# All the Brighter Things

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Zootopia (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Judy Hopps, Nick Wilde, Chief Bogo (Zootopia), Mrs. Otterton (Zootopia), Dawn Bellwether, Bonnie Hopps, Stu Hopps, Original Characters, Mr. Big (Zootopia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 3 of <a href="#">Ruff Stuff</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2018-03-02 Chapters: 4/4 Words: 16813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## All the Brighter Things

by [Yeah JSmith](#)  

**Summary**

Judy Hopps, Zootopia’s first bunny cop, hustles herself a case: find the missing otter, Emmitt Otterton. She brings her boyfriend, licensed PI Nick Wilde, along for the ride.

(Part of a series, but this can stand on its own.)
Chapter Summary

Judy not-so-accidentally gets a case. Having pre-existing allies makes it easier.

Chapter Notes

This is a stand-alone; although it’s set within the same AU, you don’t have to read Good and Good Enough or Unbound to get what’s going on. In this AU, Judy got a scholarship to ZU and met Nick (who is only 4 years older instead of 8) in her sophomore year. They started dating about half a year after they met, making them friends for about 4 years and lovers for 3.5 years. There are some other timeline changes that are relevant to this installment but not the others. This story is rated T, so no sexy shenanigans, but Nick and Judy have a dynamic that, while not advertised to the public or even their friends, is not a secret. Obviously, with a different, pre-existing friendship, this case would go differently. I’m only re-writing the scenes that wouldn’t make sense in this AU.

Ruff Stuff, the Playlist

“Let...it... go,” said Chief Bogo, and Judy wanted to crawl out of her skin. This whole thing was skewed. It was unjust. Nick had told her that her Chief and coworkers were bigoted, but she’d thought – hoped – that maybe he was wrong. That maybe this was some kind of hazing ritual, and once she passed, they’d treat her like the competent mammal she was. Surely they could see…

No, they couldn’t, or maybe they just wouldn’t. She didn’t know which was worse.

“Chief, I-”

As his eyes narrowed, no doubt in preparation for some kind of snide, vaguely demeaning comment, the door flew open. Judy’s eyes immediately glanced up, but the caller was about her size, so the visitor must have jumped to reach the doorknob. To Judy’s surprise, it was Octavia Otterton. Judy and Octavia weren’t close, but her husband owned Judy’s favorite flower shop. Emmitt was knowledgeable about the practical and aesthetic aspects of botany, and was almost as enthusiastic about floriography as Bonnie Hopps. He’d helped Judy arrange several bouquets, and if Fru-Fru was to be believed, her father had arranged for Emmitt to provide flower arrangements for her upcoming wedding.

The otter was crying. “Chief, please, five minutes – Judy?”

“Octavia!” Judy hopped down from the oversized chair and closed the distance between them, ignoring the breathless apologies from Clawhauser. “Are you all right? Sorry, dumb question, of course not. What happened?”

“Oh, it’s horrible,” Octavia replied, hugging a photograph to her chest. “My Emmitt’s gone missing!
He may get caught up in projects sometimes at the shop, but you know Emmitt, he loves being a father, he never misses an important event. So when he didn’t show up for Thomas’ soccer game, I knew. Something’s happened to him. I filed a missing mammals report, but it’s – what did that wolf tell me? Ah, right – it’s being handled. You must have so much going on here at the station.”

If Judy hadn’t known Octavia as well as she did, which wasn’t very (but enough to detect her gentle but piercing sarcasm), she might not have noticed the barb sent toward the Chief. She took Octavia’s paws gently and promised, “I’m going to do everything I can to find him, Octavia. I won’t let you down.”

“Yes,” said Bogo with a glint in his eye. “Officer Hopps here graduated at the top of her class. Will you excuse us for a moment, Mrs. Otterton?”

And, moving with grace and speed Judy hadn’t quite anticipated from such a large mammal, he fairly slammed the door in Octavia’s face. “Hopps.”

“Yes, Chief,” she answered, pretending not to notice the threat in his voice. She’d heard scarier from the shadow in the underworld she’d helped investigate with Nick. After that debacle, anything short of a razor at her throat probably wouldn’t even get an ear flick out of her.

“I want to make this perfectly clear: I am only giving you this case because you are such great friends with a mammal who insists on ruining my day, every single day. I am giving you 48 hours to solve this case, as the best and brightest officer the ZPA has produced to date.” Even Judy couldn’t miss the self-indulgent irony in his voice. Some part of her brain, speaking in Nick’s smarmiest voice, called him a prick. She refused to feel bad about it, but she wouldn’t voice it, either. This was her chance to prove him wrong about her. “If you don’t succeed, you will resign. You can get the details of the case from Clawhauser. Or would you rather go back to putting tickets on parked cars?”

Judy thought about Octavia’s tears. She thought about Mayor Lionheart’s pride, not in her, but in the success of his affirmative action project. She thought about her parents, who wanted nothing more than to see her fail, although they would probably protest that phrasing. She thought about Gideon Grey, who had only seven years prior rather violently reminded her of what a bunny should and should not do, and smiled. “I’m going to solve this case, Chief. Thank you for the opportunity.”

Revenge would be sweet.

As though the universe were smiling upon Judy, the door opened again and in strode Assistant Mayor Bellwether, whose face lit up when she saw Judy. “Oh, hello, Officer Hopps! Mrs. Otterton was just telling me that you’ve been assigned her husband’s case! Good thing, too; small mammals so often get overlooked in favor of the bigger ones. Mayor Lionheart will be so pleased to hear about this.”

What would Nick do?

Judy knew exactly what Nick would do.

“I’ll have to try not to let him down by failing to meet the time requirements,” she said innocently.

Dawn’s eyes narrowed. “Time requirements?”

“The 48 hours?” Bogo’s face twisted, and Judy tried not to enjoy it too much. Nick had been a terrible influence on her. “I’ve been given 48 hours. I’m assuming it’s some sort of test for all rookies after they move on from parking duty.”

“Parking duty?”
“Oh, yes.” Judy sent an adoring glance toward Bogo, who looked trapped somewhere between panic and rage. “All rookies have a few days of it, or at least, I think they do. Can’t imagine that I’d be treated any differently from other officers, what with all the anti-discrimination laws in place. Well, anyway, I’d better get going, if I want to solve the case within the time limit!”

“Time limit,” echoed Dawn, eyeing Bogo suspiciously before looking down at her phone. “I’ll have to text Leo, set a time to discuss protocols, that really doesn’t seem like a safe way to introduce officers to police work.”

Bogo’s eyes went wide. “Oh, there’s no need to text him—”

“And, there it goes, so I did do that. Anyway, Idris, I’m here to ask you about the budget request you made…”

The door shut, leaving Judy with Octavia, who was staring at her with concern. She smiled much more gently and put her paw on the otter’s arm. “I’m going to find Emmit, okay? I’m a real cop, despite what some mammals might try to say, and I have Nick to help me. Remember Nick Wilde?”

“Who doesn’t, once he’s bothered to make an impression?”

“Well, he’s a licensed PI now. I helped him build his business. We have a wide network of contacts and a lot of resources. We’re going to find Emmitt.”

“I know,” said Octavia, sighing. “I know you will. I just can’t help but think that whoever took my Emmitt could be just as dangerous for you.”

“Maybe so, but this is what I’ve been trained to do. Just hold tight to that photo, Octavia. I’ll find him. I swear it.”

Judy tried to sit stiffly in the guest chair and play up the “client” angle, but she couldn’t hide the gleeful spark running through her, and Nick caught on before she even opened her mouth.

“Good news?”

“That all depends on whether you have 48 – sorry, 46 – hours to blow on a wild and merry chase with me.”

His eyebrows did a funny thing that looked like they were trying to rise, but he was too concerned for it to work. “Want to explain that a little further?”

“Emmitt Otterton is missing,” she told him, “and it’s my job to find him. I promised Octavia I would, and anyway, the Chief was gracious enough to give me 48 hours to solve this case. I’m just glad it wasn’t 24.”

Nick flopped back in his chair, looking at the ceiling. She knew what he was thinking. It didn’t take a genius to get it, after all. “You risked your career on a florist, Carrots? Really?”

“I risked my career on a missing mammal,” she corrected sharply, “but yes. You should have seen it, Nick. Octavia was crying. She was sick with worry. And everyone was writing her off. She didn’t matter. So I told her, in front of the Chief, that I would find Emmitt. But it’s okay. I have insurance.”

“Insurance?”

“Well, I mentioned in front of Assistant Mayor Bellwether that I hope to impress Mayor Lionheart by
solving my first case within the time limit, since I don’t want to go back to parking duty. I pretended I had no idea that the way the Chief is treating me is abnormal. She’s already scheduled a meeting to talk to the Mayor about “officer protocols,” because having 48 hours to solve a first case with no partner is unsafe. If the Chief tries to fire me for this, he’ll look like a bigot and a fool in front of the mammals who happened to push so hard for me to become an officer in the first place...and who are in charge of his funding.”

“Ahh,” said Nick, looking constipated. Finally, he broke, unable to hold back his laughter any longer. “The student has become the master. I’m proud of you, Officer Hopps. Truly.”

“Laugh it up,” she told him, unable to pretend to be mad. “The point is, I have a time-sensitive case, and I’d like you to be my partner on it.”

“Me? A lowly PI?”

She grinned, pleased. “I wouldn’t trust anybody else at this point. You’re the best.”

“Damn straight,” he replied. “Let me get my coat.”

Asking around about Emmitt had led them to a nudist retreat. The Mystic Springs Oasis didn’t seem very fun, but Judy could see why Emmitt liked it. Everyone was very mellow and accepting. All baggage was left at the door with the clothing, and if someone didn’t behave, they would be thrown out and never allowed back in. Service jobs, like owning and running a flower shop, tended to be highly stressful with fewer rewards.

She just hoped that this Nangi could give them some real information, or she’d have gotten naked for nothing.

Judy tasted the tiny cake, watching in amusement as Nick tried to eat his and still be on his best behavior. His bite ended up clumped on his incisor, and he discreetly licked it off. She would have, too; it was delicious and devoid of fondant. Nothing but the best for Fru-Fru’s wedding.

“I hate to discuss business during such a happy affair,” said Mr. Big, keeping an eye on his daughter as she danced with the partygoers, “but I can appreciate your urgency. What you do for my associates, you do for me.”

“I’m technically asking about Emmitt in my role as an officer,” she warned gently, “but I was planning to be here to support a dear friend before I got this case. So I understand the struggle. We don’t have to talk here.”

“This is what I like about you, Judy. You understand equivalent exchange. You’re honest with me. So this piece of information is free. A party favor, if you like.” He met eyes with her before looking at his daughter again. A doting father would always be a doting father, she supposed, even if he was also a crime boss. “Mr. Otterson’s my florist. Weddings, funerals, birthdays, other special occasions... gifts... Emmitt does it all. He’s family. The night he disappeared, he called ahead and said he had information for me. He said I would know whether we could trust the police with it. But, as you know, he never arrived.”

“He was attacked on the way,” Judy surmised, remembering the claw marks and old blood they’d found at the impound after running the plates at Nick’s office. The owner of the lot had told them he wasn’t talking without a warrant and a fist in his gut – clearly another mobster – so Judy had decided that she and Nick would go straight to the source, but getting Nick into something that didn’t look
like he’d raided a geriatric yard sale had taken longer than she’d expected, so they had arrived during the wedding.

At least Mr. Big was in a good mood.

“What? No, he attacked. Nearly clawed the eyes out of my driver. Scared him half to death. Renato said he’d never been so terrified, right down to his core.”

“But Emmitt’s so gentle,” she protested, unable to picture her favorite botanist defending himself, let alone attacking someone unprovoked. Emmitt was a predator, but so was Nick. So was Mr. Big. Technically, if one moved beyond ancient digestive class and into occupation, so was she. “Why would he attack your driver? And himself, if those claw marks in your limo are anything to go by?”

“My child, you voluntarily subjected yourself to the depths of mammal depravity when you chose to be a police officer.” Mr. Big reached over to pat her finger with a tiny paw. “You should know as well as I do that things are not so clear as “civil” and “uncivil.” Deep down...we’re all just animals. Otherwise, would you or I be necessary?”

It was a rhetorical question. Judy knew academically that what he was saying was correct. It felt wrong, though, to not have an answer for Emmitt’s behavior. Mr. Big associated with the worst of the worst. According to some, he was the worst of the worst, and they were probably right. He might have been cynical enough to assume that mammals were just bad, just prone to...savagery, but Judy wasn’t inclined to believe that. She just had to find out from the source what had happened. “You said your driver’s name was Renato?”

“Manchas,” the shrew corrected. “Renato Manchas. Before you leave, speak with Koslov. He’ll give you the address. And while you’re in there, I’ll need to speak to Nicky.”

“ Alone?”

He laughed, seemingly unoffended at her outburst. “I won’t hurt your fox. I just want to talk.”

Seeing as the last time they’d talked, Nick had sold Mr. Big a rug woven from the fur of a skunk’s butt and grievously offended him, Judy was worried, but her boyfriend could take care of himself. And despite his status as the city’s fiercest crime boss, Judy trusted Mr. Big to keep his word. His particular brand of integrity was why he had that status to begin with. Loyalty was better cultivated with enticements and follow-through than with fear.

“Thank you, Mr. Big.”

“You’re welcome. You take care of yourself, Officer Hopps. I don’t trust those shady mammals at the ZPD.”

“Neither do I,” she admitted, hating the fact that it was true.

After she finished Purrandizing Mayor Lionheart, Judy found her way back to Nick, who was suckling down Snarlbucks like it was the Elixir of Life. The request for coffee had mostly been a joke, but apparently solving fourteen cases at once made the ZPD amenable even to the silliest of requests. He was such a goober sometimes, but it only made her love him more.

He’d really been a champ. Standing up for her, supporting her, helping her escape from a savage jaguar...she knew that she’d done the same for him when he’d started his business, at least as much as she’d been able during her break between the standard and advanced parts of her police training, but this was another level entirely. Not many police officers had a lot of love for private investigators,
but he had gone along with her anyway, knowing that he’d be met with hostility.

“First case,” he said, nudging her in the side. She grabbed his paw, because she felt like holding it, not for any other reason, like rubbing her interspecies heathenry in anyone’s face or showing everybody that she was luckier than they were because she had a loving partner and they were just sad and mean. “How’s it feel?”

“Like I’m going to throw up, honestly,” she admitted, leaning into his bicep. It really was too bad she was so short, although it was nice to be able to flick his nose with her ears. “That was scary.”

“And yet, I’m the one who did most of the freaking out.”

“You’re not a cop, though,” she reminded him. He wormed his paw out of hers to bring it up and stroke her ears, so she threaded her fingers through his beltloop. It reminded her of that party, back in college, when she’d introduced him to her friends. She didn’t remember most of their names anymore, but he probably would, if she asked him.

“That’s the truth. You couldn’t pay me enough to do what you do. Savage jaguars? Oversized pawcuffs coming out of nowhere? I’m full up on weird. This is the last time I do you a favor.”

But he didn’t stop petting her. She never mentioned how cuddly he was, because then he’d get weird about it and withdraw. He did that, a sort of subconscious protection thing. Maybe he wouldn’t, not after everything they’d been through especially in the past two weeks, but she didn’t want to chance it. Not tonight. She grinned and put it out of her mind. “I’m dead! You’re dead! Everybody’s dead!”

“We should be. I’m still not completely sure I didn’t get mauled by a wolf and start hallucinating this in the hospital. Who flushes themselves down a toilet?”

“Yes,” said Bogo, looming over them with his arms crossed. “I think it’s high time you explained yourself, Hopps.”

She was going to explain. She had Nick there at her side to back her up. Even if they were the least-respected mammals there, they had the truth on their side. Surely the Chief would have to listen now.
Her little nose was twitching like crazy, a sure sign of nerves. Nick watched as she paced, trying to even her breathing and pulling on her ear-tips. He considered telling her it was cute, just to rile her up, because that always cut her nerves at the root, but anger wouldn’t be a good mindset for this either.

“Breathe,” he advised.

“I’m just so nervous,” she told him. Her voice was shrill. “They want me to go up there and talk about what we saw. It’s literally my fourth day as a cop! I don’t know how to talk to the press! I don’t even know how to talk to my boss! You had to save my tail back there by the gondolas—”

“Talking to bigots like your boss and talking to the press are the same, Carrots. C’mere,” he said gently, and wrapped her in his arms as soon as she did. “Why is this getting to you? I’ve seen you take oral exams before.”

“That was just for classes,” she replied, fisting his tie.

“And?”

“Academics are only practice for real life. This is something that – I mean if I mess this up – suddenly there could be real consequences, not just a lower grade.”

He nosed at her left ear for a moment, allowing her to stop shaking, before offering, “Okay, here’s what you do. When you don’t know the answer, ask them a different question, and then answer that question.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” she said into his chest.

“Do we care if they’re stupid enough to fall for it? No, no we don’t. It’s reporters. They’re going to spin everything you say, which brings me to point 2. Make them understand that you’re a humble, lowly, newbie cop doing her job, and they’ll eat it up. Oh, and work in one of your folksy sayings. Everybody loves a cutie.”

“Don’t call me cute.”
“Why not? They will. You know they will. They’ll take one look at your big pretty eyes and twitchy nose and splash that word on the front page, even if you’re outright rude. Better to give them what they want than to get upset when they spin you anyway.”

She huffed and stepped back. “But I’m more than what I look like.”

“Preaching to the choir, Fluff. Predators are more than our teeth, too, but that’s all anybody ever sees. Or cares about,” he replied, giving her a pointed look.

“And I guess this whole savage thing won’t help at all. Dam, and they’re going to ask me about it too, I’m sure. I don’t want to say something stupid! That doctor at the asylum said it had something to do with biology, but she clammed up and won’t say anything about what kind of virus it is. She won’t even admit that it is one. How do I give them the facts of the case without making it seem like predators in general are going to go nuts like Manchas and Emmitt?”

“Just keep it vague. We don’t know what we don’t know, and the investigation into the cause is in someone else’s paws. And if they get invasive, double down. Politicians do it all the time.”

She gave him a smile, the same one that kept drawing him in. “You know a lot about this stuff – making mammals think what you want them to think. You should be up there with me.”

“But what kind of friend would I be if I stole the spotlight?” He reached out and stroked her cheek, loving the way her eyelids fluttered. Forget physicality or declarations of love; it was the little everyday things like this that told him she was with him, rather than just standing next to him. “Like I said, everybody loves a cutie, and I’m at least ten times cuter than you. You’re the cop, Judy; I’m just the street-wise, smooth-talking city boy who keeps saving your tail.”

Judy took his paw and turned her head to kiss his palm. “I don’t know how you always know what to say, but you do. Okay. Be vague, be cute, and answer weird questions with other questions. I can do that.”

“If you get nervous, think about that time your mom walked in on you paddling me,” he added. “There’s nothing you can say that would be more embarrassing than that.”

“Nick!”

“And tonight, we’re going to go out to get cheap, greasy food and watch something trashy,” he said quietly, rubbing his thumb over her scars. “It’s been a long time since we took a load off without any specific purpose. Think of it as an incentive.”

“Nick, I-”

Whatever she’d been about to say was lost when Assistant Mayor Bellwether collected Judy, giving him a harsh look. What had crawled up her butt? She’d seemed perfectly fine with him when she’d allowed them access to the traffic cameras. Maybe she’d finally caught onto the fact that technically, that access hadn’t been legal. Or maybe she’d seen his collar and made the right connections. Who knew? He wasn’t inclined to care.

He crept around a larger reporter to watch Judy take the podium. She smiled, obviously nervous, but he gave her a thumbs up when she looked at him and she seemed to draw strength just from that. Aww.

“What can you tell us about the case,” called a reporter. Nick couldn’t see her.

“Not much,” Judy replied. “We’re still collecting evidence from the crime scene.”
“The crime scene at which you found fourteen savage predators under illegal detainment?”

Judy’s eyes narrowed. “Were the mammals in question illegally detained? Yes, yes they were.”

*Atta girl.*

“But you’re not denying that they were all savage predators.”

“Were they all different species? I believe so, but I didn’t get a chance to look at all of them.” Judy looked around at the other reporters, clearly hoping someone else would ask a less stupid question. Catching Nick’s eye, she added, “It was darker than a collapsed warren at new moon in there.”

“How did you find the location,” asked another reporter. Nick couldn’t see this one either, but he didn’t want to move away from his optimal Judy-viewing position.

“It wasn’t easy,” she told the reporter with a conspiratorial grin. “I’m so new to the force I’m not even in the system yet, so I didn’t have a partner. My boyfriend is a licensed PI at Wilde Investigations, though, and since he’s awesome, we were able to use his resources to do things like run plates. The rest of it was questioning and leg work of the kind you’d expect from any officer.”

Nice. A subtle jab at her boss and a nod to his business. He was suddenly very glad they were on the same team.

“What can you tell us about the savage predators,” another voice called.

“I can tell you that the investigation is ongoing,” she said firmly.

“Are you sure this won’t happen again?”

“The – the investigation is ongoing. Our lab techs are working overtime to find the source of the – to find the source of-”

“Are the savages still locked up?”

Another voice. “Is the savagery contagious?”

And another. “Have you thought about a quarantine?”

“Great gardenias, I hope not! That would be terrible! I can’t...I can’t say...we at the ZPD are here to help, but I’m – I don’t have the answers you’re looking for. I’m just a regular cop. Maybe ask the Chief, or the press liaison, wherever they are…”

Showing some compassion for once, Chief Bogo rescued her from the onslaught of increasingly bigoted questions. Assistant Mayor Bellwether ushered her from the podium and toward the back door, but Judy veered toward him, and the undersized sheep hung back, frowning. Judy poured herself into his arms for a moment while he pretended not to be overwhelmingly proud of her.

“That was awful,” she groaned, pulling away.

“I thought it was great. Nice touch with the stutter, by the way. Really sold the bit.”

“It wasn’t a bit.” She sighed. “I was just that nervous. I kind of wanted to dig a hole and die in it.”

“That’s not dramatic at all,” he teased, placing his paw at her lower back to guide her to the side. She’d likely need to stick around for further debriefing and instructions, but there was no reason for them to stay inside the crowd. “Glad to see you’re still the same level-headed bunny I fell in love
She jabbed him in the side with her elbow, so lightly it couldn’t even really be called a jab. “You’re such a brat sometimes. Thank you, Nick. I really appreciate what you did. You’re a hero.”

“What, you don’t think I’m terribly dangerous? You don’t think I might go nuts? You don’t think I’ll go…” He raised his paws upward to show off his claws and snarled playfully. “Savage?”

And she –

twitchy nose flat ears paws balled into fists wide eyes weight shifting

– flinched.

“Oh,” he said quietly, and the sting of betrayal made no sense, but he felt it, and without his consent, it grew into something thorny and nasty in his belly and chest.

Her face fell. “Nick, it’s not – I don’t-”

“I get it.” His voice was flat, but only because his sinuses were burning. She loved him. She was with him. And…she was afraid of him. Did those really ever work together? “We were just chased by a savage jaguar. It makes sense you’d think I’m not any different. I’m just another predator. I need – to think. See you later.”

He turned and left, feeling the sting creep into his eyes, but he wouldn’t show it. Not here, not in front of all these reporters, not in front of her.

As he walked away from her, he heard her getting crowded by the reporters on the fringe. His stupid heart leapt at the way she handled their questions –

“Were you just threatened by that predator?”

“No, he’s my boyfriend.”

“Your boyfriend threatens you!?”

“No, he’s just making a joke to make me less nervous. Please let me through.”

– but she had a vested interest in keeping everyone away from their relationship, or former relationship, or whatever would come from this. Was it really even a betrayal? Surely there was some kind of explanation for her lack of faith in him, right? They were supposed to be unbreakable, but if she couldn’t even look at his teeth without shrinking…but she’d seen them before…was it the adrenaline? Being chased? Was she exhausted? How much stress would be enough to push her away? Could he continue their relationship, this beautiful thing that had improved both of their lives, knowing that it was a possibility she’d always be afraid of his fangs?

He kept walking and decided that after he calmed down, he’d let her give her side of the story. He just…wasn’t in a place to hash it out with her yet.

She didn’t find him until five hours later. In the time he’d been shut up in his office, he’d nearly cried, been mad about feeling so weak, thrown his collar across the room, felt guilty about it, put it back on, cursed a lot, and thrown the collar again. By the time she walked through the door, his fit of emotion was on simmer; manageable, so long as he kept an eye on it. He wasn’t even sure anymore why he was so angry, but he suspected it wasn’t really about her. At least not completely.
But it wasn’t like he’d been hiding. If it had taken her this long to find him, it meant she hadn’t been looking. He wasn’t sure what to think about that.

“Hi, Nick,” she said, looking at him but not meeting his eyes.

“Judy,” he replied neutrally. He took a seat in his desk chair and gestured to the guest chair across from him.

She took it gratefully, but her expression when she spied the collar sitting innocuously between them on the desk erased the gratitude and replaced it with dismay. “You’re really mad at me, aren’t you?”

“Looks like.”

“Tell me why.”

“Because I thought we were better,” he snarled, jumping up to pace. Sitting down had been a bad idea. “I thought we were solid.”

She jumped up to follow him, almost tripping in her haste, which was annoying because it was endearing. He was supposed to be able to stay mad at her for...whatever it was. He still wasn’t sure where this was coming from, but he at least knew the surface source.

“I don’t get it,” he said, stopping short and whirling around. At least this time when he loomed over her she didn’t flinch. “Why wouldn’t – I thought you trusted me!”

“I do. I do,” she soothed, reaching up to cup his muzzle as best she could. He pushed her paws away when he really wanted to lean into her, like he always did. “But Nick, I’m a trained officer, and you came at me like...I mean, imagine if I randomly came at you with a muzzle…”

The world fell sideways.

And shit, now he felt like a piece of garbage, because he knew. She didn’t let it get to her anymore, but there would always be a piece of her, no matter how small, that would see Gideon Grey instead of Nick Wilde, just like Nick would always see Charlie Branch whenever he saw a woodchuck. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that he’d fallen for a bunny who had a legitimate reason to be scared. It wasn’t fair that she’d fallen for a red fox, either. He gave in, leaning down and resting his nose on her shoulder. “How do you trust me?”

“I just do. You’re you. I’m going to have problems sometimes, Nick, but we talked about this a long time ago. At this point it’s not because you’re a fox like he was; you’re just...bigger than I am. There’s always going to be some part of me that reacts to whatever my dumb bunny hindbrain decides is a threat, whether it’s spiders or sheep or olives or you. But I will never, ever not trust you, okay? Never. You’ve proven yourself over and over when you didn’t have to. You cared for me at my lowest point, when I didn’t even care for myself. I’m a better Judy Hopps whenever I remember you exist. Which is always. Please don’t ever think I don’t trust you.”

She rolled her head to the side, completely baring her throat to him. He closed his eyes, trying not to let his brain short out at the expression of ultimate faith. Everybody with sharp teeth knew how dangerous it was to stretch the skin there, to provide an easier and softer spot for biting; it wasn’t usually done even with intimate partners, although Nick wasn’t sure if that was some cultural thing or just an instinct left over from ancient times. He’d nipped her before, even scraped her neck during more intimate encounters, but this was intentional. An invitation. He carefully bit into the skin above her carotid and her quiet moan was as distracting as her nails digging into his hips. The sensation went all the way through him.
Into her neck, so closely that he could feel her fur creep past his lips, he said, “I can’t believe I thought…”

“You had a right to think it,” she told him, making no effort to pull away. “This city – society – let you down for a long time. I’m sorry I added to that.”

“No, no, no. You didn’t. It was stupid of me to think that you, of all mammals, would just not trust me out of nowhere. After everything we’ve been through, that should have been the very last thing I could think of. This is on me, not you.”

And that was the real source of the anger: he’d assumed that she didn’t trust him. He’d assumed that everything they’d gone through was only half true. Nick was angry at himself for falling back into old habits not two weeks after the biggest breakthrough he’d ever had. Would he never learn?

Unaware of his dawning understanding, Judy said, “I don’t know that I’d agree normally, but I will, for your sake. Hey. At least we learned something.”

“What,” he asked, playing with her ear-tip.

“A while back, you said I could wreck you – that you’d let me. It scared me. I don’t want that kind of power over anybody, especially someone I love. But when it came down to it, you left. You took care of you instead of capitulating to me. It’s good. You won’t let me hurt you.”

He nodded, mild guilt twisting in him. “I took care of me...by abandoning you. That old fear – that I’ll hurt you – I seem to be determined to prove it.”

She snorted in amusement and did pull away, but only enough to look into his eyes. “Good luck, Slick. You’re talking to a well-trained cop who also happens to be a very stubborn farm girl. I’m pretty sure even the bugs fear me back...in Bunnyburrow…”

“Judy?” He watched her face contort into something between confused and suspicious. She’d figured something out. God, she was brilliant when she wanted to be. “What just clicked?”

She furrowed her brow. “Midnicampum holicithias.”

“Middle-what now?”

“Duke Weaselton stole a bag full of Midnicampum holicithias from a flower shop the day I got Emmitt’s case. I brought him in and Chief Bogo was furious at me for abandoning my post, as though parking tickets are somehow more important than a sack of Class C botanicals, but anyway, I heard a rumor that vice is cracking down on a new kind of drug that makes whoever takes it shut down mentally, and nobody knows where it comes from. What if we’re wrong? What if night howlers aren’t wolves? What if they’re drugs?”

He thought quickly. Aggression, decreased mental acuity, heightened physical capabilities, disregard for previously-acquired injuries...that could be signs of a bad trip, and it would explain why an internet search for night howlers had just brought up a few articles on canid rave culture. “That’s a possibility, although it wouldn’t really explain why the effects last for weeks, or why Manchas randomly went savage right in front of us. He didn’t exactly have time to shoot up or anything.”

She deflated. “You’re right.”

“What made you think of it, anyway? What has that got to do with Midnight-camp-whatever?”

She rolled her eyes at his deliberate butchering of the name. “Probably nothing. I was just thinking
about gardening, and bugs, and M. holicithias is a kind of natural pesticide if it’s planted close enough to the crops. But it’s a Class-C botanical, and you know what that means, so of course then I was thinking about drugs, which made me think hey, maybe this is a drug thing rather than a medical thing. Dr. Honey is an infectious diseases specialist, not a pharmaceuticals expert.”

“What are the chances they’re going to listen to us if we tip them off?”

She looked away, shamefaced. “Probably pretty low. I, uh...I was so late tonight because I might be...fired.”

“What? Why,” he asked, bewildered. “You just solved a case in two days that they hadn’t made any headway on in weeks.”

“Officially I’m on administrative leave. Apparently, being invited to Fru-Fru’s wedding implies ties to the mob, or as an anonymous tipper terms it, corruption. It’s bunk, but I know it’s because I made the ZPD look bad in my speech today, and I was already on thin ice after what I pulled during the case. I had my shock pistol on me. You know how rigorous the CCW licensing process and training are, but apparently when I’m on duty I’m only allowed to carry Department-issued weapons.”

“You mean like the kind they refused to issue you?”

She shrugged. “They don’t have any for a mammal my size; that’s hardly their fault, though I’m sure Chief Bogo would take credit for it if this case had been a failure and mammals had gotten hurt. We weren’t supposed to succeed in Emmitt’s case, so I guess this is how they’re going to get rid of me. It’s okay. It was worth it. And who knows, maybe IA will prove to be neutral, or the other officers might speak up on my behalf. Fru-Fru might have to come forward as a CI, which Mr. Big arranged as soon as I graduated, but that would force her to pretend to be on bad terms with her own father, so it’s worst-case-scenario. I’m prepared to be fired. I did the right thing. There are worse things to be punished for.”

“That is...not okay, Carrots.” He gripped her shoulders tightly. “First they punished you for being a bunny, and now they’re punishing you for being good at your job. I’m...I’m going to fix this.”

“You can’t fix everything,” she said fondly, “but I’m flattered that you want to try.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’ve had this in the works for a couple of days now. All I have to do is change the words.”

“What have you done,” she asked, suddenly wary. He realized, almost violently, that he loved that she was more worried about his extracurriculars than his proximity.

“Scandal at the ZPD! Zootopia’s First Bunny Cop Fired for Uncovering Conspiracy,” he exclaimed, spreading his paws wide. “Too much? It’s probably too long for a title. Rachel Purrst at the Herald was fuming when Ian casually mentioned the way they’ve been treating you. Imagine what she’ll do now.”

“You’re going to the press? After today?”

“I already have. It’s just a matter of releasing the right information. You’re kind of a hot topic right now, you know. If a bunny can make it through the academy, maybe there’s hope for small mammals. Public outcry is going to be rough though. We might want to consider laying low for a couple of days if you don’t want to be hounded by other reporters looking for a piece of the action, especially after today.”

“We could go to Bunnyburrow. Ask my parents about plants that could be made into drugs,” she
offered, clearly warming to the idea. “I don’t actually need to be here while IA does their thing, which doesn’t exactly inspire confidence in the bureaucratic process. Or maybe they just know the allegations are worthless; if IA believed I was corrupt, they’d have me under lock and key to avoid further embarrassment to the department. I’ve seen better security at harvest festivals.”

“Please, you were the better security,” he joked. Her shoulders drooped and he reached around to pet her ears. She always liked that. “Hey. We’ll get through this, just like we get through everything else.”

“With sarcasm and gentle violence?”

“That too,” he agreed, “but I meant together.”

He hated sounding so sappy, but after the events of earlier, he wanted to make it up to her. He’d abandoned her when she needed him because he’d allowed his own issues to supercede their history together. It wouldn’t happen again. Maybe he’d never say it aloud, but that was his promise to himself: never again. He trusted her. He had to accept that she trusted him, too.

Chapter End Notes

IRL the term “botanical” refers to a plant extract used in making alcohol or other products. I’ve expanded the definition in this world, but not to an unbelievable degree; it now refers to any plant, but especially one that can be used to make alcohol, drugs, and cosmetics. The “classes” of botanical refer to the danger posed by whatever product(s) the plant makes. Class A botanicals are benign, e.g., flowers, fruits, veggies you can buy at the store. Class B botanicals are not dangerous, but not neutral either; catnip and cannabis are examples. A and B are unregulated. Class C botanicals are dangerous and regulated, but not illegal, e.g., the opium poppy (restricted to medical professionals), Midnicampum holicithias (restricted to farmers and professionals in botany-related fields).
Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy visit the Hopps farm to gather intel, but distractions hinder them until someone unexpected gives them a clue.

(oh wait, you totally expected it.)

Chapter Notes

My head says that in order to evolve to be bipedal human-like creatures, animals more or less all became omnivorous, but daily diet depends on several factors, including culture and lifestyle. So canon Nick pre-academy can safely be a vegetarian, per Word of God, but canon “prey” mammals in labor-intensive jobs would need more protein than a vegan diet would give them. Trust me, I’ve eaten vegan before, back when I had aspirations as a pole dancer (and realized how goddamn hard pole dancing is). I got scrawny and felt awful.

The scene in this chapter with Riley in the parlor is taken straight from real life. I was lurking like a creeper (upon request) when a friend of mine had the conversation with her brother pretty recently, although the terminology was not as animal-based as this is and my friend is not a cop. I took her out for drinks after and we had a great time reenacting it, because fuck sobriety and fuck people like Riley.

Arriving at the farm was...an experience. Judy hadn’t been back in over two years, having preferred to spend her holidays with Nick at her apartment. Her excuse to her parents had been that her place in the city was closer and more familiar after years of living there, but the truth was far more shameful: she hadn’t wanted to deal with the negativity of coming back to Bunnyburrow. Every time she came back, she had to deal with comments about what bunnies don’t do, you can always come home, Judy, there’s nothing wrong with farming, Judy, you’re losing your figure, Judy. She had to deal with blind dates set up by well-meaning but off-base sisters. Old friends she couldn’t connect with anymore, fond stories about a childhood she’d left behind a long time ago. Bunnyburrow seemed like a tiny place for tiny things, and Judy felt trapped in it. She always had.

But she hadn’t expected a mob of angry siblings to meet them outside, where the taxi dropped them off.

She stepped in front of Nick, whose expression was one of fear as he took in the sheer size of the group. He’d probably faint if he saw the whole colony, but most of them lived elsewhere these days. Although they had about 350 regular workers on the farm, there were only about a hundred left living in the warren, and the ones who’d greeted them with their sterner looks were the younger group. It...wasn’t very intimidating, and she felt like kicking herself as she sympathized for a moment with Chief Bogo. She was not going to internalize his speciesism.

“What’s he doing here,” asked Riley, which was...weird, considering he was the first of her siblings
she’d told about dating Nick, and he’d seemed supportive at the time.

“He is my boyfriend, as you very well know, and he’s welcome wherever I am. If he’s not, then I’ll assume I’m not either.” She drew herself up, plastering on her cop face. “That aside, what the carrot-picking hel – uh, heck are you talking about, Riley?”

“He threatened you,” exclaimed Georgina, who was Judy’s least favorite sibling, at least out of the ones whose names Judy could remember. 300 siblings was far too many to reasonably keep track of. “I saw it on the news. All the papers are talking about it too, how your boyfriend is half-savage and threatens you when you’re nervous.”

“What,” Judy said flatly.

“It’s true,” a quiet bunny offered. Judy hoped she wouldn’t have to admit she had no idea who he was. He had Bonnie’s eyes, so Judy was reasonably sure he was a Hopps, but beyond that she couldn’t say whether he was a sibling or a cousin or just a visiting neighbor who happened to share a trait or two. “I read it in the Chronicle and a couple of websites. They have pictures. And quotes.”

Nick shifted, as if to wander off into the great wilds of the Tri-Burrows. Judy grabbed his beltloop, hoping he’d agree to her silent plea for him to stay put. Eyes narrow, she told the assembled family members, “Whatever you’ve read in the news is a far cry from the truth, unless the news says that I’m in a solid, happy, trusting relationship with the most amazing mammal I’ve ever met. He’s done more to support me than the ZPD did, and he’s been supportive of my goals ever since we first became friends. Which is a damn sight more than you all ever did. Where are Mom and Dad? They didn’t put you up to this...right?”

“Mom said there was an explanation,” Riley told her, valiantly keeping her angry gaze. “Dad said to listen to Mom, because she’s always right.”

“You’re an adult, as are Georgina and Pam, but the rest of you,” she admonished, “should have listened. Unless Mom’s mellowed out since I left, I wouldn’t be surprised if she breaks a couple of wooden spoons on your backsides.”

Nick jolted. Judy tried not to grin. She’d never told him about her family’s barbaric way of dealing with serious infractions, because it wasn’t something to be proud of, and she didn’t want to associate their own dynamic with her parents, of all things. But in this moment, it was kind of funny.

“You always let mammals hurt you,” Riley said, finally breaking eye contact and looking at his toes. “Nick looks out for me,” she told her brother, glancing at her fox. He looked...not uncomfortable, but not at ease, either. She made a note to brush him later that night as thanks for not saying something mean and sarcastic, even if her siblings deserved it. “Now apologize, and maybe I won’t tell Mom.”

The assembled group of about 20 teenagers and young adults babbled their apologies, which Nick accepted with grace, but Judy’s attention was on Riley, who was looking at Nick with a funny expression on his face. She’d have to do some damage control with him, though she had no idea why.

She could worry about that later. At least nobody was throwing rocks.

By the time they made it into the house, Judy had drawn her fingers out of his beltloop and taken his paw instead. She drew comfort from his solidness; it wasn’t just that he was there, although that was part of it, but he was Nick, and if there was one thing she knew about him it was that he’d have her
back among hostiles. Not that her family was hostile...just not the charming, close-knit country
family featured on every sitcom that didn’t make country folks out to be villains or idiots.

It was easy to understand, at least academically, where they were coming from when they told her to
settle for less. But Judy always felt the sting of the underlying sentiment: *we want you to fail in your
goals. We want you to be less than you can be. We want you to be less than you are.* It was
maddening, partially due to their complete lack of understanding of how demeaning that was. In
contrast, Nick had done plenty of teasing when they’d first met, but even at his most antagonistic,
he’d never told her not to try. Her parents would have encouraged her to give over her badge after
Manchas had disappeared from the scene. Nick had gotten in the Chief’s face – or, well,
metaphorically; physically Nick could only get in Bogo’s knees – and Judy would always be grateful
for that.

Her parents would be in the kitchen. Occupational farmers needed to eat a lot in order to keep their
bodies in working order, so the kitchen was the most occupied communal space; snacks were freely
available at all hours, and Bonnie had come up with a meal plan so that no one would be stuck in the
kitchen all day every day. Guests were received in the kitchen and since Judy was bringing her
boyfriend home, they’d be treated as guests.

(Tellingly, the welcoming party scattered before they reached the kitchen, conveniently making
themselves scarce in case Judy decided to tell Bonnie what they’d done. Which she absolutely
would.)

“They’re going to love you,” Judy told him, and she believed it. Whatever they thought about Judy’s
capabilities as an officer and an adult mammal in the big city, she knew they were grateful she had
someone bigger to protect her from whatever perils may arise. Aside from being chased by Mr.
Manchas, though, most of the “perils” had been emotional, and could have happened just as easily in
Bunnyburrow. Judy felt at *home* in Zootopia, but she’d let them think what they liked if the end
result was a better reception for Nick.

“They tried to give you a fox taser when you left for college,” he pointed out. She hadn’t withheld
that information, because she and Nick were honest with each other.

“Yes, but now I have a big, strong male to protect me.” He gave her a look. She knew it was meant
to convey disbelief, so she added, “Just go with it. Whatever allows them to focus more attention on
the kits who actually need it.”

“I would have assumed that would...rankle your pride.”

She gave him a fond look. Sometimes it was so hard to say aloud just how much she appreciated his
ability to cut through the surface stuff. “I don’t mind. In a way, you do protect me. Remember that
time you forced me to the doctor after midterms? That saved my life. I haven’t always had the
healthiest coping mechanisms and I can be reckless. Loving you keeps me grounded. We’re a team,
and I take that seriously. I can only give you the time and care that I can afford, and I can afford a lot
more when I’m taking care of myself.”

He leaned over and nipped at her ear, prompting a private, quiet smile. They were almost to the
kitchen now, so she didn’t want to say much; their relationship was theirs. It didn’t belong to anyone
else.

Her parents, thankfully, waited for them to enter the kitchen completely before standing up to greet
them, though in all probability they’d been listening since Nick and Judy walked in the front door. It
was bad manners to comment on things that other species wouldn’t have picked up on; elephants, for
example, tended not to comment on any sensed things at all, canids didn’t let on that they could smell
hormonal shifts and illnesses, and of course, bunnies didn’t usually comment on what they heard unless they were solely in the company of other bunnies. If there was one thing Judy appreciated about the country, it was the punctilious politeness that pervaded the culture; there wouldn’t, in theory, be any uncomfortable questions about the mechanics of her relationship with Nick.

“Judy, it’s so good to have you,” Bonnie said happily, moving from her position at the counter to give Judy a hug, forcing Judy to let go of Nick’s paw to return it. Bonnie stepped back and awkwardly added, “It’s nice to see you again, Nick.”

“It sure is, though the circumstances are a little more dire this time,” Nick replied, because of course he wouldn’t be able to help indulging his trollish sensibilities. The first and only time he’d met Bonnie, she’d burst into Judy’s apartment, sure that someone was attacking her daughter’s boyfriend, and caught him with his pants around his ankles.

“Dire?”

(Bless her for not engaging.)

“It’s been a rough week,” he agreed, absently petting Judy’s ears. He offered his other paw to Stu. “Hi, Nick Wilde. Judy’s plus-one.”

“You’re the one who’s been taking up all my daughter’s attention up there in the city,” Stu concluded suspiciously. Judy rolled her eyes. Males. They were all so dramatic. He surged forward and gave Nick a big hug, doing his best to wrap his arms around Nick’s torso. “Thank you!”

“Ah,” said Nick, flapping his paws. He looked at Judy for help, but she just grinned.

“We’re always so worried about her, but she’s got someone looking out for her!”

“Uh,” Nick replied.

“I was so worried my little Jude the Dude would never settle down!”

Nick mouthed Jude the Dude at her over her father’s head. In response, she stared into his eyes and mouthed Piberius. He patted Stu on the shoulder with one paw and mimed zipping his lips with the other, although Judy was fairly certain he wouldn’t be able to resist asking for long.

“Okay, that’s enough, Stu,” Bonnie said, rescuing Nick from the heart-clenching terror of being affectionately mauled by an emotional farmer. Judy was a little disappointed. “Come to the table, you two. I made tuna salad and tea.”

“Tuna salad,” Nick echoed, confused.

“Oh, sorry, honey, do you not like tuna?”

“I mean, I don’t usually eat it, but I will – I just...didn’t expect it to be on the menu for bunnies?”

“Right,” said Stu, who had pulled himself together fairly quickly. “City folks don’t usually need as much protein as we do out here.”

“We’ve got nut and veg salad instead,” Bonnie offered, collecting ingredients prepared by the morning shift.

“I...no, that’s okay.”

Seeing how uncomfortable Nick was, Judy intervened, pushing him gently down into a chair at the
table. It was slightly too small for him, but he was still skinny enough that it wasn’t in danger of breaking. He’d probably always be lean. He had the metabolism of a hummingbird and the appetite of an elderly fox. “Nut and veg is fine, Mom. We’re technically on vacation.”

Nick shot her a grateful look. She smiled at him before focusing on her father, who had two different papers next to him. Her smile dropped as she realized both front-page articles featured her; she knew where this was going.

“We read some interesting news,” said Stu, trying and failing to sound casual. “Thought you could shed some light on it.”

At least, she thought, they were waiting to hear the truth from the source. The first was sensational but factual: an account by “R. Purrst” at the *Herald* about Judy’s overall treatment, amusingly titled *FIRST BUNNY OFFICER TRASHED BY BIG BOSS BOGO*, and subtitled *Does Bigotry Lurk in the ZPD?* Rachel, one of their not-completely-shady press contacts, had a head for bait titles and an eye for detail, which was always useful. Nick must have asked for a rush order of that little gem. The second article, though, was accompanied by an unflattering photo of Judy flinching from Nick, who looked every bit as intimidating as she’d thought he had. The photo was out of context. He’d been joking. But the title played it straight:

**HERO COP MENACED BY PREDATOR AFTER FINDING THE TRUTH**

She didn’t need to read the article to know the tone of it. The *Chronicle* wasn’t the most reputable publication out there, but it was the go-to for casual traditionalists who wanted their news media in bite-sized pieces that fed their preexisting bias. Copies of it were sold at every newsstand, convenience store, and all-purpose market, and especially in a town like Bunnyburrow, it was more popular than an equally vaguely-reputable rag like the *Herald*.

“I can explain,” she blurted.

“So explain,” Bonnie said, setting down their plates and sounding reasonably calm. Judy hoped she wasn’t being taken for a ride.

“Well, that first one...it’s an exaggeration. My boss is...not very nice, but I wouldn’t call him a bigot—”

“Only because she’s too kind,” Nick put in unhelpfully. “I would call him that.”

“And anyway,” Judy continued, “that photo in the *Chronicle* is garbage. It’s taken completely out of context. I’d just gotten finished talking to the press about the case, and I was nervous, and Nick was joking around to try to make me laugh and he said, *oh, you don’t think I’m gonna go savage?* And someone took a picture of that exact moment.”

“You don’t look like you’re laughing,” said Bonnie in that same tone.

Judy looked down at her paw, which had somehow interlaced with Nick’s. It felt more natural to be touching him than to be apart. If she could handle reporters, she could handle her mother. “I wasn’t. I was tired, Mom. We’d been up for over 48 hours straight. I was afraid of losing my job and screwing up in front of the press, I was worried about how long *Nick* had been awake, since he left earlier than I did the day our case started...it was poorly timed, but it was a joke I would have laughed at some other time.”

That last part was a lie. She knew that no matter when, she’d have been taken aback. It wasn’t Nick’s fault, and it wasn’t really hers, either; she was in a place where she could admit there were
some problems that couldn’t be shoved aside forever. To publish a story like that was unconscionable, and to believe it was brainless. She’d spent probably two full minutes rhapsodizing her own boyfriend just to make it clear to the reporters who’d caught the exchange that Nick was a wonderful mammal and they had plenty of inside jokes, thanks.

Publicity was exhausting. Judy had just wanted to find Mr. Otterton and get a real place on the force, not uncover a political scandal involving kidnapping and possibly drugs.

“See, Stu? I told you,” Bonnie said, patting her husband on the shoulder as she took the seat across from Nick. “Your father was under the impression that you’d gotten in a fight. Worried the whole night about your heart getting broken. Do we need to worry about the Police Chief?”

“I don’t think so. Oh, Mom, this is good. I’ve missed home-grown food,” Judy replied, unconcerned about manners in the face of fresh veggies and fruits. She and Nick had a window planter, but there wasn’t much room for more than mint and cilantro; it was easy to get used to store-bought ingredients, but nothing would beat the taste of crisp, paw-shelled snow peas or sweet, fresh-picked carrots.

“If you came home more often, you wouldn’t miss it,” her mother replied tartly.

“Or you could just come home forever,” offered Stu hopefully. “If the cop thing isn’t working out, we always have room for a few more paws here.”

Nick looked up, startled. Judy patted his thigh covertly and tried to rebut the offer as gracefully as possible. “Even if the ‘cop thing’ didn’t work out, we couldn’t just leave. We have a business. We have a life in Zootopia. Your offer is generous, but it’s not workable. We’re happy with the work we do.”

“There’s nothing as satisfying as carrot farming,” he lamented, and she tried not to let the old argument grate on her. Stu was in love with the work and wanted her to stay safe, which were not inherently bad on their own. She just wished her parents would stop trying to promote their life choices by degrading hers.

“I’d say Zootopia’s pretty lucky to have Judy,” Nick said quietly, pretending the conversation wasn’t bothering him. But Judy knew he was, indeed, bothered, because he was tense in all the wrong places and he was using his most charming voice. “She did just discover a kidnapping plot. Imagine how many more mammals could have been kidnapped instead of hospitalized if she’d stayed here.”

“I told you Julie has a fox boyfriend,” said a male voice from the hallway. “You owe me ten bucks, Amy!”

“Oh, please,” replied a female voice, presumably Amy. “That was a sucker’s bet. I don’t owe you anything.”

“Either come in or go away, but don’t be rude,” Judy chided. Three of her siblings, all of whom looked to be just two years younger than she, filed into the kitchen, looking dirty and sun-soaked. She recognized Amy, and she was pretty sure one of the male rabbits was named Luke, but she didn’t know the other’s name. “Hi, I’m Judy. This is Nick.”

Nick started again. She made a note to explain to him bunny family dynamics and why introductions were the norm. Aside from Bonnie and Stu, everyone tended to introduce themselves to less-familiar siblings and extended family.

“I’m Amy,” said Amy, and then she pointed to the two males one after the other. “This is Ethan and

“No,” Nick said, “I’m an elaborate prop to ward off other interested parties.”

She was going to hug him to death. Truly.

“I thought you were with the other one when I heard,” said Ethan, supremely invested in the food on the table.

Judy had a short succession of violent thoughts about the buck who’d pursued her relentlessly in college. “What, Kevin? Ew. No.”

“He means Gideon,” said Luke, rolling his eyes. “It was soooooo obvious. You two were always fighting.”

“I...what?”

“That’s why he dropped out, right? Because you crushed his heart and stomped on it in front of everybody?”

Judy’s brain buzzed in alarm. “Uh?”

Amy’s face turned pensive. “Wait, does this mean he won’t be bringing any test pies tomorrow? Because it’s my turn to taste test and I pick pie over you. No offense.”

Vaguely, she heard the scrape of metal against ceramic as Nick dropped his fork, but she could only stare at her siblings in confusion.

“Oh, that’s right, we never told you. We work with Gideon Grey now,” said Stu cheerfully. “He has his own bakery, did you know? You inspired us to branch out. He gets a discount and we get free advertising, plus a sample of every item that goes on the menu. He’s bringing a new pie over tomorrow; you’ll get to taste test too.”

“What,” said Nick, a growl creeping into his voice.

“We need to unpack,” Judy exclaimed. “Got to go, we’ll be in the guest room, Nick I need you sorry about the food.”

She picked up her bag, feeling dizzy, and hoped Nick would follow her.

It was hardly a comfort to unpack after such a classless escape from the conversation, but Judy was just glad that Nick wasn’t pushing. Or, he wasn’t pushing yet. One of the perks of having a detective for a partner was that he could tell when a subject needed to lie and when it needed to be addressed; she suspected that this needed to be addressed, even if it was difficult. Apparently, her parents were working with Gideon Grey.

She looked down at the brush in her paws, the special one she’d brought for Nick’s long fur, and dropped onto the inflatable mattress. It was tall and firm, as opposed to the old one, tall enough to look like a real bed. “I’m so stupid.”

“That’s my partner you’re talking about. Strictly speaking, I don’t like it when mammals trash-talk her,” Nick replied, pausing in his move to place yet another garish button-up in the second drawer. He finished the placement and added, “Are we ready to talk yet?”

“I don’t know,” she told him honestly. She was rarely indecisive, but this was a special case. She
wasn’t certain she could put everything into words.

“Then I’ll start, and you jump in when you’re ready. Personally, I’m on edge,” he said through a look of distaste. “I don’t want to see Gideon Grey tomorrow. I might do something stupid.”

“You won’t. You’re not a stupid mammal.”

“Impulsive, then.”

She tried to smile. “If you’re thinking about it now, it won’t be impulsive. Hey, come here. Take off your clothes. I’m going to brush you.”

“It’s not going to help,” he said, but his paws went up to un-knot his tie and deal with the buttons on his shirt. That outfit really was horrendous. Maybe he got a kick out of making a weird first impression. Or maybe there was some part of him that still couldn’t let go of the need to be un alarming and unimpressive so as to go about without much notice.

Or maybe the goal was to get everyone to picture him naked. She could stand the view.

Nick took his position face-down across her lap, head resting on his folded arms and legs stretched out to the other side. It was a miracle he could fit on the bed at all, but this mattress looked newer. She assumed her mother – or maybe her father, one of the two – had gone out to buy an air mattress that would comfortably fit a 4 foot fox. Judy dragged the bristles of the special brush along Nick’s back, from his shoulders and over the swell of his rump and down to his knees, but she couldn’t reach further than that. She’d have to get his legs later. On her second run-through, she snagged a tangle over his latissimus dorsi, so she softened her pull and worked at the knot. It calmed her brain to give him this attention. It was probable that she’d stop being silly faster than usual.

Nick worked hard, and although he took better care of himself now that he had some stability in his life, he’d only ever bothered to perfectly groom the parts of himself that would matter to clients – or marks, in his earlier profession – because his fur was long and layered, and it was a hassle. He couldn’t even reach most of his back. There were salons all around the city, of course, and they all offered brushing services that were probably far more efficient than Judy’s unpracticed paws, but Nick never used them. He liked it when Judy brushed him, and Judy liked doing it. Sometimes it felt like there was so little sweet, gentle affection she could offer him, but during their little brushing sessions, he relaxed. That was something. She relaxed too, and that was more of something. A shared something.

“I can’t believe your parents partnered up with him, after what happened,” he murmured, shifting to allow her better access to the other side of his back.

“They don’t know,” she could finally admit after a few pulls of the brush.

“What.”

She sighed. “I never told them. After the incident, Sharla gave me a lift to her place and helped me clean out the gashes. We called Bobby to ask, you know, hypothetically, what his family did to help heal the wounds when kits – cubs, I mean – lashed out, before they learned to mind their claws. I stayed with Sharla for a few days, until the cuts healed enough that I could hide them with my fur, and we told my parents we were working on a joint paper for physics class. They knew she wanted to be an astronaut, and I stayed with her often enough that it wasn’t a big deal. I didn’t want them to know. I didn’t even want Sharla to know, but I didn’t know where else to go.”

He tried to sit up, but she put a firm paw on his upper back, so he stayed put while he asked, “Why
didn’t you want your own parents to know?”

“I just.” She carefully worked at another tangle. “I didn’t want them to be right. Maybe if I’d been younger, I wouldn’t have thought about the different problems telling them could cause, but I didn’t want them to think they had a point just because of one bad incident. They didn’t really have a lot of trust for predators; they gave me enough grief over being close with Bobby, and whenever they talked about being a cop they’d always mention how scary big-city predators were, and I just...didn’t want to add more fuel to the fire. I couldn’t deal with the stress, especially during the scholarship application process and comp season...it sounds dumb when I say it out loud, but you remember being that age. Everyone has it all figured out at seventeen.”

“I would like to point out,” he said softly, “that the incident was bad enough to leave scars and give you some kind of PTSD. Maybe I’m just being overprotective of someone I care about, but seeing him tomorrow doesn’t really feel...safe.”

“I’ll be careful, Nick. For what it’s worth, though, I really do believe mammals can change. Maybe at our core we have traits that don’t change, but I don’t think that anyone is inherently bad or inherently good. We can go either way depending on the choices we make. So, looking at it that way...if Gideon has his own pastry shop now, then he must have changed enough to have a better temper. Baking is impossible when you’re impatient and angry all the time. And dealing with customers, I can tell you from experience in retail, can make even the nicest mammal borderline zoicidal at times. If he can deal with all of that, then without even meeting with him I can believe he’s a different mammal. Better? I can’t say. But I won’t know if I run away forever, and I don’t feel like I’m in danger of getting scratched again.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about, Fluff. Ooh, that’s – a dirty trick.” She grinned as he performed a sort of full-body shudder. The small of his back was sensitive, especially to the bristles of a brush. “Af – after handling a rhino and avoiding a savage jaguar, I’m not worried about you getting scratched. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

Unless it required medical attention, neither Nick nor Judy usually considered physical damage to be hurt. When they used the term, they almost always meant it in an emotional sense. In theory, that old children’s song – sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me – was nice to think about, but in practice, the real damage came from words. It came from overhearing mammals talk about how you must have fucked a lot of mammals to make it onto the force. It came from vendors assuming you couldn’t read because of your species, even as you were holding out PI credentials. It came from old antagonistic relationships. Judy understood that, but the more she considered the situation, the more she thought that this could be different.

She ran the brush along his spine, watching him squirm in pleasure. “I’m not saying I won’t. I’m just saying it’s not likely. Now that I’m done freaking out, I think...this might help give me closure. I want to move on. What happened the other day, in front of the cameras...I never want that to happen again. I never want you to feel like you can’t trust me, or like I don’t trust you. So...I need this.”

He heaved a sigh and stayed quiet while she brushed him, moving onto his tail. She had to be especially careful with it; fox vanity was mostly about whiskers and tails, and she wanted him to feel as pretty as she thought he was. Finally, he said, “I get it. It’s not like I’d ever stand in your way, but I get it and I’m not going to complain about it. Just...be careful. The last thing we need is intermammal conflict while so much is at stake.”

“All appealing to professionalism. Nice,” she teased, smacking his left thigh lightly with the back of the brush.

“Whatever gets you to do that again,” he replied cheekily. She rolled her eyes and continued
Riley’s face was closed when Judy confronted him about his behavior. A few of his co-conspirators were irritated with her, obviously still smarting from being punished, but thankfully nobody had given Nick more trouble.

“I’m not sorry for looking out for you,” he said defiantly, arms crossed.

Judy sat on the couch, watching him lean against the wall in the small parlor. The kitchen was a communal area, but the parlor was where private conversations happened; it was soundproofed more securely than the bedrooms, so conflicts could be resolved. “If that was all it had been, I wouldn’t be mad at you. I’m annoyed you think so little of me that you’d rather get in Nick’s face than ask us about the news.”

“Well it didn’t matter anyway, did it? After what we read in the papers we were afraid he had you in some kinda abusive relationship. Now I see it’s the other way around.”

“Excuse me,” she asked coldly, narrowing her eyes.

“You put a damn collar on him, Jude. You’re making a statement; you own him. And he looks at you with those moon eyes anyway.”

“Okay, firstly? My relationship is none of your business. Secondly, since you’re going to passive-aggressively give me crap until I explain, I did not make the decision to collar him. I agreed to it, but Nick commissioned it and bought it before he even talked to me about it. I made a specific request of him to not wear it if it was giving him any trouble at all, but Nick’s been leading this the whole time. I have more hard limits than he does. Nick likes it when I take charge, Riley. I love him so much it sometimes feels like I’m going to explode, and he likes me to keep him in line, so I’m more than happy to do it.”

“But that...that ain’t your job.”

“My job? No, my job is to protect and serve the citizens of Zootopia. My relationship with Nick is a privilege, not a job. Never a job. Why would you even imply that?”

“Just...you know. I thought, finally settling down with a male – a predator – would bring you home to us. I was sure he’d keep you in line, like he ought to. But instead you got him under heel and he’s letting you go on with your crazy suicidal dreams.”

Her heart sank. Was this why Riley had been so supportive? “You were happy for me...”

“Course I was.”

“But it wasn’t about me being happy,” she accused, allowing her anger to override her hurt. She wouldn’t cry in front of Riley. He didn’t deserve it. “It was about stifling me. You thought he’d control me.”

“It is the natural order of things.”

“What is wrong with you? You are not the bunny I grew up with,” she said, jumping up and stalking closer to him. He stayed firm in his stance, but looked at her warily. Good. She was a well-trained cop, and her ethics were the only reason he didn’t have a goddamn bloody nose.
“What kind of mammals – who put these ideas in your head?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s not ideas, it’s just truth. After a lifetime of being fed shit by haunchy females and weak males – drones – I feel free.”

Judy stepped back, startled, and before she could stop it, she released the laugh that bubbled up in her throat. “So it’s like that, then.”

Riley’s fists clenched. He was obviously upset at the laughter, but she couldn’t help it. He was so ridiculous. She bent over with the force of her giggles until she could finally come up for air. With a fierce grin, she channeled Nick at his smarmiest and told her brother, “You’re a cute kit. I’m sure one – one of these days you’ll – heh. One of these days you’ll find a naive doe to dominate and degrade. In the meantime, there’s plenty of lube and tissues in the medicine cabinet. Make sure to drag me through the mud on your blog. I’m sure your four followers will be so angry.”

She turned and left the room, unsurprised to see Nick lurking by the door. He could always find her, even in a huge warren filled with other bunnies. She grinned at him and took his paw, leading him back to the guest room. Without a guide, visitors tended to get lost. “Did you hear?”

“Help, I’m being abused,” he replied dryly, but a spark of humor flitted through his words. “I’m a drone. And I am completely shocked to learn that makes you my queen.”

“What Haunch. You know, I like the sound of that.”

“Leaves a weird aftertaste,” he commented, squeezing her paw a little tighter. It was the only sign that he wasn’t as okay with things as he was pretending. “Milady Haunch? Ugh, no.”

“Nick.” She stopped and took his other paw, so that they were facing one another. “He’s going through a dumb phase. He’ll grow out of it. I deleted all my weird poetry from HowlWriter when I left for college. You stopped trolling the Lynxus forums with pro-Carrot posts. But...it’s okay to let things get to you sometimes. Do you feel like he had a point?”

“Not remotely. If there’s one thing I don’t regret, it’s how things have developed with you. I just don’t like it when mammals treat you like you’re less than.”

“It isn’t bothering me the same way it’s bothering you.”

“His your brother.”

Ah. Nick was an only child, but he’d always wished he’d had a sibling. Family was something that had largely been denied him, and he was sensitive about it. But Judy’s experience with family was different. She didn’t want to appear ungrateful for what she had in front of Nick, so she only told him, “My whole life, my parents and siblings tried to make me give up on myself. It was always for my own protection or to save me from myself. I love my family, but I stopped taking their opinions to heart a long time ago. Riley’s my brother by blood, but you’re the family I chose. I care about what you think. What Riley thinks is his own problem.”

They continued down the hall, paw in paw, and somehow, despite the revelations about her radically changed brother, Judy felt lighter.

Judy left Nick to bravely defend himself against Bonnie’s maternal mission to fatten him up, forcing herself to stand tall in the face of her old bully. Gideon Grey looked a little softer than she remembered, though she didn’t know if that was because he was or because her memories of him were inherently unflattering. They’d stumbled through the dance of awkward, apologetic politeness
in front of everyone else, but Judy needed to talk to him alone, away from Nick and away from the mammals who didn’t know the whole story.

“You’re a pretty good baker,” she said quietly, leaning against his truck and offering him the clean plastic cookie bin from the last time he’d brought over samples. Apparently, he was still working on his menu, and he added new items at a rate of about once every one or two weeks, pending taste tests from critical parties.

“You’re a pretty good cop, from what I hear on the news,” he replied. “Even the shadier sources agree on that one.”

“It was a joint effort. I couldn’t have done it without Nick.”

“The fox inside?”

“My boyfriend.” Judy winced as she heard strains of her mother in her voice. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap.”

He leaned next to her, keeping a distance without distancing himself too much. They shared a view of the morning fields. “You don’t have to apologize. I’m the one who owes an apology. I really am sorry, Judy.”

“I’ve been driving myself crazy over it for seven years,” she told him, despite the danger in giving a stranger personal information. That little spot of paranoia was Nick’s influence, and it had its uses in Zootopia, but not here. “I’ve been kicking myself, trying to figure out what I did to make you hate me. So just...tell me that. Why did you hate me?”

“I didn’t hate you, I was...well, tell ya the truth, I was jealous. So jealous I coulda died from it. You were the middle kit in a family of somethin’ like 250. You were a top student, but your only competition was other Hoppses, so that weren’t abnormal. You were athletic, but you didn’t shine in any sports, you were happy to be a cheerleader. And not even the head cheerleader, just a cheerleader. You weren’t the prettiest girl in school, but you had a boyfriend in sophomore year and a girlfriend in junior year. You shoulda been nobody, but somehow you were everywhere. You stood out cos you had ambition where there weren’t much ambition to be found. You an’ Sharla an’ Bobby was goin’ places, and the rest of us were just doomed to stay here and become our parents.”

“You were jealous...because I had dreams?”

“Naw, it ain’t exactly that. More like your dreams were everywhere. You remember that year you helped make the costumes for the Carrot Days stage skit? We were nine, I think. You couldn’t perform for some reason.”

“Right, I got so sick the day before. Mom threatened to tie me to the bed if I even thought about sneaking out for the play.” She smiled at the memory, almost forgotten amongst other mundane events. “What about it?”

“They didn’t change the script. Your stand-in didn’t even get to say what she wanted to do when she grew up; they had ‘er in that cop outfit, declarin’ that she’d move to Zootopia and become a police officer. An’ a few of the audience stood up and cheered yeah, Judy. That was the first time I realized you could leave the room and still be in it. Not everybody can do that. I ain’t sayin’ everyone liked you. A lot of the other kits were jealous like I was, or they just had personality clashes or what have you, but I was the one who took it out on you instead of just bein’ a regular jerk or ignorin’ you. I’m the one who clawed you. It was wrong.”
“Why did you claw me, Gideon?”

He sighed. “The therapist-approved answer is that I was full of self-doubt, coupled with unchecked rage an’ aggression, but since we’re bein’ candid...I was impulsive and stupid, and bein’ bigger than you was more important than anything in that moment. If I couldn’t ever be as smart or as dedicated or as good, I could sure as hell be bigger. Wasn’t until I had your blood on my claws that I realized all that jealousy had just turned me into my own mama. Her, I hated, but I was becomin’ her. So I left, went to live with my dad in Podunk. I won’t insult ya by sayin’ thanks, but you outhta know that you’re a big part of why I’m not who I used to be.”

“You’re wrong about one thing. I do owe you an apology for...before.” Judy turned her head to look at him, seeing echoes of herself in his guilty expression. “I had no idea what it was like for you, growing up in such a small town for small mammals full of small ideas and...anyway, I never thought about how it might be different for you. I was too focused on getting where I wanted to go to open my eyes, even for my closest friends. That day, when I called you out, it was reactionary. It was cruel. The cop at the job faire was laughing along with you, but instead of calling him out, I blamed you for his prejudice. Like somehow he would have magically lost his speciesism if you hadn’t made that comment. So I have as much responsibility for the chain of events.”

“You didn’t scar me for life.”

“That’s true. That part sucked. And the aftermath sucked harder. I won’t lie, it still bothers me sometimes, and it’s caused problems for me and Nick. That point in time is always playing in the back of my head. Mostly it’s quiet enough that I forget about it, but you have no idea what it’s like to look up at someone bigger and stronger than you, hoping this is all – hoping that you’re not going to get seriously injured, or that they won’t do something else, because they have the power. I couldn’t fight you off no matter what you decided to do, but thankfully all you wanted to do was rub my face in the dirt and yell at me. I deserved the yelling though. Maybe I even deserved a kick in the shin for being so mean. We’re adults now. After everything that happened to and for us both, I think it would be okay to call us even. Is...would that be okay with you?”

“I’d like that,” he said.

She didn’t know if they’d ever be friends, per se, but talking to the new Gideon was shaping up to be as cathartic as she’d hoped it would be. He wasn’t the monster from her nightmares. He was a normal mammal who’d been angry as a kit. He had changed.

Her eyes narrowed as she saw some of her siblings creep into the carrots through the pest control barrier and she shouted, “Hey! Hoppes! Get out of the Midnicampum holicithias!”

“Yeowtch, that’s a four-dollar word if I ever heard one,” Gideon commented. “Is it a new kind of carrot?”

“What? Oh. No, it’s the flowers we use as pest control. The blue ones. Dad always tells us not to go near them, but I’m not sure why. They’re poisonous, I think. Class-C botanicals.”

“Huh. Y’know, my family just called ‘em night howlers,” he said, completely unaware that he’d given her a very substantial clue.
Green Screen Action Heroes

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy discover the state of affairs after only a couple of days in Bunnyburrow, and also stop a terrorist plot.

Chapter Notes

Timeline: 48 hours to solve the case --> 2 days of hiding in their apartment like dweebs -
-> 2 days in Bunnyburrow --> this chapter.

They were everywhere, taunting him. Copies of the photo from the press conference glared up at him from newspapers, from tabloids, from online articles. HERO COP MENACED was one of the gentler titles; Flocks News had decided to forgo subtlety entirely and titled their article SAVAGE FOX TRIES TO KILL OWN GIRLFRIEND. Someone had spray-pained PELT across the office door and thrown a rock through the office window, as Nick and Judy found out when they went back to get Nick’s pawcuffs from the office.

“How would they destroy – it makes no sense!”

“You’re a hero. I’m the scumbag who tried to kill you,” he said, dropping into his office chair. He read the Flocks article on his phone in surprising disbelief and wondered when Judy had infected him with her optimism. “Lucas Woolworth thinks the reason we disappeared is that you tried to leave me and I have you tied up in a basement somewhere.”

Judy shook her head. “They’re stupid. We’ll fix it. I didn’t...I would never have left if I’d known it would turn out this way. You deserve better than this!”

“Yeah, I know. We both do.”

Her look turned as savage as any dosed mammal. “We’re going to bring down whoever’s targeting predators, and then we’re going to bring down these jerks who think libel is a wholesome way to spend an afternoon, and if I have to spend years mired in mind-numbing litigation, I will. You called Clawhauser, right?”

“There’s someone else at the front desk now, but I left a tip. Maybe they’ll follow up, maybe they won’t. But you officially hired me to track down the mammal who drugged your friend, Emmit Otterton, so as far as I’m concerned, this is our case just as much as it is theirs.”

“I hope you accept paw-jobs as payment, because I’m unemployed at the moment,” she said, desperate humor he appreciated.

“For you, my queen?” He smiled at her eye-roll. “Always.”
Nick was certain of three things: firstly, the Hopps family was made up of supernatural creatures. That was the only explanation for how amazing their home-grown food was and how Judy had had the strength to walk away from it. Secondly, anyone who used nightmare flowers as pest deterrent after watching a kit bite a hole in somebody’s arm was lacking in sanity, so there was more proof for point one. Finally, Judy was never allowed near the front of a train ever again.

“Pretty sneaky, Slick,” she enthused, jumping and landing a punch to his shoulder. He exaggerated his reaction to it, circling his shoulder and rubbing the area.

Whoever had conceptualized this drug was dangerous. He didn’t want to meet them in a dark alley.

“Should we take the evidence to the ZPD? Can we trust them?”

“Maybe if we...record it? Make a copy of what we know and give it to Rachel if they try to cover it up? We could keep one of the bubbles as evidence,” she suggested. “Plus, I bet my dad knows someone who can reverse engineer it to find a cure. We could hide it down here.”

“That’s a solid plan,” he agreed, unloading all but one of the pellets and sealing them into the small plastic container he’d kept in his pocket for some spare blueberries he’d brought back as a snack from the Hopps farm. He stored those in his old neckerchief and stashed the container in a corner while Judy closed the case again.

They sneaked through the Natural History Museum, hoping the shortcut to the station would keep them as unseen as possible, and Nick fretted, as he was wont to do.

This was all real. It was real and it was horrifying. Someone – and he wasn’t sure who, but they clearly had no conscience – was using bio-terrorism to try to turn the citizens against predators. He was a predator. What if the ZPD was in on it? Mr. Big had known nothing about the situation, even with his undisclosed eyes and ears in the department, and Duke Weaselton had been hardly any help, but...that meant nothing. Secrets could be kept. Plots could be conducted, alone or together with others.

Species tensions had always been there, festering under the surface, but never before had the predator-versus-prey distinction been so deep and wide. There were predator species who were highly respected – lions, for one, and since the beginning of civilization wolves had been synonymous with loyalty – and prey species largely regarded as worthless, like bunnies. This was personal to someone. A vendetta. Or maybe it was an agenda. What could be the final goal here? Mass panic, yes, but there must have been an aim beyond that. Nobody would cause chaos for the sake of chaos, not in real life.

A distraction? A power grab from outside parties who thought the (largely self-governing) city of Zootopia was a perfect place to set up shop? Who could benefit from such a state? Eradication of ancestrally predatory species was both impossible and irresponsible socially and economically, so whoever was behind this didn’t have a typical political goal...right?

Judy stopped short, and Nick stopped with her as he caught a familiar scent. It wasn’t...it couldn’t be...? Could it?

“Mayor Bellwether,” Judy cried. “We finally figured out the cause of the savage sickness! It isn’t a sickness at all, it’s drugs!”

“Oh. Oh wow. Well, you’ve done just a super job, really, so why don’t you give me that case and-”

Judy stepped back, coming to the same conclusion he had just moments before. “How did you know
we were here?"

“I was…”

“Checking on her investment,” Nick said coldly, putting a paw on Judy’s shoulder. At a moment’s notice they might need to run; those rams were no joke. One swipe of a hoof and he and Judy could be vegetables, or dead. “Someone clever figured out the secret, and since this is the only logical place our train car could have crashed, we must be here.”

“You are clever,” Bellwether told Judy. Nick, too, really, though he wasn’t sure if that was incidental or not. “Surely you can see where this is going?”

“I know where you’re going,” Judy shot back, and then they were running again. Nick’s longer stride took him further, especially with the fear pumping through his system, until he heard Judy hiss in pain and smelled her blood.

Damn, sheep noses were about as good as his. They’d be able to smell her too.

“You were so promising, Judy,” Bellwether called, her enticement echoing through the large area. Nick shuddered. Her sweet voice suddenly sounded sinister, even though it hadn’t changed. “I thought we were the same!”

Nick carried Judy behind a statue, shook the berries out of his neckerchief, and bandaged her leg as best he could. Hopefully the sweetness of the berries and the sweet metallic blood on the ancient tusk and the floor would throw off their noses, at least a little. Judy...was recording this. She had her phone’s recorder app playing, catching every word Bellwether was saying. Holding it away from her mouth, she leaned in and told him, “You have to run, Nick. Take the evidence to the ZPD. I can deal with her on my own...maybe...but I can’t walk, let alone run. You have to do it.”

“I’m not abandoning you again,” he whispered. “We get through things together.”

“We could do so much good,” Bellwether continued. Nick had never felt so much like prey as the Mayor hunted them, not even when he’d been chased out by Big’s bears. “You and I, Judy, we’ve showed them they can’t underestimate the little guy. Even your fox has done big things. There’s a place for him, too, as long as you both behave. Don’t you want to achieve your dream? Don’t you want to help me make the world a better place? Predators make up ten percent of the population, so they make for good short-term enemies, and with unity we’ll be unstoppable. We can re-make this city, and the country will follow.”

“You’re crazy,” Judy shouted, and they were off again, slower than he liked with Judy tucked under his arm. With the ammunition switched, which was a stupid, irresponsible, desperate plan, Nick tried to stay noiseless while he ran for the exit, but the case swung further than he’d wanted and knocked over a display.

The landing after being rammed over the side of the pit snapped something in his side and Nick screamed like he’d never screamed before. He’d never felt pain like this. Judy hovered over him, panicked at his noise, but he waved her off. He needed to breathe if he wanted to focus enough to make a final stand. Her phone was still recording, despite having been dropped; he hid it in the fake weeds behind a rock, hoping that if everything went the worst way somebody responsible would find it.

Bellwether appeared, looking pleased, at the edge of the pit. “Crazy mammals don’t have aspirations like mine. You could have been great, you know. We could have been. Once we loosened the restrictions and predators were allowed to re-integrate, we would have been beloved by everyone.
Even brave Nick Wilde, who, out of love for his partner, allowed himself to be a test subject for a cure and saved us all...even if it was just a farce. The truth is, there’s no cure for natural savagery. There’s only control, and the only way to get them to accept it is to make them think it’s a favor. I suppose there’s a reason bunnies never get very far, though; your sentiment blinds you. What a shame. What a waste of life.”

“So...what, you’re going to kill her,” Nick asked incredulously. “You can’t just do that! Drugs, kidnapping, biological terrorism, and murder now, too?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not going to kill her. You’re the savage boyfriend who wants to eat her.”

He felt a zing as the blueberry impacted his shoulder. With what was probably a broken rib, he knew this next charade was going to hurt. But on the other paw, what was a little trouble breathing and screaming pain in his side and back next to the subjugation of ten percent of the population? It was a fair sacrifice, in the end.

Ugh. Judy really had infected him with her optimism.

Nick watched in jealousy as his favorite bunny moved their restraint apparatus to the side and set up a foldable standing bar to do chin-ups. With his left arm effectively useless due to a broken rib and bruising along his side, he couldn’t do chin-ups. He couldn’t do much of anything, actually, because it hurt to move. Nick was used to working hard and working late, but Ian, Finnick, and Judy had been working together to finish his cases while he sat on their bed like a slug watching B movies and drifting on pain meds.

But, he supposed, Judy needed to stay in shape. Once involved parties had found out the truth and Bellwether had been arrested, even the notion of charges had been summarily dropped. HERO COP FIRED FOR UNCOVERING GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION was a good backup title, especially if it meant rubbing dirt in the faces of the idiots at the Chronicle, and as soon as she was medically cleared, she’d be able to go back to her job as an officer. She’d be assigned a partner who wasn’t him and respond to calls he wouldn’t hear and be in danger.

Good thing she was capable of handling herself, or he’d probably lose sleep over it.

Chief Bogo was on thin ice for the stunts he’d pulled and the blatant prejudice he’d showed; a few officers had spoken up about what they’d seen, in a rare show of fellowship against a superior officer. Nick didn’t think Judy would be getting much trouble on that end, and she’d struck up a rather odd friendship with Officer James Wolfard, who was due for a promotion sometime within the next five years, probably.

As for Nick…

Business wasn’t thriving, exactly, but after mass retractions and apologies (and a particularly beautiful voluntary settlement from Flocks under contractual terms Nick didn’t care about), things were looking up. They hadn’t gotten around to replacing the office window yet, but his mother said the duct tape gave it character. She was being sarcastic, of course, but he’d take it.

Things would be back to normal soon, as long as he could keep from being recognized. Bellwether’s plan had done something good; mammals had been forced to look at their underlying biases and discover the source of their interactions with other species. Not everyone would do it, and not everyone would change. Most probably wouldn’t, actually, but for those who had the strength to make a change, it would be a good paradigm shift. He wasn’t naïve enough to expect prejudice to disappear, but the shape of it could change, and over generations, it could probably lessen a little, if
mammals allowed it.

Judy dropped from the bar, grabbed a water bottle, and crawled up next to him on his good side.

“What are you watching?”

“Not sure yet. I was thinking something dramatic. Not too funny, because laughing still hurts, and no horror, because jumping at every stupid jump scare hurts too. Drama is safe.”

“Let me guess, you’ve watched all the B movies on Webflix.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Hmm.” She reached over to look at their choices. “What about a documentary?”

He shrugged and immediately regretted it. “Ow. We could. Oh, except the moon one. It made me cry.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope, I watched it the first day I came home from the hospital. It was so inspiring. Although that might have been the opiates, because I’m pretty sure none of the teams participating had tentacles.”

She snorted. “You know I love you, right?”

He reached over and petted her ears. “Do I know that we are wholly, ridiculously in love with each other? Yes, yes I do.”

“Aww, so cute,” came Bucky’s voice through the wall.

“Shut up! You can’t call a bunny cute,” retorted Pronk.

“You shut up! I’m calling the fox cute!”

“No, you shut up!”

“No, you shut up!”

He and Judy shared an exasperated look, listening to their neighbors fight over which one of them was being too loud and disturbing the “invalids next door.” Some things had changed in a big way, but other things probably never would. Judy leaned up and kissed the side of his muzzle, and the warmth that spread through him wasn’t related to the pain pills at all. This, he suspected, would never change either, and he was damn glad of it.

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