on fire, and dance on the ashes of whatever was left.

Chief Bogo wanted to put a comforting hoof around the polar bear's shoulder, but the growing anger that he saw reflected in the Major's eyes would have made a lesser mammal run for cover. Looking back to Judy to watch the way that the young doe was mothering her new partner, as the fox's eyelids grew heavier by the minute, Chief Bogo almost hated to ruin the scenic moment by smashing the last of the Major's preconceptions about their meeting today. But a mammal didn't get to be the Chief of Police for one of Zootopia's most competitive city districts by shying away from painful truths, “That was part of what Wilde stumbled across during his stay at the Academy, Lyudmila: Dr. Lapin didn't just take a 'part' in this website... he owns the whole damned thing!”

For the first time since she'd come into his office, Bogo saw Judy's ears jump up at the sudden realization of just how much the ZPD stood to lose if Dr. Lapin's adult website went public. Forgetting for a moment the catastrophic roasting that the local media would give the department for months on end should word of the website get out, dozens (if not hundreds) of families' lives would be ruined when the website's patron's started connecting the real-life officers to their salacious videos -and there was no telling how many cadets were caught unawares on those videos! Officers with decades of experience would lose their jobs for unwittingly starring in the site's tawdry 'shower scenes,' and the police department's ranks would shrink to almost nothing, overnight! Officer Hopp's looked up at the woozy fox by her side with a renewed sense of pride written all over the bunny's face as Bogo continued to press, “ Lyudmila... I need to know if you're going to work with me on this case, or against us all?”

“No...” The polar bear's angry retort came out as a barely audible hiss, but the murderous look Major Friedkin shot in Chief Bogo's direction was enough to freeze the blood in his veins, “...You don't get to call me by my first name and pretend that its the whole, happy little ZPD family against the big mean old world.” With one careful paw, the Major set down the laptop, disgust twisting her muzzle into a slow, feral growl, “You've crossed a major line with me tonight, Chief -and you aren't getting back on my good side any time soon.” Major Friedkin took one last look at the pair of junior officers cuddled up in the chairs beside her, an almost maternal look of pride crossing her tired face, “You used a cadet to do your dirty work, Marcus... to tear my house apart brick by brick, somebody that I'm supposed to be protecting from you and Lionheart's inter-office pissing match. You violated my trust, but more importantly, you may have cost this tod his one shot at a better future.” As the polar bear got to her feet, the heavy office chair behind her slammed into the wall with a deafening thud and her voice dropped to a murderous whisper, “You should be ashamed of the hell that you've put Officer Wilde through here tonight, Chief; God knows that I am.” The heavy, bronze doorknob in her paw almost snapped off in the Major's eagerness to leave Bogo's office, but she turned around any way to look the Chief in the eye one last time.

“But no, I am not going to interfere with your little witch hunt -too many people that I care about will suffer if I do.” Any spark of kindness that had glittered momentarily behind the polar bear's eyes when she looked at two of her favorite former students was smothered by the angry darkness growing in the Major's voice as she turned to face Bogo, “But Marcus, if you ever send another naive cadet to spy on the hard-working mammals that teach at my school, I am going to remind you why the Academy has only hired one mammal to teach Advanced Paw-to-Paw combat in the last nineteen years. And Mr. Buffalo... You. Are. Looking. At. Her. You don't want to see me angry, Chief.” Major Friedkin fixed the stoic cape buffalo with one last blood-chilling stare over her shoulder as she walked out, slamming his office door hard enough to crack all the glass within.

And as a hallway full of wanna-be eavesdroppers went scurrying for cover in the polar bear's turbulent wake, it was all that Bogo could do not to smile his sad, conflicted little smile of momentary triumph, before turning back to face his junior officers. Well... that certainly went better than I
thought that it would. “Officer Hopps? Would you be so kind as to remove Officer Wilde from my office and get him to the hospital before he bleeds all over the rest of my furniture? There isn't any money left over in the department's budget for redecorating this year...” Seeing the frantic, grateful smile that passed over Judy's tiny face was enough to rekindle the paternal side in the Chief's nature for a second, “You can tell me all about whatever trouble he's managed to get swept up in when you both get back to work, tomorrow morning... Dismissed!”
The very second that Officer Hopps closed the cracked glass door that led to his office, Chief Bogo let out a long-suffering sigh. The veteran officer in him didn't really care that the young bunny cop could very likely hear him breaking down from the stress of going head to head against the belligerent polar bear, Major Friedman. The Chief knew that a soft-hearted mammal like Judy Hopps would never hold a moment of weakness against her superior officer, but there were still some sides to the cape buffalo that had to remain a secret to even his most trusted detectives: The long, lonely nights spent pouring over cold case files, the endless infighting with City Hall, and the personal sacrifices of maintaining the fragile Truce between Mr. Big's thugs and the ZPD had all begun taking their toll on the seasoned officer, even before Bellwether began stoking the fires of civil war.

A lesser mammal might already have succumbed to the siren song of the twenty year old bottle of Scotch that the Chief kept in his bottom right desk drawer, to say nothing of the multitude of other vices offered by a city as diverse in its tastes as Zootopia. Bogo knew that there were reasons why the sin-peddlers of the Nocturnal District flourished, even so close to his beloved police station: he'd walked the lonely, narrow streets leading to Happytown too many times before, covered in the heady reek of cheap booze and expensive... companions. But every time the cape buffalo felt himself backsliding into the temptation to just slip away for a few hours, to just lay down -just for a moment-all the stress that came with his position as the Chief of Police for Precinct 1, all the Chief had to do was look up at the pictures tacked to his office wall.

Twenty two years of blood, sweat, and personal regrets... twenty two years of criminal take-downs, nightly terrors and professional triumphs... every professional high and personal low was enshrined on that wall in carefully arranged photos and yellowing press clippings from the Zootopian Gazette. Starting with his graduation from the ZPD academy as a fresh-faced young officer even younger than Wilde, Bogo watched as the criminals he'd collared grew bigger, the cases he solved garnered more ink in the morning paper as the criminal underworld of the great city started to genuinely fear speaking his name aloud. But now, staring back over his professional triumphs in print and a few grainy old black and white photos of the younger cape buffalo shaking the Mayor's paw in front of City Hall, Chief Bogo could all too easily count the personal cost of his rise within the ranks of the ZPD.

The candid family snap-shots that colored his early career in ridiculously bright Polaroid hues began to dwindle in number and happiness as the years pressed on: His marriage to Malika, with Bogo proudly wearing his dress blues, gave way to his daughter, Neesha's first steps, followed by a few candid snapshots of her walking across various school stages, her smile shining for all to see. Year after year, his seat got further and further away, while Malika always sat in the front row. But, as he began to climb the ranks of the ZPD, Bogo saw fewer colorful moments with his family, the photos stretching farther and farther apart on his wall. The growing chasm between him and her mother, Malika came on subtly at first, but the divorce last year was only the final round in a 15 round fight that they'd been stuck in since he made Chief so many years ago. In the end, the only bright photo left on this end of his wall was a full page clipping of “the triumphant return of Officer Hopps” to
arrest Dawn Bellwether inside the Natural History museum earlier this year. Even now, Bogo could see the smug face of the fox standing just a step behind Judy, hiding in the shadows left by the spotlight surrounding her. Wilde seemed to like standing behind her, watching the bunny succeed... a sacrifice, he gladly made.

Those two are going to be the death of me yet. After twelve years as Precinct One's police chief, Bogo was a mammal accustomed to grappling with his doubts, but Major Friedkin's parting shot about “witch hunts” at the Academy had hit the cape buffalo a little close to his heart. Hopps is far too smart and headstrong for her own good. And Wilde? What godawful mess have you gotten us all mixed up in this time, fox? Could this little stunt with Wilde be just another fox pulling a long con to embarrass the ZPD or the mayor's office? Maybe, but the veteran officer's gut told him that this fox was on the level, and had been since helping Officer Hopps secure Lionheart's arrest. Bogo didn't know what had passed between the bunny cop and her new fox partner during their off hours, but the Chief knew a changed mammal when he saw one... and Wilde's accidental “discovery” of Dr. Lapin's sordid 'extracurricular' activities showed that the fox had solid instincts for field work. Finding a new lead on the whereabouts of Doug Ramses, the last member of Bellwether's criminal syndicate had been another amazing catch for the former con-mammal. Given a little time, and a lot of professional encouragement from his fellow officers, Nicholas Wilde might just make a decent cop some day- if Mayor Lionheart didn't bury them all for this mess at the Academy, first.

With a derisive swipe of his hoof, Bogo 'accidentally' knocked down the Mayor's picture from his office wall, only to toss the smooth-talking lion's picture into the trash can next to his desk, where it belonged. If nothing else, the Chief could blame Major Friedkin's last outburst for removing that last little eye sore from his otherwise pristine wall. Outside of an election year, City Hall had never been the Precinct 1’s biggest fan, and the sentiment was uniformly shared by most of City Center's veteran officers: Mayor Lionheart loved to take credit for the precinct's victories and to double down on ridiculing career officers like Bogo every time something went wrong with a big case.

Bogo's arrest of the embarrassed lion on live television -and subsequent backing of Bellwether's public takeover of her former boss's political station earlier this year- had turned the cold war of subtle rivalry between Precinct 1 and City Hall into a daily grudge match to which the press had a ringside seat. And now, the whole Academy may feel 'the pinch' if Lionheart gets wind of this nasty business between Wilde and Dr. Lapin. These were the times that Bogo devoutly missed the simple joys of walking the beat, when the only thing that the young cape buffalo had to worry about was catching criminals like Lionheart and letting the higher-ups worry about the political fallout. If anything, this was one thing that made the older, wiser chief want to look out after young officers like Hopps and Wilde- there was so very much that could happen to derail a promising career, or ruin an otherwise happy marriage. Bogo had seen more than his share of both, even watched as his marriage went down in flames as he learned to play 'the Game' of city politics the hard way, and the stalwart old cape buffalo would be damned before he let an outsider like Dr. Lapin or Mayor Lionheart corrupt any more of his best recruits.

Chief Bogo was still looking down at the ruddy new stain on his office rug and ruefully shaking his massive muzzle when he heard the commotion begin down below in the ZPD's entrance hall. Nobody who had been privy to that last meeting with the angry polar bear would be surprised to hear Major Friedkin's frustrated roar echoing up from the lobby, but when another polar bear answered it with his own battle cry seconds later half the precinct ducked for cover. Even the ZPD's unofficial welcoming committee, the normally unflappable cheetah, Benjamin Clawhauser came screeching around the corner and running straight towards the safety and security of Bogo's shadow, “Chie-e-e-e-e-chaaaa! You gotta come see this!” What the beleaguered cape buffalo wouldn't give for five uninterrupted minutes of peace and tranquility this morning!

“Clawhauser... NOT. NOW!” The Chief bellowed through the cracked glass facade of his office
door, but the cape buffalo knew his command would fall on deaf ears. Ever since he had
“accidentally” discovered Chief Bogo seeking out over a certain Gazelle phone app that they'd both
bought in secret, Clawhauser had fearlessly stuck to the Chief's side like glue. In a less complicated
world, Bogo might have even enjoyed the camaraderie of the younger officer who shared his
unorthodox tastes in music. But how do you tell a chatty little cheetah like Clawhauser that the only
reason you started listening to the little horned diva in the first place was so you'd have something
more to talk with your estranged daughter than her fumbling through classes at university or her
mother's monthly complaint about the child support payments being late again?

The chief knew that he was grasping at straws talking with his daughter every week about this
Gazelle business, but the alternative was to never hear his beautiful daughter, Neesha's booming
laughter at her father's silly, fanboy antics again. What father wouldn't make a fool out of himself in
front of the whole world, just to make such a wonderful daughter smile? The Chief was still
straightening a prized picture that he'd stolen in to take of her high school graduation with a
telescoping lens when the flabby cheetah slid past his office door, huffing and puffing like he'd just
run a marathon. Hanging next to a grainy Polaroid snapshot of his own graduation for the ZPD
Academy twenty plus years ago, Bogo had to admire the symmetry between the two proudest
moments of his life... everybody had assured Bogo that he'd never live long enough to see either one.
I'm sorry, Chief... if only we'd caught this sooner... As it is, you'd best make good use of whatever
time you have left... Are you sure you don't want us to inform your family? There's still time...

“Clawhauser... if this isn't the end of the world as we know it, downstairs, then you're going to be
writing parking tickets until even your spots turn gray...” There, you go! Stay right where I can keep
an eye on you, baby girl! “And I will personally pay every doughnut shop in Zootopia to never sell
you so much as a crumb again, so long as you live!” Though Chief Bogo's voice never rose above
his normal, authoritative growl, you'd have found more warmth skinny-dipping in Tundratown
during a blizzard. First step in controlling your staff: establish a benevolent, but ironclad authority as
the Alpha mammal in any room you enter. Bogo could see the normally excitable cheetah deflate as
he weighed the importance of his interruption versus the nightmarish prospect of a life without
doughnuts. As the precinct's commanding officer, Bogo was not without sympathy for the poor
feline's awkward predicament, but Neesha was supposed to be calling any minute for their weekly
father-daughter chat and he didn't want miss that for anything less than a bomb scare somewhere in
the building. Second step: offer an olive branch of understanding once they remember that your
office is not some local watering hole that they can just blunder into without a moment's notice!

“Benjamin... will you please just tell me what is going on, downstairs -and who I need to arrest,
taser, or promote to get a little peace and quiet around here? It's already been one hell of a morning
around here...”

“Um, Chief? I don't think your day's gonna get any easier...” Bogo watched the nervous cat blush as
Clawhauser stared down at his boss' feet, only to look up slowly at the increasingly confused cape
buffalo with an unspoken question in his sad eyes. Why are you looking at me like that, Benjamin?
Don't tell me that bull you were seeing got himself deported back to the Old World. There is literally
nothing I could do about that, my friend. I told you as much after the concert.... “You see, Major
Friedkin is downstairs and she's kind of... wrestling with another polar bear who was on his way into
the station when she was heading out...” Bogo smacked his forehead with one massive hoof. The
Major must have been more upset than I thought. Today was already turning into one for the record
books and it wasn't even noon yet!

While instructors from the Academy weren't officers under his supervision per se, Bogo had no
doubt that Lionheart would jump at this latest opportunity to criticize the cape buffalo's ability to
control the officers under his roof. And, if the Zootopia press caught wind of the growing schism
between Wilde and Dr. Lapin, the wily young lion at City Hall might have just enough pull to oust
his older rival from his position as chief of police. “Judy- I mean, Officer Hopps sent me up here to
get you because they're kinda making a mess of the lobby downstairs, what with all the growling, the clawing, and the destruction of public property...” At least somebody in this precinct knows how to keep a level head in a crises! But if Hopps is down there, directing traffic, so to speak- then where is her shifty, new partner?

“And what, may I ask, is Officer Wilde doing during this whole fiasco?” Chief Bogo was already moving in the big cat's direction, straightening his tie as his face fell back into a carefully constructed facade of professional disinterest, mixed with a few telltale spots of polite, albeit personal curiosity. On the surface, the Chief might as well have been asking the chatty cheetah in the room if he knew the final scores to last night's baseball game. Just below the surface, Bogo was about three steps from a blind panic, the dawning suspicion of just who the polar bear was that Major Friedkin had attacked resting like a stone in his already uneasy gut. There were literally dozens of polar bears in the city making an honest living for every one working as a cop or a mob enforcer for Mr. Big, but the odds of Major Friedkin wrestling with either a civilian or another cop were next to none. My luck cannot possibly be this bad today! Suddenly, a little bad press and his petty feud with City Hall seemed like the least of Chief Bogo's problems.

“Um, last I saw of him, Wilde was sitting on my desk... offering three to one odds on Major Friedkin breaking out of the other polar bear's choke hold, sir.” Chief Bogo's jaw threatened to hit the floor for a moment, before the cape buffalo manually lifted it back into its normal, tight-lipped grimace. Yep, they are definitely going to be the death of me... if I don't strangle that fox first! With surprisingly gentle hooves, the cape buffalo lifted the flustered cheetah standing between him and the office door, pivoting gracefully to set Clawhauser's hind paws down somewhere other than the blood-stained center of his office rug. Then the cape buffalo twisted his neck and cracked his knuckles like a boxer about to take his shot at the title fight.

“Benjamin, would you mind telling my daughter that I'll call her back? Right now, I have a possible double homicide to investigate on my own doorstep.”

* ~ * ~ *

“We are going to fix this, my son. I am going to fix this,” Bogo was too busy leaning off the second floor balcony, bellowing for the two of the greenest officers under his command, to notice the blush creeping up Clawhauser's furry cheeks at being so easily 'handled' by the burly cape buffalo in the room. The chief also missed the lust-struck way that the fluffy cheetah was staring at the unsuspecting cape buffalo's finely chiseled backside and angrily swishing tail. Benjamin knew that he shouldn't be ogling the Chief's muscular calves, but there was just something so irresistibly masculine about a take-charge kind of mammal, especially when they could bench press a small hippo -or even a certain plus sized feline with a weakness for all things pastry! Clawhauser could almost hear his mother's gentle reproach ringing in his ears, “Mijo, listen... Powerfully built mammals like that spend all their time off in the gym, Benjamin... they lift heavy weights, they don't date them, sweetie.” It was like being trusted to lock up the world's tastiest doughnut shoppe, every night, but never being able to taste any of the sinfully sweetness on display. Just thinking about his nightly daydreams of the chief made Clawhauser want to crawl into a box of donuts and never come back out.

Oh, mama- why are the good ones always so clueless?!? A small part of Benjamin wanted to continue staring for hours, memorizing every taut line and sculpted curve of the cape buffalo's muscular profile, just in case the Chief ever caught onto the chatty cheetah's little office crush. Bad kitty, down kitty- he's just a friend, Benjamin Clawhauser! And you will treat him as such... as such a
handsome young specimen of bovine perfection! Oooohhh, such a bad kitty! The rest of Clawhauser knew that his crush was never going to turn out the way that he hoped every time that the two mammals crossed paths. Fernando had said it best, just before the young bull got back on the plane for the Old World, “You're very sweet, my little doughnut detective, but I'm not interested in being a stand-in for the mammal you really want.” Their last kiss had been everything that Benjamin hated when it ended: bittersweet, coldly formal, and almost platonic. So, the fluffy cheetah turned away from watching the clueless cape buffalo for the thirteenth time this month to sit beside his phone and wait.

“Sure, Chief, whatever you need me to do... I'm your cat!” If only dreaming made it true...

* ~ * ~ *

Chief Bogo's hind hooves had barely touched down on the mezzanine between floors before his worst fears came to life: Major Friedkin was indeed in a life or death struggle with one of Mr. Big's goons, and from the exhausted look in her eyes as his strong grip tightened into a headlock around her throat- she was losing. It confused and alarmed the veteran officer to see that Judy's paws were closed over her little bunny eyes, while the rest of the officers in the lobby were hooting and hollering like schoolchildren on a field trip. Somehow, Wilde has to be at the root of all this chaos, I just know it!

It didn't take long to find her new fox partner, either: Wilde was playing referee -and part time bookie- not three feet from the wrestling polar bears, a manic smile plastered to his long muzzle, like the ZPD's new fox knew something he was keeping from every other mammal in the room!

“Alright, Lucy... Let's show these animals why we still salute when call you 'Major Friedkin!'” Bogo was still reaching out for the embattled Major when her eyes shot up a territorial glance in his direction, stopping the cape buffalo in his tracks. She's... She's been faking this the whole time?!! To the Chief's utter confusion, Major Friedkin dipped down into the choke hold, letting the larger bear exert even more weight from above as she found herself a lower center of gravity. Then, with a fierce growl, the Major erupted, carrying the other polar bear skyward as she performed the mother of all power lifts, easily carrying Mr. Big's goon high into the air, before slamming the poor polar bear mercilessly into the lobby's marble tiles. This time, Bogo's jaw wasn't the only one scraping the floor as Major Friedkin put one massive hind paw down on her rival's chest in triumph. Every police mammal in the lobby but Hopps and Wilde stood there in silent awe of the Major's stamina and strength for a few precious seconds. Then came the unholy caterwauling of a a dozen different species of mammal all growling and cheering at the same time. Even the elephants on duty were trumpeting their trunks in salute as the Major took her victory lap around the ZPD lobby, complete with a few hearty paw shakes from those officers smart enough to follow the unofficial ZPD tradition of “always betting on blue.”

“Thank you, thank you, you are too kind! And remember folks, the 9:30 show is completely different from the 7:30 show, so come back out and see us again real soon!” Those officers who fell for the Major's 'overwhelmed' performance walked past Officer Wilde in a slow single file, leaving a fair mountain of money inside of his officer's cap as they slid drearily back out onto their morning patrols. More than a few dirty looks and a little murderous muttering was aimed in the fox's general direction, but Wilde was too busy paying out a pawful of today's winners to notice the Chief's approaching shadow until it covered the former con-mammal completely. It wasn't until one of Bogo's massive hooves came to rest on the fox's shoulder and squeezed down ruthlessly, that Nicholas Wilde knew his luck had finally run out.
“Officer Wilde... should I take it that you had something to do with this little wrestling match?” Chief Bogo felt the terrified fox freeze up in his grip, a small part of him reveling at the sudden, wordless terror that grew behind the junior officer's eyes as his Chief slowly turned the fox to meet his stony gaze. “And that, in what can only be described as a fit of total lunacy, you decided to stage this little circus attraction on MY doorstep? TODAY OF ALL DAYS??” Chief Bogo was expecting an apologetic young officer, perhaps even some snide reply about the fox's inability to pass up a good business opportunity when he saw it come begging for attention. What Chief Bogo got was something else entirely: Nick yelped in actual pain as he fell, scooting backward away from the cape buffalo on his tail with true terror written into every line on the young fox's face. Bogo pulled back his hoof like it had caught fire, but the Chief's concern was for the usually flippant fox staring up at him with gold-rimmed eyes, his furry orange chest rising and falling in panicked little gasps. Bogo had seen that broken, terrified look before on the faces of dozens of battered children and more than a few women during domestic violence calls, but he'd never seen that same horror etched into another officer's face until that very morning. *What did they DO to you, fox?*

Chief Bogo was still looking down at his hoof like it wasn't even a part of his body any more when Judy put herself directly between her partner and her boss, “Easy now, Chief. Nick just had a... a bit of a rough night last night.” The bunny's voice was kept calm and level, but Chief Bogo suspected that that had more to do with calming her panicked partner than appeasing any anger in the cape buffalo that towered above them both. “And the whole thing with Major Friedkin just sort of happened on its own, but he -that is, WE thought that the best thing we could do was keep all the smaller mammals out from under foot while Lucy and the other polar bear worked out their -um- differences?” There was something familiar in the weird way that Nick's hand sought out the scruff of his neck when he was scared, something that tugged at the Chief's memory: something about the way Wilde kept digging his claws deeper and deeper into his winter coat as he sucked in air by the mouthful, tearing at the skin underneath with one paw, even as he took Judy's hand with the other. “When it looked like things might get a little out of hand, I asked Clawhauser to come find you... just in case?” Bogo had seen a golden-eyed young fox with the same nervous tick somewhere before, somewhere that left a bad taste in the Chief's mouth, even to this day. *A young fox with golden eyes, I know that I saw or read something about that... But where?*

“Owwwwwwwww.” A grumbling, apologetic sound from the marble floor at Major Friedkin's feet pried the Chief's attention away from his injured officer for a second, “I think -perhaps- this is mostly my fault, herr Chief.” Somehow, the polar bear wearing an expensive, velveteen track suit managed to sound contrite, even with Major Friedkin half standing on his chest. “I was sent in to find out if fox and bunny were at work, when they stopped answering their phones...” Major Friedkin turned to give the Chief another dirty, challenging look, but his attention was back on the wide-eyed fox still hiding behind his bunny partner. “I had not expected to find this intoxicating young flower here as well... I may have over-reacted to her challenge when I tried to open door for her, but what is life, without a little risk?” Major Friedkin's smile grew, even as Bogo's own patience

“Where are my manners, Carrots??!” 3,2,1... *Here comes the wind up and the pitch!* Diving back into his game show mammal persona as he stepped around his bunny partner, Nick recovered just a little too quickly for Bogo to be completely sold on the fox's performance, “Chief Bogo, Major Friedkin... let me introduce you both to Kevin Kameroff, part of the Kameroff family trio of polar bears, local entrepreneurs one and all.” Major Friedkin's smile grew, even as Bogo's own patience
waned, but the Chief did extend a hand to help pull the polar bear back to his feet. 'Local entrepreneur' had long been street slang for a mammal working for the most notorious mob boss in Tundratown, -since the Don made many of his lieutenants independently wealthy by having them 'buy-in' to the legitimate businesses that laundered the mobster's money each week. Still... Part of maintaining the Truce was extending professional courtesy to Mr. Big's goon squad, even after Bellwether tried to split the city in two, but Bogo couldn't remember another time that one of Mr. Big's lieutenants had ever willingly walked into the police station... Looking for a bunny and her new fox partner? Things must be well and truly getting out of hand around here, but what does this have to do with Hopps and Wilde... and why didn't Officer Hopps need an introduction to one of the most feared leg-breakers on the Don's payroll?

“Oh, no need for introductions, Officer Wilde. I've been following his... work for a long time now.” In the missing mammal files, the obituary pages, and the morgue, and almost exclusively in that order. This time, it was Kevin Kameroff who surprised Bogo, shaking his extended hoof in earnest, even if the mobster's grip could shatter a bowling ball. Bogo looked on in mute fascination as a face that almost never smiled stretched into as genuine an imitation of one as the polar bear could manage. Missing mammals... Kameroff! We took a younger polar bear named Kameroff into custody when he went savage during Hopps' missing mammal case... a brother, or cousin, maybe? Either way, he should be shaking Hopps' paw rather than mine... then again, he might leave the bunny in traction if he tried.

“As I am... familiar with yours, herr Chief. Your name carries weight, even in my... social circles.” Like many of the larger predators in the Don's employ, Kevin Kameroff was used to being at the top of the proverbial food chain in any room he entered, whenever his boss wasn't there to personally supervise the operation. Though he may have just lost a wrestling match to the Academy's lead instructor, Major Friedkin, the young mobster was ecstatic with his ability to turn even this loss into a firm possibility of a later rematch, preferably some place with fewer cops watching them, and -dare he hope- even fewer clothes to get in the polar bears' way? This happy thought led the large polar bear to be far too comfortable meeting Bogo's analytical gaze, and far too lax in looking down to see the silent terror growing on the faces of the smaller mammals standing by his side. As Bogo stood there, trying to puzzle out why one of Mr. Big's leg breakers would be looking for two of his greenest cadets, Judy and Nick were both trying to divert the polar bear from his dangerous course by loudly coughing in his general direction, “Miss Judy often speaks... volumes in her appreciation for your support and leadership during the missing mammals case, whenever she comes to visit Mrs. Fru Fru and the baby.” Wide-eyed with terror and shame as they looked up frantically to meet Chief Bogo's intimidating stare, the bunny and her new fox partner were already far, far too late to derail this train.

“Does she, now?” At first, Bogo's disapproving shadow fell heavily over the two young officers that had so recently turned his world upside down. But, looking at the way that Judy's crestfallen eyes grew ever wider, even as she silently mouthed the words, “I'm so, so sorry, sir...” and the way that Nicholas Wilde stepped forward to take the blame off of her small, trembling shoulders, something in Bogo's brain swept back to Neesha, like it did more and more these days. His daughter was crying on their weekly video chat from the University, her beautiful young face twisted up by the kind of terrified, gushing sobbing that children save for those moments when they are certain that the next words out of their little mouths are going to turn their parents into fire-spewing dragons of insinuation and condemnation, “Daddy, please don't be mad...I know that I've already taken all of these courses, and I know they cost a lot of money, but I just don't want to be a cop, any more... I am so, so sorry!”

In so many ways, Neesha was the polar opposite of the bunny-sized pain in his tail that was about to start sobbing on the Chief's feet –she drifted between majors like a ship set adrift, without a star or a sail to guide her– but they both got this silent little hitch in their voices when they were trying not to cry, like the tears were an angry river about to burst through cracks in the dam just outside of town.
Maybe I could get Hopps to give a speech or something in one of her classes, something to rekindle
the passion that used to make Neesha talk like she was going to soar some day? She’d know I was
meddling then... but it might be worth it, in the end? It was all so pointless, all the fear and the
crippling self-doubt that Chief Bogo saw so clearly etched into both of their young faces, but how do
you get through to a mammal who has convinced themselves that you are suddenly about to start
hating them with every fiber of your being? At least, they'd both know that I cared... “Don't care.”

It was a definite guilty pleasure for the Chief to watch Nicholas Wilde's jaw scrape the lobby floor,
even as Judy stared at the cape buffalo, dumbfounded, “Officer Hopps! I thought I told you to get
your new partner to the hospital before he bleeds all over my nice, clean precinct. Does this look like
Zootopia General to you??” To his surprise, Chief Bogo felt the speechless young bunny rush up to
hug his leg in a rare moment of genuine, almost familiar gratitude, before she started leading the
injured fox toward the car pool out back. She even looked back over one shoulder, with happy tears
welling up in the corners of her eyes, to silently mouth the words, “Thank you, Chief!” as they
slipped around the corner and back out of sight. They'd have still have plenty of time to talk after the
shift change, and Bogo was certain that the young bunny would have some amazing stories to tell.
Nick was staggering so badly leaving the station that Francine had to help Judy gently lift Nick into the passenger seat of her squad car. “I'm sorry, Judy... Bogo made me promise to tell him the moment you and Wilde showed up.” Francine looked so grief-stricken for ratting out her friend to their boss that Judy had to stop and give the elephant's leg a reassuring hug before her trunk lifted Judy into the driver's seat that Bogo had special-made to fit the small bunny. Judy pretended not to see the meaningful glance between her new partner and the powerfully built senior officer, or the heart-broken way that Francine shrugged her massive shoulders when she looked down at her feet as Nick whispered, softly, “He'll come around, Trunks... if he's worth it.” As she turned back towards the Precinct's loading dock, Francine muttered something that even Judy's superb hearing could not make out, but the ashen look on her face said she'd all but given up hope on her mystery man at this stage. Nick had been right, even if he hadn't been terribly forthcoming when Judy pressed him for more details on the heart-broken elephant earlier: some secrets just weren't her fox's to share...

Driving back through the mid-morning traffic made the bunny feel like a trout trying to swim back upstream against the current, but she and Nick started making good time once they passed the overloaded ramps leading to the Nocturnal District. For his part, her fox seemed content to watch the world outside his window pass them by, but even half-lidded, Nick's eyes never left Judy's reflection in his window for very long. He was studying her face, looking for some hopeful sign that she might have forgiven him for going along with Bogo's insane investigation of Dr. Lapin's ulterior motives, but Judy felt the tired resignation radiating off of her fox's shoulders in waves. “...Judy? I-I didn't want to keep this a secret from you. The Chief... Bogo said I couldn't let you or Major Friedkin know about Dr. Lapin before today or we'd risk the whole investigation...” When he finally summoned up the nerve to speak to her, Nick's heavyhearted apology practically died on his lips.

Judy almost ran her shiny new police cruiser up onto the sidewalk, she was grinding her back teeth so hard, but the young bunny still didn't speak to her distraught fox until they pulled up into the parking lot for Zootopia General, “Nick, I want to let this slide, I really do... but I can't! Lying by omission is still lying to me -and that was the one thing I asked you to never do to me again...” Her heart hammering in her chest, Judy gripped the steering wheel in front of her with both paws and held on for dear life, “Even with Bogo breathing down your neck, you could have still come to me, told me something... Anything about what you were up against!” Nick's face fell, but the terrified, frantic look in Judy's soft amethyst eyes held his gaze, “You could have told me what was going on with you before Major Friedman came looking for a piece of your hide. You're supposed to be my partner, now, Slick- we could have worked this out together! What on earth were you thinking?!?”

Then, Judy saw it: the pensive, persistent clawing at the scruff of his neck, the defeated way Nick's shoulders collapsed inward like a burnt-out building, the subtle way that he slid back behind the familiar protection of those damned aviator shades like she couldn't read the shameful resignation in his eyes. You've been waiting for me to get angry enough to walk away this whole time, haven't you, Slick? Well, tough luck, partner... for better or worse, you're stuck with this dumb, country bunny-bad temper and all! Nick actually pulled his paw just out of Judy's reach the first time she reached...
out for him, but the bunny was nothing if not persistent, and right now, Judy wanted to show her fox that she wasn't running anywhere without Nick right there by her side. “Nick... I'm sorry. I know that you were trying to do the right thing, that you were trying to protect the ZPD from this nasty business with Dr. Lapin... I just don't want to lose my new partner, my best friend, and my favorite fox all in the same day.” Judy marveled at how blissfully small her paw seemed, sitting on top of Nick's, and how gently her fox intertwined his fingers with hers as Judy continued breathing out the day's frustrations, just so she could drown herself in his cinnamon and whiskey sweet scent. The woman in Judy hated to break from such a sweet, intimate moment, even as the detective inside her asked the one question that could ruin everything, “Nick, why did Bogo want me kept off of this case?”

Nick's face split in a self-conscious grin, his broad shoulders shaking with a deep, resigned sigh, “Bogo didn't want you off the case, Carrots. He wanted to send you back to the Academy that first night, sirens blazing... but I talked him out of it.” Judy's jaw would have scraped the ground if she hadn't been sitting in the driver's seat of her new cruiser. Nick pulled me off the case, before there even was a case? “Please save all punching of the fox until this conversation has come to a complete stop...” Judy's silence turned icy as she looked up at the joking fox, but the smell of fresh blood on Nick's claws kept distracting her, “What do you remember about the 'fruit of the poisoned tree,' Carrots?” When he saw how closely Judy was watching him, Nick stopped scratching the back of his neck and carefully put his paws flat on the dash. You know I'm onto you, Slick... Just tell me, already.

“They taught us about that on my first day at the Academy- a bad bust or investigation leads to all the evidence seized afterward being brought into question.” With one nervous paw, Judy smoothed down her ears, letting the frustration with her fox -and this whole situation- wash over her and down into the floorboards of her new cruiser. But, what does that have to do with Dr. Lapin's awful website... or me? Just this once, Judy couldn't stop her nose from trembling. There had already been so many surprises dropped into her lap today, -her nerves were as raw as a freshly peeled potato- and it looked like Nick might have saved the worst for last... “It's supposed to keep a cop from letting things get too personal on a case- and it's also the number one reason why judges throw criminal cases out of court. What does this have to do with you benching me, Slick?”

Nick was staring at his paws, willing them to stay still when all they wanted to do was twitch... and the sheer effort that that took scared them both. Still, the fox's voice was calmer as he continued, “The main thing that makes a bust or investigation go bad is when the cop in question has a personal stake in its outcome: some personal axe to grind, some way to profit from the arrest...” Nick finally lifted his green and gold gaze to meet hers, and Judy hated the fear that she saw reflected there, “…Or someone they want to protect.” Judy slowly did the math while Nick looked out the window as ambulances raced by, the red tinge from their paint jobs casting eerie shadows across his troubled face. Nick risked everything -graduating from the academy, his second chance at a new life- to protect me? From Dr. Lapin?!? Slick, I don't need to be protected, unless... Lapin had photos of me, too. Suddenly Judy felt about twelve inches tall, thinking over the way she'd yelled at her new partner for wanting to sacrifice everything to protect her dream. Again. “Carrots, I didn't 'take you off the case'... You are the case. Lapin may be selling a few grainy videos of the other female cadets, but he has a few hundred pictures and videos of you... Eating. Sleeping. Doing... less innocent bunny things. The rabbit is clearly obsessed with you.”

Something hard and cold settled into the bunny's belly when Judy heard how the old jackrabbit's once helpful interest in his 'prized pupil' had soured into something far less wholesome. Ever since she and Nick had cracked the Bellwether case, perverted 'fans' like Lapin had been coming out of the woodwork, all wanting more of the little bunny than she was willing (or even able) to give. “And you know all of this, because…” Judy was surprised to hear how far away and frigid her voice seemed, even to her own ears, but Nick's slow, sweet smile warmed her all the way down to her
toes. She was still there, still sitting beside him, when he obviously thought she would blame him, leave him... maybe, even hate him? Oh, Slick, somebody must have hurt you pretty bad if you think I would ever hate you like that! “...Because you saw those pictures too, didn't you, partner?” Her fox had the good grace to bite his lip, swallowing whatever glib answer might have come rolling off his silver tongue, and slowly nodded his head while looking bashfully at his feet. And you liked what you saw, even if it makes things awkward between us, huh, Slick? That tells me exactly what kind of photos Lapin has to use against me, at least! But... how would he have caught her doing 'less innocent things?' Judy had always been so careful to find an empty shower or some other deserted hiding place when the pressure from being so far from home got to be too much for the eager little bunny.

The idea of another mammal seeing her... naked and exposed like at, even another rabbit made her skin crawl under her fur in a thousand unpleasant ways. Somehow, Nick had become the exception to that rule: knowing that her fox had seen her in the buff thrilled the young bunny in some dark corner of her soul, instead. “Only by accident, from a distance and over Lapin's shoulder... But, yes, I saw them, Judy.” The way Nick's claws dug a little deeper into the pristine coating of the cruiser's dash when he used her name thrilled the bunny in unspeakable ways, but the self-loathing that Judy saw in her fox's downcast eyes as he confessed to seeing her naked without her consent made her heart throb painfully, deep down in her chest. Nick's voice shrank to almost a whisper, as the fox continued his sad confession, “Turns out, my little hidey hole in the library shared an open vent with Dr. Lapin's office... I didn't even know he was there that night until I saw the bunny paw prints in the paint over the predator's dorm.”

But if Dr. Lapin wrote the message, why did Nick risk falling twenty feet and getting EXPELLED to cover it all back up? “After that, it wasn't too hard to follow the smell of turpentine down into the basement, but even I didn't know what I was going to find...”

As the blood rushed up her body, painting the inside of Judy's ears in scarlet undertones of embarrassment and arousal, the young doe audibly fumbled in her search for a way to change the subject before Nick's nose told him just how 'grateful' she was feeling at the moment, “S-So, how does this all trace back to the angry young elephant and Otterton's niece, Susanne?” Nick certainly wasn't helping matters by running one of his claws in deft, lazy circles over her tiny wrist. “His dyslexia made a proper mess of the rest, but he recognized Bellwether's name and came running to get me and Silke -and you can guess how well that all worked out.” Nick took a brief moment to look up the hospital, his eyes growing wide with some unspoken fear as he stared, almost willing himself to walk back through the hospital's elephant-sized front doors, but all the fox got for his efforts was a cold chill running down his spine that even Judy could feel. “No, the thing with Silke started a couple of weeks before midterms...”

“Oh, Herbert was just grabbing a midnight snack when he saw what Dr. Lapin had spray painted over the dorms. Some fox who shall remain nameless might have taught him how to open the locks on the kitchen fridges without getting caught...” Judy rolled her eyes when Nick took a moment to straighten his tie -made her new partner look more like a game show host than a cop, but it always made Nick smile his goofiest grin. “His dyslexia made a proper mess of the rest, but he recognized Bellwether's name and came running to get me and Silke -and you can guess how well that all worked out.” Nick took a brief moment to look up the hospital, his eyes growing wide with some unspoken fear as he stared, almost willing himself to walk back through the hospital's elephant-sized front doors, but all the fox got for his efforts was a cold chill running down his spine that even Judy could feel. “No, the thing with Silke started a couple of weeks before midterms...”

“You see, Silke's way of handling all the stress that the Academy puts on its cadets was to swim her way out. I don't know if it was an 'otter' thing to help Silke clear her head or if she was just trying to get stronger before the final physical trials, but Susanne practically lived in the Academy pools after hours.” Nick took a moment to look his partner right in the eye, his favorite shades sliding halfway down his exhausted muzzle. He's so tired, but he still can't or won't sleep without me there to keep an eye on him... “Then, Silke comes to see me one day, saying that she found something weird in one of the upstairs pools: a 'contact lens' that's bigger and thicker than any she'd ever seen before. She actually thought it belonged to one of the elephants, but they're not big swimmers if you know
“what I mean?” The pictures on Lapin’s hard drive! I’m betting that wasn’t a contact lens at all... “...It was the lens from an underwater camera -the expensive kind that you'd have to build and install yourself. Little did I know it at the time, but Dr. Lapin installed all the Academy’s security cameras, himself. He must've saved a few odds and ends for that damned website of his...”

“But, if Silke and Hoofstedder knew about what Dr. Lapin was up to, then why didn't you get them to help you bring down Dr. Lapin?” Nick turned to look back out of his window, but Judy could see the self-conscious look come back into his eyes. She even saw her fox try to claw at the back of his neck for a moment, before Nick realized that she was watching him like a hawk, again. You didn't tell them, either, did you, Slick? Is there anybody you trust around here, anymore, partner? Judy didn't have to think too long to realize that Finnick's departure the morning prior had left her sitting alone atop what had already been a pretty short list. Judy didn't even know if Bogo or Koslov and Mr. Big had ever really earned her fox's trust, but she had to admit that there was something going on there between Nick and each of them. “So, why didn't you go to the other cadets or even Major Friedman, Slick?”

A frustrated sigh broke through Nick's lips as his paws hit the dashboard a lot harder this time, “Carrots, who could I go to? Silke's a sweetheart, but she's better off not knowing that she's on Dr. Lapin's little website. Herbert's got a bad habit of dangling his teachers off of the roof when he gets mad, and he would have been furious to see Susanne so broken-hearted...” This time, there was nothing sexy about the way Nick's claws bit into the varnish on her shiny new dashboard. “You saw Major Friedkin, she practically thinks the guy eats glitter and craps rainbows! And Dr. Lapin helped train half the cops at Precinct 1, yourself included.” Nick's next words came out as barely a reluctant whisper, like the first, tattered birdsong to split the sky the morning after a hurricane, “I was all alone on this one, Carrots... you and everybody else inside the ZPD that I knew who might believe me was already compromised.”

Nick's shades slipped down his muzzle even further, the sheer exhaustion of the past two days grinding the fox down to a blurry shadow of his former self. “That's why I called Chief Bogo: he was the only cop I knew who went through the Academy before Dr. Lapin signed on. I needed somebody who wouldn't believe me, a diehard, old-school cop who wouldn't stop until he uncovered the ugly truth.” Slowly, Judy slid closer, pulling the shades from her fox's trembling muzzle so she could see the pain reflected in his tearful, golden eyes. “I knew how much he wanted me to be wrong, to be just another fox pulling a long con, but when the evidence started mounting up, even the Chief had to start believing in what I had to say.” Her paw touching his was sweet, electric relief, soothing the fox's aching heart, even if his voice still shook as he brought his confession to a close, “It took him weeks to find two veteran officers that he trusted who were willing to come and quietly sweep Dr. Lapin's hard drive. My name, much less the fact that I was a fox, was never to be mentioned: I was simply listed as 'a confidential informant within the Academy' but I still felt like a rat, the whole time I was there...”

Judy's paw rose to gently stroke her partner's cheek, trying to gently shake the fear that tugged at the bunny's heart without full on kissing away her fox's sadness in the very public parking lot of the local hospital. “But Nick, why is Dr. Lapin trying to get your graduation revoked, if he never knew it was you? Why does he have you on video, breaking into his office the day before finals, if Chief Bogo already had evidence against him?” The gentle warmth that Judy saw reflected in her fox’s eyes did very little to stem the cold chill that swept up the bunny's spine when she heard Nick's response.

“Carrots, if Dr. Lapin didn't try to get my graduation revoked, Chief Bogo wouldn't have had legal grounds to investigate Dr. Lapin in the first place.” All Nick could do was shrug, slightly, as the world she knew shifted out from under Judy's feet: Nick had goaded Dr. Lapin into attacking him, so that he could save her reputation and that of the rest of the young women officers at the ZPD. And,
in doing so, Dr. Lapin had exposed himself to a legal investigation, just as assuredly as Major Friedkin and Chief Bogo would have to investigate Nick before he could be put back on active duty. The whole sordid, convoluted mess was either the most chivalrous thing that Judy had ever heard of, or the craziest, quickest case of career suicide in ZPD history. Maybe both. *It's called a hustle, sweetheart.*

Judy's mind rebelled when she tried to unravel the case any further, but she just had to know why her fox would go to such crazy lengths to get back at Dr. Lapin -even given the jackrabbit's filthy website, “Nick, what impossible thing did Chief Bogo promise you if you pulled this whole, crazy hustle off?” Again, Nick tried to nervously claw at the back of his neck, but Judy held his paw tightly in hers until her fox looked the young bunny right in the eyes. “What could you possibly get out of this to make all this madness worthwhile?”

Nick leaned in close to his bunny, like a kit going to his first confession, before he finally spoke, “I get you, Judy -free and clear: all the pictures and videos that Lapin took when you weren't looking are going to be erased and your name will be officially removed from the case.” Nick looked deep into his partner's pretty eyes, “Nobody will ever, EVER know how close Dr. Lapin came to hurting the bunny I love -I mean, my partner. Sorry, Carrots... you said you wanted to know everything, right?”

*          ~          *          ~          *

* Nick loves me? Like, really LOVES me? A few minutes later, Nick slid sideways out of his chair, slowly circling the cruiser to get the door for his shell-shocked bunny, but Judy was less offended by the chivalrous nature of the gesture than she was by the way all the prey orderlies avoided helping or even officially noticing her injured fox like he had Mange. *But... we haven't even been on a real date, yet!* Sadder still, Nick seemed all too used to moving among the larger animals sight unseen. The surly, young moose behind the admissions counter wrinkled her nose in disgust at them before pointing to the sign overhead that said, “No Predators Allowed!” “Especially foxes!” was practically tattooed across the moose's sour face.

Just as she was about to pull out her badge or slap the sanctimonious look off the moose's face for looking down on her fox, Nick surprised them both by sliding two business cards across the receptionist's desk and smiling his best salesman smile. One of the business cards was new, almost fresh off the printing press, with the logo of the hospital splayed across it in a shiny emboss. The other was old enough to have yellowed over time, with an antique font that managed to look stately and old-fashioned at the same time. As the nervous young moose looked between Nick’s toothy grin and the business cards of both her boss and Mr. Big, the smug look on her face turned to surprise and then dropped down into unmasked terror, “We're expected. The Penthouse suite, if I remember correctly?” Judy had never seen a mammal so eager to help, as the moose scrambled to open doors before them.

It wasn't until they were safely tucked away in the hospital's only private elevator that she saw Nick's calm facade begin to crumble around the edges. That's when her fox wrapped one tired paw around Judy and pulled the bunny close enough to steal a quick kiss in between floors, “It's a private, cutting edge operating theater, reserved for the movers and shakers in this city, Carrots. Mr. Big wouldn't take Koslov anywhere else.” *But I thought we were here to help you, Slick? What is it about this place that has you so spooked?* “Don't worry, Carrots. We're just stopping by long enough to pay our respects.”
As the elevator's pristine, expertly polished doors swung open, Judy saw six sets of polar bear eyes snap towards their direction, followed by a deep, guttural growling when the Don's saw the fox entering into their midst. Freshly bandaged up after his little wrestling match with Major Friedkin, Kevin Kameroff stood shoulder to shoulder with his twin brother, Raymond a little further up the hallway from the other polar bears in the Don's entourage, a glib smile plastered across Kevin's battered face while Raymond glowered his perpetual scowl. Despite their clear invitation back at the precinct, the bulk of the Don's security entourage looked all too happy to bodily throw Nicholas back into the elevator -or barring that, down the elevator shaft- for daring to show his muzzle in the Don's presence again. Despite her honorary status as namesake and godmother to the Don's new grandchild, Judy knew there was very little one little bunny cop could do to stop a half-dozen armed polar bears if they had murder on their minds.

Nick's paw pressed down firmly and possessively upon his new partner's shoulder, stopping Judy in her tracks as he walked calmly on into the midst of four of the Don's scariest leg-breakers, his teeth gritted and his head held high. The detective in Judy saw the frazzled swish of her fox's fluffy tail, the slightly off-kilter hitch in his walk, and the cold shudder that rippled his winter fur whenever Nick swayed slightly under the hospital's heavy air conditioning. *He still expects to get 'iced' whenever he comes to visit Mr. Big. After the viciousness of his assault last night, who can blame him?* It hurt the bunny's heart to see the small trail of crimson drops that followed each of her fox's steps and she wasn't the only mammal in the room that smelled fox blood in the air, tonight. Raymond stepped forward to tower over the fox like some kind of monster from a bad dream, his sudden smile no less alarming for the rows of sharp teeth that it put on display. "A-Amaretto?" Nick's tired, plaintive voice carried in the sudden silence of the room, but the meaning of the fox's strange utterance escaped his bunny partner. Like so much of his old life, Nick had left the meaning of the word buried among his other secrets, and Judy was just too emotionally raw to keep digging right now.

To her surprise, Judy watched the second tallest of Mr. Big's polar bear kneel to wrap his massive paws around her fox's shoulders, drawing Nick into a gentle bear hug before standing back upright with the fox left dangling in mid-air. “Little Brother, you look -and smell... woof! - a bit like roadkill. What have you been doing with your nights?" There was a great deal of chuckling that rolled through and among the other polar bears, but none so much as Raymond Kameroff's brother Kevin, who knocked gently on the door he stood guard over. With surprisingly gentle paws, Raymond set the fox's feet back onto the ground before turning to stare disapprovingly at the eavesdropping bunny.

Several of the other polar bears came forward to pat Nick roughly on the back, their heavy paws nearly knocking the injured fox off his feet in their sudden enthusiasm. “Oh you know, a little clean-living while I lay low...” Casting a sly wink over his shoulder at his bunny, Nick slid back behind the protection of his 'game show mammal' mask, but even half a hallway away, Judy could still hear his heart jackhammering away in the fox's chest, “What better way to hide from the cops than in plain sight, am I right?” In less than a minute, the mood in the hallway had spun on a dime from bloody ominous to macho camaraderie, leaving Judy's jaw scraping the floor.

*They're all crazy... every single one of them!* Somewhere in the Don's entourage, one of the polar bears replied, “No wonder you look like shit!”

Turns out, that was the proverbial 'step too far,' because the next voice that Judy heard echoing in the hallway belonged to none other than Mr. Big, himself -and the Don was far from pleased with whichever member of his entourage had spoken last. Sitting in the paws of the Kevin's other brother, George Kameroff, Mr. Big looked like a tiny volcano wrapped in a tuxedo and just about to blow its top, “My prodigal son returns to our house, and THIS is how you knuckleheads greet him? With profanity?!?” It never ceased to amaze Judy how such a relatively small figure as the winter shrew could nonetheless command such huge respect from the polar bears in his employ. “My daughter is
in the next room! Your brother Koslov is in the next room, waiting to go under the knife and this is how you waste what little time he may have left?!?” With just a few soft-spoken words, Mr. Big’s entire entourage was afraid to meet the Don’s gaze, but Judy saw a conspiratorial wink pass between Nick and the old mobster, letting Judy know that Mr. Big might not be quite as upset as he sounded. Seeing the classy old shrew growl at his entourage reminded Judy so much of Chief Bogo’s bull sessions with the officers under his command that she had to stifle a giggle. They were both adoptive fathers of an unruly mob of surly animals, but they loved their unorthodox children in their own way, too, “It's good to see you again, Nicky. Go on in, son. Koslov's been waiting for you.”
5. C.~ Sins of Our Fathers, Pt. 2

((Timeline: Late Morning, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for these scenes: “Soldier” by Fleurie, “Make it Rain” by Foy Vance.]

{Scene: Inside the private elevator to/and balcony above Don’s “Penthouse” operating theatre, Zootopia General.}

Trapped inside another, smaller elevator with Mr. Big and the stone-faced new lieutenant of his polar bear entourage, George Kameroff, Judy was still reeling from her new partner’s earlier confessions - and Nick’s strange reunion with the Don’s intimidating inner circle- when she felt her fox’s tail slowly curling comfortingly around her legs. Somehow, that simple, touching gesture broke through the fog of disbelief that threatened to swallow up the young doe’s mind, burying her under the absurd weight of those five simple words, “the bunny that I love…” Looking up into her fox’s smiling eyes felt like waking up from a long, lonely dream, but Judy couldn’t shake the feeling that there were still nightmares on the horizon: Bellwether’s last loyal hench-mammal, Douglas Ramses, was still on the loose somewhere in the city. Nick’s own sordid past might be an open book to her now, if she could figure out which questions to ask, but his future with the ZPD was still in jeopardy. And then there was the terrifying prospect of telling her fox-phobic parents that Judy was falling for a fox who was once everything that they feared… and was now so much wonderfully more than she had ever dreamed. *Mama is so going to kill you, Judy! And Dad… Sweet cheese and crackers! Dad may just kill Nick when he finds out about last night!*

And yet, when Judy listened to her fox’s gentle, smoky voice, she couldn’t help but hope that everything would turn out alright in the end, “Did I ever tell you that I was sweating bullets when I first got my acceptance letter to the Academy?” Judy could hear Mr. Big’s soft-hearted chuckle and a disgruntled huff from George as Nick prattled on, his fluffy tail coiling possessively around her outer thigh as Nick nodded his head toward Kameroff, “No, no…it’s true- I spent half the day wringing my paws and the other half looking out my bedroom window for a little ‘visit’ from the Triplets.” Even without a bunny’s keen sense of hearing, Judy could hardly have missed Mr. Big’s whispered reply in such close quarters, “But Nicholas, my son, surely you’ve broken into much more difficult places than this?” Whatever ‘jobs’ Nicholas had done for the Don in the past, Judy suspected that the old mobster was well past caring about the statute of limitations at this point, or he wouldn’t be quite so cavalier in front of the two young officers in the elevator. For now, Judy was content to take her cues from the fox standing in front of her, “Yes, but you would be amazed how much more intimidating it can be, going through the front door like you actually belong there in the first place.” *But Slick, you did belong there… just like you belong right back here… with me….*

“That’s when Koslov called, just a few minutes before midnight…” Nick’s tail slipped back from Judy’s thigh just seconds before the polar stepped back against the elevator wall to allow them to exit the elevator first, but the sly smile on Mr. Big’s lips told Judy that the intimate gesture had not escaped the old mobster’s notice. “I thought that the old bear was going to tell me to call the whole thing off or at least offer to make me the first fox to attend the Academy in a wheelchair…” Just outside the private elevator’s doors, Judy could see a small balcony overlooking a secluded, but well-stocked operating room just a little bit bigger than the bull pen back at Precinct One. Nearer to the balcony rail waited the Don’s only daughter, little Fru Fru, her swollen belly all but ready to pop with a little “Judith” all her own. “…But the threats never came; Koslov just wanted to tell me how proud of me you both were for leaving the old life behind me.” The strained, maternal smile on her
little shrew lips grew when she heard Nick’s voice, but little Fru Fru’s eyes only darted to meet her father’s once before the young mother-to-be was asked to leave. The caustic smell of blood mixed with industrial cleaners was everywhere around them tonight, and Judy was amazed that neither of them - or the prey animals working down below - had succumbed to their natural urge to throw up yet.

Only the predators in the room seemed resistant to the operating room’s grisly bouquet as Nick continued, “It’s no secret what happens to Family members who start talking to the cops, and here I was signing up to actually be one!” Even the sparse pawful of medical students watching from the small balcony opposite of their position tonight seemed strangely on edge, but Judy dismissed that to general mixture of the room’s horrible smell and the fear and awe that Mr. Big inspired, whenever the dapper old shrew entered a room. It was clear that the other balcony remained blissfully cut off from the conversation between Mr. Big and one of his prodigal sons, “And that was exactly what my past became, the moment that Koslov gave me your blessing- just another bumpy road in my rearview mirror.”

Again, Judy listened as the anxiety and exhaustion of the last few days overwhelmed her new partner, making him lean a little heavier against the guardrail overlooking the operating floor below. The urge to go comfort Nick, to stop the slow, fearful trembling of his claws upon the railing that he leaned against washed over the young doe, but this was not the place for Nick to look weak… there were already far too many sharks circling around them both to draw attention to the bloody wound at his side.

An erratic chorus of machines beeping rose from the floor below, and Judy could see a half-dozen prey mammals in surgical garb scrambling around the immense polar bear resting on an extra-large operating table. “I never thanked you -either of you- for believing in me… I’m sorry about that.” In the awkward silence that followed Nick’s apology, Judy’s superior hearing could just pick up the faint chuckle of the injured bear strapped to the gurney down below. Oh, Nick! When are you going to learn to look for hidden microphones before opening that big mouth of yours?!? The subtle flashing of the intercom button behind Kameroff’s right shoulder confirmed Judy’s suspicions: Mr. Big was certainly on top of his game tonight! “So, Nicholas, my son… what’s changed? Surely, you didn’t come all this way – dressed in those uncomfortable clothes – to tell me that you’ve rethought your little decision to leave my Family?” Mr. Big’s question left his lips as smooth as a silk, but they took on a weight that Judy could never truly understand as they hung like an anvil over her fox’s troubled head, his shoulders hunched by a hundred unspoken worries. Come on, Slick… you can do this. Just put one word in front of the other and tell him you’re out of that old life for good. …Right?

That’s when Nick looked back at his bunny, a slow, sweet smile building on his lips, “No…” Judy felt her heart skip a beat when Nick silently mouthed those four words to her, and her, alone: You’ve. Ruined. Me. Carrots. “As much as I miss you and the rest of the Family, I don’t miss my old life: I was never a very good gangster, but I think, with a little help, I might just be a half-decent cop.” This time there was no hiding the deep, gravel-bellied laughter that lifted up from the polar bear on the floor below, “Why do you think we kicked you out so soon, my little Nikita?” Even strapped to the operating table, with a dozen shards of blood red glass sticking out of his soot-stained white fur like tombstones in some forgotten snowbank, Koslov’s voice still boomed like cannon fire in the small operating room below them. “Clearly, <COUGH!> you were made for bigger and brighter things, no?” Judy had to slap one exasperated paw over her eyes when her dumbfounded fox finally saw the blinking light on the intercom behind a smirking Kameroff. It’s called a hustle, sweetheart!

“You know what, Koslov? I take back every nice thing that I ever said about you!” This time, when Nick gripped the balcony rail, there was no hint of pain in his voice, just the bittersweet laughter of a con-mammal who knows that he just got played. Watching the corners of her fox’s lips curl up into that million-dollar smile of his made Judy’s heart melt just a little, even as the young bunny had to turn her head to avoid seeing the vulgar hand gestures that followed between Nick and the former
master of Mr. Big’s inner circle.

That was when Judy saw Mr. Big’s joyful facade fall away: the happy godfather witnessing his adopted family’s reconciliation soured into a true parent’s longing to protect his children from the things that he had no control over in this life: disease, violence, and fate’s retribution for a man’s own past misdeeds. And Mr. Big was not a mammal who liked being powerless to protect his adopted family, especially right now, “I don’t care what it costs… find the ANIMALS who did this to him - NOW!” It chilled the young bunny’s blood just a little bit to watch the old Mr. Big resurface for a moment, pushing aside the kindly grandfather that she had come to know, but Nick had done his best to prepare her for moments like these.

Across the gap between balconies, Judy was surprised to see one of the medical students -a young tigress, from what the doe could see of her pretty, striped face behind the surgical mask- practically drooling over Nick’s sudden appearance. Her breath came out in hot, heavy waves against the glass wall separating the student’s booth from the surgical theatre below. Judy could practically taste the hormones in the air, as the young tigress ran one subtle, clawed finger in a tantalizingly slow circle around the nipple of one of her breasts. The cat’s crass “invitation” might have worried Judy a bit more if Nick had been paying the feline fatale even a shred of attention. Instead, his soft green and gold eyes kept drifting back to meet hers, a smile just for her plastered all over his goofy lips. Ease back on that crush, little kitty. This fox is mine… ALL MINE. The doe’s own, self-satisfied smile brought a strangely possessive, rumbling growl to the tigress’ face, before the larger predator stormed out of her seat on the other balcony.

“Mr. Bigliani, Sir! I really must protest this delay!” The weedy voice of the old goat running the operating room below cut across Judy’s nerves and drew more than an unkind look from the Don, himself. “Your… associate’s wounds require immediate surgery if he is to have any chance at recovering, and we simply cannot guarantee his safety if we wait any longer.” Or yours if you interrupt the Don again… Judy turned to look the Don’s displeasure in the eye, knowing full well the mercurial nature of his temper after almost getting iced, herself during the Missing Mammals case. To Judy’s relief, Mr. Big seemed resigned to suffer the good doctor’s protests with a minimum of personal irritation tonight. Standing patiently on Nick’s shoulder as the pair overlooked the operating theatre below, the Don simply raised his voice to carry across the intercom, “My son, the doctor is right: the time for games has passed. Tell our little Nicky why you needed him here today.”

Koslov’s barrel-chested laughter dropped down into a hacking cough so deep that Judy could swear she heard the gravel grinding in his throat as he continued, “My little Nikita… (Cough) you always w-wanted to be there the day I told the Don, ‘No.’ (Cough) I think… Today, you get your wish!” Judy turned to watch every drop of joy drain from Nick’s eyes, but she couldn’t look at her fox without also feeling the sorrow pouring through the broken heart of the tiny shrew sitting on his shoulder. A fresh golden sheen glittered in Nick’s green eyes, as disbelief and grief warred deep within his chest, his voice barely above a whisper in Judy’s ears, “Uncle, please… Don’t put this back on me.” Judy watched as a teardrop skated silently down the Don’ muzzle, even as the rest of his entourage pretended not to see his concern for his fallen son, the Don steeled himself to look down into the operating theater below, “My son- don’t do this thing… Please. We can find some other way...”

Despite their clear dismay, Judy watched the first hints of peace cross the giant polar bear’s battered face as he lay there, strapped to the gurney, “Some things (Cough) even you cannot undo, Gerald. Even if the doctor works his miracles, (Cough) and I can still walk out of this room tonight, what awaits me outside that door but a small walk to a very small prison cell?” From the defeated stoop of the Don’s shoulders, Judy could tell this was not their first time having this argument and the dapper little shrew was no closer to changing the polar bear’s mind than he had
been before Nick walked through that door. “Who will mourn a tired old bear with too much blood on his paws? There is no one waiting up for me to come home, no one to redeem my family name if I die.” Judy heard the lonely, keening sound building deep in her fox’s chest, as the polar bear’s bitter, wounded heart called out to his own. “But I am still Bolyari, still a soldier in your house, my Prince. (Cough) I still have my honor, even if they put me in a cage and throw away the key for what I did to those poor cops at the Ice Sickle…”

Koslov’s muzzle twisted up into a grimace, like he’d just bitten into something sour, but his eyes spoke volumes of his shame whenever he looked up to see Judy’s puzzled face. Ohhhh, no, Koslov, what have you done?!? Something about the words “my Prince” had Nick turning to look at Mr. Big with a mute mixture of wonder and terror, but the small shrew only shrugged in his tailored tuxedo - he was a mammal long accustomed to wearing many titles, and far too old to be impressed by any of them now. “Before I step through that door, in this world or whatever comes next, I will see that my families are protected, (Cough) even after I am gone!” Judy watched the larger polar bear’s eyes sweep over George Kameroff’s face for a couple of heartbeats, weighing something there in the balance, and finding it wanting. She didn’t know which of the polar bears was more hurt by what the other saw reflected in their eyes.

Down below, the beeping of the various machines sped up like a drunken carousel as Koslov’s claws deep furrows into the heavy gurney straps that kept him both patient and prisoner, “Promise me that you will look out for them… (Cough) No matter what happens next…” Koslov’s mighty claws dug deep furrows into the steel gurney that held him as he struggled for each ragged breath, “Protect them, (Cough) even from themselves, my little Nikita.” Judy had never seen her partner so lost for words, so absolutely stunned that his handsome mouth stretched into a surprised little circle, even as his claws drummed nervously on the gallery rails. It’s all coming undone, isn’t it, Slick? The Truce between Mr. Big and the cops… everything?!? Dumbstruck, the fox slowly lifted his head and then slowly let it nod in submission, a fresh tear streaking down his cheek, “Soon, you will understand… (Cough) Then, you will be Bolyari!”

In the surgical pit below, nearly a dozen mammals in surgical garb were all racing back and forth as the polar bear’s heart monitor started beating faster and harder than any of them had ever seen before. Judy watched as the old goat looked up expectantly at the most powerful crime boss in Zootopia with abject pity, shaking his head as if to say, ‘I told you that it would come to this…” Koslov had been right all along: some things were beyond even his control. Judy had to cover her sensitive ears when George Kameroff’s sharp claws tore the intercom panel right out of the wall, but Mr. Big’s tiny voice carried, even over the polar bear’s cry of rage, “Sedate him.”

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Nick’s fingers curled around Judy’s own as the doors to the Don’s private elevator closed behind them, his chest pressed firmly to her tail as the young doe listened to her fox’s heart racing. Ahead of them, Mr. Big was talking in hushed tones with the head of his polar bear entourage, trying very hard to soothe the immense bear’s wounded pride, but Judy could tell the Don had a real uphill climb ahead of him, “My son, nobody saw Koslov’s change of heart coming, least of all myself, but we must honor his decision as we honor the bear, himself. There must be some reason for him to do this thing…”

It didn’t take a bunny’s superior hearing to hear the feelings of betrayal grumbling just beneath the
surface of George Kameroff’s dutiful reply, “What possible reason could he have for bringing this… cheat back into the family, much less making him Bolyari?” A dismissive wave of the polar bear’s massive paw left no room to doubt about his feelings about bringing those who had left the Family coming back into the fold, but the stern look on George’s face softened just a bit when he saw how his words had cut the fox to the quick, “Not for nothing, Nicky… you got guts coming here today, but the whole thing makes no sense – how can you be a cop and a gangster at the same time?” Judy’s heart sank to feel Nick’s fingers slip out of her paw when her fox moved to stand between her and the angry polar bear who loomed over them in the cramped confines of the Don’s private elevator.

For the briefest of heartbeats, Judy listened as her new partner all but growled at the larger mammal, as the stress from the day came turned painful confusion into heated accusation, “Koslov’s decision is the only thing about today that makes ANY sense right now! Gerald…” Mr. Big’s displeasure at having his wayward ‘son’ use his first name barely registered on the doe, but Nick took a giant step back when the old mobster raised one perturbed eyebrow at the fox’s over-familiarity, “I mean, Mr. Big, sir! You told me I had your blessing to become a cop, and then a polar bear shows up to redecorate my apartment with my face.” Judy felt her partner leaning heavily against her, even as his mouth kicked into overdrive, “One second, you tell me he’s not one of your ‘messengers’ and the next we have one of your most trusted lieutenants strolling into the police precinct where I work to pull me and my new partner out for a little ‘show and tell’ at the hospital. Am I going crazy or did this whole train just jump the tracks?”

Judy’s shorter height put her at a real disadvantage when it came to grabbing her fox by the shoulder, hoping to stop her partner before her fox said something else that he would regret for the rest of his life, so she grabbed the only thing within reach: the base of Nick’s tail. The electric shudder than ran up his spine almost covered up the painful yip of surprise that escaped Nick’s lips, but the bunny’s oddly dominant gesture did have the desired effect of short-circuiting Nick’s runaway mouth, “Mr. Big, sir… This is all about saving the Truce, isn’t it?” This time, Judy took the lead, slowly crossing in front of her partner to take one of Nick’s trembling paws into her own, just to keep her small voice from shaking. “Koslov wants Nick to arrest him, if he survives surgery, for whatever he did at the Ice Sickle Bar and Grill, doesn’t he? That way, the police get their ‘bad guy’ and you get to preserve the peace…”

Mr. Big looked down at the assertive little bunny and then back up into the surprised eyes of the fox beside her before chuckling, paternally at the two officers sweating bullets in their daily blues, “And that settles the question of ‘Who’s the Brains in this little partnership?’ Yes, Judith, I think you have the right idea, here: it has always been Koslov’s way to protect the Family, no matter the cost. But who can be sure of anything these days?” Slowly, Kameroff’s steady paw lowered the Don to look the bunny and Nick in the eye, as the private elevator’s doors began to open behind them, “Like Nicky, here, my son is a mammal that likes to keep his secrets buried deep down, close to his fur. Unlike Nicky, Koslov is old enough to know that all secrets have a way of coming back into the light, no matter how deep you bury them.” Judy saw the stern look that passed between Mr. Big and his adopted son before the Don exited the small elevator -riding in George Kameroff’s clasped paws, - but there was no way to decipher all the things that went unsaid between them.

To every one’s surprise but his own, Nick had one last question for the old man, and the quiver in his voice belied the fox’s every attempt to stay emotionally-detached from the answer he already dreaded receiving, “W-W-What really happened at the Ice Sickle, sir?” Almost in unison, the polar bears that made up the Don’s security team took one giant step backward, their backs pressed tight to the hallway walls leading away from the Don’s private elevator. “If I’m going to be Bolyari in Koslov’s absence, I can’t really do that job unless I know what’s really going on… can I?” Not a mammal within thirty feet of the Don made eye contact with Nick or took an easy breath as George Kameroff
slowly turned around with cold-blooded murder in his eyes.

There were still plenty of ways to dispose of a body, even a cop, even in a hospital full of other mammals—everybody knew that all Mr. Big had to do was snap his fingers and nobody would ever find the city’s first fox cop (or his bunny partner) ever again. Sure, they’d all miss the little orange-and-cream-furred jokester that they all used to know, and Judy was a cherished friend of the family and godmother to the Don’s granddaughter-to-be, but there was no denying that Mr. Big’s patience was in bloody shreds after the attack on Kolsov. “If you really were Bolyari, what would you do to the animals who attacked my family?” Nobody really knew which side of Mr. Big would win the fight for control tonight: the kindly, patient grandfather or the cold-hearted mafia Don who had once “iced” every other major crime family in Zootopia with cruel, almost surgical precision.

In two long steps that echoed down the hospital corridors, George Kameron stood before Nick again, towering over the battered young fox with an unspoken malice that Judy could taste like copper pennies in the back of her throat. “I just made an old friend a promise that I can’t wait to keep: I’ll use everything I know to protect his family, even from themselves…” It surprised Judy to hear Nick’s voice drop into a deep, feral growl as he stared up at the Don’s head of security. Back in the Natural History Museum, that low, sensual growl had been just another art of the show—a sly means of keeping Bellwether talking, of convincing the mad mayor she’d already turned Nick into just another ‘savage’ predator. Tonight, some small part of Judy knew that her fox was done pretending; whoever had attacked the Ice Sickle had just made a lifelong enemy out of Nicholas Wilde. “…And I will find the animals that attacked him. I just need you do me one favor, sir.”

“And what ‘favor’ might that be, my son?” Even in his dapper little tuxedo, Judy could feel Mr. Big’s confidence waver, bit by bit. In all their years working together, Judy doubted that the small shrew had ever really seen Nick this angry, or this ready to put that anger to use on the Family’s behalf. Nick, what are you getting us into, partner? Talk to your bunny before you do anything crazy… We can still go to Bogo and tell him a ‘tastefully-edited version of what’s going on here. “Either tell me what you know—or get out of my way, so I can find things out for myself.” Yeah, partner… something crazy—just like that. Ohhhh, Bogo’s just going to love you for this, Slick!

Nobody in that hallway took an easy breath until they heard the small winter shrew begin his slow, paternal chuckle, shaking his tiny head in disbelief, “Yeah, Judy definitely got all the brains in this deal, but you got heart, kit. C’mon, Officer Wilde, let’s take a walk and talk for a moment?”
6. A.~ Helter Skelter, Pt. 1

((Timeline: Noon, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Carry You” by Reulle (featuring Fleurie).]

{Scene: Inside a tattered hospital room in the Predator’s Wing of Zootopia General.}

...She calls me “Honey bear” when she's holding my paw. Mammals have lived for less...

When he finally awoke, the first thing that Jacob could remember was the desert-dry, spongey taste
of medical cotton in his mouth. After that came the mildewed smell of old wallpaper that was so ugly
that it must have come off the deep discount rack, even when it was new. Whatever industrial-
strength cleaner this flop house used when they boiled their bedsheets, it couldn’t hide the grimy
smell of fear and desperation left behind by whatever poor predator had occupied the bed before him.
But it wasn’t until Jacob looked up into the erratic strobe of the long, halogen bulbs hanging over his
bed that the young polar bear started to worry that he might actually be stuck in the Predator’s wing
of a hospital. It would have been kinder just to let the cold waters of Tundra Town take me… like
they did with Uncle Koslov…

The sedatives must have been wearing off, because Jacob could
actually feel the salty sting as tears kept streaming down his shattered face, even under all the gauze.

Every predator that Jacob knew avoided this dismal part of the city hospital system like the Mange,
but Jacob couldn’t remember why until he heard the desperate, watery coughs of the poor mammals
in the waiting room, outside. Damp lungs… here? Gotta’ be Pneumonia… usually treated by
removing the infected to either Sahara Square or the City Center. They must have brought me
straight here from Tundra Town, but why? I wasn’t sick… it must have been the explosion at Uncle
Koslov’s place. One trembling paw rose to gently probe the heavy gauze bandages that wrapped the
entire left side of the young polar bear’s face like thick spider webs. Zootopia General - the only
hospital in Zootopia that keeps a reconstructive surgeon on staff who’s still willing to work on large
Predators like me after all that funny business with Bellwether earlier this year. Dad must have been
busy calling in every favor he had left while I was out, but what happened to Anna?

That’s when Jacob caught the faint ghost of her scent on his sheets lingering somewhere beneath all
the grime and despair just outside his door, like the warmth of a gentle paw resting against his
shattered cheek, telling him everything was going to be alright… somehow, some way, someday.
She came here, once, maybe twice, curled up beside me like a little kid, checking up on me, even
though half the city could be looking for her? Move over, Philip Meowrlowe, there’s a new
heartthrob in town… “…And his name is YAKOV SERGEY- OH, SON OF A B*TCH!” Jacob
didn’t just feel the stitching pop as he opened his mouth wider to yell, triumphantly, he felt the
tattered skin underneath all the other stitches begin to fray around the edges, threatening a full,
bloody mutiny if he ever did anything that stupid ever again. The young polar bear couldn’t even
cry, roar, or scream, as each new tear streaking down his frayed face only intensified the salty
agony hidden just beneath his bandages.

“Kit, your mom and I may have our differences, but that’s no way to talk about the woman.” Jacob
heard his father’s gruff voice chastising him from a chair in the corner, but the gauze covering his
left eye blanketed that whole side of the room in a blizzard of white, obscuring the old man’s face.
“She did the best job she could raising you, all things considered. And she did it all on her own…”
Unfortunately, it didn’t hide the smell of cheap booze that came rushing towards the younger polar
bear every time his father sloshed his words. A small part of Jacob knew that if he turned his head
just right, he could see his father slouched in the chair, his dress blues a wrinkled mess, his sleeves dotted with blood and ink stains on the cuffs after he’d personally run some poor mammal through paw-printing or helped them back up after they’d fallen face first into the sidewalk ‘resisting arrest.’ But the majority of the young polar bear -the part of him that was still the old man’s son- knew that if he looked his father in the eye right now, all that he would see would be the heavy bags under his eyes and the clumsy way that Sergei pawed at the cheap, mustard-stained tie that the old man got from him so many missed Father’s Days ago. After all these years, it’s still his favorite tie… I guess some things never change. Love you too, you old boozer, even now.

The relentless old bear ate, slept, and worked at his desk twelve hours a day, every day of the year since he made Captain on Jacob’s eighth birthday; The last six hours, Sergei spent walking the streets of Tundra town or pouring over cold case files until his eyes bugged out and his meaty fists shook with the futility of it all. Too many unanswered questions for the old man to take, but what else can you do in a District where nobody tells the cops what’s really going on until it’s much, much too late? So, who the hell was manning the Precinct while the old man slept off another booze-filled night in the corner of his son’s hospital room? “Pop, you sound like hell. When was the last time you caught a little shut-eye?” The thought made even Jacob squirm a little as he slowly pushed his way off the bed and back onto his own unsteady hind paws.

“Back before you went under the knife, Sleeping Beauty. The doctors here, they said you were on the table for a very long time… something to do with the gas they use not working right?” Again, Jacob listened as the old bear tugged nervously on his mustard-stained tie, trying to straighten out the worn-out knot that clung so tightly around his thick neck. “You know I was never that good on all that ‘Science’ stuff… and trust me: ignorance ain’t got nothing to do with bliss in situations like this.” Jacob could hear the half-empty flask in his father’s coat pocket sloshing about as the old bear leaned just a little too heavily on the wall, steadying himself as Sergei slowly lurched to his feet. “…I gotta be honest with you, kit, everything after ‘Your son is going to live’ is sort of a blur.”

Sergei’s hind claws bit deep trenches into the cheap linoleum underfoot as he fumbled for traction in the flickering light of the room’s only working bulb, bringing a disgusted grunt from the big polar bear that Jacob knew all too well. The beat cop in him still hates hospitals, even after all these years: too many witnesses that never made it to their trials. But he was here all night, just waiting for me to wake up? Something’s eating at him, something he doesn’t want to ask me, but he’s going to, anyways… Something about what happened at the Ice Sickle Bar and Grille. Jacob could just imagine the look of shame in the old bear’s eyes as he tried anything to keep from staring at his son’s battered face, blaming himself for putting his son in danger. You didn’t do this, Pop. This one is all on me for not grabbing Anna and hauling tail out of there at the first sign of trouble, just like you told me. “Your mom came to check up on you, but when she saw me… Well, it went about as bad as you’d expect. At least this time she left the pepper spray at home -that’s gotta be some kinda progress, right?”

Jacob could tell that the old bear was grasping at straws for things to distract his son from asking too many questions, but the faint afterglow of Anna’s soft, salty fur brushing against his cheek gave the young polar bear the courage to soldier on. Gathering up what little pride he had left, Jacob turned to look his father in the eye one more time, “What happened to Uncle Koslov, Pop?” And just like that, all the warmth was sucked out of the room, and Jacob turned to see the slow, angry muscular twitch that started in Sergei’s tattered right ear and worked its way down the old bear’s clenched jaw and down into his father’s meaty fists. This time, when the old bear spoke, his voice was colder than a midnight breeze down at the Tundra Town pier, “What happens to everybody who works for Mr. Big, eventually, kit. Somebody wanted something he had, or revenge, maybe for some dirty deal gone south… I dunno ‘the who’ or even ‘the why’ yet, but I know that they came for him with a vengeance.” Jacob saw the old bear grip his tie again, wrenching the taut fabric between two murderous fists as he whispered, “And they didn’t much care who else got hurt in the
process…” Hello, Ewe-ston, we’ve found the problem: he’s worried about Uncle Koslov AND he’s pissed about me getting caught in the crossfire. That’s. Just. Grrreat! “He’s upstairs, with the Don and his crew, waiting for his turn on the table, but it’s… it’s touch and go, son. The doctors up there wouldn’t tell me anything, but they didn’t look all that optimistic about his chances…”

“Kit, I hate to have to ask you something like this, especially when you’re on the mend, but… was there anybody else there that night who saw what happened? Anybody at all?” …So you came down here to do a little family ‘interrogation’ off the books before some pencil-pusher back at City Hall made you pass off the case to somebody who wasn’t so intimately involved with both the key suspect and the only known witness to the crime?? It should have made Jacob mad to be drawn back into his father’s world like this, to be just another witness in the never-ending feud between him and Uncle Koslov. Pop, one of these days you gotta tell me what started this whole mess between you two. But, as Jacob took another long, steadying breath through his bandages, he couldn’t even fake being surprised anymore: Sergei Andreyevich was an old-school cop, in the worst of ways: he didn’t wear a badge, because it was too busy wearing him.

Everything else in the old bear’s life took a backseat to ‘the Job’ -even family and friends- and they always would. That was why mom divorced the dumb old bear in the first place… she spent too many lonely nights, coming in a distant second to some case that his father just couldn’t get off his mind. But then, thoughts of his mother shifted the young polar bear’s mind back to the soft fur of her vixen in hand-me-down dress, her cool paw resting softly on top of his, practically begging him to keep her safe… He’d said he would, promised her the impossible, without ever saying the actual words. Come with me… I’ll keep you safe. Somehow, somehow… And that was a promise he intended to keep, even if it meant lying to the only father he’d ever known, “No, Pop… It’s-It’s just me this time; I’m sorry about that.”

“So, who’s Anna?” Sergei Andreyevich whispered the question into his son’s ear like a prayer, but he never let go of his fatherly grip on the younger polar bear’s shoulders, their muzzles close enough to almost touch cheeks on Jacob’s good side. He didn’t want to see the panic in his son’s eyes as he searched for some lie to cover up the painful truth or hear the sudden intake of breath that always followed when he caught a witness lying at a crime scene. The old bear was used to all manner of people lying to him: hardened criminals, scared citizens, even the coroner downtown that he was sure was on the Don’s payroll, but there had never been a moment that Sergei had counted his son among their ranks.

They’d never had a real father-son kind of bond like the happy people do in the movies, not with the Job always calling him away, but he had thought the younger polar bear still respected him enough to tell him the truth in a sticky situation like this. Jacob lying to him hurt the older bear in a uniquely fatherly way, his old heart aching for all the things they’d never shared together; but even through the hurt, the cop in his blood had to keep smiling, keep playing his part to draw out the bitter truth, “You talk in your sleep, little cub -just like your mom used to when we were still together… It’s how I knew the divorce was coming, months before she served me with all those papers.”
Jacob’s paws fumbled in their search for the doorknob behind the young polar bear’s back while his father hugged him, blind panic running through his young mind as the boy stumbled backward, “She’s nobody, pop—just a girl I hardly know: a new waitress at the Ice Sickle who wants to be a singer someday….” The younger bear had just started to pull open the door, when Sergei’s bigger paw shoved it closed again with a definite slam, trapping the young polar bear between his angry father and the heavy metal door. This time, there was no escaping the younger bear’s reflection in his father’s cold blue eyes, “Little cub, that makes two times that you’ve lied to me tonight, right to my face, and we’re not even out of the hospital yet.”

In all the time it took for the young polar bear’s heart to skip a beat, he was six years old again, listening to his mother and father in their tiny apartment, scared to death that this time, they might really kill one another. “You really don’t want there to be a third…” There was nothing loving in the way his father’s long, sharp teeth glittered in the strobing light over their heads, but there were still a few embers left behind by the kind-hearted bear he had once known, still glittering behind his father’s eyes, “…and neither do I, son.”

Jacob watched the anger fall from his father’s broad shoulders in waves, the bigger bear almost collapsing into himself in defeat as he sat back down on his son’s tattered hospital bed, “This ain’t about you and me, kit—or me and your mother, for that matter. It’s about your uncle, Koslov getting out of the Life, while he still has time to live some other kinda life.” Sergei patted the empty side of the mattress, inviting Jacob to sit by his side, but somehow the young polar bear doubted the moth-eaten old mattress would take the weight of two full grown polar bears. If anything, his father seemed to understand that the world around them just wasn’t built to handle anything so large as a polar bear and his son at the same time, “You see, Mr. Big? He’s put out this crazy kind of bounty on whoever did this thing to your uncle and his club: he’ll square all the family debts for whoever brings in the …animals responsible. That means, we could get your uncle back, that I could get him back before it’s too late…”

“How the young bear hated himself for the heartbeat he almost gave in to the doubts in his head, but one strange thought kept him on the narrow, winding road ahead: She saved my life and it almost cost us both everything. A man doesn’t turn his back on that kind of kindness and still call himself a man in the morning. “And you are NOT going to interrogate her after she saved my life!”

Sergei’s face split in a sly, contemplative grin as he turned to look the young cub in the eye, “Never said I planned on interrogating anybody, kit. But thank you for confirming that this ‘Anna’ was the young lady whose voice I heard on your radio that night. It does make my job a heckuva’ lot easier when I can get out ahead of the crowd.” Jacob had been played like an old fiddle, and they both knew it, but he had to hope that there was still some part of his father left inside the battered old beat cop that sat before him, “Pop, you’re not going to hurt her… are you? Not after all that she did for me?!” It was a six-year-old child’s prayer that passed through the young polar bear’s lips, bringing with it over a dozen years of missed birthdays and scheduled visitations with his father, while his mother looked on with worry in her eyes. Even with a little ‘liquid courage’ drawn from the half-empty bottle sloshing around in his coat pocket, Sergei just couldn’t face the sound of those words coming out of his son’s lips one more time. Never again.

“No, son – she gave me back my boy; That’s the honest truth. She’ll get a fair shake from me AND
as much of a head start as I can buy her: her name left out of the reports, the audio tape from your call confiscated, the works.” Sergei’s paw frisked his inside pocket while the old bear shook his head in disbelief, looking for a pack of cigarettes he hadn’t carried in the last six years. Old habits die hard, but the muscle memory, that crap is yours for life! “But kiddo, you gotta know that I ain’t the only person who is gonna’ come looking for your little ‘friend,’ and the rest of these mooks ain’t gonna’ play nice like me. And I can’t protect somebody I’ve never met.” The old bear tried one more time to reach out to the boy he saw standing before him, to make him understand just how deep they were in the muck right now, “Listen, kit: half the city has family that owes the Don money and getting them free and clear of that debt? It’s gonna’ be like every scumbag in Zootopia fighting over the same winning lottery ticket.”

“Pop, I don’t know if I can do this…” Jacob looked through the small window in the door that separated his hospital room from the waiting room beyond, scanning the faces of a dozen strangers as he searched for the only friend he had left after last night. In one corner of the dimly lit waiting room, Jacob’s ears led him to the source of that wet, painful wheezing: a family of jaguars huddled pitifully around the one, tiny space heater that the hospital could scrounge up. Sitting as far away from the miserable jungle cats as they could, the young bear saw three Bobcats who’d obviously been in a drunken brawl, one husky lioness with a newborn cub sleeping in one arm and her other in a sling, and a broken down, old cougar holding a bag of ice over one eye, but Jacob’s heart sank when there were no foxes to be seen. Another swing and a miss there, lover boy. If Anna has any sense, she’s long gone by now. No need to keep torturing yourself… And then one of the jaguars slid sideways to huddle under his mother’s outstretched arms, and Jacob’s heart skipped a beat. She smells of lilacs, the stormy sea… and hope: Anna!

Somewhere outside the waiting room door, Jacob saw two security mammals in heavy gear come running by in the hallway, but the majority of mammals he saw were running the other way. “Kiddo, there are days when there aren’t any good choices left, when Life has dealt you crappy cards, hand after hand… that’s when you gotta pick the bad ones you can live with. I know that you want to protect her, -and I don’t blame you: you got your reasons. But you gotta ask yourself: could you live with yourself if somebody got to her before I did?” Sitting there warming her cold, trembling paws over the faltering space heater, Anna looked up at the miserable faces of the Jaguar family with an odd mixture of hope and fear reflecting in her soft, brown eyes. She’s hiding here in plain sight… but why? Then Jacob saw the vixen visibly shake as she looked from face to face in the waiting room, watched her sink into herself as even the poorest predators in the city looked right through her, and he began to understand the young vixen’s growing panic. It wasn’t until the frail young fox looked up to see his eyes on her that her smile came back, a halcyon beacon of hope in all this misery. That’s why she’s stayed so close to me?!? Of course, that’s all it was… she has no one else to turn to: Not the Don, not uncle Koslov’s people, not the cops. Just… me.

“You gotta see that she’d be safer with me, son.” And somewhere deep in the young polar bear’s chest, he felt his heartbreaking, leaving behind a simple choice that was made before the words ever left his lips: Koslov or Anna? “She might be safer with you, pop… but I won’t know that until I find her and talk with her, by myself.” Anna’s sweet smile shifted from hopeful to confused when Jacob’s eyes shifted sideways three times, growing wider with fear and more insistent every time. We are not alone here, sweetheart… but even a two-bit stumblebum like me knows you keep your word to a client. Especially a dame with eyes like that. “But, if you back off her scent like you promised me, I’ll give you something nobody else knows, and I mean NOBODY, Pop: not the Don, not the cops… Nobody but me and you.” The young polar bear’s claws wrapped out a steady, determined drumroll upon the heavy steel door to his room. Jacob could almost see the wheels turning in his father’s head, the paternal pride giving away to professional curiosity, and the dwindling desire to pull his son out of the mud, even as Sergei slipped further down, beneath its cold surface. “Deal.”

Another secret glance in Anna’s direction as the young vixen slowly inched her way through the
waiting room towards the emergency exit door had Jacob’s good eye tearing up, even as he slowly nodded his head whenever she looked back. Go ahead, sweetie. Stay safe out there: I got this. “It was a hit, pop, but the Ice Sickle wasn’t the target; Koslov was. I didn’t see their faces, but I know that they came for uncle Koslov from the way that the two of them joked about him being ‘the mighty Koslov’ when they were tossing his body into the river, outside.” As the vixen slipped out into the hospital’s fire escape, Jacob turned to fully face his father, but he couldn’t hide the hollow feeling her leaving left in his guts. The cop in his father waited patiently for him to continue spilling his sad story, but Jacob saw the concern etched into his father’s face and the heavy toll that interrogating his son was taking on the older bear. “In your own time, son.”

“Didn’t catch a look at their faces, or really anything much above the knee when I was trapped under that car, but I saw the boots that the female feline wore… old-style military leathers, like you and grandad wore during the war, but these weren’t some cheap knock-offs or museum pieces… she kept them polished within an inch of their lives.” Jacob slowly slid with his back facing the door until his short tail rested uncomfortably on the shabby linoleum floor. "The other one had to be one big-assed bear to carry Uncle Koslov around like a rag doll, big as a house like you and grandad, but brown fur speckled with white on his toes. I’ve never seen anything like him.” It was like the weight of the world slowly slipped from Jacob’s young shoulders, but he could already see his father picking that same weight up to carry it with him as he slowly made for the door his son was sullenly guarding. “I don’t think Uncle Koslov knew they were coming. They had some kind of military gear with them in the bar, too: a heavy duffle bag with the letter M, followed by the numbers 202. I… I think it’s what the used to set the whole place on fire.”

To his surprise, Jacob’s father came to kneel beside his son, cupping the young bear’s wounded face in one immense paw before pulling him into one last comforting bearhug. “Did I do the right thing, pop?” Tears ran down Jacob’s face, but for the life of him, he couldn’t tell if they belonged to him or his father. “Yeah, kiddo. You did alright. Now, let’s get you the hell out of here.” Even kneeling down by his son’s side, Jacob was amazed at the gentle strength of his father’s weathered paws as they carried the young polar bear back onto his feet. “Y-your mother already has it in for me, kiddo. I think she just might make a bear-skinned rug out of me if I let you catch pneumonia on top of everything else!” One immense paw rubbed the teary corners of his father’s face as the other reached around Jacob to open his hospital room door.

That’s when they heard the stampede of doctors and nurses come screaming past the waiting room door, running in a mad dash for the elevators going down to the lobby. Predators and prey alike were scrambling over each other as the emergency lights kicked on overhead and alarms started erupting all over the building. Over the head of the two polar bears, a simple, automated announcement cut through the tumultuous cacophony of animals screeching and growling in the hallways outside, “The hospital regrets to inform you that a savage predator may be loose in the building. Please evacuate the premises in an orderly manner to prevent further loss of life at this time.”

Jacob marveled at how even the trained professionals, doctors and nurses even, charged towards the elevators as the power in the building shuddered and failed, bit by bit. What the hell is going on in this city lately? “For those who cannot evacuate, we will begin lockdown services in 5 minutes. We apologize for any inconvenience at this time.” Sergei muscled open the heavy fire escape door so that the other predators in the waiting room could squeeze past him and hobble down the stairs. Pandemonium was rapidly setting in as the first waves of fleeing mammals found out that the elevators were the first systems to get locked down in an emergency like this. Jacob let out a shrill whistle like he was calling for a taxi, pulling the attention of the terrified animals in the hallway back to the safety of the stairs nearby as his father looked on with pride.
“Not a word about this part to your mother when you get home, kiddo.” Sergei flashed his son a knowing smirk as he pushed him out ahead of the maddening crowd. “We wouldn’t want her to think I’m getting you into trouble or anything.”
6. B.~ Helter Skelter, Pt. 2

((Timeline: Noon, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Who are you?” by SVRCINA.]

{Scene: Walking through the crowded halls of the Prey Wing of Zootopia General.}

Walking in the shadow of so many large mammals made Judy’s mind drift back to her former partner, Francine. In the six months that Nick had been away at the Academy, Judy had had the pleasure of getting to know the young female elephant pretty well. Towering over her fellow squad mates with a gentle strength that had nothing to do with her muscular frame, Francine had stepped easily into a motherly role for the new recruits like Judy. More than one newcomer to the ZPD had sought out the older officer for help working through a difficult case or an emotional breakup after duty, and they always left with a kind word or two of encouragement and a hug from the ZPD’s most gentle trunk. But, when everybody else leans on you for support, who’s left for you to lean on when everything goes wrong? From years of silently watching her mom ‘weather the storm’ of over 300 screeching babies and hormonal teenagers living under the same burrow roof, Judy knew that every mammal -no matter how strong- has a breaking point.

A large part of the bunny wanted to take up a collection to send her friend on a vacation cruise far away from Zootopia and whatever was troubling the young elephant, but Judy knew that the problems she ran away from for a few days wouldn’t just disappear when Francine came home. In the six months that they rode in the same squad car together, Judy had seen the young elephant hold the paws of terrified pedestrians injured in a hit-and-run as they waited for an ambulance. She’d seen a soot-caked Francine carry a dozen young lynx kittens out of a burning building when the shoddy wiring in the older brownstone finally gave out, her ZPD uniform a smoldering wreck of its former glory. She’d seen how proud her former partner and mentor had been when Chief Bogo handed her a framed commendation from City Hall for foiling a bank robbery two weeks after the fire. She’d seen the way that the tears welled up in the corners of her former partner’s eyes when Mayor Lionheart reached up to personally shake the elephant’s paw. But Judy had never seen Francine cry the way that she had the night of the after-party and nobody at the ZPD -not Nick, or Chief Bogo, or even Judy, herself- seemed to know why.

It hurt the young doe’s heart to see such a strong female officer, somebody she looked up to -in every sense of the word- hurting in silence, unable to reach out to the rest of her friends on the squad. Judy could still hear Bogo’s gentle rebuke, when he put one massive hoof on the bunny’s shoulders to steer her away from pursuing the mascara-smeared sight of her former partner the night of the after-party, “Everybody has their secrets,Hopps. If somebody like Francine wants you involved in their problems, they’ll ask you for help. Until then, the best thing you can do is not make things harder for them.” It was a hard lesson for Judy to swallow, then, and things were only getting harder now that Nick was starting to open up to her, again. Maybe Chief Bogo was right, Slick. But how can I help fix something if I don’t know what’s broken?

As the group’s only bunny, Judy was still getting used to keeping up with the longer stride of the grim polar bears in the Don’s entourage when she heard one of the male surgeons whispering, “You see what I mean? This city has gone to hell since they let predators join the police force…” Using her sensitive ears, the doe followed the voice back to its owner, a snide looking old stag in green doctor’s
scrubs, well past the point of caring if anybody in the Don’s employ overheard his callous comments about the fox standing by Mr. Big’s side, “First Bellwether, now this? I never met a fox who wasn’t crooked as a question mark, but I never thought I’d see the day they let one of them wear a badge.” Close to the stag’s side, two female deer in blue nurses’ scrubs looked over the Don’s entourage with uncertainty in their eyes, unable to meet Judy’s searching gaze. They merely nodded their heads numbly whenever the stag spoke, unwilling to contradict a doctor when there were so many witnesses about.

The situation only got worse further up the hall, as the Don’s entourage brushed up against hospital security, the two elephants and one very large rhino in green shirts and tan pants peering down at the polar bears in tuxedos with barely contained contempt. “Not happening.” Judy had no doubt that if things devolved into a fist fight, the Don’s entourage could quickly bring down a couple of hospital security mammals, but hospitals like this usually kept a dozen or so off-duty cops on their payroll per shift and there were only the six polar bears. Add that to that the sixteen different large prey mammals of various species just in this hallway, and things could go very badly for the Don if things got out of hand. Even Mr. Big wouldn’t be safe for very long if Bellwether had gotten her way. Judy looked up and down the halls for another predator who might be or willing to help, but she only saw one kindly old grizzly bear pushing a mop absent-mindedly up and down the hall, nearby. We’re all alone here. Judy had never wanted to call Chief Bogo so badly in her life, but what would she tell the ornery cape buffalo—that she had a bad feeling deep down in the pit of her stomach? Welcome to life in Zootopia after Bellwether.

The Don’s confusion at being barred from the nursery wing of the hospital was rapidly heating up into an ugly spat of temper, but only a mammal intimately familiar with the arctic shrew could hear the irritation building behind his seemingly innocent question, “Nicholas, what is the meaning of this… obstruction?” Judy looked on in frightful confusion as the rhino tilted his long, stubbled snout towards a meticulously dressed little raccoon that was scurrying towards the group with a clipboard gripped tightly in one trembling paw. For his part, Nick just looked from Mr. Big to the ornery rhino and then back down to hospital administrator who was already sweating bullets as he sidled up to the Don’s entourage, the poor raccoon already doing his level best to disappear behind his clipboard. That bad feeling in the pit of her stomach was rapidly turning into a lead weight as Judy saw the apologetic way that her fox looked back at her. Oh, Slick, you didn’t do this. The Don looked up at the new head of his security detail, completely ignoring the frightful little raccoon, “I’ve been coming here to look at the little babies every week for what… two or three years now?” George Kameroff shrugged and then nodded off-handedly like he was trying hard to remember past the events of the past week.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, the small raccoon would not be denied, “I—I’m sorry, sir, but the hospital as a new policy: no large predators are allowed past this point.” In his role as assistant to the hospital administrator over the past three years, Joffre Ringtail had had to soften the blow for a lot of mammals being asked to leave the hospital grounds, but Judy could see that he never thought that he’d see the day when he’d have to square off against Mr. Big and his entire entourage, “Sir, a lot of good mammals are scared these days, even lesser predators like myself. Every day, we watch the news, hoping that we don’t see another story about another predator going savage. I’m afraid that after all those poor predators lost their minds…”

A wide-eyed Nick tried to stop the raccoon before he dug himself in any deeper by coughing loudly and making a giant X with both of his arms, but the signal came too late. Though a full head shorter than Koslov, George Kameroff was intimidating enough on his own, when the Don’s new right paw loomed over a smaller mammal, but flanked as he was by his two smaller, quietly snarling brothers, the polar bear looked one step away from turning the small raccoon into a meat pie should he misspeak again, “I mean that Bellwether made go savage… on the news. The parents of these kids… they just won’t let us make any exceptions, sir. S-Surely, as a father, yourself, you can understand w-
why we have to start taking extra p-precautions?"

“As a father? Then you have some idea of who I am, apart from what I do, and what I’ve been known to do to those who stand in my way?” Nick and Judy held their breath while Mr. Big sized up the small raccoon in his meticulous little suit, noting the raccoon’s trembling knees, the slight stutter when he spoke, and his complete inability to look any of the snarling Kameroff trio in the eye. “And you came out here to tell me ‘No’ anyway, completely alone, knowing that it might displease me?” With the three polar bears glaring down upon him, it was all that the poor little guy could do to gulp and slowly nod his head. “What is your name, or should I just call you Mr. Raccoon to save us both a little time?” Nick took Judy’s paw in his, slowly backing the young doe further away from what he was sure was about to become the scene of a crime.

Judy was too busy redoing the mental math from earlier: Six angry polar bears -the Don’s most trusted leg-breakers- against three hospital security guards and a small pawful of civilians, with Nick and Judy stuck playing peacemaker in between. Cheese and crackers, Slick, this is the last place we want to be right now! She could already hear Major Friedkin’s voice as the large polar bear strutted down the Academy firing range, carrying a bag of heavy ZPD armaments like it was filled with down-stuffed pillows, instead, “The average ZPD sidearm carries six gas-propelled darts, filled with a fast-acting tranquilizer. You smaller mammals get issued a smaller model with a four-round clip, but the payload is identical. On anything smaller than a charging rhino, one shot should do the trick, so why do we load you and your partner up with extra clips?” In case we miss, get out-numbered, or have to quell a riot before it gets out of hand. “Remember cadets, there is going to come a day when you don’t know who to shoot to stop things from turning bloody.” And wouldn’t you know it, partner: it looks like today is gonna’ be our unlucky day. Nick was too busy wrapping his tail around the young bunny for emotional support to notice the way Judy had already shifted an extra clip out of the utility belt around her waist and into her off-hand sleeve.

Judy was already reaching for the poor raccoon, trying to pull him out of the line of fire, when he spoke, “Ringtail! J-Joffre R-Ringtail, sir.” Looming nearby, George Kameroff cracked his knuckles, smiling grimly at the rhino in charge of security, no doubt waiting for his boss to give him permission to vent a little of the day’s frustrations out on the hapless security chief. Nick turned back to look wide-eyed into his bunny’s determined face, only now seeing the miniature ZPD sidearm slowly rising in her velvety paw. His eyes closed shut in a determined grimace, but Nick still managed to put himself directly between Judy and George Kameroff, the barrel of her tranquilizer pistol pressed firmly into his stomach, hissing between gritted teeth as he whispered one last plea into Judy’s sensitive ears, “Wait.” Holding her trembling paw in his, Nick leaned over his partner’s shoulder, pressing her gently but firmly against the wall, her service pistol hidden from view by the collision of their ZPD blue uniforms, “The Truce, remember?”

Judy couldn’t tell if she was more surprised by her partner’s sudden, tight grip on her wrist or the pleading look in his green-gold eyes as Nick slowly pushed her pistol back into its holster, where it belonged. Nick pressed closer still, until every contoured inch of her partner was pressed tightly against the bunny’s inner thigh, softly pleading for her, alone to hear, “There has to be a better way, Fluff.” An embarrassed smile splitting his lips, Nick’s heady winter scent flooded the small hospital corridor for a moment, his hot breath whispering in her ears, “We’re just here to ‘serve and protect,’ right?” All around them, the Predators were hastily covering their sensitive noses -even the raccoon-while the Prey nearby shuffled as far away as their duties would let them. Nobody really saw the apologetic glance that passed between the fox and his partner, or the way that Judy rubbed the feeling back into her wrist. Meanwhile, Mr. Big’s booming laughter filled the halls, cutting through the building tension like a knife. “My son, you really do need a shower. And what should we do about you, Mr. Raccoon... Hmm?” With a small signal to George Kameroff to lower him down to the small raccoon’s eye level, Mr. Big waved the young raccoon closer, like an old friend about to share some juicy gossip, “You’re braver than you think, Mr. Ringtail. Stick with it, and someday, you
might just be the one running this place.”

“I take it you have no problem with me getting a little ‘police escort’ in go see the babies this time, Mr. Ringtail? We can talk later about this new policy if you like?” The Don’s voice came out as sweet as honey, but Judy could see the fear still hiding in the raccoon’s eyes when he turned to look up at Nick, “It’s your call, sir. If you want to trust a fox around the children… who am I to tell you otherwise?” The uncertain shrug that rolled across Ringtail’s shoulders did very little to ease Judy’s raw nerves, even when the raccoon turned to look pointedly in her direction, “Just please… promise me that you’ll both keep an eye on him while he’s in there?” It was all that Nick could do to keep his bunny from deck ing the little creep when he smiled in her direction. When next he spoke, Mr. Big let his voice carry far enough for all to hear, “You heard the raccoon, boys: Today, we'll play by their rules. Watch the door for now; I'll call you if I need you.” Sliding over onto Nick’s shoulder as easily as he slipped on his dapper old coat, the Don still managed to look as regal even as a king addressing his kingdom, even as he whispered, “And remember this, Mr. Ringtail: I never forget the face of a friend… or an enemy.”

The maternity wing of Zootopia General was the one place in the whole hospital where the Prey and Predator wings really connected, a shining circle of polished steel and spotless windows overlooking three rows of bassinets and baby blankets. Standing like the ends of a great hourglass were two separate viewing areas, each reserved for parents of the two groups, where expectant fathers of all species paced their weary vigils, wearing grooves into the linoleum underfoot. Three nurses - two skunks and a kangaroo - walked the rows between bassinets, turning or burping the tiny bundles of joy whenever their mothers drifted off in their chairs for an exhausted bit of shut-eye while bonding with their newborns or returned to their beds, alone to dream of happier days yet to come. And in the corner of this happiest of rooms sat a great, big plastic tub where the smaller children slept in a great big pile, their faces turned up in the very picture of peace and contentment. Judy could see why the aging Don would find the scene soothing, but she was surprised to see way Nick shied away from the sight, his tail whipping back and forth in a frantic figure ‘8’ as the nervous fox took it all in. He’s not looking at the babies, or the mothers, or even back at me… Something about being around so much polished metal is making you jumpy, partner. We can all see that, but why?

“After all of these years, -even before I found out I was going to be a grandfather, myself- this sight still gets to me.” The Don looked past the bassinets to watch three tiny tiger kittens snuggling up to a small sleeping hippo and a deer foal, their tiny bodies sprawling out in an awkward, but happy heap in the large plastic tub, while an aged armadillo nurse with tortoiseshell glasses kept watch over them all to prevent the hippo from squishing the smaller babies. “You see, my son? This is the dream that Zootopia was built upon, all those years ago.” One of the kittens was sleepily suckling on the foal’s long ear while to other two tucked themselves further under the baby rhino’s warm forearm to purr the day away. “We were never meant to walk alone, or even in packs of only one kind or another, no matter how much the outside world tells us so.” Nick took in a deep breath, but the sight of a very worried bunny staring back at him from Judy’s reflection in the glass gave him pause before he could speak.

The sound broke the Don from his reverie with an exhausted sigh. Sometimes wisdom is wasted on the young. For a mammal so accustomed to riding around on the shoulders of others, Mr. Big Looked like he was carrying the entire city around on his back today, “Nicky, I owe you an apology: You were right about Koslov’s little black book going missing. We have combed through the
wreckage of the club, frisked the survivors, and dragged our nets up and down the river for a quarter mile. Not a trace…” If anything, Nick looked even more upset by the news, his fuzzy tail standing on end like an exclamation mark as he turned back to look at Judy over his shoulder, “That means all the Family’s secrets are up for grabs if somebody finds that book: its network of confidential informers and paid muscle, and even the runaways like me, Carrots.” Mr. Big took one last, longing look at the babies frolicking in their clear plastic tub before he turned to look Judy squarely in the eye, “Until now, only George and I knew about the book’s disappearance. I would like to keep things between the four of us, for now. I know that Nick can keep a secret, but what about you, my dear?”

Judy looked down at her feet for a moment, trying desperately not to look at the hurt look in her fox’s eyes as she weighed her options. For one glorious second, the bunny saw Chief Bogo gold medals on her chest, newspaper articles with her picture in them under the giant headline, “ZPD Bunny finally brings down Mr. Big!” Parades were being thrown in her honor every day for a week where she got to ride around in the Mayor’s fancy car, holding the key to the city. It was everything that a rookie cop could ever dream of, but Nick wouldn’t be there to share any of the glory. Even if she found the book and turned it over directly to Chief Bogo, Judy had no way of protecting the mammals in her life from the violent repercussions of exposing the secrets of some of Zootopia’s most influential mammals. Even beyond the immediate threats against her family, the bunny knew that a fox like Nick would take the brunt of Zootopia’s elite criminal circles, if not the Don’s family then whoever rose to take its place. After hearing Bellwether’s plans to turn the city against itself, she knew that there were no limits to the cruelty that some animals were capable of. The thought of him being hurt again, thrown in jail or worse yet, hiding back under that bridge where she found him, shivering alone in the pouring rain… it made all those moments of glory taste like ashes in her mouth. Judy’s heart actually ached deep down in her chest when she looked back up to meet Nick’s sad gold-green eyes. Bogo wouldn’t like being kept in the dark on this any more than Mr. Big and his family would like to be drug out into the light…and here poor Nick and I are, caught in the middle!

At moments like this, Judy could almost hear her mother’s voice ringing in her long ears, “Judith Laverne Hopps! What were you thinking, getting into a fight with that fox?!? He’s twice your size! Just once, I wish you’d think before you go barreling into these things! What would happen to your family if you got hurt?” It had not been a particularly bright week for mother-daughter relationships that evening, but Judy had tried to make her mother understand why standing up to Gideon Gray had been about so much more than a few rolls of carnival game tickets, “What would happen to my friends if I didn’t at least try to help? You told us always to try to do the right thing! How is letting a bully like Gideon Gray push everyone around the right thing?!” Her mother actually took the bloodied dishrag from Judy’s and threw it on her nice, clean floor in frustration, “What I should have told you was to do the SMART thing once in a while! You don’t have to fix everything wrong with the world, Judy, but you do have to live in it! Next time, please THINK before you leap into a dangerous situation… for all of our sakes!” A small shiver rolled down her spine at the memory of a young kit sneaking down to clean up the mess she’d made, after all the other bunnies in the Hopps household went to sleep that night. Judy’s pride might sting a bit, but this one time, she knew her mother had been right: Too many people that she cared about could get hurt if Koslov’s book fell into the wrong hands, with Nick and her family’s names topping the list!

The only joy Judy got out of answering the Don’s question was in seeing the way that Nick’s hopeful eyes lit up when she slowly nodded her head, “W-What do you need us to do?” Chief Bogo is going to skin us both when he hears about this, Slick! Judy could already see some of the weight leaving the Don’s small shoulders, even as her own felt heavier by the second. His heavy eyebrows lifted in surprise, then furrowed a bit as he looked deeper at the mismatched pair, seeing for the first time the way that Judy’s worried eyes kept darting back to her partner’s wounded side, an
understanding smile parting the Don’s lips as he looked back at Nick. “My dear, I’d never ask you to be anything less than what you are: a good cop. Take it from me, this is a rarer thing than you know in a city like Zootopia.” It chilled Judy’s blood to hear the unflinching certainty in the small shrew’s words, even though he looked on the young doe with fatherly affection and pride. You made it make your business to know one from the other when you forged your Truce with City Hall, didn’t you, Gerald? “The only thing you need is somebody you can trust to guide you through the darker parts of our city without getting hurt.”

That same fatherly affection filled Mr. Big’s small voice as he turned to pat Nick’s cheek, halfway between bragging about his wayward son and chastising the fox for staying away for so long, “Like most Nocturnal mammals, Nicky here was born into those shadows, scrambling to make ends meet in a city hostile to his breed. Before he brought you into my house, I would have bet that your new partner was content living the terrible life that the City had chosen for him.” With a son’s careful hand, Nick set the aging Don on the window frame, before turning to walk back to Judy with an embarrassed grin plastered to his handsome mug, as the Don’s small shoulders rose in a resigned shrug, “I’m not convinced that his being a cop is much better, but if Nick plans on watching your back, then you’ll need to help him step out into the light.”

“So, what do we do about Koslov’s little black book?” Nick’s words came out a little raspy, his sharp teeth cutting through what was supposed to be a confident, unhurried smile. Even leaning on Judy’s shoulder for support, the fox was starting to shiver, his thick winter coat trembling as he drew in one deep, jagged breath. The tremendous effort it took to keep his paws from trembling was wearing her fox down to a shell of his former glory, but Judy never saw the smile leave Nick’s face, not entirely. You’re pushing yourself too far today, Slick. The Don saw the fox trembling too, judging by the slow, questioning rise of one eyebrow over the other as he turned to look back at Judy, “The book is of secondary importance; even if somebody found it, it would take them months to break the cipher Koslov used. I want you to focus on finding these animals that attacked my Family, because this I can promise you: They are just getting started!”

“H-h-how do you know that?” Her left ear resting squarely against her partner’s sagging chest, Judy had a hard time listening to anything over the sound of Nick’s pounding heartbeat, but the bunny thought she heard a note of sad acceptance in the Don’s reply, “Because this is exactly how I would take down a Family as deeply entrenched in Zootopia as mine is; you find the root of their connection to the city, and you cut it, at all costs. This leaves them without the protection of their friends in high places while you close in for the kill!” Something noble in the bunny couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but the Don wasn’t one to mince words, even at a time like this.

Even as Judy set her fox down gently to rest for a moment on the other side of the nursery door, some part of her had to turn to look the old Mr. Big right in the face, “Koslov isn’t protecting the Truce, he’s protecting you!” She saw the Don’s predatory smile loom wide for a moment with the thrill of the hunt, the way his eyes glittered darkly, even surrounded by so much polished metal and plexiglass. Judy knew from Nick’s stories that the Don’s older self could be calculating, even cruel, but nothing prepared her for the way he sniffed the air for that faint scent of blood like he was savoring the bouquet of a fine wine left to breathe in his tiny glass. “Like I said, Officer Hopps... you definitely got the brains in this partnership. Now, do us all a favor and bring these animals to justice -before my boys do it for you!”
Outside the nursery room door, Nick couldn’t see the way that Mr. Big looked at his bunny, but he knew all too well the terrified twitching of her nose as the young doe slowly backed away from the old shrew, her mouth frozen in a terrified “oh.” He’d seen first-hand how quickly the Don’s mercurial temper could turn, felt the cold chill that even now crept up his bunny’s spine, but there was nothing the young fox could do to protect his bunny from seeing the horrifying change for herself. Now, she’s seen it all. Welcome to the Family, Carrots. All he could do was slide off the wall and shuffle to his partner’s side, wrapping a supporting paw around her waist as he turned the dumbstruck doe back towards the hospital’s predator wing.

Focused as he was on getting his bunny out of this horrible place, Nick almost missed overhearing the Kameroff trio arguing as they stood guard outside the nursery room doors, with Kevin taking the lead, “No way the Old Bear checks out like this; I mean, did you even see how many tranq-darts those cops hit Koslov with? They turned him into the world’s biggest porcupine, and he kept on swinging!” Raymond’s gravel-throated laughter shook the entire hall, but his brother George was less than entertained, “Yeah, but you never know-between the freezing river, the club going boom, and those scalpel-happy docs upstairs- even the Old Bear can only take so much!” As usual, Raymond had to get the last word in, “Hey, if the Don ain’t worried about Koslov pulling through, then I ain’t worried… and neither are either of you, capisce?”

It was all Nick could do to shoulder his way between the trio, holding onto Judy at his side for dear life, “How many tranq-darts did they use, Kevin?” Something terrible was gnawing at the back of Nick’s memory, something he just couldn’t put his paw on. “I don’t know it was hard to count in all that carnage… maybe ten to twelve? What’s the big deal, Nicky? We all know how tough the Old Bear can be…” Nick was certain that his new partner could hear her fox’s heart jackhammering in his chest, even as the confident smile dropped from his face, but the feeling of dread just wouldn’t go away, “Nobody’s that tough, not even the Old Bear! One or two tranq darts will bring down most mammals, maybe three or four on somebody as big as Koslov, but ten to twelve? Something about this just doesn’t add up…”

Overhead, a flashing blue light dropped from the ceiling, followed by an unnaturally calm voice coming over the intercom, “The hospital regrets to inform you that a savage predator may be loose in the building. Please evacuate the premises in an orderly manner to prevent further loss of life at this time.” George Kameroff kneeled down to look the two cops dead in the eye, his voice a hopeful whisper, “You think the Old Bear went ‘savage’ back at the club? They couldn’t throw the book at him for attacking those cops if he really was nuts at the time, right?” Nick just shrugged his tired shoulders as he looked down into Judy’s pretty purple eyes for some clue what to say to the desperate polar bear in front of them. Who knows, right? Stranger things had happened? This is Zootopia, after all. This time, the mechanical voice was accompanied by the sounds of dozens of prey animals of all sizes running for the elevators, a full-blown stampede of hospital staff running for their lives, “For those who cannot evacuate, we will begin lockdown services in 5 minutes. We apologize for any inconvenience at this time.” Even the rhino and his security detail were getting lost in the shuffle, like bears trying to wade upstream during the salmons’ mating season. “No, this is something so much worse.”

Nick looked down to Judy and then back towards the nursery room doors with an inquisitive tilt of his muzzle. What do you think, Carrots? After she nodded her pretty head in agreement, Nick turned to the Don’s entourage and gave his first order as Mr. Big’s new Bolyari, “Get him out of here and then call the cops. We’re going to need all the help we can get.”
6. C.~ Helter Skelter, Pt. 3

((Timeline: Noon, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Wake Up” by NF.]

{Scene: The Don’s private ‘Penthouse’ Operating Theatre of Zootopia General.}

Dr. Kalahari had been a fixture at Zootopia General since they laid the hospital’s foundation over 25 years ago, prompting many of the younger surgeons to joke that the “old goat” had laid the first cement slabs with his own two hoofs. The stalwart brown goat had risen through the ranks from a humble surgical intern to teach the next five generations of young residents, his impressive, bulky frame easily dominating his surgical floor as chief surgeon. Even now, calmly facing off against the terrible temper of the Don in his own operating theatre, the other mammals on Kalahari’s surgical team were only too happy to hide in his immense shadow. When things started going wrong, there were few mammals whose medical judgment the staff rallied behind with greater certainty. And just about everything in Kalahari’s life was going wrong today…

Kalahari’s nightmare of a day started when he first saw the hulking slab of burned bear that the ZPD had fished out of the rivers of Tundra town: a dozen bloody shards of broken glass sticking out of his ashen fur like quills on a napalmed porcupine and still, the polar bear clung to life. Debriding the polar bear’s wounds was a cross between disarming an active landmine with chopsticks and sewing together a freshly cooked meat pie that was still moving. To make matters worse, not twenty minutes after Kalahari made the gangster’s gruesome acquaintance, the hospital’s star anesthesiologist, a young Impala named Dr. Bovidae decided to take an impromptu ‘sabbatical’ -supposedly to “watch the leaves change colors outside Moo York” or some other hogwash. Far more likely that Mrs. Bovidae just found out about the racy little Ibex that the good doctor ‘fooled around with’ at last year’s medical conference. Kalahari didn’t give even the smallest damn about Bovidae’s serial infidelity, but the Impala was the best gas-passer this side of Bunny burrow and his sudden absence threw off the rhythm of Kalahari’s entire surgical team.

Dr. Bovidae’s replacement was a young deer so fresh out of medical school that Kalahari could still smell the formaldehyde on her winter coat. The poor doe wasn’t ready for the grisly marathon set before her on that operating table, any more than Dr. Kalahari was prepared to endure another of his daughter’s interminable school plays. Ah, the sacrifices we make, when Choice is removed from the equation. One wonders if that was what Dante meant when he described Purgatory… When the chief surgeon silently asked the heavens why he was being saddled with such a green recruit, he was reminded of the oldest of surgical truisms, a holdover from his own medical school days, “Should a surgeon ever have a favorite scalpel -or any tool, really- that he simply cannot operate without?” Though it goaded the old goat to admit it, the professor’s answer was probably a gift from his own teachers, a kind of surgical lesson recycled throughout all of modern history: “No, he does his best work with whatever tools are on hand.” Even a rock will suffice if you haven’t the luxury of a proper hammer.

Looking down at the battered body of the polar bear strapped down to his table, Kalahari felt the odd tinge of civic responsibility tugging at his neglected conscience. Three hours into their secret patch-up job on one of the city’s most notorious gangsters, with the bloody gauss pads pooling around his feet, even a trained surgeon finds themselves confronted with one inescapable question: was all of
Today’s gruesome work really worth it, to his staff, to the bear’s distraught family and patron, or to the city at large? On the one hand, the old goat had never given up on a patient before, not even when their wounded bodies seemed all too willing to give up on life, itself. His staff would work - and sleep, if necessary- in shifts, tending to the macabre chorus of machines that recycled the patient’s blood, monitored his pulse and kept him breathing while the surgeons did their best to remedy the awful handiwork of shrapnel and fire. Short of the new girl at anesthesia, Kalahari had seen each member of his team work well past the point of exhaustion, giving their all to help him save lives. On the other hand, what possible future awaited the poor polar bear, should the old goat miraculously repair the terrible damage that had been done to the gangster’s body, even before it had been thrown bodily into the icy rivers of Tundra town? The ZPD would get their arrest and the city would breathe a little easier, Kalahari suspected, but if a long life in a small prison cell was all that awaited the battered gangster on his operating table, then wouldn’t it be kinder to just let him slip away into a long, deep sleep? Looking down at the polar bear’s trembling face, Kalahari just shook his foolish, old horned head and got back to work. Ours is not always a merciful profession, but at least it’s ethical; He’s still fighting, so we will too.

Another inch-long shard of bloody glass relinquished its grip on the poor bear’s chest cavity, its jagged edges dug in mere centimeters from the carotid artery. For something so lethal, the shard made a ridiculously light, plinking sound as it joined the many, many others in the bucket by Kalahari’s feet. The old goat still had magic hands, even as arthritis waged its slow war against the chief surgeon’s livelihood. He could retire somewhere in a few years, maybe take the wife out to tour the countryside beyond Zootopia as he’d always promised, but where would Kalahari ever find the almost spiritual thrill of prolonging another mammal’s life under such adverse conditions as this? Gardening? Hardly! Going back to the synagogue to slowly while away the hours in a day arguing obscure religious texts with all the other old fogeys on his block? This body is my garden, see how it struggles to live and grow. This operating room is my church where the ‘amens’ and the ‘hallelujahs’ come after the miracles, not before.

“Blood pressure and pulse?” Kalahari’s voice was as calm and steady as his hands, even as the old goat finally stopped to take a long deep breath, steadying his nerves for the hours yet to come. Blood-pressure erratic but holding. Pulse is all over the place, but stronger than it has any right to be. “As we expected, now how about breathing and blood intake?” He’s going into cardiac arrest! We need a crash cart in here! One of Kalahari’s most seasoned colleagues, a young horse was knocked out by a nurse’s heavy winter antlers as the moose pivoted just a little too quickly to carry her instruction. He’s not having a heart attack on bypass, he’s having a reaction to the anesthesia! All around him, Kalahari saw panic descending upon his surgical team, even as the unexplainable drop in his patient’s vital signs made a cacophony of all the monitoring machine’s
beeping.

“Enough!” One little word from Kalahari’s terse lips froze the entirety of his panicking surgical team in their tracks, “This isn’t first year exams in med school anymore! You’re all doctors now! For God’s sake, show a little decorum!” Kalahari rested his stethoscope against the polar bear’s massive chest, hoping that one of the machines had just broken down, but he could hear the patient’s watery cough turning into a low, rumbling roar deep in his chest. *Nothing about any of this made medical sense- patients don’t wait three hours before developing an allergic reaction to anesthesia!* “Nurse Yakutia, consider yourself part of the clean-up crew when we finish operating. And I believe you owe Doctor Haflinger an apology when she wakes up. For now, please get her out of here and send in her understudy, will you?”

“Would you get a look at that EEG reading? His brain activity’s right off the bloody charts! I don’t know what this fella is dreaming about but he’s certainly going all in, isn’t he?” Kalahari turned to look at the erratic rollercoaster of readings that flashed across the machine’s screen, dumbfounded by the speed with which this situation was spinning out of his control. *It has to be some outside factor interfering with the anesthesia, but what?!! Something toxic in the river, maybe, or the initial explosion?* “HE’S WAKING UP!” This time, the young doe’s terrified shrieks stampeded through the whole surgical team, only to echo off of the nearby walls. Even Dr. Kalahari’s cool demeanor offered the old goat little protection from the spectacle of watching his patient open one bloodshot eye and blankly stare through every mammal in the small operating room. Whatever lights are on, there’s still nobody home… yet. “Then put him back under, immediately!” Frantically, Kalahari reached out to the panicking doe, trying desperately to banish his newfound fear from his voice. “I don’t care if you have to use ketamine, morphine, or even a large rock, he needs to go back to sleep right now, doctor!”

Already, the old goat could see that second-year resident’s itch growing in the young doe’s eyes, the almost unavoidable impulse to question her superior’s admittedly knee-jerk diagnosis, “Sir, we don’t know how much tranquilizer the police pumped into this bear’s bloodstream before they brought him to us. The wrong dosage might just kill him…” *We don’t have time to fight about this.* Kalahari’s hurried reply fell into a pleading whisper. “You’re right; we’re missing key information about this patient. We don’t know how much tranquilizer is in his system because nobody here saw the altercation when the ZPD pulled him out of the river.” Slowly, he saw the doe nod her head as if to say that this was exactly the point she was just making, but Kalahari wasn’t finished. Anybody else on his surgical team would have suspected the long fall after lifting her up, but as chief surgeon, Kalahari couldn’t let such a promising student go without her lesson. These were not the kind of things one learned at medical school.

“So, let’s focus on what we do know: This bear has a verifiable history of violence, he comes from a violent occupation that likely led to him nearly dying in a violent explosion, and when he came to the last time, he very violently tore through half a dozen police officers who were trying to save his life.” Kalahari took the errant doe’s hands in his, quickly talking her down with the same calming voice that he would often use with his own children. “Now, Doctor, can you guess which word there concerns us most at this exact moment in time?” Just as he was about to give up hope of making her understand, Kalahari saw the doe’s wide-eyed stare turn into a subtle nod. Thanks to the surgical mask they were all wearing, Kalahari didn’t even have to fake a comforting smile when he heard the doe turn the anesthetic gas back up to full throttle. *I'm trying to save her life here and she’s probably still thinking of turning me over to an ethics review board. Well, at least it got her back on task; the rest of this mess I can deal with after... What the furry hell??*

Looking down at the groggy polar bear on his operating table, Kalahari saw the patient’s gaze following his every motion. Some part of him as far removed from the civilized world as Kalahari
could imagine was tracking his every move, even as the polar bear’s lips parted to reveal a mouth full of very sharp teeth. “Oh, sweet Mother-on-the-Mountain, guide my steps, for the path is treacherous and steep…” Like cold fingers creeping up his spine when he should have been all alone in the dark, the childhood prayer came back to haunt Kalahari’s memory. But none of this frightened the old goat nearly so much as the thick red sheen that covered the bear’s one, fully-dilated pupil. *They're not just bloodshot, it's like looking Murder, itself in the eye.* The old goat swallowed hard, pushing the lump in his throat back down where it belonged, but he couldn’t look away. All around him, his surgical team moved with clockwork precision, but the watchmaker that usually guided their every move stood transfixed by his patient’s predatory gaze. Well, hell… I wasn’t looking forward to retirement anyway. Still, a captain should go down with his ship, right?

“My friends…” Turning towards the rest of his surgical team, Kalahari placed one stalwart hoof on top of the breathing mask that covered the bear’s face and spoke with a fatherly fondness toward each of them, especially the poor doe that he had just scolded so unfairly, “…If I were you, I would start running, and not stop until you are several miles away from this room.” Then the good doctor threw all of his weight down around the bear’s neck with his free hoof, trying to buy them a few more precious seconds to run for the staff elevator on the other side of the nearby clean room. The rest of his surgical team didn’t start moving until Koslov’s claws tore through the first restraint around his wrist in a single swipe. They didn’t start screaming for help until something large, black and wooly came crashing through the heavy, one-way mirror that separated the clean room from the surgical theatre behind them. Unfortunately for Dr. Kalahari, the old goat was still airborne and thoroughly unconscious when he beat the rest of his surgical team to the elevator with a bone-jarring thud.

*          ~          *          ~          *

Joffre Ringtail was still running towards the staff elevator when Dr. Kalahari’s team came screaming out of the doors, carrying the chief surgeon’s limp body between them. The fastidious raccoon didn’t know the pretty young doe who cradled the old goat’s unconscious face so tenderly in her arms as she sobbed, but he knew things were rapidly spinning out of the hospital’s control. Already, six large security guards were jogging towards the staff elevator with heavy, dogged steps, their riot shields and stun batons gripped tightly in their massive paws. The rank and file of the hospital’s support staff were already running in all directions like a bomb had just gone off and given the heavy scattering of broken glass that fell from the shoulders of Kalahari’s surgical team as they ran for cover, Joffre was not ready to discount the possibility that there were more explosions on the way.

“Hey! There’s another…” Try as he might, Joffre couldn’t yell his warning about the Don’s private elevator to the marshaling security forces, because at that very moment, a heavy bear paw wrapped around the raccoon’s panicked face, pulling the young hospital administrator off of his feet and dragging him into a nearby supply closet. For the briefest of moments, Joffre thought that one of the Don’s leg-breakers had taken their little ‘standoff’ earlier in front of the nursery as a personal insult, but the massive arm that slammed the poor raccoon’s back into the shelves was covered in thick, brown fur -not white. “There he is, my love: a spineless little rodent running off to hide in some hole, when he should be working, no?” Joffre couldn’t see much of the tigress behind her surgical mask, just an amused flash behind the feline’s eyes as her bear companion pummeled him against the shelves another time before tossing him to the floor with a disgusted huff, “Just another worthless bureaucrat!”

“Please, I did what you asked! My family…” Joffre was still trying to push his small frame up off the floor when he felt the feline’s combat boot pressing down slowly and relentlessly between his shoulder blades, crushing the raccoon back into the dust, “Your ‘precious’ little family will remain
safe, just like I promised… provided that you kept up your end of our little bargain, my dear raccoon!” Slowly, Joffre’s fingers slid forward, carrying his access card for the floor, his whole body bent in the model of submission to the larger, more aggressive predators. “Of course, if anybody found out that you were helping us today…” There wasn’t enough time for Joffre to curl his body back up into a defensive little ball before one of those same combat boots connected with the poor raccoon’s ribs, sending his battered body spiraling through the air like a rapidly deflating soccer ball. “And that’s just for starters!” It was only random chance that Joffre ended up wedged into a seated position in the corner of the small supply closet, his tattered breathing supported only by the shelves at his back and bruised side.

“I might just let my associate here eat your two little daughters, one greasy little morsel at a time, but your wife?” The giant brown bear loomed over him, menacingly, but Joffre’s attention stayed with the merciless feline who was clearly running this show. “I promise you that if you cross me, she will suffer the most hideous of violations that you can imagine. And if she doesn’t go to her grave cursing the day that she met you, then I’ll feed whatever is left of her to you by the spoon-full.” Something about that small horizon where the surgical mask dug into the fur around her mouth, blurring the thin black lines on her cheeks. *Tiger fur doesn’t leave streaks on a plain white mask. Unless… mascara and fur dye? But why?!? “Are we crystal clear, Mr. Ringtail?”*

Quickly, Joffre cast his eyes back to the bloodied floor at his feet, praying silently that she couldn’t read the secrets he had just gleaned. This time, there was no need to fake the notes of terror and miserable servitude in his voice, “Yes, ma’am. Y-You’re the boss. Take my access card, it'll get you anywhere on this floor that you w-w-want to go.” The feline cooed at her brutal bear companion, “There, do you see that, my dear? Even bureaucrats have their uses when you show them their proper place.” Somewhere far too close at hand, Joffre heard the grating of metal, followed by the terrified screams of his security personnel. Seconds later, the hospital’s alarm sirens sprang into life with a terribly calm automated message following in their wake, “The hospital regrets to inform you that a savage predator may be loose in the building. Please evacuate the premises in an orderly manner to prevent further loss of life at this time.”

*To his complete astonishment, the unlikely pair of predators standing before him seemed to revel in the carnage that was about to unfold. “Heh, heh, heh… you got no idea how true that is, folks!” The massive bear cracked his knuckles, a lopsided grin on his cruel face as he turned to nuzzle the side of the feline’s neck, possessively. Again, her boot came to rest firmly on Joffre’s chest, this time pushing the raccoon further into the corner as she slowly rotated around the bear at her side, “Not right now, Love, we’re on a tight schedule. One last little thing, Mr. Ringtail… What’s the quickest way for us to get into that lovely little Nursery of yours?”*
7. A.~ The Bellwether Effect, Part 1

((Timeline: Noon, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Panic Room” by Au/Ra.]

{Scene: The Prey Wing of Zootopia General, just 1 floor below the Don’s ‘Penthouse’ Operating theatre.}

“Stampede!” Nick’s frantic paw pulled Judy out of the way just in time, as three deer in surgical scrubs came barreling down on the young doe, their eyes wide with panic. Behind them, another two dozen prey mammals were charging their way to the exit staircases as the emergency lights overhead flickered in time Judy’s thundering heartbeat. “Nick, we gotta’ call Chief Bogo!” Even to Judy’s sensitive ears, it sounded like the order came out as a desperate, fearful squeak, but now wasn’t the time to give in to panic. They were the only ZPD officers on site when all the hospital’s alarms started going off at the same time, and she was determined to make Chief Bogo proud. Nick didn’t share her heroic aspirations, but the fox in him would be damned before he let his bunny walk into harm’s way without backup today. “It’s a hospital, Carrots. This many bells and whistles going off—trust me, Bogo already knows things here have gone six kinds of sideways!”

“But he doesn’t know that we’re in here—or about Mr. Big, and his crew! He doesn’t know that we still have civilians trapped in the building!” As always, Judy’s keen eye was focused on helping everyone else, before she gave a thought to her own safety. On most days, it would have been one of the doe’s most endearing traits, but right now, it meant watching the headstrong doe leap over the heads of the stampeding hospital staff to cling precariously on a fire extinguisher case while Nick was forced to dip and dive between their legs, scurrying forward on all fours. “Good point!” Oof! Watch the tail, buddy! “Let’s go find a phone booth somewhere far, far away from here and give him a call.” Ow! Get off of my hand, lady! I only got two of those! “What do you say? We can even go by that new Snarlbucks you saw yesterday… Maybe get one of those iced carrot coffees you like so much?” He could almost hear the bunny’s teeth grinding in frustration over the hospital’s alarm sirens, but it was worth getting kicked around like a soccer ball to see her look back over her shoulder with concern in those pretty purple eyes. Focus, Wilde, FOCUS! Look for the opening—No, not in her shirt, you idiot! Wait for the crowd to part… Now, Jump!

It took everything the injured fox had in him, but Nick sprang off the floor, bouncing off of the shoulders of a particularly confused little lady hippo in a floral print dress to slam waist-high into a high countertop near his partner, but Judy’s paws helped him in the fox’s final, desperate climb above the maddening crowd. “Honestly,” OOF, my tender bits! “I know a guy who’s figured out a way to make those things deliciously alcoholic…” OW! Sooooo TENDER right now! “We could make it a little party: just a few close friends this time, some mini-umbrellas… maybe a little music?” This time, there was no mistaking the no-nonsense look on Judy’s face or the impatient drumming of the doe’s foot on the hospital countertop. “Nick, we’re ON DUTY right now…” Actually, Fluff, it’s our day off. We can go back to that lovely little carwash, you just say the word! The fox’s smug reply died on his lips when he saw one of the polar bears from the Kameroff trio -is that George or Kevin?- wading upstream towards them, bodily tossing aside any terrified prey mammal dumb enough to stay in his way. “What are you guys still doing here?!? I told you to grab Mr. Big and get the furry hell out of here!”
George Kameroff’s booming reply came out as easy as breathing, even as the relentless polar bear gently lifted and then tossed an aging tortoise closer to the exit staircase, “The Don decided to stay and spread us out to protect the Nursery.” A gentle shrug of the polar bear’s massive shoulders was all Nick could see over the heads of the nearby stampeding crowd. “He keeps saying ‘if that room goes, so goes the rest of Zootopia.’ I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about, but I’ve learned not to argue when the Don’s giving out orders.”

A gentle shrug of the polar bear’s massive shoulders was all Nick could see over the heads of the nearby stampeding crowd. “He keeps saying ‘if that room goes, so goes the rest of Zootopia.’ I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about, but I’ve learned not to argue when the Don’s giving out orders.” Judy saw her fox’s shoulders slump in momentary defeat, but Kameroff wasn’t done delivering the bad news, “That’s your job now, as Bolyari… Sorry, little fox, but better you than me.”

Judy saw her fox’s shoulders slump in momentary defeat, but Kameroff wasn’t done delivering the bad news, “That’s your job now, as Bolyari… Sorry, little fox, but better you than me.” The grim prospect of butting heads again with Mr. Big—in front of a half dozen of his finest leg-breakers, no less—made a substantial lump form in Nick’s throat, but the dumb-founded fox just had to ask, “You mean Kolsov and the Don argued… like, a lot?”

“What is the Zootopian phrase? Like cats and hogs… or is it bats and dogs– I can never remember?” Lost in thought for a moment, George Kameroff almost missed the elderly armadillo pensioner trying to scoot past him with her walker, but at the last moment, the polar bear picked her up onto one of his massive shoulders and started wading with the crowd to place the old widow down gently as a carton of eggs at the nearest exit stairwell. Wading back to them mismatched pair of cops on their little countertop refuge proved far easier the second time, as the local Prey population started grasping that the large predator was actually there to help out their less fortunate, rather than eat them, “…Particularly about you and that crazy little brother of yours, Nicky.”

Finnick. Oh, Nick, I am so sorry! Judy watched as Nick’s smile slipped off his face in a heartbeat, even as the polar bear continued on, oblivious to the emotional wreckage left in his wake, “Koslov wanted to bring you both into the Family proper, but the Don thought it was kinder to send you away…”

Judy was still slowly reaching out for her fox when she felt him go cold, “Let’s just focus on today’s problems… Do we know who went savage?” Further up the hallway, there was a muffled explosion as one of the elephants guarding the hospital sailed across the corridor to collide with a rack of compressed gas cylinders in the room across the hall. Again, George Kameroff’s voice came out as calm and cold as the waters around Tundra town, but Judy’s sensitive ears heard the first quivering of fear pounding away down deep in the polar bear’s chest. “You have to ask?” Oh, come on, Slick! Our luck cannot possibly be THIS bad! Judy’s worst fears came to life as a very angry, very large polar bear staggered around the hallway corner, holding a terrified security rhino by the throat in his off-paw. I stand corrected! Permission to panic, myself? Standing erect, Koslov’s massive chest and arms still bore the scars of a dozen shards of glass, complete with hundreds of fresh sutures, but when the bunny looked into his bloodshot eyes, there was no sign of the gentle bear that she had come to know. Is he sleep-walking, or has he really gone savage? When the angry old bear lifted the pleading rhino over his head in both paws and then hurled the poor mammal at them with a full-throated battle growl, Judy got her answer, and then some.

“G-Get those people out of here, NOW!” Nick’s voice broke a little as the fox gave George Kameroff his marching orders, but the fox didn’t hesitate when he scooped Judy up in his arms and leapt for cover. Seconds later, the heavy security rhino collided with and obliterated the tall hospital counter that had sheltered the two ZPD officers. Judy and Nick were still digging their way out from under the resulting pile of jagged splinters and spilled patient charts when they heard the immense polar bear’s heavy footsteps cracking the polished linoleum nearby. Nick’s paw covered Judy’s lips before the bunny could even squeak, pinning her to his chest, even as his own terrified scent flooded the nurse’s station. For just a second, Judy couldn’t tell where her thundering heartbeat ended and Nick’s began, but she heard both of those hearts skip a beat when Koslov bent down to sniff at the rubble scattered over them, his hot breath flicking over them both as the enraged polar bear sought his prey. Something about Nick’s heady, copper and cinnamon scent caused the larger predator to
wrinkle his nose in disgust before he turned away to shamble further down the hallway.

Judy was still shaking when she climbed out of Nick’s arms, her nose trembling and her ears drooping low, confusion and determination warring behind her pretty purple eyes, “Nick, w-why didn’t he attack?” Slowly, her hands fumbled through the wreckage of the nurse’s station for the telephone receiver, only to find it in shattered pieces. Further up ahead, Judy saw that her field radio wasn’t in any better shape, given the bear-sized footprint that Koslov had stomped right through it, grinding the poor walkie-talkie right into the linoleum floor. *Maybe Nick still has his radio on his belt? ‘C’mon, partner, we still have a job… to do…” Why isn’t he answering me? Then, Judy saw one of Nick’s hind paws slide back under the wreckage, and finally heard the fox’s shivering over the sirens overhead. *C’mon, Nick, talk to your bunny, here. You’re scaring me, here, partner.* It took the bunny ages to uncover her partner, as every time she would free another part of him, Nick would curl further away from her, his eyes glinting red in the shifting lights overhead. Judy found herself using the same cooing, calming tone her mother used to soothe the young bunny kits whenever they woke from a bad dream, but the message was far more intimate, “Come back to me, Slick… I’m here for you, Nick.”

Staring up at Judy from the safety of his little ball of fluffy orange and cream fur, Nick’s nervous eyes glittered with gold and green, his breathing slipping from haggard wheezing to a painful keening sound, deep down in his chest. *It’s like last night, all over again…? Oh, Nick… the polar bear in your apartment… I’m so sorry that I forgot.* When the realization finally hit Judy, her heart broke a little looking at her fox ball ed up in the debris, trembling from head to tail. Koslov was in the hospital, at the time, so that rules him out as a suspect, but the rest of this carnage… it’s taking him back to the worst of last night’s beating. Her partner wasn’t just shivering: a cold sheen of sweat glistened against the backdrop of his winter coat and ZPD patrolman blues, even as Nick slipped further away from her, his eyes glinting red in the shifting lights overhead. Judy found herself using the same cooing, calming tone her mother used to soothe the young bunny kits whenever they woke from a bad dream, but the message was far more intimate, “Come back to me, Slick… I’m here for you, Nick.”

Slowly, Judy slid one gentle paw under the poor addlepated fox’s trembling whiskers to scratch his chin in comforting circles. This simple act of kindness brought an end to the fox’s painful shivering, but Nick’s eyes stayed glued to the floor in absolute shame. *You don’t have to be brave for me right now, Nick; you just have to keep trying. ‘C’mon, partner. It’ll be okay, I promise. Just, let me see your radio for a second? We’re gonna’ need some back-up on this one.”*

Two tense seconds later, Judy carefully removed the fox’s oversized radio from his trembling paw, her free hand cupped to his cheek, blunt claws continuing to scratch at spots she’d only just discovered late last night. “Okay, Slick. I need you to keep an eye out while I radio Bogo. Can you do that for me?” The gold rings were receding from his eyes, but Judy saw the red sheen of the fox’s pupils clearly for the first time as the dangling, florescent lights flickered overhead. *Oh, Slick, when this is all over, we gotta get you checked out. All this stress can’t be good for you.*

A slow, tentative nod of Nick’s handsome face told Judy she was making headway with the addlepated fox, but his tail clung possessively to her outer thigh, even as he moved far enough away to look both ways down the corridor. *Love you too, Slick, but we can’t do this one, alone.* And even with the sirens going off around her, Judy stopped for a heartbeat, holding Nick’s larger radio to her chest with both hands, as she stared down at his fluffy tail.

She’d never said it before, not even in her own head, but seeing her broken fox trust her at such a primal level had Judy thinking a lot of things that she’d never thought of before, mostly about the horrors of introducing her new lover tod to the folks back in Bunny burrow. *Slow down, bunny girl, one disaster at a time! “Clawhauser, we’re already at Zootopia General… I need you to patch me straight through to Bogo!”*

Screeching tires, wailing sirens, and a continuous string of profanity under the cape buffalo’s voice
told Judy that Chief Bogo and the rest of the ZPD weren’t having much better luck fighting against cross-town traffic than she had this morning. “HOPPS! What the furry hell is going on down there?!? Every alarm at Precinct One just went off and some of those date back to the Great War!” As Bogo’s voice boomed through her walkie-talkie’s tinny speakers, Judy felt Nick go rigid from head to tail, but he kept playing her ‘lookout’ without the bunny having to stir up his courage again. Mr. Big was right, Slick… You’re braver than you think. “Sir, we’re on the sixth floor of Zootopia General, Prey side. We’re working with Mr. Big and his crew to get the civilians out of here, but there’s a problem!” Like the fact that he won’t leave! Protectively stroking Nick’s tail took some of the worry out of the next few words to leave Judy’s lips, but nothing could take the sting out of what she had to do, “The savage animal, sir… It’s Koslov. Whatever happened at that bar in Tundra town…? I don’t think we’ve seen the worst of it, yet!” Nick looked back at Judy with worry in his green-gold eyes, nodding his muzzle toward the screeching sound of a heavy security door being slowly ripped from its foundation, “We’ve made visual confirmation of the suspect, but we can’t keep him bottled up on this floor for very long. You need to hurry, sir!”

“Hopps, we’re minutes away; you and Wilde don’t have the training to handle this! STAND. DOWN.” That didn’t work on the Emmitt Otterton case, and it isn’t going to work right now, Chief! This just became personal for all the wrong reasons! “Chief, we didn’t ask for this, -and believe me, I’d rather be ANYWHERE else- but right now, we’re the only officers you have on site!” From the squawk that screeched through her walkie talkie, Judy knew that Chief Bogo’s irritation with this situation had just leapt to ‘strangling the radio’ heights, but when he finally spoke, the cape buffalo’s deep voice was tinged with fatherly concern, “Hopps… Judy, your rookie partner is injured, and you are less than a year out of the Academy, yourself. I need live cops, not dead heroes… am I being perfectly clear?” See, Nick, he really does care about us. “Crystal clear, Chief… and thank you. We’ll try to stay safe until you get here.” Judy’s thumb slipped from the talk button when she heard the Chief’s grunted reply, a fresh tear coming to her eyes, “Try hard, Hopps. Bogo en route.”

Judy turned to scratch her fox comfortably behind the ear as she looked at the trail of carnage that followed in Koslov’s wake, “Are you ready for this, partner?” To her surprise, the terrified, panting fox at her side slowly nodded, sliding forward on unwilling paws and feet to take a determined stand between her and whatever danger lay around the next corner. Are any of us ready for this?!? Judy’s feet were already in motion when she heard the first screams coming from closer to the Nursery. Ready or not, we’re out of time! And, scared though he was, Nick followed at her heel the whole way down the hallway, practically glued to his bunny’s side.

* ~ * ~ *

(Meanwhile, just outside of the Nursery on the Predator side…)

“Okay, I just got to know…” The massive brown bear tossed his janitorial disguise aside with contempt, “How’d you know so much about that little raccoon pencil-pusher’s family?” Every time I put on something like that for a disguise, I can feel the slave collar going back around my neck. Never again. Beside him, a pair of student’s surgical scrubs fell to the floor, revealing the muscular legs of a feline wearing military fatigues. With a guttural twist, every bone in her back cracked, revealing a painful grimace on her once beautiful face, but her voice came out strong and full of contempt, “Weak men like that don’t get jobs like this unless they have a family… and usually a mistress on the side. I should know…” Her shrug was effortless, but the bear in him wasn’t fooled -
all part of the ‘nothing gets to me’ act. “All due respect, Love, but that can’t be half of it. How’d you know he even liked his old lady enough to play along?” A slow claw pulled her purple bangs free of the wig she wore under her surgical cap, brushing them back carefully to cover the scar on her cheek. “It wasn’t the wife, it was you threatening the kids, my dear.” He gripped the heavy security door at its base, preparing to force it just high enough into the air for the agile cat to slip inside. “You’d be amazed the stuff people put on their Furbook profiles, Love: school names, school plays, field trips, all with hundreds of pictures taken from the front row, every time.” Her freshly-sharpened claws glinted in the flickering lights overhead, as the toned feline took a runner’s stance, her breath quickening with feral anticipation, “Clearly he’s a devoted father, but clueless when it comes to keeping them safe; You couldn’t ask for better leverage.”

A deep rumble of laughter and disbelief was all her comments got out of the massive bear as he began to wrench the first security door skyward, against its programming. “And the Don?” She waited just long enough for the hydraulics to finish screaming their protest to run and slide under the heavy door. Much as she’d kill me for saying it, the pain is starting to slow her down. Maybe we should stop by the hospital pharmacy for a little ‘doggy bag’ on the way out? A few heartbeats later, the security door cranked open, leaving the feline standing there with a smug smile of triumph plastered to her scarred face. “Same story, just without the help of modern technology: Wilde’s alive, and he still has the same six polar bears on his protection detail after more than a dozen years?” With one clawed paw, she pulled the bear kissing close, her scent mingling with his as the security door fell, trapping them inside. “That means the old shrew is getting sentimental in his antiquity; family and honor, can you think of more classic weakness for us to exploit?”

One immense bear paw lifted her up into the air, carrying the feline effortlessly, even as the massive brown bear spun past the feline, taking his spot before the next high-security gate. “I can think of one… but you already eighty-sixed ‘seduction’ from the menu.” Two rhinos and an elephant couldn’t lift one of these gates without pry bars and a hydraulic jack, but the burly brown bear slid his claws into the linoleum at their feet and the heavy gate began to slowly lift, inch by begrudging inch. “Forget that! Listen, I know I’m a cat and he’s essentially a mouse, but there’s only so much playing with my food this kitty is gonna’ stand for – a girl’s gotta have some standards!” His baritone laughter only got fuller of gravel as the gate moved up that last impossible inch and she came running and sliding underneath. This time, it took her only a single heartbeat to use the raccoon’s stolen credentials to trick the gate into opening for him, but the bear still waited, watching her heavy breathing as he calmed his own, “How many more of these damned doors do we gotta pry open before we get into the Nursery?”

“Just four more, Love.” Her breathing slowed as the muscular feline jabbed another blue hydrosyringe into the fur above her own jugular vein. That’s her third one today. We’re already way over the recommended dose, here, but she won’t stop until the job is done. “Then, we get to kill a king in front of a captive audience. Don’t tell me that you’re actually getting tired, now?” She patted his massive forearm, silently asking him to take this for the joke it clearly no longer was. This time, his laughter felt forced, even as the bear dug his claws into the linoleum under the next gate. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world!” This had better work.
7. B.- The Bellwether Effect, Part 2

((Timeline: Around 2pm, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Cold Little Heart” by Michael Kiwanuka, "Mama Said (There'd be days like this...) (cover) by the Growlers.]

{Scene: Floor Six of Zootopia General, the Prey side, just outside the Nursery Hub.}

Whatever expectations Judy had for the battlefield that she was walking into with her new partner paled before the wreckage that the enraged polar bear had left in his terrifying wake. Walking under a gushing fire-suppression system, the ZPD’s first bunny cop was drenched in frigid water from the tips of her drooping ears all the way down to the soles of her aching feet. Carefully creeping forward on all four paws by her side, Nick’s winter coat should have protected him from the worst of the chilling artificial rain overhead, but Judy could feel her fox shivering for different reasons, entirely. *Stay with me, partner. We’ll find someone here who can help you, I promise.* Somewhere further up the corridor, she saw two ram orderlies and a llama nurse trying to drag an unconscious elephant out of the debris to perform CPR, but it was like trying to tow a stalled school bus with two mopeds and a minivan. Stopping for a second to listen to the elephant’s labored breathing, her long, sensitive ears barely covering half of his expansive chest, Judy gave the worried llama a tentative thumbs up. *He’ll live, but - judging by the size of that shiner on his left eye- he’ll be seeing stars for a week!*

Then, a brief, alarmed yipping sound escaped the fox’s throat at her side, alerting Judy to movement up ahead, even as the bunny slowly clambered back to her feet. Up ahead, the off-kilter flickering of the emergency lights made it hard to guess what species of large mammal had been stuffed face-first into the hospital’s small, dirty laundry chute was, but when Judy tip-toed closer, she recognized the polar bear as part of the Don’s entourage by the tuxedo that he wore. *One of the Kameroff trio, by the size of his feet, but which one? Only Nick can tell them apart, and he’s not exactly ‘chatty’ right now.* Somehow, that forced silence scared Judy more than the casual way that Koslov had manhandled one of Mr. Big’s most fearsome enforcers. Splaying out her fingers to grip her fox by the fluffy scruff of his neck, Judy tried to comfort her unsteady partner, even as her own confidence was in full retreat, “Just a little bit longer, Slick. Then, Bogo can take over, and we can go home.” She could almost ignore the way her silver fur came back mottled by fat, rose-colored drops wherever their fur mixed under the deluge from the fire sprinklers overhead. *Chief, whatever you gotta’ do, please get here soon!*

There it was again: the strange red sheen reflected in Nick’s gold-green eyes as her partner slowly nuzzled Judy’s outer thigh with his handsome whiskers, silently pleading with her to turn back towards the safety of the nearby exit stairwell. *His eyes shimmer red in the dark, just like Koslov’s eyes did at the nurse’s station! Something else is going on here...* With his ears slicked back and his winter coat puffed up out of the collar of his ZPD blues, it terrified Judy just a bit how much Nick reminded her right now of the night that they went to question Mr. Big’s limo driver, when the savage jaguar chased them halfway across the Rain Forest District. *Manchas’ eyes weren’t this bloodshot when Doug Ramses made him go savage -and I would know, given how close he came to mauling us both- so why is Nick going catatonic like this? This can’t just be the Night Howlers, this time. Think, Judy, think! “You still with me, here, partner?”* Swallowing an extra-large lump in his throat, Nick looked up at Judy with those same, pleading eyes, only to slowly shake his head in the affirmative before her fox took the lead, physically putting himself between Judy and whatever
nightmares might be around the next corner. *That’s my fox, folks!*

Somewhere behind them, Judy heard one of the Don’s other entourage members shouting in a heavy Old World accent for the Prey under his care to move faster as they hobbled towards the emergency exits. Oddly enough, there weren’t any disagreements voiced by the terrified Prey, in any accent, even when the polar bear carried the last invalid cow down the stairs over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes. *Good grief, Slick. Maybe we should have just stayed home today?* Judy just shook her head in disbelief, hoping that Chief Bogo would get there soon. Then, Judy felt a long, cold shadow cross over her own, far too close for her to reach out to Nick in time. Spinning on a dime, Judy’s tranquilizer pistol slid into her trembling paws like it was dipped in maple syrup, its polished steel barrel rising far too slowly to do the fear-frozen bunny much good. Lucky for her, tranquilizer darts didn’t care if you shot your assailant in the chest or in his big toe, the little, condensed gas-powered syringes did their thankless job, either way. *If you shoot the right person, that is.* Far too late, Judy realized that the blood-soaked polar bear that clung haphazardly to her shoulder with one, immense, trembling paw was still wearing his tuxedo, even if one of the posh suit’s arms had been torn clean off at the shoulder. “Nursery… defenseless… Stop him!”

A few, painfully slow heartbeats later, George Kameroff slid backward, collapsing against the hallway wall, his face a tired mask of physical exhaustion and unspoken questions. Nearby, Nick let out a frustrated huff as he turned back to see the horrified look on his bunny’s pretty face. “Nick, I-I didn’t mean… I thought he was… Koslov.” Without a word, the fox let his nimble tail curl around his bunny’s trembling shoulders until its fluffy tip caressed her tear-streaked cheek. “I know that it’s just a tranquilizer round, but I’ve never shot anyone before… Nick, I hate feeling like this.” Rising unsteadily to take his distraught bunny into his arms, Nick rested his tired head on her shoulders, a soft, keening noise of sympathy for her pain echoing from deep in his chest. Standing cheek to chest again in the hallway, her fur almost frozen by the heavy downpour of the sprinklers overhead, Judy was amazed at how warm and welcoming her partner’s arms felt as Nick’s paws stroked her trembling shoulders. *It’s not the thought of having kits with him someday, the warmth of that fluffy winter coat, or the sinfully sweet scent of him, Mama…*

It’s everything about Nick: the way he holds me when I’m scared, the way he makes me feel so safe, and the way my fox needs me just as much as I need him. Instinctively, Judy found comfort in stroking Nick’s handsome face with both hands, her fingers reveling in the warmth of his winter coat, even as his cinnamon-sweet scent washed over them both. “You still can’t talk, can you, Slick?” Nick’s fingers clawed frantically at his throat for a second, only to curl up into frustrated fists that pounded out a slow drumbeat at his sides. “It’s okay, partner; you’ve been through a lot, recently. I can be patient.” Judy brought both of Nick’s trembling fists up to her shoulders like the two of them were back in the evidence room, dancing with her cheek resting on his bare chest, “Good things come to bunnies who wait, right?” Even with the golden rings reflected in his eyes, -and the snoring polar bear curled up across the hall- Judy couldn’t help but feel better when she saw her fox’s million-dollar smile returning.

With one last apologetic back at the slumbering polar bear across the hall, Judy turned Nick’s trusting face towards the Nursery as she stroked his handsome whiskers with her thumbs. “Now, we don’t have to tackle Koslov all by ourselves, but we do have a job to do until Chief Bogo gets here. Are you with me, partner?” This time, the fox’s head nodded almost immediately, but there was no denying the worried look in his eyes. *He’s still worried about me -after everything that we’ve been through together? A girl could grow to like that kind of concern.* “Then let’s get this done and go home. What do you say, Slick? Does that sound good to my handsome fox?” When she finally let go of Nick’s smiling face, Judy lost herself in the slow, sweet territorial purr that rippled through her fox’s lips. She just wasn’t expecting to hear the same possessive, loving growl echoing in her own chest. *Oh, Nick, what are you doing to me? We have so much to talk about, but all I want to do right now is get you somewhere safe, where we can be alone…*
“Alright, partner, let’s get to work.”

(Meanwhile, inside the Nursery Hub…)

Gerald Biglianni was not a shrew to accustomed to feeling intimidated, not after nearly forty years of blood, sweat, and tears spent carving his criminal empire out of the hands of larger predators, but even the dreaded Don of Tundra Town had to admit that today was rapidly spinning out of even his control. Overhead, the lights twitched and died out by degrees, shuddering with each new sundering of the security doors that separated the Nursery and the Prey wing of the hospital. Once so distant and remote a possibility, Mr. Big could no longer ignore the certainty that his son’s sudden, inexplicable rage might claw its way even into this hallowed place where families were born every day. All around him, the young mothers and their infant charges huddled together without a thought to who was Prey or Predator, all of them trembling fearfully at each new eruption of violence upon their shared doorstep. My dear boy, what has driven you to wage such a vicious assault, especially against your adoptive father? What could I have done to wrong you so deeply?

Around the terrified mothers’ shoulders, several battle-worn nurses laced their careful hands, whispering whatever comforting words they could imagine, each trying to protect their lucky charges in his or her own way, even as the lights around them died, one by one. If Koslov were here -and in his right mind right now- the Old Bear would ‘cross’ himself for luck, but I gave up on such hollow superstitions the day He took my sweet Francesca away from me. Sprinkled amongst the trembling masses were a few fathers lucky enough to be here when the troubles started, but most of them, - Gerald knew from experience- would be outside the hospital desperately trying to fight or sneak their way past the ZPD officers cordoning off the area surrounding the hospital. It’s just like it was during the last Great War: you can actually taste the fear filling up the room. Families almost as newborn as the children they held in their arms, all waiting to be torn apart by the War knocking on their doors. Gerald’s stomach clenched at the painful fear that memory awoke in the old shrew, even after all the decades in-between. Too many of his friends -Prey and Predator, alike- had answered the terrible Call to Arms, only to never come home when the war finally ended. Gerald and Koslov – they were among those lucky few to beat the odds, even if Koslov never went home. Then again, what was left there for my broken son to return home to but more heartache and poverty?

The thought wore heavily on the old shrew’s heart, even as he rose to tap the intercom button, hoping that there was still enough electricity running through the system to carry his voice into the next room, “My dear ladies and gentle-mammals, I know that you’re afraid of what is going on outside those doors. To tell the truth, so am I…” For my own selfish reasons, entirely. “But this is not the time to let our fears overwhelm us. Your job as new parents stays the same as it was yesterday, and likely will be for the rest of your lives: You take care of those little babies until they’re old enough to take care of themselves. As a soon-to-be grandfather, myself, I can assure you there will be plenty of overtime to go around.” Tinny and altogether too loud for the old shrew’s liking, his voice never-the-less blanketed the small, circular room, calming the Nursery’s occupants slightly with its frank, Old World timbre. “Outside these doors are two ZPD officers, sworn to serve and protect all of us, Prey and Predator, alike. They wouldn’t be here if I didn’t call them, but trust me, folks… they’re the best this city has to offer, and you can bet that the rest of their department is headed here right now.”

A natural orator, even since his boyhood days in parochial school, Gerald was delighted to see his audience stop shivering with terror, several of them even looking up at the dapper old shrew with renewed hope in their eyes, “No matter what’s outside these doors, you hold your loved ones close to your hearts -keep them safe- and everything else will work itself out. That much I can promise you.” Ironically, thinking back on the night a drunk driving wolf took his beloved Francesca from his
side didn’t hurt Gerald as much as it used too. Maybe this business with Koslov was taking more out of the Don than the shrew had ever admitted, even to himself. If only praying made it so. All the lonely years since Francesca’s passing came rushing back at Gerald in one tearful moment, but the dapper little shrew kept up the cheerful ‘grandpa’ masquerade long enough to release the intercom button and turn his world-weary eyes back towards the last standing security door on the Prey side. Another heavy blow dented the heavy security door, leaving behind four polar bear claw marks etched deeply into the door’s heavy frame. And for the second time in the last twenty-four hours, the most feared Don in all of Tundra Town found himself hoping that the Zootopian Police Department would get here sooner, rather than later.

* ~ * ~ *

(Meanwhile, back outside in the hallway, in a tiny office just past the destroyed nurses’ station, Floor Six, Prey Side, Zootopia General Hospital…)

For once, Joffre Ringtail was glad to be small enough to go unnoticed by the larger Predators and Prey mammals in the hospital, even if it might be for the last time in his young life. In a building dedicated to the healing arts, there had still been nobody left to help a broken raccoon stagger back up to his knees, or to see him fall time and again as he staggered down the deserted hospital hallways, looking for a working phone through his painfully swollen eyes. Every breath caught fire in his chest, even as his broken fingers trembled with the cold certainty that there was nobody left on this floor to help him now. **Boy, they really worked you over good, Joffre… still, it’s better than high school. No more quaking in the locker room, waiting for the next hit to land as the bigger Prey animals held you down, counting the seconds to final bell… Some blind instinct led the poor raccoon’s feet back to his cramped office, with its wall-to-wall stacks of old patient files, a second-hand desk held together with duct tape on all four corners and his threadbare office chair. But I’m not that scared little kid anymore… this is still my hospital and you animals have messed with the wrong raccoon!**

On every corner of his desk, there was a picture for every happy year in his life: from marrying his high school sweetheart to the birth of his twin baby girls, to their first steps and beyond. He was particularly proud of watching his two girls take their first steps out onto the school stage, despite the girl’s shaking knees, half-remembered lines, and butterfly-filled stomachs. From a framed copy of the school paper, his daughter’s smiling faces gave him the strength to do what came next, as Joffre pulled the ancient receiver from his office telephone into his lap, dialing 9-1-1 on the slow rotary dial as he pulled open the refurbished old desk’s only working drawer to pull out a small, dust-covered bottle of Grey Goose vodka with a hand-written note from his wife that read, “Mama always said there’d be days like this…” It was the first song that he and Mishka had ever danced to, both at the school formal and later at their wedding reception, and he’d never had the heart to break the bottle’s seal until today. He took the note and carefully pressed it to his lips before dropping it into his shirt pocket, just a few millimeters above his aching heart.

With trembling, reverent hands, Joffre set the bottle aside, pulling out the desk drawer’s only other occupant, a shiny new case, sixteen inches wide and made of polished steel, bearing the hospital’s seal overlaid by the embossed seal of City Hall. **“Emergency services, how can we direct your call?”** The lady lemur’s empathetic voice almost fell on deaf ears, so heavy was the box’s weight in Joffre’s black and blue fingers, but the raccoon was nothing if not a master at multi-tasking; being the father of twins will bring that out in a mammal. **“This is General Hospital, Sixth Floor, Prey side, Joffre Ringtail speaking. We’re in full lock-down, “savage predator” protocols enacted, but it won’t be enough.”** A bloody hiccup forced the raccoon to grip his desk so hard that he almost tore off all the duct tape, but Joffre persevered. **For Mishka and the twins, my beautiful baby girls… “Tell the ZPD that they’re going to need to bring Acetylene torches to breach the doors on the stairwells and around the Nursery. I tried to give the rest of the staff time to evacuate the building, but… blood loss is**
becoming a factor, and there’s… there’s nobody left up here to patch me up…” Baby, I am so sorry, but it looks like daddy may have had a little accident at work… might be a little late coming home tonight… Unavoidable…

Looking down at the small steel case made every inch of Joffre’s body ache, and catching his breath was coming harder with each passing moment, but the raccoon had one last job to do to keep his family safe, and he’d do it, even if it took his last breath to see it done. “Sir, please hold on; we can get you an ambulance from another hospital, and first responders are already on the way…” Joffre just had to laugh at the earnestly naïve, but utterly impossible optimism embodied by the emergency services operator’s suggestion. There were literally hundreds of worse-off patients downstairs by now, each scrambling as best as they could to find medical attention and shelter in equal measure, so what was one more raccoon trapped on the sixth floor of an empty hospital with a couple of murderous thugs and a savage predator. No, ‘holding on’ was no longer a viable option, which brought Joffre back to the steel case and the unopened bottle of vodka sitting on his desk. “That’s not what this call is about, so please stop interrupting me and just get this all on record. I don’t have very long… and I need to make sure my family knows why I won’t be coming home tonight…”

The bottle cap bounced across Ringtail’s desk like a stone skipped expertly across the surface of a still lake, but he never saw -or honestly cared- where it landed amidst the endless stacks of paper that lined his already-cramped office, “Are you recording this call now?” The lemur’s voice came out a little choked-up like she was crying on her end of the line, too, but this wasn’t her first one-way call, either, “Y-yes, sir. We’re recording, now.” The first sip of vodka burned going down Joffre’s throat, but the pain helped him to focus, even as the alcohol started to burn away the cold haze that was creeping up his spine. “Mishka, baby, I am so sorry. They were waiting for me in the parking garage downstairs. I tried to run away like you always told me to, but they caught me and t-they b-beat me.”

The second sip was worse, burning his throat like he’d swallowed hot coals, but the bittersweet alcohol got better and better at focusing the bruised raccoon’s rambling thoughts. “Don’t let the twins listen to this recording, baby, I don’t want them to have nightmares. Just tell them that daddy loves them and did everything that he could to keep his family safe.” Joffre had worked for the hospital for over a dozen years, so he had no doubt that the trembling in his hands was only going to get worse the longer that he waited, but the raccoon couldn’t open the case until he’d set the record straight, “They didn’t come here for me, but they needed my access card and my help in isolating the Old shrew from his bodyguards. I didn’t want to give them either, I swear to you and God, baby, but they started threatening you and our girls… with some weird, truly awful shit.” His wife’s hand-written note in his pocket was getting heavier on his heart with every ragged breath, but Joffre would happily hold onto that weight until he finally sank back into the shadows.

With two trembling fingers against his throbbing wrist, Joffre could actually feel his pulse ebbing as the exhaustion over-powered the fading adrenaline in his bloodstream. Not long now, boss. “They were beyond savage, that bear and the feline with wash-away stripes; I had to give them whatever I had to keep my family safe…” A slow, steady stream of crimson drops was cascading down the sides of his desk, wherever Joffre rested his weary paws. “…But they didn’t know about the case: a little contingency plan dreamed up by those geniuses over at City Hall.” Gotta’ get the case open before I black out. Losing too much juice… “Such a small little thing shouldn’t feel so heavy… It’s just over a foot across and almost again as tall- but it should still be on my desk when the cops get here, even if… even after I’m gone.” Slowly, Joffre slid the case open, revealing a single red button against a smooth façade of soft green felt, with the innocent-sounding words “System Purge/Reverse” inscribed on an even smaller bronze plaque, above. Joffre could hear the lemur on the other end of the line crying softly and was glad for the sympathy; He’d never felt so alone in his entire life.

“One push to purge all the access cards from the system, turning this damned hospital into the
world’s largest paperweight. One more push should restore the whole system, if you can make it to my office on the sixth floor, somehow.” C’mon, Joffre… just this once, for one time in your whole, miserable life… go down swinging. Already, the shock was settling in, despite Joffre’s best intentions -and the vodka in his system- making the poor raccoon see two buttons where there should only have been one. *For Mishka and the twins...* One last swig from the bottle helped to steady his nerves as Joffre brought one bloodied fist down hard on the button, half-hoping the wretched device wouldn’t work at all. All around him the sirens stopped and the other security doors started slamming shut as the system dropped into full lockdown mode. *No such luck, my friend. Now, its all on your head if they can’t get back up here in time to reset everything,* “Please tell them I did all I could…”

Slowly, with a strange giddiness brought on by all the blood loss, Joffre started humming along to his and his wife’s favorite song, “Mama said there’d be days like this…” Somehow, Joffre found the strength to set the bottle back down next to the pictures of his beloved family, even as his world started to blacken at the edges. *And she was right! Oh Mishka, kiss my babies for me... and tell them I love them. Daddy will be home soon... as his chores... are done.* The brave little raccoon didn’t even hear the lemur’s frantic calling of his name when the phone finally fell from his outstretched paw a few moments later.
((Timeline: Around 3pm, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Chainsmoking” by Jacob Banks, “Your World will Fail” by Les Friction.]

{Scene: Floor Six of Zootopia General, the Prey side, just outside the Nursery Hub.}

I’m getting too old for this bullcrap. His chest painfully heaving with every huffing breath, Chief Bogo had barely crested the sixth floor of the exit stairwell when the hospital’s final security measures kicked on, silencing the overhead alarms for one fitful second before the slamming of falling security doors could be heard up and down the halls. Just a few steps behind him, the ZPD’s most beloved mother-elephant, Francine Pennington was half-pushing, half-carrying her latest partner -the tigress Sascha Fangmeyer- up the final flight of stairs, carrying the extra 60 lbs. of both mammals’ riot gear without so much as a cross word in complaint. Buried under his own riot gear and heavy shield, Bogo’s leg muscles started making mutinous complaints halfway up the narrow staircase, but neither he nor Fangmeyer had stopped to catch their breath for more than a second with the stalwart elephant cheering them on.

Trailing all three of the seasoned veterans, and the only ZPD officer in the stairwell not breathing hard right now, was the plucky, but awfully plump desk sergeant, Benjamin Clawhauser. This might be because the young cheetah was simply too wide around the waist to slip into ballistic armor made for other felines, or because -despite his girth- Clawhauser still held the ZPD’s coveted track record for long distance running, even though more cheetahs five years younger and half his size joining the police force’s ranks every year.

Twenty damned minutes late to the rescue… And now, I’m out of breath in front of my squad. Not looking good there, Marcus… When the final heavy security door came crashing down, it was Chief Bogo’s riot shield that met it on the way down, cracking the shield’s hard, plexiglass face like an egg dropped from a high countertop, even as the cape buffalo reluctantly hit one knee under all that added weight, “Francine, would you mind taking this off my hands so I can go throttle Officer Hopps and our newest recruit?”

For once, the reason behind their Chief’s souring mood was obvious to all his junior officers: it had taken far too long for the officers in his precinct to break their riot gear out of mothballs and now two of their own might pay the price for the department’s poor response time. “Gotcha’ covered, Chief.” Setting her partner down with a maternal shrug, Francine stepped forward and gave the heavy security door a mighty shove skyward, wedging her own shield into the door’s tracks when it wouldn’t go any higher. “But I don’t know how long this is gonna’ hold, given the circumstances.” Already, the door’s immense weight was causing the shield to slowly warp and crack around its edges.

“Just give me all the time you can, Trunkaby.” Chief Bogo was too busy catching his next breath to see the hurt look that silently crossed his lieutenant’s face, but the tigress at her side had no trouble speaking up in Francine’s defense, her voice deepening into a warning growl, “You know that’s not her name, Chief. Not any more…” Bogo’s slip of the tongue hit the distracted cape buffalo like a sucker punch to the gut when he looked at the tearful way Francine pulled her riot helmet down to cover the mascara rivers slowly trickling down her face, but it was looking back into the tigress’ rapidly narrowing eyes -and seeing the way that her lips curled back to reveal those long, sharp teeth-that sent a cold shiver running up the Chief’s spine. “Francine… you know I didn’t mean anything by that…” The livid outburst exploded through Francine’s pursed lips before either of her
fellow officers had time to blink, much less scurry for cover, “My marital status is not up for rutting debate! It’s over when I say it’s over!” This time, when the crying elephant hit the stalled security door, the thick metal bent under her massive fist. Even Bogo’s normally booming voice dropped a few octaves into a sympathetic whisper, “Listen, Francine… if you need to take a few days off to clear your head or whatever, we can make it work somehow…”

Fangmeyer just shook her head, her tail flicking about in a frustrated circle as she walked past the suffering elephant and her befuddled chief of police, her voice barely rising above that same dismissive growl, “What did I tell you, Trunks? No matter the species or the rank… men are idiots.” Then, with the grace embodied by her race, the feline dipped low to scoop up Chief Bogo’s battered shield and hand it back to him with a wry wink. “…Some of the time. Right, Chief?” The cape buffalo’s scowl lessened by a few degrees, but it never quite left the Chief’s face, as he huffed a long-suffering sigh, “We all have our moments, even those spending the next two weeks on the radio… Food for thought, wouldn’t you say, Officer Fangmeyer?” Clawhauser stepped forward to rub the other feline’s shoulder in support, even as the tigress’ face fell. “Yeah, that’s how he got me, too, Stripes. ‘Two weeks’ he said. You’d be amazed how quickly that turns into two years -and I didn’t even call him an idiot to his face, honey. But at least there’ll be plenty of donuts to keep you company…”

As the tigress looked down at the cheetah’s bulging midsection and then at her own taut, six-pack of a stomach, the horrible turn of events hit her like that first whiff of pepper spray when the winds turned it back into your face. Everything that the young feline loved about being a cop—from listening to the stories of a great mentor like Francine to the thrill of chasing some perp down a back alley, with adrenaline coursing through her veins to all those grueling hours spent at the gym, pushing her lithe, muscular frame to its limits- it all seemed to just go up in smoke, “Oh, come on! You know that I didn’t mean what I said, right… Chief?”

This time, the feline’s smile couldn’t have been less predatory as she stared up at the cape buffalo with pleading in her eyes, but Chief Bogo wasn’t a mammal known for changing his mind, even on the best of days. “Then you know exactly how I feel right now. Two weeks riding the radio desk, Officer Fangmeyer, starting first thing Monday morning.” Slowly shaking his head, Clawhauser stepped out of Bogo’s shadow with a shrug, “Sorry, Stripes. I’ll come in early to show you how everything works. What do you want us to do, Chief?”

Looking both ways down their small slice of the hospital corridor, Chief Bogo scratched his chin in frustration, “Dispatch said this Ringtail character had some kind of ‘reset’ button to get this building back up and running. We’re going to need reinforcements and the patients downstairs are going to need more medical help than an ambulance can provide.” As Chief Bogo stared down at his feet, lost in his calculations for a moment, he spied something white and fluffy amidst the wreckage, “Rhinowitz and his new partner, the otter girl- Silke are working on opening up the elevator shafts, but there’s no telling how long it’ll take that rhino to climb up six floors, or if the hydraulics on those doors will let them open with the power cut…”

With a determined huff, Chief Bogo bent low to pull a tiny, cashmere bunny rabbit doll out of a pile of splinters and torn paperwork that used to be a nurse’s station, tucking the child’s doll gently into the hip pocket of his work pants, so he could return the plush keepsake to its owner later on. “As much as I want to go rescue our two newest recruits, -and take down the animals responsible for this ugly mess- our first priority has to be finding that raccoon’s office and getting those security doors back up. We can’t help anybody if we can’t run a proper search of this place.”

The Chief’s team rallied around the cape buffalo, waiting for their marching orders, their differences
momentarily forgotten when their two fellow officers were still missing in action, “Francine, take my new radio officer and flank left; I’ll take Clawhauser and circle around to the right. We need to find some way over, under, or around these gates, even if it means cutting through the drywall – just avoid any load-bearing structures, if you can.”

Francine was already gearing up to lead the charge, pushing her feline partner forward before the cat could dig herself in any deeper with the Chief when the crisp note in Bogo’s voice stopped the young elephant short, “And if you see either of our two trouble-makers, I want you to drag them back here to safety, whether Officer Hopps comes along willingly or not. I will not have this situation getting further out of hand, am I being perfectly clear, Francine?”

A motherly concern crossed her face like a dark cloud, even as Fangmeyer stepped forward to ask the question that everyone here was trying to tiptoe around, “Chief, what do you want us to do if we run into the Don’s head enforcer, Koslov?”

The cape buffalo’s face fell as he silently counted to ten, with one heavy paw raised, silently demanding a moment of absolute silence from his troops, “That polar bear just put six of our fellow officers in the hospital, -Hopps says he might even have gone savage- and we have no idea how many other lives he’s snuffed out over the years.” Chief Bogo lifted his riot shield in one massive hand, while pulling his heavy shock baton out of its holster with the other, his face slipping into a warrior’s mask of grim resolution, “So, let me be perfectly clear about this: If any of you so much as smell Koslov, you radio for backup and then you put that monster down-by ANY means necessary.”

Clawhauser looked like he might faint at any moment, but the chubby cheetah still managed to stammer out one last question, “Chief, w-what do we tell Mr. B-Big if that means ‘putting him down’ for good…” Cracking his knuckles around the stun baton’s thick rubber handle, Chief Bogo resigned himself to accept the all-too-personal consequences of the day’s no-win situation, “If Mr. Big has a problem with me putting down one savage animal to save two of my officers, then he can take it up with me -personally- after this is all over.” Who wants to live forever, right?

* * *

{After more than a few terse minutes of backtracking and slipping sideways through a few unlocked operating rooms, Chief Bogo and Benjamin Clawhauser had canvassed half of the hospital floor with no sign of their missing fellow officers or any of the animals responsible for all of this destruction, but the tense silence had started getting to the ZPD’s favorite chubby, chatty cheetah. Making things worse, in his own uniquely “Chief Bogo” -overbearing, but sweet- way, was the cape buffalo’s sudden habit of staring back at the cheetah following him as if he was about to say something crucial, only for the cape buffalo to clamp his mouth shut with a frustrated grunt before moving on to the next room. Something intensely personal was clearly driving the larger herbivore crazy, but Clawhauser only knew one way of getting the stressed-out Chief to talk to him, even it meant Bogo yelling at him again…}

After nearly 30 minutes of sneaking around on bended knees in full riot gear, Chief Bogo had just taken cover behind a thick support pylon in the one spot on this whole, rutting floor with both a decent amount of cover and an almost 360-degree view of the Nursery when he heard the first, unmistakable crinkle of a candy bar wrapper being peeled open in slow motion. Are you shitting me with this right now, Clawhauser? Here? NOW, of all times?!? Eyes tinged by equal parts wrath and disbelief turned to look over the cape buffalo’s shoulder to find the Precinct’s most friendly feline looking back at him with half a chocolate bar sticking out of the desk sergeant’s smiling, cherubic
face as he slowly peeled back the next candy bar wrapper without a care in the world.

“Clawhauser, if you don’t get rid of that junk food right now…”

The cape buffalo hissed sharply under his breath as he scanned to hallway slice behind the pillar for signs of movement, only to find a surprisingly strong feline paw physically pulling the Chief back to face his utterly unphased subordinate, “Yeah, yeah… I know: ‘No donuts ever again and parking duty until even my spots turn grey.’ Do you know how many times you use that threat in a given week?”

*You think this is my first trip to the ‘rodeo,’ Chief? I know how bad you “bully” boys push people away when you’re exhausted. It got so bad with Fernando that I had to start keeping a stash of these ridiculous protein bars in the nightstand just to get him to go another round! To Chief Bogo’s continuing dismay, he found that the normally subdued cheetah stood poised over his kneeling boss, all too eager to shove a chocolate-covered protein bar down the cape buffalo’s throat, whether Chief Bogo took the time to chew or not, “Eat something, Chief. Everybody knows that you always get cranky -well, crankier, anyways- when you skip breakfast… and I personally know that you haven’t eaten anything since this whole mess with Wilde started this morning!”

Just when it looked like Chief Bogo was about to rally, like he might just tell the closest thing that the cape buffalo had to a friend in the Precinct to go to hell, the pushy, plush cheetah cut him off, cold, his voice dropping into a low, confidential whisper, “Look, Chief, this just officially became a stakeout: I know you make all the rules back at the Precinct, -‘Big Bull in Charge’, or whatever- but you can’t make the bad guys show up on your time table, and you’re of no use to me if you nod off before they get here. So, eat something, already, will you? Pretty, pretty please? For me?*

Seeing Clawhauser fussing over him like a mother tending to her kits, it was all so comical, so completely outside of where Bogo thought his day was going, that Chief Bogo found himself wolfing down the offered power bar with a grateful smile plastered to his tired face. When was the last time he’d had anything bigger than a vending machine side salad to eat? He remembered joking with Major Friedkin about lemongrass salads with alfalfa sprouts, but that felt like days ago, according to the clock in his stomachs.

Two bottles of water materialized by the Chief’s side before he even recognized the powerful thirst building up in the back of the cape buffalo’s throat, but Clawhauser came and left without a word. *Looks like Officer Wilde’s not the only one getting ‘looked after’ today, huh, Marcus? The question is “Why?” Why is Clawhauser fussing over me like this when he knows I have to tell him something rotten? “So, Chief… When Officer Fangmeyer is manning the radio desk, what do you want me to do?” Oh, Benjamin… if you only knew how hard this is gonna’ be. On both of us.*

It took everything that Marcus Bogo had not to stare down at his feet and mumble something like some rookie fresh from the ZPD Academy meeting his commanding officer for the first time, but Benjamin had been open and caring about him. The trusting feline deserved at least a little honesty in return, even if it hurt Chief Bogo to say the words, “*What I need… is for you to stop acting like the damned precinct mascot!*”

This time, it was Chief Bogo’s turn to loom over the desk sergeant, as all his frustration with the over-friendly feline over the last two years came boiling to the surface. *“You were a good officer once, Benjamin – Jack Kodiak said you were one of the best he’d ever trained.”* The cape buffalo hated himself even more when he saw the half-eaten chocolate bar fall from his friend’s normally cheerful face, but the police chief in Bogo knew that this painful conversation was long overdue, “Then, one day the old bear retired and you just mentally checked out, took a desk job watching the radio; You never even looked back to see what you could have been: a
For some reason, Chief Bogo couldn’t get Nick Wilde’s face out of his mind; the young fox’s terrified reaction earlier this morning to Chief Bogo suddenly grabbing his shoulder made the cape buffalo wonder: *Have I really become the monster here? Is that why I raced over here to help bring down Koslov?* “My partner didn’t just ‘retire,’ Chief…” Clawhauser’s melancholy reply brought Bogo back to the situation at hand, “One minute, Jack Kodiak was laughing and telling me stories about the stakeouts you two used to stay out on. Just like every other night we spent on patrol, he sent me around the corner to get us some hot coffee to ward off the Tundra Town chills…”

A fresh tear streaked down the cheetah’s fluffy cheek, “And when I got back, he was just gone: slumped over the steering wheel in our cruiser like he’d fallen asleep again… but he never woke up, no matter how hard I tried!” Seeing his friend two steps away from bawling his eyes out moved the Chief in ways that the older cape buffalo couldn’t have prepared himself for. *Benjamin, I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you all of this… but I need more from you than I have any right to ask… especially from someone with such a kind heart.*

*“He had a brain aneurysm, Ben. There was simply nothing you -or even Jack- could have done by the time you found him.”* Looking around quickly to make sure they weren’t about to be ambushed by a savage polar bear, -or the rest of his squad, for that matter- Bogo took the trembling cheetah in his arms and let his junior officer cry on his shoulder.

*How do I tell him that Jack Kodiak’s death saved my life that day, by giving me the wake-up call I needed to go get myself checked out. “I hate to tell you this, Clawhauser, but a lot of us plan to ‘retire’ that way someday.”* As much as Benjamin wanted to ignore anything beyond the purely masculine comfort of having the Chief holding him close enough to curl the cheetah’s whiskers, some part of him woke from the unbelievable dream of finally being wrapped up in the cape buffalo’s arms long enough to listen to what Chief Bogo was actually saying and wonder, “What do you mean ‘us,’ Chief?”

Standing within kissing distance of the plump, but perceptive little cheetah made it harder than it should have been for Bogo to lie to his friend, but the police chief soldiered on, trying to distract Clawhauser with the same half-truth that he told himself in the mirror every morning, *“There’s a reason that they call us old timers ‘lifers,’ Ben. We don’t plan for retirement; we either get sloppy and get wounded, get pushed out by the bureaucrats down at city hall, or get…”* Stepping back from the cheetah’s warm embrace made Chief Bogo’s heart ache almost as much as the betrayed look that crossed his friend’s face. *“Dead.”*

*What do you mean ‘us’ Chief?* The accusation in Clawhauser’s question cut right to the core of Bogo’s problem: How could he tell the biggest gossip in the Precinct that a simple aneurysm was the least of the big cape buffalo’s worries right now? How could Chief Bogo admit to anyone that it was no longer a question of “if” he got retired like Jack Kodiak had, but “when?” *Maybe it’s better this way; Maybe I can shield my team from Mr. Big’s retaliation if he knows it’s my name on the bottom line, this time?*

*How do I put into words the nightmare that we push back every day as officers of the ZPD- how do I make him understand?* This time, when Bogo’s hands came to rest on his friend’s shoulders, there was nothing left unsaid between them, “Ben… After Bellwether’s little coup, Zootopia’s standing on the brink of civil war and who knows if we’ll still have the Truce with Mr. Big tomorrow.” Clawhauser’s eyes grew wide as saucers, even as the chubby cheetah’s voice dropped into its first, terrified whisper since he’d been just a cub, “Oh, Chief… I didn’t know things had gotten that bad!”
“Then you haven’t been paying attention, Ben. Every day, it gets hairier out there on patrol and we’ve got more predators quitting or asking for a transfer to another district far outside of the city.” The cape buffalo kept his head swiveling, trying to watch over the Nursery and cover their own backsides, as well, "They can smell it, Ben: War is coming to this city and I’m going to need soldiers, not secretaries.” Marcus watched as the normally effervescent cheetah deflated, his shoulders trembling in sudden realization, “Then you don’t need me… I don’t even like carrying a gun…”

But, just when Clawhauser turned to hide the fresh tears streaking down his chubby cheeks, Chief Bogo put one strong hand under the cheetah’s chin and turned his face back to look at his commanding officer, “Not all soldiers carry a gun, Ben, but they all need to be ready to use one if it means keeping the people that they protect safe. And you’re wrong if you think I don’t need you…”

That one hand slid dangerously close to caressing the cheetah’s cheek, but Chief Bogo had no idea how close that simple touch came to almost stopping the feline’s heart for a moment, “There are thirty officers downstairs, with nearly fifty more being pulled in from the other precincts or coming in early off the night shift. And you know what they’ll all be doing when they get here? Directing rutting traffic!”

Bogo’s grip tightened to the point it dimpled the shoulder pips of Clawhauser’s uniform, “In my whole department, out of eighty-four line officers, only two officers have taken the advanced first aid courses offered by the Academy: You and Officer Hopps. Ditto for the advanced weaponry and marksmanship courses.” Chief Bogo stopped for just a moment to enjoy the proud smile blooming on Clawhauser’s face, relishing the unadulterated way that the large cat purred as he basked in his commanding officer’s approval.

Another frustrated sigh deflated the cape buffalo’s broad chest, “Some of our larger officers like Francine, Rhinowitz, and McHorn haven’t stepped onto the marksmanship course in years… And that’s our problem: we’ve gotten lazy, green too accustomed to having the upper hand in numbers, in technology, or in raw strength.”

Now, it was Chief Bogo’s turn to drop his shoulders in embarrassment; the Precinct’s failures were, ultimately, his failures as a commanding officer. Chief Bogo had accepted that responsibility when he took the job, but Marcus Bogo was not a mammal who took failure well. “And our riot gear was packed under so many mothballs that we almost missed coming to the rescue, today. That can’t happen again, Ben.”

"We can’t allow anything so stupid to stop us from doing our jobs, because we’re all that stands between Zootopia and its own worst instincts.” Tentatively, Clawhauser reached one trembling paw to rest it on the Chief’s armored chest, imagining that he could actually feel Bogo’s heart breaking under the bulletproof shell provided by the cape buffalo’s riot gear. “Maybe we won’t have to, Chief… if you let me help.”

Chief Bogo looked at the confident grin spreading on the young feline’s face, seeing the cheetah’s boundless energy and hope in a new light. “I can get the riot gear organized before the weekend’s up, if you don’t mind approving a few overtime hours for me and a few of the other officers back at Precinct 1?” And just for a second, Clawhauser saw the rarest sight in the world: a cautiously optimistic smile crossing the police chief’s handsome face. “As for the rest? We’ll figure it all out, Chief. Like you said, Hopps and I had the training so it wouldn’t take very long for us to get the new recruits up to speed; after that, maybe we can even show you and the other ‘lifers’ a thing or two?"
“I’m counting on it, Benjamin. And when it’s just the two of us like this, you can call me Marcus, if you’d like…” From the ear-splitting squeal that came steaming out of the overheated little cheetah, Marcus guessed that he’d like that very much. Yeah, I’m DEFINITELY getting too old for this bullcrap. …
((Timeline: Around 3:30 pm, Two days after the Gazelle concert in Zootopia...))

[Music for this scene: “Hurt” (cover) by Johnny Cash and “Awake, O’ Sleeper” by the Brothers Bright. ]

{Scene: Floor Six of Zootopia General, Prey side, just down the hall from the Nursery Hub.}

Clawhauser! Judy Hopps was still scrambling over an overturned surgical gurney made for a mammal many times her size when her hyper-sensitive ears picked up on the cheetah’s unmistakable, high-pitched squeal. From the way that Nick went from slinking around the gurney’s side on all fours to curling up into a little ball on the hospital floor, with his paws covering his ears, Judy was pretty sure that her partner heard it too. Frankly, when the ZPD’s favorite “donut destroyer” started making happy, squealing noises, Judy would be amazed if they didn’t hear it all the way back in Bunny Burrow. “You hear that, Slick! I told you that Chief Bogo wouldn’t leave us stranded! And even better, they sound like they’re just down the hall…” The rapid influx of relief flowing through the bunny’s bloodstream ended almost as soon as it began when Judy turned to see the bristling of her fox’s bushy tail and the panicked way that Nick had started to gulp in air by the lungful. She’d been so happy to hear that her friend was on this floor with them that she almost missed the fearful yipping sound that came from Nick’s throat as her partner skidded backward towards her, almost falling head over bushy tail in his hasty retreat. This time, there was no mistaking the silent terror written across the fox’s face or the trembling way that Nick wrapped his tail around Judy’s ankles.

Nick? Okay, Slick, what’s got you so spooked all of a sudden? …Oh. Oh, no… Then Judy saw the heavy spatter of red blood pooling on tan linoleum, the sloppy zigzag of an animal about her size dragging its lower body down the hallway, and the deep claw marks left by the much larger animal that pursued it. Koslov’s been here. The cold certainty of seeing those massive paw prints following the blood trail down the hall sat like a lead weight in Judy’s gut, made all the heavier by her partner’s plaintive attempts to take her hand and lead her back to the exit stairway. Bogo’s down that way… we could be safe, just go home and hold one another -pretend that this whole rotten day was just a bad dream. Against her better judgment, Judy took a better look at the coppery red color of the smeared bloodstain on the floor at her feet. It was too fresh, too painfully wet to be more than thirty minutes old, too painfully real to be just another Academy training exercise.

With a gulp, Judy looked down the small hallway that the blood trail wound down. And down that way is somebody who we might still be able to save. Oh, God, Nick… I am so, so sorry. Sweetie, I know that you’re scared right now, -hell, I’m terrified- but I have to help them if I can. It took everything that Judy had in her not to get violently ill at the smell of so much fresh blood at her feet but running her fingers through the thick patch of winter fur just below her partner’s cheek helped steady the young bunny’s nerves a bit. Against every natural instinct in her body, the bunny’s unsteady feet started moving further down the hallway, pulling her and Nick further from the safety of rejoining Chief Bogo and the rest of her team, but Judy still had just enough gumption left in her to radio in her decision, “Ch-Chief Bogo, we’re close. I can hear Clawhauser from here, but there’s a problem. We’ve found a fresh blood trail on the ground. Somebody’s still up here, but judging from the mess, they don’t have long…We’re going to try to find them.”

“Hopps, DON’T– ” We are WAY past that point today, Chief. Mercifully, Chief Bogo’s reply faded into a harsh static hiss, no doubt lost as the signal from Nick’s radio failed to penetrate the hospital’s thick walls. That saved the little bunny from having to directly disobey her Chief’s orders, but she hadn’t felt so utterly alone since the day she told her folks about her decision to apply to the ZPD
To Judy’s eternal gratitude, her fox followed silently by her side, even if his ears did flatten down and his tail dropped to sweep across the cold linoleum tiles under their feet. “I know what you mean, Slick. I want to go home, too…but we’ve got a job to do.” The bloodstains tapered off further around the corner, as did the bloody bear paw prints that followed them, leading the terrified duo to a tiny supply closet with one small, bloody handprint wrapped around the doorknob. Some hopeful soul had taped a carefully folded piece of legal pad paper to the supply closet door before writing the name “Joffre Ringtail” on it in a flowing, hand-drawn script with calligraphy markers.

It was such a sad excuse for a little office that Judy’s thoughts drifted back to her first meeting with Dawn Bellwether, carrying half of City Hall – and the weight of Lionel Lionheart’s massive ego – on her tiny, woolly shoulders until one day the little lamb snapped under the pressure. The ZPD almost did the same thing to Clawhauser when they banished the over-friendly cheetah to the records department in a tiny little office by the ZPD boiler room, simply to allay the fears of a city terrified of predators going ‘savage.’ The more Judy stopped to think about it, it didn’t seem to matter whether it was a predator or a prey who was in charge of Zootopia, somebody else always paid the price when the city gave into panic. Part of the optimistic little bunny wondered what made one good person snap while another weathered the storm, or whether Bellwether had ever been a good person in the first place. Judy was still reaching for the bloody doorknob when she felt Nick’s handsome face nuzzling her side, trying desperately to put on a brave face for his bunny.

Inside the cramped confines of Ringtail’s office, surrounded by mountains of stacked patient files on nearly every side, Judy saw the poor raccoon slumped over his desk, the phone dangling from one of Ringtail’s outstretched paw and a picture of the raccoon’s smiling family clutched in the other. An empty bottle of expensive vodka with a pretty red bow tied around its neck lay overturned on the desk nearby, the liquor’s heady scent bathing the room in a relentless, sterile fog. It was enough to make Nick rub his muzzle fearfully at the bunny’s side as Judy stepped carefully around the bloody paw prints leading up to the raccoon’s chair.

I guess even the fox’s superior sense of smell is flying blind right now. Not a good sign, there Judy. Resting under Joffre’s cheek was a heavy steel case emblazoned with the official seals of both City Hall and the hospital, itself. For the life of her, Judy could not imagine what could be so important that a mammal would wall himself off from rescue while suffering such terrible wounds. But if you’re here, then where’s Koslov? One bloody bear hand print rested on the raccoon’s weathered desktop, but around the desk ran a small circle of heavy bear footprints, each fainter than the last.

Sweet cheese and crackers, Nick. Maybe we really should have waited for Chief Bogo and the others?

The coppery smell of fresh blood assaulted Judy’s nose when she turned the unresponsive raccoon’s chair so he could face her, but even the over-cautious tug of Nick’s teeth on the back pocket of Judy’s work pants couldn’t stop the bunny when she’d already come this close to making sense of the grisly scene before her eyes. Judy knew that something here was out of order, -some kind of clue that might explain this strange scene- but with the two of them tiptoeing through so much blood and chaos, it was nearly impossible to see what. He came in here to do something with that case, something he didn’t want anyone else around to see -something he was ashamed of. It wasn’t the drinking, because that bottle looks like it hasn’t been touched in years… Nick’s cold shivering against her outer thigh pulled the bunny back from her reverie, as the fox covered his sensitive nose with both paws. I guess predators aren’t as immune to the smell of blood as I thought…

Maybe it wasn’t what she could see, but something she heard that was setting the young doe’s raw nerves on high alert? Judy closed her eyes, trying to follow Major Friedkin’s advice from her first
week at the academy, “Cadets, nobody gets into this Academy just because they’re the biggest or the smartest mammal in the room. Some of you were born with better senses of direction, night vision, sharper hearing or a better sense of smell than the average civilian. Listen to them! They may just save your life someday!” Closing her eyes for a moment, Judy stretched her long ears, pushing the rabbit’s ultra-sensitive hearing to its limits. Something was out of place, something she should have been able to hear, but had missed when she came into the raccoon’s embarrassingly small office. There’s no dial tone on Ringtail’s phone! Opening her eyes, Judy followed the old-fashioned phone’s cord down to the wall and around the corner of one of the smaller piles of patient files, only to see that it had been completely shredded, far out of sight of anyone coming into the office to check on Ringtail’s sudden disappearance. If he really was going savage then why would Koslov go to such lengths to hide whatever he was doing here?

Looking back up at the office’s battered occupant, Judy saw that one corner of the raccoon’s tidy little suit had the same bloody bear paw print smeared just inside the suit’s lapel, almost as if Koslov had loomed over the raccoon, lifting him into the air just moments before they’d arrived. But that makes no sense: why would he spare Ringtail? When Doug Ramses sent Mr. Manchas after us, the savage jaguar would have torn me and Nick apart without a second thought! Looking around the room, Judy took another long look at the shadows cast by the other stacks of paper, seeing them move in time with the oscillating fan overhead, and felt a cold chill run down her spine. And this room would look like Bunny Borough after a tornado hit town… This is all wrong: Staged, somehow. That’s the problem! Nothing here is what it seems…

Just for a moment, Judy thought that she saw Ringtail’s chest shift, ever so subtly, like the bloodied and bruised little raccoon was shivering under the cool breeze from the fan overhead. It could just be the body settling after you pulled his chair around, Judy. No reason to get your hopes up... Quick as a flash of lightning, the shivering bunny leapt back across the office with two skips and a hop back over her wary fox’s shoulders, coming to an unsteady landing a few feet from Joffre’s office chair. Please, please, PLEASE be okay! Farther down the hall, Judy could already hear the heavy feet of another group of large mammals stampeding their way. Silencing Nick’s disgruntled huff with one outstretched finger, Judy knelt by Ringtail’s side, working hard to ignore the pungent smell of blood mixed with vodka as she planting one long ear against the poor mammal’s chest and hoping against hope that there was still something left in the raccoon to save. The problem was that it was nearly impossible to check for a heartbeat when Judy’s own thundering heart was pumping away in the doe’s chest, to say nothing of the constant, low growl coming from her new partner’s fluffy throat. His throat!

Judy pulled the raccoon’s face to rest on her frantic shoulder, bringing her ear to rest right against Ringtail’s throat. Come on, Zootopia… let the good guys win one for a change! Then Judy felt the first gurgling gasp echo deep in Joffre’s throat as the cataleptic raccoon struggled and failed to draw in another breath. The gasping only got louder and more desperate as Joffre Ringtail began to seize up, right there in Judy’s arms. He’s still alive in there?!? The hysterical doe pried open the raccoon’s jaws slowly as she lifted Joffre’s chin and pushed the raccoon’s head backward to lay against his desktop, forcing the comatose animal’s airway to open further so Ringtail could take in a ragged lung-full of air. YES! Now, what else can I do to help him? Judy’s searching fingers touched the blood-soaked surgical tape and heavy gauze pads hidden under Joffre’s shirt and tie and saw the unfortunate raccoon open one black eye. Wait, somebody else already wrapped up Ringtail’s injuries? Koslov! But why would a savage polar bear help save a little raccoon’s life, unless… unless he wanted us to find Joffre alive! But why would Koslov go through all of that trouble?!?

“Nick! He’s alive! You gotta’ go get Chief Bogo and the squad, Slick—I don’t know if I can do this on my own!” It wasn’t until the frightened doe felt Joffre’s black and blue fingers giving her hand its first, feeble squeeze that Judy finally noticed the terrified look in the raccoon’s one bloodshot eye he
turned to stare over the doe’s shoulder in unremitting terror. *Unless this whole office is one big trap!* “Nick?!?” Judy’s question was answered by the sound of her terrified partner’s claws skittering across the office’s concrete floor as one massive white paw pulled Nick back outside the office door by the scruff of his fluffy neck. *Koslov!* The gangster’s mighty roar as he lifted Nick’s petrified body to his gaping maw left Judy’s ears ringing and her paws trembling, even as she jerked her tranquilizer pistol free from the holster on her hip. Looking up from the torn sutures that ran like railroad tracks across the immense snowy plain of Koslov’s furry chest and into those blood red eyes that followed her everywhere she turned, Judy couldn’t tell where the mammal stopped, and the monster began. But, if she didn’t do something to draw his attention away from the trembling fox in his claws, then Nick might not live long enough for Chief Bogo and the rest of the squad to find them.

It sounded like a six-year-old doe was talking out of Judy’s mouth, but she distinctly heard herself squeak out one final warning, even as her trembling hands lifted her tranquilizer pistol to take aim, “Koslov! G-Give him back RIGHT NOW and g-g-get your paws up!” Whatever Judy was expecting the savage polar bear to do, there was nothing that could have prepared her for the sound of Nick’s frightened, yipping scream as Koslov tossed him at her like a football or the sickening crunch as her fox sailed through the mountains of paperwork behind the bunny only to collide, viscerally, with the wall on the far side of Ringtail’s office. “**NICK!**” Judy’s trigger finger moved on pure adrenaline and muscle memory, pulling the first hissing shot from her barrel before the echo from the doe’s own screams returned to ring in the doe’s long, sensitive ears. Sticking out of the bloody polar bear’s shoulder just below his collarbone, the dart should have hit a vein close enough to the heart to drop even an alpha predator like Koslov in a matter of seconds, but the monster at Ringtail’s door just smiled back at Judy, daring her to try her luck one more time.

Why -Why isn’t this working like it did on Kameroff just down the hall? The doe’s second and third shot slammed into the dead center of the gangster’s chest, grouped within just an inch of the polar bear’s thundering heart, just inside what Major Friedkin used to call “the Sweet spot.” **“After a shot like that, boys and girls, get the perp a blankie, because it’s ‘Goodnight, Nurse!’”** But, even as she watched Koslov stagger to one knee, saw him grip the door frame in both murderous fists, and took his first uneasy breath since the ambush, Judy could tell that the polar bear wasn’t going down so easy. The doe watched her uneasy concerns turn into terrible certainty as the gangster’s long, sharp claws slowly splintered the office’s cheap door frame as the unyielding polar bear pulled himself back to his feet. Somewhere deep in his jagged chest, the bunny’s sensitive ears heard the same thunderous, gravelly laughter that had drifted up from the operating table when he ‘promoted’ the fox to take his empty seat at Mr. Big’s side.

A miserable, woozy groan from somewhere behind her told Judy that her partner was struggling to get back to his feet, too, but Koslov would beat him there with minutes to spare. **No, no, NO! STAY DOWN!** Two more darts flew from the tranquilizer pistol cupped in the bunny’s trembling hands, digging into the heavy neck fur just over the polar bear’s jugular vein, but Judy watched him shrug off the drug’s effects even quicker on the third time around. Then the Judy felt her heart skip a beat when she heard Koslov’s claws dig into the linoleum tiles under his massive feet, only to see the polar bear turn his savage face back toward her, wearing that same horrifying grin. Flabbergasted hands slipped down the utility belt around the doe’s hips, but Judy’s spare ammo clips were safely locked away in the glove box of her new cruiser, just like the ZPD manual required when its officers were off duty.

That meant that the only weapons left within Judy’s reach were a ridiculously small, collapsible baton -given the size difference between her and the savage polar bear- and the fox-repellant spray that her father had made her take with her when Judy had first gotten her dream posting in Zootopia’s City Center. **Nick, honey, I am so sorry… if we get out of this, I’m going to make my dad drop all that anti-fox junk off at the local dump, where it belongs!** Looking up at the bear looming
just outside the raccoon’s office, Judy knew she’d have better luck trying to chop down an oak tree with one of her little brother’s ‘Bunny’s First Toolbox’ plastic saws. A small silver gleam from the top of Ringtail’s duct-taped desk caught her eye, even as Judy heard her tranquilizer pistol come up empty: an antique letter opener that tapered into a surprisingly sharp point, despite its countless years of use - no doubt another gift from the raccoon’s adoring family.

*Better than nothing, Hopps.* If they all lived through the next ten minutes, Judy swore she’d find some way to apologize to Joffre for taking the dull blade without his permission, “I know that there’s some part of you still in there, Koslov. It’s Judy and Nick; you know us!” Judy spared one last, longing look at her partner before she stepped forward to block Koslov’s view of the injured fox. The polar bear’s bloodshot eyes twinkled malevolently in the dark as he watched Judy step forward on trembling knees, with her baton fully extended in one paw and the letter opener tucked behind her back in the other, “Please, PLEASE don’t make me do this!” The shell-shocked bunny was still preparing herself to make her final stand between Joffre’s broken body and the enraged bear when something very large, very angry, and grey-and-blue all over collided with the polar bear like a runaway freight train.
One hand clutching at the fearful heart pounding away inside his chest, Nick was still trying to stagger back up to his feet when he heard his bunny squeak out one last plea for Koslov to come back to his senses, “I know that there’s some part of you still in there, Koslov. It’s Judy and Nick; you know us!” The shadows spun around him, keeping time with the oscillating fan overhead as the wounded fox watched his partner make her last stand. The crippling lump in Nick’s throat burned with shame as he watched his gentle bunny pick up a dull silver knife from Joffre’s desk, clearly prepared to use her own body to shield the poor raccoon draped over the chair behind her, “Please, PLEASE don’t make me do this!” Even after digging his feet in to gain a little traction, Nick couldn’t help slipping back down to his knees every time he tried to stagger up to stand behind her, the waxed paper folders sliding out from underfoot in a rainbow cascade of tan, blue, and green. Nobody hurts my Carrots… NEVER AGAIN. With no other option, the battered fox dug down deep, pounced with his claws out, carving deep grooves into Ringtail’s desk as he scrambled to stand in Judy’s shadow.

Something vital tore in the fox’s side the moment that he stretched to his full height to look Koslov in the eye, but Nick bit down on his bottom lip to squash the painful yip that started deep down in his chest, choking down the string of profanities that followed in its wake. Oh, crap! There’s no part of this that was a good idea. Fat little drops of crimson flowed through the coppery fur that ran down the fox’s side as he prepared to leap at the monster who stood at the office door, wearing the face of a bear that Nick had once called Uncle. She’s counting on you, Wilde. You can’t pass out until Bogo gets here… if he ever gets here! That’s when Nick saw a heavily armored elephant come barreling into Koslov, knocking the savage polar bear down the hall like an extra-large bowling pin, with a growling tigress leaping into the fray scant seconds later. Or… we could wait for Fangmeyer and Francine to come charging to the rescue. That works, too.

Dust shook from the ceiling following every visceral thump as the two heavyweights started ramming one another into the hallway walls. Now, all I have to do is get Carrots as far away from here as …we can get? It sounded like one hell of a fight going on just outside Ringtail’s office door, but Nick couldn’t look past the heartbroken way Judy’s long ears drooped a little bit lower after every bitter, angry growl that followed after each bone-crunching smash. Carrots? Standing so close to her, Nick could see every trembling sob that shook his bunny’s shoulders as hot tears streamed down her silver cheeks, the silver letter opener falling from her hands as she slumped down onto trembling knees beside Joffre’s chair. “I can’t -I can’t do this anymore, Nick… not alone. I need my partner right now, I need to hear your sweet, goofy voice… but you’re not talking to me, and it hurts…” Despite the bruised ribs on his side, Nick slid down the raccoon’s desk wrapped his comforting fingers around his partner’s shoulders and pulled her around to sob on his chest. Somehow, as the brave bunny clutched at his sides, rubbing her tear-streaked fur against his uniform, Nick found the strength to swallow the painful lump in his throat for a second and whisper the words of comfort when Judy needed to hear them the most, “Not. Alone. Carrots… Not anymore” Seeing the bunny’s pretty amethyst eyes light up was worth the fox feeling like he was choking on hot coals with every word.

Stopping to rest his chin in the short, velvety soft space between her sensitive ears, Nick drowned himself in his bunny’s sweet scent, even as the husky cinnamon smell of his own fear filled every...
corner of the office surrounding them, a whisper on his lips that only Judy could hear, “…and
neither am I.” Holding Judy tight to his chest felt so good, -so impossibly right- that Nick forgot
about the stabbing pain in his side and the burning lump in his throat for a moment. He forgot all
about the savage polar bear grappling with an elephant and a tigress just down the hall and the
terrible, insistent squawk of Chief Bogo trying to raise the pair on the radio at his hip. The world
dropped away, and he was back to dancing with Judy in the evidence room, her sweet cheeks
pressed into his unsteady hands, staring down into those same bottomless amethyst eyes, quaking at
the memory of his bunny’s hot, pouty lips, and desperately longing to feel her steamy kiss on his skin
one more time. His brave bunny was trembling in his arms, again, looking so unsure of what came
next that he just had to smile. You’ll figure it out, Carrots… You always do. This time, Nick had no
trouble leading the bunny’s lips to his, the fox bending his longer neck down to steal one perfect,
chaste kiss as the world rattled on around them.

“HOPPS!” And just like that, their private little moment was gone, drowned out by the bellowing
voice of the ZPD’s most irritable cape buffalo, his booming voice echoing in stereo a split second
later from the walkie-talkie on Nick’s belt. At least Judy had the good grace to blush furiously from
her cute little toes all the way up to the inside of her long ears, but Nick was grateful to see that her
shivering subsided a bit when he licked her blueberry lip gloss from his lips, even if her cute little
cotton ball of a tail started trembling for other reasons, entirely. Not just cute… She’s absolutely
beautiful, especially when she gets all flustered. Maybe someday, I’ll even work up the nerve to tell
her so. With a sly wink, Nick silently mouthed the words, “Sorry, Fluff” before he handed the radio
back to his partner, all too happy to give Judy the credit for another amazing save, “Yes, Chief, I
read you. We’ve found Joffre Ringtail; he’s alive, sir -but he won’t be for very long if we can’t figure
out some way to get him past the brawl going on outside our door!”

Chief Bogo’s voice cut in and out on Nick’s radio, even as Judy cupped the unreliable receiver to her
ear, trying desperately to make out every staticky word, “On our way, Hopps, but we need… reset
button… open the security doors… before this mess gets worse!” It didn’t help matters when she
saw Officer Fangmeyer come bouncing backwards down the hallway seconds later, the tigress’
painful yowl echoing through the office as her muscular frame tried to roll with a kick that would
likely have crushed the ribcage of any animal not wearing body armor. For a heartbeat, both Nick
and Judy silently cheered the tigress’ heroic attempt to claw her way back to her feet, only to cringe a
moment later when a telephone from one of the nurses’ stations rocketed into the poor feline’s face
with a heartbreaking clang of busted circuitry and high-density plastics as her riot helmet shattered
and the officer collapsed drowsily where she had first fallen. Judy’s response came out halfway
between a terrified shriek and a desperate plea for help, “Chief, whatever you’re going to do, you
better do it now, because Koslov’s not going down without a fight!” Peeking around the doorframe
of Ringtail’s office door between her fingers would give Judy nightmare fuel for weeks to come.

The bunny’s heart skipped a beat as she watched Francine’s muscular frame come crashing down
into the linoleum floor at the gangster’s feet, still clutching with her trunk at the polar bear’s thick
neck, even as he slowly pried apart the elephant’s thick, grasping fingers. Judy was still reaching for
the tranquilizer gun in Nick’s holster when she heard her commanding officer come bellowing
around the corner, his riot shield raised high, only to barrel into the savage polar bear’s chest like a
freight train jumping the tracks. “Benjamin, get in there and give Hopps a hand with evacuating
the wounded!” Before Koslov could recover his bearings, the cape buffalo was already on top of
him, raining down clubbing blows with the heavy baton on the gangster’s chest, legs and shoulders
as the chief of police pushed him back with the riot shield, one painful foot at a time. It was only
when the savage polar bear gripped the top of Bogo’s shield, forcing it down so he could try to sink
his snapping teeth into the prey animal’s neck that the Chief pumped up the wattage on his baton to
near lethal levels and stabbed the heavy shock baton into one of the ragged wounds at Koslov’s side.
The polar bear’s electrified scream shook the flickering lights overhead, even as a blind swipe from his sharp claws cut deep furrows into the hallway walls, slicing mere inches from where Chief Bogo’s face had been just moments before. “That's an order, Sergeant- Move your feet!” Chief Bogo dove past the enraged polar bear’s slicing claws, only to bring the full weight of his heavy riot shield into the back of Koslov’s skull with all of his might. The sickening crunch made Judy’s stomach twist up in knots, but for just a moment, she couldn’t look away from the spectacle of the savage polar bear swaying, the left side of his face swallowed up in a patch of nasty looking bruises as his red eyes locked on Chief Bogo’s face as if he was seeing the winded cape buffalo’s face for the first time. A part of the gentle-hearted country bunny devoutly hoped that the last, titanic clubbing blow had shaken loose some vestige of the gangster’s common sense, that Koslov would ‘come quietly’ after all. Then she heard the horrifying “Zzzzottt!” of Chief Bogo’s stun baton electrifying the chief of police right through his riot gear.

Koslov tore the riot shield right out of staggered cape buffalo’s hands and began ruthlessly bashing the cape buffalo across the face with it until the embattled Chief was forced down to one knee, his burly arms raised in one last, futile attempt to divert the polar bear’s fury. “MARCUS!” That’s when a terrified Clawhauser pounced on the polar bear from behind and covered the savage animal’s eyes with both of his paws trying to buy the overwrought cape buffalo a moment to catch his breath. It was all that the chubby cheetah could do to hold on for dear life as Koslov spun around in angry circles, growling savagely when the polar bear couldn’t dislodge the squealing desk sergeant from around his neck. “Hopps! Hit the damned button… in Ringtail’s case!” Chief Bogo’s booming voice was almost over-powered by the furious trumpeting of Francine’s battle-cry as she drove one immense fist into the gangster’s face.

Caught completely off-guard by the ferocity of the elephant’s initial assault, Koslov’s head rocked back with every brutal new jab, cross, hook and uppercut, as Francine put every ounce of her ample frame into defending her fallen comrades. Looking down at the wide-eyed cheetah who stood on shaking knees between Chief Bogo and the elephant’s raging assault, Judy knew that she wasn’t the only one who was going to have nightmares about the fight she was seeing today. Ramming the savage polar bear’s face into the hallway wall, Francine punctuated each angry word with another ceiling-rattling crunch, “YOU. DON’T. GET. TO. HURT. MY. FAMILY!” On her final word on the subject, the ZPD’s most beloved mother figure drove her adversary’s oversized head clean through the drywall of Joffre’s office wall, using her own impressive strength to lock up the gangster’s massive arms as she struggled to slap the paw-cuffs around Koslov’s massive wrists.

The Don’s most trusted soldier looked like a lost little cub as he stared blankly at Judy and the fox at her side, a sleepy, almost grateful smile crossing his face, even through all of the scratches left by Fangmeyer’s sharp claws and the bruises from Francine’s attempts to use the polar bear’s face for a punching bag. “C’mon, partner. Let’s see what Ringtail kept in that case…” As she turned away, Judy was surprised that her fox stayed put, even when she pulled at Nick’s shirt sleeve. Her partner swayed a little unsteadily under the cool breeze from the fan overhead, but his eyes stayed locked on the telling look on Koslov’s face. A small part of Judy wondered if her fox had ever seen the old gangster looking so peaceful as he did right now. The rest of her feared that the monster that Koslov had turned into might reawaken at any moment, determined to kill them all, and maybe even die trying. She wanted to get Nick as far away from this awful place as fast as she could, but when Judy turned to open the silver case sitting on Joffre’s battered old desk, she heard the telltale trickle of red drops falling from her fox’s right hand where it clutched his side. Nick? Is everything okay over there, partner?

Even as her small hand pressed down on the reset button and the hospital’s lights started flickering back to life, Judy could tell that the answer was no. When Nick finally spoke, it sounded like he was reassuring that same cub that the sun would still come out after midnight had come and gone its way,
“It’s okay, Uncle… I’ll look after them…” Nick was smiling back at the old bear, even though the corners of his gold-green eyes were rimmed with tears. Something in the mobster’s blank stare was reflected in Nick’s pretty gold-green eyes when he turned slowly to face her, and Judy could only watch as her fox’s million-watt smile dimmed a little with every fading heartbeat. At least, now… she’s safe. Watching her fox’s whiskers curl into a heartbreaking ghost of a smile, the realization of all the things her partner had tried to silently tell her hit Judy like a ton of bricks: Nick wanted to take me downstairs, where the medics were helping the wounded, where they could have helped us both. He wanted to take me away from Ringtail and Koslov; he wanted to take me where he knew we’d both be safe, but he followed me in here, anyways. Then she saw her fox start slumping down, his tired shoulders collapsing into a beaten shrug just a few feet from the chair where Joffre Ringtail was still struggling to draw his next breath.

“Chief Bogo! Nick’s really hurt! We need a doctor in here RIGHT NOW!” Even to her own ears, Judy’s terrified voice seemed a million miles away, even though the timid little bunny had never cried so loud in her entire life. “Oh, no, Nick… Stay with me, Slick! PLEASE!” Exhausted beyond measure, Nick slowly let gravity pull him down to the ground, his back plastered to the side of Joffre’s desk, but he never stopped staring longingly at the beautiful bunny who had turned his world upside-down. Oh mama, what have I done?? Judy took her partner’s paw in one of hers, the other trying to rub some feeling back into the tired legs that jerked erratically in tune with the fox’s nervous system shutting down. “Can you feel my hand on your leg, Nick? I’m right here, partner!” Nick’s eyelids drooped, even as his eyebrows raised in a half-heartedly suggestive waggle, a goofy grin spreading across his tired face, “Are y-you asking me to dance?” Judy pulled her fox’s goofy face tight against her chest, where Nick wouldn’t have to see his bunny crying her eyes out, “Yes, you giant goofball. Anything you want, just stay with me…” The sleepy response that echoed up from within her desperate embrace sounded equal parts happy and defeated to be falling asleep on her chest, but the words came out so quietly that even Judy had to strain to hear them, “Nowhere else I’d rather be… sweetheart.”

(Nearly 2 hours later…)

The next couple of hours trudged past Judy like strangers outside a café window: a lot of people came and went, their voices a faint, far-away murmur, but even the normally domineering Chief Bogo kept a respectable distance from the shell-shocked little bunny as she clung frantically to her partner’s hand. It wasn’t until Clawhauser laid one gentle paw upon her shoulder that Judy realized that she’d been holding her breath for the last couple of minutes, just trying to listen to the soft purring of the fox slumbering in her lap. “Hopps… Judy. Listen to me…” Some irrational part of Judy hated the way that the desk sergeant’s soft voice sounded just like her mother’s when Bonnie was trying to soothe the one of the baby bunnies back home. He’s just trying to help, Judy. Don’t bite his head off… “I’m not letting him go, Benjamin! I can’t… not until I know that Nick’s going to be okay!” Try as she might, that awful moment when she apologized to Nick under the bridge downtown kept running through Judy’s mind, spurred on by the doe’s guilty conscience, “And after we’re done, you can hate me because I was a horrible friend, -and I hurt you- and you can walk away knowing that you were right: I really am just a dumb bunny!”

“Honey, I don’t need you to let go of him, not yet.” Again, Clawhauser’s velvety-soft voice echoed in Judy’s long ears, even as the cheetah’s comforting paw turned Judy to face him, so that she could see the heartfelt sympathy bubbling up in her colleague’s eyes, “I just need you to grab his feet and help me get Nick up on one of these gurneys, so the nice doctors here can do a few tests.” But he’s a predator, -a fox, no less- and this is the Prey wing… Can they even, will they even know how to help him? When the dumbfounded little doe looked back at Nick and then at the cheetah, only to shake
her head as the words stopped making sense, Clawhauser dropped to one knee by her side, “Look, sweetie, Chief Bogo’s talked the hospital into looking over the team after our little run-in with Koslov: X-rays, blood tests, the works. Especially for predators like Fangmeyer, Nick, and me… it’s kinda a big deal.” Why ‘especially’ for the predators like Nick? “The waiting list over on the Predator side is three months long and with what we make at the precinct, it might take us twice that long to pay for it all…”

Something about the chubby cheetah’s math didn’t add up: back in Bunny Borough, Judy had been to the hospital half a dozen times for everything from a broken wrist when she jumped off the swings at school to having the gashes on her cheek sewn up after her regrettable run-in with Gideon Gray at the county fair. Her family had always gotten a bill, and while it had always made her father fume about the added cost to the family budget, Judy couldn’t remember a single time where the hospital bill had been expensive enough to add up to six month’s wages at her new job. *Either things in the city cost a LOT more than they do back home, or I’m making a lot more than a desk sergeant like Clawhauser as a probationary patrol officer…* Judy shook her head at that impossible thought as she helped hoist her partner up onto the rolling table. *…Or they’re getting charged a whole lot extra just for being Predators!* The thought made Judy’s stomach drop through the floor, almost taking the bunny’s meager breakfast with it.

Touching Nick’s sleeping face tenderly one more time before the orderlies wheeled him into the next room to start taking his X-rays, Judy was starting to understand why the former street hustler hated hospitals, even if it made her heart physically ache at the thought of losing him again as she and Clawhauser walked into the waiting room. Francine was sitting there, too, with her right fist wrapped in an ice pack bigger than Judy’s head, but the elephant was too busy fussing over her feline partner to wear it right. “Hey, country girl! You think this will get me out of radio desk duty?” Even with her head wrapped in gauze and her riot helmet laying in two pieces in her lap, the tigress still managed a hopeful smile. “Don’t mind her, Hopps—it’s just the concussion talking!” A chorus of laughter followed Francine’s lighthearted ribbing of her injured partner, but somehow Judy just couldn’t join in with her colleague’s smiling faces. They’d caught the ‘bad guy,’ saved the day at Zootopia General, and finally gotten Nick to someplace the fox could get some medical help, so why did Judy still feel so anxious inside?

And then the bunny remembered her sleeping partner’s red-tinged eyes, so eerily reminiscent of the savage polar bear who was lying unconscious, paw-cuffed to a bed just down the hall and she had her answer: *Whatever this thing is, what if it’s contagious?* Stretching her hearing past the waiting room door and into the hallway outside, Judy could just make out a few snippets of the argument between Chief Bogo and the burly ram that had led Koslov’s surgical team, “Doctor Kalahari, would you like to tell me exactly how a 1400 lb. polar bear under heavy sedation just happens to jump up off your operating table and run amok through this hospital?” From her first days on the force, butting heads with the stubborn chief of police, herself, Judy knew that behind the cape buffalo’s sugary sweet tone there lay an icy cliff – a point of no return, beyond which the Chief’s anger could override his better judgment.

When she heard the old ram’s testy reply, Judy knew he’d missed all the warning signs, just like she had when she’d bet her badge on cracking the Otterton ‘missing mammal’ case, “Chief Bogo, I’ve been the chief resident at this hospital for nearly thirty years. During that time, I’ve overseen countless operations and seen emergency room carnage you would not believe, but I have never seen a reaction to anesthesia like we had today!” Despite her colleague’s raucous joking behind her, the eavesdropping bunny propped the door open another inch, so she could actually see the ram’s bandaged face when he poked one surly finger into Chief Bogo’s armored chest, ‘This wasn’t some random case of ‘anesthesia awareness’ where a patient babbles a few incoherent words at his surgeon before going back under; I saw the bloody red sheen on his eyes myself—that damned polar
bear was hunting me and my team from right there on the operating table!” Chief Bogo’s low 
grumble of dissent as he glared down at the smaller mammal did nothing to dampen the surgeon’s 
furor, “Koslov Andreyevich should have died from his wounds -or severe hypothermia- long before 
he woke up on that operating table!”

“Doctor, I’ve got five wounded officers in the next room who are going to wish that he had, 
come tomorrow morning.” Judy almost closed the door when she saw Chief Bogo’s critical stare 
rise to meet her eyes, but the cape buffalo simply continued on without so much as a cross word to 
the eavesdropping officer under his command, “And that’s not counting the dozen or so 
reporters, downstairs who are going positively rabid at the sight of so many officers and so 
many injured civilians in one place at the same time. I need answers, Kalahari, not wild 
speculation!” For all of his fearful bluster, Doctor Kalahari stopped his angry rebuke of the chief of police when the enormity of the situation finally struck the old ram. “We… We can’t tell them that a 
savage predator got loose here today, can we? The people in this City… the Prey population would 
panic, wouldn’t they?”

“That’s between you and City Hall, Doc, but I doubt the hospital’s shareholders would care 
for the negative publicity at a time like this…” Chief Bogo serenely turned to look out the 
window as the last few ambulances from other hospitals left the parking lot downstairs, but his tone 
dropped to a few degrees below freezing, “…Particularly not when we finally found Ringtail’s 
boss, -your director of crises intervention- he was practicing ‘emergency CPR techniques’ 
with his secretary in the women’s restroom in the basement, and her dress was up around her 
antlers.” Doctor Kalahari shook his head in disbelief, but his stuttering retort died on the old ram’s 
lips. “One of my wolves tracked them down, and he said it smelled like the two had been 
‘practicing’ all morning. I know that canine scent tracking isn’t admissible as evidence in 
criminal court proceedings right now, but I’m pretty sure that it still counts in civil procedures 
-like the custody hearing your boss has scheduled for later this month.”

Chief Bogo affected a nonchalant shrug as the last of his own police cruisers followed in the 
ambulance’s wake, “Sordid little details like that do sell an awful lot of newspapers, though. 
And they always seem to get out, when it comes to official investigations.” Even from her 
vantage point, many yards down the hall, Judy could see the hospital’s chief surgeon turning a bit 
green at Bogo’s latest revelation. “Chief Bogo, your point is not exactly subtle… frankly, I think that 
you’ve got us bent over a barrel, but I will pass everything that you’ve told me here along to the 
hospital’s board of trustees.” Something about the way Kalahari hung his head at the mention of 
going before the hospital’s board of trustees made Judy think he’d much rather swallow a live frog, 
instead, if Bogo gave him the option. “Of course, it would be so much easier for us to sell this as a 
‘false alarm’ scenario if you’d let us hang that little rodent Joffre Ringtail out to dry for his part in this 
whole sordid affair…”The world’s falling down around our ears and all he can think of is saving his 
own backside?!! Judy still had one angry paw wrapped around the door, -and half a notion to come 
throttle the ram, herself- when Chief Bogo’s cold, disapproving stare stopped the outraged little 
bunny in her tracks.

“Look, Kalahari, I don’t want to tell you how to run your hospital…” The chief surgeon’s snort 
of disbelief wasn’t hard to hear, even as Chief Bogo locked eyes with his junior officer over the old 
ram’s shoulder, “…But I’ve listened to Ringtail’s 911 call half a dozen times, now: that ‘rodent’ 
is a damned hero in my book, as are the first officers to arrive on the scene.” An ever-so-slight 
nod of the cape buffalo’s head told Judy that Bogo meant every word that he’d said, “I can assure 
you that I am not alone in either of these beliefs, and should your board of trustees, -or even 
City Hall, for that matter- decide to start tossing around charges like ‘criminal negligence’ or
‘dereliction of duty,’ then I will be only too happy to make sure that everyone knows what happened here today: ‘the whole truth and nothing but the truth…’ Am I making myself perfectly clear, Doctor Kalahari?”

“Like I said, there’s nothing subtle about the point you’re making here today, Chief.” Unabashed, even in his moment of defeat, Doctor Kalahari’s smile turned snide, as the old ram turned to go, giving lie to the generosity of his and the hospital’s decision to help the wounded officers in the room behind Judy, “I do hope that there are no serious injuries to your team; I’d hate for them to have to come back to this hospital any time soon… particularly the Predators in your ranks.” The bitter, old ram had already stormed off down the hall and around the corner before Chief Bogo unclenched the angry fist that hung by his side, and turned his weary eyes back to his junior officer, “Officer Hopps, perhaps it’s time we had ourselves a little chat…”

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