Rain of Blue Petals

by Empress_Imperia

Summary

Based on the Original Plot. An outcast fox's risky scheme leads to troubles with a mob boss and the ZPD's first rabbit officer. Her superior's integrity is tested when he meets a young cheetah under threat from police corruption. In the shadows, two spies compete in their hunt for a mad scientist and uncover a plot to shatter the shiny facade that is the city of Zootopia.

Notes

Lyrics and Title from Rain of Brass Petals, a song from Silent Hill 3. Awesome game.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Koslov Polarnova came from the remote town of Clawzan, located at the very tip of the north of Roarssia. He had no memory of the icy little town, and he never would; his mama had ferried him to the United States of Animerica in her own womb. Only when he was sixteen would Koslov know why his papa had not gone with them. Of all the cities his mama could have chosen to start their new life, she had chosen Zootopia. She had made her home in Tundratown, a district as frigid as her hometown, and found employment in the Fishtown Market, a building as cold as the North Pole.

The reception to a foreign predator from the mafia-ridden Roarssia, even back then, was far frostier. Koslov had been born in an alleyway, two blocks away from their shoebox of an apartment, when a stressful conflict with a belligerent bull led to labor. By the will of God his mama and himself survived.

She lived a further twelve years before a drunk driver finished what childbirth couldn't.

From there Koslov grew up on the streets, pickpocketing when he could, scrounging what he needed and sleeping where he dared. He had soon lost count of the number of nights he'd thought he'd never make it through, yet make it he did. Even when Mayor Theodore Swinton introduced the electrifying TAME collars when he was fourteen years old, he had refused to die. It wasn't until he survived to fifteen years of age that he dared to enter the city's infamous fight clubs. He'd fought his first fight in a basement beneath the Fishtown Market, succeeding beyond his wildest hopes when he knocked a grizzly's lights out with an uppercut. His earnings had put food on the trashcan lid for two weeks, and ironically earned him a new friend in his first opponent. Even now Koslov remembered the incident where they had begun their friendship. After Koslov won his first fight, some disgruntled predators who had betted on the other guy had cornered him in an alleyway, armed with claws and knives. He never could have imagined his own defeated opponent coming to his aid, eliminating the four attackers in less than three seconds. The grizzly, a gargantuan creature of Eweropean descent calling himself Sedor, would continue to prove his loyalty many times over the next five years.

After his fifth successful fight Koslov gained the courage to begin betting on himself. That alone had made him more money than he could have ever hoped for, but he would never attempt a hustle. Sedor would always advise against it. It was never worth the consequences of pissing off the gamblers.

After his fiftieth successful fight, he and the grizzly combined their shared winnings to rent an apartment, two floors above the apartment he'd lived in before his mama had perished. Three days
after his return, the building manager had revealed an enticing piece of information about his mama that she hadn't lived to tell him; the fact that his papa had been left behind when she'd emigrated, and no-one knew why. The temptation had been too great. He'd gathered up half his life savings and stowed away on the first boat to Roarssia.

Never had he suspected that his journey would have led to his first encounter with the criminal underworld.

After the boat docked in the snowy city of Moscow and Koslov had been caught and beaten, he'd travelled for four days, reaching the city of Kargoat before a chance encounter had cut his journey short. He'd met an old polar bear from Clawzan in a bar on the outskirts of Kargoat, who just so happened to have known a polar bear called Morris Polarnova. As it turned out, Morris had been dead for sixteen years. A local gangster had tired of his unpaid debts and iced him. Barzorovich had been his name, and his headquarters lay in an infamous nightclub on the other side of town. Koslov hadn't hesitated to cross the town and stride right up to the old goat as he sat at a round table surrounded by guards and prostitutes. Barzorovich had laughed at the polar bear's demands for answers, until he'd gunned down all his thugs and scared off all his whores. Then he'd cowered behind the table and told Koslov everything. He'd wailed of how he had personally pierced Morris' throat with an ice pick as his gangsters held him down before having his corpse tossed into the lake that sat between Kargoat and Clawzan. Then he'd tossed a wad of bills at the bear and begged for his life.

So Koslov had eviscerated the little fat fucker and left Roarssia for good.

Upon his return, Koslov's rise to prominence had been quick. After countless more fights and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of winnings, Koslov and Sedor had taken over the fight club, and from there, the Fishtown Market. With a steady, substantial income at long last, they'd begun to establish connections. They'd started with the local businesses before expanding to other districts from there. They'd discovered that money trumps bigotry when they also succeeded into establishing connections with some prominent officials. With their positions becoming more secure by the month, they'd even managed to bribe some corrupt officers of the ZPD to their side. Koslov and Sedor soon rose to become two of the most powerful bosses in Zootopia's criminal underworld, rivaled only by Mr. Big himself.

Koslov was thirty-five when he'd reached the top of the food chain, and by then he'd moved his headquarters from the Fishtown Market to a derelict building that he'd refurbished into a lovely night club christened Koslov's Palace. Sedor had stayed behind in the Fishtown Market, to oversee their old operations while Koslov oversaw the new. It was in Koslov's Palace that Koslov had met Anna.

They'd married within a year, and a year after that Morris Polarnova II was born. The day Koslov first held him in his arms had been the first day he'd felt joy since his mama had passed. Sedor had been more than happy to be the child's godfather, and always made sure to attend Morris' birthday parties. At Morris' christening, Sedor's gift was to personally murder a hitmammal posing as a chauffer and send his body back to Mr. Big as a warning. At Morris' first birthday party, Sedor gave him a teddy bear that looked a lot like the big bear himself.

At Morris' second birthday party, Sedor never made it.

Even now, the grizzly's bewildering disappearance filled the forty-two year old polar bear with sorrow. His gang had searched all twelve districts, but Sedor had vanished without a trace. Even a tense meeting with Mr. Big had brought no results, though it had not surprised Koslov. If Mr. Big had been responsible, he would have made sure his rival knew. At Morris' third birthday party, his
son's persistent questions as to the whereabouts of his Uncle Sedor had sucked all the joy from Koslov's soul, but at the same time had filled him with rage.

He would find out what had become of Sedor if it took him the rest of his life.

Koslov almost stopped listening to the fox's pitch, his stoic expression hiding the polar bear's inner grief as he thought of Sedor. A year and a half had passed since Sedor's disappearance, and his recent hunt for a hitmammal hiding in Savanna Central had turned out to be a dead end. As a gesture of goodwill Koslov had let the hitmammal live, but the whole affair had left him deeply frustrated. Nevertheless, he returned his attention to the fox in a brown suit sitting across the desk. He was gesturing animatedly at the model building between them, nearing the end of his pitch, and Koslov was seeing promise.

Nicholas Wilde was his name, and he was proposing an idea for an amusement park called Wilde Times. Apparently it had all started when an accident sent him to the vet with a potential neck injury. The reluctant doctor had had no choice but to temporarily remove the TAME collar so he could conduct a proper examination. Even a month after the event, Nick could remember what came next like it was yesterday. From the moment that the collar had been taken from around his neck, it was as if the weight of the world had been taken with it. For a few blissful seconds, he had forgotten what it meant to be discriminated, the fox said, to be restrained like a savage beast and feared like a ticking time bomb.

To sum it up… Nick had felt free.

And now, with his collar back around his neck, he had a plan to share that freedom with every other predator in the city. For a price, of course. With his recently acquired medical license, he could legally remove TAME collars from other predators so they could enjoy the wonders of Wilde Times without fear of being shocked. So long as they remained in the park while without their collars and no-one from the prey population discovered his operation, they could experience the same freedom Nick had felt in the infirmary.

The plan was brilliant. It was daring. It would make Nick the richest mammal in Zootopia.

So long as he made sure Koslov got his cut.

His expression never changing, Koslov signaled to the track suited polar bear holding the briefcase. Raymond approached the suddenly worried fox, slammed the briefcase on the desk, and opened it to display the cash Nick needed to realize his dream.

Nicholas Wilde gaped at the money for a few seconds before a relieved smile began to form. Raymond closed the briefcase and spun it so the handle was facing Nick.

Koslov crossed his arms and spoke for the first time since the fox had entered the room.

"You have everything you need to build your park, Mr. Wilde. Don't let me down."

Nick nodded nervously, his collar beeping yellow as he reached for the handle.
Prologue the Second: The Curious Case of Benjamin Clawhauser

I am the Second,

Alone in a Faceless Crowd.

A Mammal caught,

In Monochrome Dreams,

I scream to wake up.

My Voice drowns deep underground,

Only the Dead can hear me,

See Me.

The climate walls were going all out, unleashing a literal snowstorm upon the Tundratown District of Zootopia. The engineers had cranked them up earlier that morning, to cope with the hottest summer the city had experienced in fifty years, and they had yet to crank them back down again.

Kathryn Bogo watched the heavy snow fly past the window of the locker room in Tundratown Hospital and sighed. It wasn't windy, thank goodness, but the excessive snowfall made for very poor visibility. If those walls didn't take it down a notch, the ER would be overwhelmed by the next sunrise, and the thirty-eight year old buffalo wasn't just thinking about the traffic.

Kathryn finished packing her bag and sighed. Just before the end of her shift she'd had to treat three consecutive victims of a massive pileup on the Iceberg Arch. Halfway across the famous bridge a lion's collar had malfunctioned while he was driving. He was one of the poor souls who did not survive the catastrophe that ensued, but the news would make sure he took the flak for it. Just like they did with every collar-induced incident that has graced their pages.

Kathryn's hooves tensed at the thought. If Zootopia was so advanced, then surely they would by now have come up with something better than shock collars to prevent further accidents. If there was one thing she'd learned in her twenty-year career as a trauma surgeon, the damned things caused more accidents than snowstorms. Storms like the unnatural blizzard going on right now. There was not a chance in hell that she would drive home in this weather. If it didn't let up before she left this building she was taking the train.

Just as Kathryn was reaching for the door, she heard the beep of her pager.

Seriously? Just when she was literally leaving?

With a grunt she looked down at the rectangular screen. Her expression hardened when she saw the message.


She made it back to the ER just as the paramedics were wheeling in a motionless caribou soaked in blood. "Doctor, we've got a seriously injured caribou here!" Accompanying the stretcher was ram with thick wool and a blue business suit which she found familiar.
"What happened?" Kathryn demanded with a stern tone she'd been told many times that she shared with her younger brother.

"Savage attack! A panther did it!" The well-dressed ram said quickly. "I'm Carlton Woolton and this is Boris Antlerson."

Carlton Woolton. Now Kathryn remembered him. He was the assistant mayor to Tilda Swinton. Nevertheless she kept her focus on the other mammal.

She paced alongside the stretcher, taking in his visible injuries as she pulled on some latex gloves. There were several lacerations on his right arm and hoof. Blood from a potential head injury. More stains coming from tears in his black tracksuit. They would have to cut the clothing off to see the damage underneath. Worst of all, a deep laceration of the left arm, a little below the elbow. A beaver was kneeling on the stretcher itself, doing what he could to stem the bleeding. It spurted a little before he managed to apply enough pressure. Severed artery. They needed to get him into surgery asap.

The rest of the trauma team were ready and waiting when they brought him in. Kathryn quickly explained the situation as she held out an arm to keep Woolton at a distance. Once he promised to stay away from the table Kathryn placed an oxygen mask over Boris' face before grabbing a pair of scissors and cutting through the fabric of Boris' black sweater. Dr. Elkervera stood beside her administering an intravenous line. On the other side of the bed Dr. Minerva worked to ensure Hemostasis. The beaver paramedic stayed where he was, maintaining direct pressure on the partly severed extremity. Above the clamor, the heart monitor beeped a steady rhythm. Boris' heart rate was faster than what was normal for a mammal of his build, but he wasn't in shock. Not yet. But he could make it with both arms fully workable if they acted quickly.

Kathryn cut away the right sleeve to find a myriad of cuts and bruises, characteristic defensive wounds.

When the left sleeve was cut away she could see just how deep the arm cut was. Right down to the bone. She was looking at a partial amputation. She pictured possible nerve damage along with the artery. There were bruises here as well, but no other cuts.

Kathryn removed more fabric to find more lacerations, raggedly crisscrossed over the motionless caribou's torso. They were long and clean, most of them as long as a school ruler. Some were deep enough that she could see muscle and bone underneath. Completely treatable, but the chest hair would have to go.

Kathryn's hooves carefully traced the edge of one of the wounds. Something about this grisly pattern didn't seem right.

"Tell me again what happened." She said.

"Savage attack." Woolton replied. "A panther clawed the shit out of him. Why?"

"Because this looks like it was done by a knife." Kathryn said as she continued to probe the chest wounds. Every now and then a predator would get especially violent, or savage as the media insisted on calling it, and out of the ten cases that had occurred in the last decade Kathryn had treated three. Out of those three cases, two had been inflicted by big cats. All three had shown more or less the same injuries; parallel cuts inflicted by claws. Tooth marks typically located around the neck area or otherwise on the extremities. Blunt force injuries to the head and neck. Boris' injuries showed no such characteristics.
Woolton scowled. "What? No! It was a savage predator, I assure you." Kathryn peered at him. The ram was edgy, glancing between her and Boris. It was the kind of behavior her brother had often described seeing on a nervous criminal.

Kathryn turned her attention to the left forearm. A cut that deep should be accompanied by others if claws made it. But there were none. The edges were slightly ragged and there were traces of dirt and tiny flecks of wood. This particular wound showed more characteristics of an industrial accident, such as kickback from a chainsaw…

"Dr. Minerva, we need a lavage on the left arm before we begin suturing."

"On it."

Kathryn turned back to Woolton. "Where exactly did this happen?"

Boris hesitated. "Near the old fishery."

"And where is the jaguar now?" Kathryn asked. Insane predators were seldom in any condition to be put in a holding cell, so they were always brought straight to the nearest hospital and placed in quarantine. This hospital currently housed none.

"Not sure. Probably on its way here." Doug answered, tense as ever. Her brother had told her about him. He was the dull, overly professional type of bureaucrat. Not a suck-up like the PA always following Bellwether wherever she went, but there was no order Mayor Swinton could give that he wouldn't obey. Kathryn wondered what someone like him was doing in the poorer parts of Tundratown. "Besides, it's a panther, not a jaguar. Two different preds."

Kathryn didn't bother correcting him. Instead she took another look at Boris' wounds. She now seriously doubted that the unconscious mammal had suffered a mauling. Almost all savage attack victims had suffered bite marks or puncture wounds of any sort, but here there was none. Instead he had been slashed to hell and back, with something sharp and long enough to reach the ribcage.

It honestly looked like a knife attack. An extremely vicious attack instigated by a sane individual. Considering the sheer number of lacerations, however, 'sane' might be something of an overstatement.

"Dr. Bogo, we're ready to suture." Dr. Minerva barked.

"Do it. Mr. Woolton, you have to leave now." Kathryn said.

"What? Why?"

"You can't be in here while we're performing the surgery. The rest of you start without me, we have to stop that bleeding."

Boris turned his head slightly towards the sound of Kathryn's voice. His eyelids twitched, and his bloody lips barely moved as he tried to speak.

Making sure Woolton stayed away from the table, Kathryn rushed back and leaned over the semi-conscious mammal's face. "You're in the hospital, Boris. You're going to be alright."

"Twilight…" His voice was barely audible to Kathryn's ears.

"What?" Kathryn whispered. It sounded like a name, perhaps an attacker or an illegal substance.
"Twilight..." Boris murmured, so faint Kathryn was sure she was the only one who could hear him. "Warn Doctor Slothfeld... Twilight..."

His head went limp. He'd returned to complete unconsciousness.

"What's going on?" Woolton yelled. "Are you losing him?"

"No." Kathryn straightened and turned back to Woolton. "I'm sorry, but it's time for you to leave."

Kathryn's larger size gave her a distinct advantage in ushering out the reluctant ram. They stepped out into the hallway just as two mammals in uniform appeared. Kathryn perked up. It was the rhino Lieutenant McHorn and the hippo Sergeant Higgins from Precinct One, the precinct given the responsibility of dealing with all savage cases. These particular officers worked closely with her brother.

"Kathryn," McHorn said bluntly, all business as usual. It would be a different story if he weren't on duty. "We're here about the incident near the old fishery. Is the victim conscious?"

"I'm sorry, but he's in no condition to answer questions." Kathryn said firmly. "You'll have to come back later."

"You think he's going to make it?" Higgins asked, his ears perking.

"He's got a very good chance. Any word on his attacker?"

Higgins scowled. "No, not yet. Assistant Mayor Woolton here claims it was a savage panther."

"Where is his attacker now?"

"No idea. There was no sign of it when we got there."

Kathryn realized then that Woolton was no longer at her side, but he had merely gone to lean against the wall beside a metal shelf. The buffalo scrutinized the ram. Most witnesses to such a gruesome incident tended to be scared shitless, but not this one. He just looked troubled.

"Kathryn?" McHorn asked, with more familiarity than when he'd first greeted her. Whatever expression she was bearing must have bothered him.

"Were there any other witnesses?" She asked.

"There was no-one else around when the attack occurred."

"Who told you that?" Kathryn already suspected the answer.

"Woolton did." Higgins said. Kathryn scowled. "Dr. Bogo, what's wrong?"

"I've seen the victim. It might just be the circumstances of the incident, but this doesn't look like a mauling to me."

McHorn and Higgins traded glances. "In any case, we'll need pictures of the victim's injuries for evidence." McHorn said. "And we'll need to question the witness."

"Of course, he's right over there." Kathryn pointed, but she saw that the Assistant Mayor had gone.

Two days later, Boris Antlerson regained consciousness and gave the same bullshit answer Woolton did.
Prologue the Third: Skyefall

I am the Third,

A Master,

A Sentinel of Awakeness.

I hold Truth like a Torch,

Shadows linger before Me.

Rapid Eye follows,

The Chain of Thought,

Until the Silence Ends.

ZBI UNDERCOVER OPERATION REPORT:

ZOOTOPIA TAME COLLAR INVESTIGATION

AGENT NAME:  
FELIX LLATER

REPORT 19/05/2015

I have successfully infiltrated Zootopia City Hall under the guise of a secretary as planned. Gaining employment was easier than I had expected, and so far as I know, no-one suspects a thing. In fact they seemed quite eager to have a South Animerican mammal working with them. I suspect that Mayor Swinton is relying on diversity to win the election four months from now. I'd wish her luck, but well, you know.

At the moment, there is only one likely candidate that Swinton will be facing; a sheep named Dawn Bellwether, the CEO of the Meadowlands Gazette and a fellow advocate of TAME collar law. Whether or not she will stand a chance against the current Mayor, it's too soon to say, but personally the only way I'd vote for her is if she promises abolish those collars and take off that stupid bell choker. Way too eighties, if you ask me.

REPORT 26/05/2015

I received your message. This report will be 100% professional, I promise.

In the week since I started work, I have focused my efforts on gathering intel on the Swinton dynasty.

Here's what I know so far.

The Swinton family initially rose to power as the owners of the successful retail company Swinton
Superstores. Thomas Swinton, late grandfather of the current Mayor Swinton, became the first Swinton to be elected Mayor of Zootopia, serving three terms before becoming a United States Senator and eventually becoming a member of Congress.

It was through his influence that the government enforced prey/predator segregation. Said segregation has come to an end since his death twenty years ago, but his descendants' transparent dedication to prey supremacy has been deemed worthy of investigation.

It was Theodore Swinton, Thomas' son and successor, who introduced the TAME collars as a 'civilized' alternative to segregation. Thanks to the assistance of his father's sympathizers within the government, a law was passed that all predators at the age of five or over was required to wear a special collar that would shock them should they show any physiological signs of aggression.

Tilda Anne Swinton, forty-four, assumed leadership of Zootopia after her father, former Mayor Theodore Swinton, was forced into retirement after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease.

It was around that time that the growing number of predator sympathizers within the government demanded that the TAME collars be made more lenient in their function. Despite the efforts of Mayor Swinton and her father, the collars were adjusted to only shock the wearer in response to extreme aggression. Despite warnings on the contrary by Swinton's allies, this has led to a decrease in collar-related accidents in the last four years.

It is still too early to risk attempting to dig deeper, but I will continue to find out what I can. I will report again in another week.

REPORT 02/06/2015

The more I see of Zootopia, the more I realize that its shiny city facades hide deep shadows of their own.

Roughly two thirds of the stores I had seen have No-Predators signs on their doors and windows. That's sixty-percent more than in every other state in the country. As I walked to work this morning, I spotted a car full of gerbils deliberately drive right over this fox's tail, triggering his TAME collar. Judging from what the fox said afterward, this was not the first time they had done this.

Directly across the park outside City Hall is the Zootopia Police Department's Precinct One, and even this symbol of Trust, Bravery and Integrity has a dark side. As an employee working closely with the Mayor, I have discovered several dozen cases of police brutality, collar-related accidents and violent crimes committed by prey mammals, most of which have been covered up. This is a whole different matter that will have to be dealt with as soon as possible, preferably with some karmic jail time.

Speaking of the Zootopia Police Department, I recently attended a police academy graduation with Mayor Swinton and her Assistant Mayor Carlton Woolton. I had the pleasure of meeting the ZPD's first rabbit officer, Judy Hopps. She will be assigned to Precinct One under the supervision of Chief Trunchbull, so it's likely I will be seeing more of her in the future.

REPORT 07/06/2015

A certain series of cases has come to my attention. In the last two years, thirteen mammals have gone missing. They're not the only ones, of course, but the disappearances of these thirteen
particular mammals have concerned me for several reasons.

One. They are all predators, which with the current climate may not be a coincidence.

Two. All twelve cases have been ignored or outright covered up by the ZPD. My initials thoughts were that the Chief of Police was committing the cover-ups, but now I am beginning to suspect Lieutenant Franklin Cunninghorn. His name has appeared numerous times in the brutality cases I had spoken of in my previous report.

Three. While most of the disappeared predators are homeless or lowlife criminals, three of them are of particular interest to our organization.

The first significant name I came across was Maria Manchas, a black jaguar from the Rainforest District and the fourth predator to disappear. Her brother just so happens to be Renato Manchas, who we know to be the chauffer of the crime boss Mr. Big.

The second name I found was Sedor Valentino, a grizzly bear. He was an infamous crime boss partnered with a polar bear named Koslov Polarnova. He was the second predator to disappear, a year and a half ago to the day.

The third name came as a surprise: Cheryl Radames, a tiger born in Pregypt but moved to Fengland as a child. Also known as MI6's top agent. She just so happened to be the first predator to have vanished, two years ago according to the report. I don't know personally what she was doing in Zootopia, but I believe that this case especially needs looking into.

By the way, I won't be seeing Mayor Swinton for at least a week. She's taking time off her duties to be with her father. I don't know the exact details, but it sounds like his time is just about up.

This could be the perfect opportunity to infiltrate her office and access her personal computer. Wish me luck.

REPORT 10/06/2015

I gained access to Mayor Swinton's office, but was unsuccessful in accessing her files.

However, I was able to intercept an email for Mr. Woolton, and discovered that there is an unexpected individual in the city.

The mammal is Doctor Daniel Slotheld, a neurobiologist and the leading authority of Boarland's biochemical research.

Dr. Slotheld was alleged to have died in a suicide bombing instigated by a fanatical predator supremacist three years ago. The report was obviously false, and now it appears that he is currently working as the head of an unknown project within the city.

Judging by the email, his presence in Zootopia and the staged accidental death, I am convinced that Woolton and perhaps Mayor Swinton are somehow involved.

I am recommending that necessary actions be taken immediately.
Nick Wilde would only have been twice as scared had Koslov not notified the fox before sending the car.

His outdated Nokia started ringing just as the fox was dazedly climbing out his drawer bed. The shock of the sudden ringtone sent his head shooting straight up into the bottom of the drawer above. There was a thud, a nasty headache, a fierce zap from the collar and a slew of curses as he toppled out and hit the floor. As he sat there, rubbing his skull and making a mental note to sweep the floor as soon as he could afford a broom, the phone went to voicemail.

Nick cursed one more time before crossing the basement and climbing onto the wooden crate. The sink was old and cracked, but it did its job and filled with water so he could brush his teeth, scrub his face and brush his fur. After brushing his dark brown tail to perfection, Nick took a good long look at the mirror.

It was just another ordinary morning in the proverbial gutter. Another day as a third class citizen. But not for long.

The phone rang again just as he was reaching for his towel. Dripping, grimacing, Nick jumped down from the crate and snatched the phone from its own resting spot on the stool.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Nicholas, we need to talk."

Nick snapped to attention, the warning beep of his collar hitting his ear. "Koslov!"

"A car will arrive outside your apartment building at seven. Make sure you are home."

"But sir, I'm working 'til six today!" Nick immediately smacked himself for protesting.

"Seven pm, Nicholas."

"Oh, that works."

"Seven pm, outside your apartment building."

"White limo as usual, right?"

Koslov answered by hanging up.

Nick exhaled nervously and put the phone back down. Something was wrong, otherwise Koslov wouldn't be sending someone to pick him up. Nick's only comfort was that it didn't seem like something was you-screwed-up-big-time-prepare-to-get-iced-wrong, otherwise polar bears in tracksuits would be tearing down his door right now. More likely Koslov was having some minor concerns about the Wilde Times project and was summoning Nick to provide the necessary assurance. That didn't stop the fox from being worried, though.

But right now, he had to focus on getting to work on time.

He pulled off his drawer bed pants, tossed them into the drawer and put on his uniform. Not for the first time, he grimaced at how it looked in the mirror; white with lime green stripes. It wouldn't be so bad if there weren't so many stripes, and the pay was worth having to wear the damn thing. At
least he had Finnick to share in his suffering. Nick put on the finishing touches, a watch he had inherited from his dad and a red handkerchief made by his mom, and set off for work. Maybe this time he could get on the bus before the gerbils showed up in their ugly blue miniature.

Savanna Central was, in more ways than one, the base district of Zootopia. There was nothing thematic about it, a concrete jungle of apartment buildings, street cafes and administrative offices. That was just in the outer reaches of the district. In the central area of Savanna Central were the glassy skyscrapers and government buildings. Nick rarely went there, even if it did look beautiful at night; he would just get hard faces, insults and police harassment when did. Foxes were seldom welcome in the heart of Zootopia, unless it was to spend a night behind bars.

Nick walked the usual route, two blocks from the building to the bus stop. There weren't many prey mammals about on this particular morning. For Nick, this was one of the better ones. Less prey meant less stink-eye, and if he had a dollar for every stink-eye he got, he wouldn't need Wild Times. He reached the bus stop and leaned against the pole. The bus to Sahara Square should be pulling up any minute.

Somewhere further down the street, he heard a tiny toot-toot.

"Aw shit." Nick quickly curled his tail around himself and resisted the urge to acknowledge his harassers' presence. Those grubby little gerbils were not going to get him. Not today. Not when he literally had bigger things to worry about.

He heard the toot-toot again, and this time Nick turned to look. That hadn't really sounded like the gerbils' car. He heard the sound again, coming from a small three-wheeled white vehicle near the street corner. The traffic cones and a blue light on the roof told him it was a meter maid cart, and it was just the right size for a mammal his size, maybe a little smaller. That could only mean one thing, Nick thought; the ZPD's token bunny was on the prowl.

He'd read about her in the papers, but had yet to meet her in person. Judith 'Judy' Hopps was her name, and she had been assigned to Precinct One two months ago. When he'd last heard about her, she had been assigned to parking duty. Nick tried to remember what she'd looked like on the front page. Large purple eyes and a huge smile as she faced the camera in the formal uniform she'd worn for her graduation. She had a distinctive appearance, so it shouldn't be too hard for Nick to recognize her and run for it if he had to. Then again, he thought with a smirk, meter maids like her had no real power over him, not when he didn't even have a car to ticket.

The joke-mobile was empty and Nick hoped that the bunny wouldn't come across Finnick's van any time soon. The fennec was one more parking violation away from a court summons, and he had way too many unpaid tickets to afford a lawyer.

In any case, it was a false alarm. Nick relaxed and curled his tail. And that was when a rodent sized car drove right over it.

Zzzzt!

The shock was sharp and swift, and it made every hair on the fox's body stick up. The squeaky sound of cackling gerbils grated on his ears. He saw a familiar car full of the fucking things speeding along the tarmac.

Nick felt a growl rumbling in his throat. His collar beeped, but he ignored the warning. Before he knew it he was stepping into the quiet street, ready to verbally eviscerate the rodents.

The second shock was brutal. His legs gave out and he tumbled right into the street, right into the
path of an oncoming nut delivery truck. The squirrel at the wheel barely had time to jerk the wheel. There was an ear-rending screech as the entire toy-sized truck swerved. It was going to crash into Nick. He knew it was going to crash. A pillar of grey and blue dropped to the ground in between Nick and the truck. A ticket pad clattered on the tarmac as two arms reached out. The truck hit the small figure head on, pushing them a foot back into Nick's gut. The fox had the wind knocked out of him, but the truck was stopped.

Wheezing like a smoker, Nick looked up to see what kind of mammal had just stopped a truck only half their size.

The meter maid released the truck and bent down to check on the driver. Nick saw the long black tipped ears and the white cottontail, and his jaw dropped.

A bunny.

The ZPD's token bunny had just stopped a truck within nothing but their own body.

"Are you alright?" Judy called into the truck.

Nick tilted his head.

"I'm alright!" The squirrel squeaked.

"You sure? No neck pain?"

The squirrel must have shook his head, for the bunny was satisfied enough to step away from the truck so he could get out and check on his load. Judy retrieved her ticket pad, and her relieved smile became a scowl as her distinct purple eyes fell on the fallen fox.

Oh great, here it comes...

"What were you thinking?" She coldly asked.

Nick kept his poker face, rubbing his gut as he got up. "Hey, all's well that ends well, right?"

"I'm sorry, but is this a joke to you, fox? That poor squirrel could have been killed!" Judy pulled out a pen and started writing on the pad.

There it was. 'Fox.' Typical prey cop.

Make that prey meter maid.

"First of all, it's Mr. Wilde." Nick crossed his arms and smirked. "Second of all, you can't fine me for this, meter maid."

The pen froze. "Excuse me?"

"You heard." Nick crossed his arms and smiled down at her. "Meter maids are good for one thing and one thing only; leeching law-abiding citizens of their hard-earned money through ridiculous parking fines numbering in the hundreds."

Judy crossed her own arms and stared at him with lidded eyes, waiting for him to continue. "You can't touch for something I didn't do, Carrots. I don't even have a car."
Judy's eye twitched. "You going to want to refrain from calling me 'Carrots,' Mr. Wilde."

"My bad, I just assumed you came from some little carrot-choked Podunk."

Judy's response was disappointingly blunt. "Uh, no. I'm from Bunnyburrow."

Nick leaned against the bus stop's pole, more than ready to give this bunny rabbit the dose of reality she deserved. 'Okay, tell me if this story sounds familiar. A naïve little hick with good grades and big ideas decides, 'Look at me, I'm gonna move to Zootopia where prey live in safety and preds are kept in check. Only to find, whoopsie, we don't all get along. And that dream of becoming a big city cop? Double whoopsie! She's a meter maid. And whoopsie number three-sie, nobody cares about her or her dreams. And soon enough those dreams die and our bunny sinks into emotional and literal squalor, until finally she has no choice but to go back home with that cute fuzzy-wuzzy tail between her legs to become... you're from Bunnyburrow, it that what you said?"

Judy's expression had not changed once during his monologue. "If you think I'm going to go back home and become a carrot farmer, then you're not as sly as you think you are."

Nick was getting pissed now. He bent down to her level. "All right, look, everyone comes to Zootopia thinking they can be anything they want. Well, you can't. You only be what you are. Sly fox. Dumb bunny."

Judy finally gave the reaction he was wanting. She scowled and brought her pen and pad back together. "You just earned yourself the maximum fine."

Nick rolled his eyes. How was she not getting it? "Did you fall out of that three-wheeled joke mobile and land on your head, Carrots? Only a real cop can issue non-parking related tickets."

"And you are right." Judy replied cheerfully. With her pen hand, she gave a short wave. "Hi, Officer Mabel!"

When Nick looked behind him, he saw a gangly, wrinkly old goat in an orange vest climbing into the cart further down the street. At the sound of Judy's cry, she poked her head back out and waved back. "Hi, Officer Hopps! Congrats on that promotion!" She ducked back into the cart and slowly drove off.

Nick's blood ran cold. When he turned back round, Judy was already holding out a ticket.

"Tell me if this story sounds familiar." Nick had no idea that a bunny could look this smug. "A careless old fox nearly causes a traffic accident and tries to get out of a fine by belittling a powerless little meter maid. Only to find, whoopsie, she's not a meter maid anymore. And what you said about this incident not being your fault? Double whoopsie, this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't decided to jaywalk in front of an oncoming vehicle. And whoopsie number three-sie, that impressive little speech of yours has just earned you a two hundred and fifty dollar fine. If you have a grievance, you may contest your citation in traffic court. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to check on the squirrel you almost killed."

Two hundred and fifty dollars. There goes the money for the Urine Analyzer.

When the astounded Nick didn't move to take the ticket, Judy tucked it into his belt and strode back to the nut truck.

Nick stood there, speechless, until he heard the rumble of the bus finally arriving. He shot Judy one last dirty look before climbing on, pulling out a wallet, and paying the fare.
Nick sat at the very back of the bus so he could count the bills. Just twenty-four dollars in total, not enough to cover the fine but enough to get the last laugh.

"Whoopsie number four-sie… you didn't stay out of pinching distance."

His smug satisfaction didn't last after he made it to Bug-Burga three minutes late, which his asshat boar of a boss did not take well. After a minute of shouting, threatening, and vowing to expose whatever shady scheme the fox was planning, Mr. Tuskerson took away his wages for the day and sent him to sweep the parking lot as punishment. It was a crappy start to a crappy shift, and it didn't help at all when he was forced to sweep all the way through lunch. It also didn't help that Finnick had called in sick, which explained why the pig was even moodier than usual. Being the biggest predator serving establishment in the city, Bug-Burga also had one of the biggest parking lots, which wasn't good for one of the smallest predators. After nine hours in the horrendous heat of a summer day in Sahara Square, sweeping discarded junk food boxes, broken glass, and dried vomit with his fox-sized broom, Nick managed to finish just before the end of his shift at six. Mr. Tuskerson didn't let him clock out without letting him know just what would happen if he was late again. Sweaty, grubby, immensely unhappy, Nick used a little more of Judy's money for the return fare. This time he felt no satisfaction.

Nick nearly had a heart attack when he got home to find a massive white limousine outside the building, waiting for him.

"Everything's cool." Nick muttered to himself as he slowly approached the limo. "Everything is totally cool."

They were just here to talk about how the construction was progressing. That was all. Nothing to worry about.

Nothing. At. All.

The passenger door opened as Nick drew closer, unleashing a torrent of frigid air upon the fox. White mist erupted out, eventually clearing to reveal the big bear himself, one leg over the other, arms splayed over the top of the backrests.

Oh crap.

"Nicholas." Koslov grunted, his face impassive.

"Mr. Koslov." Nick replied meekly. He dug his paws into his pockets, wrapping his left around his phone. If things went south, he might be able to get away long enough to warn Finnick and Honey.


Nick obeyed, taking his place in the large seat opposite Koslov. The sudden change from Sahara heat to Tundra cold was not a pleasant sensation. The car began to move, going at a leisurely pace as it toured the streets of Savanna Central.

Silence filled the car for a while. Nick stared at Koslov, careful to avoid eye contact. The polar bear was so still he could almost pass for a stuffed mammal. A stuffed mammal that had been made by a deranged psycho and left in the freezer for too long. "So… how's it going?" He dared to ask, putting on the biggest, most convincing grin he could muster. "'Gotta say, it's 'ice' to see you, Koslov."

Koslov grabbed a bottle of white wine from a nearby ice bucket, filled a fancy thick glass, and drained its entire contents before answering.
"Forgive my standoffishness, Nicholas. I received some disappointing news this morning."

Nick decided it was best to drop the cheery guy act. "Did I do something wrong?"

"This news is not related to you, Nicholas. And that is all you will know on the matter."

Nick lowered his head, getting the hint.

"Nicholas, I asked for an update."

"Oh, yeah!" Nick straightened his back and his tie. "It's all going according to schedule. We just need to put the finishing touches on the Laser Tag and the Howl Along and then construction will be finished. Then we just need to add three weeks on top of that to make sure everything's safe and ready for the big opening."

"And the funding?"

"We're still in the green, rest assured."

"I am not."

Nick felt his blood freeze like the ice in the bucket. Once upon a time, this same polar bear had gutted a high-ranking member of the Roarssian Mafia. "Whuh-why not, sir?"

"I sent some boys to check up on the site, and they reported back that you are missing something."

"What did I miss?"

Koslov began to refill his glass. "Want one?"

"It's a bit early for me, thanks."

Koslov nodded slightly and put the bottle back in the bucket. Nick's ears recoiled from the harsh sound of glass and ice. "Do you remember what you told me back when we first began this endeavor, Nicholas? What convinced me to provide the funding?"

"I promised you the business would be discreet." Nick said. His eyes went wide as it clicked. "Oh, you mean the secret entrance!"

"The building you chose to open your clinic is still a derelict, Nicholas."

"We've cleaned and renovated every inch of it, sir." Nick insisted. "Yes, but where is the equipment?" The irritation was apparent now.

"Oh." Nick cringed inwardly.

"In your defense, that is the only thing that concerns me. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I think you know, sir."

"Nicholas."

Nick winced. Koslov was an understanding crime boss, but he wasn't that understanding. "No-one will provide the equipment sir. Every mammal who has we what need is a prey mammal."

Koslov scowled. "Not all of them."
Nick suppressed a shiver. "Is there someone in the black market, sir? I didn't know there were any predators who supplied medical equipment."

Koslov seemed to roll his eyes. Nick wasn't sure, but the bear's ears had definitely tilted upward for a second or two. "You know who I'm talking about, Nicholas. Someone who used to work alongside you wrapping bug burgers."

When it clicked, Nick's heart sank. No. No way. He was not getting him involved in this. "Sir, I'm not so sure that's a good idea. He's just a housekeeper."

"A housekeeper working in the residence of one of the biggest supplier of medical equipment in the country."

"He doesn't even know about Wild Times!" Technically he didn't know that Nick was behind it, but the one time Nick had brought up the possibility of the secret amusement park he'd panicked at the possible consequences of getting caught. Nick had kept quiet about his secret project ever since.

"He doesn't have to. You need the equipment for your clinic. His employer can provide that."

Nick stood up, hackles raised. "Do I need to remind you of who he works for?!"

Koslov's collar beeped raised. "Do I need to remind you of who he works for?!"

Koslov's collar beeped.

Nick's flare of anger extinguished under the ice-cold glare of the polar bear. No one stands up to Koslov. Not in his own car. Not unless they have a death wish. This bear had spilled a goat's guts all over the floor of a Roarssian bar. Finnick had been deadly serious when he'd told Nick the story. For a few seconds, Nick was sure Koslov was going to strike him down. His expression unchanging, Koslov raised a paw. The limo slowed to a stop.

"I know who he works for, Nicholas." Koslov spoke as the driver got out to open the door. "And that is why you will need to be careful when you speak with him."

Nick raked his claws through the fur on his head. "Sir, seriously. Find someone else."

"There is no-one else, you admitted it yourself." Koslov leaned forward slightly, a steely glint in his eyes. "Unless this expensive endeavor has been a lost cause from the start."

*Don't panic, Nick. You must not panic.*

"Just give me a couple of days. If I don't find someone else, I'll talk to him."

The door opened, but Nick stayed put. No-one left the car without Koslov's permission, especially if they'd upset him.

"Two days. After that, five days to get the equipment. If you have zilch by then, I break your face."

Nick's collar beeped. Koslov fell silent. Taking the hint, Nick jumped out the car as fast as he could without making it look like he was fleeing.

Seven days. One week to get his clinic up and running, or he was screwed. And he had to try and do it without the big guy.

Perfect end to a perfect day.
The maid usually in charge of dusting was taking time off after the pile up at the bridge broke her leg, but Benjamin didn't mind taking over her shift. With Nick, Finnick and Honey working on what Nick called, 'Project Nanoyabizness,' the portly young cheetah didn't have much else to do. Not since he somehow ended up going from sweeping up Bug-Burga fries to serving in the resident of Mr. H. P. Pottermass himself.

Pottermass stood at the tip of the great tree that was the Zoocell Conglomerate. Benjamin didn't know all the industries Zoocell branched out in, but he did know that it included Pottermass Arms, Hausen Security, NeoMed Technologies… and Bug-Burga. That was right. Zoocell inexplicably bought out Bug-Burga about a year ago, and that indirectly led to where Benjamin was now. Long story short, Pottermass decided he wanted to diversify his house staff by taking on a predator. That was the explanation his manager gave him when he called Benjamin to his office. Mr. Tuskerson had been pale in the face, a startling sight since being surrounded by preds usually made him red, when he spoke of how Pottermass himself had just called him on his office phone. Pottermass and his assistants had examined files on every predator in Zoocell's employ, which numbered in the hundreds, and eventually decided on a twenty-year-old Bug-Burga employee named Benjamin Clawhauser. Benjamin was sure he'd turned a little pale himself at the news, especially when Tuskerson's face turned red again. As far as at least he was concerned, Benjamin didn't have a choice in the matter. Not only that, his performance reflected on Bug-Burga as a whole. If he screwed up, Tuskerson would make him suffer to his last breath.

Needless to say, Benjamin had been feeling ill when he clocked out later at the end of the shift and told his friends everything. Nick called it a PR stunt. Finnick called it bullshit. Honey called it an opportunity to get someone 'on the inside.' None of these opinions had made Benjamin feel better.

He wasn't expecting to have had his mind changed in his first week at his new job. Sure most of the staff gave the predator nervous looks whenever he worked in the same room as them, but for the most part they kept their comments to themselves. He saw very little of Pottermass, who was rarely home, and when he was, was rarely found in any room other than the dining room and the study. The work wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be. Other than a wife who had died two years ago, Pottermass had no family to make a mess, and he only hosted a party once a month. Basically Benjamin spent every day dusting, polishing, and making sure he didn't break anything in the process. Then there was the new salary, five times what he usually made at Bug-Burga. It would go far towards helping Nick get out of his grubby basement and into a real apartment, and he could keep a little cash himself for donuts.

Out of the eighty-two rooms in Mr. Pottermass's snow-white palace, the library was by far his favorite. There were more books here than in the Central Library, and it even had an obsidian grand piano on a short platform. The library was so big that it was one of the only three rooms Benjamin had been assigned to. His job was to make sure all the furniture, paintings, books, lamps and the piano were in exquisite condition. When he wasn't tending to the library, he was tending to the kitchen and the downstairs bathrooms, which were a little harder to deal with but nothing like Bug-Burga. For one thing, the butler was too professional to scream.

Today was Sunday, the end of his first week, and Benjamin was doing the maid's usual task of cleaning all the windows of the mansion, while listening to Gazelle's first album on his earphones and trying not to dance on the ladder. The mansion had two floors, and Benjamin was cleaning the only window of the upper west bathroom. Let it Goat was fading into silence when he heard the crunching of feet on gravel, and two voices steadily growing louder. It was coming from the
direction of the main driveway, around the corner of the mansion. He knew Pottermass was in the house today. Was he receiving a visitor?

"…ow can you be so blasé about this? Don't you realize the position this puts Swinton in?" The visitor demanded. Benjamin's curiosity got the better of him and he paused the playlist, stopping the next song from drowning out the hippo's response.

"What can they do? She's the mayor, and you know how it is. When you're a Swinton, there's no such thing as a term limit." Pottermass replied blandly.

Benjamin stopped wiping. He'd heard that mayors in other cities never lasted longer than eight years, but it was a surprise to have it shamelessly admitted that the same didn't apply here. Not to the Swintons, anyway.

"That's not what at stake here, Mr. Pottermass! The public knows a malfunctioning collar caused the bridge pile up. They're not turning a blind eye anymore!"

"You mean they didn't take notice of the dozen other collar related accidents that happened in this month alone?" Pottermass's voice dripped sarcasm. Benjamin risked a glance as he sensed them come round the corner. He saw his employer, the large hippo in a pink suit, and Assistant Mayor Woolton. Benjamin quickly turned back to the window and resumed cleaning.

"Your tone isn't helping. I've spoken with Mr. Llamadæus and Mr. Bisoniing, and they agree that we need to deal with the situation now!"

"So a collar went on the fritz and caused an accident. That's been happening since day one, what's the big deal?"

Benjamin tried not to wince at how callous the hippo sounded.

"It's a hell of a big deal!" Woolton snapped. "The pred-rights acti-"

Benjamin felt the ladder shudder and heard Woolton curse, the ugly word drowned out by the beep and mild zap of the cheetah's collar.

"Watch where you're going, you idiot!" Pottermass growled.

The cheetah gripped the ladder tighter in reaction to the painful shock, heart pounding, and then breathed a sigh of relief when the ladder didn't topple with him on it. He looked down to see Woolton stepping away from the ladder, holding his arm. When the embarrassed ram looked up, Benjamin quickly returned to his cleaning, glad that he hadn't lost the bucket in the incident.

"Is that the new pred?" He heard Woolton ask.

"That's right. Just leave him to it."

The voices started receding as they continued their wander through the vast green grounds surrounding the mansion. In the distance, Lawrence the gardener was scouring the lawn with a ride-on mower.

"Look, the pred-rights activists are insisting that this latest incident raises some very serious questions about the safety of the TAME collars. That makes the public very, very concerned. And that's not the worst of it."

There was a pause. "The government?"
"They've allowed us to keep our collar laws so far because it keeps the people happy, but now they say the pros no longer outweigh the cons. There have been more collar incidents in this month alone than there have been savage attacks in a whole decade. Now they're having doubts that the collars are even needed! Swinton had to agree to let them send someone to conduct a thorough investigation."

The crunching footsteps stopped. Benjamin risked another glance to see they'd wandered over to a rose bush that Pottermass was currently admiring.

"Jesus Christ on a stick." Pottermass groaned. "The last thing we need some government bozo sleazing around when we've got an election to deal with. He'll just set us back."

"They could repeal TAME collars completely. That'll set us back even more."

Benjamin couldn't believe what he was hearing. Honey had told him of the rumors, that the mammals were steadily losing patience with the collars causing accidents and having nothing to show for it, but she was going to flip when she heard that even City Hall was worried about it.

"Who are they sending?" The hippo asked.

"Someone from the Congressional Research Service. One Jack Savage."

Pottermass invited Woolton inside to discuss the matter more privately, and then Benjamin was alone once more. He put Gazelle back on, finished cleaning the windows, discarded the dirty water, and went back inside himself to continue his original duties.

He was still reeling from what he'd overheard when he finished his shift and took the bus to the Rainforest District. He had forgotten his umbrella, so the perpetual light shower drenched him during his regular trek to a shop that sold Honey's favorite pop tarts, before continuing to Honey's house. His mood grew brighter as he reached the gnarled grey tree and gave the secret knock.

Knock.

He waited until he heard her voice coming from seemingly nowhere. "Password?"

"Swinton Sucks." Even now, Benjamin still smiled at the silly phrase.

There was a click as the door unlocked. Benjamin walked into an empty living room and shut the door behind him. He saw the locking device Honey had invented, a mechanism of gears and wires locking the door again. Tucking the bag of donuts and pop tarts under one arm, Benjamin lifted the secret trap door in the middle of the room, opened the metal hatch beneath which had already been unlocked for him, and clumsily made his way down the rungs.

At the bottom of the shaft lay Honey's bunker, a metallic chamber full of doomsday supplies, blurry photographs, and gismos Benjamin had no way of identifying. The first time he had entered the bunker had been a complete accident. He'd discovered the trapdoor while dropping off a Bug-Burga delivery, and mistaken the hatch for the entrance to the sewer. When he'd told Honey of his discovery, she'd sworn him to secrecy and didn't reveal the truth until a few weeks later.

Now he was a regular and welcome visitor to the bunker, as were his other friends Nick and Finnick. When he reached the bunker at the bottom, he found neither fox waiting for him. Instead a third, unfamiliar fox was sitting on a crate full of tins.

Benjamin's first thought upon laying eyes on her was that Nick and Finnick would almost certainly be getting hard-ons if they were here. The cream colored vixen was beautiful, with big oval eyes as
blue as the afternoon sky outside. A white shirt and faded blue overalls gave her a girl-next-door look, despite the collar but give her a gown and she'd pull off the sexy spy look no problem. Heck, she might even be a spy, considering that she was sitting in the secret lair of the best information broker in the city. Benjamin giggled to himself at the silly notion.

As for Honey herself, she was hunched over a keyboard at the shabby old desk right next to the vixen, staring at the painfully bright computer screen. Remembering the rule to never look at the computer while Honey was using it, Benjamin averted his eyes as he announced his arrival. "Hey, Honey."

"Hey, Benji. Just put the tarts in the usual spot. I'll be done in a sec." Honey never took her eyes off the screen.

The 'usual spot' was a cookie jar with a wide mouth, sculpted to resemble a sheep. Honey had customized the jar with devil horns, fangs, and a small replica of a TAME collar. Benjamin emptied the bag into the offensive jar and dropped himself on a camouflaged beanbag Honey had salvaged from a dumpster in the Canyonlands. In fact, many of the resources Honey used for her tinkering had come from the trash, including the computer.

"Hey." The cream vixen lifted a paw up in greeting. In contrast to her friendly looking ensemble, she was an icy cool cumcumber.

"Hey." Benjamin responded awkwardly, hoping for an introduction. "Are you a friend of Honey's?"

"More or less." The vixen just sat there, one leg over the other. "You must be Clawhauser."

"You know about me?"

"A cheetah from Sahara Square. Twenty years old." The vixen counted the facts with her fingers. "Born to Jared and Myra Clawhauser, who died two years ago when a truck driver's collar shocked its wearer and triggered a three-car collision that caused three deaths. You have no criminal record, but you are associated with Nicholas Wilde and Finnick Courroux, both suspected con artists."

"… Whuh?"

Honey scowled at the vixen. "You're freaking him out, sweetie."

"Whoops, sorry!" Suddenly the cool as a cucumber vixen was a sheepish young woman. "I've gotta stop doing that!"

"It's… okay?" Benjamin was seriously thrown for a loop now. He looked to Honey, now begging for an introduction.

"This pretty little ice queen is Alyssa Skyefall." Honey said, finally get up from the chair. "She just got promoted, and she's heading out for her first job soon. As you can see she's got a lot to learn."

"S-shut up!" Alyssa protested. "Have you got everything?"

"Everything you'll need." Honey plucked a flash drive from the side of the machine. "Just make sure you destroy this thing when you're done."

"Don't worry about it." Alyssa shot a furtive look at Benjamin. "Should we really be discussing this with him here?"

"Don't worry, he's good."
Benjamin smiled and gave a wave. Alyssa nodded and smiled back. "I'll be back in three weeks. I'll give you a sign when I'm in the city, okay."

"Just stay out of trouble, sweetie, okay?" Honey pulled Alyssa into a one armed hug as she handed over the flash drive. "Don't talk to strangers, watch out for bugs, and use the You-Know-What if you get into trouble."

Alyssa pocketed the flash drive. "Thanks. See you later, Hon."

Benjamin gave a short 'bye' as Alyssa climbed back up the shaft and was gone. When he heard the clang of the hatch slamming shut, he started tucking into his donuts while Honey returned to her desk and started tinkering with what looked like a plastic gun.

"So she got a promotion, huh?" He asked with his mouth full. "What does she do?"

Honey paused. "If I told you, I'm afraid I'd have to kill you. Sorry!" She chuckled and went back to tinkering.

Benjamin shrugged and decided to check out the latest updates on the Sheep-Conspiracy board. It was crop circles, today. There were half a dozen of them pinned up in the corner above the news clippings about Miss Bellwether and her mayoral campaign. Next to the photos was the centerpiece of the board; a pitch-black poster bearing a alien-like sheep's face with creepy black eyes, with the words \textit{BELIEVE} underneath. The alien sheep was a luminous green, kind of like the green 'happy' lights of their collars.

\small\textit{That reminds me...}

"Honey, you're not gonna believe what I heard at Pottermass's house today..."
Liondon, twenty-two hundred hours. Fourteen hundred hours on the Los Fangeles clock. Agent Jack Savage couldn't think how two cities that shared the same first letter could be any more different.

Thick clouds had settled across the British night sky, tinted purple-brown in the city lights. Stars could be faintly seen sprinkled here and there, but the black-striped jackrabbit didn't look up. If he did he would find raindrops in his eyes. It was a light evening shower, one that could be easily ignored. That made it easier for Jack to watch out for trouble as he wandered through the alleys on the edge of Liondon. There was only one discreet way into Throatslotter's hideout, and he didn't have long to find it.

It was four years ago in Los Fangeles, the City of Angels and Liondon's polar opposite, that Jack had completed the first mission after his promotion, a surveillance operation on a yacht owner in South Bay whose resemblance to a wanted arms dealer was too great ignore. It had also happened to be his first undercover mission. It had been nothing too glamorous. Jack had spent two weeks serving tables in a small bar right across the road from the docks, giving him a perfect view of the *Golden Hind*, the boat his target belonged to. Resemblance aside, the horse didn't do anything suspicious, and the only mammals to come on and off the boat were some delivery mammals brining onboard food and supplies. There were no mysterious characters creeping around, not even a petty criminal. In spite of himself, Jack had felt the pang of disappointment every night before he'd fallen asleep. The arms dealer had a reputation for being violently paranoid and killing innocent mammals if they so much as looked at him funny, so it was better for everyone that he wasn't in the neighborhood. Yet Jack had been itching for some action. It was his first mission, and as a scrawny little rabbit he had a lot to prove. If he'd caught one of the most wanted mammals on the ZIA's list, his larger peers would surely cut back the harassment. No more cracks about his height. No more 'accidental' bumps in the hallway. No more high-school style ignorant idiocy. At least his boss, Miss Morton, was no prick. Hell, the prickly middle-aged gazelle was the one who promoted Jack in the first place. Jack would eventually come to forget the frustration and shame he'd felt every time he'd reported to HQ on his findings, or lack thereof.

It should have been a simple mission; all the jackrabbit had to do was confirm if it really was the guy who had been selling AK-47s to foreign terrorists and then report back to the ZIA. Was the horse their guy or not? That was the only thing that mattered.

Not only was the yacht owner not the guy, but the ram who delivered the wine three days before Jack was to return to HQ turned out to be the dealer's personal hitmammal.

Jack had made the discovery in the nick of time, all thanks to his own initiative and some leeway from Miss Morton. After two weeks of watching from a distance, he'd contacted the gazelle and requested authorization to sneak onboard the yacht in hopes of finding hard evidence. He'd watched the small screen of his communicator, seen the hesitation in her stern features as she gave him his chance.

He'd been top of the class in infiltration, so getting onto the boat undetected had been a cinch. The last thing he'd expected was to walk into the horse's bedroom and find the delivery ram standing over the sleeping horse with a silenced pistol. Jack didn't go into the details of the ensuing brawl when he told this story to his coworkers. To put it simply, they'd beaten the crap out of each other so loudly they'd woken the horse, at which point the ram had kicked Jack into a trashcan and ran for it.
The horse was very quickly taken into protective custody, and the ZIA soon discovered why the horse had been almost shot in his sleep; he'd unknowingly witnessed a murder committed by the ram two nights ago and become a target himself. Needless to say, Jack got what he wanted, the horse was placed in Witness Protection, and the ram was never caught.

Until now.

Mr. Kill was the alias the ram went by, and he had been spotted four days ago in a neighborhood close to where Jack was currently sneaking about. As the last agent to encounter him, Jack was given the mission to find him. He finds Mr. Kill, he finds Mr. Trevelyan. At least that was what the ZIA was hoping for, and their hopes were not in vain. Having avoided detection so far, Jack was able to determine that Mr. Trevelyan was here in the city. Whatever the horse was up to Jack didn't know yet, but the interrogators could ask him themselves once the rabbit dragged him back to HQ.

The rain was getting worse. Jack grimaced and pulled the hood of his raincoat further over his head. This damned shower. It was going to make it harder to notice if he was being watched. His sharp white ears were flattened beneath the hood, which pitter-pattered under the relentless rain. His sky blue eyes were all he had to rely on now, and they soon found what he was looking for.

Bolted to the wall above a rusty dumpster was an even rustier fire escape that would take him right up to the roof. The apartment building was the most decrepit edifice in the area, but it was Jack's best shot of getting into the derelict church where Mr. Kill and his boss were hiding. If the apartment building was the most decrepit, the church four buildings down was the oldest. It even had a great iron bell that still required a rope to swing. Not that anyone pulled on that rope anymore.

Jack had scoped the place out for a full day before making his move. No-one went in. No-one went out. But Jack knew in his gut that the place was occupied.

Jack had one last thing to do before making the climb. He pressed himself to the side of the dumpster, both camouflaging himself and taking cover from the rain, then unzipped his raincoat to check his gear. Glock 17 with silencer- check. Two spare magazines- check. Dart Gun- check. Roarlex Wristwatch/Communicator/Homing Beacon- check. Safe Crack- check. Night vision binoculars- check. Crossbow- check. He was ready.

Jack shed his raincoat completely, fully exposing his black spy suit to the downpour, and hopped onto the dumpster. Looking around one last time to make sure he was alone, Jack started to climb. Thanks to his gloves he didn't have to worry about Tetanus as he ascended the fire escape. The roof was quiet and empty. Jack raced across to the opposite edge and looked through his binoculars. In the distance he spied the bell tower. In between, three more quiet roofs.

Cross the buildings, get inside, eliminate any and all guards, incapacitate Kill and Trevelyan and call in help to extract them. It always sounded simple.

Jack made the hop across the six-foot gap to the next building. The next gap was wider, but he made it just as effortlessly. So far so good. He reached the third roof, smaller than the roofs before it, and crouched as he approached the opposite edge. He looked through the binoculars one more time.

He'd done his homework. The church was small, small enough to warrant only one room. The nave. It was the area outside he had to worry about more than anything. Before he'd gone to look for the fire escape he'd scoped out the graveyard and paths surrounding the church and counted twelve guards. Through the ghostly green lens Jack spied two mammals with guns patrolling the
pavement between his building and the church. They were isolated, out of sight of the other ten guards. The Glock's silencer wouldn't be heard from up here, but he needed something that could aim further. Jack assembled the crossbow, armed the first bolt, and aimed it downward. He chose to kill the boar first, once he moved behind the angel statue and out of sight of his companion. The crossbow's sight followed the boar as he walked, keeping itself fixed on his skull. The moment he was on the other side of the statue, Jack fired. The bolt hit the boar right in the temple, dropping him like a sack of bricks. The loud pattering of the rain masked the sound of his fresh corpse hitting the stone, leaving the ox none the wiser. One down. Jack slid in another bolt and aimed for the ox. He wasted no time, shooting the ox right in the neck and severing his spinal cord. Death was again instantaneous. Jack didn't remember exactly when the metaphorical blood on his paws ceased to bother him.

He crept along the edge of the roof until he got a clear view of the graveyard the path led to. He spotted seven of the ten remaining guards wandering around the ancient tombstones. The buried had been left in peace alongside the church, but now the guards were traipsing about, grumbling and smoking without a care as to where they dumped their cigarettes. This was a graveyard, and Jack would make sure they would feel at home.

Another boar strayed far from the rest, strolling to a corner to unzip. Jack shot him down mid-piss. Bushes and tombstones concealed his body. The jackrabbit would have to take down the rest of them with the Glock, but first he had to get closer.

Jack disassembled the crossbow and reattached it to his back. He backed away from the edge and then took a running leap across the final gap. His shadow passed over the stone angel's face as he soared through the air and rain, catching himself on a grotesque perched beneath the bell tower. The rain made the slanted roof click, so Jack raced quietly along the flooded, leaf-choked gutter to seek out the other three guards. He found them gathered at the front gate, posing as loitering louts in black hoodies and jeans. A bullet each put an end to their farce.

Before returning to the graveyard, Jack decided to take a peek through the window beneath his current position. The intricate carvings made perfect handholds for his small paws and feet. He climbed down beside the window, waiting until he was right next to it before looking inside.

The first thing Jack saw were numerous metal crates that could only be weapon cases. He spied two-dozen in total stacked atop the pews and each other, waiting for a buyer to claim them. Jack spied the only mammal in the room, a horse in a trench coat standing at a portable table examining a map. Jack stuck his head in further, searching for anyone else. There was no-one, not even Mr. Kill.

Perfect.

Trevelyan was paranoid, so paranoid that he wouldn't even let his own guards be in the room with him. That left no-one to help after Jack fired a dart into the horse's neck. Trevelyan had time to feel the dart and form a look of shock on his long brown face before he went down.

Jack waited to see if anyone had heard the horse fall. Nobody came. They didn't hear, or didn't care. Having such a shitty boss like Trevelyan was sure to stir up some resentment. Jack climbed back up to the roof and trotted back along the clogged up gutter to the graveyard end of the church. The six guards were still patrolling. They hadn't found the dead seventh yet. Jack had fourteen rounds left in his magazine. More than enough.

Jack perched himself on the same grotesque he'd grabbed onto before. He scanned the area, deliberating which one to shoot first.
Remember your simulation training. Isolate them. Pick them off one at a time.

Yeah, that could work.

The roof was so severely neglected that Jack didn't have to pull to remove one of the shingles. He doubted that God would mind if he used some of the church's architecture to complete his goal, considering that every single one of these thugs was going to Hell anyway. Jack threw the shingle into the path with the first two bodies, putting all his strength into it to make the noise as loud as possible. Two guards took the bait, breaking away from the others to investigate. Jack took them out the minute they entered the path, not giving them a chance to spot the bodies and sound the alarm.

Only four left now, and they were beginning to realize that something was wrong. Jack saw no problem dealing with that number without the stealth, especially with the target in no danger of escaping. He shifted down behind the grotesque for cover, poking his upper body over the statue's back to aim his weapon. He took the next shot at a guard approaching the corner with the dead boar. Three. This time the other guards saw the mammal fall. They started shouting and aiming their guns, searching for the shooter. Jack aimed and fired at a porcupine, hitting him in the shoulder. Another bullet put an end to his pain. Two. A bullet shattered the grotesque's ear, closely missing Jack's. He spotted the shooter and fired back, putting three bullets in the second ox's forehead, cheek and neck. One. The rhino went down with a single bullet through the eye socket.

Jack lowered his weapon with a smirk.

Ze-

Ratatatat!

A sudden burst of bullets smashed into the grotesque and the shingles beside Jack. He dropped back behind cover, wincing at the graze in his arm, blood rinsing away under the rain.

Scratch that. Still one.

He spotted the last shooter; Mr. Kill, his eyes blazing with fury, perching on the ridge of the church with a machine gun in paw.

Jack gritted his teeth, cursed his own carelessness and returned fire. Mr. Kill dropped down the other side of the roof, dodging the bullets. Jack pursued the ram, hopping into the open belfry beside the bell to avoid the loose and slippery shingles. He dropped to the floor, in the dry spot sheltered from the rain, as another onslaught of hot lead pummeled the stone above him, striking the bell with loud *dings*. When the bullets stopped, Jack jumped up and fired at the ram.

Blam! Blam! Click.

"Rats!" Jack dropped back down and ejected the empty clip. Just as he slipped another clip into the Glock, Mr. Kill jumped into the belfry and sucker punched the rabbit. Jack staggered backward, going over the edge. A rush of adrenaline came with the realization that he was about to plummet to the graveyard below. Jack caught the closest lifeline he saw- the rope that rang the bell. Mr. Kill had to duck to evade the bell as it began to swing. Jack cringed as the bell's hammer clanged right in front of him, the shock of the sound nearly making him let go of the rope. But he endured, pulling himself back into the belfry. He realized he'd dropped his gun just as Mr. Kill plowed into him, pinning him to the floor. Jack struggled under the weight of the larger animal, head twisting left and right to find the Glock. Jack spotted the weapon just as Mr. Kill started pressing the barrel of the machine gun into his throat. Starting to choke, Jack grabbed the Glock and jabbed it under
the ram's chin, stopping the strangulation short.

The bell rang again, drowning out Jack's demand, so he repeated himself. "Get off of me."

Mr. Kill obeyed, moving to the side to avoid the swinging bell. Jack got to his feet, rubbing his throat and keeping his Glock aimed at the ram. "You're a sneaking little son of a bitch."

"Yeah, that doesn't change the fact that I'm taking you down." Jack replied, receiving a venomous glare in response. The bell rang, but he ignored it. "What was Trevelyan up to?"

"What's it to you, Stripes? How's the jaw?"

"Doesn't hurt as much as it did the last time we spoke. Drop the gun. It's over."

"No, it ain't." Mr. Kill growled. "You're still alive."

He raised the gun. Jack fired once, returning the favor Mr. Kill gave before via a graze to the arm. Mr. Kill swore, but kept his aim on the rabbit. Jack aimed back, ready to finish the ram off if his finger so much as twitched.

"Drop the gun!" Mr. Kill shouted.

"You drop the gun." Jack taunted.


"Uh-uh."

The bell rang again. Mr. Kill came closer. Jack pulled the trigger. Click.

Jammed? Darn. Time for Plan B.

Mr. Kill edged closer, smiling maliciously. Jack backed away, putting on a façade a fear. "Oh dear. What does the ZIA issue their agents nowadays?"

Jack let himself be backed into the wall of the belfry. "Really? You're going to kill a cute little bunny rabbit?"

Mr. Kill stalked right up to him. He pressed the gun into his chest. "A rabbit? A kit? What does it matter? I don't mind."

Jack dropped the act and smiled. "Then would you rather mind the bell?"

The look on Mr. Kill's face when he turned his head to see death swinging toward him was priceless. He tried to run, but it was too late. The thick iron bell, three times Mr. Kill's size, collided with the ram and sent him off with an unmanly scream.

Zero.

Jack didn't bother watching him die, only listening to the crunch of meat on pavement as he turned on the communicator within his watch.

"Mission complete. I've captured Trevelyan, but his hitmammal's dead. We've got to clean this place up before day breaks."
“You got them and that's the important thing. That's excellent news, Savage. I was just about to call you.” Jack's eyebrows rose. He wasn't expecting Miss Morton to answer him.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Miss Morton?"

"Why am I hearing a bell?"

"Blame Mr. Kill. He's become a dead ringer."

"Amusing…” Miss Morton replied, not sounding amused in the slightest. “Finish what you're doing and get back here. I have a new assignment for you.”
City Central, the very heart of Zootopia itself, had another and lesser known name; the Mountain of Light. The name came about after the last skyscraper was built and mammals noticed that the cluster of tall glassy buildings roughly formed the shape of a mountain. A mountain that looked bright and beautiful in the day, and even brighter and more beautiful at night. When the train carrying Judy Hopps cleared the Alces Forest that surrounded the city, the sight of the Mountain had been the first thing her eyes fell upon. The glistening colored towers had enthralled her, even as she remembered seeing the exact same sight on countless tourist leaflets. Then she'd seen the city up close, seen past the light and colors, and seen the hard, incredulous faces looking back at her.

Looking back now, Judy knew she shouldn't have been surprised when she'd been assigned parking duty on her first day. Valedictorian or not, she was as green as the hundred acre fields back in Bunnyburrow. Her only regret was that it had taken a disastrous unauthorized pursuit in little Rodentia, fifteen very unpleasant minutes with Captain Bogo, and a week of thinking about what she'd done to make her realize that he wasn't restricting her to parking duty just because he was a bigot. So she'd wizened up, stopped complaining about writing tickets on parked cars, and took her humiliating assignments without complaint. The day Bogo stopped glaring at her every time he set eyes on the rabbit was taken as a sign of forgiveness, and like the Mountain of Light, a sign of hope that things would get better.

It was a cloudless, bright blue day when Judy found herself climbing the Mountain of Light. On the ledge of a striped purple office building twenty stories up, she searched the surrounding buildings for her quarry. Despite the unlikelihood of the weasel managing to get this high in the time since he'd fled the jewelry store, she looked up anyway. There was no way the weasel could have gotten inside any of the buildings without being seen. He would have to climb the outside like Judy herself had done. She saw no sign of him from above, so she looked down. The buildings beneath her were less glass and more stone and brick. That made it easier for a rabbit or a weasel to climb. Sure enough, she spotted Duke Weaselton racing across the roof of a building she didn't know, clutching a gym bag carrying fifteen thousand in stolen jewels.

Judy relayed the weasel's location through the radio before taking off along the purple ledge. This wasn't like the Little Rodentia fiasco, she told herself. The only mammal in danger here was herself, even if the wind up here was gentle and the ledge was two feet wide. Judy kept her eyes on the jewel thief below as she ran. With the bag strapped across his body he turned ninety degrees and ran toward the edge of a building in the final stage of construction. Judy looked back to the ledge just in time to see the ledge come a slope leading down to the next floor. She slid all the way down, reaching the bottom and keeping her momentum without stumbling. Below, Weaselton reached the edge and jumped across the narrow gap to the scaffold atop the next building. Judy narrowed her eyes. If she didn't find a way to that building and quick, they could lose him. She reached the corner of the purple building, turned round and saw just what she needed. A bright orange crane stood beside the building Weaselton was using to make his escape. Its long arm stretched all the way up, just underneath the ledge and ten feet away.

Ten feet. She could make it.

Judy sped up. She had to time this perfectly. When she was right beside the crane, she rebounded off the dark glass window.

She flew towards the bright orange shape before her, dimly aware of the traffic jam far below. Her
legs swung beneath her, running on air. She barely felt relieved when her feet landed on the crane's arm with thirty centimeters to spare. Her momentum propelled her down the arm, her eyes fixed on the weasel racing across the finished part of the roof towards a plain white door.

A chain link fence was all that stood between them. Judy reached the crane's body and dropped down to the roof. She rolled back upright and raced for the massive toolbox in front of the fence. She sprang off the crimson metal box, clearing the fence just as Weaselton was running past it.

It was a direct hit. Weaselton never saw the rabbit coming before she slammed him to the floor. The gym bag skidded away and hit an air vent. Judy wasted no time forcing the squirming, cursing weasel's arms behind his back and cuffing him. Weaselton's fur was stuck out in all directions, no doubt from frequent shocks. The collar beeped, but didn't shock him this time. After all, its wearer was so used to getting caught that it no longer scared him into getting the zap.

She heard another door open somewhere behind her, and Officers Rhinowitz and Trunkaby came thundering up to them, stopping dead when they saw the puny rabbit and the weasel beneath her.

"How in the hell did you beat us up here?" Rhinowitz demanded.

Judy bit her lip. She'd never told anyone she'd climbed her way up. Oops.

"I may not be as big as you." She managed not to sound guilty. "But I'm still fast. Now are you going to keep gawking or are you going to secure the stolen goods?"

Rhinowitz snorted before striding past her to retrieve the gym bag.

By now Weaselton had given up, and was now sulking beneath the rabbit. Despite this he was curious enough to ask her himself. "How the hell did you beat those coppers up here?"

Judy tried not to look at the crane. "Westleton, it's a looong story."

"It's Weaselton. Duke Weaselton, Hoops."

Judy ignored the dirty looks Rhinowitz sent her way on the drive back to Precinct One. He was one of the cops most vocal about a rabbit being on the force, let alone taking part in police pursuits. It was hardly Judy's fault that she was the officer closest to the scene when Trunkaby called for backup, but that didn't seem to matter to Rhinowitz. The token bunny had shown him up, simple as that. Trunkaby's feelings on the matter were more enigmatic, but at least she wasn't shooting dirty looks as well.

They stopped before the monolithic precinct. Rhinowitz grabbed the weasel before Judy could, dragging him through the front doors without so much as a glance at the rabbit. Judy grabbed the gym bag with the jewelry instead, only for Trunkaby to carefully lay her trunk on her paws.

"I'll take that. Captain Bogo wants to see you in his office immediately."

Judy was sure her heart had skipped a beat. Nevertheless she relinquished the bag and entered the building herself.

Captain Bogo's office was on the second floor, one floor down from the Chief's Office. It lay at the back of the West Office, where every officer under his command was stationed when they weren't in the field, including Judy herself. When she entered the West Office, she saw Lieutenant McHorn and Sergeant Higgins working at their desks. They were likely updating their reports on the savage attack in Tundratown three days ago. All Judy knew about the incident was that a panther had
attacked a caribou near the old fishery. Said panther had yet to be apprehended, and the caribou had regained consciousness yesterday. McHorn looked up from his computer, saw Judy, and wordlessly jerked his thumb at Bogo's office. Judy supposed she should be thankful that in the last fortnight he'd gone from silent disdain to silent indifference. His default attitude to most of his coworkers was indifference, with the exception of Bogo and Higgins. Higgins himself was also all business when it came to police work, but he was far more vocal about it. While McHorn's desk had no personality other than a picture of Bogo and himself at their graduation, Higgins' desk had a replica Desert Eagle that he would assemble and disassemble over and over when he was thinking hard on a case or just bored out his mind. Judy suspected he kept a real one at home, along with who knows how many other guns.

She stopped at Bogo's closed door when she heard him speaking. She was too short to see through the door's window, but judging from the lack of a second voice her superior was speaking on the phone. Her rabbit ears made it impossible to not hear what he was saying.

"Yes, I have Mr. Antlerson's statement… Are you sure he's lying? What makes you… The wounds don't match a savage attack?" The mention of the caribou's name made Judy's ears prick. "I'm not that stubborn, Kathy. I'll take another look at the photographs, but I can't make any promises… Even if you weren't an expert, I'd still listen to you, you know that… Yes, I'm still going to the Pottermass place for that damned party, against my wishes I might add… I love you too, Kathy."

Judy heard no more after that, so she knocked. When Bogo called, she walked inside to find him at his desk, one hoof still on the phone. Her heart rate started speeding up again when he looked at her with those hard brown eyes. So far as she knew Bogo had mostly gotten over his prejudice towards little rabbits, but that glare still unnerved her. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Trunkaby told me that it was you who apprehended that chronic nuisance, Mr. Weaselton."

Praying that this wasn't about the crane, Judy nodded. "Sit down, Hopps."

Judy had to leap up onto the chair before she could sit down. "Have I stepped out of line again, sir?"

"So far as I know, you haven't." Bogo replied frigidly. "But I still want a word with you. This will be the last time I bring this up, and I intend this to be the last time, so pay attention."

Judy held her breath and paid attention. Bogo leaned forward over his desk.

"Don't think that just because you've arrested a criminal or two since your promotion that I've forgotten that stupid stunt you pulled in Little Rodentia. This is Precinct One, and there is no room for overachieving novices looking to prove themselves, now I won't stand for it. Now don't get me wrong…" He held up a hoof when he saw Judy's ears go flat. "The reason I'm bringing this up one more time is because you've matured since then, and I don't wish to see your recent successes going to your head. Trunkaby also told me that without warning you broke off from her and Rhinowitz in your pursuit of Weaselton. That worked in our favor this time, but the team comes first."

"Trunkaby also told me that without warning you broke off from her and Rhinowitz in your pursuit of Weaselton. That worked in our favor this time, but the team comes first." Bogo's glare softened. "Do you think I worked my way up to where I am today by myself? McHorn and I came up together right from the start, fifteen years on the streets. Higgins came up with us for eleven. Now that you're not writing parking tickets anymore, you need to work on being a team player. You do that, and keep to your assignments on top of that, and there will be no more issues between us. Remember, respect goes both ways."

Judy nodded. After she'd gotten past her frustrations with Bogo and the constant parking duty, she'd come to understand why the cape buffalo was so respected. At thirty-five, he'd accumulated more arrests and awards than more than half his coworkers, even some that outranked him. Despite his current rack, there was a rumor hovering about that he was the current Chief Trunchbull's
favorite to replace him when the time came for his retirement. The image of Bogo with eight
golden stars on his collar wasn't hard to picture. "I understand, sir."

Bogo's glare disappeared completely. "Good. Now that we've got that out of the way, good work
on catching that weasel. Now get out of my office and get started on that report."

Judy paused. "Sir, there's actually something I wanted to speak to you about."

Bogo's lack of visible irritation emboldened her. "And what is that something?"

"Do you remember that traffic incident I reported to you about yesterday morning?"

"You mean when a fox triggered his collar and nearly killed a truck driver? What about it?"

"Sir, the gerbils who caused his collar to trigger haven't been dealt with yet. From what I witnessed
it was a cruel prank they've probably pulled before. I'm not asking to be put on a high profile case,
sir. I'm asking your permission to catch a group of dangerous pranksters before anyone else gets
hurt."

Bogo tapped a pen on the desk's surface. "Do you have any means of tracking these gerbils?"

"I got their license plate number, but I need authorization to actually apprehend them."

Bogo stopped tapping. "Then authorization is granted, so long as you finish that report first. Now,
if you'll excuse me, I have a tuxedo to rent."

Judy couldn't hide a smile as she saluted the buffalo and left the office. The past was behind her
now. Things were looking up. Things were really looking up.
Things weren't looking up.

It wasn't just that Nick hadn't found anyone else who could get him the equipment needed to fill his clinic. He hadn't found anyone period. Worse, he had until tomorrow morning to do it, otherwise Koslov would be sending him to the bottom of the Tundratown River with his tail in concrete.

Nick slumped on a cheap plastic chair inside the empty space that was his clinic, staring at the phone in his paw. There was no choice. Deep down, Nick knew there never was. He had to bite the bullet and call his friend at the Pottermass Manor.

He drained half the beer bottle, called the number, held the phone to his ear, and waited.

The phone rang and rang.

Nick wished he could tell him. Benjamin was a friend, not a sucker, but he'd never wanted any part in the fox's hustles in the five years they'd known each other. Nick knew the cheetah would never sell him out, or at least he thought he wouldn't, but the mere suggestion of an illegal theme park had terrified him. That was nothing compared to the terror he would feel if he knew that Koslov himself was involved. Nick could never tell.

"Hey, Nick!" Benjamin's agonizingly happy voice jolted Nick out of his thoughts. The fox sucked in a deep breath through his nose before speaking.

"Hey, Benji!" He replied with false cheer. "How's the new job going?"

"It's going great! Right now we're getting everything ready for this big party Mr. Pottermass is holding tomorrow in Mayor Swinton's honor. Obviously I won't actually be there. I'll just be staying out of sight cleaning the other rooms, but maybe I'll spot Gazelle. That'd be so awesome!" The phone broke out with a fit of giggles. There was a warning beep, but Nick was relieved when he didn't hear a zap. "Speaking of new jobs, how's your clinic coming along?"

Nick gritted his teeth. Benjamin had been so proud when Nick had told him about his new 'honest' job as a vet. "Not good. Nobody wants to give me the equipment for it."

"You're kidding!"

"No. It's the same damn reason we never got to have our Suitopia. No one in their right mind will trust a fox."

"Aw, Nick. I'm so sorry."

The cheetah's sincere sympathy, something so rare to the fox, almost made him hang up and give up on the whole scheme. But there was too much at stake, in between the fortune he would make with Wild Times and what Koslov would do if he didn't get his money's worth. Nick swallowed, hating himself for what he was about to do. "Ben, you know Pottermass's company Zoocell supplies medical equipment."

"Want me to talk to him?"

"Will he accept?"
"He's really big on PR. If it'll make him look good, he'll go for it."

Nick closed his eyes, rubbing the spot on his skull where a headache was starting to form. "You don't know how much I appreciate this, Benji."

Benjamins voice went softer. "Nick, you don't know how proud I am that you're doing this in the first place."

Nick's stomach dropped. His collar beeped yellow. He held the phone away from his face for a second. "God damn it, Benji." He brought the phone back. "Even if it doesn't work, thanks for trying."

"I'll see you tonight in Honey's place. Bye, Nick."

"Bye, Benji." Nick hung up and dropped the phone on his lap. He slumped in the chair, all alone beneath the harsh light of the lamp above. Right now his only comfort was that so long as Benjamin remained in the dark, Koslov was very unlikely to go after Benjamin if shit hit the fan. Koslov was ruthless, but only to those who knowingly crossed him.

He didn't have much time for self-loathing before he heard the bang of Finnick's van backfiring. The abandoned warehouse where Wild Times was hidden was right beneath them, at the bottom of a cliff on which the clinic stood at the back of a disused parking lot. It was so close Nick could throw a pebble and hit the roof, but the road from there to the clinic was so long that Finnick refused to walk it with his tiny legs, no matter how many times Nick complained that the constant backfiring could bring unwanted attention.

Finnick kicked his way into the room, covered in dark stains.

Nick put on his trademark smirk and held his arms out for a hug. "Hey, did you miss your daddy?"

Finnick spat on the floor. "I ain't your kid no more! Gimme that shit again an' I'll bite your face off!"

"Aw, come on. You gotta admit that Jumbo Pop hustle was one of our best."

"Whatever! Shut up and give the damn thing a test!"

Nick strode to the back of the room. Once this place was fully furnished, the secret entrance would be hidden by four giant posters of the anatomies of different species of predator, all arranged in a larger rectangular shape. Nick had them rolled up in the corner; a generic big cat, a wolf, a bear and for the sake of it, a vampire bat. At the moment, the secret entrance was a large door almost perfectly blending into the plain white wall. The only indication it was there was the rectangular groove. Nick dug his claws into the groove and pulled the door open.

The means of travelling from the clinic to the warehouse had been designed by Honey, and it followed her plan to the letter. Behind the door was a tube wide enough for a polar bear, which curled and stretched all the way down to the entrance hall of Wild Times. It was a ride in itself, a small taste of the joy to come. Nick and his complicit friends had tested the ride many times during the park's construction, before Finnick began construction of the exit. Nick looked to Finnick, who rolled his eyes and gave him the go-ahead. Nick beamed and leapt feet first into the tube.

His stomach leapt in all directions as he fell, twisted, looped and spun, all the way down the cliff to the bottom. Plastic rainbow streams brushed his face as he popped out the other end and slid along a long safety mat, coming to a stop just short of a mountain of old cushions bound and sewn together.
A perfect exit. He was so giving Finnick a kiss for finishing the tunnel on schedule. His chance came sooner than expected when something small slammed into his back, sending him skidding the rest of the way into the cushions. Nick pushed himself away, rubbed his back, and grinned at the disgruntled Finnick. "That was faultless, Fin. All we have to do now is make sure all the rides are ship-shape and we'll be good to go."

Finnick rubbed his muzzle as he stood up. "What about the clinic?"

Nick tried not to grimace. "Work in progress. I'm waiting on a reply from someone."

"Not another one of those blunt-toothed pricks!"

"Nah, it's... someone else."

Finnick paused. "Jesus Christ on a stick. Did you go to Koslov again?"

"It's medical equipment we need. No way good ol' Coleslaw could provide that."

"If it's not Koslov, then who is it?"

"... Zoocell."

" Didn't they reject you already?"

"Yeah, but I've gone directly to the big hippo himself. Helping out Zootopia's first pred-clinic would look good for him, so he might listen."

Finnick gaped. "How the flying fuck did you get an audience with Mr. Fucking Pottermass?!"

Nick winced, knowing what was to come. "I didn't. I got someone to vouch for me."

Finnick bared his teeth. "You didn't."

"It's our last shot. No-one else will give us the-"

Finnick pounced, his tiny paws smacking Nick in the chest and pushing his back against the old cushions. "Are you crazy?! This whole shit's dangerous enough without getting Ben mixed up in it!"

"Take it easy, Ben still doesn't know!" Nick immediately cursed himself for saying that.

"Oh, so you're hustling him now?"

"No, I'm just- okay, yes! But he'll be safe as long as he doesn't know! I'm just trying to keep all of us safe, Finnick! Koslov will kill us if he doesn't get his dough back!"

Finnick gave a small shove, pressing the bigger fox deeper into the cushions, and then dropped back onto the mat. "That kid's been through enough shit since his parents died. It's a miracle that he's still all sunshine and rainbows! If his life gets fucked up more 'cause of you..."

Thoughts of his father dying in prison, convicted of a crime that did not deserve a life sentence, and his mother dying of a disease only supposed to kill chain smokers and the elderly, sent Nick over the edge into defensive fury.

"It won't." He growled. "It will not come to that. You have my word on it."
Finnick backed away, only partially satisfied. "You'd better hope Honey doesn't hear of this. Mark my words she'll bite more than your face off."

"Look, you can bitch about this once we're the richest mammals in Zootopia. But right now, we've got a shit-ton of rides to check."

The inspection took until sunset to complete. The Roar-A-Coaster, arguably the most dangerous of the rides, was the first to be checked. The ride stretched all the way around the walls of the warehouse, had three loops, and the obligatory big dip at the start. Nick and Finnick checked every wooden plank and red light that made up the track, and found everything to be in order. The Cheetah Run, essentially a racetrack surrounded by flat wooden palm trees, was the least fun to inspect, constantly bringing up memories of his most recent con. A pair of crossed wires in the display board showing Laps and Times was the only thing needing fixing. The only water feature they had the Otter Slide, had a minor issue with the motor that carried buckets of water from the pool at the bottom to the top of the slide, ensuring that the spiraling tube would always be flowing. The Cruiser, the second, smaller rollercoaster intended for young cubs and kits, simply needed an oiling. The Catch Me If You Can Carousel and the Bumper Cars showed no problems whatsoever.

After the larger rides they checked all the smaller rides and games. The Laser Tag, the Whack'A'Mole, the Prance Jumping Game, the Ball of Yarn Pit, the Bite Me Strength Tester and the Balancing Upstream Game were all tested, maintained and cleared for use. The Howl Along Karaoke next to the restaurant needed a little dusting on the speakers. Nick let the disgruntled Finnick take up the duster as he turned to the amenities. The toilets were clean and flushable. The Tiki Smoothie Hut and the Sticky Insect Shack would be well stocked on the day of opening. Nick had suggested a gift shop once, with stuffed toys in Finnick's likeness. Needless to say, Finnick had shot him down, while Honey had been too busy restraining the little fox to give her own opinion.

By the end of it, Nick was so weary and sweaty that he didn't feel up to the long journey to Honey's Bunker. While Finnick lay slumped on a dining chair beside him, Nick took out his phone and called Benjamin. This time the call picked up instantaneously. "Hey, Benji, could you tell Honey I can't-

"He said yes!"

Nick's heart leapt, bringing his body up with him. His hip knocked Finnick's chair, triggering a stream of exhausted curses. "He what?!"

"I talked to Mr. Pottermass! He's agreed to provide the equipment you need for the clinic!"

"Oh my god!" Nick elbowed Finnick, and interrupted him in the middle of a vicious verbal retaliation. "Fin, we're in business! Pottermass is gonna provide the equipment!"

Finnick was so stunned he actually looked like a child. "Holy shit, he went for it."

"There are a couple of conditions, though."

That put a tiny puncture in Nick's bubble, but was hardly surprising. "Name them."

"First, he wants a guard posted at the entrance to make sure no predator leaves the building uncollared."

"Does it have to be a prey mammal?"
"No, it just needs to be someone competent. Pottermass said he'll take care of it. Payment included."

Nick wasn't sure if he should be nervous about that. "Okay, what's the second condition?"

"Pottermass is siding with Swinton in the election. Him helping you out could help her get some pred votes. The second condition is that he and Swinton want you to come to Savanna Central Park next Tuesday for a public speech."

Finnick face-palmed. "Fuck."

Nick cringed. "Oh balls. They're not expecting me to make a speech, are they? You know I get awful stage fright."

"Of course not." Benjamin said, missing the sarcasm. "They just want the cameras to see you. All you have to do is show up."

Publicity. Shit. That was the last thing he needed. He doubted that Koslov would approve either. Hoppson's Choice. That was what they called it. Short for No Choice At All. He'd first heard of the phrase after Honey had seen the movie on an illegal website before it was taken down. It had just been one Hoppson's Choice after another for this fox, ever since his father had been dragged away and never seen again. Maybe after he opened Wild Times and made a pile of money bigger than Benjamin, things would be different. Maybe.

"What time?" He asked miserably.

"Ten am. If it'll make you feel better, I'll be there, too."

"Oh, you can go on stage as long as you want."

Benjamin giggled. "I'd rather not if it's all the same to you."

Nick checked his watch. "I've just spent all day cleaning the clinic. I'm too beat to go to Honey's. Tell her I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Not me. I've got to spend all day getting Pottermass's house ready for the party, then I'm gonna be there all night."

"Make it the day after tomorrow, then."

"Okay, see you then. Oh, before I forget! Did you get in trouble with the law again?"

"What? No, why?"

"I passed by your place on my way to Honey's. I saw Hopps, you know, that new bunny officer from the news? She was watching your apartment building."

Nick thought of the little wallet still on his person and grimaced. This wasn't the first time he'd been staked out by the morons in blue. "Don't mind her. She's just wasting her time trying to be a real cop."

"If you say so, Nick. I gotta go get my outfit ready for the party. I'll let you know when the equipment's coming. Bye!"

Nick put the phone away and ignored Finnick's scowl. Once they were rich he would pay the cheetah back in full and everything would be right again. If only he could get rid of the horrible
regret churning in his gut.

Benji... I'm sorry.
Captain Bogo didn't hate parties. If he did, he never would have volunteered to oversee security for every one of Gazelle's venues. But he most certainly hated this one, on account of the company he was forced to endure.

He wished they'd told him sooner that it was a Masquerade party, so he could have put more thought into the mask he was forced to wear for the whole thing. He supposed the shiny black mask he'd found wasn't too flamboyant, even with the silver lace decorations adorning it. Thank God the party required only the masks, and not a whole bloody costume.

Every male in the cavernous ballroom that was the centerpiece of Mr. Pottermass's mansion was dressed in a black tuxedo, with the exception of the big hippo himself. Dressed all in white, with a feathered silver mask to match, Pottermass stepped on the stage with the band he'd hired for the night, tapped the microphone, and began his speech.

Bogo propped himself against the pillar farthest from the stage, unable to care less about the speech. At least he could focus on the stunning interior; walls of white tinted gold beneath swan-shaped lamps. Five massive, sparkling crystal chandeliers arranged like dots on a dice. A cluster of circular tables draped in thick linen. Rippling curtains, blood red like the gown of the guest of honor, Mayor Tilda Swinton.

Bogo cringed, almost overwhelmed by the sudden and almost offensively loud applause as Swinton stepped onto the stage. She removed the Venetian mask that matched her dress, fully exposing the perpetual smile he was convinced she'd ripped off the Mona Lisa, and began a speech of her own. Bogo grimaced and looked away from the stage. He wasn't interested in anything she had to say.

When he turned his eyes, he found himself staring at a wall of black cloth. He looked up to see two tusks, one broken, peeking out from beneath a blue and gold mask.

There were six elephants attending the party, but Bogo instantly recognized his superior, Chief Horace Trunchbull of Precinct One. Despite half his face being hidden behind the mask, Bogo knew Trunchbull was frowning. "You could at least pretend to enjoy yourself."

Bogo pretended he was glaring at his drink. What idiot sticks a whole strawberry bigger than Hopps's head on the lip of a cocktail glass? "With all due respect, sir, I didn't want to come in the first place."

"Ugh, this isn't because of the masks, is it?" Trunchbull stuck his trunk into the big wide glass, sucked up half its contents, and sprayed the cocktail into his mouth. Bogo knew he was joking, but he wasn't in a humorous mood.

"You know what the problem is, Chief Trunchbull." Bogo lifted his eyes to the two mammals standing near the stage, two of what was the Triumvirate of Zootopia, along with Pottermass. Mr. Louis Llamadaeus, head of ZNN, and Mr. Peter Bisoning, who owned the biggest chain of retail stores in the state. The Triumvirate was second only to Swinton in power, and never took any major action without her input. The only reason Bogo knew any of this was true was that Chief Trunchbull had told him, the day he revealed he wanted Bogo to be his eventual successor.

The ballroom was silent by this point. Bogo caught some of Swinton's speech; she was expressing her gratitude toward all the mammals who attended her father's funeral the week before.
"You'd think she'd look more sad." Bogo muttered.

There was a scolding nudge from Trunchbull's trunk. "She can't show weakness. Not now. Not when she has an election to win."

Bogo felt a little guilty at that, in spite of the reality of Swinton's situation. "The election is a farce. Swinton will win. They always do."

"Not according to the press. The collar accidents have dealt heavy blows to Swinton's popularity. Her family invented them, after all. The opposition might just have a chance this time."

"Good."

Trunchbull sighed and rubbed his forehead with his trunk. "Mansa, please. It's been five years, and they'd had the best intentions. Let it go."

Bogo's blood boiled. He turned his body so nobody else would see him lift his shirt and jacket to expose his left side. "I wouldn't call racial hypocrisy the best intentions, sir!"

He pulled his clothing back down once he was sure Trunchbull had gotten a good look. The narrowed eyeholes of the mask did not conceal the quiet remorse in the elephant's eyes. Bogo felt his anger evaporate as he realized what kind of mammal he'd just said this to.

"Sir. I'm sorry, I-"

"It's alright. You have a right to be angry about what happened to you." He sprayed the last of his drink into his mouth, dried his trunk on a napkin, and draped it on Bogo's shoulder. It was a comforting gesture he'd made to the cape buffalo many times before, ever since he'd taken him in under his wing back when he'd been a nervous rookie.

"The past is the past, Mansa, no matter how much it hurts. But we have to think of the future, now. If you don't replace me, Commander Cunninghorn will, and believe me when I say that he is the last mammal I want running my precinct."

Bogo scowled. He believed him. "Every time I see them, I remember what they did. I don't see how I can work with these people."

"If you're lucky, you won't." Trunchbull spoke, surprisingly softly for the biggest land mammal in the world. "They'll only contact you if they need a crime investigated or they need security for public events. Most times the only one who'll contact you on a frequent basis is the mayor."

Bogo sipped his drink, trying to avoid dislodging the ridiculously placed strawberry as he contemplated this. "I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

Swinton's speech ended and she and Pottermass stepped off the stage. The crowd began to get chatty again as the band began to play.

"Do me a favor, Mansa. Just think positive. You'll do far more good as chief than Cunninghorn ever will."

"I'll try, sir."

"Good. I'm going to go express my compliments to Mr. Pottermass. Did you know he has a predator working for him now?"
His trunk gave Bogo's shoulder a gentle pat, and he strolled off towards the Triumvirate as they began to chatter. Once the party really got going, Bogo wondered why anyone even bothered trying to hold a conversation.

He'd underestimated how boring the so-called party would be. No-one was dancing to the music, leaving the architecture the only interesting to look at. They seemed to think it would be more fun blathering endlessly to each other like they were in a meeting, ignoring the music and the expensive drinks in their hooves. An overly dramatic bull knocked the glass from Bogo's hoof as he was describing one of his clients, causing a fruity, dangerous mess. Servers in eighteenth century costumes quietly and respectfully guided the guests away from the area. As he moved himself further around the pillar, Bogo felt something cold and wet in his hoof and realized that he'd somehow saved the half-divided strawberry. It was like an apple in his palm. Where the hell did Pottermass find strawberries this big? He was in no mood to eat it, however, so he held the berry safely in his hoof as he glared at the crowd. He knew it was irrational, but he hated everything about this party. He hated the music, which he couldn't even put a name on. He hated the guests, half of which he knew for a fact had bribed their way out of criminal convictions. He hated how alone he was in his misery.

His ear twitched at the sound of clinking glass. He looked down to his left to see one of the servers, a short one shaped like a pear, kneeling before what was left of his cocktail, sweeping up shards with a brush and dustpan. Bogo left him be and turned his gaze back up to glare at the band.

His glare softened. He looked down again, sure he'd seen a striped furry tail that belonged to no prey mammal.

He saw the predator looking up at him through a blue mask with bronze detail. Large eyes the color of chocolate flicked down nervously. Bogo saw that the puddle he was trying to clear had spread close to the buffalo's feet. He wordlessly moved along so the mammal could finish his work. As the young predator wiped the mess, Bogo curiously examined him. Golden fur. Small, black spots. Black ears submissively flat. This was a cheetah, and a uniquely chubby one at that. A TAME collar peeked out from beneath the collar of the cheetah's costume, glowing yellow. With his head held low, the cheetah took the dustpan and departed through the nearest door. Nobody else seemed to notice he'd ever been in the room.

Bogo was surprisingly sorry to see him go. The cheetah had been an intriguing distraction from this mind-numbing soirée. The buffalo wanted out. He'd only been invited here because Trunchbull was adamant that he was to be the future chief, and he'd only accepted so he wouldn't embarrass his mentor. Trunchbull would surely understand if Bogo took a break.

"... I must admit I have some concerns about the predator that's working here. Aren't you worried that something will go missing?"

"He's no fox, Bisoniing. Come, I want to meet Trunchbull's future successor."

Bogo turned his head sharply, making out Llamadaeus's bird-shaped white mask and Bisoniing's metallic looking purple mask. Along with Swinton and Pottermass, Trunchbull was leading them this way.

Bogo immediately made for the nearest door with as much subtlety as he could manage. He regretted his cowardly retreat but he didn't want to face them now, not when he was so riled from being forced to endure this party. He needed quiet. He needed to let off steam. He would talk to them when he was ready.

He found no relief from the music in the corridor outside. He shut the door behind him and strode
down, dimly aware of the large strawberry still in his hoof. It would be something to nibble on once he found a quiet room.

The mansion seemed much bigger inside than it was outside. Bogo strolled through two wide corridors and the entrance hall before a large pair of wooden doors caught his eye. He'd seen them when he'd first entered the mansion, but had never seen them open. What a perfect opportunity to satisfy his curiosity. He must have done a complete circle around the mansion, for the main entrance to the ballroom was right behind him, spilling the prissy music even though they were closed. Along with the violins and cellos he heard a piano that didn't fit with the rest of the tune. Now desperate for peace and quiet, Bogo opened one of the doors, quietly slipped inside and closed the door again.

At first he was dismayed when even the closing of the door failed to mute the music, until he realized that he could only hear the piano now. At least he liked pianos. He was always the favorite to play them at family reunions and Christmas parties. It was a slow tune that echoed in whatever room he had walked into, a repetitive melody that hesitated at frequent points, as if the player was trying to muster the courage to continue the song. Speaking of which, who was playing it?

Bogo slowly turned around to find that he was in a library, a welcome surprise that reminded him of the archives and offices back in Precinct One. A voice in the back of his head reminded him that Pottermass's recently deceased wife, Meredith Pottermass, had been an avid reader.

The tune became less hesitant as Bogo stepped further into the library, searching for the piano. He stepped around a bookcase taller than Trunchbull. Then he saw him.

On a small platform stood a grand black piano from which the music emanated. On the tiny stool playing the piano was the cheetah, smiling and unmasked.

Bogo stared, dumbfounded by his discovery, as the cheetah found his courage and began to sing.

"Maybe I didn't treat you,
Quite as good as I should have.
Maybe I didn't love you
Quite as often as I could have."

Bogo knew this song. He'd never played it himself, but he knew it. The cheetah's voice was almost feminine, confirming that he was of a very young age, probably just out of his teens. It sung the lyrics with a demure emotion that warmed the buffalo's heart as it reminded him of the rendition Gazelle had sung during the Christmas Charity Ball last year.

"Little things I should have said and done,
I just never took the time..."

The cheetah beamed, pleased with his own performance.

"You were Always on my Mind…
You were Always on... on my Mind."

Bogo didn't realize the cheetah had spotted him until he heard the zap of the collar being triggered.
The cheetah jumped up from the piano, all happiness gone, staring at the buffalo with a mix of pain, embarrassment and fear. Without the mask, Bogo could see a black cluster of spots on his right cheek that resembled a Hidden Mickey.

"Um-I-" He fought for words as he found his mask and struggled to tie it back on. The collar beeped in warning.

"It's okay. I didn't mean to startle you." Bogo put on the tone he used for distressed civilians. He reached up and removed his own mask.

The light blush on the cheetah's face deepened. He seemed to realize he was staring and looked away. He gave up on tying the knot and tugged at his jacket. "I should get back to work."

Bogo looked around. "What work? This place is spotless."

"Oh! Yeah! I finished, didn't I?" The feline hid his eyes and sat back down. "I-I finished sooner than I'd thought… I thought I'd have a go of the p-piano… I didn't mean any harm, sir!"

Bogo stepped onto the platform and ran a hoof over the glossy surface of the piano. "Does it look harmed to you?" The cheetah looked at the piano and shook his head. "Then calm the hell down."

The cheetah winced. Bogo immediately regretted how harsh he'd sounded then. He didn't want to drive this cheetah away, not when he had only the party from hell to go back to. "I heard that Mr. Pottermass had enlisted a predator, but I never expected to meet you. What's your name?"

The cheetah sounded confused when he answered. "B- Benjamin, sir."

"Benjamin? I'm Bogo. I must say, you played that quite well. Do you know any other songs?"

Benjamin's ears perked. "Only a couple. Twinkle Twinkle-" He paused, his ears momentarily going flat again."… Little Star and Moonlit Sonata. Sir."

"Moonlight Sonata. That's a good one." Bogo turned his eyes to the keys, his hooves suddenly itching to use them. Perhaps a short rendition would make him feel better. "Mind if I give it a shot?"

Benjamin practically leapt away from the stool. Bogo did not appreciate how skittish the mammal was around him. Surely being a buffalo cop didn't automatically make him scary. He didn't even know Bogo was a police officer. Did he? "Take it easy, I don't bite."

"Sorry, sir."

Bogo sat down, placing the strawberry on the black surface behind the keys. He pondered for a moment which song to choose from, and then began to play.

The melancholy melody Clair De Lune, his absolute favorite, seemed to drown out everything else, even the faint racket from the band back in the ballroom. It was a difficult feat, playing piano music with only two fingers, especially with Mozart's music, but with twenty-five years of practice under his belt, Bogo managed. His breaths became softer, his annoyance from the mindless party fading with every note. He inhaled the faint scent of strawberry. Out the corner of his eye, he noticed Benjamin staring at him, but not out of fear. His gaze was fixed on the singing keys, his jaw slack as he listened to the buffalo play. Bogo used to see that same look on his family members before they got used to hearing him play. Come to think of it, he'd never performed before a stranger before, let alone a predator.
The song reached its end, and the library was quiet once more. It wasn't quiet for long, though.

"O. M. Goodness." Benjamin breathed. "Now I feel like an amateur!"

Bogo puffed his chest out. "Practice makes perfect, kid. You weren't so bad yourself."

The blush returned. "I wasn't bad, maybe. But you were amazing. What're you, a musician?"

"Only on Christmas. I'm a police captain."

He was relieved when the cheetah showed no alarm at this. "Really? What precinct?"

"One."

"Cool. You know, I've never actually been in City Central." He rested his chin on his paw as he propped it on the edge of the piano, and stared into space. Bogo knew he was wondering what it would be like to see the lights of City Central up close, rather than at a distance in the outer districts. Bogo had rarely seen a predator in City Central unless they were being brought in by himself or other officers. It was an unspoken rule established by the upper class hypocrites of this city that predators were not welcome there otherwise; less chance of important prey mammals getting hurt if the worst happened.

The song in the distance changed, reminding him that Trunchbull wanted him. He decided he'd hidden himself long enough. "I'll just leave you to keep practicing. Don't worry, I won't tell Pottermass you touched the thing."

"Thank you, sir." Benjamin took Bogo's place on the stool, and that was when he spotted the strawberry. "Wow! Look at the size of that thing!"

If he hadn't been irritated at the thought of facing Swinton and the Triumvirate, Bogo might have chuckled. "It's yours if you want."

Benjamin looked at the large berry with uncertainty. "Really?"

Bogo picked up the strawberry. Holding it upside down by the stem, he held the berry out to the cheetah. "Really. You probably won't find any store in the city that sells strawberries this big."

He gave a small smile, assuring the cheetah that this wasn't a petty prank by some upper class clown.

Benjamin slowly reached for the strawberry. His furry fingers closed around the green stem beneath Bogo's own finger. They were warm and fluffy, like the blanket he used to sleep in during winter nights back when he was a calf. Bogo let go, leaving the upended strawberry in the cheetah's pinched fingers. The berry looked like a giant speckled rose bud.

"Thank you, Captain Bogo." Benjamin hesitated before taking a small bite out of the strawberry, removing the part of the berry that had been cut in half by the cocktail glass. It must have tasted magnificent, since he closed his eyes and beamed, his whole body relaxing as he chewed. An amusing overreaction to be sure, but Christ that berry was big.

Bogo put his mask back on and left the cheetah to his treat. Soon after he left he library, the first notes of the Moonlight Sonata followed him on his way back to the ballroom, gracing his ears like a fond farewell.
Jack didn't show it, but he was excited as he strode down the short glass corridor to Miss Morton's office. Only the top gazelle herself briefed the high priority missions.

The door slid open to reveal Miss Morton sitting at a black desk in front of a window that took up the entire wall behind her. The midday sun was especially brilliant today turning even the darkest buildings into brightened colors.

"Jack." Miss Morton didn't smile, but Jack knew she was pleased to see him here on time. He in turn was pleased that she was pleased. Out of everyone in the ZIA, it was her approval he coveted most. The other bigots could squirm at their desks for all he cared, so long as Miss Morton could look past his species and appreciate his work. "Before I brief you, there is something you need to know. Sit down."

Jack hopped onto the chair in front of. The first time he'd done this, he'd slipped and elicited a chuckle from her. It was the first and last time she'd laughed at his expense. "Has something happened, Miss Morton?"

Her speech was brisque, as always. "Mr. Kill is gone."

"Something tells me you don't mean dead."

"When the team arrived to clean up the site and take in Trevelyan, Mr. Kill's body wasn't where you said it was. He has vanished."

Jack squeezed the armrests, furious with himself. It was his first screw-up in years, and quite possibly his worst. And Mr. Kill, of all mammals. Why did it have to be the one that got away? "It's my fault. I didn't check to see if he was dead."

"He was shoved off the top of a church by a giant bell. You couldn't have anticipated he would walk away from something like that." She smirked ruefully. "But you're right. You should have checked."

"This will not happen again, Miss Morton. You have my word on it."

"There is some good news, though. Some blood was left behind, and we were able to find out who he really is. I don't have the time for details, but you can read his file after we're done here."

Jack nodded. Finding out Mr. Kill's real name would be some comfort, at least. "You said you have a new assignment for me?"

Miss Morton pressed a button on the small but conspicuous control panel to the side of her desk. The city skyline vanished behind a black screen. A large, bright white rectangle flashed into existence before it bore the same image of the Howlalayas mountain range as the screen of Miss Morton's computer. The gazelle moved the mouse and clicked on a file in the top corner, beginning the presentation.

The first slide was a photograph of a bespectacled llama and some text beside it.

"I'll begin by telling you about Felix Llater, a mammal you'll be in contact with during your mission."
Jack nodded. The ZIA had worked with the ZBI before. "What is he undercover for?"

"They received an anonymous tip that Zootopia City Hall is engaging in corrupt activities and sent Agent Llater to investigate." The next slide showed a photograph of a nicely dressed swine and some information identifying her as Tilda Swinton.

"Shouldn't the ZBI be handling this on their own? The ZIA only deals with foreign threats, not national ones."

"And he discovered one." Miss Morton switched to the next slide. It didn't bother Jack that she was going through them so quickly, since he would be reading their files later anyway. The next slide was a photograph of a computer screen bearing an email. This time Miss Morton waited long enough for Jack to read it.

**Dr. Daniel Slothfeld**

*RE: Project Twilight Update XXXVI*

*To Carlton Woolton*

_Woolton,_

_I have reviewed the psychiatric reports you have sent to me courtesy of the psychiatrist responsible for the diagnosis and treatment of the predator minority. Frankly, it's exactly the sort of biased bullshit I feared would inhibit my work ever since I accepted your offer to fund my research in Boarland's place._

'It frustrates me that I have to remind you that I asked for psychiatric reports so I could pick out viable candidates for the project, not determine if resenting the TAME Collars makes one a predator supremacist. Dr. Lemming's PHDs and mental jargon do nothing to change the fact that his so-called 'diagnoses' are a complete waste of time and printed-paper._

_Tell that moronic paranoiac that I will personally have him and his practice terminated if this happens again._

_With kind regards_

*Dr. Daniel Slothfeld._

"Dr. Daniel Slothfeld? What's his field?"

"Boarland's top neurobiologist and a leading authority of its biochemical research." Miss Morton said. "Until his untimely death in a suicide bombing three years ago. But Agent Llater intercepted this email for Assistant Mayor Woolton and discovered that he is still alive and hiding in this city. Since foreign threats are the ZIA's jurisdiction, as you just pointed out, they contacted us."

"Aside from that fact that he's faked his death, what makes them think Slothfeld's up to no good?" Jack asked.

"Before his supposed death, he'd come under suspicion of involvement in at least thirty terrorist attacks around the globe. All of them involved chemical weapons. It is believed that he'd been weaponizing his creations and selling them on the black market to fund his research, but the bombing occurred before they could find anything concrete."

"What is Project Twilight?"
"That we don't know. All we know is that Dr. Slothfeld is up to something in Zootopia, and that City Hall is involved somehow. And an authority in biochemical research has the capability of producing weapons of mass destruction." She picked up a thin glass of iced tea and drank from it. "I don't need to tell you the boys at the pentagon are going nuts."

Jack tilted his chin up, indicating that he got the point. "My assignment, Miss Morton?"

"Jack, I need you to find Dr. Slothfeld and figure out what he's up to. Without anyone finding out we're on to them, of course."

"Being a sloth, I highly doubt he'd get far."

He was fairly sure Miss Morton rolled her eyes. "Don't be so sure. He synthesized a special stimulant that allows him to move and speak at the speed of most mammals. The formula is his little secret. You'll find out more in this flash drive." She plucked a flash drive from the side of the computer. "Also included is information on Mayor Swinton and everyone else in City Hall, all the intelligence Agent Llater has collected so far and information concerning your cover during your investigation."

She slid the item across the desk. Jack slipped it into his tiny jacket pocket, where it stuck out like an oversized candy bar. "And what is my cover?"

"In light of the numerous TAME collar related accidents beginning to turn public opinion against their laws, the Congressional Research Service is sending you to investigate if they are even needed anymore."

"I can't imagine the mayor would like that."

"No, she won't. But the government is likely to repeal collars completely if she doesn't cooperate. This cover will enable you to get close to City Hall, but don't expect a warm reception."

Jack looked back at the door leading to the rest of the building. He refrained from expressing the irony of Miss Morton's warning when the reception he'd received here in the ZIA had hardly been any better. There was a reason he never went anywhere with a partner. He and everyone who wasn't Miss Morton just didn't get along.

"Anything else, Miss Morton?" He asked.

"Yes, and this is probably the most essential part of this mission." Miss Morton clicked on what Jack was sure was the final slide. It was a heavily pixelated photograph of Dr. Slothfeld, a middle aged sloth who seemed extremely fond of the color white, even for a scientist. He was sitting at a desk of silver and glass, pulling an unmarked disk from inside his computer to place in a translucent indigo blue case. "This is what we call the Data Disk. Dr. Slothfeld has copies of all of his research from all of his projects, but he keeps everything on this one disk. And I mean everything. There may be secrets on it that could help us solve over eleven years of unsolved cases. I won't ask for any promises, but if you find Dr. Slothfeld and see an opportunity to recover this Disk, take it."

"Consider it done. If I find it, of course." Jack amended.

Miss Morton tapped on the laptop and the desk console, ending the presentation and lifting the screen. The rabbit blinked from the sudden onslaught of sunlight. "You have one week until we'll have everything ready for your mission. I suggest you spend that time researching."
In a Cinnabone Bakery Jack always visited at least once while he was in the city, he ordered his coffee and cinnamon roll and brought his pale blue laptop to the table in the farthest corner, the one beneath the large mirror with the ornate silver frame. He plugged in the flash drive and searched for the file he wanted to see first. He found the file near the bottom, named MrKill.

"Douglas Ramses." Jack murmured, eyes narrowing as he gazed upon a photograph of the ram who should have died in that graveyard. He used to work for a small time gang in Zoo York before they were wiped out in a shootout with a rival gang. Doug was the only one to survive, and since then he'd taken on a new career as a contract killer before attaching himself to Trevelyan. The ZIA had questioned several mammals who'd known Doug, and while their opinions varied they all agreed on one thing; once he developed a grudge against someone, he would never let it go.

Jack felt no fear towards the ram, just caution. He never let his guard down outside of the ZIA base anymore. He eyed every ram that passed him by. He was wary of every tourist that asked him for directions. One of these days the next ram he ran into would be Doug, and then they would finish what they started.

But for now, he had homework to do.

He hovered the little white arrow over the file named Slothfeld. Before he could click, however, his ears began to twitch. He was hearing faint thudding sounds. Grunting. Clanking. Jack had sparred enough times to know what that meant.

He looked around the bakery. No-one else seemed to hear the brawl going on next door, but then again none of them had ears like his. It was a good thing he and the manager were friends.

He carried his laptop over to the counter. "Keep an eye on this. Don't touch the flash drive. If I'm not back in five minutes, call the number."

The manager frowned, but nodded and took the laptop.

Jack left the bakery, following the noises to the alleyway next door. When he realized the noises had stopped, he reached inside his jacket for his gun. It had a silencer, but passers by could still hear. It would have to be a last resort.

He was almost to the alley when someone popped out. He raised the gun—and lowered it before anyone else saw him. It was a white vixen in a poppy-patterned dress and black leggings. Her fur was ruffled, and she was pulling down her skirt when she spotted Jack and gasped. "OmigoshIdidendoanyfing!"

Jack frowned. "Why don't you talk properly?"

Large crystal blue eyes blinked a few times as she tried to collect herself. "I didn't start it."

"What are you talking about?" Jack couldn't see down the alley from his position. He didn't put his gun away. He had nothing against foxes personally, but with Doug still out there he couldn't trust anyone.

"It's pretty hard to explain to a guy with a gun."

Jack surmised she wasn't some dumb party girl when he noticed how quickly she regained her composure. More likely she'd been shaken up by whatever had happened in the alley, if she wasn't putting on an act. The British accent was convincing enough. "Try your best."
The vixen tucked a phone away into her black purse. "Nothing happened, really. Just minor spat."

Jack gestured to the small red stain on the fur of her eyebrow. "Care to explain that?"

The vixen winced as she felt the small cut, saw the blood on her fingertips and sighed. "I was just standing by the alley texting a friend when I got jumped by these three tossers, alright? Sure they got in a hit or two, but I managed to break loose."

Jack strode past her and looked into the alley. The alley was empty, but a trashcan had been knocked over and there was a switchblade on the floor. So far it looked like the girl was telling the truth.

"Are you going to call the police or not?"

The vixen shrugged. "What's the point? It looked like one of them was the son of that senator looking to get reelected. And it's my word against his."

Jack eyed the collar around her neck and understood. His gaze became curious. She'd just come out of a fight, but the large bulb on her collar was green.

Still slightly red in the face, vixen smoothed her fur. "Really, I'm fine. You should head back before your coffee gets cold."

"Don't you want to get your head looked at?"

"I said I'm fine!" The vixen paused and amended herself. "I'm sorry. I'm just a bit frazzled from nearly getting gang raped."

Jack put his gun away. "Are you sure you're alright?"

The vixen smiled sweetly. "Really, I'm fine. I kind of can't leave just yet, anyway. I'm waiting for someone. I'll wait a few more minutes before finding a doctor."

"Okay. For what it's worth, I'm glad you got out of that… relatively unscathed."

The vixen leaned against the wall next to the window of the bakery. "Don't worry. I may not be an apex, but I can still hold my own."

"I noticed." Jack replied dryly. "Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around."

He returned to the bakery, retrieved his laptop, and returned to his table in the corner. Just as the vixen had predicted, the coffee had gone cold. The manager provided another as Jack went through the rest of the files one by one.

His desktop picture was a dark starry sky, dark enough that he could see the mirror in its reflection. Through the mirror could just make out part of the vixen outside the window. She was directly facing the mirror as she leaned beside the window, but her eyes were on her phone. She was holding it horizontally. Like a camera. Right at the mirror, through which she could almost certainly see the screen of his laptop.

He jumped out his chair and raced to the door. The vixen was gone by the time he'd barged out the door. He looked up and down the street. He looked in the alleyway. He even looked through the window at his laptop, but the flash drive was still in its port.

"Drat."
Forced to give up, he leaned against the window, hoping the vixen was either a reporter or just being nosey.
Beside the large pond Savanna Central Park was a short stack of wide flat stones on which a podium stood. Behind the podium stood Mayor Swinton. Instead of her favorite red cardigan and simple white dress she was clothed all in black, for not much time had passed since her father's passing. Today she was wearing a plain pearl necklace, but above her mayor's badge was the only piece of jewelry she wore on a daily basis, or so Benjamin had guessed from seeing her on the news all the time. It was a heart shaped brooch as big as her fist, formed by encrusted rubies. It was a family heirloom, according to that one news article about an attempted mugging gone bad.

She wasn't alone on the rock. At one side was Assistant Mayor Carlton Woolton, the other her campaign manager, the horse Mr. Oates. A massive crowd of reporters and cameramammals had formed, clicking and flashing before the current mayor had even begun to speak. There were civilians on the outskirts of the small park, all prey of course, with three exceptions; Benjamin himself, and his two vulpine friends leaning against a tree far from the crowd, trying to stay unnoticed.

When Mr. Pottermass had brought Benjamin with him, it had confirmed to the cheetah that his new job in Pottermass Manor was nothing more than a publicity stunt. Why else would Pottermass insist that Benjamin stand behind him as he sat at the line of VIM seats beside the mayor's rock, in clear view of the cameras? In the other seats were Bisoniing and Llamadaeus, trying to pretend that there wasn't a predator behind them.

Surrounding the park and the rock were officers of the ZPD, not including the newly promoted Judy Hopps. He'd spotted a tiny figure with long ears leaving the precinct earlier, climbing into a patrol car and taking off. There was no sign of the police captain he'd met at the party. The gorgeous one who aced *Clair de Lune*. Bogo.

A hush fell over the crowd. The mayor was about to speak. Benjamin wondered if she was going to bring up the issue concerning the shifting public opinion of collars.

"Good morning, Zootopia." Her cool, clear voice sounded strange coming from the microphone. Usually she smiled when she spoke, but not today. "As you all may be aware of, it has been two weeks since my father, former mayor Theodore Swinton, passed away. Though the loss has been painful, and will continue to be painful for a long time to come, I am happy to announce that it will not stop my campaign for reelection. I am grateful for your continued support in this undertaking. Before I continue, I would like to express my thanks to Mr. Pottermass, Mr. Llamadaeus and Mr. Bisoniing for their own support, especially on the day of the funeral."

Benjamin remembered the funeral making headlines. Swinton had insisted on the funeral being a private affair, with only a select few attending the burial. All attempts by the paparazzi to sneak some unwanted photographs had been thwarted with extreme prejudice.

"Now, I am well aware of the issue on everyone's minds. I am aware of the numerous accidents plaguing our city. I am aware that TAME Collars are increasingly taking the blame for those incidents. In the coming weeks, my first priority will be to determine if the collars are indeed to blame, and if so, to formulate a solution. Believe me when I saw that we have everything under control, and we understand what is best for Zootopia. And what is best is to declare the collars innocent until proven guilty. In one week a thorough investigation will be taken to find the truth, but no matter what is uncovered, please understand that my father invented the TAME Collar for a reason."
There was a lot of murmuring in the crowd when Swinton paused. More than a few faces looked at Benjamin, who tried not to show how uncomfortable he was feeling. The faces showed the same thing: fearful disdain. Benjamin didn't want to be here anymore, but he couldn't leave without Pottermass saying so. What he wouldn't give for a big box of donuts right about now.

"There is another reason… the collars are not just for prey's safety, but the predators as well. Should they ever lose control, they're as much a danger to themselves as others. Understand that they are as much a part of the city as we are." Benjamin was sure he'd just seen Finnick gag, but he couldn't be sure from this distance. "In fact, one of my supporters and a very close friend of mine, Mr. Pottermass of Zoocell, has recently decided to support Zootopia's very first predator run clinic, which will open its doors at the beginning of next week."

There was some shocked whispers, some applause, and a lot of cameras turned toward the two foxes beneath the tree. Both of them looked ready to run for it, but squared their shoulders and stayed put. Benjamin gave a small smile of pride at the two of them, and hoped they could see it.

After that, the speech moved on to what every campaigner said; Swinton's service as Mayor of Zootopia was more than enough proof that she had the leadership qualities to continue her rule. She understood the people, and wanted nothing more than to see them prosper. Any and all votes would be most appreciated.

After that the speech was over, and Pottermass gave Benjamin a message to send to Nick before giving him the rest of the day off. Benjamin walked off the grass onto the pavement that bordered the park, and soon felt his phone buzz as he received a text.

[Give me strengthen. C u at wooly coalbox.]

Benjamin giggled to himself. Autocorrect was and would always be one of Finnick's greatest foes.

There was a bus stop outside of Zootopia Central Station. Benjamin walked over to it, wishing he could stop by the little ice cream shop he'd spotted on the way to the park, but knowing he would get nothing but an icy reception.

He leaned against the pole, wondering why he was feeling so down. Swinton's speech hadn't given anything resembling bad news. In fact, it wasn't anything he hadn't already known. Maybe it was the fact that he was in the very heart of the city, where predators were as welcome as a fly in your bluegrass soup. Even so he wished he could see more of the place. The skyscrapers here were like works of art, the gold and glass spiral by far his favorite.

Maybe it was the fact that he didn't get to see Bogo again. If true, then he was being silly. Putting aside that he was a buffalo and a police officer, they'd only spoken for a few minutes, and even then he' spent most of their time playing the piano while Benjamin listened. Why was Benjamin still thinking about him, even now?

"This is bullshit." Someone spoke harshly, making the cheetah's head turn. Beside one of the bulky advertisement stands close to the bus stop were three mammals, a disgruntled zebra eating a moss sandwich, a brown horse eating fries and a donkey with fries and a soda bottle but having neither. "Even after what happened on the bridge they're still trying to defend those stupid collars?"

"They're not stupid." The donkey grunted, with a slight slur that made Benjamin doubt that the bottle was actually full of soda. "They're the only things keeping us safe."

"Bullshit." The zebra muttered.
"Who's to say that the collars are totally to blame?" The horse asked through a mouthful of fried grass. "Maybe there's a defect of some kind, or even sabotage?"

"That's not the point." The donkey said. "And what about that shit about a predator clinic? Don't they realize the potential issues of that place being run by a fox? They're servants of the devil, doesn't everyone know that?"

"Oh god, not that 'foxes are red because they were made by the devil' crap, again." The zebra groaned.

"It's not crap! It's the word of the Lord!"

"The word of the Lord of Bullshit, more like."

"Shut the fuck up!" The donkey lashed out, sending the zebra's sandwich and his own fries flying. The sandwich flattened against the bus stop sign above Benjamin, and the cheetah backed away to avoid mayonnaise dropping on his head. When he looked back towards the trio, the horse was struggling to keep the zebra and donkey apart.

"ZPD! What the hell is going on here?"

Benjamin froze. No way. Clichés like this only happened in rom-coms. But there he was, striding out the station with a badge in his hoof. Following behind was a lady buffalo holding two cups of coffee.

"Come on, fundie! Take your best shot!" By now the zebra had backed off, leaving the donkey to struggle against the bigger mare.

"Nobody is taking shots at anybody! Stop it!" Bogo barked. He wasn't in uniform. Instead he was in a tight black t-shirt that had Benjamin's heart thumping.

Don't be ridiculous. He's a buffalo. Get over it, Benji.

"That stripy little prick insulted my faith!" The donkey yelled.

"Oh, Christ." Bogo glared at the mammal. "One of those guys, huh?"

"He used hate speech! Arrest that fucker!"

Bogo female companion caught up. "Hey, lay off the righteous anger, why don't you?"

"Stay out of this, Kathryn." Bogo said. "I'm off duty spending quality time with my sister right now so I'm going to assume you mammals aren't friends and tell you to go your separate ways. If anyone has other ideas, the station is right over there." The horse cautiously released the donkey, who glared at the zebra but wisely stayed put.

"Good. Now break it up and go home. Don't make me call for backup."

They broke up, the zebra and horse going one way and the donkey going another. Not wanting to get caught staring, Benjamin looked back towards the road.

"See, this is why I don't believe in God." Bogo muttered.

"Every side has its idiots, Mansa. Even the atheists. At the end of the day, God has nothing to do with it." Kathryn replied. "Now take the damn coffee before it gets cold."
They walked past the bus stop, seemingly not noticing the cheetah, and headed in the direction of the nearby Museum of Natural History. When he was sure he was beyond their peripheral vision he finally turned his head to look at them. The lady, Kathryn, now had her arm linked around her reluctant brother's. "Kathy, I'm sorry if I've been a bit of an ass today."

"Hopps?" Kathryn asked.

"She's grown a few brain cells since that little incident, so no."

"Nightmares?"

"Not every cop gets PTSD, Kathy."

"Cunninghorn?"

"Ding ding, we have a winner."

"Oh God, what has he done now?"

"Only made himself the only other candidate for Chief of Police. If I don't take the job when Trunchbull finally retires, he will. But on the other hoof, I'll have to do it-"

Bogo stopped talking. Benjamin realized with a jolt of irrational terror that the police captain had spotted him. He tore his gaze away, pretending that he had just seen a bus approaching. Oh thank you, God.

"Mansa? What is it?" Kathryn asked.

"Nothing. It's nothing, Kathryn."

" Seriously, what is it? Is it Cunning- wait a second. That cheetah…"

Oh cripes.

"Kathy, we only have the one day together. Can we please just hurry up and get to the museum?"

The bus pulled up, and as luck would have it, it was the one Benjamin needed.

"But isn't he the one you were talking about?"

"Don't care." He replied quickly.

"Alright, alright. Let's go Mr. Grumpy-guts."

Benjamin climbed aboard, ignoring the look on the pig driver's face as he paid the fare and took his place in the front of the bus. When he'd first started taking the bus by himself, Finnick had explained that the reason predators were seated in the front was so they couldn't attack anyone from behind. He'd then called the law bullshit, just like nearly every other predator-oppressing law in this city.

One good thing had come out of that near-encounter; it was too early to say for sure but Bogo had probably made it easier for Benjamin to get over him.

He reached Wild Clinic about an hour later, just as the smaller foxes was finishing up cleaning the windows. The night before, someone had sprayed FUCK OFF FOX in bright red paint.
"Assholes." Finnick was grinding his teeth as he wrung his sopping wet, crimson stained cloth over the bucket. "Hey, Benji."

"Hi, Finnick. Where's Nick?"

Nick came out at that moment. "Making sure those jerks didn't deface anything on the inside. Something tells me this is gonna be a recurring problem."

"How about a little something to raise your spirits?" Benjamin asked.

"A blueberry muffin?" Nick asked.

"A beer?" Finnick asked.

Benjamin rubbed the back of his head. "I would have brought you something, but Mr. Pottermass wants me to personally give you a message. Now that you've fulfilled one of his conditions by showing up to the speech, he's prepared to send somebody to act as your security, as per his other condition."

"Oh joy." Finnick groaned.

Nick tapped him between the ears. "It's better than no security at all, Fin. And when we open you're on collar duty."

Benjamin tilted his head. "Collar du-"

"Nurse duty!" Finnick snapped. "It's called nurse duty, you idiot!"

"Ooooh, I get it!" Benjamin grinned. "You mean Finnick looks after the collars when you take them off to examine the patients!"

"Yes, that's right!" Nick said a little louder than necessary.

"Collar duty. Dumbass." Finnick threw his cloth into the bucket. "So when's this new bodyguard coming?"

"Noon."

"That's a few minutes from now!" Nick's ears pricked, as did Finnick's. A moment later Benjamin heard the sound himself; a car was coming.

When the car came into view, he thought that Pottermass himself had come to visit. The car was as dark and shiny as black ice. As soon as it pulled to a stop in the middle of the parking lot, two polar bears clambered out and Benjamin felt a chill so sudden and severe that he shivered.

"Ooooooooooofuck." Finnick fur shot up on end, as did Nick's. "That is not Ray and Kev."

"Ben, get out of here." Nick said.

"What? Why?"

"Just go!"

"Not so fast." Said the bear who had emerged from the drivers' side door. "Nicholas Wilde?"

Nick loosened his tie. "Uh, who wants to know?"
"I'm getting my bat." Finnick whispered and started for the van nearby. Immediately the second bear blocked his path.

"Stop right there, short bread."

"Easy there." The first bear said in a friendly tone. However, he didn't look friendly in the slightest. "We're just here 'cause Mr. Big wants to make ya an offer."

Mr. Big? Who was he? Judging from the horrified look on his face, Nick knew.

"Wha-what kind of offer?" Nick stammered.

"Protection." The bear was grinning with malice now. "This place, a clinic run by predators, is the first of its kind. A place like this is gonna need protection. Wouldn't want anything to happen to it, ya know."

"Excuse me." Said a third voice, surprising everyone. "But you two appear to have skipped school before they could teach you how to blackmail someone properly."

They all turned to see the newcomer; a short tigress who had silently walked up beside the car without anyone noticing her until now. She was dressed in bland black clothes, but her features more than made up for it. She was so beautiful even Benjamin was feeling hot under the collar. The two bears seemed to agree, for the moment they set eyes on her their expressions turned from malicious to lecherous. Both their collars beeped.

"And what's that supposed to mean, sweet thing?" The first bear asked.

The tigress regarded him with frigid amber eyes. Benjamin felt another chill as he looked at them. Were her pupils always that narrow, or what she ticked and now showing it? "Mr. Pottermass has already arranged protection for this clinic, and if you think he's going to take someone extorting his investment lying down then you're thicker than the fur on your arse."

"Is that right?" While the first bear spoke, the second moved away from Finnick and inched himself behind the feline. Neither fox had the courage to move. Benjamin stared at the feline, wondering what he should do and terrified of making the wrong choice. "Well, what's to say we can't make an arrangement? Guarding a clinic's a lot more dangerous than mammals let on. You never know when some junkie's packin' heat."

"I think I can manage." The tigress replied snidely.

"It's bottom feeding extortionists like you and your boss I'm more concerned about."

Both bears stopped smiling. Suddenly the bear behind her hooked her arms and held her against his body. "You sure got a pretty big mouth." The first bear said as he advanced on her. Finnick ran to get the bat from his van. Benjamin started to pull out his phone while Nick started to protest.

"Pickup lines. Guh. That's the worst one this week." The tigress spoke.

Then she lifted both legs up and kicked the bear clear across the tarmac. In the second it took for Benjamin to register what had happened and freeze, she then threw her head back into her captor's snout. He staggered back with a broken nose before she whirled round and socked him in the jaw. He fell to the ground, conscious but in agony. Meanwhile the first bear clambered to his feet, deterred from retaliating by god knows how many ribs the feline had broken.
"I don't like males who play rough." She flexed the fingers of the fist she'd just punched someone with. "But for their sake, I'm going to let you go this time. Now go back to your master and tell him to bugger off."

The first bear snarled at her, but did the smart thing and dragged his bleeding companion back to the car.

After the car sped off, the tigress turned toward her dumbstruck wards. "Well, when I decided I wanted to give you boys a demonstration, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind."


"Mr. Pottermass didn't mention he was sending a predator." Benjamin said, or at least he tried to. The 'demonstration' had left him at a loss for words, but fortunately Nick said it for him.

"He didn't want to risk a prey guard scaring off paying patients. I believe you've been informed that Zoocell will be covering my fees."

They nodded.

"So what exactly are you gonna be doing?" Nick asked. "I'll mostly be standing by the door, making sure no-one tries to sneak in and steal some painkillers. I'll also be taking care of any unruly patients or anyone who tries to leave without their collar. That's about it, unless there's anything else you need."

"Your phone number."

Nick swatted Finnick's ear. "He means your details, Miss…"

The tigress chuckled. "Zoocell will send my details through your fax. And my name is Cheryl Ransome."
Judy II

Judy was practically skipping out of Precinct One with the arrest warrant in one paw, and the address from the license plate in the other. In her pocket was a brand spanking new wallet. She was in such a good mood that she'd stopped caring what had happened to her old one. She'd never told anyone she'd been pickpocketed. She'd be the laughing stock of the precinct if she had. Whoever had taken the wallet would get his, she could count on it.

The owner of the car was Jerome Murphy, a gerbil from where else but Little Rodentia. Judy had been very thorough in making sure she had everything she needed before requesting the arrest warrant. She'd pored over the traffic cameras until she'd found at least two feeds showing that jerk and his friends pulling the same dangerous prank not just on Mr. Wilde, but a hapless wolf as well. Both times it had occurred next to a busy road. If it hadn't happened already and she didn't know it was connected, a tragic accident was only a matter of time.

She had just reached the bottom of the stone steps before a shout made her stop. "Hopps, wait up!" She turned to see Higgins stomping his way down the steps after her. Judy felt annoyed at herself. She'd almost left her temporary partner behind. Bogo had told her she needed to learn to work as part of a team, and already she was screwing up. Now wonder she'd spent so long writing parking tickets.

"Sorry, Sergeant."

"Don't be. I was excited when I made my first arrest." Higgins said as he reached her. He looked apologetic. "Look, the citizens of Little Rodentia may not be too happy to see you after the last time you were there, so you should probably let me do most of the talking."

Judy sighed and wondered if she was ever going to live that down. "Yes, Sergeant. So how are we going to actually apprehend this guy?"

"I called ahead to Precinct Five. They should have Mr. Murphy ready and waiting for us at the gate when we get there."

"Good job, Sergeant." Judy tried not to grimace. Why hadn't she thought of that?

But before they were even in the car, Higgins received a call on his radio.

"Sergeant Higgins? This is Sergeant Small of Precinct Five. The suspect you're requesting isn't at home, and he's not supposed to be working today."

Judy had a bad feeling. "Is his car still there?"

"What was that? We didn't catch it."

Higgins bent down so the radio was closer to Judy. "My partner's asking if his car is still there."

"No, it isn't."

Judy turned her eyes to Higgins. "He could be planning to assault another predator. We need to find him, fast."

Higgins shrugged. "He could be anywhere in the city. Unless you've got any ideas, Hopps."
"I do. Murphy and his friends appear to have a favorite victim."

"The fox?"

"Mr. Wilde, yes. He's the only predator they've targeted more than once, and according to his file he'll be leaving for work today in…" She checked her watch. "About one hour and twenty minutes. I think that would be a good place to start."

"Sounds like a stakeout is in order." Higgins didn't look as excited as Judy felt. "I'll get one of the unmarked cars. You radio Bogo and tell him there's been a change of plan."

"Will he authorize a stakeout?"

"There's no time. He'll understand."

Higgins strode off to find a car while Judy radioed Captain Bogo. Just as Higgins predicted, Bogo immediately authorized the stakeout, citing that the risk of the gerbils' stunt leading to another traffic accident was high. His tone was edgy, but that didn't worry Judy too much. If she'd done something to upset him, she'd know.

She received a call from Higgins directing her to a plain white car. She found him waiting for her in the driver's seat.

Alright, I'm driving." Higgins said as he lowered the window. "Where is his address again?"

"Wait a minute, why can't I drive?"

Higgins raised his eyebrows and gestured inside. Judy's ears went flat when she saw the size of the seat. And the steering wheel. And the pedals. "Unless you've got an Ant-Mammal Suit tucked beneath that uniform, you should probably leave the driving to me."

Says the hippo rumored to keep an elephant gun in his basement, Judy thought as she begrudgingly walked around the car to the passenger side door, ignoring the hippo's chortling at his own joke.

The drive through the streets was quiet, the mammals within surrounded on all sides by the muffled sounds of the city outside. Before the first corner they turned to leave the square road, Judy spotted a caribou in a black suit leaning against a bus stop, checking his watch. "Did you ever find the panther that attacked Mr. Antlerson?"

Higgins took a few seconds to answer, eyes focused on the road. "No. There wasn't a damn trace, not even at the fishery."

"Oh, sweet cheese and crackers. A savage predator like that, it's amazing there hasn't been another incident." Higgins grunted, frowning. "What is it, Sergeant?"

"I'm not I sure be saying this to you, Hopps."

"We share the same office, Sergeant. If there's something fishy going on, maybe I could help."

Higgins tapped the wheel with a wide, stubby finger. "We're not so sure it was a savage attack."

"What?"

"So far we've seen no sign of a savage predator, and the only evidence we have it was a savage is the assistant mayor's word."
"What about the injuries? Surely there are photographs."

"That's the thing." Higgins finally looked at her. "The captain's sister is convinced it wasn't a feral animal that attacked the caribou."

"His sister?"

"Kathryn works in the ER at Tundratown Hospital. She treated Antlerson herself. She said the injuries don't match those from previous savage attack victims. She reckons the poor bastard was attacked with a knife, and perhaps some sort of mechanical weapon. After seeing the photographs for myself, I'm inclined to believe her."

"Where is Antlerson now?"

"That's what got the Captain on edge. Before we could question him about his suspicious injuries, Antlerson disappeared right after being discharged last night. Apparently he's on paid leave while he finishes his recovery, and guess who told us that?"

"… Assistant Mayor Woolton."

By now they were close to their destination. Judy recognized the street they were driving down to be the same one she always took on her way to stake out Wilde's apartment in the hopes of catching the gerbils red-pawed. "I don't trust his word any more than I trust those creepy square eyes of his."

"Sergeant!"

"Hey, McHorn and Bogo feel the same. Woolton's lying but without Antlerson we can't prove it. Alright, we're here." The hippo brought the car to a halt on the side of the road. "Which apartment building is Wilde's?" Judy pointed to the shabbiest one. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Could you move the car so we can see the bus stop nearby? Wilde uses it to get to work, and Murphy will try to get him while he's standing still."

"Didn't the other victims get attacked at bus stops?"

"Yeah, they did."

Higgins smirked. "I'm beginning to see why they assigned you to us."

He inched the car backward until they could see the bus stop. "Well, would you look at that? You were right, Hopp's." He nudged the rabbit and pointed. A tiny red car was parked beside a trashcan between them and the bus stop, conveniently out of the line of sight of anyone who would be waiting for the bus. Judy counted four gerbils. Murphy himself was at the wheel.

"That's definitely the one?"

Judy looked through her personal binoculars. "13GER81. Yes, that's the one."

"Perfect. We'll get the whole thing on dash cam." Higgins muttered. "And now we wait."

Judy stared when he pulled out a large handgun. "Don't worry, it's just a replica. I field strip when I'm idle."

He started doing just that, expertly dismantling the gun while Judy watched.

"In a car?"
"That's right."

"Over and over?"

"I'm sure you have a strange habit or two yourself."

Judy meekly apologized and turned her eyes back on the little red car and its oblivious passengers.

Judy expected them to be waiting in silence, but it wasn't too long before the hippo spoke up again.

"Hopps, what do you think of all this anti-collar sentiment going around?"

Judy crossed her arms and thought. She'd been so caught up in her excitement at finally becoming a real cop that she'd never really thought about the collars until now.

"Um… my parents think abolishing the collars a bad idea."

"Never mind the parents. I'm asking for your opinion." By then Higgins had completely reassembled the replica handgun. Despite herself, Judy was a little impressed. Her firearms were far smaller, but it still took her ten minutes on a flat table to do what Higgins had just done.

"I'd never really thought about it until now." She admitted. "They're right about these accidents being a problem, but I've read the surveys and it appears that the number of accidents per year has not actually increased."

"You're right." Higgins said, nodding. "A hyena's fur catches fire from a collar-produced spark, that's an unfortunate accident. A collar causing a massive pile-up on a busy bridge is an unacceptable catastrophe. Is it so irrational that mammals are now demanding that the TAME collars be banned, or at least replaced with a safer alternative?"

Judy shook her head. "I guess not. Do you think the collars should be banned?"

"I think they should be replaced with some kind of safer model, but not banned outright. They were invented for a reason." He paused. "It's the captain who thinks they should be banned outright."

Judy leaned forward. "Captain Bogo? I don't believe it."

"I had the same reaction a few weeks ago. Bogo's a real stickler for rules. Always has been. He used to believe in the collars as much as the rest of us. But when you've been through what he has, well, it can change you."

"What happened?" Judy asked, her voice softer.

Higgins cleared his throat. "It was back when he was a sergeant, like I am now. We received a high priority call concerning a domestic disturbance in the Sahara Square Marketplace. This elephant apparently took way too many drugs and started trashing everything and everyone. Bogo and McHorn answered the call, and I tagged along as backup. By the time we got there, the marketplace was a wreck, and this elephant, some dumbass in a green tracksuit, was freaking the hell out. You know, screaming and stomping and swinging his trunk like a firehose. Anyway, we took cover behind our car while McHorn got out his rifle to put a dart in the maniac and put an end to it. But then Bogo noticed something out of place; some kind of fluid was coming out the sides of his head."

He stopped speaking, his eyes hardening suddenly, and pointed. Nicholas Wilde was approaching the bus stop. Judy looked back to the gerbils; Murphy was starting the car. She reached for the
door handle, but Higgins held out his arm.

"Hold on. I've got a better chance of stopping that car if they make a run for it."

Judy scowled. "But what am I supposed to do?"

Higgins pointed through the windshield again. "See how this street has only two exits? While I confront the perps, you go on ahead and block that exit so they can't escape that way. You got that, Hopps?"

Wilde reached the bus stop. Judy swallowed her pride. "Yes, sir."

"We'll wait until the dash cam sees them aim for the fox. Go as soon as I open the door, and don't let them see you." Judy poised herself as Higgins gripped his door handle, staring out the window at the gerbils. Then he opened the door, leaning back so Judy could leap across his lap and onto the sidewalk. She raced for the end of the street, turning her head to see Higgins emerge from the car himself and approach the gerbils as they prepared to speed right towards the tail of the oblivious fox. There was a quiet rumble as the tiny engine roared. The gerbils sped towards Wilde. Higgins shouted for them to stop. For a horrid moment, Judy thought she was about to see the poor fox's tail get crushed again.

Then she saw the smirk on Wilde's face. In the split second before the red car could run over his tail, Wilde leapt up onto the pole. Startled both by Higgin's shout and the fox's unexpected dodge, the car hit a crack in the sidewalk and swerved right off the curb. Judy saw tiny rodents go flying over the steering wheel and bouncing on the tarmac.

Higgins reached them before she did. He bent over the squirming perps, laughed and gave a thumb's up. Apparently the only thing seriously wounded was their pride. She'd stopped near the bus stop, so she could hear their high-pitched curses and demands that they arrest the fox that caused their accident. Higgins rebuffed every single one of their protests, instead reading them their rights as he picked them up and stuffed them in a specialized segmented cage.

"Why the hell are you stalking me, Carrots?" Nick demanded from above, making the rabbit look up with a scowl. "What, fining me a quarter of a grand wasn't enough for you?"

Judy crossed her arms, her eyes tracking the fox as he slid back down the pole. "For your information, Mr. Wilde, I was in fact stalking these gerbils here." Wilde raised an eyebrow at her. "You know what I mean! They didn't seem to like foxes very much, so I figured they've come back here sooner or later."

Wilde looked suspicious. "What kind of excuse is that?"

"Putting aside your own actions, what they did to you and other predators is still assault. It's up to us from the ZPD to put an end to it."

"Put an end to making us chompers look like victims, you mean."

Judy tapped her foot. "A simple thank you would suffice."

Wilde leaned forward. "Thanks. Now stop following me."

She narrowed her eyes. "Gladly."

"Hopps!" Higgins was back inside the car, the cage containing Murphy and his friends safely secured in the back seat. "Come on!"
Judy looked away from Wilde to call back to Higgins. "Wait, what about Wilde's statement?"

"Obviously ask him if he wants to come down to the station with us!"

"Yes, sir!" When Judy turned back, Wilde had vanished. She looked from left to right but saw no sign of the fox, not even the tip of a furry dark tail disappearing around the distant street corner.

She stomped back to the car, internally screaming all the way.
In the cheapest, filthiest room in the cheapest, filthiest hotel in Virginia, Alyssa Skyefall examined each and every snapshot she'd taken of the ZIA rabbit's data. Twelve snapshots in all, most of them concerning the 'deceased' Dr. Slothfeld and his coveted Data Disk. She'd looked over these snapshots half a dozen times now, but they all gave the same spiel; Dr. Slothfeld was formerly a distinguished scientist in Boarland until he came under suspicion of developing chemical weapons for terrorists. He'd died in a suspected suicide bombing before he could be formally charged, but if the information from that ZBI Llama was to be believed, reports of Slothfeld's death had been greatly exaggerated.

But nothing on Agent Cheryl Radames, the objective of Alyssa's personal mission.

Nevertheless, she looked over every image, every slightly blurry word, until she was sure she had left nothing out of her report to HQ. She typed in the most essential information first, that the ZIA had confirmed that Slothfeld was alive and undergoing a secret project somewhere in Zootopia. It was almost certain that the Assistant Mayor Carlton was involved if the incriminating email was anything to go by, which meant that the Mayor was possibly involved, too. The project was looking for candidates, which may mean that illegal mammal testing was involved. With Slothfeld's track record, the project was almost certainly a new chemical weapon, a weapon so powerful it warranted helping Slothfeld to fake his death and then ferry him to the other side of the planet. None of those things bode well for Animerica or Fengland. That made it all the more essential for them to find Cheryl, find Slothfeld and put an end to this project.

But there was nothing here about Cheryl! Alyssa gritted her teeth and dug her claws into her snowy scalp. She'd done a very risky thing tracking down Jack Savage to find out what he knew about Cheryl and Slothfeld. Even riskier was following him to that café and sneaking pictures of the laptop's reflection in that mirror. If there was any information on Cheryl Radames in that flash drive, she'd missed it when Jack had realized what she was doing and forced her to flee.

Her cellphone rang and she picked it up.

"Skyefall, it's Ryder."

"Honey." Alyssa recognized the blunt greeting immediately. With her free paw she sent the report and closed the laptop. "What's the sitch?"

"Haven't heard from you in a week. Just wanted to make sure the sheep didn't get ya."

Alyssa laughed. She turned away from the laptop and approached the cheap coffee pot on the counter nearby. "No, they didn't. Did you find out what Trevelyan was doing here two years ago?"

"Hold up!"

Alyssa stopped in the middle of starting the coffee making process. "What for?"

"You know what for."

Alyssa groaned and leaned against the counter. "Really, Honey?"
"You have a voice modulator, don't ya? How do I know it's really you?"

"The modulator is only activated by my voice, you know that."

"But you're not the only who has a modulator. Cheryl had one when she disappeared, remember?"

Alyssa bit her lip. "Honey…"

"Why is six afraid of seven?"

"Oh god…"

"Why is six afraid of seven?"

Alyssa shook her head, exasperated. "Because seven is a prime number and prime numbers can be intimidating."

Honey chortled. "Love that show."

"Can I debrief you, now?" Alyssa picked up the kettle and filled it with questionably clean tap water.

"I spent three days hacking the system to find this information, so I expect a substantial payment when you get back."

"Let me guess. A giant Horsey bar?"

"One for each day I spent finding this info for you. I only spent eighteen hours of the third day, so you can have a quarter of the last one."

"How very generous of you." Alyssa set the water to boil.

"Hey, I'm a greedy guts! Whaddya want? Anyway, Trevelyan came to Zootopia to make a delivery to a certain doctor."

"Slothfeld?"

"Nah, a different doctor. Dr. David O. S. Cogsworth. A goat." Honey's voice dripped distaste. "He's one of the best engineers in the country, and he wanted some special parts off the black market. That and he's a friend of Dawn Bellwether."

"That's Mayor Swinton's rival in the election. But isn't Trevelyan an arms dealer?"

"That's his key niche. But he'll sell anything for the right price."

"What does this have to do with Slothfeld?"

"Nothing, but it has a lot to do with Cheryl."

Alyssa's heart leapt. She pushed herself off the counter. "And?!"

"A few months after the sale, Cogsworth died in a car accident. No faked death here, FYI. Anyway, Cheryl was investigating Cogsworth's death when she disappeared. Before she went MIA, she wrote a report that never made it to HQ. Instead she passed it on to an acquaintance she'd been cooperating with, who then disappeared along with Cheryl and his wife. The happy couple
"happened to be clients of mine."

"Who are they?"

"Seriously? I put their info in the flash drive!"

"Oh. Sorry, I haven't read all of it, yet." She'd been too busy observing Agent Savage.

"Anyway, their names are Gabriel Mossberg and Starlight Foxtrot. They're pretty decent mammals, not counting the kickassery and espionage. Less than an hour ago, I received a call from Gabe. He sounded pretty freaked out. He said he managed to escape from whoever captured him and the others a few months ago, but he's been hiding from them ever since."

"What about Cheryl and Foxtrot? Are they okay?" She then held her breath.

"He doesn't know. He'd been trying to get back to his wife, but there's no way to get her and Cheryl out on his own. Alyssa, he needs our help."

"What're you waiting for? Arrange a meeting!"

"Ok. I'll call you back in a few."

Alyssa whirled round, her heart pounding as she stared at the steaming water inside the glass coffee pot. This was the biggest lead since Cheryl disappeared. The first time she'd had hope that they'd find Cheryl alive. Cheryl had taught Alyssa everything she knew about being a predator in the spy business. Cheryl was her friend.

A knock on the door popped her bubble. There was no way in hell she'd have visitors. Could the manager finally have gotten fed up with having a fox for a guest?

It could be Agent Savage. The thought made Alyssa freeze on the spot. If that black striped, crystal blue-eyed rabbit could hunt down and capture Trevelyan, he was more than capable of hunting down and capturing her. Perhaps even capable of making her suffer a little for making him look a fool.

But knocking on the door was a little bold for a spy, wasn't it? This was the spy with the brains and the brawn to kill two dozen thugs in one night.

The mystery visitor knocked again. Alyssa put her phone on the counter, strode over to the door, pulled up a stool to step on and looked through the peephole.

In the dimly lit corridor outside stood a sneering woodchuck flanked by a warthog and a zebra, all sporting cuts and faded bruises from their punishment in the alley several days ago. Except now they had bats.

"Bollocks." Alyssa whispered. Her collar beeped.

Even as she cursed, the woodchuck gestured to the zebra, who stepped up to the door. Alyssa jumped down and away from the door as it started quaking under the zebra's rear hoof.

Get your gun, you twit!

Cheryl's angry scold jolted Alyssa into action. The screws of the hinges began to come loose as she dived under the hard tiny bed and grabbed the silenced pistol she kept hidden under there. If a traditional asskicking hadn't scared them off for good the first time, maybe this would.
Now that she could back up on it, maybe a threat alone would end this before they even broke the
door down.

"I've got a gun! I'm warning you! Get the fuck out of here!" She quickly checked the gun to make
sure it was okay to fire.

"Nice try, fox!" Was the response from the other side of the weakening door.

Alyssa contemplated firing at them. They would not be her first kills. Then she realized that didn't
make it any easier just yet. That and there was nothing in this room that a warning shot wouldn't go
through and kill an innocent mammal.

Think, think! What would Cheryl do?

"What would I do to avoid needless killing? If you have to choose between fight or flight, pick
flight first. Unless your mission is to kill someone. Well then, tough titties."

Alyssa quickly shifted herself over to the closed laptop as the invaders continued to kick at the
door. If she was going to run for it, the laptop was the only thing she could take with her. As soon
as it was safe, she would have to come back and expunge everything in the room, pawprints, DNA,
belongings, everything that could be traced back to her and her organization back in Fengland.

She supposed it was a good thing in this case that the hotel was so shitty even the windows on the
fourth floor could be opened.

She was curling her arm around the laptop when the door flew open with an earsplitting crash. The
three would-be muggers stormed into the room, and then they stopped dead when they saw the gun
in Alyssa's paw.

"Fuck me, she wasn't bullshitting!" The zebra hissed. He lowered his bat and ran.

"Fuckin' pussy." The woodchuck muttered.

"Nope, just smart." Alyssa steeled herself and aimed her gun right at his face. Behind her, she
heard the water bubbling in the coffee pot. "If you know what's good for you, you'll follow his
lead." She didn't expect her threat to sound so cold. Maybe she was in control after all. She just
needed to remember to fake a wince if her collar turned red.

"Yeah right, like a mousy little thing like you could seriously shoot me! The woodchuck laughed.
Either he had an ace up his misshapen sleeve or he was a colossal wanker.

Alyssa reminded herself that a warning shot was too risky. "I beat your arses back in that alley with
my bare fists. Do you really want to call my bluff when I've got a gun in your face?"

Even the warthog holding a bat longer than Alyssa's body looked like he was thinking twice.

"I had to go to a job interview with two black eyes 'cuz of you!" The woodchuck shouted. "That
asshole thought I was some kind of raccoon hybrid freak!"
"That's what you get for trying to mug random strangers."

"Bitch, if that gun were real, you'd have used it by now! And besides… mine's bigger than yours!"

Alyssa had been too focused on the woodchuck to notice the warthog pull out a magnum from the
front pocket of his hoodie and begin to aim it at her. Fuck!
His fear of Alyssa's own firearm had made him too slow. A shift in aim and a bullet to the hoof put the odds back in her favor. The warthog screamed and dropped the weapon. "You shifty bitch!" The woodchuck swung his bat. Alyssa leapt back and felt the tip of the weapon skim her stomach before hitting her wrist and making her drop her own gun. The warthog collapsed to his knees, clutching his wounded limb, in too much pain to join the fight. Alyssa felt her back bump against the counter and heard the boiling water right by her ear. She bent her knees and waited for the woodchuck to swing again. He swung. She ducked and rolled at just the right moment, grabbing her gun on her way back to her feet. The woodchuck was pulled forward by the weight of the bat and collided with the counter. She took a moment to kick the magnum away from the sobbing warthog before aiming at the woodchuck.

"Do you think I'm kidding now, you wanker?" Alyssa snapped. "Get the fuck out of here before I shoot you, too!" She stepped away from the door for good measure. The warthog took the hint and staggered out, leaving a trail of blood behind him. Alyssa wasn't too worried. There was a small hospital not far from here.

As for the woodchuck, all the cruel bluster had gone out of him. He was cornered against the kitchen counter, the gap between them too wide for him to attempt another swing. It took a moment for the reality of the situation to sink in before he dropped his bat and put his paws up.

"I-I'm sorry. I'll go. I wo-"

"Shut up and leave." Alyssa gestured with her gun to the door. "And make sure you and your boys leave me the fuck alone, because next time, I won't let you walk away."

"You… you're not just some whoring vixen, are you?"

"Thought you realized that in the alley."

"Jesus Christ, what the fuck are you?!"

The counter was against the thicker outer wall, so it was safe enough to shoot the coffee pot beside the woodchuck. He shrieked both from fright and hot coffee splashing his body.

"I won't tell you again!" Alyssa snapped.

The woodchuck ran past her and out the door, leaving the bat behind.

Alyssa poked her head out and watched him sprint down the corridor and catch up with the warthog. Both of them disappeared into the elevator. The arctic fox exhaled, holstered her weapon, and returned to the counter to pour some water into the mug she'd intended for the coffee. She drank the whole thing to steady her nerves, then filled it again. Then she took the toilet paper from the tiny bathroom, went out into the corridor and wiped away the trail of blood and coffee left behind by her attackers. Judging from how the trail ended a few feet from the elevator, the warthog had managed to stem the flow of blood, so she wasn't worried about the incident being discovered any time soon. There were also no security cameras, or even other guests on this floor for that matter. And she'd used a silenced handgun, which sounded more like an obnoxious tapping sound than a gunshot when fired. There was still time to clean up the mess.

On all fours, she followed the trail all the way back to her room, cleaning as she went, until she crawled backwards through the doorway and shut the door behind her. She wiped the remaining blood and coffee off the floor and tossed the tissues in the tiny wastebasket beneath the counter. She cleaned up the glass shards, making sure to get every last one of them. Then she put on some latex gloves and tossed the bats out the window into the alley below.
She wasn't worried about the bullet holes. They weren't the first holes to riddle this decrepit place. The manager was unlikely to notice two more.

Alyssa wiped her prints off every surface in the room, wrote a note apologizing for the broken coffee pot, and left it on the counter along with fifty dollars just as Honey called her back.

"Honey, I've just had to deal with the biggest wankers I've ever met. Please give me some good news."

"Don't tell me the sheep are on to us!"

"No, they're not!" Alyssa took a deep breath, regretting her snippy tone. "Sorry, Honey. Did you speak to Mossberg?"

"I've managed to get in touch with Gabe. He says he'll see you."

"But?"

"I told him you were in another state right now. He didn't want to travel too far from where Starlight and Cheryl are being held, so I agreed to wait until you got back to Zootopia before arranging a meeting."

"Tell him I'm on my way."

"Will do. And look, don't worry too much about Cheryl, okay? We'll fix it."

Alyssa nodded even, though Honey couldn't see it. She slipped the phone into her pocket and reached for her laptop once more, more than ready to leave behind this whole kerfuffle with cowardly thugs and superspy rabbits with big blue eyes.

It was time to leave.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, Mossberg and Starlight are both OCs of Fazbear300.
Nick III

There was an added bonus to Wild Times even Nick had never seen coming. Not until its grand opening.

When they weren't putting the finishing touches on the park and maintaining the rides, they had spent the past week putting the word out that there was more to the new pred-run clinic than what meets the eye. They'd been damned careful about it too, telling only the acquaintances they were sure wouldn't sell them out to Mr. Big or anyone else, and left it to them to spread the word from there. Mr. Big's goons hadn't bothered them again after their brush with new security guard Cheryl Ransome. Nick suspected that Koslov had warned the shrew off in his typical Koslov way after the fox had told him what had happened.

As a result, there was no trouble at all when Nick finally opened Wild Times, nearly a week after the opening of the clinic. There had been a minor setback concerning the Roar-A-Coaster, which wound up working in the fox's favor as he'd taken the time to get used to running the clinic and its marvelous equipment. Pottermass had sent him the best of the best, just as he'd promised.

The park became a hit, way faster than they had ever anticipated. The very first visitors had been some hesitant locals worried that they'd fallen for a dumb joke. Then they'd seen the Coaster, and just like that, they were hooked. Word spread faster, and the visitors kept on coming. A few at first, then more, and more, a never-ending army of paying predators. Because he had a cover to maintain, Nick had seldom ventured down to the warehouse during the day, instead staying up above in the clinic tending to predators who genuinely needed tending to. Any visitor looking for a good time simply had to say the phrase, 'I got a wild kink in my neck' and Nick would remove the collar and keep hold of it after he sent them down the proverbial rabbit hole. Beside the chute was a set of stairs the visitors had to ascend to collect their collars when it was time to leave. Nick was setting money aside to build an elevator for visitors who may in future need it. The management of the park itself was mostly left to Finnick until sunset and Nick would come down to take over for the evening. Every other night Honey would venture out from her bunker to help with maintenance in exchange for a small share of the profits.

Cheryl never left her post outside the clinic door. It turned out that there was no need to worry about predators leaving without their collars. They no longer even needed to worry about prey mammals sneaking around to vandalize the property. When Nick mentioned to Finnick that Cheryl never left her post, he meant she never left her post. Unless of course she needed to go to the public restroom on the edge of the parking lot. She didn't talk much nowadays, not since her skirmish with those polar bears. She just observed. In fact, she seemed to be observing Nick and Finnick just as much as she observed the customers. It was a little unnerving if Nick was honest, but she did her job and she did it well. As for Benjamin, he was still completely in the dark about the clinic's true nature, and as much as he hated to do it, Nick had managed to keep it that way.

Wild Times was making him a fortune. He'd expected that much. More than enough to pay Koslov back within a month at least. He'd hoped that much. What he hadn't anticipated were the visitors' responses to the fox himself.

It was the night that Nick was due to make his first payment to Koslov. It was also the busiest night so far, and the park was completely packed. The fox was striding through the main pathway through the park towards the fire exit. So he wouldn't arouse suspicion by showing up near the clinic, Koslov had agreed to Nick's suggestion to meet him on the isolated road beneath the cliff, not too far and not too close to the warehouse. Nick was on his way to the meeting with a wad of
Nick had slowed down and listened. The voices became more distinct and clear. "Hey, Mr. Wilde!" This. "I'm definitely coming back here!" That. Then there was, "You're the best of the best, Wilde!"

Nick had been so happily bewildered that he'd almost stopped dead. Every single voice was singing his praises. They were praising the fox who started all this. Threats and insults and distrustful questions were a dime a dozen. Not here. Not in Wild Times, which was built solely to give the predators everything they'd been denied their entire lives.

Nick was still grinning when he reached the road beneath the cliff and spotted Koslov's limo. One of the windows rolled down as he approached, spewing white mist. Nick hopped up, grabbed the bottom of the window and propped himself up with his arms. Koslov was sitting in his usual seat, a bucket of ice and champagne at his side. He lifted his face out of the shadows and locked cold eyes with Nick.

"Ice to see you." Nick held out the cash. Koslov took the money wordlessly and counted it. Nick relaxed when he saw a small smile tug at the polar bear's mouth.

"Promising, Nicholas. Very promising." Koslov tossed the money to a second polar bear, Raymond, who tossed the bills into a suitcase already containing a small fortune. No trussed up weasel this time, thank god. "But now that you are underway, you'll have to be careful. Zootopia is like little baby. Does not like to be changed."

"I'm a small-time fox in a big prey world. I couldn't change this shithole even if I wanted to. Don't worry about it, I know what I'm doing." Nick said with a wave of his paw. "Once I pay off your debt, my weekly payments will go down by half. That's the agreement, right?"

"It is." Koslov looked away with a scowl.

Nick felt a cold chill and he lost his grin. Then he felt an instant of pure terror when the big bear grabbed him by his tie and pulled him into the car. But Koslov simply sat him on the seat right in front of the champagne bucket.

"Er, if you've had a change of heart, I guess I can-"

"Quiet." Koslov ordered. Nick shut up. "Has Mr. Big's men been bothering you recently?"

"Not since our new security guard beat the shit out of them."

"Good, good…" Koslov's frown deepened. "I fear he may be making his big move."

"Oh dear." Nick replied. If Mr. Big knew about Wild Times, that could be bad for his business.

"Raymond and Kevin received disturbing news from their mole in the Sahara Camel Toe Gang." Koslov stopped when he heard thumping coming from the other side of the partition window separating the passengers from the driver. "Raymond, please explain while I check on my son." He tapped on the window, which rolled open. Morris's little white head popped up and held up a handheld console.

Raymond started speaking, drawing Nick's attention away from the father and son. "They decided to move their drugs lab to a more isolated location. Half a dozen camels were sent up to Founder's Mountain to scout out an old cabin that hadn't been used in decades. During the night, something happened. They went up to the shack the next morning and found the lab equipment ripped to
pieces, with blood everywhere." He paused. "But no bodies."

Nick pictured it in his mind and swallowed back bile. He shivered as the cold air washed over him. "What makes you think it's Mr. Big?"

"Mr. Big is the only boss other than Koslov who hires bears, and there's no other mammal in the city capable of butchering like that." Raymond lowered his voice as Koslov gave the little cub in the driver's compartment some advice on how to defeat Bowser. "And it sure as hell wasn't Koslov's bears."

"But slicing and dicing isn't really his thing," Nick said. It's more your thing, he thought but didn't dare say out loud. "I always heard that he was more or an icing kinda guy."

Koslov reached through the window and patted his son on the head. "Now, now, moy khoroshiy. Papa's working. We will defeat Bowser when we're back home." Morris pouted, dropped out of sight and closed the window. Koslov turned back to Nick. "Mr. Big is using scare tactics. By killing differently, he incites fear in his opponents without incriminating himself. But he will not declare open war. Not yet. Not until he is sure of victory."

"Are you going to declare open war?" Nick asked. It was no secret in the underworld that Koslov believed one of the other bosses to be responsible for the disappearance of his partner, Sedor, the great grizzly Nick hoped he would never meet. The polar bear hadn't acted against them only because he had no proof, but it was only a matter of time before his infamous thirst for vengeance got the better of him. Nick would stay the hell out of his way when he did.

"Two bears do not live in one lair," Koslov said simply. "But in the meantime, stay out of trouble. Keep your business secret. Keep it safe. There may come a time that we will need the money you provide us."

Meaning that one day I'm gonna get caught up in a fucking gang war. Fuck me.

Koslov handed him a business card as big as Nick's head. It was the card for Koslov's Palace. "If Mr. Big attempts to extort you again, if Pottermass's tigress gets wise, if a cop gets nosy, call this number and I will make sure it is the last time they ever bother you."

Nick swallowed again. "Yes, sir." He pocketed the card, hoping he would never have to use it, and put on his best hustler grin. "But back to Wild Times. You should take your kid and come see it sometime. It's a bigger hit than we ever hoped for, especially the coaster. After I've paid off your loan, I'm thinking of putting money aside to expand the place. Maybe even add an elevator to bring in handicapped visitors."

"About that..." Koslov leaned back and put one leg over the other. "Have you heard the other rumors?"

"What other rumors?"

"About the collars. Word is, if the collars continue to cause accidents, the government will abolish them entirely."

Nick grimaced. He hadn't thought about it much until now. If collars were abolished that would be great for the predator community. Fucking fantastic. But for Nick personally, it would mean that practically all of the money Koslov loaned him would have gone to waste. He feared to think what this meant for his business, and his wellbeing.

"Tell me, Nicholas." Koslov went on. "If the collars were to be abolished, how would you adapt?"
Adapt? Nick was too nervous to think about it. "I-I don't know."

"Hrmmm…" Koslov changed legs. "Tell me this, then. Was I the first mammal you approached for the loan?"

"No, sir." Nick said.

"And why did the mammals before me reject you?"

"Before they said it wasn't safe to remove collars expect for medical reasons."

"And because it is technically illegal." Koslov said, nodding. "Hence the clinic. Does it not occur to you, Nicholas, that if collars are abolished, that they will no longer be able to use this excuse?"

"Sir?"

Koslov tilted his head. "I know what you are thinking, Nicholas. I have done much thinking on this myself. But this possibility changes nothing. The only difference it will make is that you will no longer have to hide. You have proven you can run the clinic, and the park both, with minimal staff. It will be easier for you if the park becomes public and you can hire more staff without fear of being exposed and arrested, will it not?"

"It would…"

"Then let us hope those collars keep causing accidents." Koslov picked Nick up by the collar and lifted him outside the open window. "Until next week, Nicholas."

"Hang on a sec!" Nick struggled to speak with Koslov holding the back of his collar and the front of his collar pressing into his throat. "A chunk of your loan went to the measures I took to keep Wild Times a secret! That's gonna go to waste if the collars are abolished! Doesn't that bother you?"

Suddenly there was a shout from the driver's compartment. "Yes! Yes! I gotcha, Bowser! I gotcha!"

Koslov chuckle at his son's antics, but lost the smile when he looked back to the fox dangling from his grasp.

"In less than five months, Morris turns five. That's how much the wasted money bothers me."

He dropped Nick on the tarmac and closed the window. A second later the limo drove off, leaving the fox alone to think of what his own Taming Party was like.

He had no idea back then. None of them did. Dollars to donuts Morris didn't either.

When Nick saw Officer Hopps again the next day on his way to quit his shitty Bug Burga job, he initially thought he was cursed. But the cute little bunny was sitting alone on a table outside an ice cream parlor, her squad car parked on the side of the road nearby, scooping up strawberry and vanilla flavored balls of goodness. She hadn't noticed him as he stopped on the pavement just before the parlor. She was on her phone, sounding exasperated as she talked to the mammal on the other end.

"Yes, mom, I know it's my cousin's fifth wedding… No, I can't just take a week off to go… Maybe next time, for the sixth wedding… But mom, you know it's true. No matter how many guys she marries, there'll always be someone richer… Mom, it is exactly like that!"
Nick rolled his eyes and turned to walk back to the zebra crossing he'd passed just before, when the rabbit said something that stopped him dead.

"Have I arrested that fox ye- how did you-" Hopps slammed the spoon on the table. "How did you know about that?! Tell me now… Send him home. Now. I don't care if it's dangerous, it's my job and I love what I do! And as for that 'fox,' I was only staking out his apartment so I could catch some dangerous drivers red handed! They'd been running over predators' tails and deliberately setting off their collars… No, mom, what they were doing was dangerous! I'm just glad I caught them before they could go after Mr. Wilde again!"

Nick turned back around and stared at the agitated bunny. Was it true? Had she really been telling the truth the last time they'd spoke?

"If I catch him following me around again, I swear to the Lord Almighty that I will knock him out and drag him back to Precinct One. Is that clear?" Hopps relaxed at whatever her mother said. "Thank you. I'm sorry I yelled… I'm still not going to the wedding. I can't. We don't get along anyway… Thank you for understanding, mom… No, I haven't found my old wallet yet… I love you too. Goodbye."

Nick frowned and pulled out the missing wallet with three quarters of its cash now spent. When he'd picked the little thing to get back at her for fining him, he'd felt great. Now he just felt shitty.

Nick saw that one of the squad car's windows was slightly open to keep the interior from getting too hot. He made a quick calculation in his head. From his own wallet, he pulled out the exact amount of money he'd taken from Hopps's wallet and slipped it inside the smaller item. Then, when Hopps momentarily went inside the parlor to pay the bill, he sauntered past the squad car, on the side with the open window, and tossed her missing wallet through the crack.
"Chief Trunchbull does know that Mansa's a better cop that Cunninghorn, right? He knows that." McHorn was growling into his coffee.

"He knows, Mac." Higgins kept his eyes on the report he was typing up.

"Well then, Higgins..." McHorn glared at the hippo. "Would you mind explaining to me why the hell Cunninghorn got promoted to Commander of TUSK instead of Mansa?"

Higgins rolled his eyes and looked away from his computer. "Mac, you've been griping about that every day. I swear to god you've said more words in the few days since the promotion than you've said in a whole year. I agree with you, but for god's sake shut up already."

"I'll shut up when he stops rubbing Mansa's face in it."

"Mansa doesn't care. He told us the day of the promotion that he's happier where he is."

"Working with us dime-a-dozen cops. And a bunny rabbit. He can do so much better and he knows it."

Smirking through his open office door at his coworkers, Bogo finally decided to speak up. "I can hear you, you know, and working with Hopps isn't as bad as it once was."

"Sorry, boss." Higgins went back to his typing.

"Shutting up, now." McHorn did the same. "Where is Hopps, anyway? She's got her own report to write."

"She finished it the day after I caught those gerbils." Higgins said. "We're short on cases right now, so she's practicing her gun maintenance. If I didn't know any better I'd say she's trying to break my record."

McHorn gave an amused snort. "Good luck with that, Hopps."

Bogo chuckled in agreement. Hopps was valedictorian of the Academy. She'd learned from her mistakes in the Rodentia Incident. She was following his advice on working as part of a team if the success of the gerbil arrest was any indication. But even she couldn't be the best at everything. If Bogo was the leader and McHorn was his second, Higgins was the weapons master. For now, Hopps would have to settle for being the rookie.

The intercom on his phone spoke. "Captain Bogo, Chief Trunchbull wants to see you and Lieutenant McHorn."

"Did he say why?"

"He needs your input. He'll explain when you get here."

"Tell him we're on our way." Bogo stoop from his desk and walked out his office and down to McHorn's desk. "The Chief called. He wants us both in his office now."

"Sure thing, Mansa." McHorn said. "I should have this report done when you get back." Higgins said.
Bogo never expected anything less. Together he and McHorn made the short journey upstairs to Trunchbull's office. Bogo raised his hoof and knocked. "Come in." Trunchbull called. Bogo opened the door and saw two mammals. At the large wood and glass desk sat Trunchbull, and opposite him sat Commander Cunninghorn.

Shit.

Stubby horned Frank Cunninghorn was as self-centered and self-serving as the Triumvirate that controlled this city. It was no secret that he had racked up more police brutality reports than any other officer on the force, even though many of them had been disproven or even outright vanished. There was even a rumor going around that his recent promotion from Lieutenant to Commander had not been Chief Trunchbull's choice.

Bogo clenched his jaw as he watched a superior smile form on the rhino's face. He'd never wanted the TUSK Commander position himself, but an elite team of razorbacks specializing in full-fledged assaults being led by a trigger-happy thug like Cunninghorn could only lead to trouble.

"Glad you're finally here, Captain Bogo." Cunninghorn with the biggest 'take that' grin that could be pasted on someone's face.

"I just want to know what this is about, Lieutenant."

The grin became a grimace. "It's Commander."

Not if Trunchbull had his way, you prick.

"Sorry, it's going to take me a while to get used to calling you that."

"Anyway..." Trunchbull said sternly. "The pair of you sit down. I want this resolved quickly."

Bogo and McHorn sat down on the other two seats.

"Ok, Chief. What is this about?" Bogo asked.

"Commander Cunninghorn wants to discuss the savage attack in the Canal District." Trunchbull said. "As your subordinate was one of the officers who responded to the call, I felt that your involvement was required."

Bogo scowled and traded glances with an equally confused McHorn. They knew for a fact that the Antlerson Case had occurred in Tundratown. "There's been another savage attack?"

"About an hour ago this morning. An otter snapped and tore his back yard apart. I expect you'll see the whole story on the news soon."

"Christ." Bogo muttered. Just when he was thinking Cunninghorn leading TUSK was the real issue here.

Trunchbull gestured with his trunk for Cunninghorn to speak.

"Sir, we need to make these incidents. The Antlerson Case, and the otter, our top priority." The cool, professional tone coming from the rhino didn't suit him at all.

"I should hope you already are, 'Commander.'" McHorn said. "You took the case from us weeks ago and you still haven't found Antlerson's attacker."

Cunninghorn glared in his direction but didn't retaliate. Not while they were in the Chief's
presence. "Not just a mammalhunt. I don't think patrolling the streets aimlessly is going to help us find this pred. There appears to be a deeper root to the problem."

"It might be a little late to bring in a psychiatrist." Trunchbull said.

"Not what I meant, sir."

"Then I don't follow you."

Cunninghorn leaned forward in his chair. "This all started round about the time that fox started his clinic. And I don't believe in coincidences. I want to send TUSK to check it out. Maybe he's tampering with the collars in some way or-"

"You want to conduct a full scale raid based on a hunch?" Bogo snapped in disbelief. "Do you have any idea how stupid that sounds, Cunninghorn?"

The rhino squeezed the arms of his chair as he glared at Bogo. "I don't hear you giving any ideas, Captain."

"I just don't see any need to harass a mammal's business just because they had bad timing, fox or not."

"Foxes don't have a great track record for honest businesses. Remember that one fox you caught smuggling drugs in knockoff handbags?"

"Yes, and he came quietly the second he realized the jig was up. Then I passed him over to you while I collected evidence, and before I knew it we were sending him to prison in a body cast."

"That's enough!" Trunchbull silenced them both. "Cunninghorn, Mr. Pottermass himself invested in this fox's business, on the recommendation of that cheetah he'd employed. He wouldn't have done so without a thorough background check."

Bogo felt a small flip in his stomach. That Clawhauser boy was associated with Mr. Wilde? He hadn't mentioned that when they'd met in Pottermass's library.

"Then we'll bring in the cheetah and get the truth out of him!" Cunninghorn said. "I don't trust that kid. He's too cheery."

Bogo bristled. "Let me get this straight. Mr. Pottermass himself handpicked Clawhauser out of hundreds of mammals under his company's employ. On Clawhauser's recommendation he personally invested hundreds of thousands in medical equipment to support the fox's clinic. And now, less than two weeks after the clinic has opened, you want conduct a raid… because the fox has the legal right to remove a collar?" He shook his head in disgust. "With all due respect, Commander Cunninghorn, you are an imbecile."

Cunninghorn fumed in his seat, his little green eyes fixed on Bogo. Again, he didn't dare retaliate in front of Chief Trunchbull.

"I will not tolerate insults in my office, Captain Bogo." Trunchbull said before turned to the angry rhino. "But he has a point. We can't risk Precinct One's reputation based on a wild guess. If we raid Pottermass's investment and it turns out to have no connection to the savage incidents, he'll have us all printing parking tickets."

"But sir-"

"I said no!" Trunchbull said with an edge of finality. "You are all dismissed, and until you find real
evidence, leave Wilde's clinic alone. That is an order."

Cunninghorn stood up and stalked out the office, refusing to look at Bogo as he left. With the rhino gone, Bogo and McHorn got up to leave as well.

"Oh, by the way, Officer Hopps." Trunchbull spoke up, stopping them. "How has her performance been recently?"

"A heck of a lot better since Little Rodentia, sir." Bogo said. "She's conducted four successful arrests since I took her off parking duty. I've been taking steps to make her improve on teamwork."

"And no-one under your command has encountered aggressive predator activity?"

"Nothing like what Antlerson went through, sir."

"Let's hope it stays that way. And Captain, have you thought any more about my offer?"

Bogo tried not to scowl. "I'm still thinking about it, sir."

Trunchbull nodded. "You have plenty of time to decide. I'm not retiring any time soon. Goodbye, gentlemammals."

Cunninghorn was nowhere to be seen when they finally left the office. He was probably already in his office by now, hating Bogo's guts more than ever.

"Don't know why he even bothered summoning me." McHorn was muttering. "He thought he might have needed your input." Bogo said. "Come on, let's get some more coffee before we head back to the office."

"Hold up." McHorn held up a hoof. "What was the Chief talking about an offer?"

Bogo paused. He'd refrained from letting anyone else know about Trunchbull's intentions for him, but he could trust McHorn not to give him the stink eye for it.

"He wants me to replace him when he retires."

McHorn raised his wrinkly brow. "Son of a bitch."

"And I still haven't decided if I'll accept."

McHorn started at him in disbelief. It slightly startled Bogo, who was used to McHorn rarely displaying any emotion other than anger, disgust, intimidation, sarcastic humor, or pride. "I'm gonna take a deep breath and ask why. Why haven't you decided yet?"

Bogo leaned against the wall. It was a good thing they were alone right now. It made it easier to speak his mind. "If I become Chief, I'd have to work closely with Mayor Swinton and her high class sycophants. I don't know if I can handle that."

"Says the guy who's handled two hundred thefts, fifty two assaults, thirteen murders, four suicides, and one serial killer in your captaincy alone."

"On the other hand..." Bogo continued. "If I don't accept, the position will almost certainly go to Cunninghorn. And it's bad enough that he's Commander of TUSK right now."

McHorn leaned against the wall beside Bogo and started drumming his fingers. "I'll ask again. Why haven't you decided yet?"
Bogo paused. "I don't know."

"If it's because you're worried you won't do a good job, then you're a dumbass." McHorn punched his shoulder for good measure. "You do this job better than anyone, I'm serious. Chief Trunchbull wouldn't pick you just because he likes you more than Cunninghorn. He trusts you. I trust you. You can do it."

Bogo finally allowed a small smile to cross his face.

"Tell you what." McHorn pushed himself off the wall. "If you haven't done it yet, do what you always do. After the shift's done, go to the Observation Deck, get some real fresh air and some peace and quiet, and think about everything you've done since we joined the force. Then decide if dealing with a bunch of swaggering bureaucrats every now and then really is that bad."

Bogo nodded. "I will, if you stop griping about Cunninghorn. I appreciate your loyalty, but if he catches you bitching about him behind his back, it'll just stir up more shit. Best to just keep it between me and him."

The Observation Deck was a short stretch of faded cracked tarmac on a cliff overlooking the three miles between here and the city. About two and a bit miles of forest and less than a mile of water was his best guess. The only building for miles around was right here, a public restroom that judging from the smell hadn't been cleaned in years. Mammals had stopped coming here frequently since a second deck was built closer to the city a few years ago, but the toilet was still used by travellers. The deck had existed since before Zootopia became a city. It was the only place that had gone completely unchanged since its construction. It was also quiet and isolated, a perfect place for a cape buffalo to be alone and think on things.

After Bogo brought his car to a stop in the small parking lot beside the Deck, he climbed out and took a deep breath. The air was cool, with a faint smell of pine coming from the trees around him, and none of the noxious exhaust. Founder's Mountain was beautiful tonight. The sky was ruby red, amber orange and deep indigo blue as the sun continued its descent down the horizon, bathing the trees and the distant skyscrapers in a warm glow not unlike firelight.

Twilight.

Bogo shut the door and made his way to the wooden rail at the edge of the cliff. He was close enough to the city that he could still access the internet on his phone. He did just that, accessing the online dictionary.

Twilight

NOUN

1 mass noun The soft glowing light from the sky when the sun is below the horizon, caused by the reflection of the sun's rays from the atmosphere.

1.1 The period of the evening when twilight is visible, between daylight and darkness.

2 in singular A period or state of obscurity, ambiguity, or gradual decline.

Bogo read the page over and over, gently humming an earworm under his breath. Sure it had been unlikely that Antlerson had been talking about that sparkly vampire rubbish, but the dictionary definition gave no better explanation as to why the caribou would say the word. Kathryn had
reported him saying it multiple times, as well as a desire to warn someone called Dr. Sloane… Slowfold… Slothfeld, that was it. Bogo would have to ask her again about the name, just in case she'd misspoken the name by accident. They'd looked up Dr. Slothfeld, but he had died in Boarland two years ago. Better yet, they would need to find Antlerson and try to get the truth out of him. Bogo had looked over the photographs of the injuries and compared them to photographic evidence of past savage attacks and knife crimes until he'd been fully convinced that Antlerson and Assistant Mayor Woolton had both been lying through their teeth.

But if it wasn't a savage panther that had attacked that caribou, then who was it?

Bogo put his phone away and rested his arms on the old and sturdy rail, humming *Always on my Mind* as he gazed upon the city and the trees and water in between.

Maybe McHorn was right. Maybe Bogo was being ridiculous about the whole Chief of Police thing. It wasn't like he'd have to deal with Swinton and the Triumvirate on a daily basis. Besides, better him that Cunninghorn. The thought of that bastard controlling Precinct One was too infuriating to imagine-

Bogo stopped humming when he heard something. He turned around and eyed the line of trees behind it. He was sure he had heard the distant howl of a wolf, coming from higher up the mountain. But what would a wolf, let alone anyone be doing way up there? There was only one road leading up the mountain, and only four places on the mountain someone would drive to. There was an abandoned lodge Bogo couldn't remember the name of. A cable car station nobody had used in years. An old lumber mill that was shut down after one accident too many. Finally there was Founder's Mount Asylum, which was closed down after the construction of Cliffside Asylum in the Meadowlands. But none of those places warranted going to, and he was fairly certain entering them was illegal.

Bogo was retrieving his phone from his trench coat pocket when the police beat him to the punch. His phone started ringing as he stared into the darkening trees.

"Mac? You chose a hell of a time to call."

"Mansa, another pred just went crazy."

"God damn it! What now?"

"A polar bear went nuts and flipped a car."

Bogo didn't know what was going on, but he didn't like it. And as much as he hated Cunninghorn and his vicious methods, they had one thing in common; he didn't believe in coincidences either. "This is getting ridiculous. I'm not saying I'm agreeing with Cunninghorn, but I need to talk to Trunchbull, see if he'll let me send someone to pay Wilde's clinic a visit."

"Who're you gonna send?"

"Hopps. She's dealt with that fox before. If Trunchbull allows it, I'll send her to check the place out. Make sure nothing's amiss. We need to get to the root of the problem before someone gets killed."

He hung up and took one last look at the trees. The forest was dark but peaceful. Even the birds were quiet. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

It was probably the birds. Bogo returned to his car and climbed inside. As he started the engine, he caught himself humming *Always on my Mind* again and stopped himself. "Get out of my head." He muttered irritably and got the car moving. While the car was turning in the parking lot the public
toilet building appeared in the rear view mirror. He spotted a figure in a muted dark green coat and a motorcycle helmet emerging from the male entrance and stopping to watch the car leave. He hadn't realized he wasn't alone up here.

Something glinted in the figure's hand, but he couldn't see what it was.

Bogo drove the car out the parking lot and sped up as he followed the road back to the city. Just as the Observation Deck disappeared from the side mirror, something occurred to the seasoned buffalo cop.

If that mammal was wearing a bike helmet, then where was the bike?
Jack Savage very nearly reached for the third item when he emerged from the taxi to see a ram approaching him from the front steps of City Hall. Just in time he realized it wasn't Doug Ramses. It was Carlton Woolton, the Assistant Mayor of Zootopia, right hand of Mayor Swinton, and the only mammal Jack knew for certain had been in contact with the wayward Slothfeld. He was flanked by two rhinos in black suits and black sunglasses, who followed the smaller mammal as he reached Jack and held out a hoof. "Mr. Savage. I'm Assistant Mayor Woolton. Welcome to Zootopia."

Jack accepted the handshake, holding the briefcase close to his stomach with his other paw. He took note of how wide and strained Woolton's smile was. It made him look almost like a caricature.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Woolton. I assume the mayor sent you?"
"You assume correctly." Woolton replied. "She herself had assumed that you would want to meet with her as soon as you arrived."

Jack nodded. He had a little present he wanted to get into the mayor's office as soon as possible."Will you be escorting me to the meeting?"

Woolton nodded back. "She's reserved a table in Tiana's Palace for three-thirty. Mayor Swinton thought you'd appreciate a good lunch after coming all this way."

Jack raised his eyebrows. Sucking up already, was she? Then again with her family legacy on the line, it would have been surprising if she didn't attempt a little brown-nosing. Besides, Jack hadn't eaten since breakfast. "Thank god. I'm famished."

"Ramon will deliver your luggage to the Palm Hotel for you in the meantime." The left rhino stepped forward.

Jack nudged the suitcase forward. "I'd rather keep my briefcase close at hand if it's all the same to you." Woolton nodded. "Of course. Ramon, Palm Hotel, room one-thirteen." Ramon took the suitcase, holding it in one massive hoof like a cigarette case, and strode off. "The limo's waiting for you outside. Shall we, then?"

The drive took them from the concrete jungle of Savanna Central to the gentle downpour of the Rainforest District. The pitter-patter of the artificial rain and the lush green foliage was a sight of wonder for normal tourists, but they put Jack ill at ease. His enemies could use the rainfall to cover the sound of movement. The leaves and bark provided the perfect camouflage. Jack had learned that the hard way; he'd completed precisely two missions in this type of environment. The first had been a surveillance mission on some rebels scouring the market for nuclear weaponry, and the second had been an old fashioned hunt for a terrorist who'd tried and failed to assassinate a cabinet minister. Both missions had almost been his last. Once he arrived at Tiana's Palace, he'd eat his lunch and then he'd get the hell back to the urban streets. He'd feel better then. A clear head made for an easier mission.
The car stopped outside a restaurant that looked like it had grown out of a massive gnarled tree. The second rhino wordlessly opened the door, his face stony as he watched the rabbit climb out. Woolton held an umbrella over them both as he led Jack inside the restaurant. Unsurprisingly Tiana's Palace lived up to its name. Thanks to a trick of the lighting, everything inside from the tables to the curtains looked like it was made of gold. He spotted Swinton sitting at a large circular table in a corner of the room that had been placed further away from the other tables, accompanied by Mr. Bisoniing, Mr. Llamadeus and Mr. Pottermass. "Oh, good grief."

"Is there a problem?" Woolton asked.

Jack didn't insult the ram's intelligence by lying. "You didn't mention that this dinner would be attended by the masters of the universe."

"Apologies, it slipped my mind. The outcome of your investigation affects all their businesses, so Mayor Swinton thought it best to invite them to speak with you."

The maître de, a prim and proper deer dressed in black and white, escorted them to the table. Swinton smiled and stood up as they approached, her jeweled heart brooch glinting in the lamplight. "Mr. Savage. Welcome to Zootopia."

Jack shook hands for the second time since his arrival, then the third, and then the fourth as the Triumvirate greeted him one by one. The fifth, Mr. Pottermass, had a smile as wide and fake as Woolton's. "Madame Mayor told me you'd be here for three weeks at most."

"As long at it takes to get to the bottom of this whole palaver." Jack said. He scrutinized each mammal carefully as he sat down in between Pottermass and Llamadeus, directly across from Swinton. None of them looked genuinely happy to see him, but none of them looked particularly suspicious either. For the time being, his cover was safe.

"That will do, Woolton." Swinton spoke. "Go back to City Hall, and make sure Llater has all our data delivered to Mr. Savage's room before three."

"Yes, Mayor Swinton." Woolton turned on his heel and saw himself out, followed by the second rhino.

The smile Swinton gave Jack when she turned back to him, reminded him strongly of the Moona Lisa. She kept her eyes on the rabbit, not even acknowledging one of the waiters as he filled her glass with blood red wine. "Don't worry about the bill. I'll cover all of it."

Jack merely nodded. He knew what she, what every mammal on this table was trying to do. They all had some kind of stake in the TAME Collars. Bisoniing's retail stores, which he had taken over after the original owners become the de facto rulers of this city, also sold the medication which supposedly helped to suppress the primal emotions that caused predators' collars to trigger. Llamadeus's Zootopia News Network produced most of the propaganda surrounding the collars. Hausen Security, one of the businesses under Pottermass's control, produced the current TAME Collar model, the model causing all the present strife to be precise. As for Mayor Swinton, it was her father who invented the collars in the first place.

In short, each and every one of them had something to lose.

So it was no wonder that they'd decided to greet a visiting government agent with a high-class lunch. Jack wondered how many of them knew about Dr. Slothfeld, and what it meant for their future if they did. When the gazelle waitress arrived with champagne, she filled Llamadeus's glass first before doing the same for Pottermass. The hippo drained it in one go, requiring the waitress to
do a refill before moving on to Jack. "I'll be hosting a charity ball in four days." Bisoniing said. "It's a relatively new charity. We're raising money to support mammals affected by all these collar accidents. I'll send you an invite."

"I appreciate your generosity, but I would much rather visit the ZPD. I want to see their reports concerning all these incidents, especially that pile up on Iceberg Arch." Jack said. While he was at it, he would also see the reports concerning the missing predators Felix Llater had brought to the ZIA's attention.

"Of course, of course." Swinton said. "I'll have Chief Trunchbull see to it personally."

"In the meantime, I'll get you a VIP pass for ZNN." Llamadeus propped himself on an elbow as he looked down on the striped bunny. "I'll have my PA take you on a private tour behind the scenes. You'll be here for three weeks after all, and you know what they say. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"Will I be getting a sneak peek of tomorrow's news, as well?" Jack asked. "I assume the story of those gerbils being imprisoned for deliberately triggering collars and endangering civilians will never see the light of day."

Llamadeus frowned at Jack's tone. "Mammals get convicted every day. They're rarely worth a headline."

"Indeed." Jack looked to Swinton. She still bore her Moona Lisa smile. "What BPM is required to trigger the collar?"

"Depends on the predator." The pig said. "The menus will be here in a moment. Just relax and enjoy your meal."

Enough, Jack thought.

"Let's get something straight, Mayor Swinton. I'm not a politician and this is not a vacation. This is a serious investigation into the safety and necessity of the TAME Collars. The United States Government that I represent is deeply concerned. Three weeks from now, if I'm not convinced, they're not convinced. They'll have the collar laws repealed."

The table fell silent, even as the sound of clinking cutlery and indiscernible chatter echoed all around. Swinton's eyes glinted like Shuriken, but her smile never faltered. "Pardon me for wanting to make a good impression, Mr. Savage."

"I'm sure he didn't intend to sound ungrateful, Miss Swinton." Pottermass said. "Three weeks from now, he'll see that his precious inspection is a waste of time. Now enough of this talk of dodgy collars. The menus are here."

Swinton looked up, ready to receive her menu. She stiffened. Her smile finally vanished. "Oh, look. The muttonchops have arrived, too."

Jack blinked and looked behind him. During their conversation the closest table had been cleaned and prepped for the next set of diners. Now the maître de was leading a diminutive sheep in large orange glasses and several bigger rams and ewes to be seated. Jack immediately recognized her as Swinton's rival in the reelection campaign, and wondered if the little sheep's arrival in the same restaurant at the same time was coincidental. He stayed silent and still while the other mammals at his table grimaced and glared in their opponents' direction, intrigued as to how this would play out.

"Mayor Swinton." Dawn Bellwether said, her voice as sweet as a honeycomb crawling with bees.
"Miss Bellwether." Swinton put a smile back on her crimson lips as she returned the greeting. "I didn't expect to see you here, today."

"Well, if your mayoral campaign was garnering as much attention as mine, wouldn't you want a break?" Bellwether replied as she sat down and a waiter filled her glass with sparkling white wine. "That's a pretty brooch, Miss Swinton. Doesn't quite go with your mayor's badge, but I doubt you will have to worry about that for much longer."

"The mayor's badge has been in my family for generations. It doesn't matter to me if it matches or not." Swinton replied cheerfully. "You might say it actually belongs to us in a sense. Gentlemen, doesn't her outfit look lovely? The cardigan, the glasses, the polka dots, that's not something you see every day, is it?"

"Not, it's not." Llamadeus smirked.

Bellwether's lenses flashed. "That truly is a magnificent brooch. Might even be useful as a bit of armor some day. My sources tell me there were two predators went savage not long ago. They're garnering more attention than the Iceberg Arch pileup."

"Yes, but they were both dealt with quickly and efficiently. You can thank the ZPD for that." Swinton said.

"Mayor Swinton and her Assistant Mayor are very close with the ZPD, Miss Bellwether." Bisoning said, grinning at Bellwether. Bellwether's own grin looked strained.

"I do not intend to let these incidents go ignored, Miss Bellwether." Swinton said. "In fact, Mr. Pottermass and myself have something in the works to prevent future disasters like the Iceberg Arch pileup." Jack's ears pricked. "Besides, the roads are dangerous at night regardless of the TAME Collars."

"The entire city will be dangerous at night if we don't start thinking outside the box, Miss Swinton." Bellwether said. "Who's to say that whatever you have in mind will actually improve the situation? Eweope had obviously lost faith in your collars, otherwise they wouldn't have abolished them. I say the problem lies with predators themselves."

"Talk like that will ensure you never win the election, Bellwether." Swinton sneered. "Then again the city would always look dangerous to your kind."

"Your father bore similar sentiments, do you not recall?" Bellwether asked. "Maybe you're not your father's daughter after all. Then again, you wouldn't want to be like him in the first place, would you?"

Swinton somehow maintained her smile, even as her lips pressed together to form a line a thin as piano wire. Jack could see anger building in her eyes, threatening to erupt. He was impressed when she spoke without so much as a tremor. "I'll admit that my father wasn't perfect. Nobody's father is. But he raised me well and that's all that matters. I'll thank you if you keep that in mind when you remember your own father, Bitchwether."

Bellwether and her cohorts gaped, but Swinton had turned her full attention to her menu without another word. Jack and the other mammals at the table took that as a cue to do the same. They didn't address their rivals again for the remainder of their time at Tiana's Palace. They made their orders and chatted until their meals arrived. They talked of the improvements made to the city since Swinton's ascension, Swinton's progress in the reelection campaign and the unusually sudden increase in savage predator incidents. At one point Jack apologized to Swinton for his earlier
rudeness and expressed his condolences for her recently deceased father.

When he inquired about Swinton and Pottermass's plans, they explained that they were developing a revolutionary new collar that would no longer require the shock element that was the cause of the accidents. Jack asked if he could meet the scientists and engineers developing this mysterious collar, but they refused, not wanting to risk the information getting into the hands of corporate spies. Naturally, this only served to make Jack very interested.

He ate his lunch and took his leave, citing that he wished to freshen up in his hotel room and then begin his investigation as soon as possible. After arranging to meet Swinton in her office tomorrow morning to discuss the matter more thoroughly, Jack accepted her offer to escort him to the Palm Hotel in her own limousine. They walked out the restaurant, ignoring the glares from Bellwether and her cohorts as they passed their table.

Twenty-five minutes later Jack was in his hotel room, unsurprised that Swinton had arranged to place him in the Presidential Suite. His suitcase was waiting for him as promised, looking like a glasses case on the massive bed. On a small table was a large cornucopia full of expensive shampoo, cologne, and the biggest vegetables Jack had ever seen. He checked every single item for bugs, both biological and electrical. Then he scoured the rest of the room, finding a bug in the telephone, one of the lamps beside the bed, and on the underside of the dressing table in the corner of the room. When he checked the frond-shaped wall lamps, he found that two of them had hidden cameras. In the bathroom he found another bug concealed in the showerhead and another camera in the ceiling lamp. He gathered every single item, wrapped them in a towel and stamped on the bundle until he was sure every last one of them was broken. Then he threw them in the trash and picked up the telephone.

"Assistant Mayor Woolton? This is Savage."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Savage?"

"You can tell me why my suite is crawling with bugs."

The line was silent for a moment. "I'm terribly sorry. I'll have you moved to another room straight away."

"I'm talking about electrical bugs! Someone's trying to spy on me! You and Mayor Swinton wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"I'm afraid I don't. We'll get to the bottom of this, I assure you."

"Good. I've destroyed all the bugs and cameras I've found, and now I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and not immediately report you for spying on a government agent. But I'm warning you, this had better not happen again."

"It won't, Mr. Savage. We will find out who did this."

"Thank you. Goodbye." Jack hung up. "Well, that takes care of that."

He knew better than to think he was invincible, but it was very unlikely that Swinton or her cronies would try for him at any point. Their situation was too precarious. If anything happened to him, the government would be on their butts faster than a car careening into a storefront. The ZIA and the ZBI already knew City Hall was harboring a supposedly deceased sloth suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction. For the time being, Jack was safe.

But just to be extra safe, there was one more thing Jack needed to do before he could begin the
mission.

He set his briefcase on the coffee table and opened it. He lifted out the paperwork that served as a cover and removed the black panel to access the equipment concealed inside. He pulled out a tiny thin camera shaped like a disk. He hopped up and stuck it to the peephole in his room door. Now he could see if anyone was approaching his room even if he was on the far side of the city. He planted a second camera inside a large plant on the balcony, the only other to get into the room, just as he heard a knock on the door.

Jack tapped the face of his watch, opening the screen displaying the camera feed. Felix Llater was waiting out the room. The rabbit strode up to the door and let the undercover ZBI agent inside.

"I've destroyed all the bugs, Llater. It's safe."

The llama raised an eyebrow when he saw the rabbit. "Huh. He wasn't joking."
"About the ZIA agent being a rabbit?" Jack tried not to scowl.

Llater looked rightfully embarrassed. "In my defense, he sounded like he was joking."

"He just thinks it's a joke that a rabbit joined the ZIA." Jack didn't know who the 'he' was, and he was long past caring.

"After how you pulled off the Trevelyan mission? What a narrow-minded nitwit. Anyway, I have the data you requested." The llama immediately presented a black briefcase as tall as Jack.

The llama frowned. "Including the one in the showerhead?" Jack nodded. "Good. What idiot puts a bug in a showerhead, anyway? The only thing they'd hear is shitty karaoke."

Jack smiled at the joke. "I also called Woolton to warn him against planting any more. So far as they know I'm a distrustful government agent who just caught them invading his privacy, so they'll definitely be thinking twice."

"All the same, make sure you check the place after each time you go out. The mayor's scared shitless that her family legacy will be destroyed if the inspection doesn't go well." Llater said.

"Anyway, the data."

"Thanks." Jack couldn't hold the large briefcase, so he let Llater place it on the coffee table. Meanwhile the rabbit procured a bottle from the cornucopia and filled two glasses. They wouldn't have even known about Slothfeld if it weren't for that llama. He'd earned a taste of fine wine.

Jack gestured for the llama to sit down. "Have you got absolutely everything?"

Llama accepted the glass. "Not everything that could blow my cover. I couldn't risk it. Everything in that briefcase is everything Swinton wants you to see."

Jack wasn't surprised. "So have you uncovered anything else since the email?"

"Very little that will help you find the doctor. Almost squat if you ask me." Llater admitted with a sip. "I'm starting to think I got lucky when I intercepted that email. Almost like someone wanted it seen."

Jack sat on the couch opposite Llama. "Better than nothing at all. What did you find?"

"I haven't found anything that proves that Swinton is in on it, but I managed to eavesdrop on Woolton in his office, arguing with someone over the phone about the escaped test subject."
Jack froze in the middle of sipping his own wine. "Test subject?"

"Apparently there was a problem at the place where Slothfeld's working on his project. I didn't get any details, so I'm not sure if it was a predator that escaped confinement or a field test that went to pot. In any case, they sent some goons out to retrieve the predator, but all they came back with was a caribou carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey. No prizes for guessing which poor bastard nearly bit it."

"Antlerson."

"Bingo."

"But what was Woolton doing there?"

"Probably went to oversee the retrieval operation." Llater paused. "The conversation got pretty heated. Woolton had tried to pass off Antlerson's injuries as a savage attack, but it sounds like the surgeon who treated him didn't buy it."

"Did you get a name?"

"Kathryn Bogo, and that's why Swinton's so upset. Kathryn's the older sister of a ZPD captain, and now him and his crew are doubting the cover story."

Jack gulped down the burning drink as he considered this information. "I'm going to speak to both siblings. I want to know what made the sister realize Woolton was lying."

"I can run it by the mayor. Have Chief Trunchbull arrange a meeting."

"And be careful." Jack added. "Woolton and maybe Swinton may be going down for this, but Slothfeld's the priority. If we jump the shark and make some arrests without first apprehending the sloth, he'll disappear along with whatever he's working on. More than anything we need his Data Disk."

Llater frowned. "So for now, we're going to do nothing about the assistant mayor? What about those savage attacks?"

"They're savage bull. A bunch of predators just happen to get the primitive crazies at the same time a government agent comes to Zootopia to inspect Swinton's precious TAME Collars? Not a chance in hell. In any case, the ZPD can handle that."

"I suppose."

Jack sensed the doubt in his ally. "Look, I want to stop these incidents just as much as you do, but arresting Woolton won't guarantee that there won't be any more in future. I have to find the sloth who's developing whatever is making the predators go savage. It's the only way to be sure."

Llater nodded. "You're right. And I guess it's up to me on my end as well. If I learn anything helpful, you'll be the first to know."

"Do whatever you can, just be careful. You did good with that bug, but don't push your luck." Jack placed his own empty glass beside Llater's.

"When you find Slothfeld, you might find capturing him easier if I come with you."

"Out of the question. You have your cover, and I have mine." And besides, years of dealing with
his coworkers had taught Jack that he was better off working alone.

Llater smiled slightly. "You might want to know that we identified that vixen who sneaked a peek at your laptop. Alyssa Skyefall, ZI6."


Jack grimaced, feeling that familiar flame of anger and embarrassment. "So she'll be coming to Zootopia at some point. She might even be here right now."

"Hold on. She's a predator, but as ZI6 she's technically on our side. Don't get mad if you see her face again."
Jack stood up on the couch, his scowl becoming a smirk as he gradually realized what this meant. "I don't get mad. I get even." Llater looked bemused as he watched the rabbit drop down from the couch and walk out onto the balcony. The afternoon breeze stroked his face as he gazed at the beautiful city skyline, that sharp arch known after sunset as the Mountain of Light.

"Alright, Miss Skyefall. Let's see who gets to Slothfeld first."
Judy stopped the car on the last bend in the road before the parking lot where Wilde's Clinic was based. The last time she'd set eyes on the lot during her stint as a meter maid the place had been empty. Now she counted at least fifteen cheap looking cars and one bang up van, none of which were occupied. Even more curious was that despite the numerous vehicles, she didn't see a queue of predators outside the tiny building. She wrote down the suspicious sight in her notebook so she wouldn't forget it in the report later before getting out the car.

She trotted down the road to the parking lot, the cool breeze of Savanna Central stroking her perked ears as she reached the clinic and approached the tigress guard Captain Bogo had told her about. Cheryl Ransome, he'd called her. He'd also told her that Mr. Pottermass had assured the ZPD that her background was as clean as a whistle.

Ransome tilted her head when she saw the officer. She didn't appear worried by Judy's appearance, but she didn't look surprised to see her either. "Top of the day, Officer Hopps."

Bogo hadn't mentioned the Eweropean accent. "Is Mr. Wilde in at the moment?"

"He's barely left since opening. May I ask what this is about?"

"Just a visit, nothing more." Judy assured her. She didn't mention that it would be an entirely different story if she found proof of a connection to the recent savage attacks. "Is he in?"

The feline nodded. "He may be busy at the moment, but I'll just let him know he has a visitor." Without looking away from Judy she knocked on the door three times. Judy felt a shiver at her eyes. She couldn't call it a glare, but there was something about Ransome's cold, hard stare that had the bunny itching to grab her fox repellent.

The door opened, and Judy's suspicions were raised higher at the alarmed expression on the fennec fox's face when he saw who had knocked. He was dressed like a nurse, red crossed hat included. His collar was yellow as he glared at her. "How did I know you were gonna come knocking some day, flatfoot?" He asked rhetorically.

Judy ignored his mocking bravado. "Good morning. I'm Officer Hopps. I was sent to see how this business was doing."

"What she said." Ransome said with a wave of her paw. "This little ray of sunshine is Finnick. He's the nurse, and before you check his records, his medical license is legitimate."

Judy frowned. "I wasn't going to-"

"You most certainly were."

Judy shook her head. She needed to stay focused. "May I speak to Mr. Wilde?"

"It's Dr. Wilde, and let's just get this over with." Finnick snapped, turned on his heel and stormed back inside. Beneath his boisterous attitude the little fox was on edge, as if he had done something wrong. Judy wondered why.

When she saw the examination room, she scowled. Other than the insufferable fox typing on a sophisticated computer no doubt supplied by Zoocell, the room was empty. This was despite the parking lot being almost completely packed. What the dickens was going on here?
"Yo, doc!" Finnick yelled. "We've got company!"

Nick grimaced when he saw Judy, and then winced as his collar zapped. "Jesus Christ on a stick, not you again!"

Judy immediately bristled. "Nice to see you, too."

"What the hell do you want now, Carrots?"

"Settle down, Mr. Wilde. I just want to ask you a few questions concerned recent events."

"What recent events?" Nick's attitude was different from the last two times he spoke. No jokes. No sarcasm. He was pissed, plain and simple. "Is this because I skipped out on giving a statement on those gerbil jerk-offs?"

"We'll get to that in a moment." Judy said, inwardly glad that Nick had reminded her of that. "The main reason I'm here is because of the recent savage attacks."

Nick clenched his jaw. "And you think I have something to do with that, do you, Carrots?"

"Well, let's just say that your attitude at the moment isn't exactly helping. This will go a lot smoother if you cooperate, Mr. Wilde!"

"It's Doctor!"

"It's Officer, too!" Judy retorted. "I've told you before about calling me Carrots!"

"What're you gonna do, multiply and smother me with cuteness?"

"Knock it off, Nick!" Finnick barked. "Just answer the damn questions!"

Nick fell silent, visibly steaming. Judy forced herself to calm down. She should not have lost her temper like that. She couldn't let this fox get to her. "What do you want to know?"

"I would like to start by having a look around. I won't touch anything, I promise." She would need a warrant to do that, even with Bogo's support. "After that, I'll ask you a few questions and then take your statement concerning the gerbils who assaulted you. After that, if everything checks out, I'll leave you in peace."

Nick seemed okay with that, even if he still looked a little nervous and angry. "Finnick will show you around. I've got a record to type."

There were only three rooms other than the examination room in the little clinic, and all of them were tiny in comparison; the little entrance hall that separated the examination room from the front door, and two storerooms for cleaning and medical supplies. There was nothing suspicious that Judy could see with her eyes, or anything that violated guidelines. If there was anything under the surface, she would need a warrant to find it and without hard evidence Pottermass would never allow it. That left pressing the fox and his employees her only option, to her immense irritation. When officer returned to the examination room with the fennec, Nick was off his computer and waiting for her. Finnick grabbed a cheap plastic chair for Judy to sit down on.

"Let's get this over with." Nick had his arms and legs crossed defensively. Judy remained calm. For all she knew, he was still angry about the fine. She sat down and got her notebook and pen ready.

"You've heard about the savage attacks, right?" She asked first. Nick nodded. "Has either predator
visited your clinic at some point?"

"No, and I can prove it to you with records."

Even if the fox had deleted the records, Judy could still confirm it via the traffic camera she'd seen above the parking lot, so she moved on. "How often have you removed a TAME collar since opening your practice?"

"A fair few, I'm not sure how many exactly." Nick said. "That'll be in the records, too."

"Will you be willing to provide them?"

"I'd say you'd need to come back with a warrant, but knowing the ZPD you will."

"Has there been any violent incidents at this clinic since you opened?"

"A few, but no big deal. Cheryl takes care of anyone causing trouble before they even get through the door."

"Yeah, you should have seen her when some wasted asshats talked shit about Benji being a sellout just for getting to work in a fancy house." Finnick said. "Nick told them to knock it off, and when the punks tried to smash the front door down, she let them have it."

Judy frowned. "Did she do serious harm?"

"Nah, just disarmed them of their beers and threw them to the curb. They took off real quick after that. I'm telling ya now, Cheryl is the last predator in the city you wanna fuck with."

"Fin, you're just saying that 'cause you get a hard-on every time you set eyes on her." Nick said. "But… yeah."

"Why didn't you report this to the police?" Judy asked.

"The cops wouldn't have done shit."

"You don't know that."

"Yeah, I do."

Judy paused and gazed down at her notebook. Twice now these predators had displayed their distrust of the ZPD with such certainly. The rest of the questions came and went, and as Nick gradually eased up he answered each question with calm certainty. If he wasn't telling the truth, he was an incredible liar. Even so Judy couldn't stop thinking about the red flags she had seen on her way here, and so she saved the most intriguing question for last. "One more question before I take your statement. If you're so busy, then why are there so many cars outside and no patients?"

There it was, in the fox's bright green eyes. Exactly what she had been searching for. Hesitation. She waited for an answer, but it never came. Finnick was also silent, looking from one mammal to another with barely disguised worry. She was about to repeat the question when she heard the door open.

"Hey, guys!" It was a portly cheetah carrying a paper bag in one paw and a stuffed animal in another. He stepped into the room and stopped when he saw Judy.

"Benjamin's, here." Ransome called from outside.

"Hey, er, what's going on, here?" The cheetah asked.
"I'm just asking him a few questions about a case, Mr. Clawhauser." Judy said before turning her hardened gaze back to Nick. "I'll ask you again. Why are there so many cars outside and no patients? Where are they, Dr. Wilde?"

"Maybe it's all the mammals who go under the bridge." Benjamin said.

Judy looked away from the stunned fox and back up at Benjamin. "The bridge?"

"Yeah." He said, nodding. "I've seen them. It's pretty quiet on the road that goes under the bridge near here, so people go there every now and then to do goodness knows what. I guess they must have started using this parking lot again after the clinic brought it to everyone's attention."

"Yes, exactly!" Nick exclaimed, suddenly back to his suave self. "I'm sorry, Officer. There are some mammals who do pretty illegal stuff down there, and I was worried about what they would do to me if I tipped you off and they found out."

Judy slowly wrote down the information and then paused in deep thought, tapping her pen on the edge of the notebook. The cheetah's answer made sense, but there was something about this place and the fox that just didn't feel right. There was something about the wall with the four posters in particular that made her tingle, but it might have been because of what was on them. "I see. We'll have to look into that, but we'll make sure no-one knows about your tipoff. That's all the questions I have for now, so if I can just take your statement..."

Nick gave the statement within five minutes, with no contradictions to what Judy and Higgins had written in their reports. With all the information she had to take in, she recorded the whole thing on tape before getting down from the chair. "So is that everything, Carrots?" Nick asked.

Judy didn't bother correcting him this time. Other than the attitudes of the two foxes and Nick's hesitation in answering the question about the suspicious number of cars, she had found nothing wrong with Nick or his clinic. To truly find anything, they would need a warrant that Pottermass would never permit, not after Judy's findings today. That was if there was even anything to find. The silver lining was that after today, she would likely never have to endure the intolerable Nicholas Wilde again.

"Yes, that's everything." She agreed. "Thank you for your cooperation, Dr. Wilde."

"Hey, Nick." Benjamin spoke up now that Judy was finished. "Did you examine any kids today? I found this in the parking lot." He held out the toy. It looked a lot like Finnick, and on the shirt were the words 'WILD TIMES' stitched in green thread. It looked adorable, especially the childlike smile on the toy's face. It was certainly more adorable than the look of abject horror on the real fennec's face. "It looks a lot like you, doesn't it, Fin?"

"Yeah." Finnick said carefully.

Judy approached the cheetah. A little boy or girl had lost that toy. It was probably precious to them. She'd lost count of how many of her brothers and sisters' hearts had been broken from losing their own toys. "May I have that?" She asked. "I might be able to return it to its owner."

Benjamin beamed in appreciation. "Sure that'd be great!"

Nick leapt up from his chair. "Hold on, maybe we should hold onto it! What if the kid or his parents come back?"

Judy was tempted to hand it over, but the fox seemed unusually distressed over the lost toy. She narrowed her eyes and started squeezing the doll in various places. Was there contraband hidden
inside? Drugs? Gun parts? Cigars? She didn't feel anything unusual. Perhaps it was the doll itself. Perhaps Nick was conducting another business on the side, something not entirely legal.

"No. I'll just take it with me." She took the toy from Benjamin's paws. She could always get it back to its owner if there was really nothing wrong with it.

"Hopps, hold on!" Nick said.

"What, Dr. Wilde? Is there something about this doll you're not telling me?" Nick fell silent. "In that case, I'll just take it off your paws. Good day, gentlemen."

With the fennec doll in paw, she strode past the cheetah and out the clinic.

She started out spry, but as she continued the short walk back to the car she started to slow her pace as doubt gnawed at her gut. If she brought this doll to forensics, they'd probably laugh her out of the lab. Captain Bogo certainly wouldn't appreciate the time wasted if Judy's hunch turned out to be wrong. She didn't want to think what Pottermass would do. Maybe she would be better off just giving this doll back to Nick. She shook her head. That was just her meter maid fretfulness talking. She could pull this off without looking like a dumb bunny if she did her research first. 'Wild Times.' The name on the toy's shirt. That was the key. It sounded like the name of an amusement park or a brothel, but there was no park or brothel she knew with that name. Not that she would know about any brothels, obviously!

As she neared her car, she saw someone walking past the car towards her, an arctic vixen in a red sweater. Her collar beeped when she spotted Judy. Perhaps she'd had run-ins with the law before.

"Problem, ma'am?" Judy asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" The vixen said sheepishly. "I thought you were someone else."

Judy relaxed. "It's alright, ma'am."

"I'm looking for Dr. Wilde's clinic. Is this the right way?"

"Sure, right down there." Judy pointed back down the road. The vixen thanked her and continued on her way. The bunny reached her car, and that was when she saw that her tire was flat. "Darn it, when did that happen?" She muttered. Ah well, it was nothing a quick call to the tow truck company couldn't take care of, and Captain Bogo couldn't put her at fault for it. She was about to make the call when she took another look at the tire and gasped softly. There were deep gouges in the black synthetic rubber.

Vandals. A chill ran up Judy's spine as she grabbed her radio to call it in.

Then she heard the jingle of a phone in her pocket.
When the rabbit was gone, Nick slowly turned to Benjamin. "Benji, I've got an appointment in a few minutes. Sorry, bud, but we're gonna be too busy for a visit."

Benjamin cheerfully placed a paper bag on the counter. "That's okay. I just came to drop off your lunch, and Honey needs me in the bunker to babysit this little kid she's been looking after. Then tomorrow morning I have to see someone called Dr. Lemming."

"That bullshitting hack?" Finnick snapped. "I was forced to see him a month ago, and he suggested that my 'anger management issues' could be solved if I took a vacation in the madhouse! So you got the letter too, huh?"

"Yeah. Apparently every predator in the city has been summoned to an appointment with that psychiatrist over the last couple of months or so, and tomorrow it'll be my turn. I'll see you after my appointment, right?"

"Sure."

Benjamin gave a happy wave as he left. Nick waited until the cheetah had had been gone for ten seconds before flipping his shit.

"WHO THE FLYING FUCK HAD THE IDEA TO STITCH WILD TIMES ON THE MERCHANDISE?"

"DON'T YOU FUCKIN' LOOK AT ME!" Finnick hollered. "HONEY'S THE ONE WHO MADE THE LITTLE SHIRTS!"

Nick paced furiously back and forth, nearly knocking Finnick over. "WHAT'RE WE GONNA DO?! IF THAT BUNNY TAKES THAT THING BACK TO THE STATION…"

He stopped, and slowly pulled out the card Koslov have given him. One call would be all it took to fix this mess. Just one call, and that doll would never make it back to the precinct. On the other paw, neither would the bunny. He crushed the card in his paw and stuffed it back in his pocket, disgusted with himself. There had to be another way.

Cheryl Ransome burst into the room, holding a cheap phone and glared down at the profanity-ridden fennec. "Keep your bloody voice down!" She snapped. "The kid hasn't gone too far, yet!"

Nick gaped up at her, as did Finnick. "Fuck me. How much of that did you hear?"

"Oh, I heard all of it." Cheryl replied casually.

Nick was lucky he'd gone to the toilet before Judy had shown up. This was it. This was the end.

"Fuck." Finnick dug his tiny paws into his scalp. "Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

"Will you watch your language and shut up?" Cheryl snapped. "Don't worry, I've got a plan to save your skins."

Nick blinked several times. "What?"

"As crazy at it sounds, I'm on your side."

"But Pottermass…"
Cheryl smirked. "What Pottermass doesn't know won't hurt him. I called a friend to buy us some time. Officer Hopps won't be going anywhere for a while."

"But the doll?" Nick was still in disbelief.

"We're going to get that back. Trust me."

Nick rubbed his face, eyes almost budging. "Okay. Okay. What do we do?"

"I could get my costume from our old hustling gig!" Finnick said. "I could pose as the kid missing his doll!"

"She'll see right through you." Cheryl said immediately. "Dumb bunnies don't make it all the way to valedictorian. Not in the ZPA."

"Okay then, what's your plan?"

"We're going to put Finnick's five finger discount skills to good use. That bunny won't hold onto that doll all the time. When she puts it down, that's when little Toot-toot will filch it."

"And how am I gonna pull that off without her seeing me?"

"That's where I come in. In one minute Officer Hopps is going to receive a phone call from her mother. I suggest you get in position."

Finnick stared. "Position?"

"The car is on the road near the clinic. Move it."

Finnick moved it, disappearing out the door.

By now Nick was both terrified and bewildered. "What're you up to, Ransome?"

Cheryl started dialing a number into her phone. "Be quiet."

Whether it was the fear of disaster should he not follow her instructions or the powerful commanding tone in her response, Nick fell silent as the striped feline held the phone to her ear.

When she spoke, his jaw dropped.

"Hi, sweetie! I hope I'm not interrupting your work, it should be lunchtime by now, right? Oh, good. How's your new job as a patrol cop coming along, honey?"

Nick gaped at Cheryl as she sat herself on the counter, chatting all the while in that countryside accent, a voice utterly alien to how she usually spoke. Sweetie? Honey? What the frack?

"Ransome, what the-"

"Settle down, Pop-pop! I'll make your potato salad later!" Cheryl's eyes flashed dangerously at the fox. "Sorry, sweetheart, what were you saying? Not a good time? What's wrong? You don't sound fine, Judy. Has something happened? Do you need us to come over there? Stu, pack the car!"

Judy? Was Cheryl speaking to that rabbit cop? The faint, tinny sound of Judy frantically placating her 'mother' confirmed Nick's assumption.

"Alright, if you're sure… Okay, you got me, I need your help with something… No, it's not the
wedding, it's your grandfather. At this rate, he's going to have a coronary if we can't convince him that you'll be safe from those predators. I believe you keep most of your gear in the trunk of your car, right? Do you think you could take a look, make sure you have everything you need?"

There was a knock on the door. Cheryl covered the phone with her paw. "We can't let anyone see me making this call. Make sure no-one goes in the storeroom." She ducked into the storeroom and shut the door behind her.

Nick was borderline shell-shocked as he answered the door, and was snapped out of his shock when he came face to face with a beautiful arctic vixen.

"Good afternoon." The vixen spoke sweetly. "Honey said to come see you if she wasn't in her bunker."

Nick's eyebrows rose along with his temperature. He seemed to running into a lot of attractive females lately. "You know Honey?"

"Yes, and I know about Wild Times as well. Is she here?"

Nick was sure she was still doing ride maintenance down below. "Let me check."

Casting a wary glance at the storeroom door, Nick called Honey.

"Nick, for god's sake! What have I told you about calling me when I'm out the bunker? What if the sheep hacked your phone?"

"I'm sorry, Hun, but there's someone here to see you. Someone called…"

"Skyefall." The vixen said.

"Skyefall." Nick repeated.

There was a long pause. "You don't mind if I borrow your office for a few minutes, do ya?"

"… Not particularly."

"Tell her to get her butt down the chute and I'll meet her there. Sorry, Nick, but this is private. As in top secret private."

Nick grimaced as the badger hung up. His mind was going to blow at this rate. First the security guard flawlessly mimicking a bunny cop's mother, now this. Honey never kept secrets from him. Never.

"Is she here?" Skyefall asked.

"She said she'll meet you in my office down below." Nick said as he crossed the exam room and pried open the secret door. "Please don't touch anything while you're in there. The stairs to the office are beside the carousel, you can't miss them."

"Thank you." Skyefall whooped as she dropped herself down the slide.

Nick closed the secret door and knocked on the storeroom door. "It's clear!" He called.

Cheryl stepped out, still talking like a carrot farmer. "… And you still have your fox repellent, right? Your fox taser? Good, good." The door opened once more, and in walked an anxious Finnick clutching a stuffed fennec. "Well, I'll just let you get back to your break. Keep making the world a
better place, sweetheart; just be careful while you're doing it. Love you, bye!"

Cheryl hung up and smiled down at the two flabbergasted foxes. "You're welcome." She said, before returning to her post outside.

Nick collapsed into his desk chair. "You got it?" He asked, too stunned to care that he was stating the obvious.

"Yeah." Finnick tossed the doll onto the counter. "I got lucky. The bunny got a call from her momma, then went to check the car trunk, and left that fuckin' thing on the hood. I swooped in, snatched it, and that was that."

"Did Benji see you?"

"Nah, and neither did that fine vixen who came along. We should stay low 'til the tow truck takes the car away."

"What happened?"

"Some asshole slashed her tire while she was questioning us."

Nick glared at the exit door. Too much weird shit had just happened in the span to four minutes, and he didn't like any of it. "Mind the place for a bit, will you? I'm heading down below."

"Nick, wait, what the hell went on in here?"

"I'll explain when I come back." Nick opened the secret door and leapt down the chute himself. He hit the cushions at the bottom and immediately leapt to his feet, racing through the wooden gates and into the heart of Wild Times. It was quieter during the day, and that made it easier for the fox to sprint through the massive warehouse until he reached the stairs. He avoided all the creaky steps as he crept up to the closed door to what used to be the manager's office, the little room that overlooked the entire warehouse interior. He pressed his ear against the door, glad that the clamor of the rides and visitors wasn't as loud up here.

"… with Mr. Big?" He recognized Skyefall's voice.

"He left the little girl in Mr. Big's care while he took care of some bastards who were tracking him down. I've been looking after her for the last couple of weeks, but since then he's been repaying the favor by acting as Mr. Big's personal spy. He's been gathering intel on rival gangs for months, at the same time gathering resources for his eventual return to the facility."

"Where is the facility?"

"He doesn't remember. Whatever Slothfeld did to him has made his memory a bit blotchy."

"I'll take whatever answers I can get. I take it we're not going to meet on Mr. Big's turf?"

"Gabe and a bunch of Mr. Big's boys are going to Paradise Poolhouse tomorrow night and you'll meet him there."

"… Bollocks."
Honey laughed. "Don't worry about it. You'll need to find something to wear, though."

"Oh, ha ha."
"Just wander around and pretend you're looking for something to rub. He'll come to you. You'll go to a private booth and talk there. His memory of the facility's location might come back, you never know."

"Let's hope so, Honey."

"Okay, I've gotta finish checking on the rides and get back to the bunker. I don't wanna leave Sherry alone with Ben for too long. She might say something she shouldn't."

Nick heard footsteps and did the first thing that popped into his head; he leapt over the stair railing and onto the canopy of the carousel. He rolled off and landed in a heap on the floor at the feet of a bewildered family of otters.

The fox got up and dusted himself off. "Canopy's solid as a rock. Keep having a fun time, everyone!" He said as he hurriedly strode to the nearest exit.

Luckily for Nick, Finnick knew Paradise Poolhouse like the back of his paw. There was a booth in the corner right behind painted wooden partition where they could spy on the entrance without being immediately spotted. The music wasn't loud enough to drown out all conversation, but Finnick took a good long swig of brandy and glared at the redder fox staring at the entrance. "Not that I don't enjoy a good massage every now and then, but I still say we should have talked to Honey first."

"She'd just blow us off, and I want some answers." Nick said. He'd be talking out of his ass if he said the scantily clad babes massaging or otherwise helping their collared guests to relax weren't constantly distracting him. A pretty wolf in black was the closest to the entrance, but the worst offender by far was a grey-furred otter carrying around a tray of martinis in a blue bikini. Every time his eyes strayed to her he'd imagine that recurring cop in her place, and he'd mentally kick himself for thinking that way. He ended up having to force himself to turn away from the otter again to check on Skyefall. She was serving drinks farther away from their booth, dressed in a deep red dress with one sleeve and a rose pattern. Unless she took a good look through the gaps in the wooden partition, they were hidden from her sight.

"Come on, man. I know you got freaked out when Cheryl made that phony phone call, but she saved our butts."

"And I am eternally grateful for that, but I don't think she is what she says she is. But we're not here about that. I want to know who this Skyefall really is, and I want to know about this Gabe guy she's meeting."

"Why is spying on them so important to you?"

"Because Gabe works for Mr. Big."

"Who became your enemy the second Koslov gave you that loan! Nick, this is a bad idea!"

"It'll be bad for our business if Skyefall leads Mr. Big right to Wild Time's doorstep!" Nick whispered furiously. "If we don't find out what's going on, we could get caught right in the middle of a gang war! Is that what you want, Fin?"

Finnick grimaced, finally understanding. "Hell, no. So how are we gonna eavesdrop without getting caught?"
Nick sighed. "I haven't thought that far ahead. At the very least I want to get a good look at Gabe so I can warn Koslov about him."

"You gonna tell him about this Slothfeld guy, too?"

"Yeah."

Suddenly Finnick lowered his glass and tugged Nick's sleeve. "Incoming!"

Nick looked back to the entrance to see half a dozen wolves and polar bears saunter into the room. When they started to spread out in search of a warm body to take their pain away he spied a seventh visitor, an unusually short cheetah with a cross-shaped scar on his left cheek, dressed in an oversized trench coat. When he locked eyes with Skyefall, Nick knew he was their guy.

"That Gabe?" Finnick had lowered his voice.

"Yeah. Let's see what he does."

They watched, paws clamped around their cold, wet glasses. Gabe broke away from the group of gangsters and took an empty booth to himself. Instead of passing the time with a beer, he took what looked like a ring off his finger and held it in both paws. Nick wondered if he was married, and when he saw the feline's expression he also wondered if the spouse was still alive. Gabe didn't stop morosely staring at the ring until Skyefall ambled up to him.

If Nick didn't know it was an act, he'd thought have thought the following exchange was no different from what was going on in nearly every other booth in the room. Skyefall eventually bent over and whispered something into Gabe's ear. She then teasingly stroked his face before making her way up the stairs. So they were going to talk in one of the private rooms. Gabe slipped the ring into his pocket before following her tracks.

"Okay, we've got Gabe's description. Let's get out of here before Big's boys see us." Finnick said.

Nick shook his head. They needed more to go on. "Fin, how thick are the walls upstairs?"

"As thick as wallpaper."

"Come on."

"Fuck you, Redneck." Nevertheless Finnick followed Nick as they made their way through the busy room, making sure to take their collars with them; though they could have them removed, it was the responsibility of the customer to look after their collars and put them back on before leaving. The two foxes moved quickly, nearly barging into a wolf in another black trench coat as he made his own way to the stairs with the pretty wolf in black. The wolf scowled in their direction, a paw tucked deep into his pocket, but let them pass as they reached the stairs first and went up.

They reached the upper floor just in time to see Gabe disappear into room thirteen. They spied an empty room next door and ducked into it.

"I've been in this room before." Finnick said quietly. "There's a drainage pipe just out the window, so we can make a run for it if we get caught."

"Good." Nick leapt onto the low bed and pressed his ear to the wall, and Finnick rolled his eyes before he followed suit.

"Hear anything yet?" Nick asked.
"They're playing music." Finnick said after a moment. "Crap."

"I know. We're not gonna hear a word of it."

"No, crap as in 'we've got company!'"

Nick turned his head to see the lady wolf in black slowly crawling onto the bed. Her tail leisurely lashed behind her. Her bikini was black as night against her light grey fur. She had curves in all the right places. Nick's collar beeped as his pulse quickened. Didn't she already have a client? She crawled completely onto the bed, her paws and knees sinking into the mattress as she came closer to the two foxes.

"Uh, could you find another room, please?" Nick asked. Damn, she was hot when she got down on all fours like that, but she was a masseuse, not a hooker. There's a reason there are no predator prostitutes in Zootopia. He needed her out of here, and fast, before his pants got too tight. He glanced down and saw that it was already too late for Finnick. The wolf was almost on top of them. "Miss, we're kinda busy here. Don't you have a client to get back to?" He frowned when she didn't answer. He looked into her grey eyes, and saw that they were slits. "Lady?"

The glint of the wolf's bared teeth in the lamplight was the only warning they had before she lunged at them, howling.

"FUCKING SHIT ON A STICK!" Finnick threw himself into Nick's stomach, knocking them both back as the wolf's teeth snapped at the spot where he'd just been. Nick fell back and bounced on the mattress, nearly head-butting the wall behind them. He grabbed Finnick and rolled off the bed, dodging a swipe from the madwoman.

He felt claws grab his shoulder, making him drop his buddy. Another set of claws grabbed his jaw and forced his head back, fully exposing his cream colored throat. Nick heard Finnick scream, felt the zap of his collar, saw the teeth of the wolf descending on him.

He should have listened to Finnick when he had the chance.
As soon as the door was locked behind them, Alyssa directed the short cheetah to the bed in the middle of the room. "We should keep up the act, just in case anyone's watching us through the window."

Gabriel 'Gabe' Mossberg merely nodded and started to remove his dress shirt. His wardrobe tonight, the blue shirt and black slacks, was not the same as the hoodie and cargo pants that frequented the pictures Honey had given her, but given his circumstances he had good reason to change his look. Even his cross-shaped reddish pink scar had concealer on it, camouflaging the distinctive feature in his greyish cream fur.

The feline looked fine, but he didn't look fine. Months of hiding with Mr. Big's organization had turned him into spitting image of a mafia enforcer, but he didn't have the cold, dead eyes of one. Alone with one of the few mammals in the city who knew his true identity, Gabe's stoic expression gave way to tiredness and sorrow. Once his upper clothing was off, leaving only his black wrist guards, he practically collapsed onto the bed and put his face in the hole. Despite her growing excitement at finally getting some answers and her embarrassment at the prospect of touching a half naked male, Alyssa's heart felt a pang as she approached him and got to work. She didn't actually know anything about massaging, but she could still pretend. She gently gripped his shoulders and started circling her thumbs into his fur. She felt hard muscles underneath, and hoped her blush wouldn't stand out too much amid her white fur. It wasn't just his face. His entire body had a grey tint that was unusual for a cheetah. There was a second scar on his neck that looked like a burn.

"I was starting to think I'd have to find my way back alone." She heard him say meekly, and wondered what the hell had happened to him since he, his wife, and Cheryl Radames disappeared two years ago. "I can trust you, right?"

"If I couldn't be trusted, Honey wouldn't have led me to you." Alyssa replied, sensing that the mammal needed a comforting voice more than anything. "If we're going to hunt down Slothfeld and rescue Starlight and Cheryl, we have to work together. First of all, I need to know where he is."

There was a long, worrying pause. "I don't know."

Alyssa froze in the middle of moving her fingers down his back. "You don't know? How can you not know if you escaped?"

Gabe tensed beneath her. "Slothfeld did something to me. To all of us. My memory's like a paper target full of bullet holes right now. I still remember my past, and who I am, but a lot of my time in Slothfeld's facility is just a blur. I'm sorry."

Alyssa sighed in disappointment. "I'm sure it'll come back. Tell me what you do remember. Start with what happened when you got captured, then go on from there."

Gabe's ear twitched. "Did you hear something?"

Alyssa hesitated. "Must be the mammals next door."

"FUCKING SHIT ON A STICK!" Came a scream through the wall.

"Finnick?" Alyssa's heart skipped a beat when she heard the snarling of a wolf. Either Finnick had way too many knots in his back, or he was in trouble.
Gabe leapt from the bed and raced through the door, Alyssa following with her gun. The feline busted the other door open, and Alyssa nearly froze stiff when she saw Finnick on the floor, Nick Wilde in the grip of the pretty wolf in black, and the wolf about to chew his throat out.

Alyssa aimed her gun at the wolf's head, only for Gabe to suddenly block her view as he raced towards the two. He threw his fist out just as the wolf's jaws flew down towards Nick's neck, but Alyssa could see instantly he was going to miss. But he hadn't intended to punch the wolf. Instead he thrust his arm across Nick's neck and in between the sharp white teeth, and the wolf's jaws clamped down on his wrist guard. Before the wolf could respond he swung his arm, pulling her away from the fox. In two seconds he had her on the bed, her arms pinned behind her, and with his free arm he pointed to the bathrobes hanging on hooks on the door. "Skyefall! Get the belts!"

Alyssa could hear hurried footsteps approaching, so she tucked her gun back in the thigh holster beneath her dress before getting two belts. Gabe used one belt to tie the wolf's paws to the bedpost while the vixen bound her jaws together with the other. Just as they finished Mr. Big's polar bears burst into the room along with some staff and customers who had also heard the commotion.

"What the fuck is going on here?" The front most bear shouted. Then he saw the snarling wolf on the bed struggling against her bonds. "Aw shit! Not you too, Piper!"

Meanwhile, Nick and Finnick had backed into a corner, staring at the polar bears in pure terror. Honey had told Alyssa that Nick had been having trouble with Mr. Big's goons. So what the hell were he and the fennec doing here?

Before the bears could spot the foxes and make things worse, they all heard the sound of approaching sirens. "Shit, we gotta go! Gabe, come on!" Another bear shouted.

"Go on ahead!" Gabe shouted back. "I need to go underground for a bit. Tell Mr. Big I'll be back by midnight!"

He locked eyes with Alyssa, and she understood the hidden meaning behind his words. Honey's bunker. They would meet again there.

"Suit yourself!" The polar bears took off, leaving the staff and customers to stare in horror as the feral wolf as she continued to flail madly. The sirens had stopped, but Alyssa could see blue and red flashes of light from the window.

"I need to go before the police show up!" Gabe said. "You get these two out of here and we'll talk later!"

Nick looked between the two. "What exactly is going on he-"

Gabe cut him off with a glare. "You two have gotten yourselves in enough trouble! Go with Skyefall, go home and pretend this never happened. Got that?"

He pushed past the patrons and out the door, presumably to retrieve his clothes and leave via the window. Alyssa rushed to the two foxes and grabbed them by the shoulders. "Come on. Fire escape. We're leaving. Now."

They could hear the ZPD making their big entrance as they left the room and climbed through the window onto the fire escape. They climbed down and raced through the alley, getting as far away from the flashing lights as possible. It wasn't until they had reached Finnick's van five blocks away that Alyssa decided it was safe to stop. Outside a gun shop on an empty street corner, the vixen put her paws on her hips and glared at the two males panting on the bench.
"Alyssa…" Nick spoke between gasps. "Thanks."

"Never mind gratitude!" She snapped. "What were you and Finnick doing there? You know Mr. Big's boys frequent that place!"

The two foxes avoided her gaze. "Look, we…"

"Were spying on us, weren't you? How did you know where we'd be meeting?" She scowled as she remembered her meeting with Honey in the office. That was the only time they'd spoken of the meeting place. They must have been eavesdropped. "What were you thinking?"

Nick wrung his paws. "I was worried you were a spy for Mr. Big."

"Well, I'm not! What I'm doing here has nothing to do with him, and it has nothing to do with you!" She paced in front of them in agitation. "You two put yourselves in danger tonight, in more ways than one. I want you to go home right now and never interfere with my business again! Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nick and Finnick mumbled. "But can't you at least tell us what you're really doing?"

"No. I can't. Now sling your hook!"

The two foxes hung their heads, shaken and embarrassed, and drove off. Alyssa dropped down onto the bench herself, feeling suddenly weary as she watched them go. As angry as she was at them, she couldn't help but wonder how much of this was her own fault for going to Wilde Times in the first place. She leaned back, taking deep breaths of cool night air. She needed to rest so she'd have a clear head when she spoke with Gabe again.

"You're soft." A voice beside her and something hard pressing into the back of her head chilled her blood. "I would have threatened to kill them."

Alyssa had heard that voice before. She swore under her breath. "Would you have followed through?"

"Maybe. Put your paws where I can see them or I'll follow through with the threat I'm giving you now."

She put her paws up. "Is this any way to treat a lady?"

"Female abusers of men use a similar defense, so don't pull that with me. Move yourself to the armrest."

Alyssa pushed herself into the armrest and felt the gun disappear from her head. She turned her head, seized her chance and pulled out her own gun when she saw the striped rabbit lounging on the other armrest. Dressed in a dark blue suit and thick coat, Alyssa would have thought Jack Savage had merely been taking a leisurely evening stroll if he wasn't still pointing his silenced weapon at her.

"How long have you been following me?!" She demanded.

"Don't flatter yourself. I followed the police so I could see one of these savage attacks for myself. I spotted you three leaving through the fire escape and, well, here I am." He gestured to himself with a sardonic smile and slid down onto the seat. "You and I have unfinished business."

Oh shit, this was bad. Alyssa's finger slid over the trigger. "Look if this is about before, it's not
"I know we're on the same side, ZI6." Jack holstered his gun, stunning her. "And that's the only reason you don't still have a gun in your face. Speaking of which, do you mind?"

Alyssa slowly lowered her weapon but didn't put it away. There was still no telling how upset he was about her deception. "What do you want, Agent Savage? Do you want to know my mission? It's the same as yours."

"I already know you're after Slothfeld."

"Then what is it? Is it about the mammal I was meeting?"

"You mean the hybrid? I found your hotel room and helped myself to your laptop. You stole my intel, and now I've stolen yours."

Alyssa blinked. "You looked in my laptop? He's a hybrid?"

"His father's a fox, but his mother was a cheetah."

She shook her head in disbelief. "How?"

"Heck if I know. Your intel only told me so much."

By now she was sorely tempted to put a gun in his face again. As a secret agent, she felt violated. "For god's sake will you just tell me what you want?!"

"I want to get something straight." Jack stopped smiling. His blue eyes grew colder. "We may technically be on the same side, but you deliberately spied on me and stole my intel without my knowledge, and I do not like being made to look a fool, Miss Skyefall. I can find Dr. Slothfeld on my own, so you can just stay out of my way. Don't be fooled by your success during our last encounter. You're green and you got lucky. Try to pull the wool over my eyes one more time, and you'll meet with trouble. Got that?"

Alyssa clenched her fist. Before she could respond, Jack Savage hopped off the bench and vanished in the darkness beyond the street lamps. The vixen holstered her weapon, stood up and strode in the opposite direction.

Screw that rabbit. If he could find the sloth on his own, so could she.

It was nearly midnight when she made it to the Rainforest District and knocked on the door to Honey's house. The door unlocked, and she walked in just in time to see Gabe lowering the bulky metal hatch.

"Bye, bye, Gabe!" Piped a voice that wasn't Honey's just before the hatch was sealed.

"Was that a child?" Alyssa asked. Since when did Honey keep kids in her bunker?

Gabe gave her the side eye. "What's it to you?"

"Honey's my friend too, so I'll find out eventually."

The cheetah, the hybrid, sighed and stood up. "Her name is Sherry. That sick bastard decided he wanted to start testing on kids, so he had her abducted. I managed to intercept her on the road while I was escaping, but now she's seen too much. Slothfeld and Swinton's people will kill her if they find her, so I've kept her hidden even since."
Alyssa nodded, feeling the second inkling of respect for the mammal she'd felt this evening. "You're a good mammal, Mossberg."

Gabe shocked her by slamming the trapdoor with a loud bang. "Good mammal?! If I was that good, I'd have rescued my wife by now!" He turned away from the trapdoor and breathed deeply. "I'm sorry. Between my crap memory and my only ally until now having no combat experience, I've felt so helpless! How can I help Starlight and Cheryl if I can't even remember where they're being held?"

"Well I'm here, now." Alyssa stepped up to Gabe's back and put a paw on his shoulder. "And I have a stake in this, too. Cheryl taught me everything I know. I accepted this mission so I could find out what happened to her. Help me find Cheryl, and I'll help you find Starlight."

When she looked round, she saw that Gabe was staring and fiddling with the ring again. Eventually he put it away and walked up to the kitchen area. He opened a cupboard that had seen better days and pulled out a bottle. "Do you like lemonade?" Sherry nodded, and he filled two mugs and handed one to her. "We'll talk up here, because I don't want Sherry hearing any of this. I'll have to go back to Mr. Big soon, so let's make this quick."

"I understand." Alyssa pulled out a recorder. "I'm going to record this for my report to HQ. Just start from the beginning."

Gabe nodded, and began the instant she pressed the red button.

"It started when Cheryl approached us for help in investigating the death of an engineer called Cogsworth. He'd been killed in a car accident almost two years ago, but ZI6 suspected foul play. Sure enough, we discovered that before he died, he'd been working with Dawn Bellwether on a collar that could theoretically replace the shock collar and eliminate the risk factor that's currently got the government contemplating their abolishment. It was supposed to be her Ace in the Hole for her mayoral campaign, but Slothfeld saw how the collar could be applied to his own research, had Cogsworth killed, and stole the data. Cheryl tried to handle the rest on her own for our safety, but she disappeared."

"You mean you weren't captured the same time as Cheryl?" Alyssa asked. "When were you captured, then?"

"We tracked them down to Zootopia, but we were ambushed in our hideout." Gabe paused. "We should have been able to take them, but something was wrong with Starlight. She'd thrown up that morning, and she became dizzy during the fight. That was about nine months ago, unless my memory fucked up my sense of time as well."

Alyssa nodded in sympathy. "What can you remember of your time in captivity?"

"The next thing I knew, I was in this cell. I remember just being kept in there for the first week, with Starlight in a cell across from me. There were other cells, but they were all empty. For the first few days some lemming shrink came round and asked both of us a load of weird questions. On the seventh day, the last day before the experiments started, I was taken to this examination room for a physical. I was given a clean bill of health, obviously, but they must have discovered something wrong with Starlight because after her physical they removed her from her cell. I never saw her again."

"… I'm sorry, Gabe."

Gabe took a long drink from his mug, his eyes burning. "I'll tell you something, Skyefall. I'm
holding out hope that Starlight is alive, but if she isn't... good fucking luck getting that sloth back in one piece." He drank again. "After that I officially became a test subject, but that's the part I remember least of all. It might be because I spent most of my time in there, but I do remember being moved to another set of cells, ones with thick glass doors. Most of them were full. I think there were about twelve different mammals, all predators. Cheryl was there, and there were at least three wolves from what I could see, a panther, a couple of lions, a bunch of rodents and this big fucking grizzly bear." Gabe paused again, his gaze darkening. "I remember something seriously wrong with them. They were all different species of predator, but all of them had one thing in common. They were batshit crazy. I don't mean feral crazy, but some of them were close to it. It was like being trapped in an asylum for the criminally insane. Someone, I don't know if it was a researcher, a guard, or Slothfeld himself, called it the Twilight Phenomenon. I don't remember exactly when, or what happened when I got experimented on myself."

Alyssa looked him up and down. "Then why aren't you crazy?"

"It's a long story, but I have this thing where I can go into berserk mode. It's the best way I can describe it, and I don't know you enough to explain any more. In any case, it must have helped me to resist the madness until I could remember myself again. I remember I was placed in this maze and ordered to do all kinds of stuff. At some point I got the bright idea to just play possum. It took everything I had to keep up the act while they looked me over, and eventually I got a booting down the waste disposal chute, presumed brain dead."

"Some kind of behavioral experiment, then?" Alyssa remembered the report mentioning that Slothfeld was a neurobiologist.

"That's one way of putting it." Gabe emptied his mug and placed it on the counter. "And there's something else I do remember. Some of the commands they gave me were stuff I would never do normally, but while I was wearing the collar they put on me I felt like there was nothing I wouldn't do. There's no way to properly describe it, but... but it was like the collar was sapping away my free will."

"You mean Slothfeld's testing some kind of mind controlling technology?" Now that was worrying. "Is that what's making the predators go savage?"

"No, that's something else, something that's just a blur to me." Gabe said. "But I do know this. Slothfeld may be working for Swinton, but he's got his own agenda. He gives the results Swinton wants, and keeps the real results for himself. That's it. That's all I remember for now."

Alyssa switched off the recorder, drained her mug, and slammed it down, her gut churning with unease. "This is worse than we thought. Way worse. You remember anything else that could help us, you call me as soon possible."

"I will." Gabe said on his way to the door. "On the condition that when we figure out Slothfeld's location, we go together."

Alyssa nodded with an assuring smile. "Deal."

Gabe nodded and left.

Alyssa leaned against the counter beside the two mugs, contemplating her next move. Her thoughts turned to the lemming Gabe had mentioned. She had a good idea as to the identity of that rodent. In the intercepted email sent by Slothfeld, he'd complained about the biased psychiatric reports from one Dr. Lemming. They had to be the same rodent. She needed to find him and force Slothfeld's whereabouts from him.
She scowled, annoyed with herself. One way or another, that would just alert Slotheld that someone was on to him. She could try searching Dr. Lemming's office and resident for clues before doing something so drastic.

Yes, she could do that. In fact, that should have been the first strategy that popped into her head. Maybe that rabbit was right. Maybe she was still green.

Alyssa considered entering through the hatch, but decided calling Honey would be quicker. It turned out that Dr. Lemming's office and residence were in the same place; a small building across the street from the border of Little Rodentia. She made it there before two am, and decided to avoid the jam cams by entering through the back door. When she tried to use her lock pick, she was surprised to find that the door was already unlocked. Pulling out her pistol in case she needed to hold anyone at gunpoint, Alyssa eased the door open and slipped inside.

She was on edge the second she entered the small hallway connecting all the rooms of the bottom floor. Blood. A lot of blood. She couldn't see it in the unlit room, but she could smell it as strongly as if she were sniffing her own perfume. She jumped and nearly fired her weapon when someone emerged from the room on the left.

It was Jack, who seemed to be doing his best not to look nauseated. His gaze became stone when he saw her. "You catch up quick. I've already searched the building. There's nothing here to lead us to Slotheld."

"What happened here?" Alyssa whispered.

Jack gestured to the doorway he'd come from. "Your guess is as good as mine. You can try asking the Lemming back in the kitchen, but I doubt he'll have much to say."

He strode past her and out the door without another word. Alyssa didn't watch him go. Her gaze was fixed on the doorway. Gripping the gun tightly with both paws, she crept through the darkness until she was standing in the doorway.

The ochre glow of a street lamp streamed through the only window in the little kitchen area, partially illuminating the little shape on the counter. Alyssa edged closer. The light wasn't fully showing what she was looking at, so she pulled out her little flashlight.

Her eyes slowly widened as the narrow white beam hovered over an empty tub for cocktail sticks, a tiny brown furry hemisphere lying in a pool of blood and the still form of Dr. Lemming, propped in a sitting position against the large coffee jar he was strapped to. Her first thought was that the top half of his head had been shaved, but it quickly dawned on her that it wasn't just his fur that was gone.

The scalp was gone. The bone was gone. The eyes were gone. Everything above Dr. Lemming's nose and ears was gone. All that was left up top was his bloody brain, and the cocktail sticks stuck in so deep they poked back out through his abdomen and between his legs.

Jack was right. She was still green.

That was Alyssa's only thought before she dropped her flashlight and rushed to the kitchen sink.
It was morning when Bogo brought the car to a stop and climbed out from underneath the wailing sirens in time to see Officer Hopps stagger out the entrance to Dr. Lemming’s practice and vomit onto the pavement.

"Hopps!" He raced over, at the same time signaling for McHorn and Higgins to go ahead and investigate. The rhino and hippo released the safety on their weapons and entered the building.

If Hopps weren't so small, Bogo would have put a hoof on her back. "What did you find, Hopps? Talk to me!"

"He's… Lemming's gone!" Hopps wiped her mouth, staring at the mess with a haunted look in her eyes.

"Gone where?" Bogo had a sinking feeling, but he had to ask.

"In the kitchen! He's dead!"

Bogo cursed under his breath. "Was he alone? Is there anyone else in the building?"

"I-I don't think so." Hopps stood up. "The kitchen was one of the last rooms I checked. I was able to search the remaining rooms after that before I…" She closed her eyes looked away. "I'm sorry, sir."

Bogo shook his head and slipped on some gloves. "Don't be. I threw up at my first cadaver, and all the victim suffered was cyanide poisoning."

His radio crackled. "Captain, we need the call the ME! Jesus Christ…"

"Dr. Lemming's DOA. Homicide from the looks of it. We've swept the building, but no-one else appears to be home. Be advised, sir, Higgin's on his way out to throw up."

Higgins burst out a second later, and unlike Hopps managed to hold it in long enough to reached the garbage can nearby.

Bogo made the necessary call to Precinct One. "Higgins, Hopps, McHorn and I will finish securing the crime scene. You two stay out here and make sure no-one goes in."

"Wait, sir!" Hopps said as she put on her own tiny pair of gloves. "The back door was unlocked. That's how I got in."

"Did you touch the handle?"

"I didn't need to, sir. The door was slightly open, so I just pushed. Maybe we should secure the back alley as well."

Bogo looked up at the grey clouds above. "That'll be your job then, Hopps. It may start raining soon, so collect any evidence you find."

"Yes, sir!" Hopps saluted him and took off to follow her orders.
When Bogo reached the kitchen, he had to swallow back bile himself. The dead lemming on the kitchen bench was not a pretty sight, even if he didn't have several chopsticks protruding from his exposed brain and the lower parts of his body. McHorn was shining a flashlight into the sink, looking more collected than Hopps and Higgins put together. "There're drops of water in the sink, sir. Maybe something was washed in here."
"It might have been whatever the killer used to scalp the victim. We'll need luminol to confirm that, though."

"Hopps said the backdoor was unlocked. Neither of you touched the handle without gloves, did you?"

"It was wide open."

Bogo had seen the open door on his way to the kitchen. "Good. From now on, nobody goes in and out that way. That goes to you too, Hopps!" He shouted.

"Yes, sir!" He heard Hopps shout back.

"And don't forget to photograph evidence before you collect it!"

"Yes, sir!"

McHorn snorted as he turned away from the sink. "The bunny's finally learning."

Bogo eyed his old partner. "She's learning to work as part of a team. Can I trust you to do the same?"

McHorn looked humbled. "Sorry, Mansa. I didn't mean anything by that."

"Forget it. If that's everything, let's get out of here so the CSIs can do their part."

"What's their ETA?" McHorn asked as they made their way out the kitchen, leaving the grisly scene behind.

"Twenty minutes at the time I called it in."

"Great. Let's hope they get here before it rains."

"Hopps already has that covered. A mammal her size will probably see things we can't."

They exited the hallway and paused in the waiting room. The scent of death wasn't as strong here, but neither of them were able to relax. The victim was tiny, no bigger than a coffee mug, but that had to be the most horrific homicide they had ever seen. Even the serial killer they'd taken down years ago had only stabbed his victims to death with an ice pick. This was a whole other level, and they could only hope and pray that this was the first and last.

"The whole upper half, eyes and all." McHorn breathed. "Jesus Christ on a stick."

"In twenty minutes it'll be Homicide's problem." Bogo decided it was time for a change of subject before another stomach was emptied. "So what movie did you and Hillary see last night?"

"Fifty Shades Freed, and what a frigging waste of time that was." McHorn wrinkled his nose. "It's bad enough that Grey punk kept showing up wherever Ana went back in the first movie. In this one, when she tells him she's pregnant with his baby, he throws a hissy fit! If this were real life, he'd be behind bars for sexual assault right about now!"

Bogo smirked as they continued on to the front entrance. "Isn't that always the case? I just thank
God that Kathy doesn't inflict that kind of torture on me. I think I'd sooner shoot myself in the balls than sit through even one of those rom coms." He reached the door first and grabbed the handle by the very end. "The dreamy gentleman showing up wherever the lovelorn lady goes? In what universe does that actually happen?"

He pulled the door open and found himself face to face with Benjamin Clawhauser.

Bogo stopped dead in the doorway. Benjamin stiffened, looking as shocked to see the buffalo as Bogo was to see him. Higgins stood partially between them, one arm held out to keep the feline away from the door.

"I was just about to call, sir. This cheetah says he has an appointment with Dr. Lemming."

Bogo kept staring at the feline, who didn't make a sound other than the warning beep of his collar. This was the first time he'd seen him up close without a mask. Eventually he muttered, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

McHorn spoke up behind him. "What was that, Mansa?"

Bogo cleared his throat. "Benjamin Clawhauser, right?" The feline pulled out his earphones and nodded.

"You know him?" McHorn asked.

"I'll explain later." Bogo grunted and exited the building, leaving McHorn to close the door behind them. "Clawhauser, you said you're here for an appointment?"

With shock still in his warm brown eyes, Benjamin pulled an envelope from his satchel. "Yes, Captain. I got this letter telling me to come here at nine thirty for a mandatory psychological evaluation. From what I've heard, every predator in the city has been sent one." Benjamin tilted his body to look past the three officers. "Has something happened?"

Bogo frowned. "I'm afraid there isn't going to be a psych eval, Clawhauser. Not today. Dr. Lemming is dead."

Benjamin clapped a paw over his mouth. "Oh my gosh!"

"I'm afraid you can't stay here. This is a crime scene now." Bogo was going to say more when he saw movement out the corner of his eye. Two large armored vans led by a black car were pulling up behind the two already present squad cars. On all three vehicles were the massive letters T.U.S.K.

McHorn swore. Bogo glared at the vehicles in disbelief as the inhabitants of the black car emerged first. What the hell were they doing here?

"Cunninghorn!" He stalked past Benjamin and up to the stubby horned rhino as he approached with an armored wild pig on either side. "What do you think you're doing? This is Homicide's jurisdiction!"

"Not this time." Cunninghorn stopped and folded his arms, looking smug. God, Bogo wanted to flip him on his face when he had that look. "Dr. Lemming is the most esteemed psychiatrist in Zootopia, and Mayor Swinton wants the very best to solve this."

"Don't pull that shit with us, Cunninghorn! T.U.S.K. doesn't do this kind of work!" McHorn snapped.

Bogo stepped in front of the entrance. "How do I know you actually have authorization to take on
"Ask Chief Trunchbull. He personally ordered me to find out who killed Dr. Lemming and that is exactly what I'm going to do. Now get out of my way. You're wasting my time."

Bogo clenched his fists. T.U.S.K. should not have been sent here, but he knew Trunchbull could not refuse an order from Swinton herself. The buffalo stepped aside. "I do hope Mayor Swinton chose the right mammal for this, Lieutenant."

"Commander!" Cunninghorn snarled as he opened the door.

"Not if you screw this up."

The rhino slammed the door. "Listen, you uptight little-"

"Captain Bogo!" Hopps came running around the corner, clutching a small plastic evidence bag. "This bit of fur was all I could fi- Oh." She stopped when she saw Cunninghorn. "I thought Homicide was taking over this case, sir."

"Apparently there's been a change of jurisdiction." Bogo said. "Hand over that evidence so we can get out of here."

Hopps looked reluctant as she walked up to Bogo and Cunninghorn and held out the bag, which contained a small clump of black fur.

Cunninghorn grunted, looking over his nose at the bunny. "You picked up evidence?"

Hopps flinched at his tone. Bogo gave a sharp angry snort. "It might rain soon, so I ordered her to collect any evidence in the back alley she could find before it could get washed away. Did you photograph its location like I said?"

Hopps's face fell. "Errr…"


Cunninghorn smirked. "I don't expect my men to make those kinds of mistakes, Captain." He bent down, reached past Bogo and took the bag from Hopps. As he pulled his arm back, he bent it at just the right angle to elbow the Captain in his lower left side.

The sensation came without warning. The sudden, painful jab of something hard into his flesh. Just like that, Bogo's steely shell broke. His throat constricted. His heart began to pound. His body started breaking into a sweat as he reeled back from the unexpected blow and fell back against the window.

"Sir?" He heard Hopps ask. He was too busy trying to control himself to answer her. His chest was so tight he wasn't sure he would even be capable of answering. He clenched his fists tighter as they started to shake.

It had been more than a year since the last time this happened, but McHorn saw the signs instantly. He barged past Cunninghorn and grabbed Bogo by the shoulders as the buffalo struggled to breathe.

"Just breathe, Mansa!" He said. "Come on, deep breaths, you can do this! It'll pass, just like the others. Listen to me. Just keep breathing and it'll pass…"
Bogo stopped hearing him after that.

He was back in the marketplace. What was once a bustling sandy square of activity now looked like a demolished war zone. There were bodies in the sand and splintered wood, wounded or dead. The sun was hot and bright, even though it was winter. A bull elephant in a bloodied green tracksuit was trampling a car into something unrecognizable. The sounds it made were like nothing Bogo had ever expected to hear from a pachyderm. Even behind the cover of his squad car, the buffalo felt his blood freeze as he listened to the beast's otherworldly roar.

Taking cover beside Bogo, McHorn was loading a dart into his rifle. On the buffalo sergeant's other side was Higgins, calling for backup. With his sidearm grasped with both hooves, Bogo peered through the car windows at the mad elephant as it started stomping around the ruins, looking for something else to obliterate. Drugs had been Bogo's first theory as to the cause of its rampage, but when the monster came closer he saw something strange. A dark colored fluid was seeping out of its swollen temples, running down into the corners of its mouth. It had peed its pants. Bogo's next theory was that the elephant had suffered some kind of head injury. He grabbed the barrel of the rifle before McHorn could fire, concerned as to what would happen if the elephant suffered another cranial blow when they darted it.

Big mistake.

The elephant spotted the only intact thing in the square, their squad car, bellowed and charged. McHorn fired, but the dart had missed. Bogo fired his own weapon, but the dart didn't even slow it down. The elephant reached them before he could reload. The car went flying. McHorn fell to the side. Higgins rolled away. The bull elephant charged between them, eyes fixed on Bogo.

Bogo fired another dart, the needle striking the elephant just above the tusk that skewered him in that instant.

The tusk sent him flying back into a wall, the tip hitting the brick before he did. The wind was knocked out of him. Somewhere nearby, McHorn screamed. As Bogo gasped for breath, he tasted warm blood in his mouth. The elephant collapsed on the spot, succumbing to the doubled dose. McHorn sprinted to his side, screaming Bogo's name over and over as the buffalo gripped the tusk with bloodstained hooves.

On his other side, he heard Gazelle singing in the distance. It was her first single, *Try Everything*. Bogo didn't remember her being there.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was sitting on the cool pavement outside Dr. Lemming's office, his back against the glass window. McHorn was kneeling by his side, telling him to breathe deeply. Cunninghorn and his Razorbacks were staring. Hopps was struggling across the street from a coffee shop with a bottle of water two thirds her size. Higgins was in the squad car, speaking into the built in radio while glancing at Bogo.

Gazelle was still singing.

Bogo turned his head and found himself looking into Benjamin's warm brown eyes again. He was kneeling opposite McHorn, gazing at the police captain with concern. A hesitant paw was raised, mere inches from the buffalo's shoulder. As a member of one of the most hated organizations in the eyes of the predator community, Bogo had never expected this kind of compassion.

Hopps reached them and passed the bottle to McHorn, who in turn put it in Bogo's hoof after removing the lid. "Remember what the therapist said. Take little sips."
Bogo obeyed, taking small sips even though his mouth was as dry as the desert where he'd almost died.

*I didn't just get impaled*, he told himself in his mind. *It was an elbow, not a tusk. It was just Cunninghorn being an arsehole…*

McHorn took the moment to look at Cunninghorn with pure scorn. "You stupid son of a bitch."

"Is he going to be okay?" Benjamin asked softly. Gazelle's song faintly emanated from the earphones dangling from his shoulders.

"Yeah, don't worry about it, Clawhauser." McHorn said gruffly. Despite the assurance, Benjamin looked worried. "Okay. I guess I'll just go, then."

When he stood up, he was startled to find Cunninghorn standing over him.

"Clawhauser?" Cunninghorn narrowed his eyes at the cheetah. "As in Pottermass's new PR stunt?"

Benjamin swallowed. "Um, yeah…"

"You can stay right where you are, pred! I've got some questions for you!" He took Benjamin by the shoulder, drew him away from Bogo and propped him against the window on the other side of the door. The buffalo tried to stand up, but his legs were like jelly.

"He just got here, Cunninghorn!" McHorn said. "He had an appointment with the victim this morning!"

"I'm asking him questions, not you!" The shorter horned rhino retorted before glaring down at the nervous feline. "You've heard of all the savage attacks going on, right?"

Benjamin nodded quickly. "Is that what happened here, Officer?"

"Commander." Cunninghorn growled loudly enough to make the cheetah flinch. "And no! But there was a savage attack last night. A wolfy slapper turned feral in the Paradise Poolhouse. Did you know that?"

"I haven't seen the news yet, Commander."

"But you do know the fox seen fleeing from the scene, don't you? You talked Pottermass into investing in his business."

"Nick?" Benjamin stared up at the rhino. "Correctamundo. Did you also know that his clinic opened about the same time preds started going savage?"

"Yes, but that's a coincidence! It has to be!" Benjamin pleaded.

"Bogo's rabbit paid him a visit last morning, but turned up nothing. She didn't have a warrant to conduct a thorough enough search. But you're going to help me get that warrant, aren't you? You will, if you value your life."

Bogo nearly choked on his water.

"What did you just say?" Hopps gasped.
"Let me finish!" Cunninghorn snapped. "Why do you think Pottermass chose you, huh? Why out of all the predators in this city would he choose a pudgy little thing like you? Did you ever think of that?"

Benjamin shook his head, his collar bright yellow. "N-no."

"He had a wife, you know. Meredith Pottermass. Or he had a wife until two years ago. A truck driver fell asleep at the wheel, lost control and hit two cars. Three mammals died. Two cheetahs and one hippo." He leaned over the speechless feline. "Each car only had one survivor… you… and Pottermass."

Bogo shoved the bottle back at McHorn, planted a hoof on the low windowsill and pushed himself up.

Benjamin's collar beeped. He looked ready to have an anxiety attack of his own. Cunninghorn leaned down at the cheetah's eye level with a cold smile.

"He was a mess after that. He was never the same again. I do wonder how he's feeling nowadays, knowing that the one thing he loves move than wealth and power is gone, while a lowly commoner like you gets to live. How far would he go to correct that injustice?"

"Enough!" Bogo shoved Cunninghorn away, hard.

"Sir!" Hopps gasped.

Before the rhino could recover, the buffalo turned to Benjamin. "You need to go. Now. You have no involvement in this case."

Benjamin was squeezing one paw in another, staring at nothing. His collar beeped again. His lip trembled as he began to retreat. "Okay. B-bye."

He turned and hurried away.

Cunninghorn tried to follow, but Bogo blocked him with an arm. "What the hell are you doing, Captain?!"

"Putting an end to your coercion!" The buffalo shouted. "You were given direct orders to leave Clawhauser and Wilde alone! When Chief Trunchbull and Pottermass hear of this, a murdered shrink will be the least of your problems!"

Cunninghorn's face froze in the middle of beginning a retort. "You wouldn't dare. If Pottermass finds out, he'll go ballistic. The entire precinct may come under fire."

Bogo sneered. "You should have thought of that earlier." With that he returned to his car, followed closely by his officers.

Within two hours, Bogo and Cunninghorn were summoned back to the precinct. While Cunninghorn was called to the Chief's office to endure what sounded like twenty thoroughly unpleasant minutes with Trunchbull and Pottermass, Bogo was told to go back to his office and await the arrival of a government official who wished to ask him some questions about the first savage attack. Normally he would bristle at the thought of wasting time with some self-important bureaucrat, but with the Dr. Lemming murder case out of his hooves, Bogo saw no reason to complain this time.

Bogo was relaxing in his chair, listening to the distant shouting with a cup of coffee and a contented smile on his face, when there was a knock on his door.
"Come in!"

A striped white rabbit in a black suit walked inside. "Captain Bogo?"

"Yes. You must be the mammal who's investigating the collar incidents."

The rabbit got up on to the chair and held out a paw which Bogo shook. "Jack Savage, Congressional Research Service. I've already spoken with your sister."

"Yes, the Chief told me you were interviewing her first." Bogo said. Even with his suit and suitcase, something about the rabbit's hard eyes reminded him of the buffalo's most seasoned coworkers. "I don't know if I can tell you anything she hasn't already covered."

"You both work in very different occupations." The smaller mammal explained. "There may be something you know that she doesn't. This won't take long, I assure you."

Bogo took one last sip before pushing the mug aside. "Let's get this over with, then."

Jack got started right away, recording device at the ready. "What has your sister told you about Antlerson's case."

"Normally she wouldn't say anything at all because of Patient Confidentiality, but my officers were the ones who questioned her. She told me that Assistant Mayor Woolton and Antlerson both claimed the caribou's injuries were caused by a savage jaguar, but the appearance of the wounds made her suspect otherwise. I was told you would provide photographs."

Bogo nodded and reached into one of his drawers. "I also have photographs of injuries inflicted in past incidents of predators going savage, just as you requested."

"And past victims of knife crime and industrial accidents?" Jack questioned.

Blunt and to the point. Bogo appreciated that. He relaxed some more as he placed the required photographs on his desk and spread them out.

"Here are the photos of Antlerson's wounds." He pushed three pictures forward.

Jack looked at the middle picture in particular. "Did Woolton say what caused the partial amputation?"

"He bailed before Kathryn or my men could ask. He and Antlerson claimed later that the jaguar tried to bite it off." Bogo slid forward a photo of a gruesome bite inflicted by a lioness. "Here's a bite from a similar big cat for comparison."

Jack scoffed. "If that's a bite, then I'm a bear. Can you show me that picture over there?"

Bogo slid over the picture of a chainsaw wound inflicted by a logger high on LSD. He scowled at how similar it looked to Antlerson's arm.

"What about the claw wounds? Dr. Bogo said that she believed they were more likely caused by a bladed weapon."

"What sort of blade?"

"Hard to say. It might not even have been a knife that did this, but I can safely say that it wasn't claws. None of the cuts are parallel to each other."
Jack scowled and rubbed his chin as he examined the photos. "Do you have any photographs of the crime scene? Woolton claimed it happened at a fishery, but you wouldn't find anything there that could cause a wound like that."

"We checked the place out in case the attacker was still prowling around, but it was clean for the most part. There wasn't even any blood."

"You mean there were no responders to the attack?"
"The first we heard of it was right after Antlerson reached the hospital."

"So you're telling me," Jack said through narrowed blue eyes. "That Woolton may not even have been telling the truth about where the attack took place?"

Bogo fell silent and shook his head.

"In any case…" Jack continued. "I would very much like to know where you would find a chainsaw in this city."
When one spends most of their everyday life in an underground bunker, one of the important amenities they must have is something to keep their mind occupied.

It was for this reason that Honey had a rickety shelf full of books and board games with which she could entertain herself whenever she took a break from the computer. Neither Benjamin nor the little cheetah named Sherry knew a thing about playing chess, but the child had insisted on giving it a go.

Beginning with the white side on Honey's advice, Sherry moved a pawn three spaces. Benjamin perused the crumpled manual that had come with the game. "Sherry, it says here you can't move the pawn more than two spaces." Sherry pushed hers once back and Benjamin moved one of his red pawns twice. "Honey, what are rooks?"

"They're the castle towers in the corners!" Honey yelled from her desk. "Horses are knights, the pieces that look like screaming clowns are bishops. The shorter crown is the queen and the crown with the cross is the king."

Benjamin read the manual again. "It says here the rook can be moved any number of spaces but they can only go straight."

With the castle tower in the corner free to move, Sherry moved it all the way down and claimed one of his other pawns.

"Yeah!" She pumped her fists in the air. Benjamin swooped in and claimed her tower with his red tower. "Hey!"

Benjamin couldn't bring himself to smile as he set the white tower aside. "Your move, sweetie."

Sherry pouted as she moved another pawn twice. "These pawns are so slow."

"You have to follow the rules, Sherry." Honey said. "For the record, for a pawn to take a piece that piece has to be on one of the two diagonal spaces in front of them."

Sherry put her paws on her hips. "You break the rules all the time!"

"I break the law, sweetheart, also known as being a criminal. Just because I let you stay down here doesn't mean I want you following my example. You want to be a good grown up? Be more like Ben." Sherry blinked and stared at Benjamin's stomach. "You know what I mean! He's never broken a law in his life and now he's working for a bigwig in an ever bigger mansion."

Benjamin's heart lurched as he moved another pawn.

Honey frowned and spun her chair so she was fully facing him. "What's with you, Benji? You've claimed the first piece but you're acting like you're already in check."

"It's nothing."

"You're not a very good liar, Ben." Benjamin watched as Sherry moved her pawn closer to his line of red pawns. Honey scowled at his silence. "Sherry, could you sit in the bathroom for a bit?"

"But what if he cheats with my pieces?!!"
"He won't. Like I said, he follows the rules. You can read the manual while you're in there."

Sherry sighed dramatically, grabbed the manual and shut herself in the little toilet. At her age, she would have started learning to read fairly recently. Reading that manual would take a while.

Honey picked up her soda and took the girl's place on the beanbag. "Okay, what's up?"

Benjamin twiddled his thumbs. "Do you think my working for Pottermass is too good to be true?"

Honey leaned forward on the crate on which the chessboard lay. "Okay, what happened?" She asked before raising the bottle to her lips.

Benjamin bit his lip. Even now, his horrible loss two years ago was difficult to talk about. "Did you know Pottermass's wife died in the same accident as my parents?"

Honey spat cherry soda all over the board. She coughed and wheezed and stared at Benjamin in horror. "What? What?!"

"I'll take that as a no." Benjamin started wiping the mess with his sleeve.

"Meredith Pottermass's death is one of the biggest sources of conspiracy theories in the city!" Honey gasped. "The sheep covered it all up so not even the press knew what had really happened! How did you find out?"

"You know how I went to my appointment with Dr. Lemming yesterday, only to find out he was dead?"

"And the fuzz implied it was murder, yeah?" No doubt Honey would be looking up every mad theory on the internet tonight.

"Well, one of the officers started quizzing me on whether or not Nick had something to do with the savage attacks, which he doesn't of course." Benjamin said. "When I told him that, he told me my life would be in danger if I didn't tell him what he wanted to hear. He said that I was only hired so Pottermass could get revenge on me for surviving the crash while his wife didn't." His skin was tingling with cold by now, and he hugged himself.

Honey squeezed the bottle, looking livid. "You know, I never trusted that hippo from the moment he chose you to work for him. I bet you more than anything the sheep put him up to this!"

Benjamin shot up. His collar beeped. "Honey! Will you forget about the stupid sheep for one minute?! What if that officer was right? What am I going to do?!"

"Woah, easy!" Honey moved around the crate and grabbed his arm. "Look, I'll do some digging on Pottermass. I've been trying to hack his computer for weeks, and I think I'm getting close to a breakthrough. If he's planning to do something to you, I'll find out soon enough. Here, drink this and calm down."

Benjamin accepted the cherry soda. "Thanks." He sipped the sweet and bubbly liquid and sat back down. He was still afraid, but the reminder that he wasn't alone made him feel better.

"Who was the officer who told you that, Ben?" Honey asked.

"Bogo called him Cunninghorn."

"Cunninghorn…" Honey's lips pressed together. "I know him. I suggest you stay clear of him from now on, Ben. In fact, stay clear of any officer you see. You can't trust any of them. You don't know who might be on Bellwether's payroll."
Benjamin stared at the red liquid in the bottle; despite his friends' past experiences with the ZPD, a small part of him was opposing Honey's opinion. "I met one at Pottermass's party the other week."

"Not Chief Trunchbull himself!" Honey gasped.

"No, no! He was there, but there was another officer." Benjamin said. "Captain Bogo of Precinct One. He's the one Trunchbull wants to take his place when he retires."

"Bogo?" Honey was surprised. "He's the superior of that cutesy rabbit officer who's been giving Nicholas so much trouble. How do you know he's not trying to scare you into giving false testimony for when he arrests Nick on some trumped up charge?"

"Because he hasn't asked yet. He gave me a giant strawberry from one of those fancy cocktails. We even took turns playing the piano." He gestured to the cheap electric piano in the corner.

"He gave you a giant strawberry."

"Yeah, you should have seen it! It was this big!" He formed a circular shape with his paws.

Honey whistled. "If I didn't hate the bigwigs so much, I'd be jealous of you."

"Pottermass spares no expense, that's for sure. Still it's pretty amazing how much he spent when I convinced him to help invest in Nick's clinic."

"He's doing this for his own benefit, Benji. Don't forget that." The badger stopped. "Say that again."

"I said it's amazing how much he spent on Nick after I talked him into it."

"... I thought Nick had approached him personally!"

"No, he asked me to talk to Pottermass."

Honey stiffened. Her eyes widened, then narrowed in the space of five seconds. Benjamin wondered why this had suddenly upset her so much. "Could you go and get Sherry out the bathroom for me? I need to go send an email!"

Benjamin got up from his beanbag. "Where are her parents, anyway? I never thought you were the babysitting type."

"Long story. Go let her out."

"Alright. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Honey quickly returned to her computer, stabbed at the keyboard until the message was completely written and clicked send. Meanwhile Benjamin knocked on the bathroom door, letting Sherry back into the main bunker. With the manual still in her paws, she rejoined the larger feline back at the chessboard.

"Kings rule kingdoms, right?" She asked.

"Yeah." Benjamin replied as he wiped some leftover soda from the corner of the chessboard.

"So why is the queen the best piece?"

"I dunno. Maybe 'cause women are wiser?"
Half an hour later, the match ended with every piece but the kings taken. Benjamin had spent another few minutes chasing Sherry's king around the board before the girl decided she was hungry. Benjamin would have joined Honey and Sherry for dinner, but then he received a call from Nick.

"Benji, I need a favor."

"What's the matter, Nick? You sound worried." He waved goodbye to Honey and Sherry and pinned the phone between his head and shoulder as he started up the ladder.

"I had a little accident in the clinic and now I need more glasses. I bought some this morning, but I left them in my apartment. I'm... er... all the way on the side of city and won't be able to get them until late. Could you stop by my pad and take them with you to the clinic?"

"Sure thing, Nick!" Benjamin put the phone on the floor as he pulled himself up through the trapdoor and closed it behind him. "Where are they exactly?"

"They're on the table as soon as you walk in. Just be careful while you're carrying them. They're very, very, very, very-" "Fragile, I know." Benjamin said with a chuckle. He picked up his phone "I'll be careful, Nick. Don't worry."

"You've got that new key I sent you, right? I really appreciate this, Benji."

"Don't mention it. I promised you before when you told me you were going to go straight, I'll be more than happy to do everything I can to support you."

"Er... yeah. Thanks. Just don't open the package when you see it. You might get them dirty. See you tonight."

Benjamin whistled one of Gazelle's songs as he walked out the door.

When Benjamin reached the apartment block, a recent and much improved change to the grubby, dripping basement that had been Nick's old home, he was surprised to see a small squad car parked outside. Then when he reached Nick's floor, he was more than a little alarmed to see a bunny rabbit in blue knocking on the door like a jackhammer.

"Officer Hopps?" He asked, drawing her attention. "What are you doing here?"

"How do you know my name?" She asked.

"We met yesterday. Outside the office of that poor lemming."

"Oh, that's right, we did." Hopps seemed hasty, even for a rabbit. "Where is Mr. Wilde?"

"He said he was on the other side of town. What do you want with him?" He asked with a pang of fear.

"I finally got a warrant to search Wilde's residence and business!" She showed him the document. "I need to know where he is so I can enter the premises!"

"He's not here. He's on the other side of the city." Benjamin crossed his arms, feeling the first inklings of anger. This was getting ridiculous. "What are you going to do in there? I hope you're not going to break anything!"
"Of course not! But that fox is up to something and I'm going to find out what it is!"

Benjamin huffed. "Officer Hopps, if you're going to insist on bothering a fox when there's no proof he's doing anything wrong, then maybe you shouldn't be a cop! Why don't you forget about his species for a few seconds and think about what you're doing!"

Hopps stared up at him, frozen in shock at his outburst. The feline tensed, expecting a tiny gun to be pointed at his face any moment.

"This…" She hesitated. "This isn't about species. Pottermass finally relented so we could determine Wilde's guilt once and for all and put an end to this. I was given orders from the Chief himself to complete the investigation and to do that I have to search his apartment."

Benjamin looked behind her at the empty hallway. "Don't you usually have more than one officer to do that?"

"They're all a bit big for Wilde's room, and we've been warned about causing him any unnecessary distress." Hopps scowled as she said this, as if even she found it slightly odd. "I'm only telling you this to assure you that I truly don't intend to hurt Wilde."

"Because Pottermass would have your badges for hurting his investment." Benjamin had overheard Pottermass himself promise to ruin the careers of anyone stupid enough to mess with his business.

Hopps's ears drooped. "Yeah. But the savage attacks are getting worse and we're getting nowhere. I have a feeling you've got a key, Clawhauser. You can help eliminate your friend as a suspect. If he's truly innocent, then this will be the last time we bother him."

Benjamin drummed his fingers on his forearm. "You promise you won't break anything?"

Hopps nodded. "I will be very careful."

The cheetah sighed and walked up to the door with the spare key. As he slid the key into the lock, he glanced down at the rabbit, who looked relieved that he was cooperating. The sight of her reminded him of her superior.

"So, um, how is Captain Bogo? Is he still okay?"

"He's fine. Why do you ask?"

"He looked awful after that panic attack, whatever it was. I thought he was going to faint." He could remember it like it had happened this very afternoon. It had terrified the feline to see the captain like that; his first thought was that he'd been having a seizure. He'd had to resist the urge to hold the buffalo throughout the entire ordeal. Even now he wondered what it would have felt like. How hard would Bogo's muscles have been?

He opened the door, and obeyed Hopps's order to stay outside while she searched the apartment. It was the same size as the old basement, but less decrepit. Benjamin figured the search wouldn't take long.

"Do you know what's in this plastic bag here?" He heard her call.

"What plastic bag?" Benjamin looked through the doorway to see a black garbage bag on the short oval table. "I have no idea, officer. I was sent here to get glasses."

"Glasses?" Hopps asked while untying the crumpled knot.
"For the clinic. I figured he meant beakers or something."

The bunny opened the bag and looked at Benjamin with a quizzical expression. "Beakers, you said? These look more like pilsners to me."

Benjamin's ears pricked. "What?" Having no idea what the bunny was talking about, he entered the living room and peered into the bag himself.

Apparently pilsners were drinking glasses.

"Is this what Wilde sent you to get?" Hopps asked in a low tone.

Benjamin blinked several times at the contents. "He must be planning to serve drinks to waiting patients."

"That's for salons and restaurants, Clawhauser. What would a clinic need drinking glasses for? And why aren't they stored in a crate?"

Benjamin's shoulders slumped. "I don't know."

Hopps rubbed her chin. "Maybe it's to disguise them as trash. Maybe he didn't want them seen."

"No." Benjamin shook his head. "Why would he do that? They must be for waiting patients. That's all they can be."

Hopps searched the rest of the room, and Benjamin's doubts faded when she founded nothing else that was strange. They didn't fade entirely, however. Hopps had a point. What would a medical practice want with drinking glasses?

"Can I take the bag, now?" He asked when the officer was done. She consented, and they left the apartment. Benjamin locked the door behind them, his mind swimming in search of a better explanation.

"You're taking that bag to the clinic, right?" Hopps asked. Benjamin nodded. "My car won't take a mammal your size, so I'll have to go without you. I'm warning you now, if you or that bag don't show up, we'll be coming for you."

"Don't worry about me." The cheetah replied quietly. Hopps took off down the hall and down the stairs. He lifted the bag, which clinked like chimes, and walked after her.

She and her police car were already gone by the time he exited the building. Benjamin walked to the empty bus stop, leaned against the pole, and pulled out his phone.

"Good day, this is Nicholas Wilde, the sexiest fox in all the kingdom! Please leave a message after the beep!"

Benjamin swallowed. "Nick, an officer just searched your apartment and looked in the package. What the heck do you want with all these drinking glasses? I'm scared, Nick. The police think you have something to do with all these predators going savage and I don't know what to think right now! I want an explanation as soon as possible, do you hear me?"

He shoved the phone back into his pocket and waited for the bus. It showed up seventeen minutes later, giving him a temporary reprieve from the cold. He took his place at the back of the bus, paws tight around the garbage bag.
Was he being too quick to doubt Nick? Were years of watching Nick evade the law time and time again clouding the cheetah's judgment? Benjamin closed his eyes, remembered Nick's voice on the phone asking him to plead his case to Pottermass, and begged his growing feelings of trepidation to be misplaced. The glasses were for waiting patients. They had to be.

They had to be.

Lights flashed through his eyelids as he felt the bus crawl to a stop. He opened his eyes and saw a line of squad cars speeding down the sloped road to Nick's clinic like a luminescent red and blue serpent.
Cass Tile

RE: I WILL KILL YOU FOX

To Nicholas Wilde

NICHOLAS TIBERIUS WILDE.

YOU FLAMING FURRED IDIOT WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT DRAGGING BEN INTO THIS? YOU TOLD ME YOU SPOKE TO POTTERMAS PERSONALLY, BUT BEN JUST TOLD ME HE SPOKE ON YOUR BEHALF, AND ALL THIS TIME YOU'VE BEEN LYING TO HIS FACE! WHAT DID YOU HAVE TO HUSTLE HIM TOO FOR, YOU SONNYMABUMP! HAVE YOU CONSIDERED WHAT COULD HAPPEN TO BEN IF YOUR CLINIC GOES BELLY UP AND POTTERMAS FINDS OUT THE TRUTH? I WANT A WORD WITH YOU. A.S.A.P.

Cass.

Nick was cringing when he finished reading the email. He could imagine Honey screaming these words at him right now as he sat in what used to be the manager's office, staring at his computer screen. Finnick had warned him about this, so despite his apprehension the fox wasn't fully surprised. It would take a lot of sweet-talking to placate the badger. A lot of sweet-talking.

He'd have to start by explaining to Honey that he had no other choice. The rest of the investment had come from Koslov, who would have made Nick and his friends suffer until their last breaths if he'd failed to pay back his loan. As for speaking to Pottermass personally, as a fox Nick wouldn't have made it within a hundred feet of the hippo's office. Benjamin, who was already working close to Pottermass as a house servant, was the only one who could have done it.

Nick started typing that explanation into a reply email right now. Maybe if Honey knew that Benjamin didn't know about Wild Times, let alone ever set foot inside the warehouse, she'd calm down. At the very least being in the dark about the clandestine business protected the young cheetah from Koslov.

Nick finished the email with a promise to discuss the issue tomorrow night, sent it, then groaned and went limp in his rickety desk chair. Compared to the clinic and its brand spanking new technology, his office in Wild Times was full of scrap. Even his computer was shaped like a Chinese takeout box. Once he finished paying off Koslov, he'd soon be able to afford better stuff.

Merely thinking of the polar bear gave Nick the shivers. He'd spoken to him again earlier this evening, and what he'd told the fox was not good. Mr. Big was on the warpath, seeking the head of the mammals responsible for the drug lab massacre on Founder's Mountain. Even worse, as an organization consisting almost entirely of bears Koslov's gang were being considered the prime suspects. A gang war was on the horizon, a war that could tear Tundratown apart. Koslov had already made arrangements for Morris to be smuggled out of Zootopia as soon as possible, and Nick was seriously considering gathering supplies for he and his friends to ride out the war in Honey's bunker. He still had concerns about the strange company Honey was keeping, like the little cub she was harboring as a favor for a 'friend,' but now was not the time for forming rifts. If war was declared, everyone would need their friends more than ever. Koslov certainly seemed to
To Nick's surprise, the ruthless gang boss had shown a moment of weakness during their discussion on opposite sides of the limousine window. His stoic glare had melted away, and from his pocket he'd pulled out a photograph that had been folded and unfolded so many times it had permanent wrinkled creases. On it had been a younger Morris, sandwiched in between his large father and an even bigger grizzly. Usually polar bears were bigger than grizzlies, but that had not been the case for Koslov Polarnova and Sedor Valentino. Sedor's height rivaled that of a rhino's and he was just as strong, but beneath his brawny brown bulk he'd had a reputation for being the more reasonable of the two. How such a powerful predator could have disappeared without a trace two years ago was one of the biggest mysteries in the criminal underworld. Koslov had stopped talking to Nick after procuring the photograph, and sat back and gazed at the image of his partner while muttering morosely in Roarssian. He'd then waved for Nick to get down from the window so the limo could drive off. The fox had decided against mentioning Skyefall and Gabe. It was the least he could do after they saved his neck.

The fox stood up, walked around his aged desk and stopped at the large window overlooking the park. The carousel had just slowed to a stop, and customers were climbing out to make way for the next batch. The Tiki Hut was closed until the new glasses arrived to replace the ones that had been broken when Finnick had slipped on spilled vomit from the Roar-A-Coaster. On the Roar-A-Coaster track that stretched alongside the window, a carriage full of happy predators sped by. Nick allowed himself a smile as he gazed upon his creation. Wild Times was going as strong as ever, and he was only one payment away from paying off Koslov's loan. The park was a success, and if the TAME Collars did eventually become abolished, it would become so much more. Even his brush with death the night before had already become nothing more than a bad memory. The spate of recent savage attacks was a phase brought on by years of oppression by those jackass VIPreys. The death of Dr. Lemming, horrible as it was, was a blessing in disguise.

And if war was declared in Tundratown, Nick could handle it. Wild Times was nowhere near that district. They would survive. They always did.

Nick checked his watch and returned to his computer. Benjamin should have dropped off the glasses by now. Nick had transferred them from a crate into a plastic bag to not arouse suspicion, but he doubted the cheetah would think anything of it. The security cameras Honey had installed a week ago would let him know if the glasses had arrived yet.

He moved the mouse, clicked a couple of times, and a set of four gray scale screens filled the monitor. One for the exterior of the clinic, one for the interior, one for the emergency exit out of the warehouse, and one for the road where Koslov's limo stopped to collect payments. He didn't see Benjamin, and the bag of glasses wasn't there either. Nick frowned when he saw that Cheryl wasn't at her post. That wouldn't have worried him so much if it wasn't Cheryl, and she didn't know about Wild Times. She wasn't in the other three camera feeds either.

Finnick was taking a break at the second kiosk. Nick prepared to make a call and ask the fennec to go out and look for the mysterious tigress.

He froze, phone halfway to his face, when he checked the monitor again and saw that the secret door in the clinic was open by a forty degree angle.

Shit.

Shit, shit shit! He'd established over and over that the door was to be closed when customers are not coming and going! Where the hell was Cheryl?
Nick speed dialed Finnick and started shouting into the phone the second the smaller fox picked up. "Finnick! Who left the fucking front door open?!"

"The front door's open?" Finnick sounded just as horrified. "Did you say the front door's open?!"

"Get up there and get it shut!" Nick's heart dropped to his feet when he saw Officer Hopps, the very last mammal he wanted to see right now, show up outside the clinic. "NOW!"

Finnick hung up without replying. Nick sprinted to the window and pressed his face to the glass in the hopes of seeing Finnick already running to the entrance. He couldn't see the fennec for the crowd. He raced back to the computer and spun it round to face him. Hopps was pacing outside the clinic, likely wondering where Cheryl was, too.

Movement, at the darkened back of the office. Nick noticed it above the edge of the monitor, and looked up.

Memories of the savage lady wolf came flooding back as he recognized the wolf in a black hat and tan trench coat that had been her client that evening. Oh God, now what?!

"Can I help you?" Nick asked as calmly as he could, even as out of the corner of his eye he watched the image of Hopps approach the front door of his clinic.

The secret door was still open.

The wolf didn't say a word. Quick as a cobra, his arm reared and spat in a sharp, swift motion. Nick felt something smack wetly against his neck and recoiled from pain and shock. He brought a paw up, wiped at his fur, and saw midnight blue liquid rapidly fading through his fur. He watched his skin absorb the fluid, not comprehending…

Poison, he realized as his breath became ragged and his pulse quickened. The wolf had shot poison at him.

As the fox collapsed against his desk in convulsions, his attacker returned the strange looking pistol to his inside coat pocket and strode out, leaving the door open. Nick tried to yell for help, but only a tortured growl escaped his maw. Judging from the racket going on outside, nobody would have heard him anyway. Finnick was far away, racing to the door he would never get to in time. He'd dropped his phone. He didn't know where it was. His eyes found the monitor again. In the second feed, the little grey rabbit was warily approaching the open secret door.

Higher thought was rapidly escaping the fox as saliva began to foam from his mouth. Every name he knew, every painful memory of his past was being wrenched away until absolute senselessness overtook him. Senselessness and pain. Hundreds of sounds, smells and lights melding together into a horrific, excruciating experience that made the fox want to tear it all apart. The pain, the noise, the light, he wanted it to end. He would make it end.

Movement in the darkness again. The fox snarled in rage. The wolf had come back. Only it wasn't a wolf. This dark figure was taller. Its tail was thinner and longer. The coat covering it was different. It was black, had a hood, and resembled a gothic coat and flowing skirt that stopped at the knees. Tight pants and flat boots. They were black too. The fox growled with fear at its ghastly visage beneath the hood, too mad to know it was merely a modernistic gas mask.

The fox pounced, dripping jaws open wide, but the intruder was beyond his power. In a split second the fox was on the floor, the black figure's gloved hand on the back of his neck. With its other paw, the figure procured a syringe injection gun.
"Forgive me."

The fox struggled, but the figure held him tight. He let out a whimper as he felt a sting like a wasp's needle. The figure extracted the syringe, released the fox, and vanished from his eyesight.

The fox got back up on all fours and spun on the spot, but he was alone. The lights and noises drew his attention again, and he propped his front paws on the window and looked through the glass. There were so many mammals down below, but only one prey; the horrified rabbit standing in the archway of the main entrance, speaking into a radio.

As the fox crawled to the open door, he became aware of screams. He stepped onto the top of the stairs before the door and looked down. There were two or three predators down below as mad as he, judging from how they were attacking anything that moved. Sane predators were fleeing in all directions. The rabbit was running towards the commotion, dart gun in paw. The fox started down the stairs, able to focus on the empty part of the floor now that the sounds and lights weren't distressing him so much. They'd been growing steadily tolerable since the dark figure had shot something into his neck. He reached the bottom of the stairs as the rabbit started shooting, bringing down the three savages in quick succession. Her grey face, black tipped ears and amethyst ears were familiar for some reason.

The rabbit spotted him, gasped, and aimed her gun. A growl rumbled in the fox's throat and he leapt behind a stand. Attacking her directly wasn't the best move, if his encounter with the wolf was an indication. The poison spitter in her paw would bring him down before he could get close. He saw the archway in the distance; an exit as he remembered, and decided that flight was the better option. He leapt from behind the stall and ran for it.

The rabbit shouted, and the fox heard a pitter patter as she took off in pursuit. A feathered needle of poison flew over his head as he sprinted through the archway, nearly colliding with a pile of cushions. He dodged the obstacle just in time and fled up the stairs beside the chute. As he neared the top, he heard terrible high-pitched wailing.

He burst through the secret door, through the clinic, and would have smashed right through the glass of the front door if a cape buffalo in body armor hadn't opened it at that very moment. The fox found himself on cold tarmac, facing six bawling monochromatic monstrosities with flashing blue and red lights. More cars and big black trucks bearing the name TUSK were speeding down the road to the warehouse. The hippo shouted into his radio and aimed his gun. The fox took cover underneath one of the squad cars. He looked past a wheel and saw the rabbit emerge from the building. Big mammals in black armor were emerging from the other cars, but the slope leading back to the streets of Savanna Central was clear. The fox could make it. He climbed out from under the rear bunker and ran for it.

"Stop right there!" He could understand the rabbit now as she effortlessly caught up to him. Barbs struck the fox in the rear, sending electrifying pain shooting all over his body. He collapsed to the ground, literally paralyzed, but he fought it off and ripped the barbs out with his teeth. He turned round and bared his teeth at the rabbit as she approached, spitter raised. The fox saw her finger squeeze and ducked. The dart flew over his back. The rabbit pounced before the fox could recover, and delivered a kick to the jaw that knocked him flat. The fox's head swam, and he almost missed the sound of shattered glass from behind. A hippo ran over and pressed a foot on his body with just enough force to trap the fox without crushing him.

A long horned rhino and the buffalo from before came striding up as the rabbit put cuffs on the fox. "Be careful, sir! He's gone savage!"

"I can see that, Hopps!" The buffalo barked. "Where is this park?"
"In the warehouse at the bottom of the cliff! I think that's where Cunninghorn's going!"

"We'll let him take care of that. You've done a damn good job, Hopps. Get a muzzle on that fox and we'll take him to-"

The buffalo's breath seemed to hitch as he looked up and spotted something beyond the fox. His cold visage went slack with horror.
"Sir? Sir, what is it?"

"CLAWHAUSER!"

The buffalo raced past the two mammals holding the fox down. The fox turned his head, his cheek scraping against the tarmac, and saw what had the massive beast so terrified.

At the bottom of the sloping road lay a motionless round figure of golden fur and black spots, a feathered dart protruding from his thigh. His left arm lay sprawled across a crumpled garbage bag, amongst black plastic and protruding jagged glass.

The cheetah was familiar to the fox too, and he flailed and squirmed against his captors when he saw the pool of red spreading from beneath the bag of broken pilsners. The rabbit backed away from the fox, staring down at her empty pistol.

The long horned rhino came running up with the muzzle, and stopped dead when he saw the buffalo pull the unconscious cheetah out of the bloody glass.

"Oh fuck."
Judy's first big case was closed, but she didn't know whether to call the ending bittersweet or downer. She was supposed to be celebrating right now, but she couldn't stop thinking about that poor cheetah lying in a pool of his own blood.

She'd never thought that Captain Bogo would be capable of losing it, until he'd pulled Benjamin Clawhauser out of the broken glass and saw the extent of the damage. After that he'd simply exploded, bellowing for someone to call an ambulance while doing his best to stem the bleeding without pushing glass shards deeper in the cheetah's wounds. Even the fox was almost forgotten about, left flailing against his cuffs and muzzle with only Higgins to watch him. Fortunately an ambulance had come quickly, since calls from the ZPD were for obvious reasons high priority. It wasn't until Benjamin was loaded into the flashing van and taken away that they turned their attention back to the savage fox. A brief search for weapons revealed that he wasn't wearing his collar, and neither were the dozens of apprehended predators caught fleeing from the warehouse.

After her failure to find any evidence during her first visit, Judy had been surprised when he later approached her and Bogo with a warrant allowing them to search Nick's home and business. Mayor Swinton had seen to it, he'd explained, having had enough of all these savage attacks plaguing the city. She had also advised that Hopps go alone to search both premises, claiming that Pottermass would not take kindly to a full-scale raid should they turn up nothing. When Judy conducted her second search, she had expected to find evidence of drug dealing or illegal gambling or even conning patients with unnecessary treatments. The last thing she had expected was to find the entrance to an illegal theme park inside an abandoned warehouse. It was one of the biggest, craziest busts in Precinct One's history, especially when they discovered that every predator that set foot in 'Wild Times' had their collar removed beforehand.

No wonder predators were going savage! Removing collars willy-nilly had been a disaster waiting to happen, and that greedy idiot of a fox was going to spend the rest of his life behind bars for this. But the thought of that innocent cheetah bleeding out on the tarmac because of a stray shot still haunted her. When she finally got home before one in the morning, she'd cried herself to sleep.

When she'd arrived at the Precinct later that morning, Judy finally received news on Benjamin and Nick. Benjamin had escaped any nerve damage, and they had been successful in suturing his artery back together. He'd needed a blood transfusion, however, and would be stuck in the hospital until Friday. Upon hearing this from McHorn, Judy had started crying again for two different reasons; the realization that her blunder could have outright killed someone, and the knowledge that he was going to fully recover in spite of it. It barely helped that Bogo had decided not to punish her for the incident, citing that it was bad luck on both sides.

As for Nick, something very intriguing had happened. Every savage predator before him was still feral to this day, but when the nurse had checked on him she'd been shocked to find him completely lucid. So far as they knew, he was the first predator whose savagery was temporary, and the doctors were more baffled than ever. When Nick was deemed safe enough, he was transferred from quarantine to a private hospital room guarded by the ZPD twenty four-seven. Since then there have been no signs of the fox regressing back into a primal state, no any signs of what had caused his insanity in the first place. No signs other than a needle mark on his neck, something that had not been present on any of the other savage predators.

Four days had passed since then, and with T. busy hunting for Finnick and Cass Judy was being given the honor of transferring the fox alongside her captain. Knowing that Benjamin was going to
be okay had lessened the guilt enough for her to finally take some pleasure in being the one who had taken him down.

Today they were removing him from the hospital and putting him in a holding cell, making the transfer at night to decrease the chances of an angry citizen trying for the fox. After the news announced the exposure of Wild Times, the public had quickly found Nick guilty of causing the savage attacks, and death threats had already been made. Nick would be moved the next morning to Zootopia Penitentiary where he would stay until his trial. Said trial date had already been set, exactly one month from now. The whereabouts of his employee, Finnick, the security guard Cheryl Ransome, and the 'Cass' who had sent Nick an email just before the incident, were still unknown.

The officer guarding Nick's room recognized the buffalo and his subordinate immediately and opened the door for them. Nick was already in a set of day clothes, a pair of cuffs and a muzzle, looking miserable as he sat on the bed with a reindeer officer's hoof on his shoulder. She'd feel sorry for him if it weren't for the enormity of his crimes.

Judy crossed her arms and cleared her throat, drawing the fox's attention. "Nicholas Wilde. You look better than the last time I saw you." The fox's green eyes narrowed above his muzzle. "Don't look at me like that, Wilde. You were the one who'd been removing collars left and right. What did you think was going to happen?"

"It wasn't the collars!" Nick insisted. "How many times do I have to tell you that a wolf poisoned me?"

"A wolf?" Bogo asked.

"He wouldn't shut up about it during questioning." The officer said with a wrinkle in his snout. "He insists that a wolf in a tan coat shot him with some kind of serum and then did the same to those other three preds that went crazy. Sounds like a cliché in a spy movie if you ask me, and Cunninghorn didn't believe him either."

Judy rolled her eyes. This fox had no shame, did he? "Which movie do you think that sounds like most? Savage City? Despicable Mole 2?"

"It's the truth!" Nick shouted.

"Why would a wolf do that to his own kind?" Bogo demanded. "If he existed, he'd know damn well what his actions would mean for the predator population!"

"I don't know why, alright? But there really was a wolf and there really was a serum!"

Judy shook her head. "Cut the dung, Wilde! There's no way you're getting out of the charges against you, even if this wolf did exist! We've got enough evidence to put you away for life!"

"Why aren't you listening to me?!"

"Think about it! You lied about your clinic! You lied to my face! You conned Mr. Pottermass out of thousands of dollars in medical equipment! You've even been giving money to criminals!"

Nick balked at the last accusation.

"We have witnesses stating that a white limousine has been making frequent visits to your area." Bogo growled. "Sooner or later, you will tell us who was in that car."

"All this time you've been running an enterprise that was built on fibs." Judy pointed a finger at
Nick. "So why the dickens would we believe another word you say?"

Nick fell silent. The metallic muzzle glinted in the streetlight shining through the window. Judy smiled mirthlessly as she watched him shrink in defeat.

Bogo snorted. "Enough. Let's get him out of here, Officer Reinhold."

Officer Reinhold joined them in escorting Nick out the room, and the fourth officer followed them through the maze of hallways leading back to the elevator. When they reached the elevator they stayed back as several staff emerged pushing a patient on a bed. Then they walked inside, keeping the fox between them as Bogo pushed the button.

While the elevator descended to the west lobby, the one with the least amount of traffic, Nick looked up at the taller officers. "Nobody will tell me what's happening. What happened to the other predators?"
"We've had to release them all." Bogo said. "Even if we could charge them with anything severe enough to warrant a prison sentence, there's no prison in the states that could take them." "The only predators we will be detaining are you and your two partners in crime." Judy said.

"Two accomplices?" Nick stared at her in shock.

"Finnick and Cass. We'll be asking you questions about Cass later. Don't worry about those two. They'll be joining you in prison shortly."

Nick's hackles raised. His collar beeped. Judy held her paw over her fox repellent. "Christ, you must be one smart bunny if you think catching the cause of the savage attacks is less important than two lowly accomplices! Anything to keep those collars in business so you rabbits can sleep better at night!"

"Don't talk to me about business! None of you would be in this mess if you hadn't been pretending to make an honest living!" Judy snapped, aghast by the fox's lack of remorse.

"If you value what little rep you have, you'll forget about Fin and Cass!" Nick snapped back as the elevator doors opened and they started filing out into the lobby. "Those two will never get caught, especially not by a cute little… shit."

Nick had stopped dead several feet from the elevator. Judy and the other officers looked to see what had stunned the mouthy fox. The rabbit's own heart dropped.

The lobby was empty at the moment, and waiting at the silent reception desk with his back to them was a round cheetah. She had completely forgotten that this was the day Benjamin was getting discharged. Thanks to Cass's email, the lack of evidence and Nick's own insistence that he'd known nothing about Wild Times the cheetah had already been cleared of any wrongdoing, but that just made Judy feel even worse about what she had done to him. She felt goose bumps beneath her fur when Benjamin's black ear twitched at Nick's curse.

"How's the clinic going, Nick?" He turned his head. His expression was unreadable. "You didn't tell me you'd expanded to a warehouse."

His left arm was wrapped in a white dressing to protect the two-dozen stitches they'd needed to close the lacerations. Judy looked to Nick, examining his expression. She couldn't read his full face for the muzzle, but his eyes were full of fear. "Ben." He started. "Whatever they told you, not all of it is true."

"Really?" Benjamin's voice was low and quiet. "Because according to the T.U.S.K. officers who
questioned me after my surgery, your clinic was a front for an illegal theme park where you removed TAME collars for a price.” He pulled out a brown envelope. Judy recognized it as the envelope full of copies of photographs the CSIs had taken of the warehouse. It must have been left with Benjamin as a taunt from those jerks in T.U.S.K. Benjamin pulled one out and looked at it while Nick looked on. “And judging from what happened to you and those customers the night of the raid, removing those collars may have something to do with the savage attacks.”

“No. Ben, that's not true!” Nick pleaded. “Okay, yeah, it's true that I was running a secret theme park and removing collars for money, but that's not what was causing the attacks, I swear! Just let me explain. This is going to sound crazy, I know.”

Benjamin tucked the envelope back in his pocket, took a step away from the desk and put his uninjured arm on his hip. “Try me.”

Bogo and the other officers had gone still and silent. This was very likely the last time the fox and cheetah would ever speak to each other, so they were intrigued as to how it would play out. If Benjamin was acting like he'd been truly ignorant of the truth, he deserved an Oscar, and so could Nick for that matter.

Nick tried to take a deep breath through the muzzle. “Look, it's not me. It's this wolf that's going around shooting predators with some kind of poison. That's what's turning them savage.”

Benjamin looked bewildered. He turned his gaze up to Bogo.

“That's what he told us.” Bogo said with a shrug.

Benjamin stared back at the fox. “Nick…”

“He's the one who left the door open for the rabbit to find.” Nick insisted as the cheetah stepped back, looking more overwhelmed by the second. “He's the one who made everything go wrong.”

“You can't seriously be lying to me again…” The cheetah was now holding the desk for support.

“I'm telling you the truth, Benji.” Nick said softly.

“And what about the mob?” Benjamin's voice trembled slightly. “You know, the criminals you've been giving money to?”

“I had no choice.” Nick explained. “No-one would give medical equipment to a fox and Pottermass was my last hope, and the only way to make the proposal to him was through you. I had to do it, Benji. If I didn't pay back what they lent me, I'd be at the bottom of the lake by now!”

“Nick, stop.” Benjamin held up his bandaged arm, stopping the fox. “Was your clinic… ever… just a clinic?”

Nick's silence told the cheetah all he needed to know. His collar beeped red, as if signaling the moment of his heart breaking. His eyes turned misty, and he held his bandaged arm for a few moments before starting for the exit.

“Benji, wait!” Nick yelled.

The cheetah kept walking.

“Benji, I tried to tell you the first time!”
"Stop it!" Benjamin spun back round, his eyes burning behind his tears.

"I didn't want anyone to get hurt! How was I supposed to know this would happen?"

"You shouldn't have done something so illegal in the first place, Nick!"

"It wasn't hurting anyone. The predators loved it, and they loved me. I wanted to tell you the truth after Wild Times became a success, but I knew you'd react like this!"

"HOW WOULD YOU REACT?!!" Benjamin's voice echoed in the lobby. His collar zapped him, and he flinched before continuing. "You used me to con my boss! Now that he knows the truth, I could lose everything! And now I might even have the mob knocking on my door some day!"

The acidic scorn that dripped from the cheetah's words seemed to make Nick shrink back as if he'd actually been burnt. There was no fear in his eyes now, or even the sarcastic anger he'd shown in his argument with Judy. Now, there was only shame.

"What is wrong with you?" Benjamin whispered.

"I was trying to protect you, Ben."

"That is crap, Nick! If that were true, you wouldn't be making deals with gangsters!"

"I was just trying to survive."

"What about me? What about Finnick and Honey?"
"They got away, didn't they?"
"Surviving with us wasn't enough for you, was it?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"Then what did you mean?"

"I was trying to make things better for us! The money from Wild Times would have had us set up for life!"

"Make things better? Wasn't it you who said that if the world's only going to see you one way, then there's no point in trying to be anything else?"

"I didn't build the park so I could change how the world saw me."

Benjamin shook his head. "The way you talked about how your customers loved you and your park… I thought the lie about the wolf was pathetic, but that one… that one's a belter."

Judy felt her own eyes well up with emotion. As much as she disliked the fox, this was too painful to watch.

Benjamin sniffled and turned away. "I'm going home."

Judy expected Nick to protest one more time, but the fox stayed silent as he watched his friend push his way through the exit and walk out of his life. When the cheetah was out of sight, Nick hung his head. He wouldn't say another word for the rest of the night. Judy watched the fox stew in his remorse, her feelings of triumph taken from her once more.

Bogo exhaled deeply. "Let's go."
As they got moving once more, Judy wondered if this was what the Academy Instructor had meant by not every case closing with a happy ending.
In the four days since the big news was announced that an illegal theme park called Wild Times had been discovered underneath Nicholas Wilde's controversial new clinic, Jack was keeping himself busy.

On the first morning after ZNN made the big broadcast, Assistant Mayor Woolton visited Jack in his hotel room with some extra details that had yet to be made public. A secret passage connecting the park to the clinic had confirmed Wilde's involvement, but it would be another three days before he could be discharged and put on trial. It was also apparent that what had made the predator-only park so successful was the fact that every customer had their collar removed before entering. That fact, coupled with Wilde being seen fleeing from the scene of the savage attack at Paradise Poolhouse, left little doubt as to what was responsible for the savage attacks. Jack was on edge throughout the entire visit. It turned out there had been a reason he'd nearly pulled a gun on Woolton the first time they'd met; there was a familiarity to the ram that reminded the rabbit of someone he had last seen falling from a bell tower. The minute Woolton left, Jack sat before his laptop and did some homework. What he discovered was interesting. Woolton had no living relatives that the database knew of, but a year before he became Swinton's Assistant Mayor a tabloid rag had published photographs of Woolton and Dawn Bellwether leaving a restaurant in the Rainforest District. They hadn't been seen together since then, but if Bellwether still held a torch to Woolton, it could explain the ewe's attitude towards her political rival.

On the second morning, a journalist working for Saharaside reported a stunning turn of events; Nicholas Wilde had fully recovered from his savage stage and had been sane for over twenty-four hours. There was no explanation for this recovery, or why he was the only predator so far to recover in the first place. Needless to say, Jack called Woolton immediately and playing up the part of an obstructive bureaucrat, demanded to know why he hadn't been informed. Woolton explained that the decision was justified. Patient confidentiality, he'd cited. Jack demanded to see the fox immediately, and didn't budge even when the ram suggested he simply read the police report afterward. When Woolton called back, he'd stated that a visit had been arranged for tomorrow afternoon, after the police were done questioning the fox themselves. A satisfied Jack then got in contact with Felix and asked him to relay any information that contradicted the official story, before spending the rest of the day secretly keeping tabs on the ongoing investigation into the murder of Dr. Lemming. Cause of death had been confirmed to be major blood loss incurred by the removal of the top of the skull by a scalpel like weapon, and the cocktail sticks had been applied post-mortem. He'd died approximately one or two hours before Jack had infiltrated the office and discovered him. The fur found in the alleyway belonged to a tiger, but they couldn't find a match anywhere in the database. They did have a prime suspect in Cheryl Ransome, who had disappeared right before the raid. They hadn't even caught her leaving on the traffic cameras. Jack decided that day that finding Cheryl would be among his higher priorities, what with the escaped test subject that had attacked Antlerson still unidentified. Aside from the fur, only one piece of evidence had been found in what they had thought to have been an empty cocktail tub; a crimson bishop chess piece with the top half of its head broken off.

That evening, the update on the Wild Times story was pouring heaps of praise on Officer Judy Hopps, the rabbit responsible for exposing Wild Times. Jack caught her outside the Precinct at the end of her shift, just in time to ask her some questions.

"Officer Hopps?" He called as he ascended the wide stone steps. The rabbit in blue stopped just outside the glass entrance.
"Yes." She said warily.

Jack reached her and held out a paw. "Jack Savage, Congressional Research Service."

Judy relaxed and accepted the pawshake. Her paw was slightly sweaty, which may be linked to the slight flush barely visible through her fur. "You're the government agent who spoke to my superior. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to ask you some questions about the night of the raid, primarily your part in it."

"Oh, of course!" She exclaimed. Jack smiled, partly with amusement. He could smell the arousal on her. "Wait, I don't think I can tell you that information."

"The Mayor has already promised me access to the police reports once they're written, since Wild Times is relevant to my own investigation. I have two weeks left to gather everything I can, so I'd rather not wait if I can help it." That and he wanted Hopps's information firsthand should anyone try to alter her report later.

Judy brushed her ears back. "I suppose. So where should we do this?"

Jack procured his recorder and gestured to the park bench on the edge of the small park in between Precinct One and City Hall. "This won't take long at all, Officer Hopps."

They strode down the steps and sat down. Seeing Judy sitting beside him on the bench made him wonder what Alyssa was doing at the moment. Probably she was following up on whatever leads Mossberg had given her. Jack had contemplated pursuing Mossberg himself, but his current hiding place with Mr. Big made that too risky for now.

"What would you like to know, Mr. Savage?" Judy asked meekly. It was cute how flustered she was acting, but Jack stayed professional. He couldn't in good conscience exploit her attraction to him, not unless it was absolutely necessary… even if she was incredibly hot as far as rabbits go.

"How did you discover Wild Times?" He asked.

"That was the easy part." Judy replied. "I searched his apartment first and discovered that he'd asked a friend to deliver a garbage bag full of pilsners."

"Pilsners?"

"Drinking glasses. The friend's name was Benjamin Clawhauser."

"That cheetah who was injured by a stray dart?"

Judy's ears drooped and she hung her head. "That's him."

"I heard that you found no evidence that he was involved with the park. Do you believe he's innocent?"

"He was surprised when he learned what kind of glasses he was delivering, so yes, I believe he was innocent. I believe Mr. Wilde tricked him into persuading Pottermass to invest in the clinic."

"Let's get back to that, shall we? I thought Pottermass had forbidden the ZPD from interfering with Wilde's clinic?"

"I received a search warrant out of the blue, and was told to conduct the search alone."

"And you didn't think that was odd?"
Judy put a knuckle to her lips. "I did, but at the time I was more concerned with proving once and for all that Wilde was up to something."

Jack scowled at that. "After finding that suspicious package in the apartment, what did you do next?"

"I went straight to the clinic, and knew right away that something wasn't right. The security guard was missing."

"Cheryl Ransome?"

Judy nodded. "I went inside, and that's when I saw that secret door at the back of the room."

"Open?"
"Yes. When I tried to push it further open, I slipped and fell down a chute. I reached the bottom without injury, and there it was. I immediately called for backup, and it was roundabout that time those three predators went crazy. I took them all down relatively easy, but everyone else was flying into a panic. I soon came across Wilde, also in a savage state. I pursued him back up to the clinic, just as T.U.S.K. arrived. We apprehended Wilde quickly after that."

Jack tapped his recorder on his chin. "Did you see anyone suspicious while you were in Wild Times?"

"Like I said, it was chaos down there. What made you ask that?"

"Because from what I've learned, Wilde seems like a very intelligent mammal." Jack said. "Was that your impression of him?"
"He's especially sly, if that's what you mean."

"Then consider this, Officer Hopps. Fox aside, does he seem like the kind of mammal who would be so careless as to leave that secret door open?"

Judy grimaced. It seemed to pain her to admit it. "No."

"Then I'll ask one more time before we finish. Did you see anyone suspicious?"

Judy insisted that she didn't, and that was the end of it.

A sweep of the city that night had turned up no traces of the missing Cheryl, raising Jack's suspicions that unlike Finnick, Cheryl's disappearance had been premeditated. Pottermass had been embarrassed when the truth about the clinic became public, but insisted that he had no idea of Wild Times's existence or the whereabouts of his security guard. The theory that the hippo had sent Cheryl solely to spy on and eventually betray Nick came to mind, the latest theory of many.

The third morning, Jack was getting frustrated. Since his arrival in Zootopia there had been several savage attacks, a murder and a massive raid on an illegal theme park, but he was no closer to finding Slothfeld than he was when he came here. It seemed like all he could do right now was be nosy and keep questioning the official story, to make Swinton and her cronies nervous in the hopes that they will slip up. It was looking more and more likely that he would have to bite the bullet and go after Mossberg, but first he needed to read the reports Swinton had sent him and then question Wilde.

The reports, naturally, gave away nothing suspicious. Even the door left open was down to negligence on the fox's part. He could only hope that Wilde had some answers. The fox was strapped to his bed and fixed with a muzzle when Jack entered the room.
"Good afternoon. Jack Savage, Congressional Research Service. I would like to ask you some questions."

"So you can write them off as bullshit, too?" Nick growled. "No thanks."

"He's not giving you a choice, fox." The reindeer office said coldly.

"Fuck you! You won't even tell me what's happening with Benji!"

This was Jack's chance to gain a slither of trust from the fox. "Clawhauser is fine. He underwent surgery on his arm and he's going to make a fully recovery. There won't be any nerve damage."

Nick stared at Jack, as if stunned that someone had actually listened to him, then moaned with relief and relaxed beneath his straps. Not wanting any chances of the fox being intimidated into following a script, Jack asked the two officers to leave them alone. They left with some hesitance. Jack sat down beside Wilde and got right to it. "I have no assumptions that everything you will say to me is a lie, Mr. Wilde. I only want the truth, whatever it may be."

Nick eyed the rabbit. "I've never even heard of the Congressional Research Thingymajig. What do you want to know about Wild Times for?"

"Because your activities in that place may be relevant to my own investigation." Jack replied patiently. "Is it true that you have been removing the collars of every predator that set foot in your park?"

"And I put them back on when they leave, yeah. But I swear to God that is not what's causing the savage attacks! It was that fucking wolf!"

"What wolf?"

Nick scoffed. "Of course they didn't tell you. They didn't believe me either!"

"What wolf?" Jack repeated forcefully.

"This fucking wolf in a trench coat shot some kind of poison at me! That's what made me go savage!"

Jack prided himself on keeping his emotions in check, but he felt his shock make itself known in that moment. "He shot poison at you?"

"Yeah, and I know that's what made me go savage because the next thing I knew I was in quarantine!"

Jack hopped onto the bed and stood over Nick. "What happened? How exactly did he shoot you?"

Nick blinked up at him. "He shot me with some kind of pistol when I was in my office. It wasn't a dart, more like a paintball."

"And what color was this 'paintball'?"

"Blue. Dark blue, like a blueberry."

Jack clenched his jaw. This had to be the biggest lead yet, and the fox had no reason to make up a lie this ridiculous. "What other details can you give me other than the coat?"

"He was wearing a fedora, and his fur was black and white. You're just getting a rise out of me,
aren't you?"
"I'm asking the questions!" Jack snapped. "Is there anything else you can tell me? Was there anyone else in the room? Did you see him anywhere else?"

"No, and no! Back off buddy!"

Jack got his face out of Nick's, breathing hard. So this mystery mammal was working alone, and from the sounds of it was using some kind of chemical weapon to turn predators savage. This had Slothfeld written all over it. If it was part of Project Twilight, it likely meant that he was still somewhere close by. He needed to leave, now, and figure out where this shooter will strike next.

"One more question before we're done here." Jack spoke. "Are you absolutely certain it was a wolf?"

Nick said yes, but Jack suspected otherwise. He thanked the fox for his cooperation and stalked out the hospital, convinced that the wolf was a disguise. Slothfeld would never work with predators. Heck, the shooter could even be Slothfeld himself. Jack had to catch this guy, and quick, before Alyssa retook the lead.

That evening, he donned his alternate suit, the midnight blue form fitting sweater, black pants and flat soled boots designed to decrease the chance of any incriminating hairs being left at a scene. Taking his personal forensics kit and hiding his identity beneath a cheap hoodie he'd bought in Tundratown he made his way to the taped up clinic, making doubly sure that there were no officers at the scene before entering.

The secret entrance had been left open, and Jack approached it first. He dusted for pawprints, and the ones he found were at just the right height and size for a fox, but there were none at for a wolf. Either a real wolf had never touched the door or the prints had been wiped away. Jack searched the rest of the clinic for anything the ZPD may have missed, but the CSIs had been thorough. He descended the secret stair beside the chute, and spotted a thin tuft of black hair caught in a crack in one of the wooden steps. Remembering what Nick had said about the wolf's fur color, Jack plucked the hair with a pair of tweezers, pulled out a magnifying glass and brought it up to his eye. The ends of the hairs were blunt, the first red flag. He split the tuft in half, placed one half on the step, and used a lighter to set the half still in the tweezers on fire. He watched the fur burn. He grinned when he smelled the polyester.

The fox had been telling the truth. Not only that, the exposure of Wild Times had been a setup. Even the wolf was a fake. The rabbit knelt there on the steps, putting it all together. Mayor Swinton's plan to save her precious collars was to 'prove' that removing the collars would cause a massive increase in savage attacks. She had helped Doctor Slothfeld fake his death and provided asylum in her own city, and in exchange he developed the weapon that could cause predators to go savage in a matter of seconds. Just like that, one third of his mission was completed. He needed to report this to HQ immediately. The evidence here was not enough to stop Swinton, but a plausible deduction would satisfy Miss Morton's demand for results for the time being. Now all Jack had to do was find Slothfeld and his Data Disk.

Jack bagged the remaining fake fur and descended the rest of the way to Wild Times. The sheer scale of the illicit enterprise impressed the rabbit. The rides all looked like they had been built by hand, but at the same time were as sturdy as the rides in Coney Island he'd ridden on as a kit. They were good memories, some of the few he had. Sometimes Jack wondered if he had grown up too fast. In any case, he spied his destination, the officer overlooking the park, and searched for the stairs. He ascended them and stopped halfway when he spotted something small, green and thin. It looked a green needle, too thick to be grass. Jack bagged the strange item and continued up. He
was almost to the top when he looked through the open door and spotted a black-clad Alyssa Skyefall sitting at the computer.

Jack shook his head with a small smirk. He crept into the room, snuck up behind the vixen and pressed the barrel of his pistol to her pretty white head.

The vixen went stiff as a board, and Jack allowed himself a chuckle. "How many times do I have to take you by surprise before you learn to keep your guard up?"

Alyssa spun round in her chair and glared daggers. "Fuck you, Savage."

"I take it the search isn't going too well?"

"I wouldn't say that." The vixen replied smugly. "I know what Slothfeld is working on."

"You mean the blue serum?"

Alyssa frowned. Jack was about to take pleasure in stumping her again when she said something that stumped him instead. "Gabe told me he was working on a collar that overwrites free will."

"What? But that isn't Slothfeld's field of expertise."

"He killed the original inventor years ago and stole his research. His murder was what Gabe, Starlight and Cheryl were investigating when they went missing."

"Cheryl?" Jack holstered his pistol. "What has Ransome got to do with this?"

"I'm not talking about the security guard Pottermass sent. Cheryl Radames, a ZI6 Agent."

Jack stared at the vixen. Felix's reports had mentioned a Cheryl Radames, tigress from ZI6. Two Cheryls. Two tigresses. Could it be?

"There's something else." Alyssa interrupted Jack's train of thought and pointed at the window. "I think Nick wasn't alone when he turned savage. Look out the window then look down."

Jack had no reason to assume the vixen was up to something, so he strode to the window and looked down. He saw nothing but grass, but there appeared to be something on the exterior wall just beneath the windowsill. He aimed his little flashlight, and saw a cross shaped hole. "What is this?"

"We have a grappling gun in ZI6 that makes a hole similar to that." Alyssa procured her own grappling gun for comparison.

"I think someone infiltrated the office through that window and did something to Nick that caused him to go feral."

Jack turned away from the window and frowned at her. "I pointed a gun at your head. Twice. Why are you giving me so much intel?"

Alyssa sighed and put away her grappler. "You and I have the same mission, don't we? We've been here for days and as far as finding Slothfeld we're getting nowhere. If we cooperated more, we could have a better chance."

Jack leaned against the windowsill and considered her words. Alyssa had proven herself intelligent and skilled, even though that was tempered by inexperience. There was however, the issue of that
one basic rule of being a spy: trust no-one. It did not appear to have occurred to the vixen, if she wasn't actually in on the whole thing, but the grapple mark beneath the window had unpleasant implications. She herself had said that a ZI6 grappler could cause such a mark, and the exact cause of Cheryl's disappearance was still unknown.

For all Jack knew Slothfeld could have changed his mind about working with predators.

"I suppose." Jack paused, choosing his next words carefully. He couldn't say anything that could give away his suspicions. "And I suppose I should return the favor. I talked to your fox, and he insists that a wolf shot him with some kind of serum."

"A wolf?"

"Obviously that's not entirely true. I found fake fur on the steps behind the secret entrance. Whoever did this was wearing a disguise. That's all I know." They both tensed when they heard the roar of an engine close by, but it was only a motorcycle on the road above. "There's nothing else here. We should go in case the ZPD shows up."

Alyssa nodded, switched off the computer and followed Jack out. "If you're wondering about Gabe, he's lost most of his memory of his time with Slothfeld, probably because of that serum you were talking about. I'll let you know as soon as he remembers the facility's location."

"Yeah, you do that." Jack said. "And in the meantime, I think we should keep to our separate investigations. Judging from ZI6 using predators things are slightly different in Fengland, but here predator and prey don't exactly get along. Especially foxes and rabbits.

They split up at the base of the stairs, Alyssa leaving via the back door, Jack leaving via the secret entrance.

By the time he changed back into his day suit and returned to the Palm Hotel, he was too tired to do anything other than follow up on his hunch. With a hot chocolate in paw he turned on his laptop and searched the records of known ZI6 Agents. He'd seen Cheryl Ransome's face when he'd checked out the clinic himself a few days before the raid, so resolving this would be quick. He reached the database, typed Cheryl Radame's name, and then waited for her portrait to appear…

He stared at the screen, the steam of the mug rising in front of his face. A complete, one hundred percent match.

"Darn it." He muttered.

If Cheryl was part of the conspiracy, there was a chance the other ZI6 agent was too.

"So much for cooperation."

Jack finished his mug and fell asleep right there on the couch.

The entirety of the fourth day consisted of Jack secretly observing Wilde from an empty skyscraper across from the hospital and then following him back to the Precinct, just to make sure he didn't suffer any 'accidents.' Nothing happened other than a well-deserved butt chewing from the cheetah in the west lobby. If the conspirators weren't sending anyone to eliminate Nick, then they were surely relying on the stereotype of compulsively lying foxes to ensure that their secrets were kept safe. If the ZPD's disbelief of Nick's story was an indicator, it was working.

On the fifth day, the day Nick was to be transported to jail, Jack sat beneath a tree in the park and watched the police escort a cuffed and muzzled fox from the Precinct and stuff him in an armored
van sandwiched in between two squad cars. There had been a delay when the van they were initially going to use broke down in the parking lot, so it was sunset by the time the convoy got underway. Jack watched the three vehicles disappear around a street corner, got up and took up Swinton's offer of dinner back at Tiana's Palace. The meal was more pleasant than the last time they were there, mainly because it was only Swinton dining with him this time and Bellwether didn't show up to stir up tension. They spent the hour discussing random topics, even Bellwether's unusual animosity towards Swinton.

"She's always been a bitter little sheep." Swinton said with a wrinkle in her snout. "I knew her when she was younger. She wouldn't shut up about the world being hard on the little guys. I think she's only out to become mayor to prove a point."

"She and your assistant mayor used to date." Jack said, raising the pig's flawlessly waxed eyebrows. "Are you sure she isn't just jealous?"

"You know, I'd never really thought of that. I should set her straight the next time we meet, make sure she knows there's nothing going on between us."

"That might be a while. The forecast this morning said there would be rain for a few days starting tomorrow morning." Jack said.

"Oh well, I guess I'll have to take my next public appearance inside then. You said before you wanting to talk about my father."

"I did. I'll understand if it's too soon."

"Father was stern mammal." Swinton leaned over her main course, her expression becoming sentimental as she touched her brooch. "He was very proud, proud of his station, proud of his heritage, and he was especially proud of his TAME collars."

"I heard your family used to own a chain of superstores. What made your family change to politics?" Jack asked. It wasn't relevant, but after several days' worth of dead ends he didn't have the energy for subtle interrogations.

"It all started when my grandfather became mayor. I was too young to know exactly how he did it, but his power expanded greatly from there. By the end of his first term he had connections in the Whitehouse itself."

"That's a heck of a lot more power than a mayor is supposed to have. No offense."

She chuckled. "None taken. I think it helped that he was also a businessmammal and knew how to deal with politicians. During that time my father replaced him as chairman of the superstore chain and eventually merged with Bisoning Wholesales. When grandfather became a senator and father became mayor in his place, he left management of the new chain to the Bisoning family and became a silent partner."

"And you're the silent partner now?" Jack asked.

Swinton nodded silently, clutching the ruby brooch like it was her own heart. "The collars are the only legacy my father has. I would do anything to keep them from disappearing."

Jack tilted his head. "Forgive me for asking, but why is it that every other mayor has to give up their position after a certain number of terms, but mayors in Zootopia don't have to?"

Before Swinton could answer, her phone buzzed. "Oh for crying out loud." She answered the phone
nevertheless. Jack's ears swiveled towards the frantic voice coming from the device. The pig's became a mask of blank shock and she lowered her phone.

"What is it?" Her companion asked.

"It's Wilde. There was an accident on the road in the Rainforest District. God damn it, he's gone!"
When Precinct One received the anonymous call about a body in Dr. Lemming's office, Judy had been first on the scene purely because she'd been the closest at the time dispatch had given the alert. This time she was the first because she was fast.

She brought her car to a screeching halt several feet from the squad car that had been the rear of the convoy. It took her mere seconds to deduce what had happened. Something had caused the car in front to lose control, creating a domino effect in which the van collided with the front car and then was rear-ended in turn by the car in back. That along with the perpetually rain soaked roads of the Rainforest District had caused the first two vehicles to crash through the barrier and into a ditch.

Judy leapt out the vehicle, ignoring the rain as she sprinted to the only car still on the road. The two officers had already emerged, but were in too much pain to do anything other than lean against the car.

"What happened?" Judy demanded.

"Hell if I know!" The rhino officer snapped. The antelope didn't say anything.

Judy raced through the broken barrier and checked the front car first. The car was on its side, and its occupants were trapped but otherwise okay. The rabbit turned her attention to the van. Her heart sank when she saw that one of the rear doors was open. The driver was limp, his neck at an odd angle. Judy checked for a pulse and her heart sank lower when she didn't find one. She hopped down into the mud beside the doors, noticed a key still in the door lock, and looked inside.

Empty. It was freaking empty!

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers!" She grabbed her radio and alerted dispatch to the situation. Almost immediately the emergency was relayed to every available unit.

The rain was getting heavier; the dark skies above had grown cloudy, and natural rain was mixing with the rain from the sprinklers. Judy held a paw over her eyes as she searched for any trace of Nick before it could get washed away. She couldn't believe this was happening. Mere days after she had solved the biggest case in over a decade, the fox behind it all was going to get away with it.

Judy saw footprints in the mud, shielded from the rain by plate-like leaves.

*Over my dead body!*

She announced on the radio that she was pursuing the prisoner, pulled out her dart gun and charged into the bush. Pulling out a baton to swipe the massive fronds out of her way, she kept her eyes low and on the trail. Behind her she heard ambulance sirens. The injured officers were going to be fine. That just left the fox to worry about. Nick was going in a straight line, trying to put as much distance between himself and the crash site as possible. After several minutes of striding through thick jungle, soupy mud and heavy rain she checked the compass app on her phone. They were heading south. She switched to the maps app and saw that she was almost to the border of the district, just north of Downtown and Little Rodentia. She transmitted her current location through the radio and pressed on.

When she finally reached the edge of the district, the soaking wet and muddy rabbit broke free of the vegetation and found herself facing the ornate stone wall served as the border separation the district from Downtown. The carvings were deep and intricate, perfect for climbing. Judy could see
muddy stains leading straight up the wall.

Judy hopped onto the short stone platform before the wall and wiped her muddy feet to reduce the chances of slipping. This was no frigid ice wall, however, and going up and over was practically effortless.

Judy reached the top of the wall, straightened herself and looked around for the missing prisoner. Ahead lay an empty parking lot, and beyond, the tall rectangular buildings of Downtown Zootopia. The rain had soaked right down to her skin, but she didn't have time to shiver. She had just spotted an even wetter and muddier fox ducking into an alley on the other side of the parking lot.

Judy resisted the urge to shout at the fox. The element of surprise would make for a swift arrest. Instead she gave an update through the radio, jumped down and raced across the parking lot. As she ran dispatch reported through the radio that backup would reach the area within seven minutes.

She reached the alley and peaked around the corner. Nick had slowed down, fidgeting with his cuffs as he neared the broken wooden fence at the other end of the alley. He stopped at what looked like a loose board.

A dart was unlikely to hit him at this range. Judy edged into the alley and ducked behind a dumpster. She peeked around. Nick was picking at the cuffs with something small and pointy. One cuff came loose and dangled from his right wrist. She moved closer, crossing the alley and taking cover behind a thick drain pipe. She should be close enough now, she figured, as she aimed her gun.

Her target, the soaked shirt clinging to his back like a second skin, shifted as he bent lower, shielding his paws as he worked. Seconds later there was a click as the second cuff came free.

Judy adjusted her aim and put her finger over the trigger.

The radio crackled. "All units, all units-

Judy shut the radio up, but it was too late. Nick had spotted her.

"Shit!" He flung the cuffs at her.

Judy ducked the projectile and fired, but the dart hit wood as the fox lifted the loose board and slipped through.

"Hey! Stop right there!" Judy ran and slid through the small gap, ending up in a wide street. Nick was racing across, avoiding the light traffic.

He was heading straight for the black iron fence that bordered Little Rodentia.

"Wilde! Don't be an idiot!" Judy dodged the trunk-like legs of a rhino as she took off after him. The cars that had been brought to a halt by the foxy jaywalker stayed put as the officer sprinted past, allowing her to catch up with him just as he reached the top of the fence. He dropped down the other side and took off through the tiny skyscrapers of Zootopia's smallest district.

"Stop! You're going to get those rodents killed!" Judy hollered. She didn't bother going up and over this time, being just thin enough to squeeze through the bars.

She caught up to the fox just as he reached the foot wide main street. A hard tackle sent them both tumbling across the park beside the street and into a hotel, nearly toppling the entire building. Squeals filled the air as rodents fled in all directions. All Judy could think about was making sure
Nick stayed down. She reached for her fox repellent. Nick cursed and flung her off.

Judy went clear over a ten-centimeter tall fence, terrified of the innocent civilians she was about to crush. Then she hit the ground, and felt confusion when the ground malformed and became cold water, enshrouding her entire body. She pushed herself through the surface, sputtering, and discovered that she had fallen into a swimming pool the size of a doormat.

That fox was so going to pay for that.

She pulled herself out the pool, climbed back over the fence, and raced down the main street. She spotted Nick's dark ears above the round lighted window and darkened brick of Rodentia's mid-sized buildings.

"Wilde! Enough!"

She went ignored. Judy avoided the rodents beneath her as best as she could as she reached a T-junction and saw the fox fleeing down an adjoining street. He looked behind her, not seeing the little semi he was rapidly catching up to until his muddy foot literally came down on top of it. He yelled in shock as he suddenly lost control of his movement, struggling to balance on one leg as his makeshift roller-skate had him swerving down the road. Judy aimed her dart gun, only to realize she had forgotten to reload. Nearly panicking at the thought of Nick getting away because of the delay, she frantically grabbed another dart.

Meanwhile Nick was heading straight for the little Big Donut cafe in the middle of a roundabout. Before he could collide he leapt straight up, barely clearing the edge of the round building, only for his foot to hit the giant donut sign that stood atop the restaurant. He fell flat on his front, sliding across the rain-slicked street and scattering parked cars in his wake. The big donut sign broken off and rolled after him. Judy clenched her teeth at the collateral damage as she loaded her dart and aimed.

The fox slid under a grid of colored pipe bridges to a stop near the end of the street, a mere three blocks from the fence on the far side of where they'd started. The big donut rolled right between his legs, eliciting a flinch and a groan. It was now or never for Judy as she aimed for his back and fired.

Nick ducked around a corner at the last second, the dart hitting a neon sign and creating an explosion of sparks. Judy reloaded, but it was already too late. The fox was using the taller buildings as stepping-stones, leaping across them one by one until he was high enough to grab the top of the fence and pull himself over. He dropped out of sight.

"No!" Judy hopped onto one of the tallest buildings near the fence and onto the fence. She squeezed through the bars and landed on the grass below. The fox was gone.

"This isn't over, fox!" She shouted.

A shadow passed over her face, and then she gasped as her arms were suddenly pinned together. She looked down and saw a ring of pink icing and sprinkles stuck around her body.

The fox that had been waiting beneath the brick base to ambush his pursuer pushed her to the ground. She rolled into a trashcan and became stuck there, her legs flailing as she tried to free herself.

"Yes. It is." He didn't sound particularly proud of himself.

"Get back here!" Judy shrieked and struggled, but the donut sign was like a thick sprinkled cuff.
Nick turned round and ran across the quiet street.

"No! Get back here, Wilde! For Pete's sake, where is backup?!"

She was still shouting when backup finally arrived two minutes later to find her stuck in a donut beside a trashcan, surrounded by rodents and tiny smart phones with cameras.

"Get those cameras out of here!" Judy turned her head and hollered when she saw half a dozen news cameras aimed right at her butt. An antelope officer shooed them away as Higgins and McHorn tried to free her from the donut. Higgins pinned the donut to the ground, holding back laughter as McHorn pulled at her legs as best as he could without injuring the tiny officer. Judy was sure she would be dead of mortification by morning. No doubt every video of her colossal failure has been uploaded on the internet by now, and even McHorn was smiling as he finally gave up and called for Sergeant Ramsbottom to assist. Judy nearly had a heart attack right then and there.

A pig in full riot gear took Higgins's place, holding the donut still while the burly ram with big curly horns scraped his hoof along the ground. Judy heard him snort, the signal that he was going to charge. She screwed her eyes shut and braced herself.

Five pounding footsteps later and Ramsbottom's skull hit her butt dead on with the force of a monorail train, sending the rabbit soaring into Higgin's waiting hands.

"All hail King Arthur of Fengland!" The hippo laughed along with his comrades and set the rabbit down.

"That's a sword in a stone!" Judy was the only one not laughing as she massaged her horribly sore bottom. "Please tell me you caught him."

Higgins stopped laughing. "Sorry, Hopps. We lost his trail a few blocks from here. He could be anywhere in the city by now."

"Darnit!" Judy kicked a clump of overgrown grass. "Why did I let that stupid fox get the drop on me?! What is Captain Bogo going to say?!"

"If it'll make you feel better he probably won't yell." McHorn said. "You were the only one who got even close to catching him."

"But I didn't catch him!" Judy groaned. "Bogo's going to put me back on parking duty, I just know it!"

"Settle down, fuzzy bunny." McHorn said. "I've known him long enough to know he's not going to do that. See for yourself."

Judy turned round and shrank when she found Bogo's massive form looming over her. He looked like he'd swallowed some particularly foul medicine, an expression she had seen many times after the last Rodentia incident.

"Hopps. You're finally out of the donut, I see."

"Sir, I am so sorry." Judy pleaded.

The buffalo put his hooves on his hips. "You do realize that this is the second time you've caused big trouble in Little Rodentia."
"I let him get the drop on me, sir. I got so close. I'll get him next time, I promise."

Bogo shook his head. "There won't be a next time."

"But sir!"
"You misunderstand me. The assignment of recapturing the escaped fox has been passed to T.U.S.K. As of now we're no longer in charge of the hunt."

Judy heard McHorn snort behind her. "Let me guess. The mayor put Trunchbull up to this."

"What choice did he have? On the bright side, the Dr. Lemming murder case has been passed to Homicide, where it belongs." Bogo replied. "But back to you, Hopps. Did you see anything suspicious at the crash site?"

"What do you mean, sir?"
"We spoke with the officers who had been driving the front car before T.U.S.K. took over. Apparently someone wandered in front of the convoy and caused them to crash."

"What?" Higgins responded before Judy could.

"It happened too fast for them to remember any details other than a description. The mammal was dressed all in black and was wearing a hood, but they reckon it was some species of cat."

Judy's eyes widened. "Sir, there was something! When I checked to see if Wilde was still in the van, I noticed that the door had been unlocked. The key was still in there."

Bogo scowled. "The van's driver was the only one with the key, but he died in the initial crash. You mean to say that someone deliberately caused the crash to help Wilde escape?"
McHorn stepped around the rabbit. "Then why did they run off afterward? Why did they leave the fox to escape on his own? And how did they know which road the convoy would take?"

"Sir… what is going on?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out. Just remember that Cunninghorn is calling the shots on this one. Chances are that we'll never see that fox again."

Because of the perpetual downpour, the press conference the next morning took place in Precinct One's lobby. Judy stood at the edge of the stage and watched as Chief Trunchbull stepped up to the podium, flanked by Mayor Swinton and Assistant Mayor Woolton. Mr. Pottermass was standing away from the crowd, flanked by a pair of bodyguards. Chief Bogo stood behind her, arms crossed as he glared at the pig and hippo. Judy wondered what they had done to earn the buffalo's bitterness.

"Ladies and gentle-mammals, earlier this week we exposed the worst crime that has ever occurred in this city since the Zoodiac killings." Trunchbull spoke before the podium, which had been raised on another pedestal so the microphones could reach his face. "Thanks to the investigations of Captain Mansa Bogo and his newest recruit, Officer Judy Hopps, and the action taken afterword by Precinct One's T.U.S.K. unit, Nicholas Wilde, the fox responsible for the scheme and the savage attacks that have occurred because of his reckless removal of numerous TAME Collars, was apprehended five days ago. But at approximately eight-thirteen last night, the convoy escorting Wilde to prison met with an accident, and the prisoner escaped. Anxious murmurings rippled through the crowd. "He was last spotted outside the border of Little Rodentia, where he had been involved in a pursuit by Officer Hopps, who almost succeeded in capturing him. As of now he is still on the run, but I assure you that T.U.S.K. is already on his trail."

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"What caused the crash in the first place?" A boar from Saharaside called. "That is still under investigation."

"Was it really an accident?"

"That has yet to be determined."

"Another predator went savage two days ago! Has stopping Wild Times really put an end to the attacks?" A yak from Zootopia News Network demanded.

"As I have said, the regular removal of the collars appears to have increased the risk of said attacks happening. It is likely that we will see more attacks over the next few weeks, but City Hall assures you that it will come to an end."

A ram from the Meadowlands Gazette pushed his way to the front. "Do you believe TAME Collars truly prevent savage attacks?"

Trunchbull and Swinton both narrowed their eyes. "Yes I do."

"Zoocell is the company that currently manufactures TAME Collars. Is it possible that a defect is causing the increase in attacks?"

"That is very unlikely." Swinton spoke up.

That answer turned out to be a mistake. "Then you admit that the collars aren't as effective as you say they are?"

The murmurings grew louder. Bogo's lips very slightly curved upward. Judy remembered that Bellwether was the CEO of Meadowlands Gazette. She waited with bated breath for Swinton's response. The pig's eyes glinted at the ram. "I have said no such thing. We have already explained who is responsible for the savage attacks."

"It just sounds very coincidental." The ram spoke. Judy could imagine the words coming from Bellwether's mouth instead. "Mr. Pottermass, one of your supporters, invests in a fox who turns out to be responsible for numerous savage attacks because he has secretly been removing the collars that supposedly prevent these attacks from happening. Not just coincidental, but convenient. Will the incident provide sufficient proof that TAME Collars are needed?"

Swinton pushed her way past Trunchbull. "What are you accusing us of, exactly?"

"I am not accusing you of anything, Mayor Swinton." The ram replied, even as he retracted his microphone slightly. The murmuring crowd had fallen silent. "I am only asking if it's possible that the Wild Times case has proven that TAME Collars are needed despite the accidents they cause on a regular basis."

Swinton drummed her fingers on the side of podium's pedestal. "If you will excuse me, Chief Trunchbull, I will take it from here."

The perturbed elephant nodded and stepped away. Two officers removed the pedestal and placed the podium on the stage before the mayor.

Swinton straightened her brooch before speaking. "TAME Collars are needed. They always have and they always will be. In fact, a new generation of collars is being developed as we speak, one that will decrease the chances of accidents and savages attacks occurring by at least ninety-five percent."
The ram thrust his microphone out again. "And when can we expect to receive details of this 'new generation'?
"Swinton smiled. "As soon as next morning. I will explain everything in the ZNN studio at ten am. You know which channel."

The ram didn't ask any more questions after that. A giraffe from Tundratown Times stepped up and brought the subject back to the missing fox. "Mayor Swinton, did Wilde have any accomplices and have they been apprehended?"

Swinton brushed a tuft of platinum blond hair from in front of her eye. "Wilde had two accomplices; Finnick Courroux, a fennec fox, and Cass Tile, species unknown. They're both on the run, but the ZPD will catch them before long."

"Mayor Swinton, is it true that Wilde received most of his investment from the mob?"

"It is a very strong possibility."

"Officer Hopps, is it true that you failed to apprehend Wilde?"

Judy blinked when she realized that a squirrel from Little Rodentia Times had broken off from the gaggle to question the rabbit.

"I…" She hesitated.

Bogo grunted. "Let me ask you a question. Is Officer Hopps standing at the podium?"

The squirrel looked quizzical. "I beg your pardon?"

"Is Officer Hopps standing at the podium?"

"No?"

"Then direct your questions to the mammal who is." Bogo ended the order with a wave of dismissal.

The squirrel responded by pointing the microphone up in the buffalo's direction. "A comment from you, first. Do you believe that a rabbit is capable of protecting us?"

Bogo looked more stunned than angered at the reporter's audacity. "She's the one who exposed Wild Times. What do you think?"

"Do you believe that was skill or luck?"

"Get."

The squirrel finally got the hint and scuttled back to the crowd.

Judy stood there under Bogo's shadow, unsure if she was supposed to feel grateful.

"Sir…"

Bogo didn't answer. Instead he turned and walked away.

"Sir?"

Judy followed him until he stopped by the doors to the stairway. Beside the doors was a pair of
vending machines, one of which served hot beverages. The bunny watched nervously as Bogo procured plain water.

"Sir, I'm sorry I failed. The last thing I wanted was to embarrass you." When Bogo didn't answer it made Judy feel worse. "Sir, you said yourself that it was me who exposed Wilde. You know I can set this right."

Bogo finally turned to her, a paper cup in his hoof. He looked thoroughly depressed. "How good are you at keeping things to yourself, Hopps?"

"I have over three thousand family secrets locked away in my brain, sir."

Bogo drained the water in one go. "You did good exposing Wild Times, Hopps… but a part of me wishes you hadn't."

Judy gaped. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You heard that reporter. The only reason I sent you to that clinic was so we could stop the savage attacks. Taking down Wild Times was supposed to be the end of it, but predators are still going savage."

"City Hall said that would stop after a few weeks."

"And you believe them?" Judy recoiled at the fierce look he gave her. "Here's a tip from a vet to a rookie, Hopps; take everything City Hall says with a pinch of salt."

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Judy jumped and turned. She hadn't realized that Pottermass had followed them. The hippo stood near the reception desk with an exasperated smile and crossed arms. "You're not still brooding about what happened five years ago, are you? So you got bayoneted by an elephant on LSD, so what?"

Bogo crushed the cup in his hoof.

For a second Judy was sure he was preparing to lunge at the hippo. Pottermass's bodyguards seemed to have the same thought, for they immediately looked on edge.

Bogo stayed where he was.

"It was Musth and you know it." He rumbled with quiet fury.

Pottermass shrugged. "I've never heard of that drug before." He turned to leave.

"I haven't forgotten what Cunninghorn said about you, Pottermass!" Bogo growled after him, pointing a threatening hoof. "If anything happens to that kid, you will be the first on my suspect list!"

Pottermass stopped and turned his head. His small eyes flashed at the two mammals. "You are mistaken, Captain. If anything happens to him, it'll not be by my hand."

He and his guards returned to the conference, leaving Bogo to fume and Judy to stare up in concern at her superior.

"Captain Bogo?"

Bogo tossed the remains of the cup into the nearby wastebasket and leaned against the wall. He rubbed his left side and stared at the floor.
"Sir, what is Musth?"

"Look it up, Hopps!"

Judy winced at his harsh tone. "Do you want me to leave you alone?" She took his silence as a yes. "Ok, then. See you later, sir."

When she returned to the press conference, Trunchbull has returned to the podium. "That's all the time we have. No more questions." He was saying at that moment.

Swinton had stepped off the stage and was standing beside the plant pot in quiet discussion with Woolton and Pottermass. Potter nodded at something Woolton said and handed him a small picture. Judy caught a glimpse of gold fur and black spots before Woolton pocketed the picture. Swinton spotted Judy, beamed and approached her. The crowd of reporters, who through their reporters' instincts had sensed that the conference wasn't truly over just yet, followed her.

"Officer Hopps!" She said with pride. "I never had the chance to express my praises for lifting the lid on Wilde's illegal enterprise."

Judy swallowed, conscious of the many cameras currently fixed on her. "Thank you, ma'am."

Swinton's smiled widened and she put a hoof on the rabbit's shoulder. "Don't feel bad for losing him in Little Rodentia. Our best teachers are our own mistakes." She leaned in slightly and winked.

Judy's heart swelled. Suddenly the cameras weren't so bad. She turned to face them, feeling the defiance and anger show on her face. The next time she saw that fox, it would be *him* being brought to the ZPD with a donut stuck around *his* chest.

"The escape of Nicholas Wilde was my fault, and mine alone! This is not about finding a mole or finding a scapegoat." She glared at the black lens of one camera, imaging that it was the emerald green eye of the fox who had humiliated her. "And let me tell you something, Mr. Wilde. There is no swamp you can swim to, no desert you can cross, no hole you can hide that I will not find you!" She narrowed her eyes. "The bunny is coming."
Benjamin IV

Benjamin had mopped up vomit before. It came with working at a fast food joint which had a
parking lot that moonlighted as a hangout for drunks and junkies. So when Pottermass informed
him that he would be spending an entire day cleaning up sick, the cheetah considered it as getting
off lightly.

Apparently some drunkards came into the Tundratown Bug-Burga and caused a massive scene the
night before. By the time Precinct Three came by, the restaurant was a mess. Chairs had been
overturned, windows had been broken, and food, trays and vomit were everywhere. The awful
mess had yet to be cleaned, and after his blunder in inadvertently assisting in a plot to con
Pottermass out of expensive medical equipment, the task had been given to Benjamin. Benjamin
had accepted the punishment without so much as a grimace, being just happy that Pottermass was
letting him keep his job.

Benjamin had slept little that night, partly because of the lingering pain in his stitched up arm and
mostly because he couldn't stop thinking about Nick. The news that the fox had escaped and was
now on the run had left the cheetah with mixed feelings. Nick had lied to him for months. He'd
used him to con his own boss. He'd put his job and even his life at risk. Despite it all, Benjamin
worried about him. Nick could have been hurt in that crash, perhaps badly. For all he knew Nick
might be dying right now, and there was no telling what the ZPD would do when they inevitably
called up to him. Then there was Finnick and Honey. Finnick had gone completely AWOL, even
taking his distinctively painted van with him. He was likely with Honey in the bunker, but
Benjamin had been unable to bring himself to go there. What would he do when he saw Finnick?
The little fox had to have known about the con, too.

Benjamin gave up on sleep when he opened his eyes, spied the alarm clock and saw that it was ten
to four. He downed a mug of coffee and a small box of donuts for energy, put on his only coat,
grabbed an umbrella and then set out for Tundratown.

He reached the frigid district at approximately four-twenty, just as the black sky started to
brighten, turned a deep dark blue. The streetlamps were still lit, and Benjamin followed the path of
bright yellow circles on the pavement to the stretch of tarmac where Bug-Burga was located. The
constant rain had reduced what was normally a winter wonderland into a filthy grey wasteland. The
snow had turned to muddy water and slush, and Benjamin was finding it almost impossible to
avoid the puddles in the darkness. Even with the umbrella, the feline found his legs almost
completely drenched by the time he reached the length of pavement before Bug-Burga. The water
was absolutely freezing. A couple of times Benjamin turned his head to see a completely empty
street.

He had a strange feeling that he wasn't alone out here.

The honk of a car horn made Benjamin jump and turn.

Behind him was a pink limo, rainwater streaming down its black windows like rivers. The middle
window slid down with a hum, revealing Pottermass's smug face.

"Sir!" Benjamin gasped. "What are you doing here? It's not even six!"
"I'm just making sure you haven't done a runner like your foxy little fraud friends." Pottermass
replied casually.

Benjamin's ears lowered. "No, sir. I haven't."
"That's good, good." The hippo smiled, but his eyes were hard. "I hope today teaches you a jolly good lesson."

"It already has, sir." Benjamin shivered both from cold and the memory of that rhino officer's words.

"The mess has been contained to the front area, so there's no need to go in back other than getting cleaning supplies. I just thought that you should know."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that you're not firing me."

Pottermass leaned his arm on the window frame. "There are worse things than a pink slip, Benjamin, I can assure you."

The cheetah nodded quickly. Satisfied, Pottermass closed the window. The limo drove off and disappeared around the Bug Burga building.

Benjamin shifted the umbrella on his shoulder and walked the rest of the way to the building. Even from outside he could see the damage. Two windows had been smashed, and one was cracked and covered in tape. Jagged glass balls were scattered all over the outdoors eating area, glinting in the rainwater. Benjamin decided he would take care of that first as he folded the umbrella, wincing as every movement he made aggravated his arm. He pushed open the door and went inside.

It was even worse than he'd imagined. He hadn't expected all of the chairs to be toppled, or the condiment sauces covering almost every surface like a three-dimensional abstract painting. Drinks had been spilled along with stomach contents. The cheetah's shoulders slumped at the sight. It was going to be a long, long day. He leaned his umbrella against the wall, figuring he could save the dripping puddle forming beneath the umbrella for last, and looked for the closet. Luckily for him the layout of Bug Burga was identical to that of the place where he used to work, and the closet was in the kitchen, right where he had expected it to be. The black metal door to the staff washrooms and the manager's office was shut, but he'd been told not to worry about cleaning in there. He took out a brush and dustpan and returned outside, where he spent the next few minutes sweeping up all the bits of glass he could find, doing his best to ignore the chilly raindrops pounding on his head and shoulders. It was raining so hard that it almost hurt. When the exterior mess was in the trash, Benjamin checked his watch. It was still over an hour until ZNN gave the morning news. He would check it out on his phone soon; see if there was any news on Nick or the others. The sky had turned a shade lighter, but it was still far too dark to see much. With the glass outside cleaned up so far as he knew, Benjamin went back inside. He would have to check the outdoors area again when the sun rose and make sure he hadn't missed anything.

Benjamin tugged at his collar as he reentered the dark room. He wasn't used to being in a Bug-Burga on his own in the dark. There were seemingly impenetrable shadows everywhere he looked, and the pale grey glint he could make out on the shinier surfaces looked sinister. Benjamin found the light switches in the kitchen area, but the electricity had been cut. Even the heating was off, which was no help at all for the dampness of his clothes chilling his legs and arms. If he'd known that Pottermass wouldn't have even had the power turned on, the cheetah would have brought a flashlight. His phone would have to do. Benjamin left his coat beside his umbrella and with his lit phone in the breast pocket of his shirt he began to sweep up the glass and fries. Every thrust of the brush made him grit his teeth. The painkillers were only doing so much for his arm.

A shadow passed by the window, but he paid it no mind. He couldn't say for sure but this was the time that mammals usually started coming home from their night jobs. Benjamin hoped the streets would fill up soon. He didn't like it here. He wasn't used to Bug Burga being so dark and quiet. Even a clicking sound he just heard coming from the back made his heart skip a beat. Stuff this, he
was putting on his ear phones.

The flawless tunes of the Angel with Horns made him feel better, and he sped up his work while avoiding the spilled drinks and sick. That was something else that bothered him; Bug Burga smelling of vomit. It was freezing in here, only slightly less cold than it was outside in the rain. His teeth were chattering lightly as he swept, and his stitches were seriously hurting. This was officially the most miserable cleaning assignment of his life, and he was sure that this was exactly what Pottermass had intended.

"Nick, you jerk." He muttered bitterly as he emptied the dustpan into the trashcan.

With most of the mess cleaned he started picking up chairs and stacking them on the tables so he could clean the rest of the floor. He just had to sweep up a burger and fries in the corner and then he could switch to a mop and bucket. Once the last of the spilled food was scooped up and dumped with the rest, he started back to the closet for a mop and bucket. On his way through the kitchen he hesitated by the walk in fridge.

The door to the private area had been shut when he'd last been there… hadn't it?

Benjamin looked through open door at the short hallway, but saw nothing but shrinking shadows. The ambient light that came with the coming dawn was just enough by this point to see without a flashlight. Maybe he'd misremembered. The door itself was black anyway. The cheetah stepped away from the doorway and started to turn back to the storeroom.

Before he knew it he was toppling backwards. His stomach leapt into his chest. His bandaged arm slammed into the edge of the counter on the way down. Benjamin hit the tiles with a soft thud that knocked the air out of his lungs.

The cheetah lay there on his back on the freezing cold floor, trying not to black out. His arm felt like it had been slashed with a red-hot knife. At one point his collar beeped and zapped him. When he could breathe again, he slowly pushed himself up and looked around what he had tripped on.

He felt another chill when he saw that it was a gun. It wasn't a true handgun, like the Berettas and Glocks Honey kept locked in a safe far out of Sherry's reach. No, this looked more like a dart gun. Benjamin tentatively picked it up with his good arm while holding the other to his chest. The dart guns he'd seen the ZPD use at the rain on Wild Times were blue, white and orange. This one was coal black with yellow stripes on the sides, like a hornet in reverse. Also unlike the ZPD guns it had a thick nozzle that resembled a silencer. It must be a new model. The ZPD had come here last night to deal with the rowdy rioters, and perhaps had left one of their weapons behind in the chaos. A silly thing to do, for sure, especially for a cop, but Benjamin didn't find it funny. It had been a dart gun that had nearly killed him.

His arm was still on fire. He held it out, and his heart sank. There was a red stain forming on his sleeve. He sniffed it, but his hopes that it was only ketchup were dashed. He pulled the sleeve down to find that the stain was even bigger on his bandages.

His stitches had popped. Great. Just freaking great! The sun hadn't even risen yet! Could this day get any worse?

That jerk of a manager kept a first aid kit in his office back in the Bug Burga where he used to work. Benjamin hoped this one did the same. He had no idea what to do with popped stitches, but some extra dressings could stem the bleeding until he got to the emergency room. With the dart gun still in his good paw the cheetah got to his feet and entered the dark hallway. If the layout of the two Bug Burgas were identical, the manager's office was on the right hand side. He saw the
doorway immediately and held his bleeding arm to his chest as he walked to it. He reached the threshold just as he pulled out his earphones, and then he froze.

There were shadows here too, formed by the filing cabinets and cheap wooden desk. But there was one shadow in particular that caught his eye, a big black shadow in the middle of the small room that was alive and breathing.

Benjamin frowned, his ears filling with a strange, squelching, crunching sound as the living shadow jerked its head. His breath stilled when he realized that the shadow was a mammal, a massive, breathing mammal dressed in a robe-like coat and a wide brimmed hat, both as black as death. It was crouched low on the floor, kneeling with its back to the puzzled cheetah as it held something in its thick arms. Benjamin stared at the intruder in silence as he tried to work out what it was doing. In the blackness close by, something the color of bone stood out to him. It resembled a mask like the ones everyone had been wearing at the party where he’d first met Captain Bogo, but this mask looked like a child would draw the skull of a crow, with round black lenses for eyes. Another crunch drew the cheetah's stare back to the dark shadow. The shadow jerked its head with a vicious motion, and something red sprayed on the floor and one of the filing cabinets. Benjamin flinched, and then tilted his head so he could see what it was holding.

It was another, smaller mammal, their tan coat soaked in blood. The coat had been torn open, half the buttons gone, the clothes and flesh beneath torn to shreds. Benjamin tilted his head further and saw the head of the smaller mammal. It was a wolf, lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling as the big shadowy mammal lowered its head back down to his ragged throat. There was another crunch, and the wolf's head tilted back. He was still alive! Then Benjamin realized the falsehood of his realization when the head tilted all the way to an impossible angle over the big mammal's wrist. The neck connecting the head to the shoulders was a glistening mess of pale skin, frayed muscle, and fragments of vertebrae, everything that made up the back of the neck. Benjamin couldn't think of anything else but the sudden, horrible realization of what he was seeing. He stood there, frozen in the doorway, unable to move, speak or scream, as he watched the shadow feed. The wolf's head, almost completely upside down, began to lose the skin of his face. The grey fur gave way in a manner that was nothing like skin, then the snout and upper row of teeth, a mask, came away and hit the puddle with a soft splat. The head tilted slightly, the blank eyes of what was now Assistant Mayor Woolton with a wolf's body staring straight into Benjamin's soul.

The shadow stopped chewing. Slowly, a low growl spewing from its maw, the shadow turned its head. Benjamin saw the left side of the face of a dark furred grizzly, dripping bloody jaws, and a black, shark-like eye.

He dropped the dart gun and ran.
Bogo didn't mind letting McHorn drive for a change, and he'd picked a hell of a day for it. The rhino was grumbling under his breath as he pressed the switch for the windshield wipers again and again, going slowly on the rain-slicked roads of Tundratown. Bogo shared his sentiments. The drains were surely going to flood at this rate and when they did, filthy slush would be the least of their problems. At least Bogo would be spending most of the day out of the rain so far as he knew, unlike Cunninghorn.

Since his narrow escape from Little Rodentia, Nicholas Wilde had gone completely AWOL. Cunninghorn and his elite T.U.S.K.s had searched every place they'd known the fox to frequent. They'd searched his apartment, they'd searched the bar he frequented, they'd even returned to Wild Times and turned the entire warehouse upside down, but there was no sign of him. They'd even paid a visit to a mare whose name, Cassandra Teal, closely resembled that of the Cass Tile who had sent that email, but that had turned out to be a dead end. Bogo knew he shouldn't be happy that a criminal was still on the loose, but Wilde wasn't a mass murderer and he was enjoying seeing Cunninghorn simmer like a lit stick of TNT.

Judy Hopps, meanwhile was dead serious on correcting her mistake and catching Wilde herself. When she wasn't on assignment she was searching the city like T.U.S.K. was, questioning anyone and everyone. She had been the one who had discovered that after incapacitating her Wilde had made his escape through a disused subway entrance. By the time T.U.S.K. got down there, however, it was too late to pick up his trail. Hopps was not one to give up, however. She was already out with Higgins searching one of two areas where the tunnel began and ended, braving the frigid downpour in Tundratown in her search for clues. Bogo and McHorn would have gone with them but Trunchbull wanted a pair of available officers to find Benjamin Clawhauser and question him. The buffalo had immediately volunteered himself and the only other colleague he trusted not to cause the feline any unnecessary distress. That poor kid had been through enough these past few days.

In the meantime, the murder of Dr. Lemming continued to go unsolved. Forensics had completely failed to find a match to the tiger fur found at the scene, and even then there wasn't enough evidence that a tiger had been responsible for the murder. Dr. Lemming had no enemies other than the hundreds of predators he had 'diagnosed' during his career. Given the gruesome MO, it seemed quite possible that someone gotten a little too ticked off and decided to give the hack a taste of his own medicine. *Never mind that, Mansa.* What the killer had done was completely disproportionate to the victim's own wrongdoings, and there was no doubt that they were genuinely certifiable. Now there were two criminals on the loose in this city.

No, make that three. Bogo's conversation with Jack Savage had erased any lingering doubt that the mammal that had attacked Antlerson was not a savage, and they also had yet to be apprehended. He couldn't even get authorization to bring Woolton in for questioning unless he had concrete evidence that the ram had lied about everything involving the circumstances of the attack.

Three criminals, two of them extremely dangerous, running around Zootopia doing who knows what. Bogo rubbed his temple and wondering how much more of this he could take.

With the sky completely clouded over it was still dark as dusk when they parked outside the Tundratown Bug-Burga. Bogo was feeling apprehensive about seeing Benjamin again. He'd been through so much because of Wilde and the ZPD's actions. There was no telling how he would react to being confronted by the police again. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cared so much
about how some felt about him and the organisation he worked for.

The buffalo and rhino didn't realize they'd parked right in the middle of a puddle until they stepped out and found themselves ankle deep in water. McHorn practically leapt onto 'dry land.' "Fuck me, it's freezing! Where's a pair of Tundra Boots when you need'em?"

"Wuss." Bogo taunted in good nature as he stepped out the puddle and made sure his waterproof trench coat was fully fastened.

McHorn held a hoof over his eyes to shield them from the heavy rain. His long curved horn was already as slick as the roads. "Clawhauser should be inside. Let's make this quick."

They crossed the outdoors area, making a small splash with each step. Even in the dim light and near-blinding rain they could make out the damage to the building. It was a good thing that the wind was blowing the rain away from the broken windows; otherwise Benjamin would never get the place cleaned. Some of their acquaintances from Precinct Three had told them horror stories of what the drunks had gotten up to in there. There had been fries tossed around like confetti, chairs used as clubs and vomit as substitute pepper spray. Hell, there was even a bloody paw print on the glass of the front door.

"Jesus." Bogo muttered as he pulled the door open to let McHorn through. "I bet you're glad you weren't dispatched to this one, Mac." McHorn didn't say a word as he peered at the paw print. "Mac?"

McHorn touched the print with a finger and examined his fingertip. He stared at Bogo with a stunned look in his small brown eyes.

"It's fresh."

A hundred different curses flooded through Bogo's brain in the second it took to pull out his weapon.

"Clawhauser!" He shouted into the dark, empty room.

No answer. Shit!

"McHorn, watch my back!" Bogo pointed his gun dead ahead as he stalked forward. He heard McHorn pull out his own gun and follow him.

The shadows were transparent enough to see that there was no-one hiding in them. Bogo stopped in the middle of the room and ducked low, but there wasn't anyone under the tables. It was cleaner in here than he'd expected. There wasn't even any more blood other than the print on the door. Benjamin must have made good progress before…

"Clawhauser!" He called again. Bug-Burga was deathly silent. Bogo took deep breaths as he walked. He couldn't lose his cool, even if there was a strong possibility that the bloody print had been made by a cheetah. A twenty-year-old cheetah who had lost his family when he was only eighteen, been exploited by his own friends and had already almost died less than a week ago. Bogo approached the kitchen, dreading what he might find on the other side of those tills. He stepped through the open gap.

Nothing. Nothing but a faint red smear on the tiles near the door leading to the staff restrooms and manager's office.

"It's all clear, Mansa." McHorn growled under his breath.
"Call this in and then search the customer rest rooms. I'll check in there." Bogo went to the open door without waiting for a response.

Ignoring the sound of McHorn hurriedly speaking into his radio, Bogo stopped in the doorway. It was darker in here. "Clawhauser!" He called one more time. When he heard nothing, he pulled out his flashlight and aimed at the short hallway. It was empty. The only open doors were the fire exit and the manager's office. Bogo heard a lot of rain and smelled a lot of blood. He stepped cautiously into the hallway and aimed his flashlight downward.

There it was. One of the biggest bloody messes he had ever seen. Big blotches covered the floor inside and outside the manager's office like freshly painted crimson flowers. A thick trail stretched further down the hall like a streak of dark red paint and out the fire exit.

Bogo felt ill as he looked into the manager's office. The bloodbath was even worse in there, no doubt the scene of the crime. There were even small bits of what looked like flesh and wool lying in the pool.

Wool? In a predator-only restaurant?

"Sir, the restrooms are clear- Jesus, Mary and Joseph." McHorn's footsteps stopped suddenly when he entered the hallway and saw the mess for himself. "What happened here?"

"Another savage attack." Bogo turned away from the office, feeling sicker by the minute. He entered the two staff restrooms, but both were empty. "No sane being could spill this much blood."

"Sir, I saw this near the front entrance when I went to search the restrooms. We missed it when we went in." McHorn had gloved his hooves by this point, so he was at no risk of leaving prints when he held up a mobile phone attached to a dangling pair of earphones. He pressed a button and showed Bogo the screen; it was a picture of a nuclear cheetah family of three. Two parents and one chubby teenage cheetah.

The buffalo clenched his jaw. "Check the staff restrooms."

Bogo checked the female restroom while McHorn checked the male's. Both stalls were empty. When Bogo returned to the hallway and met up with McHorn again, the rhino shook his head. Bogo rushed to the fire exit, but there was nothing in the parking lot but floodwater. The blood trail had been completely washed away at this point.

Bogo had to squeeze the grip of his gun with both hooves so he wouldn't punch the wall. "Where the fuck is he?"

"Easy, Mansa! We'll find him!" McHorn sounded grim as he said this. Whether Benjamin was the victim or the attacker, the chances of finding him both alive and well were slim. "Hopps and Higgins are the closest. They should be here soon."

Right on cue they heard sirens. They looked through the doorway back to the kitchen and saw the counters and appliances flashing red and blue. In less than a minute Higgins and Hopps showed up and froze when they saw the blood. "Christ on a bike." Higgins breathed. Hopps had her lips pressed together.

"Hopps, if you're going to throw up do it outside!" Bogo snapped.

The rabbit swallowed down her nausea. "Sir, where's Clawhauser?"

"I don't know!"
"Sweet cheese and crackers, we have to find him!"

Bogo agreed wholeheartedly. "This blood is still wet so he may not have gone far. Hopps, you're the fastest so you'll come with me to look for him. McHorn, Higgins, you two stay here and secure this crime scene! Make sure no-one enters this building unless they're ZPD!"

To avoid the blood and other evidence Bogo left through the main entrance, followed by a determined looking Hopps. If that bloody paw print came from Benjamin, he could have come out this way. Blinking relentless, freezing rainwater from his eyes Bogo shone his flashlight in the gradually fading darkness and looked around for any clues that hadn't yet been washed away. From here on out it was a race against time. He spotted something just as Hopps started running towards the corner to go around the building.

"Hopps, stop! He went this this way!" Bogo rushed to the dripping table closest to the road and bent down. Sheltered beneath the tabletop were several scattered sprinkles. They must have fell from Benjamin while he was running from the crime scene.

Or being dragged from it.

They weren't alone out here, for mammals were beginning to fill the streets as they began their day. Hopps held her raincoat over her head as she joined him beside the table. "Sir, it's no use! He could be anywhere by now!"

"There's a savage mammal out there too, Hopps!" They both had to shout over the rain.

"Good point! Where should we start looking?"

Bogo recalled Benjamin mentioning that he used public transport to get around and pointed to the bus stop down the street. "There!"

As they made their way down they received a call from the radio; T.U.S.K. was on their way to Tundratown to take over the search for the savage cheetah. If anything that made Bogo feel even worse. They reached the bus stop and almost immediately saw a small bloody smear on the post, what could have been a paw print almost completely washed away. There was a white flash from the corner of Bogo's eye and he looked down to see Hopps holding up her phone. Her ears drooped at his expression. "I didn't want to forget again, sir!"

The buffalo snorted. "I'm not angry at that Hopps! Take a sample before the rain gets rid of it all!"

Hopps nodded, understanding. She looked scared for Benjamin, too. "Do you really think he took the bus, sir?" She asked as she swabbed the blood.

"Either that or he went further down the street!" Bogo pointed further down. "The road splits from there!"

"I guess we're splitting up too, then!"

"You'd guess right!"

Hopps saluted. "I'll call you as soon as I find anything, sir!"

They split up, Bogo taking the left street and Hopps taking the right. Eventually he entered a busy street, virtually a multicolored river of umbrellas flowing in both directions. Bogo quickly holstered his gun and pressed onward, keeping his head beneath the umbrellas as best as he could in the hopes of spotting a hint of spots. He saw a giant yellow M. A billboard displayed Gazelle wearing the latest fashion. No cheetah.
When he reached the end of the street, the radio crackled and Bogo picked it up. With voices, splashing footsteps and the pattering of rain on umbrellas all around him he could barely hear Hopps's voice. "Sir, any luck?"

"Negative, Hopps." Bogo growled.

Higgins cut in at that moment, sounding shaken. "We've found the body, sir. T.U.S.K. discovered it while searching the riverbank near the crime scene. The CSIs searched the body and managed to identify him."

Bogo glared at the radio, wondering just what kind of condition the body was in. "Well?"

"There was a wallet in the inner pocket of his coat belonging to Assistant Mayor Woolton."

Bogo swore into the radio. This case just got a whole lot worse.

"We're going to keep looking for Clawhauser. Keep me posted." He wiped water from his face as he glared at the street that veered slightly to the right.

His rage flickered like a candle. He had just seen a flash of gold and black spots.

He pushed on further in pursuit, eventually pulling out his badge to get the commuters to clear the way. He reached the cheetah in the middle of the street, just as the cheetah came to a stop. Bogo knew right away it was Benjamin. He was standing on two legs rather than four, but Bogo nevertheless reached for his dart gun as he approached.

Shivering, soaking, Benjamin turned around. His arm, the one in stitches, was bloody, the paw almost completely red and dripping onto the already wet ground. It was his face, however, that made Bogo stop dead. The rest of his expression was blank, but his wide, haunted eyes were unblinking despite the rain. He was insensible to his injured arm, even though it was likely that most of the stitches had popped. The only sign he was even aware of the buffalo standing in front of him was that he had turned to face him. Bogo stepped closer, and Benjamin's face tilted up. Their eyes met, and Bogo knew right then and there that the traumatized young cheetah was innocent. This was no bloodthirsty killer, but an injured, traumatized kid who had just seen more horror in one morning that most police officers saw in a lifetime.

Emotion, heavy like the rainstorm, flooded Bogo's chest. His hoof moved away from the gun and took hold of his trench coat. As the police captain closed the distance between him and Benjamin, the coat came off and came to rest over the cheetah's head and shoulders. Whether it was the weight of the coat or his senses coming back to him, Benjamin's head tilted forward and came to rest against Bogo's chest. His thick arms came up and around the trench coat, holding the shaking feline closer to his body. The mammals around them began to take notice, giving the pair odd looks, but Bogo ignored them all.

Questions would come later. So could the matter of Woolton's death. All that mattered to Bogo now, the only thing in the entire world he gave two shits about, was the fact that Benjamin alive and safe.
Rule 62: Use the enemy's bigotry against them. That was the advice Cheryl had given to Alyssa when they had been assigned to steal a phone containing incriminating intel from a Yakuza boss in Tokyo.

That was why Alyssa played up the seductive vixen angle as far as she could get when posing as a foreign tart, and the target fell for it hook, line and sinker. The stereotype of the thieving fox had also worked to their advantage that night, for the boss had distrusted Alyssa enough to lock the phone in a safe in the walk in closet. While Alyssa had the boss preoccupied, Cheryl had infiltrated the penthouse, cracked the safe, taken the phone and left as quickly as she had came. Alyssa hadn't even needed to go so far as to engage in actual coitus before the theft had been discovered, and no-one had been able to claim she'd been involved. That had been their first assignment together, and the beginning of the friendship Alyssa cherished to this very day.

That advice had paid off again two days ago, when Alyssa had decided to plant bugs and cameras in City Hall after one too many days of fruitless investigating. It was a fact in most of the world that if they weren't career criminals foxes could only get the lowest of jobs, so nobody had batted an eye when a fox in a cleaning uniform entered the building. Hidden in her headscarf had been several tiny cameras that she slipped into the lobby and other rooms that linked to the outside in the hopes of spotting anyone resembling Slothfeld or one of his known associates entering or leaving the building. The operation went off without a hitch, and now Alyssa and Finnick were sitting in the back of a white van parked on a street in full view of City Hall, watching the footage on a laptop that had seen better days.

Heavy rain rattled on the roof of the van. Finnick opened up a flask of coffee and passed the first cup to the white vixen, who accepted the drink without taking her eyes off the screen. Then he crawled through the tiny window into the driver's seat up front, ready to go if Alyssa spotted anyone on that feed that seemed worth tailing. Honey was still in the bunker looking after the girl Gabe had saved.

"Remind me again why we're sitting less than fifty feet from the fucking fuzz who have been after my ass for about a week?" The fennec grumbled.

"Quiet." Alyssa replied.

Finnick had stumbled upon Alyssa's true identity when he'd evaded the police and made it to Honey's place, dropping down into the bunker right as the vixen and badger had been discussing a new plan to find Slothfeld. Several days later he was still getting over the shock of Alyssa being ZI6 of all things, but he'd negotiated a deal with Alyssa; if he helped her in her mission, she would help him find Nick and escape the state.

"What're those bigo-bitches doing now?" Finnick's big ears flicked when Swinton's voice changed tone.

"Spewing the same political crap they always do." Alyssa watched as Swinton and Bellwether took turns addressing a reporter who had talked his way into the lobby just in time to confront both opponents. While Bellwether had her flock behind her, Pottermass, Llamadeus and the secretary Felix Llater were at the current mayor's side, staying silent. "Swinton is insisting that they're doing everything they can to catch Nick and Bellwether is subtly accusing Swinton of knowing about Wild Times all along. Hold on, the reporter's picking up his phone… it must be something big because he's leaving."
"The police scanner said there was another savage attack earlier this morning." Finnick spat. "Wild Times got busted days ago and they're still accusing us of being responsible. Fuck 'em." They sat in silence for a good while. Swinton and Bellwether didn't leave the lobby, miraculously edging closer to the hidden camera so Alyssa could hear them better. Now they were talking about Woolton. Swinton was coolly denying that Woolton was more than just an employee when Chief Trunchbull edged through the rotating glass door. He looked deeply troubled as he approached Swinton. Alyssa tensed. This might be exactly what they were waiting for.

"Chief Trunchbull." Bellwether spoke politely. "What brings you here on this fine morning?"

Trunchbull barely acknowledged her with a glance before looking to Swinton. "Mayor Swinton, could you come with me, please? It's important."

Swinton beamed like a red setting sun. Pottermass's smile was thinner. "If it's about the latest savage attack, we should save it for the announcement at ten."

Trunchbull's trunk curled inward. "Swinton, I need you to come with me now."

Pottermass raised his eyebrows. "What is it, Chief?"

Swinton's grin faded. "What's the matter?"

"Ma'am, we should-"
"Will you just tell me what's going on?" Swinton was getting agitated. Alyssa clenched her fists, hoping they wouldn't take the conversation elsewhere.

Bellwether looked between the pig and elephant. "Has something happened?"

Trunchbull rumbled mournfully. "Maybe it should wait. It'll be on the news by now."

"Will you tell me what's going on?!" Swinton snapped. "What is it, Wilde? Has he done something?" Trunchbull didn't answer. "Is it Bisonning? Is it Savage? Has something happened with Mr. Savage?"

"No." Trunchbull said quickly.

Pottermass gripped the rim of the plant plot where the camera was hidden. "Is it Woolton?"

Trunchbull opened his mouth, but hesitated with bottled-up anguish.

Swinton now looked afraid. "What's happened to Woolton?"

The elephant wiped his brow with his trunk, which then slid down to the back of his neck. "I don't know the full details, but... there was a savage incident at the Bug Burga where Pottermass sent the cheetah boy... and... it would appear that Assistant Mayor Woolton has been killed."

Swinton's gasp was barely audible on the feed, but her shock was clear as day. Trunchbull mumbled an apology while a stricken Bellwether staggered away from the dumbfounded rams that made up her faction and shoved her way through the front door. Alyssa turned to tell Finnick to hit the pedal, but the engine was already roaring to life, not quite loud enough to drown out the stream of profanities spewing from the little fox's mouth. Alyssa had to remind him to stay within the speed limit as they tore through the streets of Savanna Central, passing the border into Tundratown in less than ten minutes. By then the seemingly endless rain had weakened to a misty shower. As the cold air seeped into the van, the vixen could feel her own dread chilling her blood. It worsened when they reached the street where the Tundratown Bug Burga was situated and they saw the herd
of flashing squad cars parked outside, and an ambulance inside the outdoor eating area itself. On the road were several news reporter vans, the reporters lined along the fence speaking to the cameras with their mikes in hand.

"Finnick, stop!" Alyssa urged. Finnick looked like a stick of cream dynamite, but had enough sense to listen to her and bring the van to a stop twenty feet away, near the other vans. Alyssa reached into a duffel bag, pulled out her listening device, which resembled a gun with a satellite dish fused to the end, and squeezed through the little window into the passenger seat beside Finnick. She opened the door's window, duct taped a sunshade over the opening, and aimed the device through a gap the anxious Finnick held open at her instruction.

A shiny silver-white car screeched to a halt on the other side of the road, and Bellwether leapt out. The listening device caught the frantic clopping of her hooves as she ran towards the restaurant.

"No… no, no, no!" She cried when she saw the cars and ambulance. Officer Hopps appeared from behind one of the cars and rushed to Bellwether as the ewe began to lose the strength in her legs.

"Miss Bellwether, what are you doing here?" The rabbit asked.

"Tell me it's not true!" Bellwether pleaded. "Tell me he isn't gone!"

Judy paused. "I'm sorry, Bellwether."

Bellwether's sobbing became unintelligible after that. Judy supported the majority of the ewe's body weight as she guided her to a bench. Another officer walked over to see what was going on. Judy explained while she patted Bellwether's back.

"I'm sorry for your loss, but how did you know what happened here?" He asked.

"Tru-Trunchbull told Swinton." Bellwether struggled to say as she sat hunched over with her face in his hooves. That seemed to make sense to the two officers.

A limo appeared in the side view mirror, stopping behind the van. Alyssa quickly moved the device away from the window as Swinton, Pottermass and Llater filed out with umbrellas. A large squad car stopped near the limo, and Trunchbull climbed out to join the group. The pig and her crew were stopped at the fence by Cunninghorn and two T.U.S.K. officers, while a dozen normal officers kept the reporters from approaching her.

"Madame Mayor!" Cunninghorn looked just as shocked at the situation as the others. Finnick's claws were tearing the sunshade, and Alyssa knew he was getting impatient for news on Benjamin.

"He's still in there, right?"

"Swinton, you can't go in there." Trunchbull stepped between them and held her at bay with a trunk on her shoulder.

"So she can but I can't?!" Swinton hissed and slashed a hoof at the dripping bench where Judy and Bellwether were still sitting.

"No-one has been in there but the ZPD!" Cunninghorn insisted.

Swinton bit her lip. "Is he really dead?"

"Yes."
"You're lying!"

"You know we're not, Madam Mayor."

Swinton flung her umbrella to the ground. Alyssa thought of Woolton's involvement in the Anterson incident and the fake wolf responsible for Nick going savage. This was looking more and more like things had gone horribly wrong this time.

Pottermass stepped up while the others kept Swinton from doing something rash. "Where is the cheetah that did this?"

Cunninghorn grimaced and wiped rainwater from his face. "At the Tundratown hospital, sir. But there's something you need to know."

"Well?"

"Bogo found him wandering around a busy street a few blocks from here."

Trunchbull balked. "And why has no-one been dispatched to the scene?!

"Because that wasn't necessary, sir. The pred was near catatonic, but far from savage."

The device caught nothing but ambience in the long pause that followed. Finnick nearly lost his grip on the sunshade as he slid down onto the car seat.

"Are you sure?" Pottermass had lowered his voice.

"Bogo was pretty sure, and there's more. The CSIs just finished checking the body and they don't think a cheetah killed him. They said the bites and claw marks were made by a predator with a longer maw, but he'll need to go to the morgue because they can determine which species it is. So far as they know, the cause of death was literally being eaten alive."

Trunchbull rubbed his temple. "Dear lord. Mr. Pottermass, you told me Clawhauser would be the only mammal at the Bug Burga today."

"And he is! Or he was supposed to be!" Pottermass retorted. He was the only mammal of the group who looked angrier than anything.

Trunchbull nodded, taking his word for it. "Is Bogo still with the mammal?" Cunninghorn nodded. "Tell him I want Clawhauser questioned as soon as possible."

The rhino's scowl deepened. "Yes, sir."

The elephant turned back to the group. "I think the rest of you should return home. Mayor Swinton, I'll update you on the case as soon as we make further progress."

Alyssa switched off her device. Now that they got the information they needed they couldn't stay any longer, or their conspicuously unmarked van would be noticed. As Finnick started the engine the vixen noticed Llater spot something beside a trashcan and walk over to it. It was Jack Savage, dressed in a dark blue raincoat. Alyssa raised the device one last time.

"What are you doing here?" The undercover ZBI llama agent, whispered.

"Why are there so many officers? What's happened now?" There was genuine curiosity in the rabbit's large blue eyes.
Llater held a hoof for him to wait and quickly returned to Mayor Swinton. "Mr. Savage is here, ma'am. Should I tell him?"

Swinton gave her consent with an anguished grunt. Llater walked back to Jack. "You'd better come with me, Savage."

They started toward a nearby coffee shop, and Alyssa put down her device for good. "Okay, we're done here."

The van took off at a leisurely pace, picking up speed once they were a block away. Finnick was so tense it was as if a statue was driving the vehicle. Eventually he turned his head so his glare was piercing directly into Alyssa's eyes.

"You know what happened in there, don't you? It's the same as that Lemming bastard, isn't it?"

Alyssa thought carefully on her answer. "I honestly don't know if it's the same killer. Dr. Lemming died horribly, but no-one said he'd been eaten. On the other paw, it probably isn't a coincidence that both victims had ties to Slothfeld."

"But you know what happened in there, don't you?" Finnick asked aggressively. "You were there at the first murder."

"I know as much as the police, maybe less." Alyssa insisted. "But I can hazard a guess as to what Woolton was doing in Bug Burga."

Finnick slowed the van's speed. "Go on."
"It makes sense now. The fake wolf at Wild Times was Woolton. He used Slothfeld's serum to turn Nick savage, just like he did to every other predator that's gone savage these last few weeks, and earlier this morning he tried to do the same to Ben. But someone or something got him first. As for the rest of the mystery, I swear to God I don't have a clue. Maybe Woolton shot the serum at a burglar by mistake, or had the really bad luck of being the victim of a cannibalistic serial killer. I really don't know. All I know for sure is that we've lost our biggest lead!" Alyssa shouted the last few words as frustration took over, along with a gnawing doubt that Slothfeld would ever be found. She leaned on the dashboard and put her head in her paws.

"Cheryl would know what to do."

"So what now?" Finnick sounded calmer now. "Do we check on Benji, or do we head home?"

"First option's O. U. T. You're a fugitive and I'm the same species as Nick."
"You're white."

"Like that matters! We should go back to Honey's for now and see if she's got any news on Nick."

Honey had a hell of lot more than just news on Nick. Alyssa dropped down into the bunker just in time to see the wayward fox emerge from the bathroom in nothing but disheveled pants and a towel.

"He dropped in a little after you left." Honey said matter-of-factly as she typed on her computer. "And about damn time, too."

Nick sniffed his forearm. "I still smell like sewer shit."

Alyssa looked him up and down. He was clean, but there was no denying that he'd been through
hell the past few days; there were bags under his eyes, and his ears were flat. There were holes in the knees of his pants, and grazes beneath. There was no telling how long the poor fox had gone without rest.

There was a small thud as Finnick dropped down beside the vixen, and then dead silence as the smaller fox spotted Nick.

"Uhhh… hey." Nick held the towel around himself like a piece of armor.

Alyssa looked down to see that the fennec's face was blank. "Nick… I don't know whether to hug you or punch you."

Nick took a step back, leaving a trail of droplets. "Look, I know you have every right to be pissed."

"I'm not pissed at you!" Finnick snapped. "Okay, maybe a little. But I really, really need to punch something. Have you heard yet?"

"Heard what?" Honey frowned and stood up from the computer desk.

"Well, I'll just leave you to it." Alyssa walked over to and collapsed into a beanbag next to the little cheetah girl.

"Excuse me, heard what?" Honey strode over and stopped beside an equally concerned Nick.

Finnick crossed his arms. "While you were running away from the biggest fuckup of your life…"

"Don't remind me." Nick muttered.

"The bastard who turned you savage went after Benji!"

The wolf and badger bore equal expressions of horror. "What?"

"Yeah. Benji got sent to clean up the Tundratown Bug Burga that got fucked up. He went there in the early morning all alone. Woolton showed up to turn him savage! Or he would have if some psycho hadn't shown up and had him for dinner! Literally chewed him up and spit him out while probably saving Benji for dessert!"

The towel slipped from Nick's shoulders. "Where is he?"

The sight of Nick still caring about the cheetah's wellbeing appeared to appease Finnick. "Benji escaped. The ZPD has him right now, but he's okay."

"Oh thank god." Honey said. Then she reached out and clipped Finnick's ear. "And language!"

Fortunately Sherry hadn't been paying attention. She was intensely reading the chess manual like a bible, and then randomly moving the pieces on the board. The pieces were white and black, but Alyssa imagined white and red pieces in their place as a memory came to her.

It had occurred in a break room in the offices of ZI6. The newly ordained Agent Alyssa had been standing at the water tank with one of the few coworkers who didn't shun her species and discussing the Tim Boarton Alice in Wonderland sequel *Alice through the Looking Glass*.

"I know Wonderland-"

"Underland." Agent Crowe corrected Alyssa.
"I know *Underland* is supposed to be weird but how the hell does hitting your head make it swell three times bigger?"

The black ox shrugged. "I dunno, Cartoon physics?"

"And then there's the playing cards. How come the Queen of Hearts has playing cards for minions and the White Queen doesn't?"

Crowe paused in the middle of filling his cup. "I thought she was the Red Queen?"

He'd asked that at the precise moment Cheryl Radames walked by with a folder in one paw and a coffee in the other. She'd been wearing a black and red pantsuit at the time, which made her look all the more intimidating when she stopped and spun to face them.

"She's not the Red Queen! The Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts are two different bloody queens! The Queen of Hearts was the villain in the first book, and the Red Queen was a living chess piece in the sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*! Christ on a bike, why does nobody gets it straight?!"

Crowe slowly supped his cup. "That's because no-one else reads the books."

Cheryl sniffed. "You uncultured cretin."

Alyssa suppressed the urge to laugh. "I think it's called being a 'composite character.'"

"I know that!" Cheryl threw her arms out, nearly spilling her coffee in the process. "But would it kill them to make an adaptation where they're two different queens?"

"It probably would since they'd have to pay for two different actors."

Crow refilled his cup. "Actresses."

Alyssa giggled as she remembered the response she'd made, drawing Sherry's attention. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, this chess board's just reminding me of the first time I met this friend of mine. She loved the *Alice in Wonderland* books, but hated it whenever someone said that the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen were the same character."

Sherry tilted her head. "Are they not?"

"Apparently not. I remember after we got to know each a little better she started calling me 'Alice.'"

"How the hell did you get hold of this?" Finnick asked.

"I have my ways." Honey replied with a sly smile. "Anyway, they also found traces of dirt, rust and pine needles in the wound."

"So he was attacked by a really old, really filthy chainsaw, so what?"

"*So...*" Honey glared at the two foxes. "Pine trees don't grow anywhere in the city except the forest around it! Dollars to donuts that Antlerson was attacked outside of Zootopia!"
"Jesus Christ." Alyssa hissed.

"There's more." Honey jerked a thumb at Sherry. "I asked her about what happened when she was kidnapped, since Gabe's memory of that whole mess is a bit patchy right now. Turns out the guys who took her were taking her into the forest outside the city when Gabe intercepted them."

"Jesus Christ!" Alyssa hissed again. If Honey was right, then she had been looking in the wrong direction from the beginning. No wonder she'd found no trace of Slothfeld. He'd probably never been in the city to begin with! The vixen groaned through gritted teeth and sprawled herself on the beanbag. How could she have been so narrow-minded?

"Woah, wait a minute!" Nick was still locked out of the loop from the sounds of it. "Why are you looking into the Antlerson attack?"

Honey turned in her seat to look at Alyssa. "Should we tell him?"

Alyssa nodded. She got up from the beanbag, walked over to the group, and told Nick everything. When she was done, the fox staggered over and took her place on the beanbag. "Christ. Christ. I should have listened to Ben. Wild Times had always been a risky idea, but I thought the cash was worth the risk. And now look what's happened."

"It's the damn sheep, Nick. You can't blame yourself." Honey insisted. "But now that you're here, you can help us put an end to this."

"And how the-" Nick paused and glanced at Sherry "... fudge are a bunch of street preds going to do that?"

"Slothfeld's Data Disk is the key. It'll contain all the evidence we need to prove that you're not responsible for the savage attacks." Alyssa said.

Nick sat up straighter. "And how do we find this 'Data Disk'?"

"According to our intel, Slothfeld keeps it close at all times. "We find him, we find your proof."

Finnick pulled himself onto the desk, which Alyssa now saw had a worn map beside the keyboard. "Come on, snowdrop. Let's start looking."

Alyssa heard Nick join them at the desk, and felt the tension emanating from him. "Do you think Benji will be okay?"

"You kidding me? He's with the ZPFuckingD!" Finnick growled.

"Language!" Honey growled louder.

"Sorry! You know those guys! They'd sooner cut off their cajones and boil them in motor oil than treat him with any decency."
As he sat in the waiting room, Bogo was a little annoyed to find that Tundratown General Hospital's coffee tasted better than the ZPD's. He'd taken some liberties with Trunchbull's order to question the cheetah as soon as possible after Kathryn had given him the report on his condition. Most of the stitches in his arm had indeed burst, but were easily fixable. It was the very mild hypothermia from wandering round in the Tundratown downpour in a bleeding, emotionally traumatized state that Bogo was waiting for her to treat before beginning the interrogation. Bogo scowled as he stirred his coffee. Interrogation didn't sound right this time. Benjamin was no criminal; he knew that in his gut.

"Captain!" He heard Hopps before he saw her, and she soon rushed into view with McHorn and Higgins behind her. "Sir, where is he?"

Bogo gave the short version of events. "Kathy said he'll be physically okay once she fixes his stitches."

"Is that the injury you were talking about?" Judy looked deeply distressed, which was understandable considering recent events. "And what is he doing in quarantine if he isn't savage?"

"He's mildly hypothermic. Because hypothermia affects the heart rate, it was thought best that they remove his collar until treatment was finished." Bogo glanced at his damp trench coat in the seat next to it. There were faint red stains on the thick fabric. "Has Mayor Swinton been informed?"

"Yes, sir. Chief Trunchbull told her." Hopps said sadly. "I didn't think she'd get that upset. Bellwether was a wreck when she overheard."

"Bellwether?"

"Yeah. Turns out she and Woolton used to date." Higgins said. "Small world, huh?"

Bogo nodded. "What's happening in City Hall now?"

"Swinton managed to get it together enough to start making arrangements for a new Assistant Mayor." McHorn said.

"So soon?"

"Don't be like that. Woolton's death hit her so hard her campaign manager had to push her into doing something about it. Last the chief heard she'd got someone coming in to handle some of Woolton's duties while she's bereaved."

"Ah well, I suppose that's good news." Bogo tugged at his damp pants as they clung to his skin. "But I'm more concerned about Clawhauser. He's deeply traumatized, so we might have to wait to get anything out of him."

"I'd recommend giving it a few hours." Kathryn Bogo walked up at that moment in her pure white coat. Bogo stood up, anxious to hear the update. "The stitches have been fixed and we're applying passive re-warming techniques as we speak."

McHorn took a step forward. "So when can we talk to him?"

"Like I said, a few hours. He fell asleep almost as soon as I finished treating him." Kathryn smiled softly, just like she always did after a patient well treated, especially when that patient was a sweetheart like Ben. "Rest assured that come tomorrow morning he'll be just fine. I must say I'm
astounded considering the circumstances." She suppressed a shiver. "Yeah, I saw the news after you brought him here. I can't believe what happened to Woolton… Christ, this damn city. What the hell was he even doing in Bug Burga anyway?"

Bogo grimaced. "I wish I knew, Kathy. Let us know the second he's ready to talk."

"Sure thing, little brother. I've got to get back to work any- what the hell are *they* doing here?"

Kathryn's face contorted into a contemptuous scowl when she spotted something beyond the four officers. They turned round to see Cunninghorn and two razorbacks stride in through the plain double doors.

"Aw, for God's sake!" McHorn groaned, and Bogo agreed with the sentiment. He knew damn well what Cunninghorn was here for.

Nevertheless he confronted the rhino as soon as the trio reached them. "What are you doing here, Cunninghorn?"

Cunninghorn didn't look as smug as he usually did when he exercised his newfound authority. More than anything he looked slightly ill; chances were he'd seen what was left of Woolton. "What do you think? We're here to bring the cheetah in for questioning."

"I can't allow that." Kathryn said immediately.

Cunninghorn turned his glare in her direction. "Give me one good reason."

The good doctor's gaze hardened. "He'd being treated for hypothermia right now, you can't just take him!"

Cunninghorn snorted. "Nurse Bogo-"

"*Doctor.*"

"- we have a case to close. Are you prepared to go to jail for this predator?"

Bogo had heard enough. He stepped closer to Kathryn and squared his shoulders. "When the doctor says no, I suggest you bloody listen."

Cunninghorn's lip curled as he turned to the buffalo. There were looks of discomfort from their companions on both sides. "I understand that you feel a need to take your sister's side, but I am not going to stonewalled for the sake of this hospital's protocols."

"Then I guess you're going to have to find some other vulnerable predator to coerce, won't you?" Bogo didn't miss a beat.

"Besides, you're currently assigned to the missing fox case, aren't you?" Hopps pointed out.

McHorn shot her a look and then looked Bogo dead in the eye. "Maybe it hasn't sunk into your thick skull yet, but I have a fox and a savage to find, and the last thing I need is some curly horned shish-kebab interfering with my case."

Bogo thought of that shivering, bleeding, scared feline being muzzled and cuffed to a chair under a harsh white light with this bastard looming over him, and made a split decision.

"Fine. Guess I'll just have to take this up with Chief Trunchbull."
He turned his back on the rhino's surprised anger to address his officers. "Until told otherwise, you three will stay here and play guard duty. Clawhauser is not to be left alone while these razorbacks are here. Not for one minute."

Cunninghorn similarly ordered his men to stay in the waiting room until his return, and the captain and commander left the hospital and drove their separate vehicles to Precinct One. Bogo wasn't entirely sure this was going to work. He had Trunchbull's favor, but the capture of Wilde and Woolton's killer were both very high priorities. But Benjamin's wellbeing was on the line, and he had to try. His best bet would be to convince Trunchbull to hold back on arresting the kid until the forensics returned with evidence either incriminating him or absolving him of suspicion. Then there was procedure to consider. Bogo continued to think on how best to approach the coming dispute until they were both in Trunchbull's office and beseeching the chief on opposite ends of the desk.

"Sir, I appreciate that Assistant Mayor Woolton's death is a high priority case, but T.U.S.K. isn't a detective department." He said after several minutes of what was so far a relatively calm debate. "They already have a high priority assignment, and that is the capture of the fugitive Nicholas Wilde. The investigation into Woolton's death is better placed in the hands of-"

"You? You haven't found Antlerson's attacker in the four months since he was attacked, so what makes you think you can find Woolton's killer?" Cunninghorn demanded.

"I was going to say the Homicide Department." Bogo took a deep breath to ease his temper. "They're better suited for handling suspicious deaths. I should add that you haven't found Antlerson's attacker either, or the missing fox. For all we know Antlerson's attacker could be one of the savage jaguars we've already apprehended."

And that was if it even had been a jaguar like Woolton had claimed, but Bogo wasn't going to bring that up without hard proof. Trunchbull stayed silent, his trunk curled like a saxophone, having said nary a word since the debate started.

"Homicide's already got their hands full, you know that." Cunninghorn replied.

"And our detectives are very busy, Captain." Trunchbull said.

Bogo changed tactics. "Then at least wait for Forensics to get back with the DNA results. If there's any evidence that Clawhauser is more than a witness, then you can put him in a holding cell."

"We'd have gotten a statement out of him by now if you hadn't butted in." Cunninghorn said acidly.

"I was not going to stand by and watch you take a patient out of a hospital before they were ready to be discharged!"

Trunchbull's trunk curled further as he straightened in his seat. "I beg your pardon?"

Bogo turned to his superior, pressing the advantage. "When I brought that cheetah to the hospital, most of his stitches had burst and he was mildly hypothermic. He was in the middle of being treated when Cunninghorn tried to arrest him."

Trunchbull eyed the rhino. "Is this true?"

Cunninghorn held his hands up. "You and the mayor both said you wanted this case solved ASAP."

"That doesn't make it necessary to violate procedure, Commander." Trunchbull scolded. "Until he's discharged, we can't bring him in."
"And if we haven't gotten the results by then?" Bogo asked.

"Then we stick to procedure, take him into custody, then keep him there until either we get the results or twenty four hours have passed." Trunchbull said. "When did they say they would release Clawhauser?"

"Next morning was their estimate, sir."

"Then we'll just have to wait until then."

Cunninghorn crossed his arms. "I'll be ready to take him first thing in the morning. We'll get answers out of him within forty-eight hours, sir. One way or another."

Again, the image of Benjamin bleeding and nearly catatonic in the freezing rain entered Bogo's mind. "Sir, with the utmost respect to both of you, I'm not sure having Cunninghorn lead the interrogation is a good idea. Not after what happened last time."

Cunninghorn's entirely body tensed so tightly it was almost shaking. "I already assured you and Mr. Pottermass that it will not happen again, sir."

Trunchbull nodded in response. "And I believe you."

Bogo took a step toward the desk. "Sir, I insist that we do not cause that cheetah any more emotional distress than he has already suffered!"

Cunninghorn planted his hands on the corner of the desk. "Emotional distress? If he were in 'emotional distress', his collar would have shocked him into a frizzball by now! I refuse to delay my investigation just because Captain Bogo here has a bleeding heart!" Bogo felt a surge of adrenaline and slammed his own hooves on the opposite corner. "I do not have a bleeding heart, Cunninghorn! It would be police misconduct to harass that feline further!"

"I don't give a damn about your warped ideas about police misconduct!" Cunninghorn snarled. "The capture of the fox and Woolton's killer takes priority!"

Trunchbull's trunk rose up to rub his temple as he listened to the increasingly hostile dispute in front of him.

"But not at the expense of innocent civilians, predator or not!" Bogo was getting louder. "Wearing a collar does not make them expendable!"

"Give me strength! You used to believe in the collars as much as anyone! Five years ago you would have muzzled that cheetah yourself!"

"Don't you dare assume what I would and wouldn't have done! I am nothing like you and I never will be! I may have been short-sighted, but you've always been nothing more than a dirty thug with a shiny badge!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW A DAMN THING ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH CHOMPERS!"

"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO-"

"STAND DOWN, BOTH OF YOU!" The desk and its contents shook as Trunchbull slammed down his front feet and shot up. The smaller mammals fell silent and stared at their boss. Cunninghorn's expression was sour, while Bogo was speculating if he hadn't just completely blown it. "Wilde and Woolton are still being considered top priority!" He looked to Cunninghorn, his ears flared. "But Captain Bogo is right! We cannot have this kind of behavior damaging the reputation
"Damaging the reputation of the ZPD?" Cunninghorn drawled. "A fox is loose and an Assistant Mayor is dead! Our reputation is already damaged! The only we can mend it is if I catch those bastards!"

"You will catch that fox by the book, and that is final!" Trunchbull sat back down. "In the meantime, I will be assigning the investigation into Woolton's death to Captain Bogo. His is the only available team with experience in homicide investigations, and you already have your own assignment. They will handle Clawhauser when he is released."

For a moment, Bogo was sure that Cunninghorn was going to explode at the elephant, but he somehow kept his voice steady. "The Mayor said she wanted immediate results."

Trunchbull righted the glass paperweight that had been dislodged by his outburst. "If she doesn't approve, then she can take it up with me."

When Cunninghorn fell silent, Bogo thought that was the end of it. He was wrong. "Why do you always take his side, sir?"

Trunchbull stopped in the middle of fixing the pile of paperwork. "What did you say?"

"Ever since his promotion, you have always, always taken his side!" The rhino slashed an arm in Bogo's direction. "There're even rumors that you want him to succeed you as Chief of Police! What about me, huh? You have never once taken my side, with the sole exception being my promotion to T.U.S.K. Commander! How can you disregard me after everything I've done for this city?"

Trunchbull's eyes narrowed. "You want to replace me?"

Cunninghorn very subtly balked. "That isn't quite what I'd meant, sir."

"… Bogo, you are dismissed."

There was no mistaking the quiet anger in his tone. Bogo stood up and left the office as quickly as he could without looking like he was rushing. When he was outside he radioed his team back at the hospital to let them know he was returning, and then slumped against the wall. He'd won the argument in the end, but at the same time he wished he'd won without the shouting match. He shouldn't have let Cunninghorn get to him, but at least the stubby-horned asshat wasn't going to be turning his big mouth on a traumatized and injured feline any time soon.

When Bogo returned to the hospital, he was happy to see that the T.U.S.K. goons had gone, presumably called away by their defeated commander. McHorn and Higgins were still standing by the doorway, just as he'd ordered. "Where is Hopps?" Bogo demanded as he walked over.

"Her parents called. They rang four times before she gave in and picked up the phone." Higgins had propped himself against the wall besides a painting of violets. "From the sounds of it they weren't too happy to find out their daughter had been putting herself at risk by chasing after a fox."

Bogo snorted. After the Little Rodentia incident, he'd experienced Mr. and Mrs. Hopps' persistence first hand. "How is Clawhauser?"

McHorn glanced at the door to Benjamin's room. "Doing better. He's come out of his shock and his core temperature's almost back to normal. Kathy's checking on him just now before she lets us in to talk to him."
With that they waited until Kathryn emerged from the room. "How is he?" Bogo asked.

"He's ready to talk, but please be gentle." She said softly.

Bogo nodded. "McHorn, you're with me. Higgins, you stay out here with Hopps. You two are to make sure no-one else comes in to stir up trouble." By no-one he meant T.U.S.K.

They entered the room to see Benjamin in a thick blanket and a hot drink on the bedside table. Bogo relaxed slightly at the sight of him; the cheetah looked a damned sight better than he did when Bogo had found him in the Tundratown downpour. Even his look of blank shock had diminished somewhat, but there was still a haunted look in his eyes. A part of the buffalo dreaded what the cheetah had to tell him.

"Clawhauser. It's good to see you're recovering." He said. Benjamin looked up, and his eyes seemed to brighten up. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but we need to ask you about what happened in that restaurant."

"Okay." The cheetah said meekly, and reached for his cup. "There's only one chair. Sorry."

"It's okay, kid. I'll stand." McHorn stepped into the corner while Bogo sat in the single padded chair.

"I understand that this has been a very traumatizing time for you." Bogo said after he planted a recording device on the table. "What were you doing in Bug Burga at the time of the murder?" They already knew, but reports demanded every detail.

"It was Mr. Pottermass's way of punishing me for being an unwitting part of Nick's scheme." Benjamin said. "Bug Burga was trashed the night before, and I had to clean the entire place up by myself without the power on. It was a heck of a lot better than being fired, so I accepted it without complaint."

"Why so early?"

Benjamin hesitated. "I couldn't sleep, and the cleanup would take all day. So I decided to just have some donuts, go over there early and get it over with. I'm used to getting up really early, anyway. I worked at another Bug Burga before Pottermass hired me."

"Can you tell me what time you left and what time you got there?"

"I'm not sure when I left, but I got there between four-twenty and half past. Mr. Pottermass showed up at that time."

"Pottermass was there?" Bogo and McHorn exchanged glances. "Why?"

"He said he was making sure I hadn't run off like Nick did." Benjamin clenched his fists for a moment. "He didn't stay long. He just told me not to go into the staff area and drove off before I went inside to get started. I guess he was just warning me against stealing anything."

"Makes sense, I guess." McHorn muttered.

"Anyway, I started by cleaning the outside area, and then went inside to clean the worst of the mess. I..." Benjamin stopped and seemed to go slightly pale as he turned his eyes down to his steaming cocoa. "I don't know what time it was when I saw what happened."

"What did happen?" Bogo asked.

"I went into the kitchen, because that was the only way to get to the cleaning equipment, when I
noticed that the door leading to the manager's office and staff restrooms was open. I'm sure it was shut when I first came into the place."

"Wait, didn't you hear anything strange while you were working?" McHorn spoke, frowning. "If the power was out, there wouldn't have been anything to drown out the sounds of Woolton being attacked."

"I had my music on while I was cleaning inside." Benjamin admitted. Bogo remembered the earphones they'd found at the scene. "Listening to Gazelle makes me feel better. Do you guys like her music?"

McHorn shrugged. Bogo cringed inwardly and changed the subject. "Go on."

Benjamin bit his lip. "I thought that the door hadn't been open before, but since I didn't see anyone in the hallway I didn't think much of it. I was about to go back to work when I fell over one of your dart guns."

"Dart guns?"

"Yeah. The police were called in when those guys started trashing the place, and one of them must have left their gun behind. I hit my arm on the counter on the way down and burst my stitches. It must have been a new model, because it looked different from the ones you guys use. It was black and yellow and had some kind of silencer thingy on the end."

Bogo looked up at McHorn again, but the rhino seemed just as puzzled. "No-one in the ZPD uses a dart gun with that description."

"You don't?" Benjamin tilted his head. "It was pretty dark, so I guess I got it wrong. Maybe it was a paintball gun or something."

"What happened next, kid?" McHorn asked.

"Well, my arm was bleeding pretty badly so I went to the manager's office to get some gauze from the first aid kit."

"How did you know there would be a first aid kit in there?"

"The manager at my old Bug Burga kept one in his office, so I just assumed. Anyway, I went to the office to get some gauze, and that's when I-" Benjamin stopped again and pulled the blanket tighter around himself as the memory came back to him. Bogo waited with bated breath. "I saw… I saw that someone was already in there."

"Who?"

"A bear. A great big grizzly bear dressed like some kind of undead bird in a black coat. It's mostly a blur, but I do remember that he was big. Really big."

"How big? Can you give a comparison?"

"Him." Benjamin pointed up at McHorn, who raised his eyebrows. It was unusual for even a polar bear to grow to that size, let alone a grizzly.

"What was he doing?" Bogo asked, his voice softening.

"I wasn't sure at first. His back was to me, and I think his dead bird mask was lying on the floor at
the time. It was dark in there, so it took a minute for me to see what he was doing, but I noticed he was holding someone."
"Was Woolton alive at the time?" McHorn asked.

Benjamin was starting to shiver again. "No."

"How do you know?"

The feline's eyes welled up. "He was eating Mr. Woolton."

Bogo failed to stop the "Fuck me." that escaped his mouth.

"He seemed to sense that I was there, and turned his head to look at me. That's when I saw that he was a bear. After that I just… ran. I don't know how long I ran for, or where I ended up. The next thing I remember is you finding me." Benjamin rubbed his moistening eyes. "I'm so sorry, I don't remember anything other than that."

"You were in shock, kid. Don't beat yourself up." McHorn said. Bogo noticed he had a pen and notepad in his hands. "So a grizzly bear in a black coat and an undead bird mask, roughly my height. The size alone should narrow down the list of suspects. Can you remember any more details? What sort of coat was he wearing?"

"I don't know, I only saw the back of it. It was a pretty long coat. If you want, I could try and find a picture of the mask online." Benjamin said.

Bogo shook his head. "We'll handle that. You just work on putting this whole mess behind you. Can you think of any reason why Woolton or that bear would be at Bug Burga?"

"I really have no idea." Benjamin said. He paused, looking troubled. "What was the Assistant Mayor doing there?"

Bogo didn't answer, thinking deeply about the question. What had Woolton been doing in Bug Burga? What was he doing at the fishery or wherever Antlerson had been attacked? What if he had been at the office when Dr. Lemming was killed?

"Do you think you could identify this mammal?" Bogo asked. Benjamin nodded. He was a brave kid, Bogo noted. "Good. I believe we're done here for now. Thank you for your cooperation, you've been very helpful."

"We might be needing to ask some more questions in future, so don't go leaving the city any time soon." McHorn said.

"I won't!" Benjamin shook his head furiously. "I'll probably be at home, I'm being discharged tomorrow."

"Good to know, but more likely we'll be taking you straight to the station for further questioning." Bogo retrieved the recording device and stood up. "See you tomorrow."

The captain and lieutenant started toward the door. "Captain Bogo?"

Bogo paused and turned around. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry if this a bad time, but do you know where I can find some sheet music for Clair de Lune?"
Bogo felt a rush of heat and glanced at McHorn. The rhino just looked mildly bemused. Bogo swallowed and turned back to Benjamin. "Not sure. You could always get it online and print it off."

Benjamin considered this, and then smiled gently. "Yeah, that would work. Thanks."

Despite himself, Bogo smiled back before following McHorn out and shutting the door behind him. Higgins was still outside, and Hopps had returned. She looked up at her superior curiously. "Sir, who's Claire de Lune?"

McHorn frowned and tilted his head at Bogo. "Yeah. Who is 'Claire de Lune'?"

*Damn that rabbit's superior hearing*, Bogo thought.

He felt McHorn's thick finger tap his shoulder. "May I have a word with you privately?"

The nearest place was a restroom for the handicapped in the next corridor. McHorn locked the door behind him and propped himself against the door, crossing his arms and grimacing at Bogo.

"What is this about, Mac?" Bogo asked for the sake of it.

"You still haven't told me how you know that cheetah."

Bogo sighed. "I met him only once before he showed up at Lemming's office. It was at Pottermass's masked party, you know, the one I absolutely wasn't looking forward to."

"Yeah, you made that quite clear." McHorn said with a smirk.

"Anyway, Clawhauser was one of the staff present. I decided to take a break from the snore-fest and ran into him in Pottermass's library."

"And?" McHorn's scowl returned, deeper than ever.

"We talked, and that's it. I was barely there ten minutes."

"You talked? That's all?"

"Well, I also had a shot at the piano in there. That's why he asked about 'Clair de Lune'."

"Nothing else?"

Bogo suddenly realized what the lieutenant was insinuating and barely missed punching the mirror above the sink. "McHorn, what the flying fuck do you take me for?!"

McHorn backpedalled. "Woah, easy!"

"We talked! That's it! You know I'm not that kind of gay, so shut it!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean that, I swear! Ok, maybe a little bit." McHorn took a step forward. "I just wanted to get all the facts, you know how it is! What if someone else found out, got the wrong idea and reported it to Trunchbull?"

Bogo slowly calmed down, flexing his aching fingers. "I've never screwed with a predator my entire life. You know this."

"I just want to know why you haven't taken your beefy butt off this case by now. Even after what
happened five years ago, you're still one of the most by-the-book cops I know, but you're keeping a tight hold on this case even though the mere fact that you know this predator constitutes as a conflict of interest." McHorn took a deep breath. "I'm siding with you no matter what, obviously. I just want to know why this case is so important to you that you'd hide something like this."

Bogo nodded. McHorn was absolutely right. "It's the cheetah. I can't trust anyone else to ensure his safety."

McHorn uncrossed his arms. "So that's it. You're worried Cunninghorn's going to pin a trumped up murder charge on him or something… unless it's not just Cunninghorn you're worried about."

Bogo paced across the small restroom. "Clawhauser's statement indicates that Woolton had broken into a place that a herbivore had no place being in. He also indicated that Woolton might have been armed in some way."

"Armed?"

"The weapon he described is not police issued, or issued to any security organization that I know of. That and the report on the mammals who trashed the place didn't mention paintballs of any sort." Bogo replied.

McHorn's massive body tensed. "You think Woolton might have intended to harm Clawhauser?"

Bogo nodded. "All I think is that someone entered that building with a weapon. It may have been Woolton, or the big bear that killed him, until we find that gun we won't know. I know, it's all conjecture at the moment." He added when McHorn opened his mouth. "But one thing I do know is that I don't trust City Hall."
Wearing shoes was one of the more uncommon practices in the animal kingdom, but Alyssa had good reason to pull on the state of the art boots specially designed by ZI6. By covering the foot, the chances of fur being shed, left at the scene and being traced back to her were drastically decreased. Since tonight may be the night that they finally find where Slothfeld were hiding, it was better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them.

Once both boots were on Alyssa she put on her headset and strode over to the creased old map splayed out on Honey's desk. The badger was poring over the paper, and Finnick was sitting on the desk itself as he pored with her.

"The most likely place for the true scene of the crime is this derelict sawmill outside the city?" He tapped a black spot in the big green mass that was Founder's Mountain. "The name speaks for itself. I think it'd be a pretty good place to start."

Alyssa grinned. "Good work, guys. Honey, call Gabe and tell him to meet me at Zootopia Overlook in three hours."

"Meet us," Nick emerged from the bathroom at that very moment. "I'm coming with you." Alyssa was about to protest when the redder fox cut her off. "The only way I can clear my name is if I can find proof that someone else is causing the savage attacks! I need to get out the city, anyway, Skyefall! It's not just the cops that are after me!"

"He's right." Honey said grimly. "My sources tell me that Koslov's boys have been asking around."

"I'm coming too, lady." Finnick growled. "No arguments, we have a deal!"

Three against one. The odds had already decided the outcome. "Fine." Alyssa muttered. "Fine. But you two stay with the car, and if we find the facility you get as far away as possible. That's final."

"Fine." The two male foxes agreed.

"And me!" Sherry had run up to the adults while they were arguing. "I wanna see Gabe again!"

Honey held her back with a paw on the shoulder. "Out of the question, sweetie. Gabe can come visit afterward, okay."

Alyssa chuckled at the pouty look on the girl's face. "Okay, I need to go get my gear prepped. Everyone will meet up at the car, got it?"

"Got it."

Alyssa was almost trembling as she strode to the ladder. Maybe, just maybe, there would finally be a breakthrough.

When she, Nick and Finnick took the van from its hiding place in the branches of a fallen tree and made the long drive to the Zootopia Overlook, she found that Gabe had beaten her to the site. He was leaning over the hood of a parked black car dressed in not only his gauntlets but a pair of boots just like Alyssa's, dark blue pants and a lighter blue hoodie. He was the spitting image of the photo Honey had given her.

When the car stopped and Alyssa climbed out, she saw that the clothes weren't the only things that
were different. On the hood was a set of shiny new weaponry. There was a berretta with a silencer attachment beside it, a sawed-off shotgun for close encounters, and most intimidating of all, a pair of kukris that gleamed white in the beams of Finnick's headlights.

Nick stayed slightly behind Alyssa as they approached. "Where the hell did you get those?"

"Courtesy of Mr. Big." Gabe kept his eyes on the magazine he was currently loading bullets into. "He's very big on family, if you'll pardon the pun, so when I told him I was following a lead on Starlight, he loaned me some gear from his gang's personal armory." He turned his eyes to Alyssa. "That is what we're here, for right?"

Alyssa nodded. "You've heard what happened to the Assistant Mayor, right?"

There was a cold glint in the hybrid's gaze. "Yeah, and I remember him too. Some of it came back to me when I saw the news and his picture came up. He visited the facility a couple of times, once with a new predator for the experiment. If I was a sick bastard, I'd toast the psycho who killed him." He slammed the clip into his pistol with the force of a punch. "Good fucking riddance!"

"Damn right." Finnick popped up out of nowhere by Gabe's side to offer a high five. Gabe accepted without so much as a glance before beginning the process of applying the gear to the straps and holsters on his body.

Nick wrinkled his snout while Alyssa merely looked on with sympathy. She couldn't blame their shared feelings over Woolton's death. She couldn't blame their shared feelings over Woolton's death. The ram had been part of the organization responsible for their suffering, was part of the conspiracy that tortured Gabe and personally ruined Nick's life and turned him savage. Then he'd tried to do the same to Benjamin before falling victim to a savage of a different sort. The way he died had been horrific, but none of them were going to shed any tears over it.

When Gabe was done, he and Finnick strode over to Alyssa and Nick. "So, why are we here?"

"We have reason to believe that Slothfeld's facility may be located in the forest outside the city. There're a few places we're going to check out."

Gabe stared past her head at the line of trees and shadows behind them. His pupils shrank. "Oh god… I think I remember now. The forest was where I saved Sherry."

"Can you remember anything else?" Alyssa asked eagerly.

He shook his head. "Sorry. All I remember are the trees. Then there was this mountain road. We find that road, we might just find the facility."

Alyssa pulled out her PDA and opened open a digital version of Honey's map. "We're going to check out the old saw mill first. It's the closest place, and it's linked to the road you're talking about." She tapped the line that was the only road up and down the mountain. Then we'll check out the lodge further up, and then the asylum. Any questions?"

"Just two. Did you know we might be running into Mr. Big's boys up here?"

"What?" Nick and Finnick double-taked.

"This morning he sent some men up here to try and track down the mammals who slaughtered his drug smuggling scheme." Gabe paused. "We haven't heard back from them yet. Don't worry, I've got a cover story for you if we do run into them."

"Good." Alyssa breathed.
"Question two; what are these two doing here?" Gabe jerked his head at the two male foxes.

"They're my ride." Alyssa said. "Also, they agreed to assist me in my mission if I helped them escape the authorities."

"Don't worry, we're just gonna stay with the van and make sure it's ready if you need to get the fuck out pronto." Finnick said. "We may be civvies, but we're not stupid."

"Given none of your rides collapsed since Wild Times opened, I'd imagine you wouldn't be." Gabe said dryly. "Your van's quieter, so we'll use that to get to the saw mill. We'll park on the main road close to the turnoff to the mill, then those two can watch the van while we investigate."

"Fine by us." Nick said with a shrug.

The sky was inky black when they reached the turnoff, and away from the bright lights of the city the stars were free to sparkle like a thousand little diamonds. " Weird." Nick muttered as he looked out the open window. "I've lived in the city for so long I've forgotten stars even existed. If I ever escape I'm going to live in the countryside."

"Same here, buddy." Finnick brought the van to a stop on the side of the road. "This is the turnoff, right?"

Alyssa consulted the map. "Yes. Move the van into the shadow by that boulder over there."

Finnick did as he was told, and the van became perfectly camouflaged. Alyssa handed them a com- link that looked like a silver hearing aid. "If there's trouble call us and we'll get back as soon as possible. Don't take any chances. I don't want anyone put in unnecessary danger."

With that Alyssa and Gabe climbed out and began the short hike to the sawmill. They avoided the narrow road that was slowly being consumed by the forest, trekking through tall grass and black trees. Within ten minutes Alyssa spotted the derelict that was the nineteen-twenties era sawmill. It was bigger than she had expected, but shorter at the same time. They slowed their pace, their footsteps growing quieter, and crouched low beneath the tall grass as they approached. They passed a massive rusting wheel constricted by ivy and reached the wooden steps leading up to the open front doors. Gabe held a paw out to stop Alyssa front ascending and knelt down before the steps. He shone a tiny flashlight, and Alyssa saw large faint prints in the dirt and moss.

"There're polar bear… wolf… cougar prints here. They match the species of the goons Big sent. They've been here recently… and unless they found a back door somewhere they never came out."

He pulled out his silenced berretta. The windows were boarded up, so the doorway was the only visible way in. In spite of this Alyssa hesitated. The darkness beyond the doorway reeked of death.

Her headset beeped. Finnick. Alyssa pressed the button on the side. "Fin? What's the situation?"

"Sorry, just wanted to make sure this thing works."

"Well, now you know it does."

Nick's voice came up next. "I'm seriously starting to regret this. Big's boys know I'm with, or was, with Koslov. What if they find us?"

"Relax, we're in the middle of nowhere. There's no chance of anyone finding us here!" Finnick's end fell silent all of a sudden. Alyssa touched Gabe's arm, making him stop his trek up the stairs. "Oh shit, they found us."
"What? Who's found you?"

"The junior ranger scouts. Who do you think, it's T.U.S.K.!!"

"I thought Honey disabled the tracking devices in your TAME Collars!" Alyssa growled.

"They obviously found another way, didn't they?" Gabe said. "I warned you these guys don't mess around."

Finnick was cursing. "Shit, shit, shit! I think they spotted us! Hang on, we're coming over!"

"You're what?"

"Jesus Christ, look!" Gabe pointed at the dark tree line just as Nick and Finnick burst out of the foliage, followed by distant beams of light.

Alyssa cursed and backed into the sawmill, followed by Gabe. Seconds later the two male foxes tore in after them.

There was no power in a place as old and decrepit as this, but when they were all inside the vixen was stunned to see that there was light inside the cavernous mill. That wasn't the only thing odd about this place; what was supposed to be an empty building instead housed a maze of crates and cardboard boxes that seemed all too easy to get lost in. Her first thought was that the sawmill had been converted to a warehouse.

Alyssa heard voices, coming from outside and coming closer. "Come on!" She whispered furiously and led the others into the maze. The entire interior was shrouded in ominous shadows and bloody orange light from the lanterns high above. Alyssa's mind raced as they tread deeper into the maze. This place was supposed to be abandoned.

Alyssa's flashlight caught something else; some of the boxes were sitting on a large faded brown stain. Alyssa was sure it wasn't coffee.

"Does this mean anything to you, Gabe?" She asked.

Gabe shook his head silently, but the look of dawning horror on his face indicated otherwise.

From somewhere behind them they heard the sound of hooves on floorboards. The T.U.S.K. team was inside. Alyssa dreaded it every time they turned a corner, thinking that at any moment they could come across their pursuers or something even worse. It was quiet here too, just like Bug Burga.

They turned another corner and Nick suddenly went flying, toppling into Gabe and nearly knocking the blue-clad warrior off his feet. "What the fuck, Wilde?!"

"I tripped!" Nick pointed, and froze.

The object he'd tripped over was a tiny two-caliber pistol built for a wolf, lying in a pool of dried dark red blood and spent cartridges. Gabe carefully touched the blood with a finger. "It's not too old. Whatever happened here happened today."

"Whatever, can we keep moving?!" Finnick gestured angrily in the direction of the razorbacks' footsteps.

They began to press on, when suddenly the clanging sound of metal hitting the floor made them all
stop dead. Even the razorbacks in the distance fell silent, before their leader ordered them to fan out. Judging from the variation in the voices, there were four of them. Alyssa wondered why they had only sent one team.

"Come on." She whispered, but her companions refused to move.

"Do you smell that?" Nick whispered, his gaze fearful.

Alyssa sniffed, and then she smelled it too; blood.

Krrrrrunch...

A sound like celery being wrenched in half, coming from the other side of a ten-foot high row of boxes, was inexplicably sickening to the vixen. Her companions froze, and even Gabe looked disturbed. He edged in front of Alyssa. He signaled to the others that they would go back they way they came and take their chances with T.U.S.K. The razorbacks were close, so close Alyssa could practically smell them right around the corner. One of them called out for Gidgen, presumably one of the team. Alyssa switched her pistol for a tranq gun, not wanting to kill these mammals. They were only trying to catch a fugitive, after all. Gabe unsheathed his kukri and raised three digits on one paw.

One… he lowered his thumb… two…

A bestial growl followed the thing that flew up above the tall row of boxes, something with flailing limbs, and Alyssa fired, half the shots hitting their mark. Dark blood splattered on wood and cardboard as the thing hit the floor with a wet thud… and it was the missing T.U.S.K. member, but only two thirds of him. The arms and legs had chunks of flesh missing, exposing stained yellow bone. The head was gone, but the body armor and hooves confirmed it was Gidgen. The torso had been almost completely hollowed out.

Two razorbacks rounded the corner and then retched and reeled back from the body, and Alyssa had to look away herself. She had never, ever, ever seen a murder like this before, but it was beyond any shred of doubt that the boar had gutted like a fish.

She hoped to God that the killer had already fled the scene.

"Gidgen! You sick sons of bitches!" The razorback leader growled and pointed his machine gun straight in Nick's face. The third razorback came up from behind with his gun aimed at Alyssa, trapping them completely.

"Wait a sec, we didn't do this!" Finnick yelled.

"Then who did? Slendermammal? And who's the vixen?"

"None of your business." Alyssa gripped her gun tightly, waiting for the right moment to start firing.

The razorback leader snorted, and then frowned when he saw Gabe, who was poised like a coiled rattlesnake. "You… aren't you Doctor Slothfeld's…"

A growl was the only warning they had before the wall of boxes came crashing down.

A cardboard box pushed Alyssa violently to the floor, and for a moment everything went black. She wasn't knocked unconscious, but large falling boxes blocked her sight and the light of the lamps as they piled up in front of her. She could hear her friends yelling, the T.U.S.K. members
cursing, but by the time the avalanche stopped a pile of toppled boxes had completely cut her off from them.

She shoved the cardboard box off her legs, retrieved her gun from the floor and got to her feet. "Guys!"

She heard the sound of a knife slicing though flesh and Nick and Finnick's horrified cursing before someone answered. "Skyefall, I've brought one down! They're working for Slothfeld, so do not hesitate to do the same!"

Alyssa nodded, even though they couldn't see her. "Get Nick and Fin out of here! I'll catch up!"

Something struck the back of her hand. Stars danced in front of her eyes, and when she regained her senses she was back on the floor. She turned her body and found herself facing the barrel of the razorback leader's gun. "No, you won't." He snarled, glared down at her with tiny hateful eyes. "Forrest! Forrest, where are you?"

"Sir, I'm stuck back here!" Yelled another razorback.

"Make your way outside! I'm on my way now with one of the foxes! Kill the others if you find them, but the doc wants the hybrid back alive!"

"Yes, sir!"

The leader turned back to Alyssa and twitched the barrel upward. "Get up and get moving." Alyssa had lost her gun when the boar hit her, and she couldn't see it among the boxes. She reluctantly got to her feet and put her paws up. The razorback leader gestured with his gun for her to move slowly to the corner that was illuminated by an unseen source, the corner itself a black silhouette beside the light. Alyssa reached the corner and heard a scream.

"Forrest?!" The razorback leader yelled. "Forrest, what-"

Alyssa didn't hear the rest. In the split second that the leader yelled Forrest's name a black blur shot from around the corner and struck the vixen across the face, knocking her to the ground for the third time. She tasted blood and felt it trickling down her mouth. The black-gloved arm retracted, and then the rest of her attacker emerged. Clothed in black and concealing their visage behind a red and black motorcycle helmet, the wolf-sized assailant charged at the distracted razorback leader with a gleaming machete. The razorback turned his head too late, and screamed when the machete sank into his gut, all the way to the hilt. They both fell to the ground, and Alyssa felt transfixed as she watched the helm wolfd straddle the boar and pull out the bloody machete. It sank the blade back into his victim's body, pulled it out, and repeated the action in a vicious cycle. The boar stopped moving after the third stab. After eight stabs the boxes surrounding them were splattered with blood. After eighteen stabs the helmeted wolf finally stood up, kicked what was left of the razorback's torso, and advanced on Alyssa. The vixen willed herself to move and scrambled backward, her back hitting another box. She had a knife in a sheath on her thigh strap. She pulled it out, her heart sinking at how small it was.

The helmeted wolf froze, its machete dripping dark blood all over the floor, and then ducked. A small arrow struck the box behind it with a papery thud, and then a striped rabbit dropped down in front of Alyssa. The wolf snarled and disappeared around the corner where it had ambushed Alyssa. Jack dropped the crossbow, pulled out his pistol and waited, but the attacker didn't come back.

"You okay?" He asked while keeping his eyes on the corner.
"More or less." Alyssa wiped the blood from her mouth. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Looking for Slothfeld's facility." Jack cocked his head to the dead razorback. "I was heading up the mountain when my ZBI contact tipped me off that these guys were on Wilde's trail. I decided to tail them, see what they would try to do. Turns out their orders were to kill on sight." His nose wrinkled with disgust. "Judging from how few of them were sent, they might be the only T.U.S.K. members on Slothfeld's payroll."

"But why would they want Nick dead?"

Jack picked up the crossbow and reattached it to the strap on his back. "We'll figure that out when we're safe. We need to find your friends."

While avoiding looking at the unfortunate T.U.S.K. leader, Alyssa found her pistol and followed Jack through the maze of boxes, eventually coming across the boar who must have been Forrest. He was lying flat on the floor like a five-pointed star, and that was all Alyssa saw before she had to look away.

"Both eyes ripped out." Jack breathed. Even his voice sounded unsettled. "Sick freaks. I think we'd just run into Lemming's killers."

"Killers?" Alyssa spoke hoarsely.

"I saw three of those helmet heads. It was pretty clever, what they did. They sprang a trap and killed those cut off from the main group." Jack smirked humorlessly. "They would have killed you too if I hadn't stepped in."

Alyssa spun on Jack, momentarily forgetting about the body. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Skyefall."

"I did nothing!"

"Precisely." Jack sneered. "You did nothing while a homicidal wolf was coming at you with a machete longer than me. You're trained in paw-to-paw combat, Skyefall. Why didn't you use it? And what were you thinking bringing those civilians with you? The only combat experience they've collectively got it how to batter up!"

"I…"

"Well?"

Alyssa's ears flattened with humiliation as the answer sunk in. "I don't know."

"I told you that you were still green." Jack said coldly. "If you're ever going to complete this mission, then you'd better get with the darn program, and quick. If not… I might see your face there."

Alyssa instinctively followed his pointing finger and froze at the sight of Forrest's blood-soaked body.
Hoping that Agent Skyefall got the message, Jack split up from her just before they reached the exit, not wanting to get mixed up with the companions she'd unwisely brought along. He left the sawmill through one of the open windows and trudged back through the forest towards the road, pondering over what he'd found in there.

He'd told a lie when he'd told Alyssa's he'd followed those dirty razorbacks to that building; in fact he'd already been in the building when Alyssa and her friends had shown up. After determining from the pine needle he'd found in Wild Times that Woolton had been in the forest at some point, he'd chosen the sawmill as the first place to check. What he'd found was unexpected, and it wasn't just the boxes; there had been blood too, so old it had turned brown. Behind an old crate of rusted parts he'd found a rusty chainsaw covered in the same dried blood. He'd pried open one of the crates to discover that it was full of T.A.M.E. collars, and that was right about when the bloodbath had started.

Who in God's name were those psychopaths anyway?

In any case, Slothfeld's secret facility either wasn't there or it was very well hidden. He'd check the other buildings on the mountain for the time being in search of further clues. When he was almost to the road he felt a pang of displeasure at himself for lying to Alyssa, before he remembered her connection to Cheryl Radames. If his suspicions about Radames were correct, then the agent closest to her couldn't be trusted either. Just when he thought this couldn't get any more complicated, he reached the road and saw a police car parked behind the T.U.S.K. van and a certain rabbit officer appear from the opposite treeline.

"Hopps?!" He was so stunned he actually shouted her name, starting the bunny.

"Mr. Savage?!!" Hopps looked him up and down, noticed his attire and weaponry, and pulled out her dart gun before he could react.

Jack quickly put his paws up, hoping that Alyssa wouldn't show up and see this after the butt-chewing he'd just dealt her. "Hopps. Please lower your gun."

"Not a chance! Start. Talking!" Judy ordered through gritted teeth.

"I want to know what you are doing here, first. Does your superior know you're here?"

Judy's hard glare faltered. Of course he didn't. She was too impulsive for her own good. "I'll radio him my location right now."

"Wait!" Jack growled, the word 'superior' reminding him of the fake badge he kept in case of emergencies like this. "Officer Hopps, do not drag your boss into this."

"Don't tell me what to do, Mr. Savage!" Judy snapped as she pulled her radio from her belt.

"It's for your own good, officer. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into."

Judy cocked her head. "Really?"

"I'm going to very slowly take something out of my pocket. So please don't shoot me." Judy
narrowed her eyes, but didn't pull the trigger as Jack slowly procured a fake badge and showed it to her.

"ZBI?!" Judy's eyes widened again. "You told me you were from the Congressional Research Service!"

"That's my cover." Jack said, choosing his words carefully. He didn't have a choice, he knew that now, not when the only other option was murder. No matter what, he must not mention Doctor Slothfeld. He just needed to say enough to convince Hopps to lower her weapon and interfere no further. "You are interfering with a very delicate operation and you need to lower than gun right now."

Judy shook her head. "What are you doing here, Agent Savage? If you really are ZBI."

"Smart girl. We think Mayor Swinton is breaking the law to try and keep her collars from being abolished."

Judy frowned. Jack could imagine her thinking about all those questions he'd asked her when they'd last spoken, and the seed of doubt he'd planted with the circumstances surrounding Wild Time's exposure. Please, please let that be enough.

"I'm going to let the precinct know that I'm looking for Mr. Wilde on Founder's Mountain. That'll at least let them know where to look if you make me go missing."

Jack shrugged. "Just don't mention me, okay?"

Judy made the quick call, and thankfully didn't mention Jack. Then she pocketed the radio and held out her paw. "Throw me that badge."

Jack obeyed. Judy caught the badge and scrutinized it closely, checking for signs of forgery. She wouldn't find any. That badge had been made by the ZIA itself. Eventually she tossed the badge back. "Okay. I'm convinced."

"Thank God, Jack thought as she holstered her dart gun. "Now that you understand the situation, I suggest you get back in that car and go home."

"Out of the question." Judy said sternly. "I'm not entirely sure you're telling the truth. Wherever you're going, I'm going too."

Jack sucked in a deep breath. "Officer Hopps, with respect, we're dealing with very dangerous mammals here."

Judy folded her arms. "Mr. Wilde is out here somewhere. I'm not going back without him."

"On your own?" Jack demanded, remembering the psychopathic wolves that were probably still lurking about the forest.

"If need be." Judy replied defiantly.

Jack paused. He understood Judy's feelings all too well. However, he couldn't leave her out here on her own.

"Fine, but at the first sign of trouble we're out of here."

"Officers do not back down from anything!"
Jack was upon her in an instant. Judy grabbed her gun, only for Jack to grab her wrist and hold it out while he brought his face right up to hers. His blue eyes burned with frustration as they bore into Judy's shocked purple eyes.

"Officer Hopps, this is not worth dying over!" He snarled.

Judy stared up at him in shock before nodding. "Okay. Okay."

Jack released her wrist, and she holstered her weapon. "Okay, we'll leave at the first sign of trouble, deal."

"Good." Jack said coldly. Inwardly he regretted manhandled her like that. He knew what it was like to be a token bunny in a mega-fauna oriented organization, and what the constant discrimination could do a mammal. He'd heard about Judy's promotion to 'real cop.' It must have been a very big deal for her. He wondered how much of her obsession with Wilde was borne of prejudice and how much of it was borne of desperation to not let Captain Bogo down.

"So where are we going now?" Judy asked.

"There's a lodge further up the mountain that I want to search for evidence." Hopefully Jack would find a way to convince Judy to go back to the city before they got there. "If you're going to insist on coming, then let's go already. And no headlights."

"Okay. Let me at least get some extra gear." Judy returned to her car, opened the trunk, and pulled out some equipment. "I'm taking a flare gun, some extra darts and a bunch of evidence bags. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

With that they got into the car and continued up the road, driving at a slow speed to decrease the amount of noise they made. Taking the wheel, Judy ensured all the lights were off and the car was covered by the darkness of the forest.

"Where's the T.U.S.K. team?" She asked.

"Dead." Jack said, knowing the ZPD would find out eventually. "They were sent to capture Wilde, but someone got them first."

Judy's ears flattened with horror. "You?"

"No. It was not me." Jack assured her. "That's why I don't want you here, Hopps. You're in over your head."

Judy swallowed, finally having second thoughts. Then she clenched her fists and glared at Jack. "I can't just run when there're dangerous mammals on the loose. If they're out there and they've really killed the T.U.S.K. team, then I have to report this to Precinct One." She picked up the radio, and then she froze.

Jack gently put a paw over the radio, preventing Judy from putting it to her face. "Be very careful what you tell them, Hopps. If Swinton really is behind this, she may decide that you're a loose end."

Judy looked stricken. "But… she's supported me every step of the way. I'd never have made the academy if it weren't for her."

Jack sighed with true empathy. "She's a politician and you're a token. That makes you expendable.
I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is."

Judy brought the car to a stop in the middle of the road and rested her arms on the steering wheel. She had a faraway gaze as she pondered on his words. "I'll just tell them the truth. I found their vehicle empty and the team missing. They should find the sawmill soon enough."

Jack nodded. Judy made the call, looking downcast as she spoke. Then she put the radio down and gazed through the windshield. She blinked, and then turned on the headlights.

"Agent Savage." She breathed.

Jack saw what the headlights were illuminating; a forest jeep covered in fallen leaves on the side of the bended road up ahead, its hood crumpled against a boulder. All four doors were shut, and the windows were so filthy even the lights couldn't penetrate them. The remains of the headlights were scattered all over the road.

"Oh my gosh!" Judy was the first to get out.

"Hopps, wait! Don't go alone!" Jack leapt out after her, keeping his eyes and ears open. He could see Judy's own ears swiveling as she slowly approached the silent vehicle and felt some relief that she also was being vigilant. She reached the car and peered through the front passenger's window. She rubbed at the dirt only to see that the inside of the car was also obscured. Jack could make out still figures through the interior dirt, and felt a chill. Judy tapped the window. "Hello? Can you hear me in there?" Silence. "This is Officer Hopps, ZPD. If you can hear me, please make noise."

The car and its occupants didn't make a sound. Judy tried the handle but the door didn't open. Jack stepped forward, even though everything about the jeep was making his skin crawl. "Hold on, my lockpicks might work here."

He knelt down and set to work, utilizing the set of lock picks specially designed for vehicles. He worked for less than half a minute before he stopped. "Hold on, the door's already unlocked. I think it's just stuck."

"Maybe if we both pulled." Judy stood by Jack's side and grabbed the handle with him. Together they pulled at the handle with all their might, but it didn't budge. Jack lifted his lower body, pressed his feet against the side of the car, and motioned for Judy to keep pulling.

With one great yank from both bunnies, the door came free, swinging fiercely enough to make them lose their grip and fall to the mud. Jack recovered first, standing up and looking into the car.

It was the stench he noticed first, the unmistakable smell of old rotting flesh. Then he saw the bodies. A rhino in the driver's seat and a beaver beside him, recognizable only by the horns and tail. Both were so decomposed they had turned black and eyeless, but that wasn't the worst of it. They had sustained horrific wounds that couldn't possibly have been inflicted by the crash. Jack saw punctures. Gashes. Open throats. The mess on the inside of the windows was the same brown color as the dried blood in the sawmill. A bloody, gruesome death, just like all the others.

He heard a squeak behind him as Judy saw the corpses and stifled a scream. When he turned to look, he saw tears in her eyes.

"When is this going to end?" She whimpered through the paw she held to her mouth. After Dr. Lemming and Woolton, Jack couldn't blame her for wanting an conclusion to the gruesome murders.

"Leaving would be a good idea." He said calmly.
Judy shook her head. "Captain Bogo needs to know about this. I need to stay, secure the crime scene. You should go."

"I'm not leaving you alone with those killers out there." Jack retorted. "I'll stay until I hear sirens. Go radio your people while I secure the area."

"O-okay. Just don't mess with the crime scene."

Jack pulled out his pistol and checked the area surrounding the car while he thought about what he'd just seen. Those mammals had been dead for months, and almost certainly had come from Slothfeld's facility. The rhino was dressed in the remains of a black security guard uniform, and the beaver was wearing the white coat of a researcher… yet in all that time no-one, not even Slothfeld or Swinton, had made an effort to retrieve the bodies.

"What the hell is going on around here?" He muttered to himself.

When he was sure they were alone, he returned to the car to find Judy gingerly shining a flashlight into the car. "The weather will have removed any evidence on the outside by now, but just in case be careful where you step." She said weakly. "It's rained a fair few times these last few months. If the ground was wet enough, the car could have lost control on the bend and hit this boulder here. But who could have done this to them?"

"Maybe these two can give us some answers." Jack started to climb into the vehicle, only to feel Judy's paw around his arm.

"Hey, you can't just go in there!"

"Watch me." Jack pulled his arm out of her grip. "Seriously. Watch me so you can see I'm not stealing anything. There may be something here that can help my own investigation."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling." Jack said. There was indeed a feeling growing in his gut that could either be excitement or anxiety. If Judy's theory about the crash was right, they must have been going quite fast, and if they were going fast they must have been trying to get away from something. Getting away from Slothfeld, perhaps? Why would they do that?

Had they taken something they shouldn't?

Jack searched the bodies, avoiding touching what remained of the flesh as much as possible. Then he searched the rest of the car, all the while being illuminated by the flashlight wielded by his suspicious companion.

Nothing. Not even the car keys. Jack mentally kicked himself for getting his hopes up. He clambered out the car and dropped to the ground beside Judy. "Okay, I'm done. You didn't see me take anything, did you?"

"No." Judy admitted, the flashlight's beam tilting downward as she lowered her arms. "We should step away from the car until backup gets here… wait a minute. What's this?"

She shone the flashlight on something mostly buried beneath the mud under the front tire. She took a picture of the item and then bent down to examine it closely.

"Are those car keys?" She asked.
"I'm fairly sure." Jack said. "Looks like our victims had gotten out the car at some point."

There was a rustle in the bushes on the other side of the road. Jack tensed and readied his weapon. "Stay here."

He cautiously crossed the road, pistol trained on the bush that had twitched. Meanwhile Judy walked slightly up the car to examine the crumpled hood.

"A crowbar?" Jack heard her mutter. "The hood was forced open... old blood spatter. One of them got out the car to see if the engine was fixable... Something happened... They got attacked... Maybe there's something in the engine compartment..."

"Hopps, what are you doing?" Jack demanded as he reached the bush.

"I think there may have been a third victim!" Judy called. "I noticed blood in the back seat while I was watching you search! I'm just gonna shine my light under the front of the car and check!"

That made sense to Jack. If the third victim was a small mammal, they could have ended up anywhere in the car. He shone a light into the bush, but didn't see anything other than leaves and dirt. He moved around the bush, and his foot nudged something in the grass behind it. He shone the flashlight down and grunted in disgust.

"Found your third victim!" He called. "It's a porcupine! He must have been killed when he got out to examine the engine and dragged over here!"

He searched the body, but other than his white researcher coat, he found nothing significant. He started back towards the jeep and saw that Judy had crawled underneath the front of the car. "What are you doing now?" He demanded.

"I heard something fall out the compartment." Judy said, her feet the only part of her that was visible. "We may have dislodged something when we forced the door open. Darn, there's a huge puddle under here!"

"Here, let me help you out." Jack crawled under her, finding himself in a deep muddy puddle beside the doe as she rummaged through the water. After a few seconds of rummaging through the muddy bottom, Judy let out a short laugh. Her arms worked back and forth, the puddle water turning even cloudier as she worked to remove the mud holding the item under. Then she lifted the item out the water.

"My God." Jack whispered.

When the water had almost completely dripped away from the object, leaving only translucent beads on the plastic surface, there was no mistaking the Data Disk. It glinted in the flashlight's beam like a blue diamond in Judy's gloved paw. Very few things amazed Jack these days, but finding Slothfeld's most precious possession in a muddy puddle under a car full of dead bodies was one of them.

"I think the disk's okay." Judy said as she examined the disk. "It doesn't look like the water penetrated the casing. Forensics should be able to get a good amount of evidence out of it."

She blinked when Jack held out a paw. "Hopps, give me that disk."

"What?"

"Give me the disk."
Judy held the disk to her chest. "You can't be serious! It's evidence!"

Jack put on a calm façade. He didn't want to act too threatening. "If you take that disk to the ZPD, I guarantee that it won't make it to Forensics. Swinton would sooner put a bomb in your car than let the contents of that disk be made public."

Judy gazed down at the disk. "And what about you? What are you going to do with it?"

"Take it to HQ. With that disk, we could solve ten years worth of unsolved cases worldwide. Hopps, don't make me take it from you… hold it." He froze, his ears pricking as he caught the sound of a car coming from up the road. He shushed Hopps, who wisely shut up.

They saw the tires and lower body of a white car slow to a stop Beside the police car. Three pairs of feet came down, the wide white paws of polar bears. One pair of white paws lightly splashed on the wet road as he approached the jeep. "Fucking shit, that's sick."

Jack shared the sentiment. Even under the jeep, almost chest deep in liquid mud, the scent of death was sickeningly strong. With luck it was overpowering the scent of the two rabbits as well.

"Anyone alive in there?" Asked the second polar bear who was staying beside the white car.

"Hell no, they've been dead for weeks at least."

"Any foxes?"

"Nah. No bears either. They're both leaf-shitters."

Judy frowned at the mention of foxes.

During the exchange, the feet of the third bear had wandered over to the cop car. "That's weird. There's no cops here either, but we should get out of here before the fuzz comes back." The velvety pipes of Jerry Vole suddenly blared out. "Hang on, that could be Koslov." While he answered the call, the first bear slammed the jeep door shut to seal in the smell and returned to the white car. The third bear finished the call and raced back to the others. "That was one of our boys! They spotted the fox and some friends taking off in a car! If we hurry we can pick up the trail!"

They were almost back in the white car when Judy's radio crackled.

"Crap!" Judy silenced the radio, but it was too late.

"What was that?" A bear asked as the six feet splashed back down on the road.

"Sounded like a radio." Said another. "It was coming from under that car."

Judy tucked the Data Disk in an evidence bag and stuffed it in the biggest pouch on her belt before tugging at Jack's arm. "Come on, let's get out the other side." She whispered.

Take care not to splash in the water, they climbed out from under the other side of the car and snuck into a thick bush. Judy grabbed her phone, put it on silent, and started frantically texting. Jack spied the name 'Bogo' on the screen. Judy clicked send, pocketed the phone, and pulled out her dart gun. Keeping his eye on the bears as they checked out the car again, Jack kept his pistol at the ready. He had a feeling that Judy wouldn't approve of him killing these mammals, and he still had to convince her to relinquish the Data Disk.

One of the bears wandered around to the other side of the car and tilted his nose downward. "Guys,
"I smell something!"

"Me too." Said the second bear, wrinkling his nose at the lingering scent of decay.

"Not that, you dumbass!" The first bear sniffed the air. "I smell rabbit."

Judy chose that exact moment to fire a dart into the bear's hip, dropping him to the ground.

"Shit! One down!" The other two bears sprung into action, pulling out their .45s as they charged around the car in search of the shooter. By now both rabbits had split up, taking different directions to divide the two bears.

"Hey, butthole!" Judy yelled, drawing the attention of one bear. He raced after her, firing blindly into the dark wild shrubs she had concealed herself in. Before he knew it a grey and blue blur fly out of a tall evergreen and into the side of his muzzle, sending him tumbling to into the wet grass. Judy landed on his back and fired a dart into his shoulder, putting him down.

Jack took the quieter approach, deliberately stomping of a dead branch as he took off into the foliage. The bear heard and followed, gun at the ready, unaware that Jack was circling around, silent as a wraith as he made his way behind the bear and poised himself to strike.

The bear spun round prematurely, drawn by the sound of Judy's third dart firing and missing him. He spotted Jack and aimed. The rabbit leapt forward feet first, the bullet striking the dirt behind him as he slid up and kicked the last bear's right foot from under him. The bear crashed to the ground, the gun falling from his paw, and this time Judy's dart didn't miss.

Jack straightened himself and rejoined Judy beside the car. "And now we know how Judith Hopps became Valedictorian."

Judy smirked despite herself, but the smirk quickly vanished. "Sweet cheese and crackers, their friends are after Wilde."

"Go." Jack said immediately. "You need to get in that car and go after them."

Somewhere in the forest, a bird chirped.

"I can't just…"

"Your buddies will be here to secure the crime scene any minute now!" Jack urged. "You need to get to that fox before Koslov's men do!"

"What about you?" Judy demanded.

"I still have an assignment to complete." Jack said. "Speaking of which, I still need that disk." Judy pulled out the disk, looking uncertain. Jack pressed on. "Trust me, Hopps. You don't want Swinton to know you know that disk exists. Think of your family, the people you love. You take that disk to the station, you're putting them all in danger."

Judy swallowed, held the disk to her chest again for a moment. Slowly, at long last, Judy held the disk out to Jack. "I'm still not sure this is the right thing to do, but I can't obstruct the ZBI."

Jack exhaled and took the disk. He opened the case, just to make sure that Judy had been right about the disk being clean. It was. Jack closed the case and looked for a place to store it. Being sloth sized, the disk was barely small enough to fit into the biggest pouch on his belt without the flap buttoned.
Finding the facility could wait. It was second priority compared to the Data Disk. He needed to get it back to his hotel room as soon as possible.

"You've made the right choice, Officer Hopps." He heard the chirping again, and paused. That hadn't really sounded like a bird. It was closer too, somewhere in the bushes behind the bears' white car. Jack was instantly on edge. He didn't know if it was spy's intuition or primal instinct, but he had the feeling that something even more dangerous than Koslov's boys was lurking just out of sight.

"Hopps, you need to go. Now. Find Wilde before the bears do."

Judy's expression hardened. She ran to the police car, slammed the door shut, and took off down the road.

Jack watched her leave, glad that she was finally no longer a part of this, and then turned his attention to the direction of the chirping.

He heard the rustling of bushes once more, somewhere on the left hand side of the road. Jack glared at the three bears, but they were all still unconscious. He sniffed the air, but the scent of the new threat couldn't be detected beyond the scent of bears and decay.

A light splash to his right. His ears caught the sound a second too late. A black shape slightly smaller than Jack lunged at him. The rabbit twisted his body to dodge the assailant, letting out a sharp yell when he felt something slash into the flesh of his left forearm. In the split second the attack lasted he smelled otter, and then the attacker was gone from his sight. Gripping his arm, he saw a long deep cut bleeding into his sleeve and glove. He'd lost his gun in the fight, and it wasn't on the ground either. The otter must have taken it. Why did they give up the attack so quickly? Why weren't they attacking again?

He heard the chirping again, closer than ever. Then the low growl of a wolf. Another growl from further up the road. Three hostiles, maybe more. The crossbow would take too long to assemble, especially with an injured arm. He had to retreat. It was all he could do.

Clamping a paw tight around the red and itchy cut, Jack fled into the cover of the dark forest, all the while wondering what the unseen enemy was waiting for.
Alyssa couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in the sawmill even as her group reached the van and climbed inside. The white vixen entered the passenger seat in the front cabin, then heard the approaching sound of a speeding vehicle and grabbed Gabe's wrist just as he was about to start the engine. She put a finger to her lips and pointed to the road. Seconds later a black and white car sped past, heading back down the mountain.

"What was that?" Nick asked from the back.

"ZPD." Gabe said, eyes narrowing.

"What?!"

"It's okay, I don't think they saw us." Alyssa turned her head to look into the back, and saw that Nick and Finnick looked on the verge of peeing their pants. "Change of plans. We're taking you back to Honey's place."

"Fucking A!" Finnick said. "I'll take on some assholes but I'm not going up against whatever took out those razorbacks! That ain't right!"

"I agree, but I'm not going back to Honey's. I've put enough friends in danger." Nick said.

"They don't know she's involved, I told you." Alyssa replied. "Honey was damned careful when communicating with you at Wild Times. So far as the ZPD know your second accomplice was someone called Cass Tile."

"Don't you mean Castiel?" Gabe asked.

"No. Cass Tile." Alyssa's response was more biting than she'd intended. She couldn't stop thinking about that helmeted wolf with the bloodied blade, and Jack's harsh words after he saved her from her own stupidity.

"Alright." Gabe said with a shrug. "The city's not safe for them anymore, so we should drop them off at the Overlook. They can take the car and escape while we take the van back up the mountain."

Alyssa nodded, wishing she had a better idea.

She rest her chin on her paw, propped her elbow on the window and brooded as Gabe drove the van out of its hiding place and began the return journey down the twisting mountain road. When the van was completely on the mountain road he pulled cd case from the clove box. "Pardon me. I feel like I really could do with some tunes right now." With that he procured the Gazelle disk and slipped it into the player. A second later Gazelle's rendition of *The Winner Takes It All* filled the interior of the van.

"So you're an enforcer for Mr. Big?" Nick sounded wary as he addressed Gabe.

"I'm more a spy." Gabe replied. "My wife and I are freelance spies, and nearly a year ago a mission went bad. Mr. Big requested my services in exchange for protection, and I've been collecting intel on his enemies ever since."

"You assassinated anyone yet?" Finnick asked.
"I never said I was an assassin." Gabe said. "But Big did ask me to try and take out Koslov about a
week ago."

"Did you succeed?" Nick asked.

Gabe shook his head. "I checked some intel before making the attempt. You know all that money
you were paying him every week? Turns out he'd been putting it into giving his limo a serious
upgrade after the last time someone tried for him. Armor plating in the doors, reinforced glass,
everything they used for Mayor Swinton's car. Not even a fifty caliber will punch through first
time."

"So he's still out there. Shit." Nick paused. "Sorry, that was a shitty thing to say. He's got a kid,
after all."

"Yeah." Finnick said. "Isn't he turning five in a few months?"

"Yes." Nick sounded tense.

Alyssa didn't say anything. She hated that it was Gabe who came up with a new plan. This was her
mission. She was supposed to be in control. Maybe the ZBI had made a mistake in giving her this
assignment.

"You've been quiet." Gabe said matter-of-factly as the road took them past a cliff, nearly doing a
full one-eighth as they reached a U-turn.

"So… you weren't hurt when those wolves attacked, right?" Gabe asked.

"No. Jack made sure of that."

"Who?"

"Agent Savage, ZIA. He's looking for Slothfeld for the same reason I am." Alyssa lightly bit the
inside of her cheek. Right now even thinking of the rabbit was annoying her.

"So he's not from the Congressional Research Whatever after all. Does he know about me?"

Alyssa nodded. "Mm-hm. Sorry, I don't want to talk right now."

"Alyssa, you're not the only agent who froze up." Gabe said.

The vixen scowled. "Who said I froze up?"

"I heard someone chewing you out. That was him, wasn't it?"

Alyssa spun on the fox-cheetah. "Oh, so everyone in this van knows about my fucking screw up,
do they?!"

"Yeah, but the mission isn't a bust just yet." Gabe held up a placating paw. "We'll still catch
Slothfeld no matter even if you do freeze up again."

Alyssa's eyes narrowed. "Gee, thanks."

Gabe grimaced at his poor choice of words. "That's not what I meant. Look, you're one of the more
inexperienced agents, but you'll learn. Mr. Bone, James Bone didn't turn into a super spy
overnight."
That didn't make Alyssa feel better.

"Speaking of spies, how did you get into the spy business?" Alyssa asked. "Did you just have to fill in an application form, or were you interviewed through a holographic communicator?"

"Very funny." Gabe said. "The 'spy business' as you so eloquently called it, is all I've ever known. My parents so far as I know were both ZI6, way before you joined up, but they died when I was a kid."

"Both of them?"

"Yes. My dad got lucky. Died instantly in a car accident after I was born. My mom…" He took a deep breath. "Not so lucky. When I was eight, or maybe nine I was captured by some mad doctor and experimented on with a prototype collar. The experiment went bad and I almost got shocked to death. Mom started an investigation into the bastards responsible and was killed for it. After that I was pretty much on my own before I met Starlight."

"That's rough." Alyssa muttered. She didn't remember her parents at all. She turned her eyes to the rear view window and saw Nick and Finnick in the reflection. "Nick? Why are you looking at Gabe like that?"

"No reason." Nick blatantly lied. "So, did anyone get a chance to see what was in those boxes back there?"

"Nope." Gabe sounded even tenser.

Nick poked his head in between the seats. "Mossberg, I saw your face in there. What's in those boxes?"

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Gabe's fists tightened around the steering wheel. "I don't know."

Alyssa turned her eyes to the road, and her nocturnal eyes caught a small shape staggering onto the road up ahead.

"That is bullshit, Moss-" "GABE!"

Gabe saw the figure and stomped on the brake. Nick and Finnick cursed loudly as the van skidded to a halt, splattering the mammal with mud and water as he collapsed.

"Shit!" Gabe was the second to leave the van, Alyssa leaping out first the instant she recognized the rabbit. Jack Savage was lying on his side in the muddy road, soaked and semi-conscious. Gabe quickly caught up and shone a flashlight on the rabbit.

"Agent Savage?"

"Oh shit!" Finnick came running up, Nick close behind, and cursed again when he saw Jack. "Fuck, ya didn't kill him, did ya?"

"No!" Gabe said firmly.

"Is that Carrots?" Nick stared at the limp rabbit.

"No, it's someone else." Alyssa wiped mud from Jack's short but slender neck and searched for a pulse.
"Oh God, is he dead?" Nick moaned.

"No, he's alive… but his pulse is unusually fast." Alyssa smelled blood on the rabbit. When she tried to turn him in search of wounds, he mumbled under his breath. He lifted his head and opened his large blue eyes for a moment, only to slip back into unconsciousness. He was breathing heavily, the sound making the vixen feel hot under the collar while at the same time unnerving her.

"What's wrong with him?" Finnick asked.

"I don't know, but he clearly needs attention." Alyssa said. Her ears caught a faint rustling sound nearby. If it was the wolves from the sawmill, she couldn't afford to put civilians in danger again. "Okay, we need to get out of here. Screw Overlook, we should drop him off at the nearest hospital."

"You're not serious," Finnick said.

"We can't just let him die!" Alyssa fired back. "You should be okay so long as you stay in the back and stay quiet, but we have to go now!"

Gabe had pulled out his pistol and a kukri by this point; he had sensed danger, too. Alyssa lifted the smaller mammal in her arms, becoming surprised by how heavy he was and how well tones his muscles felt through his clothing, and followed the others back to the van. This time she joined Nick and Finnick in the back, letting the bigger fox shut the doors as the van took off.

Alyssa saw the wound when she adjusted Jack in her arms; a long deep cut stretching diagonally from wrist to elbow. Beneath the torn sleeve his pale grey fur was soaked with blood. He'd been attacked, and almost certainly by the crazies from the sawmill. He coughed and started breathing heavier. Seeing him like this scared Alyssa more than the machete-swinging wolf had.

"Nick, help me out here."

"Huh?"

"You didn't con your way into getting a medical license, did you? Get your arse over here, you wanker!"

"Oh, right!" Nick crawled over to the two mammals. "Jesus, did he get that cut when we hit him?"

"No, this is something else. I think he got attacked just like we did."

Nick gulped. "Hold him still while I check his vitals." He leaned over Jack and checked his pulse. "He's tachycardic."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Finnick stared at him. A bump in the road knocked him on his side.

"His pulse is rapid." Nick explained quickly. "Has anyone got a clean cloth?"

"I have supplies in my car." Gabe said from up front. "It has disinfectant and everything. You'll have to make do until we get there."

Nick made do with a pack of tissues, wiping at the cut as carefully as he could, then frowned at what he saw. "The cut's red around the edges."

"Infection?" Alyssa asked. Outside the trees began to thin, and she could see the lights of the
distant city skyline through the windshield.

"I don't know. There's no dirt in the wound. He's burning up, but infection symptoms shouldn't set in so quickly." He stared at Jack for a moment, then cursed and grabbed the rabbit's head. Before Alyssa could ask what he was doing he turned Jack's head just in time for the vomit to spew out onto the floor of the van.

"Aw jeez!" Finnick groaned and edged away from them.

"What's wrong with him?" Alyssa cleaned Jack's mouth and turned him on his side.

Nick scratched his head, struggling to keep his cool. "S-seems like an anaphylactic reaction. Maybe he came into contact with a plant of some kind, but I can't think of any plant that can make a cut like that. It doesn't explain the other symptoms, though. Lipopolysaccharide, perhaps?"

"I literally don't have a frigging clue what you're talking about." Finnick said bluntly.

"I'm calling Honey!" Alyssa held Jack with one arm and tapped her headset. "Maybe she can get some info on Jack, see if he has any allergies."

"NO!"

The headset went flying when Jack's eyes flew open and a foot shot out, brushing her face. Nick leapt back with a shout as the rabbit thrashed in Alyssa's arms.

"DON'T TOUCH HER, RAMSES! DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER!"

"He's hallucinating!" Alyssa struggled to regain control of Jack, barely avoiding a broken nose when a gloved fist shot out. Finnick pressed himself into a corner of the van. "What the hell is happening back there?" Gabe shouted.

"Hallucinating!" Alyssa shouted back. She eventually grabbed both wrists and pinned the rabbit to the floor, using her thighs to trap his legs. "Jack! Listen to me! Ramses isn't here! You've got to listen to me, you're hallucinating! Snap out of it, for God's sake!" Jack continued to struggle. Alyssa took several deep breaths as she held him there. He wouldn't calm down unless she did the same.

"Jack, listen to me." She said again, her voice softer. Her eyes locked onto the pair of furious blue eyes beneath her. "Whatever you're seeing isn't real. Ramses isn't here. You've been poisoned and it's causing a hallucination." She continued to tell him the same thing for several minutes, repeating herself over and over with tiny variations, until Jack finally believed her and relaxed.

"Where… what…" He looked around the van as if finally realizing where he was.

Alyssa deemed it safe to release him, and tried not to think about how she had straddled him like a prostitute. "We found you collapsed in middle of the road."

"And nearly ran over you in the process." Nick added.

That was all Jack seemed to hear before he passed out again.

"What the fuck just happened?" Finnick asked as Alyssa turned him on his side in case he vomited again.

"Hallucination." Nick said, nearly planting a paw in the puddle of sick as he propped himself up.
"The fever must have set it off."

"He must have been poisoned." Alyssa said. "If Slothfeld's behind this, our intel on him may include a cure. Where is my com-link?"

She thanked Finnick when he found it for her and put it back on. "Honey! Honey, can you hear me?"

"Alyssa?" Honey responded.

"Honey, we've got a serious problem! Agent Savage has been poisoned!"

"Poisoned?!"

"It may have been something Slothfeld worked on before he disappeared! I need you to go through our intel and look for an antidote!"

"O-okay! Try and keep him stable, and I'll call you back in a fe-"

"Hello, Alice."

Alyssa froze, her finger still on the headset.

"What is it, Skyefall?" Gabe asked as he came to a stop at Zootopia Overlook.

Alyssa's flicked to the speaker built into her headset. She knew that voice. She knew that nickname.

"Cheryl?" She didn't dare believe it.

"What the…" Honey sounded just as stunned. "Radames? What the hell are you doing on this channel?!"

"Cheryl? Is Agent Radames on the line right now?!" Gabe turned in his seat. Nick and Finnick watched in shocked silence.

Alyssa nodded wordlessly. Then she heard the second voice again.

"Go home, Alice. Slothfeld is mine."

"Cheryl!" Alyssa found her voice with a spurt of anger. "What's going on? How did you escape from Slothfeld's facility? Where are you?"

"I'm fine. We all are. You need to go home before you get put in harm's way again."

"How do you know about that?" Alyssa demanded. A bout of coughing from Jack reminded her of a far more urgent matter. "Cheryl, a friend of mine has been poisoned. If you know something about that too, you've got to help me!"

"Let me guess, rabbit buck? Grey fur? Black stripes? Has the sexual orientation of a broken compass?"

"Yes! He could die, you've got to help me save him!"

"He's after the Vorpal Blade. He can't be trusted."
"What are you talking about? Please, he saved my life! I can't just let him die!" Alyssa could feel hot tears beading her eyes at this point.

There was a pause. Even Honey was silent.

"He saved you?" Cheryl asked.

"Yes! I can't return the favor until I know what's wrong with him! Please, help him!"

"Was it a cut? Inflamed around the edges? Tachycardia? Fever? Respiratory distress?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I know what he's been poisoned with. One of Slothfeld's imperfect chemical weapons. I'll get you the antidote, but after that you need to take your friends and leave. Listen carefully, Alice. A friend of Nick's is currently on his way to collect an important package and drop it off at the Arctic House. A shot of antidote will be included with the package. He will need to be taken to hospital to be treated for anaphylaxis afterward."

"Is that what's happening to him?"

"Partly. Slothfeld has yet to omit the symptoms unassociated with a fatal allergic reaction. This is important, Alice; the contents of the package must only be opened by Gabriel Mossberg. It will be a metal box the size of a suitcase, and password locked. The password is his mother's first name. The package must be held right-side up at all times and be handled very gently. It is also essential that the package be opened within six hours."

"What is inside the package? A bomb?"

"A little more volatile than that. Agent Savage must be given the antidote before you take him to a hospital, otherwise the anaphylaxis treatment will not work. I suggest you give it to him before he goes into full cardiac arrest."

"Cheryl, are you alright? Where are you? We've got a van, just tell us where you are!"

"It's too late for that. For any of us. Just do what I say, save your buck, and go. Goodbye, Alice."

After that, the headset fell silent. Alyssa stared at the metal side of the van with wide eyes. "Cheryl. Cheryl, wait!"

"It's no good, she hung up." She heard Honey's voice again. "What the hell was that about?"

"Hold up!" Finnick stood up. "Don't tell me that's the Cheryl Ransome who went AWOL when Wild Times got busted!"

"No, it's Radames. She's a ZI6 agent who went missing two years ago."

Nick shifted on his knees. "Let me guess, a tiger?"

Alyssa stared down at Jack, ears flat. "Yes. One of the best."

The male fox rubbed his chin. "She wouldn't happen to be any good at mimicking voices, do you?"

Alyssa stared at him. "That one of her most valuable skills. How did you know that?"

"Because that's how Cheryl Ransome managed to help us steal back a stuffed animal that could
have busted our operation. She called Officer Hopps and disguised her voice as her mother's."

A heavy silence ensued, permeated by Jack's strained breathing.

"I'll get the medkit." Gabe got out the van.

Nick tapped his paw on his knee. "It never occurred to you that Radames and Ransome may be the same mammal?"

"Yes… I… of course I did!" Alyssa snapped. The van doors flew open and Gabe entered the back of the van with a box in paw. "But how was I supposed to know?! I never saw Ransome!"

Nick grimaced. "You got a picture?"

Alyssa shook her head.

"I've got one." Gabe tossed her his wallet as he knelt down beside the semi-conscious Jack. "Nick, take this kit and do what you can."

Alyssa glanced at Jack, who was still breathing heavily, then found the photo in Gabe's wallet. She felt her heart ache as she gazed upon Cheryl's face before showing it to Finnick.

The little fox gaped. "Holy crap, that's her!"

"It can't be!" Alyssa threw the wallet at the back of the driver's seat. "She can't have been posing at Ransome! She would have told us! Why didn't I see her?!"

"Woah, take it easy!" Honey scolded through the com-link.

"The one time you two were in the clinic, she hid in the storeroom." Nick said while cleaning Jack's cut. With most of the blood wiped away seeing how inflamed the injury was made the vixen feel even worse. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say she didn't want you to see her."

"Radames and Ransome even sound the same for fuck's sake!" Alyssa swung the side of her fist into the side of the van with a loud bang and gritted her teeth with pain and rage. "I thought it was a coincidence! If Cheryl had escaped, she would have contacted us as soon as possible! I don't understand!"

Her tirade stopped when Gabe reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "Let's calm down."

"How?!” Alyssa asked furiously. "I don't understand how she could do this!"

"Ask her when you find her!" Gabe fired back, and only then did Alyssa see the anger simmering in his own blue eyes. It was at least a little comfort to know she wasn't the only one upset by this revelation.

"Okay, that should stop the bleeding and keep out infection!" Nick breathed as he finished off dressing Jack's forearm. "Can we get out of here now?"

Alyssa nodded. Jack was breathing so heavily he was almost gasping. "Yeah. We're running out of time."

The van took off again, speeding down the road back to Zootopia.

"What's that in his belt?" Finnick pointed at Jack's hip.

Alyssa's jaw dropped when she finally saw the translucent blue plastic square poking out of one of
Jack's pouches.

No… no way… She reached for the flat object and carefully slid it out the pouch. It couldn't be…

But it was. An unmarked disk in a translucent sapphire blue case, just like in the photograph.

So Jack had found the Data Disk before her. That must mean he'd found Slothfeld's facility, possibly even found the good doctor himself. And then something had gone wrong.

In any case, it was too risky leaving this disk with Jack when they got him to a hospital. Alyssa would have to hold onto it for the time being until she decided what to do. Would she give it back if he recovered? Should she? If she brought this disk back to Fengland, she just might become more than the seductive assassin ZI6 had raised her to be.

But Jack had found the disk first. He'd earned it fair and square. He was literally dying for it in her lap.

For now, Alyssa would hold onto it.

"Gabe, give me that Gazelle case. I want to see if this disk fits."

"Hold on, what is that disk anyway?" Nick asked.

Alyssa smiled. "This, Nick, is everything we need to clear your name."

Nick gasped. "Wait… it's that disk?" Alyssa nodded. Nick and Finnick burst out laughing.

Gabe was grinning himself as he passed Alyssa the case for his Gazelle cd. Alyssa breathed a sigh of satisfaction when the Data Disk proved to be a perfect fit.

"There we go." She tucked the disguised disk into her own pouch. Now the disk would look like a pirated cd to anyone who didn't know better.

"Good thinking." Gabe said. "Now lets go get that antidote."
Benjamin scratched at the bandage as he sat all alone in the interrogation room, waiting for someone to enter and give him some news of his fate. He’d been here for two hours now, and almost twenty minutes had passed since the interrogation had ended.

He’d stuck to the same story, with some added details that had returned to the surface of his memory after the shock had worn off. The hippo officer had been firm but fair in his questioning, aside from a few odd questions that Benjamin suspected to be subtle attempts to trick him into contradicting his story. Benjamin remained adamant throughout that he was telling nothing but the truth, and Higgins appeared satisfied when he’d ended the interrogation and left. He didn’t know if the ZPD usual leaves someone in the interrogation room, but during the drive from the hospital to the precinct he’d overheard McHorn telling Bogo that a recent predator riot in the Canyon District had left the holding cells full to the brim,

Benjamin looked at the mirrored window across the table and wondered if there was anyone on the other side watching him right now. He hoped at least one of them was Captain Bogo, or McHorn or Higgins, even Officer Hopps. She may have been the one most responsible for Nick’s misery, but he had given her every reason to distrust and hate him. At least T.U.S.K. was having no part in the interrogation, even though they were in charge of the search for Nick; apparently Cunninghorn wasn’t allowed anyway near Benjamin after his previous behavior towards him, so as increase their chances of getting viable information out of the witness.

Benjamin saw the door open in the window’s reflection and saw Higgins enter. He turned his head to look at the real Higgins, heart beating faster with anticipation.

“The evidence checks out.” He said, his expression neutral. “You’re free to go.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Benjamin breathed.

“Oh, we might need to ask you some more questions, so don’t go leaving the city any time soon.”

“Oh, don’t you worry!” Benjamin quickly stood up, eager to get out of here. He’d had more than enough of hospitals and police stations for one day. “What about Mr. Pottermass? Is he mad I didn’t finish cleaning Bug Burga?”

“I think he’s more upset that the Assistant Mayor was murdered on company property. Don’t you worry about that, Clawhauser. Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

Benjamin followed Higgins out, glad to finally be out of that harshly lit room, and followed him down the hallway and into the lobby. He almost stopped dead when he saw Captain Bogo standing by the front desk. His trench coat, presumably still stained with cheetah blood, was gone and replaced with a sleek black biker jacket that had Benjamin’s heart pumping. He wasn’t sure what it was about the jacket that was making him burn up. Perhaps it was because the color and length reminded him of the tuxedo Bogo had worn when they’d first met. He’d tried to forget about his burgeoning crush on the buffalo ever since that brief moment they’d crossed paths outside of Zootopia Central Station, but with the number of times Bogo had come into his life that was turning out to be as doable as forgetting about chocolate drizzled donuts.

Bogo seemed to exhale when he saw Benjamin and Higgins approach. “Finally. Come on, Clawhauser. We’re taking you home.”
Benjamin looked between the two officers. “You are?”

“We are. I’m not letting you go on your own after what happened yesterday.”

“It’s not up for discussion, kid.” Benjamin spun round with a start when he heard McHorn right behind him, stunned that such a massive mammal could move so quietly. “An Assistant Mayor is dead and you’re the only witness we’ve got. Chief Trunchbull has given us orders to escort you home.”

“We’ve managed to keep your identity a secret from the media for now, but until we catch this bastard I suggest you keep a low profile.” Bogo said. “Mr. Pottermass has agreed to have a carpool sent to take you to and from work. It’s for your own safety.”

In the past Nick had warned him about the perceived horrors of the twelve Zootopia Precincts, all but comparing them to the courthouses of the colonial witch trials. Essentially if you were a predator, you were automatically found guilty. Benjamin pressed his fingertips into his forehead. This was getting too much.

“Okay, what is going on here?” He asked as calmly as possible.

Bogo frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“I’m a predator, right? You know, fangs, claws, TAME collar?”

“And?”

“And you’re treating me like a pop star who’s being stalked.” Benjamin continued. “You even stopped T.U.S.K. from arresting me in the hospital. I swear I’m not being ungrateful, but what gives?”

“It because you don’t deserve to be treated like that.” Bogo said immediately. “Predators get arrested all the time for crap they didn’t do, and I’m getting sick of it. The sooner the government pulls their heads out of the sand and abolish those collars, the better.”

“Yikes.” Higgins muttered.

Bogo ignored him and checked his watch. “It’s getting late. Let’s go.”

McHorn stayed behind to fill out more paperwork while Bogo and Higgins escorted Benjamin to a waiting squad car and drove him to the apartment block. By the time they got there it was quite late, almost eleven. Benjamin wondered if they were doing overtime.

They stopped outside the building and Bogo exited first to let him out. Benjamin stepped outside the car and looked up at the wide, aged building. It felt so good to be home.

“Remember what we told you.” Bogo said. “Stay out of trouble and keep a low profile. We’ll update you on the case when we can.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Benjamin said quietly.

Bogo raised his hoof, but seemed to decide against whatever he was going to do and lowered it. “See you around.”

“You too.” Benjamin turned and entered the apartment building, feeling the buffalo’s eyes on him as he walked away.
Once inside he stopped before the elevator, waiting beside three polar bears. He didn’t recognize any of them and assumed they were visiting a fellow tenant. There were at least two polar bears residing within the apartment block after all. Eventually the door slid open, and they all entered the small, dimly lit space. Benjamin reached past one of the two bears in tracksuits and pressed the button for his floor. When the door slid closed, the bear in a black jacket and gold chain looked down at him. “Benjamin Clawhauser?”

Benjamin looked up, mildly surprised by the unusual accent. “Yes?”

The bear held out a paw. “Koslov Polarnova. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Benjamin looked at the paw, suddenly feeling nervous. The other two bears had squeezed themselves behind him, keeping him from leaving the elevator even as it stopped at his floor. Scared of the potential repercussions of not accepting the pawshake, Benjamin shook it. “H-how do you do? Do I know you?”

“No.” Koslov said bluntly. “But I know your vulpine friend very well.”

Benjamin’s blood froze. “Nick?”

Koslov nodded. “We need to talk.”

He pressed the button open the elevator door and stepped out first. Benjamin felt one of the other bears nudge him out. The four of them walked down the hallway without a word, eventually stopping outside his door. Benjamin’s breath hitched in his throat when he saw the door ajar and being the telltale scratches and gouges of being forced open. “Come inside.” Koslov said politely, opening the door to let Benjamin through.

The cheetah was sure he was going to pee his pants as he entered the small apartment. There were signs that the entire place had been searched, such as opened drawers and cupboards, but it hadn’t been completely trashed like rooms usually were in the movies. Koslov moved past him and sat down at the old couch. He gestured for one of his men to guide Benjamin to the nearby wooden chair and sit him down.

“I don’t know where he is!” Benjamin cried the second he sat down on the uncomfortable seat. “The ZPD questioned me all day, and I told them the same thing! I don’t know!”

“Indeed.” The cheetah wasn’t sure if Koslov truly believed him or not.

“You’ve got to believe me!” Benjamin shivered not just from fear, but from how cold it was in his home, if he could even call it a home anymore. Trashed, cold and dark, it felt like he’d walked into the home of a stranger.

“I almost do.” Koslov said with a small wave. “I’ve had my boys watching your home for some time. Since Wild Times was busted, in fact. No sign of fox.”

Benjamin gaped. He’d had no idea he’d been followed. “How did you know where I live? How did you know I was friends with Nick?”

“He mentioned your name more than once.”

Benjamin felt a jolt, like an icicle stabbing into his stomach.

“He told you?”
“He told me much. Not your address, however. We had to find that by using other resources. He did mention your recent employment by Mr. Pottermass, though some might call it selling out.”

Benjamin almost belched double at the words, which despite Koslov’s tone and intent had such a venomous context. It had not been the first time someone had used the word ‘sellout’ against him.

“He did?”

“In fact, it was my recommendation that he approach you for the rest of the funding.”

Benjamin felt another jolt. How could Nick have done this to him? “I haven’t seen him since we both got discharged from hospital! I told him our friendship was over! Well, I implied it, but he knew what I meant!”

“Da. I too have felt the sting of treachery in my youth.” Koslov propped his elbow on the armrest. “It is a pity he had to drag you into this mess, unknowingly or not.”

“It’s a pity he dragged himself into this mess to begin with.” Benjamin said shortly.

Koslov examined his very pointed claws. Benjamin remembered a story Finnick had told him once, of the time Koslov had hunted down a gang boss in his home country and gutted him like a Howloween pumpkin. “He never appeared at your apartment, but I am intrigued by your absence these last two days. Were you meeting your former friend in secret?”

“No!” Benjamin said firmly.

“And he has not contacted you since his escape?”

“He never even sent me a paper airplane!”

“So you claim.” Koslov said cooly.

“Please, I don’t know where he is, I swear!” Benjamin begged.

One of the bears stepped forward, but Koslov held up a paw, stopping him. “No need for that, Raymond. I told him I just wish to talk.”

“What do you want from him?” Benjamin asked, struggling to keep his voice calm in the face of three bears who almost certainly had blood on their paws, and the realization of just how badly he’d been played. “Money? Revenge?”

“That is not your concern. I just need you to tell me where to look, and you would do well not lie to me.”

Benjamin bit his lip, instantly thinking of Honey’s bunker, and then thinking of Sherry. “You tried Ho-his apartment, right?”

“Yes.” Koslov stated the obvious answer.

“What about that bar he always goes to? Grey’s Bar? I think he knows the owner.” Benjamin’s thoughts now turned to Nick, and the pilsners that had almost claimed his life.

“As do I. We already checked there.”

“Did you try Scumbag Street?” Benjamin’s fingers dug into the wood of his chair.

“Is that supposed to be an insult?” Koslov’s voice turned cold.
“Yeah, but not for you.”

The large bear cocked his head, not looking amused in the slightest. “Then who is it you are insulting?”

“Who do you think? Do you really think you’ll get anything out of him now that he’s a fugitive on the run?” Benjamin’s voice was now rising with every word.

“A fugitive on the run must have run somewhere. Where would he run, Benji?”

Benjamin bristled at the nickname. His shoulders were shaking.

“Don’t ‘Benji’ me! The only reason you and your boys are here is because Nick used me to get the cash for what your… your blood money didn’t cover!”

“Do not change the subject, boy!” Koslov scolded. “I’m warning you now-”

“SCREW YOUR WARNING!” Benjamin shouted, his words tumbling out in a torrent as he leapt to his feet. “I KNOW ABOUT MAMMALS LIKE YOU! YOU’RE JUST GOING TO KILL ME NO MATTER WHAT I SAY! WHY WOULDN’T YOU? IT’S NOT LIKE ANYONE WOULD CARE IF THE ULTIMATE RACE TRAITOR TURNED UP IN A GUTTER ONE DAY WITH A BULLET IN HIS HEAD!”

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever raised his voice like this, but he couldn’t hold it in anymore: being treated as a sellout, getting his arm ripped to shreds by Nick’s pilsners, finding out his friends had conned him out of his boss’s money, being fooled into thinking that they was finally going straight, discovering that his employment by Mr. Pottermass was a curse in disguise, learning that Pottermass held a grudge against him for surviving an accident where his wife didn’t, walking in on a demon bear eating the carcass of the Assistant Mayor and finally facing the very gang boss Nick had loaned money from. Every moment he’d felt terrified or furious over the last few days had built up to this.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t know where he is? Why are you even wasting time going after him anyway? There’s no way he can pay you back, if it even is that much money!”

Koslov stayed silent, looking stoic but clearly not expecting this tirade. His two goons stayed still, looking unsure if they should stop the cheetah.

“You’re scared he’ll squeal! Is that it? You obviously knew him long enough to know he can’t shut up to save his life, so if he was going to blab the cops would have got you by now!”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t wear him down eventually.” Koslov said evenly, holding up a paw when his men stepped toward Benjamin again.

“That’s if they catch him! Knowing what a coward he is, he’s probably long gone by now! So either shoot me or go bother somebody else! You wanna know where I’ve been these last two days? In the hospital after watching the Assistant Mayor get eaten by a giant grizzly!”

“What did you say?”

“There’s your answer, happy? Why can’t everyone just leave me alone-”
Koslov backhanded Benjamin just hard enough to shut him up without knocking him to the floor. The feline’s breath caught in his throat, the sting of the polar bear’s paw not immediately apparent. He held his face when the pain did come and stared at the floor while his heart thudded.

“Want him taught a lesson, boss?”

“Quiet.” Koslov didn’t sound as angry as Benjamin thought he’d be. Benjamin looked up to see the large predator staring down at him with an expression that looked almost like shock. “Did you just say something about a giant grizzly?”

Benjamin stared, his paw still on his stinging cheek, not quite understanding.

“Answer me, boy!” Koslov snapped.

“Yeah, answer him!” The bear called Raymond snapped.

“What did you say about a giant grizzly?” Koslov demanded.

Benjamin swallowed. “The predator who killed Woolton. He was a giant grizzly bear.”

“How giant?”

“Huh?”

“How giant is he?”

Benjamin hesitated, then held his arm up as high as it would go. “Rhino sized.”

Koslov’s eyes widened. His paw thrust under his jacket. Benjamin expected a gun and nearly screamed, but instead of a gun the crime boss pulled out a creased up photograph.

“Tell me the truth, boy. Is this the grizzly?”

He held out the photo. Benjamin immediately recognized Koslov holding a little polar bear cub who could be his son.

On the other side of the child was a grizzly bear inexplicably bigger than the already gigantic Koslov.

The grizzly’s eyes were a normal grey, like the ocean on a cloudy day, but there was no mistaking the rest of his face.

... Teeth red with blood rending what little remained of the ram’s throat into nothing more than skin and gristle, before the smeared dark muzzle turned and black dead eyes stared into the cheetah’s horrified soul...

Benjamin leapt back from the photograph as the memory came rushing back like a freight train, hitting the chair and falling back into it. Tears sprung to his eyes and threatened to spill. His paws clamped over his mouth as nausea built up in his stomach.

“Yes...” He barely managed to say.

The three bears’ reactions were immediate; Raymond said, “You gotta be fucking kidding me!” Kevin cursed and raced to the door to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. Koslov’s eyes widened even further as he pocketed the photograph and slowly sat back down.

“Are you sure?” Koslov said in a soft voice that was very unsuitable for a crime boss.
Benjamin swallowed back bile and lowered his paws. “Yes. It’s him. I could never forget that face.”

“Tell me what happened, boy.” Koslov said. “Tell me what happened that day and you have my word we will leave you in peace.”

Benjamin wasn’t sure if he should trust the word of a gangster, but he had little to lose. Before he could begin, however, the cheap old phone Honey had given him in case his other phone got hacked began to ring. He could hear it jingling in the nearby open drawer.

The other bear, possibly the Kevin that Nick had mentioned some time ago, strode over to the drawer and pulled out the phone. Koslov gestured for him to give it to Ben. “No funny business.”

The cheetah brought his face close to the phone. “Hello?”

“Benjamin. How are you doing after that terrible business in Bug Burga?”

With a chill, Benjamin recognized the voice immediately. “Mr. Pottermass! I’m doing fine, sir!” He didn’t ask how Pottermass had gotten this phone number.

“Good, good. You do realize that you failed to completely clean the Tundratown Bug Burga, don’t you?”

Benjamin gulped. “Sir, I…”

“Not to worry, dear boy. I have another task for you that will more than make up for it. It requires a hell of a lot more travel, but lot less fries and vomit. You up for it?”

“Of course, sir!”

Koslov stayed quiet, watching the feline talk to his boss.

“In Boathouse One in the Rainforest District is a very important package that I need delivered within six and a half hours. The contents are very fragile, and the package must be held right-side up at all times. The package is password locked, but the recipient will know the code.”

“What’s in the package?”

“That’s for the recipient to know. His name is Gabriel Mossberg, an employee of Mr. Big. He should be at the Arctic House by the time you get there.”

“The Artic House? But your company doesn’t own that building.”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” Benjamin answered quickly.

“Good. Get the package to Mossberg, and you can consider yourself completely forgiven.”

Benjamin locked eyes with Koslov and felt a rush of fear. “Sir, I’m kind of busy right now. Is there anyone else who can deliver it.”

“No, only you.” Pottermass’s tone became harsher. “Deliver the package to the Artic House, or else.”

“… Yes, sir.”
Pottermass hung up.

Koslov immediately snatched the old phone. “Who was that?”

“My boss. He wants me to deliver a package within six and a half hours.” Benjamin had a feeling that wasn’t going happen.”

“What sort of package?”

“I don’t know. He just wants me to retrieve it from Boathouse One and take it to the Artic House.”

Koslov cocked his head, intrigued. “Boathouse One is a shack on the edge of town. Why would Mr. Pottermass leave a package there?”

“I don’t know.” Benjamin repeated.

Koslov seemed to make a decision and stood up. “Change of plan. We’re taking him.”

“Sir?” Kevin asked while Benjamin’s heart skipped a beat.

“The boy is a witness to Woolton’s death. The police will not leave him alone for too long. We need to leave before they come back. Also, I would like to see this ‘package’ for myself.”

Benjamin knew immediately what the large bear was thinking; Pottermass obviously wanted this package delivered discreetly if he was placing it in such a secure location. Either it was something illegal, something valuable, or both. That meant Koslov wanted it. Benjamin didn’t have a clue how he was going to explain that gangsters had stolen Pottermass’s package, and that was if he somehow lived to face him.

In case, Benjamin was taken roughly by the arm and escorted from his apartment, back down the elevator, and out the building. He was bundled into a refrigerated white limousine three blocks away and made to sit in the seat opposite Koslov.

During the long, cold drive to the Rainforest District, Koslov made Benjamin tell him everything that had happened that horrible morning at the Tundratown Bug Burga. Benjamin hated having to relive that memory, and was nearly brought to tears as he told of how he had walked up to the manager’s office and discovered the big grizzly crouching in a puddle of blood, and the dawning terror he’d felt as he’d gradually realized what the grizzly had been doing.

After he finished, Koslov stayed silent as he ruminated on the information. Benjamin stayed quiet himself and looked around at everything that wasn’t Koslov or the two bears up front. Eventually his eyes fell upon the rear view window. He could see a small red car in the little glass reflection.

They reached Boathouse One, a wooden shack on the bank of the river that flowed along the lowest level of the Rainforest District, and Koslov ordered Benjamin to stay in the car. Raymond and Kevin got out and Kevin entered the boathouse first. Less than a minute passed before he emerged carrying what at a distance looked like a large silver box. Raymond opened the limo door so Kevin could set the box on the seat beside Koslov.

It looked like a thick, handle-less metal attaché case with a high-tech luminescent glass keypad featuring all twenty-six letters and all ten single digits. Duct taped to the box was a small long box that appears to be clipped shut. Benjamin couldn’t stop staring at the box, and neither could Koslov. What on earth was Pottermass thinking leaving something like this in a shack?

“What the hell is this thing?” Raymond scratched his head. “A weapon’s case, maybe?”
“What’s the code, kid?” Kevin asked.

“I’ve no idea! Mr. Pottermass didn’t tell me, I swear!” Benjamin insisted. “He just told me to take it to someone called Gabriel Mossberg.”

Kevin looked up sharply from the box. “Mossberg? Why does that sound familiar?”

Koslov growled. “That’s the mu’dak who stole the receipts for my limo upgrades and got away with it. Raymond, take us to the Arctic House. Kevin, call Vincent and tell him to have ten boys packing heat at the Arctic House in twenty minutes. We’re going to have ourselves some payback.”

Benjamin shivered, but not from the cold, as the limo took off. His collar, currently a perpetual yellow judging from the reflection in the window beside him, was feeling uncomfortably tight. He reached up to tug at it, and that was when he remembered the tracker.

Back when he’d first started being educated about the TAME collars, Benjamin had been told about the dormant tracking devices built into every single collar, designed to trigger should a predator attempt to foolishly remove it and bring the ZPD down on their butt within the hour. The cheetah didn’t remember how much jail time he would get, but anything had to be better than whatever Koslov intended to do to him. As he tugged at the collar, Benjamin tried to be as subtle as he could as he pierced the material of the collar beside the little metal device, feeling the hard wiring beneath break in two. He heard the faintest beep, seemingly unheard by Koslov, and hoped to God it was enough. He lowered the paw, clasped his paws together and stared down at the unusual high tech box as the limo entered Tundratown and continued onward to the Arctic House.

The Artic House was Tundratown’s oldest landmark, an unassuming white brick building where the first machines that maintained the district’s artificial climate had been invented and then developed for over eleven years. Compared to the frozen sculptures that made up the newer buildings the Arctic House was an eyesore, but it had so much historical significance that no-one could so much as take a jackhammer to the building. Benjamin had seen it with his own eyes only twice, and remembered it as being only slightly smaller than Precinct One. The limo drove through a rusted metal gateway and entered the streets of the industrial area of Tundratown, which at this time of night were completely deserted. Benjamin gasped softly when the limo turned a corner and he saw the side of the building. There was a parked van beside a door that looked like it had been forced open. For a moment, Benjamin thought it was Finnick’s, but this van was plain.

Again, Benjamin wondered what Pottermass was thinking. If what Koslov said about this Mossberg guy was true, then the hippo was in league with Mr. Big. The cheetah bit his knuckle, trying to work it out as the limo drew closer to the Arctic House. They were about fifty feet from the Arctic House when Benjamin saw that the rear doors of the van were open, and a tiny cream-colored mammal was leaping out. Benjamin recognized the large ears right away, and so did Koslov.

“That’s one of them!” The gang boss growled and pointed as the fennec ran into the Arctic House. “It’s Nick’s nurse! That fox must be in there!”

Benjamin would have stood up if they weren’t in a moving car. He felt a rush of terror and reached out to Koslov. “Wait! Don’t hurt them, plea-”

Thunk!

A sound like crunching ice struck the feline’s left ear like an electric shock. He turned to see a white mark in the window beside his head, like an artist’s interpretation of a star.
Koslov cursed in Roarssian. Benjamin leapt back from the window as a second white star appeared with another crunch and he saw the bullet lodged in the glass. “Blyad! Someone is shooting at us!” Koslov roared at the two bears in front. “Get us out of here!” A third shot hit the driver’s side window. Raymond yelled in fright and hit the gas, sending the car flying down the street. Benjamin slid down in his seat, yelling in fright as a fourth bullet struck the window but again failed to penetrate. There was a bang and a hiss from outside, and the limo began to swerve.

“Shit! The wheel!” Raymond howled as he struggled with the steering wheel. “Hold onto something!”

Benjamin was wearing a seatbelt, but he twisted his body and grabbed the backrest behind him, crying out and ducking when he heard another bullet strike his window. He heard a loud crunch, then a thud as the bullet pierced the wounded glass and hit the inside of the opposite door.

It had to have missed him by centimeters.

The limo lurched as it passed the van and hit a curb, sending it onto a beeline for the white wall of the Arctic House. Another bullet hit Raymond’s window. Raymond spun the wheel to no avail. Kevin threw his arms up in front of his face. Another bullet hit the white star of the previous bullet. Koslov bellowed out curses like a sailor. Benjamin screamed as another fifty-caliber bullet pierced the weakened window, plowed through Raymond’s head in an explosion of claret and into Kevin’s body.

The limo hit the brick wall and kept right on going.
Alyssa, and Gabe had been striding across one of the rusted metal walkways with the deteriorating Jack in tow and Nick had been standing beside the exit waiting for Finnick when the wall near him exploded.

Nick hollered and threw himself away from the blast, hitting the floor and throwing his arms over his head as shattered brick rained down on his back and dust enveloped his body. Dimly he heard Alyssa and Gabe shouting his name from up above, harsh clanging sounds like a hammer striking a metal barrel, and a familiar voice screaming in terror.

Benji?

Nick lifted his head, blinking in the dust as it settled on the cold floor of the almost empty Arctic House. He turned his head and found himself face to face with Koslov's contorted license plate.

Somehow Koslov's limo had tracked him down and decided to try and do him in by ramming him through a brick wall. The limo had hit the wall at a diagonal angle, the crushed hood and the two right hand doors making it inside before the long white vehicle got lodged in the makeshift archway. The interior of the cracked windshield was soaked in so much blood he couldn't see who or what was inside.

"What the fuck?" Nick turned to see Finnick standing right behind him.

Nick heard the clanging sound again. It was coming from outside. He heard more screaming from inside the car, and his blood ran cold.

"Benji?!" Finnick muttered in shock.

Nick ran to the limo and grabbed at the door handle, but the force of the crash had practically welded the door shut. He grabbed the bottom of the window and pulled himself up.

Benjamin and Koslov were the only mammals inside, and they were hunched up on the floor beneath the windows. To his absolute horror, Nick saw at least three bullets lodged in the opposite windows overlooking the street outside.

"Ben!" Nick yelled.

Benjamin looked up from beneath his arms. His eyes would have widened if they weren't already as big as dinner plates. "Nick?!"

"You!" Koslov snarled. He started to get up, but another bullet striking the armored door make him duck his head back down. Benjamin shrieked in terror and curled into a shaking ball. Nick could feel the limo shake with each impact. Judging by the force, they were the large fifty caliber bullets of a sniper rifle.

He felt Finnick grab his tail and drag him back down. "Careful, Nick!"

"What the hell is going on?" Alyssa yelled from up above.

"Sniper!" Nick yelled back as he and Finnick both pulled at the door handle. "Get down here and help me! Benji's in there!"
Gabe holstered his handgun. "Stay with him, Alyssa." He vaulted over the railing, broke his fall on one of the ancient machines that dotted the wide concrete floor and raced over to the limo just as more bullets hit the side of the car still sitting in the street, making Benjamin scream again.

In his panic-stricken mind, Benjamin's only confused thought was that he was somehow not dead. He could feel the bullets striking the door he was pressing his back against, like an intruder pounding at the door to break into his home. Even as he clamped his paws over his ears he screamed each time a bullet hit, having quickly realized that most if not all of those bullets were meant for him. The ZPD had told him that he was the only witness to Assistant Mayor Woolton's death. They'd warned him that he might be in danger. Now Woolton's killers had come back to silence him.

"Stay down!" Someone who wasn't Nick yelled outside. "The limousine is armored! Those bullets can punch through the windows but they can't get through the doors!" Benjamin clung to the inside of the door, half-believing him. Koslov was lying flat on his stomach, bleeding from his nose as he rummaged for his phone.

"We've got to get him out of there." That same voice said. Benjamin heard a rattling sound coming from the opposite door.

"It's no good! The door's stuck tight!" Finnick growled. Finnick? He was here too?

He heard an angry voice in the limo. Koslov was calling for help on his cell phone. Benjamin didn't know what good his men could do.

Someone rapped on the door. "Benji, can you hear me? It's Nick!" In his panic, Benjamin nodded instead of answering. "Did you hear what Gabe said? The bullets can't get through the armor plating! You're going to okay!"

Benjamin felt and heard his breathing begin to go under control as he listened to the fox outside. Nick had lied to him before, but he would never lie about this. He heard the rattling sound again and saw the dark tips of the fox's ears as he yanked at the door.

"Shit, shit shit!" He cursed and gave up. "We'd need Supermouse to get him out!"

Benjamin felt tears spring to his eyes. This was looking more hopeless by the second.

"Then for now we'll take out the sniper!" Alyssa could see nick was startled when he heard the vixen speak directly into his ear. He must have forgotten about the com-link he was still wearing. "There're windows up here where I can spot the sniper so long as he keeps focused on the limo! Someone will need to get up here and keep an eye on Jack! Is the package in that limo?"

Nick turned back to the ruined vehicle. "Benji! Did someone call and ask you to bring a package here!" There was another bang, and Alyssa could faintly hear the feline yell again inside the limo. "Okay, we've really got to get in there!" Nick growled. "Fin, go keep an eye on the rabbit."

"Fucking hell, fine!" Finnick took off for the nearby staircase. Alyssa lay Jack down on the walkway, whispered to him to hold on and ran across to one of the smudged rectangular windows. She reached the window, pulled out her stubby high tech telescope and started searching. Through the device's night vision mode all the buildings were a dozen shades of green against a dim greenish black background. She scanned the eerie skyline, searching for a dark figure and the telltale muzzle flash of a sniper rifle. She was beginning to suspect a setup. The shooter had no way
of knowing that Koslov would be coming this way, but if they had caught wind of the task Cheryl had asked Benjamin to do… Alyssa gritted her teeth. For all she knew, Cheryl could be behind the whole thing. Hell, she might even be the one shooting. As Alyssa searched for the shooter with growing trepidation, she heard Nick speak through the com-link.

"You're absolutely certain the bullets can't get through the armored metal?"

"Absolutely." Gabe said. Alyssa heard a strange creaking sound but didn't lower the telescope. "Try the driver's door while I try and pry this open."

"Damn it! This one's stuck, too!"

Alyssa hearing the banging sound of another series of large bullets striking the limo, almost the same time she saw the muzzle flash she'd been waiting for. Bingo! "Guys, I've located the shooter! He's situated on the rooftop of Corona Offices two blocks from here! The one with all the scaffolding on one side! Try and keep him distracted while I maneuver around and catch that bastard!"

"You got it." Gabe said.

"Hold up, there's some more cars coming…" Alyssa had spotted the six cars when she lowered the telescope while still looking out the window. Her heart sank when the cars opened and spilled out polar bears with guns. "Shit, it's Koslov's guys! They're here!"

Down below, Gabe cursed and pulled out his shotgun. "Nick, go hide up top with Finnick! I'll take care of them!"

There was a loud thumping sound coming from their side of the limo. Koslov was trying to kick open the warped door to no avail while keeping himself beneath the windows.

Suddenly the air came alive with gunfire. Alyssa cursed and flung herself away from the window as it shattered, the ceiling above becoming peppered with bullet holes. There was a bang as one of Koslov's goons kicked the door open, and Gabe grabbed the back of Nick's collar.

"Stay down!" He flung Nick several feet at the same time he opened fire. The fox slid to a stop behind one of the old machines. Alyssa pulled out her own weapon as she regained her senses and looked down upon the battle that ensued.

Gabe had told him about his profession, but Nick had never imagined that the feline was that… good. Gabe had killed two bears with two blasts on his way to cover behind the protruding hood of the limo. They hit the ground in bloody heaps. Six more bears barged into the building, two of them spotting the mammals on the walkway and unloading on them with machine guns. Alyssa fired back, making them retreat to the cover of another old machine. Then she grabbed the motionless Jack and raced to the cover of the big stone box that was the manager's office, followed closely by Finnick.

"Do you think Mr. Big's making his big move?" Alyssa asked through the com-link.

"How the fricking hell should I know?!" Gabe shouted back as he and the bears continued to fiercely exchange bullets. He received a slight graze in his arm just after dropping three more bears. A couple more bears entered and started trying to open the limo as their boss roared at them to get him out and kill the sniper.

As Nick cowered behind his own machine, he spotted the stairs.
But how to get there without getting pumped full of lead?

"Guys?" Nick asked, having no idea how to operate his com-link.

"What, Nick? We're a bit busy right now!" Alyssa asked tersely. Nick could barely see her through the gaps in the walkway, returning fire through the office door.

"Do you think you guys can cover me while I get up the stairs?"

"No promises! When I say run, you run!"

"Okay!" Nick poised himself to run, and waited. Dimly, he heard the distant sound of car engines and wondered how many more goons they would have to deal with. Thank God Alyssa had disabled the shocker in his TAME collar otherwise he'd probably be in cardiac arrest right now. Five of the seven bears firing guns stopped to reload.

"Now!"

Nick took off like a shot, reaching the stairs in two seconds flat. His heart pounding with each step, especially when he heard the thundering footfalls of a polar bear spotting the fox and taking off after him.

"Get back here, fox!" The bear was bellowing. "You set this up, didn't you?"

"Hell no!" Nick shouted back, but he may as well have been talking to an out of control semi. He reached the top of the stairs just as he felt the bear's claws tighten around his body like a vice.

The fox could barely breathe as the bear lifted him up to eye level. "You'll pay for this, fox!"

"Will that be before or after I pay the last of my loan?" Nick immediately cursed his silver tongue, and so did the bear as he began to squeeze.

Blam!

Blood spurted from the bear's arm, and Nick didn't have time to figure out if it was the bullet of a friend or a foe before the bear roared in pain and flung the fox straight at a window.

By some miracle the window was unlatched, so instead of smashing through and getting cut to shreds the force of Nick's body hitting the panel caused it to swing open. Nick's flailing fingers caught the edge of the panel, saving him from a two storey drop to the frozen ground beneath.

"Nick! No!" Alyssa screamed through the com-link.

"I'm okay!" Nick yelled. "More or less!"

"Shit, there's too many of them!" He heard Gabe yell. "I'm calling the cavalry!"

"Whatever you're doing, do it fast! Agent Savage is getting worse!"

Nick couldn't reach the window frame so he could pull himself back inside, but there was a convenient draining pipe right next to the window. On the other paw, he would have to swing to reach it. Nick tried to ignore the lactic acid building up in his shoulders as swung his legs back and forth. The worst he'd probably get at this height was a broken leg, he'd tried to tell himself. His arms were screaming by the time he gained the courage to let go.

He grabbed the drainpipe in the split-second his body hit the cold metal, his fingers getting a
painful purchase on the pipe clips. His feet dangled for a moment before he pressed them against the white brick. He'd made it!

He looked down to see the street below clear; all the action must be happening in the street around the corner. His turned his gaze upward to the sun insignia of Corona Offices in the near distance.

"Gabe, how's Benji doing?"

"He's still under fire. That sniper's persistent, I'll give him that."

"You're certain the bullets can't get through?"

"Dead certain. Hang on, I just got a reply from Mr. Big. Huh. Turns out they already got wind of a lot of heat coming from the Arctic House and they're already on their way." He suddenly cursed, and Alyssa heard another blast from his shotgun.

"You called Mr. Fucking Big?!" Finnick hollered.

"If you have a better idea, say it without shouting! If you can!"

The com-link fell silent.

Nick slid down the drainpipe, nearly slipping twice before reaching solid ground. He spotted a thin steel pipe resting beside an old dumpster and picked it up.

"How soon can Big's boys get here?" Nick asked.

"ETA two minutes." Gabe said. "They know not to shoot at any of you, so don't shoot them and you should be okay. I'll do what I can to protect Ben."

Nick gripped the pipe and ducked into an alley. "Do it. I'm going after that sniper."

Alyssa didn't like the idea of calling Mr. Big any more than the big-eared fox with a napoleon complex did, and she really didn't like what Nick had just said.

"You're going after the sniper?! Are you nuts?!"

"I made outside and no-one saw me. I can do this." Nick said.

"Nick, you don't know who you're up against!"

"And you do?"

"No! That why I'm saying this is bad idea!"

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm full of bad ideas!"

"Nick! Nick?!" When Nick didn't answer, Alyssa swore and started for the single window of the manager's office.

She stopped dead when a terrible gasping sound filled her ears. She spun round to see Jack convulsing on the floor as a scared Finnick tried to keep his head from hitting anything hard.

"Oh no." She whispered, turned tail and raced back to Jack's side. She knew enough about seizures to know that restraining him was a bad idea. Instead she turned to the com-link while keeping her
gun trained on the office door. So far no other bears had gotten up here since she'd put down the bear crushing Nick. "Gabe, Savage is getting worse! Please tell me you've got your mitts on the antidote!"

"Negative. Ben! Does the package have a syringe, a vial anything like that? He said yes!"

Alyssa relaxed slightly, only for a nasty thought to hit her. "How're we going to get it out if we can't get in?"

"Worry more about Mr. Big's boys! They're here!"

Suddenly there was more shouting, more gunfire, more holes peppering the walls and ceiling. Alyssa ducked low over Jack's trembling body, certain that HQ would have her hide for this. She was supposed to be capturing Slothfeld, not starting a fucking gang war.

For that was what was happening right now. The orange flash of an explosion outside drew her to the window. She looked out and saw what looked like a free-for-all with bullets and blood. Several black cars had pulled into the street where the limo had crashed, forming a barrier that Mr. Big's cavalry were currently using to lay down hellfire on their mortal enemies as they ran for cover behind their own cars and the building. Alyssa heard a poof, a whistle, and then an almighty kaboom as one of Koslov's empty white cars exploded in a fireball.

"THEY'RE SHITTING GRENADES?!" Alyssa shrieked. "WHY DIDN'T YOU MENTION THEY'D BE SHITTING GRENADES?!"

"HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW?" Gabe roared.

Behind the black barrier, a wolf raised a bulky grenade launcher just as one of Koslov's men got him with a bullet. He pulled the trigger as he fell, the grenade going wide and hitting the side of the building. "HOLY SHIT!" Alyssa screamed as the explosion knocked her off her feet and enveloped her in smoke and rubble. Her ears were ringing, but she could still hear everything happening inside and out. When the dust cleared, she saw a massive hole had taken out the wall of the big room outside and part of the office walls. She checked on her companions. Finnick was shaken, and Jack was unharmed but still convulsing. She dragged them both away from the hole.

Through the com-link she heard Honey's voice. "Alyssa Patricia Skyefall, what the everlasting flying fuck is going on?! The police scanner just reported a massive gunfight in your area!"

"Long story!" Alyssa yelled. "Wait, the police know about this?"

"Yes, and they're sending the wrath of god your way! You've got four minutes to get out of there!"

Alyssa could hear Jack's unconscious struggle for life behind the lingering ringing. "Not without the antidote! Jack won't make it without it!"

"Fucking stubborn-ass foxes! Where is the antidote!"

"It's in Koslov's limo, but he's got the entire thing reinforced! The doors are locked, we can't get in! Honey, can you help us?"

"Is there a way to break the windows from the inside?"

"What?"

"Gabe showed me the receipts he stole. Koslov had his limo fitted with one-waybullet resistant
glass. The outside layer is brittle glass and the inside layer is polycarbonate. If you can shoot the
inside layer first, you might be able to make a hole big enough to retrieve the antidote."

Alyssa had no doubt that Koslov carried a gun at all times. "That's brilliant, Honey, thank you!"

"Thank me when you get back here!"

Alyssa took a peek out the window overlooking the rest of the Arctic House and saw that Gabe had
discarded his now empty shotgun. He was now going all out against the polar bears with his
kurkris and pistol, taking them out one by one while two of Mr. Big's men covered him their own
machine guns. Just as he'd promised Nick he was staying close to the limo, making sure neither
Koslov's nor Big's guys got near Benjamin. She waited until he landed back on the floor amongst
two fresh bodies before speaking. "Gabe, did you get all that?"

"Yeah. Does Ben have a gun?"

"Unlikely, but Koslov will. See if you can convince him to break the window for us, and I'll cover
you from up here. Finnick can keep an eye on Savage."

"Great. By the way, that bastard's still sniping at the car. Not even Starlight was this obstinate.
Hold up!" Gabe spun round and flung a kukri at the skull of a bear who had tried to charge him
from the left. When no other threats immediately attacked, Gabe took a moment to shove another
mag into his pistol. "Okay, I'll see what I can do before the heat picks back up. Koslov isn't going
anywhere, boys! Get out and finish off the rest of those bastards!" Alyssa realized he'd been talking
to the mammal who had been covering him. They took off out the other door they came in from,
leaving Gabe alone with the limo.

Alyssa ran back to Jack's side. He was still convulsing, but also still breathing. "Hang in there,
Jack." She urged him.

Suddenly two shots rang out. She ran back to the window. There was a fist-sized hole in the car
window Gabe was crouched beneath. "Gabe? What happened?"

"I goaded him into shooting at me, but I think he's decided to save the rest of his bullets. Ben, give
me the box! Hurry!"

Alyssa saw Benjamin crawl to the window, flinching as more bullets struck the side of the limo
still outside. It wasn't just sniper fire anymore. Alyssa dreaded the moment a grenade hit the limo;
she had no idea how much more the armor plating could take. With bravery she had never
expected of the feline, he got up on his knees and shoved what looked like a metal syringe through
one of the holes. Gabe took the syringe and ducked back beneath the window before Koslov
decided to fire at him again. "Good kid! Stay down and we'll get you out soon!"

Alyssa felt a rush of hope. "Finnick, stay with him. Gabe, I'm coming down. Don't try to throw the
needle, it's too risky!"

She was almost out the office when Honey called her again. "Time's up! Here they come!"

Through the crumbling hole in the building, Alyssa heard the piercing sound of police sirens.

When Bogo had radioed Hopps to chew her ass for leaving the newly discovered crime scene on
Founder's Mountain, he'd been forced to cut it short when dispatch reported that the tracker in
Benjamin Clawhauser's collar had been activated, meaning either something had damaged the
collar or Benjamin had removed it and tried to run.
Bogo, McHorn and Higgins followed the tracking signal in Benjamin's collar into the industrial part of Tundratown, brought their squad car to a screeching halt and stared in horror at the orange glow emanating from the next block.

The street ahead of them had become a warzone. On the end of the street closest to them a variety of predators were firing off rapid-fire bullets and sizzling grenades. On the other, unseen end of the street, Koslov's men were firing back with everything they had. The two officers backed the car down the previous street, unwilling to get within a hundred feet of the carnage without at least five armored trucks backing them up.

This was a nightmare come true. The gang war they'd been dreading for years had begun. Even worse, according to the tracking signal, Benjamin was somewhere in all that chaos.

A smoking fireball raised up beyond the black car barrier as another grenade detonated. "My God." McHorn said softly. Then he spoke a small prayer when they heard the sirens of approaching backup. He didn't know how long it would take for T.U.S.K. to reassemble and get here, but until then it would be up to the regular officers to secure the area. Bogo couldn't remember the last time he'd been happy to have T.U.S.K. here, but then again this was their forte. All the three officers could do for now was report on exactly what was going on so both backup and T.U.S.K. could be prepared.

It occurred to Bogo that Hopps may not know better. He'd better call her radio and find out where the hell she was. "Officer Hopps, this is Captain Bogo! Where are you?"

"Heading down Tundratown, Frozone Street, sir! I heard what's happening!"

That was a mere two blocks from here. "Hopps, stay away! That's an order!"

"That's not where I'm going, sir! I have a positive ID on Nicholas Wilde and I'm currently in pursuit! I'm on foot, I don't think he knows I'm following him!"

Bogo couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Where is he now?"

"He's breaking into Corona Offices right now. I'll call back once I've apprehended him."

"You do that, Hopps! Good luck!"

Bogo dropped the radio and felt a rush as he watched the armored vans and squad cars race past him.

Nick had been forced to smash the glass of the entrance doors to Corona Offices to get inside, and hoped the sniper was high enough not to hear it.

"Alyssa, can you still see the sniper? Is he still shooting?" He asked through the com-link as he carefully stepped past the broken glass into the building. The rooms were grey and completely bare, giving no indication of their intended purpose.

"I'm a bit busy right now, Nick! You'd better hope he's still occupied!"

"What's happening back there?"

"Mr. Big's boys and the ZPD's shown up and now all hell has broken loose! The gangsters are starting to retreat back into the Artic House! Nick, it's fucking chaos here!"

Nick could hear all kinds of gunfire through the com-link, and it absolutely terrified him. "Is Benji
okay?"
"For now! I don't know how much more that car can take!"

"I'm entering the building now! I'm gonna try to ambush him from behind. You're certain he's on the roof?"

"That's where I saw him. I'll patch Honey through. She might be able to find you the best route. Holy shit!" He heard her firing her pistol.

Then he heard Honey's voice. "Nick, I've found the plans for Corona Offices. The power's out, so you'll have to take the stairs. They're right across the hall. After that go right up to the floor beneath the roof."

"Okay, Honey!"

Nick took the steps two at a time until he reached the third floor, upon which he got winded enough to reduce it to one. By the time he reached the top of the stairwell at the eighth floor, he was panting. "Honey, I'm at the top."

"Okay. Keep your voice down. There's another stairwell down the hall that'll take you to the roof. I'd say you're out of your little red mind if this guy wasn't trying to kill Benji."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm serious, Nick. Be careful."

Nick was stopped from answering when he caught the scent of rabbit.

"End of the road, Wilde." Judy Hopps spoke. Nick was sure his stomach was going to drop out. Jesus Christ, not now! "Drop the pipe and put your paws in the air. Slowly."

Nick turned around to see Judy standing behind him at the top of the steps, dart gun aimed at his chest. There was anger and triumph in her bright purple eyes.

"Carrots. Hopps. You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't understand. What're you up to, Wilde?" Judy asked coldly, her arms unwavering.

"There's a sniper on the roof, and he's trying to kill my friend. You have to let me stop him!"

Judy's eyebrows arched further as she doubted him. "A sniper?"

"He's the one who made Koslov's limo crash. Hopps, I'm begging you to believe me. He's going to kill Ben if I don't stop him."

Judy's eyes widened slightly when he mentioned Benjamin. She twitched the barrel of the gun to the rail beside the stairs. "Put your paws on the rail." Nick obeyed and felt cold steel close around his wrists as the rabbit cuffed him in place. He glared at Hopps as she stepped back. "If there is a sniper up there, I'm going to stop him. You can just sit tight and stop causing trouble." She picked up her radio. "Sir, I've apprehended Wilde. He insists that there is a sniper on the roof targeting Clawhauser. I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and check it out." She listened to her superior's response. "Understood. I'm going into radio silence, sir. Good luck over there."

She raised her dart gun once more before disappearing through the door.
Nick supposed he should be thankful that she was at least taking no chances that he was lying this time. He just hoped that she was up to the task of stopping the sniper as he pulled out a hairclip and starting picking at the lock.

"Nick, it's Gabe." Came the familiar, exhausted voice from the com-link. "The sniper fire's stopped. I think he's given up. He might be heading your way, so you've got to be careful."

Judy could see very little of the dark hallway she stepped into. She switched on her flashlight as she crept forward, checking each door as she went. There were only two doors to check, and two empty rooms before the hall opened into a bigger square room. As she swept the room, she noticed three things; the ominous fiery glow of the riot two blocks away, the distant sound of gunfire and explosions reaching her ears, and the long open black case at the foot of the stairwell. Judy shone her flashlight on the case as she approached, and saw the tell-tale depressions shaped like weapon parts.

Specifically the weapon parts of a sniper rifle.

She heard footsteps from above. Someone was coming down the stairwell. She backed away and turned her flashlight off, but it was too late. The footsteps stopped as the mammal above sensed her presence. She aimed her dart gun up, waiting for him to either attack or try to run.

Instead something small and blue came tumbling down the steps.

The world turned white in an instant at the same time a massive bang hit her ears. She was disorientated for a few seconds before she sensed someone rushing at her. She literally dodged a bullet and fired back with her dart, but the shot went wide as the figure came closer. On instinct she swung her flashlight, which hit something fleshy and caused a handgun to fall to the floor. She caught a glimpse of a gloved black hoof before the assailant plowed into her. The dart gun fell from her paw as they fell. They landed hard on the floor, and Judy saw his face for the first time; it was a ram with a striking resemblance to the late Woolton, except for the nose that looked like it had been broken at least once in his lifetime. The ram raised the butt of his sniper rifle to bash her brains in, only to be sent flying back with a kick. A radio fell from his jacket pocket and skidded across the floor. Judy scrambled to her feet and pulled out her baton. She ran up to the ram and swung down with all her might. The ram raised up the rifle at the last second, blocking the blow before sweeping her legs out from under her. She hit the floor and got the wind knocked out of her lungs. The ram appeared above her and aimed the rifle at her face. Judy rolled aside and heard a dull phoof as the silenced rifle fired, the caliber tearing a crater in the floor where her head had been. There was a dry click, then a curse from the ram. That must have been his last round. The ram tossed the rifle aside and came after her. Judy reached for her baton, only to feel a hoof grab her ankle and drag her out of arm's reach of the weapon. She spun on her back as the ram dropped down and straddled her.

He pulled out a knife and raised it high. Judy caught his wrists as he thrust down. They struggled, Judy's muscles aching from the exertion. There was nothing but cold-blooded, murderous intent in the ram's rectangular pupils. The tip of the gleaming knife inched closer to Judy's throat.

Then Nick showed up out of nowhere and started pulling at the ram's shoulders.

With most of the pressure eased Judy managed to inch his left wrist within biting distance and chomped down with her buckteeth. The ram roared and dropped the knife, which landed sideways on Judy's chest. She seized the opportunity to grab the knife and lash out, driving the ram off of her body. Nick ended up beneath the ram as they fell on the floor. Judy stood up, and then heard a strange, distorted voice. It took a moment for her to realize it was coming from the radio the ram
Mark II, what's happening? Is he dead yet? Answer me, Mark II!"

"Not now, Boss!" The ram shouted as he punched Nick over and over.

Judy retrieved her baton, charged at the ram and kicked him off. Then she pressed the baton to his chest, pinning him to the floor.

"Now tell me! What was that all about, huh?" She shouted. "Tell me, 'Mark II'!"

Mark II got an arm free and punched her. Judy saw flashing lights as she tumbled off, and the ram leapt up with her baton in his grasp. Nick ran at him, only to be knocked off his feet when Mark II threw the baton at his legs. With both mammals stunned, he grabbed the sniper rifle, picked up the case and ran.

Back at the Arctic House, it was pandemonium. With the unexpected arrival of the ZPD, several of Mr. Big's boys had been taken out before they could react, rapidly evening the score between them and Koslov's boys. The gangsters had recovered quickly, and were now using everything they had to hold back the police and each other. With the introduction of T.U.S.K.'s gargantuan gattling dart guns Alyssa could barely hear herself think. Her ears had started ringing at some point. She lay low beside Finnick and Jack, only maintaining her composure because her mind was working on making sense of the chaos, and Jack had stopped shaking. It was apparent what the intentions were on all sides. Koslov's men were trying to get to the limo so they could evacuate their boss, only to be held at bay by Mr. Big's boys. Mr. Big's boys were trying to get to the limo so they could finish off their boss's main rival, only to be held at bay by Koslov's men. The ZPD and T.U.S.K. were trying to pick off both sides, but were being held at bay by sheer firepower. The outcome of the fight would depend entirely on whoever ran out of bullets first.

When mammals from the first two factions took the fight back inside the Arctic House, Alyssa had lost sight of Gabe. When she called through the com-link, he didn't answer. Worse, Jack was having another seizure. She was beginning to think the worst when Gabe came barging in through the manager's office door, syringe in paw.

"What took you so long?!!" She shouted.

Gabe looked beat up. He was covered in blood and dirt and was clearly exhausted, but he wasted no time dropping to his knees beside Jack and holding out the syringe. "I'll hold him. You give the shot."

"Isn't restraining him a bad idea?" Finnick asked. Alyssa was a little impressed that he hadn't become a quivering wreck yet in light of everything that was going on around him. Darts shot through the hole at that moment and sank into the ceiling above.

"We don't have a choice!" Alyssa snapped as she accepted the syringe. "Hold his head!"

Finnick held Jack's head while Gabe used his superior size to restrain the rest of the rabbit's body. Alyssa decided his thigh would be the best place. She removed the cap, decided after a second's hesitation to place her trust in Cheryl, and stuck the syringe into Jack's flesh. She pressed the plunger all the way down.

She removed the syringe, and Finnick and Gabe released the rabbit. For a time, nobody moved. Gunfire rattled all around them. Outside, another car exploded.
"Did it work?" Gabe asked.

"We'll find out in a minute or two." Alyssa said. "In the meantime, we need to get out of here. D'you think our van's still in one piece?"

"I doubt it. It's right in the middle of the street, which by the way, is officially on fire." Gabe said. "And it's not just escaping we need to worry about. Your buddy and that package are still in the limo."

"Guys, the rabbit's stopped shaking." Finnick said.

Alyssa heard Nick's voice at that moment. "Guys? Guys, are you there?"

"We're here, Nick. Did you find the sniper?"

"Yeah, but I ran into Hopps again and the bastard got away. I managed to get away while she was stunned, though. I locked the door on my way out. That should slow her down for a few minutes."

Alyssa rubbed her chin. "Where are you now?"

"I've just left Corona Offices and I'm lying low in an alley about a block from here. Is Benji okay?"

"I think so. I had to leave him to get the antidote to Savage." Gabe said.

"Guys, I think his breathing's getting better." Finnick said louder.

"Shit! There's gotta be something we can do!" Nick shouted.

"Hold on, I'm going to scout the area." Alyssa crawled to the hole and looked through her telescope. The street truly had gone to hell. There must have been a gas leak that had caught fire or the thugs had been using Molotov cocktails, for the cars of both barriers were completely aflame. Alyssa suspected the gangsters had intentionally started the inferno to keep T.U.S.K. from closing in. She could see the part of the limo still outside, the doors completely riddled with large bullet holes. There were gangsters still on the road in between both flaming barriers, wreaking havoc on each other while hiding behind whatever cover they could find. Just as she'd suspected, they were keeping each other from reaching the limo. T.U.S.K. was cut off from both ends, shooting through the flames in an attempt to pick off more enemies.

"Guys!" Finnick shouted.

"What?!" Alyssa snapped.

Finnick pointed at Jack. "I think he's coming round."

Jack felt weak and hot all over when he opened his eyes and found himself staring up at a cracked ceiling with three faces staring down at him. It was the snow-white face with the slender muzzle that he focused on as his vision cleared.

Alyssa Skyefall beamed, her wide blue eyes moistening as she patted his shoulder. "Welcome back, Agent Savage."

Jack's throat felt like a nun's crotch that had been stung by a bee and subsequently swollen. His voice sounded strange when he spoke. "Skyefall? What… happened?" He remembered getting that cut in the forest, collapsing in the mud as a van came speeding right at him, and a strange dream about a white vixen being chopped to pieces with a machete.
"Long story." Alyssa gently eased him back down when he tried to get up. "I'll explain when we get out of here."

Jack's arm hurt, and there was a faint sting in his thigh as if he'd been injected with something. "What's… going… on?"

Finnick chuckled nervously. "We may have kind of started a gang war."
"May have… kind of?"

"Enough." Alyssa said. "You're in no condition to fight, so just stay down while we work on a plan." She crawled out of Jack's peripheral vision. The rabbit turned his throbbing head to see her looking out a hole in the wall and floor with a high tech telescope, her wide buttocks rising high above her head. On the floor beside where she'd been kneeling was a syringe. Jack's weary mind started working as he stared at it and her. He'd been poisoned, he knew that much. Had that empty syringe contained the antidote? Who had injected him? Was it Skyefall? If it was, then he owed her one heck of an apology.

"Wait a second…" Alyssa said as she stared through the hole. "Nick, where is Officer Hopps' car right now?"

Benjamin hadn't felt any bullets hitting the limo for some time. He steeled himself and took a peek.

He stared in horror at what had become of the street outside. It was blocked on both sides by walls of fire and twisted blackened metal, and in between predators with guns were screaming curses and trying to kill each other. The fire from the right hand barrier was spreading to the bottom floor of the factory across the tarmac.

On the other side of the limo Koslov was muttering in a language Benjamin didn't know. He seemed to be coping much better than his captive was. In between them sat the package, which fortunately hadn't been damaged in the crash. The feline dropped back down and propped his back against the door. He was shaking all over, especially his arms. His bandaged arm was hurting again, but it didn't look like the stitches had ripped this time.

"Mr. Polarnock?" He asked meekly.

"Polarnova. What?" Koslov growled.

"Can I have my phone back?"

The large polar bear glared at him, then growled through his teeth. "Screw it." He slid the phone across to the feline, who gratefully picked it up.

Benjamin dialed a number and held it to his ear.

"I'm a bit busy right now, so this had better be good!" Growled the voice on the other end.

"Honey?" Benjamin asked.

There was a pause. "Benji?"

"Yeah, it's me." Benjamin gripped his knee with his other arm. "I've kinda got myself in some real trouble, and I'm pretty sure I'm gonna die."

"You are not going to die!" Honey snarled. "I'm listening to the police scanners, Ben, so I know
what's going on! Listen to me. You're going to be okay."

"I-" Benjamin sniffled. "I don't think so."

" Nick stopped the sniper. All we have to do now is get you out of there."

Benjamin's heart seemed to stop mid-beat. "Nick stopped…"

" He still cares about you, Ben. He always has. You have no idea how sorry he is for getting you into this."

Benjamin stared into space, unsure how to feel.

" Ben, I need you to do something for me. I know the doors into the Arctic House are jammed, but I need you to find out if you can still open the doors on the other side."

"Okay. I'll try." Benjamin's heart hammered as he turned his body and slowly pulled the handle. Koslov demanded to know what the hell he was doing. There was a click, and he felt the door come free of the lock. He quickly shut it before any bullets could get in. "Yeah, I can open it."

" Great. That's great. I'm watching the jam cams and I can see what's going on in the street right now. I think I know a way we can get you out. There's a gap in one of the barriers where a grenade took out one of the cars that's nothing but burning gasoline. A car can drive right through that."

Benjamin felt hope and fear. "Do you guys have a car?"

" Not yet, but Nick might be able to get a hold of one that's bulletproof. We can plow right in and get you out in half a minute."

"With a dozen mammals firing in all directions?!" Benjamin yelled into the phone. On cue a nearby explosion rocked the car and caused more rubble from the hole to rain down past the windows.

" Don't worry about it. We've got two friends right above you who'll pick off as many as they can before Nick moves in. You just need to move your butt the second that door opens. And don't forget that package!"

Benjamin glanced at the polar bear beside him. "What about Mr. Polarnova?"

" Let his men worry about saving him. You just get ready to move. Stay down and stay on the line, okay, sweetie?"

"Yes, Honey." Benjamin's voice sounded different. Stronger. He'd thought his friends had abandoned him. He'd thought wrong.

Hisssssssssssssssss…

The screaming taunts and curses turned to shouts of confusion as a sinister hissing sound filled the air on both sides of the limo. "What in God's name?" Koslov whispered as he stared outside.

Benjamin looked out the windows into the street and saw a billowing cloud of white smoke rapidly growing in size. In mere seconds the bewildered gangsters were enshrouded. When the smoke reached the limo, Benjamin's view was completely blocked. Had the ZPD made it past the fire? He turned his head to see that smoke was filling the Arctic House, too. Before he knew it the world outside had completely disappeared.

Then the screaming changed from confusion to pain and terror.
"Ben? What's happening?" Honey asked.

"I don't know." Benjamin thought he could see figures moving in the cloud. He made his way to the partially broken window he'd used to pass the syringe to that mammal in the blue hoodie and tried to see past the smoke.

The sudden loud *splat* of blood splashing the window made him leap back in fright.

His back hit the opposite door, and he instinctively raised his paw up to touch his face where he'd felt something wet splash upon it. Blood. Some of it must have gotten through the holes in the window.

"Ben!" Honey yelled through the phone.

Benjamin didn't answer. He could hear screams coming from outside too. Then the street fell deathly silent.

Benjamin was about to turn his head and look out into the clouded street when a massive shape appeared before the bloodied window, obscured by the smoke. Then there was a horrendous metallic screeching sound. Koslov backed away from the door and aimed his gun. He fired until the gun ran empty, but the figure had ducked before he could hit it. Benjamin watched in amazement as the door, so warped that it would have taken the jaws of life to remove it, peeled away from the frame like a raw cookie shape. The large being flung the door to one side and ducked its head into the opening.

Benjamin felt the blood drain from his face.

He recognized the long black coat. The flat black hat. The undead bird mask.

... Woolton's head was barely connected to the shoulders by a glistening mess of pale skin, frayed muscle, and fragments of vertebrae, everything that made up the back of the neck...

Benjamin lost it. He screamed bloody murder and grabbed at the door handle beside him as Woolton's killer reached into the limo. Koslov looked on in shock, his empty gun still aimed at the monster. Benjamin shoved open the door behind him and tried to climb out backwards. The monster grabbed his ankle and began to pull him across the floor of the limo.

Then something thick and warm wrapped tightly around Benjamin's chest and started pulling him back. "NO, NO, NO!" The feline screamed in pure terror as he kicked at the monster's large fist. The mammal pulling him the other way gave an almighty yank, making the monster lose both his balance and his grip. Benjamin struggled desperately as the other large mammal pulled him out the vehicle and into the street, pounding on the arm holding him off the ground.

"Clawhauser! Ben! It's me!"

Benjamin stopped all of a sudden and looked up.

"... Captain Bogo?"

Bogo held tightly onto Benjamin as he pulled him away from the masked beast, trying not to imagine what could have, *would* have happened if he, McHorn and Higgins hadn't found a gap in the infernal barricade where they could drive their car through. They'd made the drastic decision after some whackjob threw half a dozen smoke grenades at the street and the ZPD vehicles stuck behind both burning barricades. The three of them had been in the car, listening through the radio
Hopps’ angry report on the sniper and the fox that escaped yet again when they heard shouting and gunfire all around them. Bullets had struck their car but failed to penetrate the reinforced glass and plating. By the time they’d realized the ZPD were under attack and leapt out of the car, most of T.U.S.K. were either dead or disorientated. They’d immediately realized that more thugs had snuck up and ambushed the officers, Higgins thought he’d seen a hooded black figure in a gas mask spring from one of the armored trucks and smash through a window into the Arctic House. On the other end of the street, Cunninghorn was shouting through the radio, demanding to know what the hell was happening over there. Bogo merely told him that the squad on his side was down, and he and his men were going in to put an end to this shitstorm.

So they got back into their cars, plowed through the fiery gap in the barricade, and came out guns blazing to put an end to the dozen gangsters still left in the street.

Bogo put down three predators before he heard Benjamin screaming and ran for the limo. The door flew open before he reached it, and he grabbed Benjamin in the nick of time before the masked monster on the other side could drag him to certain death.

"… Captain Bogo?" Benjamin stared up in awe when he finally recognized the mammal who had saved him.

"Mac! Higgs!" Bogo shouted into the steadily clearing smoke. "Don't keep me in suspense!"

"I think that's all of them, sir!" McHorn shouted from somewhere in the smoke. "It's just the bastards in the Arctic House now!"

Speaking of which, the masked monster was now making his way through the limo in pursuit of them, glancing at the stunned Koslov as he passed him. Bogo swore and set Benjamin down. "Run! We'll take care of him!"

"Run where?" Benjamin cried, pointing out that they were still trapped on both sides by burning cars.

Bogo pointed to the slightly charred squad car that had shielded them from the fire. "Get in that car! Go!" Benjamin didn't need telling twice, barely noticing the bodies that lay among blood and thawed snow. Bogo shouted to his coworkers. "Who's closest to the car?"

"Me!" Higgins shouted.

"Get to the car and get Clawhauser out of here!" Bogo turned back to the massive masked mammal as he emerged from the limo. His eyes narrowed and his heart quickened.

Black clothes. Incredible size. A plague doctor mask that Benjamin had mistaken for an undead bird. A perfect match for the description of Assistant Mayor Woolton's killer.

"Freeze!" He shouted and aimed his dart gun. The killer grabbed the open limo door, ripped it off with seemingly not effort, held the makeshift weapon in his paw and advanced. "I said freeze!"

Glowing orange in the firelight, the killer kept coming. The tip of the mask’s ‘beak’ was pointed not at Bogo, but at the fleeing feline behind him. The buffalo fired, the dart striking the monster's chest. The monster kept going. Bogo fired again. The dart hit the hostile killer's chest near the first dart but did nothing. Bogo kept firing until the monster got close enough to swing the door.

Bogo dodged backward, barely escaping disembowelment. Six darts! Six fucking darts didn't do a damned thing! This psychopath must be wearing some kind of protection under that coat!
Thank god for the weapons the scumbags had so thoughtfully left all over the street. Bogo dodged another swing from the limo door, rolling across the wet ground and grabbing an AK-47 as he stood up. He yelled for McHorn to get his ass over here as he opened fire.

Except the monster had taken off the armored door for a reason. He held the door in front of his body like a shield, deflecting the bullets Bogo sent his way. He had fast reflexes too, as the buffalo learned to his dismay when he tried to aim for different parts of the body. Bogo risked a glance at Benjamin, who had stopped by the police car to watch the battle unfold. Higgins was almost to the car himself.

The machine gun ran empty. Bogo threw it at the giant bear to distract him while he retreated, grabbing a shotgun in its place as he ran across the street in search for McHorn. The big rhino was beside the factory, cuffing a sedated polar bear. "Bogo, what's going on?"

"Woolton's killer!" Bogo panted. "Forget that punk and help me take down this fucker!"

He spun round to see the masked bear making his way towards the police car. By now Higgins had reached the police car, but had stopped to fire on the approaching monster. The monster shielded himself with the limo door, prompting Higgins to shove Benjamin into the car before getting in himself, starting the engine before he'd even shut the doors. The car started to turn to make the return journey through the gap in the barricade as the monster broke into a run. Just as Higgins was about to complete the turn, the monster moved in front, grabbed the bumper and lifted.

Bogo's jaw dropped as the front of the car lifted clear off the ground. The rear tires screeched and smoked on the tarmac. The buffalo and rhino began to move to a position where they could shoot the monster without hitting the car. The monster held the car with one paw while lifting the hood with the other. Then he reached into the hot running engine and ripped out something that killed the car completely.

"Holy fuck."

The monster dropped the bumper and the piece of engine. Then he started making his way to Benjamin's side of the car.

Judy managed to kick the door open after the seventh attempt, but by the time she made it outside Corona Offices both Wilde and 'Mark II' were gone. She may not have lost her temper to the extent she did if her car hadn't been gone too.

"Sweet and sour chicken!" She kicked a mound of dirty snow to smithereens and stood there seething for a good while before she heard her radio crackle.

"Hopps! Where are you?!"

"Sir! I'm sorry, I lost Wilde again!" She looked down at the spot where her car had been. There were clear tire tracks in the snow. If she hurried, she could pick up Wilde's trail, or the sniper if it had been him who had swiped the car.

"Forget Wilde! We've got bigger problems! Woolton's killer showed up and he's after Clawhauser! We need backup and we need it right now!"

Judy stared at the ruined snow mound as she took in the information. Gang wars. Cold snipers. Now a meat-eating monster joining the fray to kill the only mammal who could identify him. Maybe her parents had been on to something.
Judy kept looking at the tracks her car thief had left behind. "Hopps, we need you!" Bogo shouted. Judy clenched but teeth. "On my way, sir."

As she took off towards the orange glow on foot, the cool air of Tundratown cooled her temper. As her anger faded, her more rational side reminded her that before locking her in that room, Wilde had saved her from an unnecessary tracheotomy. When she was one block away from the burning street she began to ponder over why Wilde would do such a thing.

Jack's ears swiveled toward the door as he lay there in the manager's office. "What's going on out there?"

He watched Alyssa and Gabe look up and see what he saw; white smoke was rising up through the gaps in the walkway outside.

"Is that a smoke bomb?" Jack asked, his voice stronger than it was two minutes ago.

"Finnick, stay with him." Alyssa ordered as she and Gabriel Mossberg stood up.

"Yeah, for once I don't mind being benched." Finnick muttered. Alyssa and Gabe crept to the doorframe and took a peek. Jack could hear frightened shouting along with the near-relentless gunfire. "What is it, the fuzz?"

"I don't think so." Alyssa said. "Maybe one of the gangsters… wait, what is that?"

Jack heard a high-pitched scream.

Gabe shifted himself back behind cover. "There's someone else down there."

Alyssa tapped her com-link. "Nick, where are you?" She paused. "What do you mean someone wiped out the T.U.S.K. squad on your end? Never mind that, just sit tight and wait for my signal!" She turned to the others. "We can't take Jack through that shitstorm out there."

"What about the hole?" Finnick asked. "The street's been quiet for a while. Maybe it's safe."

The sound of rending metal struck their ears. Alyssa ran to the hole and looked out into the street. "Who the hell is that?!"

Jack's arms and legs felt like jelly as he struggled up to Alyssa's side. He stared at the hulking black figure in the plague doctor mask that was currently breaking into a singed police car. Sergeant Higgins came out firing, buying Benjamin time to escape out the other side of the car. Jack felt a jolt in his chest when the large mammal struck the hippo with what looked like a bullet riddled car door, sending him rolling into the factory wall. Higgins didn't get back up, even when Lieutenant McHorn rush to his side.

The plague doctor turned its attention back to Benjamin.

"Shit. I think he might be a problem." Gabe muttered. "We can't be sure the ZPD will be able to handle him. We've got to get down there and take him out."

Alyssa checked her weapon. "Gabe, I'll take care of him. You need to secure the package."

"Got it." Gabe flicked the blood off his kukris and together they leapt out the hole.

Jack would have followed them if he hadn't just survived being poisoned. That didn't mean he
couldn't be useful.

"Finnick, right?"

"Yeah?" The fennec fox said gruffly.

"Get my crossbow. I might need your help pulling the string back."

Judy could hear Cunninghorn shouting at everyone and anyone through the radio, demanding in between curses to know why the fire truck was taking so long to get to the site. She soon saw why a fire truck had been called when she saw the barrier of cars burning like a furnace, the heat hitting her like the massive vents of the Sahara Square Climate Wall. Even worse, over a dozen T.U.S.K. officers lying on the tarmac, either dead or incapacitated. There were empty armored trucks and squad cars all over the place, including one that looked like hers. She couldn't imagine why Nick would come back to this awful place. She'd never imagined it was this bad.

As she stared at the blazing obstacle, her phone rang. Despite herself she answered. "Now, dad!" She hung up before her dad could respond. When the phone rang again she switched it off and started running along the side of the Arctic House in search of another way in.

She found a small door that had been forced open so violently it was bent into a crescent shape. With her dart gun in paw she carefully approached the doorway, which was seeping smoke that was too white to be caused by a fire. She peeked into the doorway and saw something far worse than every crime scene photo she'd ever seen.

Beneath the clearing smoke were the bodies of God knows how many predators, several of which looked like they had been cut apart rather than shot. Judy saw what looked like their killer slicing the throat of a panicking wolf before charging at a trio of tigers. It was a tall mammal dressed in a gothic form-fitting black coat with a hood and a gas mask. Judy suspected a big cat as she stepped into the clouded room and aimed her dart gun.

"FREEZE!"

The figure shot all three tigers dead with a silenced pistol before it stopped and turned. Judy saw the assassin's arm slash at the air between them and caught a glint of metal flying at her face. The rabbit shrieked and ducked to avoid the knife, then fired a dart straight at her attacker.

The assassin's arm shot up in a black flash, their fist stopping right in front of their left shoulder. Judy saw the green feather of her tranq dart poking out of their gloved paw.

Never had she ever heard of a suspect having reflexes fast enough to catch a dart in flight.

There was a roar. A polar bear rose up from the floor with a shotgun in paw. The figure turned their head and flicked the dart at the bear, bringing him down before he could get a shot.

Gunfire coming from the burning street outside caught the assassin's attention. Judy fired another dart as the assassin started running in the direction of the fighting, but the assassin deflected it with a long thin blade. The assassin stopped before the wrecked limo and reached inside. They seemed to be examining a metal box that was sitting on the floor of the vehicle. When Koslov tried to attack, the assassin stabbed him with a tranq dart with red feather and rendered him unconscious in seconds. Judy raced after her, firing another dart that missed and hit the side of the limo.

The assassin retaliated with a pistol shot that grazed Judy's hip. She lost her balance, and her momentum propelled her head into the hard barrel of a fallen shotgun. She felt an instant of sharp
pain before everything went fuzzy. Her vision doubled and swirled as she watched the assassin walk away from the limo, leaving the metal box behind. They ignored the dazed rabbit as they walked past her and out of sight. Seconds later two polar bears came charging across the room to pull Koslov from the limo.

Jack and Finnick worked together to draw the string back far enough to load the bolt, and then the rabbit inched his way up to the edge of the hole overlooking the street.

He immediately found himself admiring the plague doctor's creativity; the behemoth now not only had Koslov's limo door for a shield, but a Mag-7M1 shotgun which he had just used to blast McHorn off his feet. In the back of his mind the rabbit remembered a Baz Furmann movie in which some trigger happy rich guy speaking Shakespearean had a gun just like this. He believed the gun in the movie had been called 'Longsword.'

McHorn groaned on the ground, clutching his bloodless chest; he'd been lucky he had a bulletproof vest, but also was clearly in too much pain to continue the fight. The big masked bear seemed satisfied that the rhino was out of the battle, for he turned his attention back to Benjamin once more. The feline was currently taking cover behind the remains of a van, too afraid of his pursuer's shotgun to run for it.

Jack took a moment to examine what the other mammals in the street were doing; Alyssa was firing her weapon from behind another car, her pistol seemingly doing nothing against whatever protection the bear was wearing beneath his coat. Whatever it was, it was clear on a different level from the ZPD-issued bulletproof vests. Gabe was halfway inside the limo, taking out the metal box as carefully as possible. Captain Bogo was charging after the massive bear, firing an AK-47 with such relentlessness that the bear had to turn to hold the shield in front of him, unable to find an opening to fire back with his 'sword.'

Jack raised the crossbow and looked through the scope, taking aim. His arms were still too weak to hold the crossbow steady. "Finnick, help me out here."

Finnick crawled in front of him and held the crossbow steady, his ears going flat to avoid the string. Jack's aim quickly fell upon the bear's head. That flat hat was snazzy but it was no helmet. One aluminium bolt ought to do it, but first he needed to get a clear shot.

Bogo's gun ran out of bullets and he had to throw himself behind cover to avoid a painful blast, ending up behind a car close to the limo. The buffalo and Gabe locked eyes, the hybrid stiffened with his arms locked around the metal box. Jack wondered what the officer would do.

"I assume you are not with him?" Jack's keen ears heard Bogo say.

Gabe shook his head. "Hell, no."

"And you're not likely to get very far with that box?"

"Not far at all."

Bogo nodded. "Good."

There was a clicking sound. The shotgun had run empty. Bogo took that cue to move. The bear tossed the 'longsword' aside and continued on towards Benjamin. He reached the van and turned the corner…

And recoiled as a loud bang came from behind the van. There was another bang, and the bear
staggered back. He blocked the third bullet with his shield but Benjamin was already running for
his life, holding a gargantuan .500 magnum he must have picked up off the ground. The bear made
a sound for the first time, growling behind his mask as he began to pursue.

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!" Bogo flung himself upon the bear's back and wrapped a thick arm
around his neck, trying to choke him out. Using his superior size the bear threw him off and into
the side of the van. Alyssa backed up the buffalo by leaping high and aiming a kick to the back of
the bear's head, but the bear didn't even flinch. Alyssa dropped down and rolled away to avoid a
blow to the head as the bear swung at her with the limo door. Gabe set the metal box down on the
wet pavement beneath the limo and charged with both kukris. Alyssa saw him coming and threw a
pawful of slush at the bear to distract him. Gabe leapt up at the bear's back and plunged both kukris
into his back.

Through the scope, Jack could see that both blades had only sunk two inches. What on earth was
the bear wearing beneath that coat?

The bear growled, his head moving out of Jack's sight yet again as he reached for Gabe. The blue-
hooded spy dropped to the ground to avoid the bear's grasp and swung a kukri at his leg. The bear
roared in pain and Jack saw blood splatter across the melted snow. It was barely more than a few
drops, but it was far better than no damage at all. Jack's scope scaled up the bear's body, and he
saw a small red stain coming from one of the bulletholes inflicted by the magnum.

Suddenly the bear fell on one knee and Jack thought that blood loss was catching up to him.

Then the bear plucked a grenade launcher from the cold grip of a dead wolf.

"FUCK!" Alyssa ran for her life as the bear fired at her first, destroying an already wrecked car she
had been standing in front of a split-second earlier.

Gabe ran for it also, returning to the metal box and picking it up. The bear glanced at him, but
curiously didn't aim for him. Instead he aimed for McHorn and Higgins.

"NO!" Came a cry from near the limo, then a bang as Benjamin fired another shot from the
magnum. The bullet hit the limo door instead of the bear, but it was enough to draw his attention
away from the two injured officers.

Suddenly gunfire filled the air once again, and everyone tall enough to get hit ducked as bullets
flew through the flaming barrier blocking the T.U.S.K. forces. From his high vantage point Jack
could see at least Commander Cunninghorn and six razorbacks firing machine guns through the
fire. The rabbit hadn't seen Higgins come round, but now the hippo was crouching behind a
garbage can as he shouted into his radio, presumably to make the razorbacks stand down. He was
either unheard or ignored.

The bear blocked the gunfire with his makeshift shield as he stood up and stepped onto the hood of
the only car that hadn't been completely totaled, aimed the thick barrel of the grenade launcher past
the edge of the shield, and fired every last grenade in the loader.

Cunninghorn, who with his height advatange was able to see better past the flames, saw the
grenades fly and ran for it. The razorbacks heard his warning far too late.

Jack gaped in horror at the carnage as four grenades exploded in the immediate vicinity of the
razorbacks right behind the burning barrier: twelve razorbacks dead or maimed… at least. As for
Cunninghorn, he'd been sent flying by the blast, and was now rolling in agony on the tarmac.
The bear turned away, dropped the launcher, and dropped down from the car. Once again he turned his unseen gaze upon Benjamin.

Jack forced himself to look away from the destruction and back through the scope. He had to take this bastard down.

"Nick! Get your arse in here and run him down!" Alyssa shouted.

Jack realized the bear was positioned in front of the fiery gap in the black car barricade in the instant before the squad car Nick had stolen came blasting through. The bear moved with a speed that shocked the striped rabbit, just fast enough that the car clipped his side instead of hitting him dead on. The bear staggered, dropping the limo door as the car kept going, coming to a stop beside the limo itself. Jack grimaced as he tried to get a bead on him again.

Gabe reached the squad car first, flinging open the passenger door and climbing inside with the box. Alyssa grabbed Benjamin's paw and started pulling him toward the car. "Trust me!" Jack heard her say.

Nearby the bear roared, and Jack knew he was ticked. The bear charged toward the feline.

Crouched beside the van, Bogo opened fire with his dart gun. The darts didn't penetrate, but the sudden onslaught made the bear stop. Jack saw other darts strike the bear's side and glanced down to see a bleeding Officer Hopps standing in front of the limo, firing at the bear alongside her superior. With darts coming from two different directions, the bear hesitated and stood still.

*Finally.* Jack pulled the trigger, and the bolt soared.

He didn't hear the *thunk*, but he saw the bolt pierce the hat and lodge itself in the bear's head. The bear froze, swayed on the spot, and toppled forward like a tree trunk. Jack heard him hit the ground and smiled.

Judy lowered her dart gun and ran to Bogo's side. He appeared to have injured his leg when he'd been thrown into the van.

"Okay, let's get out of here!" Finnick shouted while both officers were distracted. "Someone get us down from here!"

Alyssa shouted for Benjamin to get to the car, then ran up beneath the hole and held her paws out. Finnick jumped first, the vixen catching him easily and placing him on the ground. Jack dropped the crossbow down to her first before jumping into her arms. She carried him into the back seat alongside Finnick.

"Come on, Benji! Get in the car!" Nick shouted from the driver's seat.

Benjamin hesitated a few feet from the car, the magnum still in his paw. There was an even louder hissing sound; the fire truck had arrived at last and was now working to put out the burning barricade Cunninghorn's people were currently stuck behind. The cheetah turned his head to stare at the buffalo and rabbit, and then back at Nick. "You should go."

"No! Not without you!" Nick snapped.

"I can't!" Benjamin shouted back. "Running will make me look guilty! I don't want be a fugitive, Nick! I can't live like that!"

"We can't just leave you here!"
"I will not live the rest of my life on Zootopia's Most Wanted!" Benjamin fired back through gritted teeth, shutting up the fox. "Please… you've got to go before T.U.S.K. breaks through."

Nick started to leave the car. "I can't just leave you with these sons of-

Quick as a flash, Benjamin raised the magnum. "Will you just go?!"

Nick stared at the barrel. He looked more sad than afraid as he sat back down and shut the door.

"I'm going to set things right, Ben, I promise." He swore. "I promise!"

Benjamin stepped back as Nick reversed the car before Alyssa could shut her door, the door shearing off as it hit one of the blackened vehicles that filled the street. Then he sped forward, ferrying the weary mammals through the fiery wall and into the T.U.S.K. reinforcements that had arrived at that very moment.

"Shit!" Nick jerked the wheel in a panic, sending the car into a violent spin that had the razorbacks scattering before they could fire. Alyssa began to fly out the car through the space where the door had been, her wide eyes locking with Jack's. He reached out helplessly, and to his great relief Gabe reached above the weakened rabbit and grabbed the vixen's tail in the nick of time. The rabbit saw a Gazelle CD fly out of her damaged belt pouch and vanish into the turbulent whirlwind of color outside just as Nick miraculously regained control of the car and raced on to freedom.

They had been too quick to escape.

Bogo's leg was throbbing too much for him to stand up, which was why he felt complete horror when he saw Woolton's killer, who was currently lying on the thawing ground twenty feet away with an arrow in his head, begin to push himself up.

"Oh shit." Judy gasped. She began to raise her gun, and then she froze.

Another masked mammal had just dropped down from a window above and aimed a silenced pistol at the three mammals huddled in front of the wrecked van. Bogo's tired eyes took in a medieval themed hooded coat and a gas mask as the mammal strode over to the colossal plague doctor as he continued to get up.

Lady Gas Mask glanced at the barricade farther down. The fires were being doused and the ZPD could break in at any moment. Bogo realized his gun was empty and willed T.U.S.K. to move faster.

Lady Gas Mask grabbed the back of the bear's neck as he pulled the arrow from his skull.

"Hurry." Her voice sounded distorted through the gas mask as they both rushed to the shattered windows of the factory, leaving a thin trail of blood behind them. Bogo grabbed the magnum from Benjamin and aimed at their backs, but the gun clicked empty. Judy had frozen stiff, eyes wide with shock. The next thing he knew they had disappeared into the darkness of the empty building.

T.U.S.K. burst through the partially drenched barricade on the other end of the street seconds later. By then Benjamin had slumped down beside the buffalo and rabbit, closing his eyes to shut out the sight of the blood and the bodies. Bogo's arm curled around the feline's shoulders and held him close, its owner content in knowing that they'd at least gotten one thing right. There was no doubt, however, that this was not a win. Koslov had gotten away, Woolton's killer had escaped with his mysterious partner, and almost every gangster that had joined this horrendous battle was dead, paving a way for a bloody gang war. The sniper had escaped too, and Hopps had reason to believe
that he'd been paid by someone to kill the cheetah. Bogo was too tired to wonder why.

Those of T.U.S.K. who hadn't been injured or killed in the onslaught of projectile explosives used their armored trucks to shove the barricade apart, and before Bogo knew it Cunninghorn was storming towards their location. The police captain checked one more time to make sure his ankle wasn't sprained before getting up. "Hopps, stay with Clawhauser." He said quietly. Hopps didn't protest. She didn't say anything at all for that matter.

While the firemammals hurried across the street to deal with the other barricade, Bogo met Cunninghorn in the middle of the street, stopping to pick up the arrow Woolton's killer had left behind. There was a small trace of blood on the tip.

"What took you so long?" Bogo asked quietly.

Cunninghorn balled his fists. There were two holes in his vest from the brief battle between T.U.S.K. and the gangsters and his clothes were singed. He was holding his torso as if his ribs were injured. "You saw what happened, you stupid prick. Those scumbags set the car barricade on fire to keep us back. We had to wait for the fire department to douse the fire before we could shift the cars. Then half of us got blown up by that Halloween psycho! What the hell happened to our men on the other side?"

"Someone released smoke bombs and took most of them down in the confusion. Higgins, McHorn and myself were unharmed because we were inside our car at the time." Bogo watched as a pained McHorn followed the paramedics leading a concussed Higgins to a waiting ambulance. There were plenty more ambulances being stuffed with wounded cops and gangsters, including the polar bears that had been tranqued with darts bearing red feathers. Bogo couldn't have imagined a more awful outcome to this mess. At least the street didn't look like hell on earth anymore, and the welcome snow of Tundratown was drifting gently on the wounded tarmac and mutilated cars. Bogo breathed the cold night air with a profound sense of relief before addressing Cunninghorn again. "Did you catch Woolton's killer and his partner?"

Cunninghorn snorted a cloud of mist. "No. Thanks to you, they got away."

"It's because of you they entered the fray undetected!" Bogo fired back. "You had the entire T.U.S.K. department stationed on both ends of the street. How could you have missed two blatantly suspicious mammals, one of which matched Clawhauser's description of Woolton's killer?"

Cunninghorn took a threatening step forward. "Don't turn this on me. You failed to apprehend him."

"Look at this!" Bogo held up the arrow. "This bastard took an aluminium arrow to the head and got back up like it was nothing! Do you really think someone like that could be easily taken down with a goddamned dart gun?"

"That's enough!" Chief Trunchbull stomped up to them, putting a swift end to the argument. "We all bear responsibility for this outcome! All we can do now is investigate the crime scene and salvage what we can from this mess."

Cunninghorn subtly cowed. "Yes, sir."

"Cunninghorn, we've got two dozen reporters from all over the city trying to cross the yellow tape. Do what you can to hold them back until the investigators arrive." Cunninghorn stormed off without a word, leaving Trunchbull alone with Bogo. "What happened with Woolton's killer,
Bogo took another soothing breath of cold air and told Trunchbull everything. The elephant's troubled expression became more pronounced with each fact the buffalo gave him.

"So what now, sir?" Bogo asked when he was finished. Trunchbull wiped his forehead with his trunk. "From what you've told me, it appears more likely that Polarnova was the sniper's target."

"You think Mr. Big ordered the hit?" Bogo asked.

"Yes, though it doesn't explain how they knew Polarnova would be coming down that particular street. Do you have Clawhauser's statement yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"If you're unhurt, take him back to the station and question him as soon as possible. We need all the facts we can get."

Bogo shook his head. "Sir, after what happened here I'd highly recommend taking him to a safe house instead."

Trunchbull paused to think on this, and then nodded. "Very well." He wandered off, muttering under his breath. Bogo turned his heel and made his way back to Benjamin and Hopps. The rabbit stood up, the blood trickling down her head now dry and sticking to her fur.

"I'm sorry, sir. I should have gone after them, I don't know what came over me."

"It's called fear, Hopps. No-one's immune." Bogo didn't have the energy to say much more to her. "Find a paramedic and get that head seen to. I'll get Clawhauser out of here."

"Yes, sir." Hopps walked off, doing her best to avoiding stepping on the physical evidence.

Benjamin was curled into a trembling ball in the murky slush. Bogo crouched over him and held out a hoof, making the feline look up with wide, tear-stained eyes, and Bogo fully saw the state he was in. There was blood smeared across his forehead and cheek, and he had a cut lip. His clothes were stained with blood, soot and dirty melted snow. "Let's get you out of here." Bogo told him, thinking of the possibility of sending an officer to retrieve a clean set of clothes.

Benjamin accepted the offered hoof without a word, letting the buffalo pull him up. Bogo grew worried by the cheetah's silence, and hoped he wasn't about to go catatonic again.

His lips were forming Benjamin's name when the feline suddenly wrapped his arms tight around the buffalo's waist, surprising him. Bogo awkwardly patted the kid's shoulder and back even as an unfamiliar sensation of warmth built up in his heart. He was accustomed to the hardened muscle and coarse hair of his coworkers, especially when sparring in the gym. The feline's soft flesh and even softer fur were even more comforting than the cool Tundratown air.

"Thank you." Benjamin spoke into Bogo's abdomen.

They stood there for a good while, for the most part ignored by the other officers as they worked back and forth through the warzone that had once been an ordinary Tundratown street, before Bogo slowly escorted Benjamin to a waiting unmarked car. The feline rested his head against the window as they left the scene and returned to normality, the car almost silent as it took them through the quiet lamplit streets of the frozen district. Snowflakes fell upon the windshield as Bogo
drove across a short bridge; the artificial dispensers were at it again. Instead of bloody slush melted by hellfire, the car drove through thick, pillowly snow.

Bogo looked through the rear view mirror at the feline in the back seat. He looked almost serene as he gazed through the window, taking in the tranquil view of the Tundratown lights.

Bogo drove on through the gentle snowfall, knowingly hoping in vain that this peaceful time would last.
Jack surprised Nick and Finnick by entrusted them and Alyssa with his ZIA spy gear, leaving him in only his clothes when they stopped in front of the first hospital they could find. The striped rabbit was in the middle of removing his utility belt when his face went slack with shock. He patted his biggest empty pouch, stuck his paw inside the pouch and looked about the interior of the van. "No."

"What now?" Nick demanded from his spot in the driver's seat.

Jack looked sharply up at Alyssa. "Skyefall! Did you take something from my belt?"

Alyssa wasn't listening. She was searching her own belt. When she too found an empty pouch, she punched the window and cursed like a sailor. "FUCK! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!"

"Aw, goddamn it!" Gabe growled. "Do not tell me you've lost the disk!"

Alyssa's wordless shout of rage said it all. Nick planted his forehead into the steering wheel.

"The button of my pouch is torn!" Alyssa pointed out the damage. "It must have slipped out at some point during the shootout!"

"Then we'll just have to go back there and get it!" Jack said furiously.

"Don't be stupid!" Finnick shouted. "I'm not going back there with those cops and that psycho!"

"He's right." Gabe said. "We should try to retrieve the disk after the police finish examining the crime scene and clear out. Let's just hope it's above their notice."

"I'm not so sure about that." Jack said sourly. "If there're more officers working for Swinton, they're probably on a lookout for a disk fitting the description."

"I doubt it." Alyssa said with a humorless smirk. "When I discovered the disk in your belt after we found you, I put it in a Gazelle CD case. With a little luck, the police will just think it's dumped trash and ignore it." She stood up and opened the squad car door a crack. "In the meantime, you need to get in that hospital before your anaphylaxis starts up again."

Jack looked irritable, but acquiesced to getting out the car. When he was outside on the frozen pavement he turned to Alyssa. "Tell me, Skyefall. Have you ever posed as a prostiture before?"

"Yes." Alyssa answered, eyes narrowing. Nick, on the other paw, was struck speechless by what the dumb bunny had just insinuated.

"Good. No offense, but Swinton's people won't find that out of place."

"What're you getting at, Savage?"

"If we're going to cooperate from now on we'll need to do a bit of roleplaying. Swinton might be keeping a closer eye on me after tonight, so sneaking off to meet you is a no go. But if we play the parts assigned to us by the established stereotypes we might be able to make regular meetings in public without arousing suspicion. How do you feel about playing 'slutty fox, horny bunny'?"

"Not for real, I hope!" Alyssa snapped, but the twinkle in the eyes indicated she was warming up to the idea. Nick was still horrorstruck.
"It's not uncommon for prey mammals to seek out predator sex workers, since they're typically forced to charge less and their clients face no commeupance should anything unfortunate befall the hookers." Even Jack had a look of contempt as he said this. "Do you see where I'm going with this, Skyefall?"

To Nick's astonishment, Alyssa smiled. "Use their bigotry against them. Clever bunny."

"We'll meet outside the Palm Hotel and take our business to the casino. If I'm there to escort you, they'll have no choice but let you in. What do you say?"

Alyssa cocked her head."I say we meet as soon as you're discharged. Sorry I lost the disk."

"Don't beat yourself up too much. The mission's not bust yet. You can make up for it by telling me what's in that box later." Jack pointed at the metal package Gabe was still holding. "I'll send you a message as soon as I'm out of the hospital, and we'll discuss how to continue to mission from here." He began to turn and leave, but then paused. "And Skyefall? Thank you."

Alyssa nodded, her eyes brightening as Jack walked toward the hospital. She shut the car door and Nick drove the car back to the Zootopia Overlook, where they abandoned the conspicuous stolen police car and returned to the city via the black car Mr. Big had lent Gabe. All the while Gabe kept a tight hold of the metal package they had all risked their lives for, not letting go until they were all safe in Honey's bunker.

Nick collapsed into a beanbag, ignoring the curious stare from the cheetah cub sitting on another beanbag nearby, and felt his eyes begin to sting with tears. He'd watched dozens of mammals die tonight. One of his best friends had almost been murdered by one of the evil sheep Honey had been constantly warning them about. Nick had almost died or been captured trying to stop him. He'd plowed through a towering inferno in a kamikaze move to evacuate several mammals he couldn't be entirely sure were his friends.

As Gabe carefully put the metal box on the table and the others gathered around it, Nick's paws began to shake. If he wasn't sitting down, his legs would have given up on him.

He could never have imagined that any of this would happen. Taking a loan from Koslov to start an illegal theme park wasn't supposed to start a gang war.

Convincing Benjamin to speak to Mr. Pottermass on Nick's behalf wasn't supposed to put a target on his head.

Finnick noticed the look on Nick's face and called to him, but the redder fox didn't answer. All the guilt, terror and anger that had accumulated over the last few days were bubbling up to the surface at long last. The thought of what had almost happened, would have almost happened to Ben had Koslov not armored his limo was seeing to that.

He'd never intended for any of this. No, scratch that. He never should have assumed that it was worth the risk. He should have seen this coming a mile away. He never should have started Wild Times.

"Nick?" Sherry was now right next to him, gazing up at the distraught fox with wide eyes.

Honey gently ushered her away. "I think he just needs some quiet time, sweetie." When Sherry was gone, Honey knelt beside Nick. "What's up, Nicky?"

"I'm sorry." Nick choked into his paws. "I'm so, so sorry. I never should have started that stupid park."
Honey sighed. "Forget the park, Nick. What's done is done. Try and get some rest, okay?"

Nick nodded, and Honey returned to the group of mammals gathered around the metal box on the table.

"You guys don't think there's a bomb in there, do ya?" Finnick asked, taking ten steps back.

"I highly doubt it." Alyssa said. "Cheryl has no reason to kill Gabe."

"Damn right." Honey said, turning to Gabe. "Cheryl and your parents go way back. She'd rather be waterboarded with a bleach and gasoline cocktail than betray you."

"All the same, I'm gonna wait up top!" Finnick climbed up the ladder out of sight.

Gabe put his paws on either side of the keypad atop the box's lid. "Okay, how do we open this thing?"

"Cheryl said that the password was your mother's first name." Alyssa said.

Gabe hesitated for a good while before pressing the buttons one by one. A... N... G... E... L...

I... C... A...

Alyssa looked sharply up at Gabe. "Angelica? As in Angelica Arcticson?"

"Yeah?" Gabe said, his finger hovering over the ENTER button.

"Holy shit." Alyssa breathed.

"Language!" Honey snapped and pointed at Sherry. "And yes, Angelica Arcticson. I'm surprised you didn't know Mossberg was her maiden name with the pedestal you put her on."

"Her file only told me so much!" Alyssa turned back to Gabe. "Gabe, your mother and father were the first predators ever to be recruited by ZI6!" She was relieved when Gabe regarded her excitement with an amused smile.

"Yeah, that was roundabout the time ZI6 saw some use in mammals that were below notice. Who would think ZI6 would send a shifty, untrustworthy fox to hunt down a wayward scientist?"

"Can we open the box now?" Sherry asked. Nick didn't remember seeing her walk across the bunker to retrieve a chair to step on so she could see the box better.

Gabe chuckled at the child's impatience. "You're right, Sherry. Here we go." He pressed the ENTER button, and there was a click as the lid unlocked itself. Nick got up from his beanbag and joined the group as Gabe slowly opened the box.

A shrill sound filled the air the instant the lid was lifted from the box. Nick gaped at the inside of the box, as did the other three adults surrounding the table. Sherry squealed in delight as the contents of the box cried and squirmed in the thick blue blanket he was swaddled in. "Oh my gosh, he's so cute!"

"Oh." Was all Alyssa could say in that moment.


Gabe was utterly speechless. Nick was half-convinced they were the victims of the bizarrest prank ever conceived.
A baby. The package they'd almost got shot to pieces retrieving was a baby. The fox's first thought was that it was a snow leopard cub, except his spots were light gray instead of black. The infant's wide, wet eyes were a familiar pale blue as they stared up at the adults that stared down at him in complete astonishment. Its tiny paws stuck up into the air as its cries subsided to distressed whimpering.

Finnick dropped down from the ladder asking, "What the hell is that noise?" Then he saw the tiny paws of the baby sticking out of the box. "Is that a baby?"

"Uh… yeah." Nick replied numbly, and then looked at what else was in the box. Fixed to the cub's face was a little transparent mask connected to the oxygen tank nestled beside it. Gabe carefully reached inside and removed the mask, but seemed hesitant to pick the baby up.

"Nick?" Honey said quietly. "Would you kindly give the baby a check up to make sure it's okay?"

Nick nodded and carefully lifted the infant from the box, setting it down on the table. The first thing he discovered upon unwrapping the blanket was that the baby was wearing a diaper, thankfully fresh and empty, so he had to unwrap that to determine that it was a boy. He was alert and warm, and there were no cuts and bruises. Whoever had placed the infant in there had made sure he was treated well, and that made the fox feel better about the situation.

"He seems okay for the most part. Definitely no more than a few months old." Nick eventually said. "Though judging from the fact he's still crying, he must be hungry."

"Thank god they packed a bottle, too." Honey plucked a bottle of milk from the box. "Hold on, there's a letter here, too. It's for you, Gabe."

Gabe was staring at the infant with something now akin to wonder. Nick knew he was thinking the same thing as everyone else. The colour of his eyes and that of the baby's alone were far too similar to be a coincidence.

"Gabe, the letter." Honey had to jab a corner of the folded letter into Gabe's arm to get his attention. The feline hybrid unfolded the letter, his look of wonder becoming more pronounced as he read aloud the contents.

"If you are reading this, then this baby will have safely reached you, and I hope both of you are well. I will cut right to the point. The baby's yours. Slothfeld discovered the pregnancy during Starlight's physical exam and made the decision to separate her from the other test subjects. I believe his intention was to keep the baby's existence from you so as not to give you another reason to try and escape, especially once the child grew old enough to become a test subject himself. Starlight gave birth two weeks before you escaped from the facility. Nice job, by the way."

"Two weeks…" Gabe whispered.

"I'm warning you now, you need to take your son and leave this city before Swinton hunts you down. Leave Slothfeld and Starlight to me. I hope you will forgive me for taking so long to get him to you, and I hope you will forgive me for hiding the truth from you. Ask Honey if you don't know what I'm talking about. As for the child's mother, if I could help her, I would. But unfortunately she's beyond my reach." Gabe looked up from the letter to the baby on the table. "Cheryl Radames."

Nick and the others watched anxiously as Gabe set down the letter and reached for the baby. The baby fussed as he was lifted from the table, but calmed down once he was safely nestled in his father's arms. Compared to the filthy, bloody fur covering the father the baby looked almost white.
Gabe hesitantly stroked the baby's cheek as he kept crying, still in need of milk. Just like that, the mammal's uncertainty melted away, and he grinned like a cub himself. Holding the cub with one arm he picked up the bottle and began to feed his son.

"So Slothfeld was planning to use this baby as a test subject?" Honey had picked up the letter in his place and was now crushing it in her paws. "Oh God. That explains why he had Sherry abducted. How could he be so evil?"

"I'd like to know how Cheryl managed to rescue him." Alyssa stepped up to Gabe to get a closer look at the adorable cub. Sherry had climbed onto a chair so she could see for herself. "I wonder if she managed to save anyone else."

Gabe set the bottle down and turned to Honey. "Honey, what did Cheryl mean by hiding something from me?"

Honey dropped the letter, her gaze turning sad. "When Cheryl approached you and Starlight for assistance in investigating Dr. Cogsworth's 'accident', she didn't tell you the whole story. She suspected right from the start that Cogsworth had been murdered, but what she didn't tell you was that she had originally intended to kill the creep herself."

Gabe frowned as he adjusted his hold on the infant. "She was planning to murder Cogsworth? Why would she do that?"

Honey's ears went flat and her collar beeped. "Cogsworth… was the mammal who built the collar that almost killed you and had your mother assassinated. Cheryl had been out for his blood ever since." She looked away from the blank look on Gabe's face. "You can imagine how ticked she was when Slothfeld beat her to it."

Nick was so shocked he was at a loss for words. He couldn't imagine how Gabe was feeling. The fox stared at the feline, who was stony silent as he continued to cradle his child.

Honey continued. "She didn't want to tell you because she knew ZI6 would punish her for plotting to assassinate someone without authorization. The less you and Starlight knew, the better. She was planning to tell you once the mission was completed, I swear to God."

Gabe sat down, the movement eliciting an annoyed whine from the baby. He hugged the little cub closer, their cheeks making contact. Nick thought achingly of his own parents. "I can't hate her." Gabe finally said. "She got my son to me. She's made her amends."

Honey exhaled in relief. "Speaking of which, you are taking this remarkably well."

"Me and Starlight have discussed kids before." The feline replied with a smile. "We had no plans, but it was never off the table either. I wonder if she discovered she was pregnant before we were captured." The smile disappeared after that.

Sherry stepped over onto the chair beside Gabe and beamed as she got a closer look at the baby. "Why don't you ask her after you get her back? You can talk about naming him, too!"

Gabe affectionately rustled the fur on her head. "You know what, Sherry? I will."

Sherry sat down on the edge of the table. "Well? Any ideas?"

Gabe shrugged. "I dunno just yet. Lance, maybe?"

"After the knight of the round table?"
Gabe laughed. "Not exactly." He started to explain a little bit about his father, but Nick was no longer listening.

Darker thoughts were too strong to make the fox feel the same merriment as the felines, so he retired to the small bathroom where it was quieter. The toilet didn't have a lid, but he sat down regardless and put his face in his paws. The door, which he had forgotten to lock, opened and let Finnick into the room. He crossed his arms and looked up at the red fox on the toilet, looking just as morose. "What a night, huh?"

"I'm so screwed." Nick knew that in his gut. "There's no way the ZPD and Koslov are going to quit after this. They're going to blame me for what happened back there, I just know it."

"Tonight was a complete and total clustercuss." Finnick nodded in agreement. "But look on the bright side."

"What bright side?"

"We did what we set out to do. We got the package and saved that rabbit. I gotta tell you that second bit felt good. I didn't think it would, but it did. And don't forget that Benji's alive because of you."

"We never should have left him with those cops."

"That's his choice, Nick. I sure as hell wasn't gonna argue with him with a giant gun pointed at my face." Nick snickered at the image of Benjamin holding that massive revolver, making the fennec scowl. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, I'm just wondering how the frig that gun didn't fly out of Benji's paws with the first shot. He's tougher than he looks." Indeed, it was astounding that Benjamin would have the courage to pull the trigger in the first place. Nick felt a growing pride toward his young buddy. "I hope he's going to be okay."

"He'll be fine. Let's worry about ourselves for now, okay? For one thing we've gotta get that disk back."

Nick nodded, realized he needed the bathroom for real, and shooed Finnick outside so he could do his business.

Finnick was right, he told himself as he turned to face the porcelain bowl and unzipped his pants. If he had any chance of setting things right with Benji, he first had to set things right with himself. That included proving he had nothing to do with predators going savage and getting that adorably angry little bunny off his back.

*Oh yes,* Nick thought with a twinge of dread. *There's no way I've seen the last of her.*
Two days later, Alyssa was setting up a camera inside a broken smoke detector overlooking Honey’s living room when a paper airplane hit her on the head.

It had been a light tap, no more painful than a baby prodding his mother’s skull, but the sudden touch had her whip her gun out in an instant. The sun was radiating through the small open window and shining down on the paper plane lying tilted on the dusty floorboards. Alyssa rolled her eyes, holstered her gun before anyone could see it and picked up the airplane. That was when she saw the writing upon it. Her heart leapt. She hadn’t heard from Jack since dropping him off at the hospital. She unfolded the paper airplane and read the black handwriting.

Meet me across the street from the Palm Hotel tonight at eight. Remember, slutty but classy.

Alyssa laughed out loud. In the two days since their separation she had grown to better appreciate the genius of the rabbit’s plan. Had they chosen to meet somewhere the likes of Happytown and been somehow spotted, their covers would be simultaneously blown out the water. A rabbit bringing a sultry vixen to his hotel room after a passionate evening in a high-class casino would just be a wealthy prey mammal taking advantage of his station to have his way with a lowly whore, a predator at that. “Slutty but classy, huh?” She said with a sly smile. “I have just the thing.”

Four hours later she was wearing the darkest dress she’d brought on her mission. The shimmering black number had a V-neck so low the point stopped at her waist, a shirt stopping above her knees and a slit exposing her right thigh. If this didn’t make her look like a hooker, nothing would. In her black and red handbag she held all the gear she need to return to Jack.

Jack was there to meet her outside a high-end bar straight across from the front steps of the Palm Hotel. The sky was only mid-way to night, but the gargantuan palm tree that made up the main building was already glowing like a brazier. Jack was wearing a tuxedo as black as Alyssa’s dress. His sleeve looked slightly tighter around his forearm, the bandage beneath peeking out like a white bracelet. Completely clean of blood and mud, the rabbit looked a damned sight better than he had two days ago. His large blue eyes reflected the golden orange lights from the palm tree as he spotted her, the pupils shining like bronze as he looked her up and down.

“Nice.” He said simply. “Let’s hope that dress doesn’t draw attention to yourself.”

Alyssa laughed, both from the rabbit’s humor and relief that he was okay after two days of worrying. “On to the casino, then?”

“Why of course. How about a martini, first?”

“Shaken, not stirred?”

“Har-har.”

“We’re going to need to code names for what we’re going to discuss. The good doctor will be Flash. The disk will be a ring. Can you remember that?”

Alyssa nodded.

Just as Jack had predicted, he was able to slip her into the casino with little trouble other than the security guards giving them both unpleasant looks. Alyssa was naturally regarded with contempt, Jack regarded with pity. Of course they would assume that Jack was nothing more than a dumb bunny wasting his dosh on a fanged harlot. Even Swinton and the triuverate wouldn’t think
The palm tree motif was prevalent in the lobby, the genuinely organic plant life stretching almost to the viridian ceiling as they stood on either side of the faux-sandy pathway leading from the front entrance to the reception desk. Other paths branched out from the main path, cutting through unnaturally clean ponds to the other rooms that made up the base of the hotel. On a sandy island in the middle of the biggest pond was the lounge, a cluster of round tables and bronze chairs that must have cost a hundred bucks apiece. A curved wooden bridge connected the island lounge to the nearby bar. Alyssa felt Jack link his arm around hers and felt an odd somersaulting sensation in her stomach.

“Nice place.” She said in an attempt to distract herself. Jack’s arm felt firmer that she’d expected.

“You don’t sound all that impressed.” Jack said as he led her toward the lounge.

“This isn’t my first time pleasuring a sugar daddy, you know.”

Jack chuckled. “Really? Who have you pleasured?”

Alyssa leaned in conspiratorily to the rabbit’s ear. “Trade secret.”

Jack sat the vixen down at the smallest empty table with two chairs. The lounge was almost full at this time of night. Alyssa blinked when she spotted Mr. Bisoniing on the other side of the lounge, getting frisky with a skimpily dressed cougar. *Jack, you sexy little genius.*

“Shall I treat you to Sex on the Beach?” Jack asked.

“That would be lovely.”

“And what would you like to drink?”

“Stop being cheeky and get to that bar.”

Jack smirked and walked off, returning with the drinks within five minutes.

They both took a sip before the debriefing began.

“Did you know about Gabe?” Alyssa asked.

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Did you know who his parents were?”

“Yes, I knew about his parents.” Jack replied. “What, didn’t you?”

“No. His file only told me so much. Not surprising, really. Even in ZI6, his existence is a closely guarded secret. The fox/cheetah hybrid of a spy and a former terrorist. Not the kind of thing one would want to make common knowledge.”

Jack changed the subject. “So, any luck finding that ring you’ve been looking for?”

“None so far.” Alyssa said with another twinge of shame. “My friend has been keeping an eye out, but the big guys are still keeping an eye on the place. They don’t appear to have found it yet, thank God.”

Jack sighed. “Don’t kick yourself too hard. I probably would have lost the thing myself if I’d kept...
holding onto it. My belt wasn’t built to hold something that big. Putting it into a CD was a smart move, though. Gazelle, was it?”

“Yeah. I’m going to go in and get it as soon as the place is clear. Or you can. I’m not sure I care anymore.” Alyssa took another sip through the straw. “Gabe’s a dad, now.”

Jack choked on his Red Vodkatini. “He’s a what now?”

“That package turned out to be a baby.” Alyssa quietly explained everything that had been in the letter Cheryl had left with the infant. By the end of it, Jack looked utterly stunned. “I think her intention was to get him and the baby out of the city as soon as possible.”

“That means she’s up to something.” Jack said with a scowl. “Where is father and son now?”

“The dad’s back at work, and Honey’s babysitting for him for the time being. Enough about me, though. What happened to your poor arm?” She gestured to his bandaged arm.

Jack grimaced and rubbed the arm. “Officially I had an allergic reaction to peanuts and cut myself on broken glass while in the throes of anaphylaxis. A good Samaritan provided an epi-pen and dropped me off at the hospital.” From there his expression became troubled. “Unofficially, I was poisoned by Anafaux.”

Alyssa knew what he was talking about; one of the good doctor’s earliest endeavors. He had attempted to manufacture a drug that could trigger anaphylactic shock in certain targets. The results were mixed and he had eventually discarded the project in favor of something else.

“So what happened? How did you find the ring? Did you find Flash’s place?” Alyssa was beginning to feel silly talking like this.

“It happened almost right after we parted ways. I ran into another bunny on the road, and I convinced her to give me a lift.”

“Officer Hopps?” Alyssa lowered her voice.

Jack nodded. “We came across a crashed car with three mammals that had been dead for months. The car crash appeared accidental, but the occupants…” Alyssa didn’t need Jack to finish. The occupants had clearly been murdered. “Felix has been keeping tabs on the investigation for me while I maintained my cover. The ZPD haven’t been able to identify the victims yet, but I’m certain they came from Flash’s place. I think they were trying to escape from something. My companion found the ring under the hood of the car and by some luck I convinced her to part with it.”

“Do you think the ring was stolen?” Alyssa asked.

“Definitely. Flash would never give up something so important.” Jack took another sip from his glass.

“Do you think Flash sent his… collar flunkies to hunt them down after they stole the ring?”

“Possibly.” Jack said. “I didn’t see a collar on the big bear or those wolves, but then again their clothing obscured their necks.” Alyssa looked down slightly as she pondered this. If Slothfeld had already applied mind control collars to the missing predators and was sending them out to do his dirty work, it could explain the gruesome murders of Lemming and Woolworth. Gabe had told her that Slothfeld had a different agenda to Swinton.
“Anyway, we split when Hopps was called to deal with a family emergency, and that’s when it went to hell.”

“Were you mugged by those wolves?”

“No, a lot smaller than that. It may have been an otter, but I’m not sure. It happened so fast. The next thing I knew I had that cut on my arm. I did the only thing I could do and retreated until I could figure out what I was up against. The allergy started to kick in roundabout the time you nearly ran me down.”

“Technically that was Gabe.” Alyssa said with a pout. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re alright.”

Jack cocked his head with a smile that had the vixen flushing. “Somehow I feel like you actually mean that.” He tapped his fingers on the side of the glass, his smile becoming a subtle frown. “I owe you an apology.”

“For what? I deserved that ass-chewing.”

“For not telling you about Cheryl.”

Alyssa went cold. He’d known?

“How long?”

“A few days, after I discovered that Radames and Ransome were the same mammal.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t trust you. Not for the reason you think.” He held a paw up to stop Alyssa’s upsetting train of thought in its tracks. “You said you were close to Cheryl, and I had no way of knowing that you were truly ignorant in her part in all this. For all I knew you were a mole.”

By now they’d almost finished both their drinks. While Alyssa processed Jack’s words she took note of how little remained of both their glasses, and that in turn made her notice a big difference between their table and Bisoniing’s. “I don’t think we’re playing the farce up enough. Look at that big guy and his squeeze. They’re literally pressed right up to each other.” Not to mention Bisoniining was laughing like a loon as he fondled every piece of exposed flesh on the cougar’s body. “Compared to them, we look like we’re on a date.”

The rabbit glared in disgust at the display. “Absolutely not. Unlike him, I have class.”

“Come on.” Alyssa grinned slyly as she began to slid her chair around the table. “They’re going to think something’s up unless you treat me at least a little like an object.”

Jack bit his lip as he tried to remain stoic. He shook his head as Alyssa inched closer, relishing in his discomfort. “No way, Skyefall.”

“Hah! Way!” With that Alyssa pressed her partly exposed hip right up to his. Jack went completely stiff. His crystal blue eyes went wide as saucers and his arms shot straight out. Alyssa’s grin turned wicked as she cupped his cheek with one paw, at the same time curling her long bushy tail around his hard, muscled legs. She put one leg over the other, the slit her dress windening enough to expose both thighs, and draped her upper leg across Jack’s legs. The adorably mortified look on his face was priceless, as was the moment Alyssa felt something hard poking up between Jack’s legs and lightly prod her calf. “That’s a weird place to hide a pistol.”
Jack looked down, and his cheeks darkened. “Now you’ve done it.”

“It’s not my fault you’re into vixens.”

“It’s not my fault you’re so damn good at this.” Jack paused. “Maybe telling you to wear something slutty was a bad idea.”

“It’s a lot easier to pull off when the client is a genuine stud.” Alyssa admitted. “You should have worn a tuxedo that doesn’t fit.”

“What did I just say about having class?”

“Just saying.”

“Great. Now Bisoning’s giving me the thumb’s up.”

“Well? Thumb him back.”

She felt his arm shift behind her back to do just that. It was like an electric shock to her, so powerful it made the fur on her tail stick up on end. She cupped his other cheek with her other paw and looked directly into his eyes. Jesus Christ, what was she doing? She hadn’t been serious about seducing him, and yet here she was, bringing her face closer to his. Jack stared back, and after a moment seemed to be slightly leaning in himself. *Alyssa Skyefall, what did you do?!*

Their lips met, and then it was too late.

They parted just as quickly. “You kiss by the book.” Jack said softly.

Alyssa chuckled at his quoting Shakespeare. “That had been ZI6’s original intention when they recruited me from that slum. I seduce, I fuck, I kill.” Matter of fact, she wanted to fuck Jack right now. After that kiss, she was viscerously craving rabbit.

“You know, that was actually my code name for a while, before it became ‘Red Sparrow’. Then Cheryl taught me to become more than a licentious assassin.”

Jack stroked her cheek with a soft white paw. “You owe her quite a bit, don’t you?”

Alyssa removed her leg from Jack’s thighs and hardened member so she could move her upper body closer. “More than you know.”

“I owe you a fair bit, myself. You saved my life. Even after I’ve been a colossal jackass.” Jack’s voice grew softer than ever.

“Just settling a debt.” Alyssa lowered her voice to his level. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you either. I should have been honest about my mission from the beginning.”

“We both should have been honest.” Jack agreed as he slowly pulled Alyssa into an embrace. Alyssa welcomed the gesture, wanting more. Fucking hell, what had she done? “It’s not like our respective countries are mortal enemies. I think we care too much about national security for our own good.”

“Or maybe we both just wanted to prove ourselves. But no more.” Alyssa breathed, nuzzling the corner between Jack’s neck and shoulder. It was a perfect fit for her slender snout. “No more lies. No more competition. First chance we get, we’re going to get that disk back and then we’re going
to catch Slothfeld together."

She felt Jack’s jawbone press against her muzzle as he nodded. “Together.”

“That means no more surprising me with a gun to my head.”

“Agreed.”

“It also means that when we get the ring back, we discuss who gets to take it back like civilized mammals.”

“Fair enough.”

Alyssa stroked his shoulder as she nuzzled harder. “Maybe that ring really is cursed.”

Jack leaned his head back, his expression quizzical. “Cursed?”

“Before I came to Zootopia, I paid a visit to Flash’s home country.” Alyssa spoke into his ear. “I… entertained one of his former employees and learned of a little legend that’s pretty popular in the workplace. Even before he came under suspicion he was so unpopular with his staff that they nicknamed him Satan. They would joke about how he’d cursed his ring so that if anyone other than Flash possessed it, bad things would happen to them.”

Jack shook his head with mirth. “I’d say you’re being ridiculous but well, you know.” He lifted his bandaged arm for a moment.

Alyssa lowered her mouth to Jack’s again and felt the craving grow wilder than ever, almost succumbing to her desire then and there. Her arms tightened around Jack’s and his arms tightened around hers. Her eyes opened for an instant and she saw that Bisoniing and his mistress were no longer at their table. She knew where they had gone, and she wanted nothing more than to take her rabbit upstairs and do the same damn thing to him. His paws were sliding up and down her back as they embraced each other tighter. None of her targets had ever filled her with such fire and hunger. She had no idea if Jack felt the same way or if he was just using good like a good little hitman, but she didn’t care. One way or another, she would complete her mission.

Eventually they parted, pressed their cheeks together and stared over each other’s shoulders. She was barely aware that one of her straps had slipped over her shoulder and Jack’s bowtie had come undone.

“Let’s finish this upstairs and then pretend it never happened.”

“Yes, let’s.”
Captain Bogo's decision to place Benjamin in the Savanna Central Safe House had not been a popular one, even with Trunchbull, McHorn and Higgins, but the Cape buffalo had been adamant.

This particular safe house was a penthouse situated at the very top of a skyscraper that was a mere five minute drive from Precinct One, a luxurious place reserved usually for celebrities and politicians. Bogo had chosen to take the cheetah there primarily because it was also the most secure safe house in the city. The windows were made of the most bullet resistant transparent material on the market, and no-one entered the room without a special keycard that was almost impossible to copy. Security cameras protected each floor, and almost a dozen guards watched the lobby and exits like heavyset black hawks. If any masked psychopath tried to gain entry they would be rendered into Swiss cheese in less than fifteen seconds.

Trunchbull have caved to Bogo's request after the captain had reminded him that Benjamin, in the span of three days, had become the most sensitive key witness in the history of Precinct One. Not only was he the only one who could indentify the predator that had murdered the second most powerful politician in Zootopia, he was also one of the few who could testify against Koslov for kidnapping, attempted murder and loan-sharking. Not to mention it was confirmed by the events in Tundratown that he had at least two mammals out to silence him. As it was, Trunchbull had left it in Bogo's hooves until the ZBI was authorized to take over the case.

"Authorized?" Bogo had immediately questioned upon being summoned to the chief's office to discuss the matter.

"Yes. Apparently someone went over the ZBI Director's head and made him hold off on taking over the Woolton murder case for the time being. For now, it will remain in our hands."

"With all due respect, what the hell?" Bogo had stood up in disbelief. "A sniper tried to kill Clawhauser right in front of us, and then two mammals in masks showed up and wiped out half of T.U.S.K. If you ask me, that looks like terrorism. Why the hell isn't the ZBI getting on top of this?"

"Like I said, they've been ordered to refrain from claiming jurisdiction. I wish I could tell you more." Trunchbull spoke.

"It's Swinton, isn't it? She's trying to keep this shitstorm under wraps." Bogo almost said this out loud, but knew better than accuse the mayor without proof. After his meeting with Mr. Savage and Woolton's murder, the buffalo had become more and more convinced that Swinton was hiding something big. But the mayor couldn't have the power to stonewall the ZBI, especially when civil war had been declared in one of the city's districts.

Could she?

Bogo couldn't stop thinking about the possibility as he sat in the passenger seat of the unmarked police car McHorn was driving to the skyscraper where Benjamin was being held, eight days after he'd left him there. Officer Hopps was in the back, her eyes unusually intense as she read an oversized newspaper. Bogo recognized it as the Meadowlands Gazette, the paper Bellwether was CEO of.
"Sweet cheese and crackers." She muttered.

"What now, Hopps?" Bogo turned his head.

Hopps lowered the paper. "It's Bellwether. She's demanding that Mayor Swinton admit responsibility for Assistant Mayor Woolton's death."

McHorn snorted. "Of course she would blame her opponent."

"It's not just that. She's accusing Swinton and her allies of lying to the public about certain incidents that have happened in the last two decades, most of them involving TAME Collars. Let me just see what else they're…" She suddenly stopped speaking upon turning the page. The car was silent as she read the next article. "Oh my gosh."

"What?" Bogo demanded.

Hopps looked up and swallowed. "Sir. Don't freak out." She spoke before she began reading part of the article out loud.

**THE TRUTH OF THE MARKET ELEPHANT RAMPAGE EXPOSED**

*Five years ago, Riccardo Trunkle, 24, a bull elephant, went on a rampage in Sahara Square Marketplace, causing thousands of dollars in property damage and injuring twelve mammals. Among the most grievously injured was then ZPD Lieutenant Mansa Bogo, who was infamously impaled by the mad elephant's tusk just as he was sedated, bringing the incident to a bloody end. The cause of the rampage was determined to be a large cocktail of drugs in Trunkle's system at the time of the incident.*

*Or so we were told.*

*Five years later, an anonymous source presented evidence that ZNN and City Hall had not been honest about the cause of Trunkle's psychotic episode, and it was not drugs. In fact, Trunkle had been suffering from a condition known as Musth.*

" *Musth is a periodic condition in bull elephants, characterized primarily by highly aggressive behavior." Dr. Harding, a psychologist from the Meadowlands, explained. "The condition has not been sufficiently researched enough to determine the exact cause, but symptoms aside from aggressive behavior include oily discharge from swollen temporal glands, permanent urinating and an intolerance to noise or sudden movements. I believe eyewitnesses reported seeing most if not all of these symptoms in Trunkle before and during his rampage. I can't imagine why City Hall would lie about such a dangerous condition."*

Hopps paused. "Should I continue, sir?"

"Hold on there, Hopps." McHorn said.

Bogo stayed silent, staring through the windshield at the hydrant in front of them. McHorn had brought the car to a stop beside the pavement, one block away from their destination. He felt angry, confused and anxious all at the same time. Bellwether had exploited what had happened to him, had used him and that elephant to score points against Swinton. This was not how he had wanted the truth the get out.

"Sir?" Hopps asked uncertainly.

"What else did it say?" Bogo asked thickly.
"Not much else. The paper basically accuses City Hall of institutional dishonesty and calls for an investigation into Mayor Swinton. They did say that the anonymous source definitely did not come from the ZPD."

"Son of a bitch." McHorn breathed. "Swinton must be frothing at the mouth rightabout now."

Bogo spotted a Snarlbucks further up the street as he pondered what this all meant. He had his hoof on the door handle when Hopps spoke up.

"Sir, I need to ask you something. Did you believe Mr. Pottermass when he denied sending Clawhauser to the Arctic House?"

"Of course not. Clawhauser recognized his voice over the phone." Bogo saw the bunny's face in the rear view mirror. "What is it?"

"Sir, do you remember when I was sent to question Wilde, and my tires got slashed and that stuffed animal with the Wild Times logo disappeared?" Bogo and McHorn both nodded. "Roundabout that time my mom called and told me to check the trunk to make sure I had all my gear. She said it was to get Pop-Pop to stop worrying about me getting eaten. When I finished the call, the doll was gone."

"Your point is?" McHorn asked.

"My mom called again later that night, and insisted she never called me at that time." Hopps said. "I know this sounds crazy, but I've been thinking about it ever since we questioned Pottermass about that phone call."

Bogo scowled and turned in his seat to face her properly. "Hopps, are you suggesting that you and Clawhauser were called by an imposter?"

"I said I know it sounds crazy. But when my mom called, it distracted me enough for someone to steal a piece of evidence that could have exposed Wild Times, and the second call led Clawhauser and his kidnappers into a trap. It seems a bit of a coincidence that both calls were intended to manipulate us."

"That's very far-fetched, Hopps." Bogo said. "I'd rather you didn't bring this up again without hard evidence."

Hopps's ears drooped. "Yes, sir."

Bogo opened the door. "I'm heading to that Snarlbucks over there. Does anyone want anything?"

They shook their heads. Bogo strode to the café and returned with a hot chocolate and a takeout box of old-fashioned donuts. McHorn tried to hide his scowl, and Bogo tried to hide his own. With Higgins still in the hospital Bogo hadn't heard much of the hippo's opinions, but ever since their discussion on the day of Woolton's murder McHorn had begun voicing his doubts about the young cheetah. It wasn't enough that Benjamin was responsible for Wilde's illegal endeavor getting off the ground, but he was also the only mammal at the scene when Woolton died. As much as it annoyed Bogo, he couldn't blame McHorn for being suspicious. McHorn drove the rest of the way to the skyscraper and dropped Bogo off outside the entrance, choosing to wait in the car. Bogo showed his badge and was allowed inside by the guards. Four minutes later he was knocking on the door to the penthouse.

When no-one answered, he knocked again. He felt a pang of unease and ordered one of the two guards posted outside to pull out his keycard and open the door.
His blood ran cold when he found the penthouse empty.

The memory of Bug-Burga and the viscous blood trail flashed through his mind.

Then he heard the faint hissing sound of a running shower.

Bogo set the drink and donuts on the shiny glass coffee table. Then he pulled out his weapon as he approached the bathroom door.

He knocked with one knuckle just as the hissing stopped.

"Clawhauser?" He called.

"Yes, Captain?" Benjamin called from inside.

Bogo exhaled. *Thank God.* "Christ on a bike, you had me worried for a second there. Let someone know next time!"

"Sorry! I'll be right out!"

Bogo found himself smiling as he returned to the coffee table and sat down on one of the bland black couches. Less than a minute later Benjamin stepped out in a white button-down shirt and jet-black pants, his spotted fur damp and spiky. Bogo tried not to stare. It didn't seem possible, but the shirt looked over-sized on the plump young cheetah, the hem draping over his thighs like the skirt of a summer dress. It made him look vulnerable and adorable at the same time, but Bogo knew better now than to assume that the feline couldn't take care of himself. His nose twitched and his gaze brightened as he caught the scent of chocolate and donuts.

"I brought lunch." Bogo held up the box like a peace offering. Benjamin smiled and sat down on the opposite couch, letting the buffalo slid the box across the table. Benjamin practically tore the box open and ate the first donut in one go. Bogo watched him eat with a curious sense of contentment. After days of blood and death, the look of joy on the cheetah's face was a breath of fresh air. "O. M. Goodness, I've missed these! Thank you, Captain."

Bogo chuckled and pushed the hot chocolate across as well. He'd heard the feline's unique acronymic exclamation before, and it had made him want to laugh then as well. "I just thought I'd check up on you. I haven't seen you since… well, you know."

Benjamin's face fell, just for a moment before he tried the hot chocolate. "Ooooooh, so good! So what did you want to see me about?"

"I've got no new questions if that's what you're wondering." Bogo clasped his hooves together. "Just an update on the case."

"Uh huh?" Benjamin asked as he grabbed another donut. "Want one?"

Bogo peered at the baked ring in the feline's paw. "Oh, what the hell." He took the donut and took a bite before continuing. It was sweet, like Benjamin's manner. "First thing to know is that we know you're not working for Koslov. The gangsters we captured eight days ago told us how Koslov abducted you to force you to help him hunt down Wilde."

"Oh, thank goodness!" Benjamin held a paw to his chest. Bogo's eyes were drawn to the way the fabric of the shirt rumpled beneath his touch. It reminded him of the large sleeves of the cheetah's renaissance costume. "What about Koslov himself?"
"Still on the loose. We have confirmed his status as a crime lord, so now we've put him on the wanted list. Now that he's finally come to blows with Mr. Big, however, he'll likely be laying low for a while." Benjamin's eating and drinking had slowed to a stop by this point. Bogo felt awful for bringing up that terrible night, but the cheetah needed to know what was happening outside the safe house. "The sniper and that masked bear and his partner are still on the loose."

"Crap." Benjamin muttered.
"We did get a code name and species on the sniper, though, thanks to Officer Hopps and Wilde's intervention on your behalf. Mark II, a sheep. Does that ring any bells?" Benjamin shook his head silently. Bogo placed a photograph and slid it across the coffee table. "Does this ring any bells?"

Benjamin bit his lip and he stared at the photograph in front of him. "Yes. Who is he?"

Finally, a lead. "This mammal is Sedor Valentino, the only mammal in our database that matches the height of the killer. He's a business partner of the polar bear who abducted you, but unlike Koslov we were never able to pin anything on Sedor. Until now." Bogo took back the photo and gazed at it himself. The photo had been taken during a stakeout, right as Koslov and Sedor were getting out a familiar white limo to attend the first birthday of Koslov's only child. Decked in a casual red sweater and loose pants, it was extraordinary how ordinary Sedor looked in the photo compared to the beast they'd battled beside the Arctic House. "He disappeared two years ago on his way to his godson's second birthday party. We were never able to find out what happened to him, but if Mr. Big was involved it would explain why the gangs are at war as we speak."

"War?" Benjamin froze in the middle of eating.

Bogo nodded grimly. "There's been at least two gang attacks in the week since the gunfight at the Arctic House. As much as you may not like being cooped up in here this may be the safest place for you right now."

Benjamin glanced out the ceiling-high windows. "I understand. Do you think Mr. Big sent that sniper?"

"Until we get more information I can't say." Bogo took another bite of the donut. "In related news, we're still on the hunt for Wilde, but at least that fox is running out of places to hide. Is there anything you could tell us to help us find him? He may be in even more danger than you."

Benjamin shook his head again, frantically.

"Alright then. I'll keep you posted on any further progression in the case." Bogo stood up. "In the meantime, stay low and don't leave this penthouse. It's the safest place for you right now."

Benjamin nodded, standing up to see Bogo out. The buffalo paused beside the couch. Somehow he couldn't leave things like this. Not after he'd upset Benjamin by talking about the incident. "I do have one question, actually. How're you feeling?"

"Scared." Benjamin said. "What about you? How're you feeling?"

"Like I should have picked up a coffee from Snarlbucks along with the… you're talking about the news, aren't you?"

Benjamin gestured to the nearby flatscreen, which was currently showing the Jeremy Koala show on mute. "That TV's bigger than my bathtub. It's kinda hard to miss."

Bogo snorted irritably. "I feel pissed, mostly. Mammals have used tragedies to fuel their own agenda before, but it's the first time they've used mine."
"I'm sorry." Bogo felt a flutter in the chest when Benjamin patted his arm.

Bogo shrugged off the sudden happy feeling. He was a cop and he needed to act like one. Once he shared a bit more with the endearing young mammal. "I feel relieved too, now that the truth is out."

"Why was it covered up in the first place?" Benjamin inched back towards the coffee table and bent down.

"Because otherwise they would have had to acknowledge that prey is capable of going savage, too." Bogo felt disgust bubble up inside him. "When I woke up in the ICU and learned what ZNN had done, I tried to get the truth out. Do you know what City Hall said?"

"What?" Benjamin asked, returning to Bogo's side with his steaming cup of hot chocolate.

Bogo gritted his teeth for a second so he wouldn't snap at the feline. "They said, 'We don't want to risk turning the public against elephants.'"

Benjamin was so aghast that he gasped loudly and clapped his paw over his mouth. "After everything they said about predators?! After the TAME Collars?!"

"I thought the exact same thing." Bogo growled. "I never looked at collars the same way again after that." He loudly zipped up his black jacket and turned to leave. He had to rejoin McHorn and Hopps so they could get back to investigating the recent events. Another day of blood and death and Cunninghorn for him.

He stopped again at the sweet smell of hot chocolate beneath his nose. He looked down to see Benjamin sheepishly holding up the half-full cup.

"Why don't you finish my drink off?" He offered. "Nick told me that chocolate releases endorphins in the brain and makes you happy. Maybe having some of this will make you feel better?"

The feline was visibly startled when Bogo suddenly clamped a hoof over his mouth as he fought to keep from laughing, even propping himself on the back of the couch for support. His body shook with suppressed laughter as the cheetah stared at him in bewilderment, until he eventually calmed down enough to lower his hoof and speak. "Endorphins?" He wheezed. He had to cover his mouth again as he suffered another fit.

"Wa-was that wrong?" Benjamin asked.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, it's…" Bogo took a deep breath and straightened himself. "It's endorphins, Ben. Not endolphins."

"Oh." Benjamin giggled in embarrassment. "Well, I suppose having a pod of aquatic mammals swimming around in your head wouldn't be very good for your health."

"Stop!" Bogo snorted. "Shut up or I'll bust an artery!" Benjamin buttoned his lips so Bogo could calm down. "Sorry, Ben. I don't know what came over me. Keep your hot chocolate. You need it more than I do. Endorphins." He snorted, but managed to avoid another laughing fit. "Jesus Christ on a stick, I think I needed that. Thanks, Ben."

Benjamin beamed. It was the kind of beautific smile you wouldn't expect to see on a mammal who had suffered so many traumas in such a short time.

Bogo returned to McHorn and Hopps' car in better spirits, leaving them both wondering if Benjamin had given him a big break in the case.
"Not since he told us that Koslov knows the identity of Woolton's killer." Bogo replied. "Come on, let's get back to the Arctic House."

"Why're we going back there in the first place, sir?" Hopps asked. "The CSIs finished processing the place yesterday. It's just the cleanup crew there now."

"We've had complaints about reporters trying to catch some exclusive footage of the scene before it goes back to normal. Oh, and before you ask 'why us,' some these reporters come from the Meadowland Gazette, so there're a fair few rams. Chief Trunchbull wants you there just in case one of them happens to be 'Mark II' in disguise."

Hopps was immediately alert. "Don't you worry sir! I'll watch them like a hawk!"

"You'd better. You're the only one aside from Wilde who has seen that mammal's face."

Judy nodded fervently. Bogo refrained from rolling his eyes and turned back to the windshield, wondering if the bunny sometimes tried too hard.

When they got there, naturally there was a ram reporter hiding around the corner of a small building next door to the crime scene, camera and all. McHorn glowered as he brought the car to a stop in the next street. "He's nowhere near the yellow tape. Damn."

Before Bogo could ask, Hopps answered. "That's not Mark II, sir. Just so you know. What do we do, wait for him to do something illegal?"

"Let's not let it come to that." Bogo said, even though his resentment towards the Gazette demanded otherwise. "I'll have a short word with him, make sure he knows what will happen if he crosses the cordon. McHorn, Hopps, check with the officers already at the scene and make sure there aren't any more reporters about."

They all got out the car and parted ways, Bogo making a beeline for the ram sneaking the camera lens at the ruined street ahead. Ten feet down the road was the cordon, already closely guard by several officers. Another officer was guarding the fire exit to the Arctic House. On the other side of the cordon the clean up crew was hard at work cleaning up the blood and rubble. Bogo could see a great empty hole in the side of the Arctic House, the limo that had punched the hole currently being processed at the Precinct for evidence. Bogo imagined he could still smell the blood that had soaked the inside of the front cabin, could still see what little had remained of the driver's skull. The polar bear beside him had been shot through-and-through by the same bullet. The CSIs had had to use dental records to identify them as Raymond Blanchard and Kevin Fureclear. Some of the mammals that had died outside the limo had been much, much worse. As for the three decomposed mammals Hopps had found on Founder's Mountain, their identities were a compelte enigma in the database but their deaths were being treated as homicide.

Bogo reached the ram and cleared his throat, nearly making the ram jump out his wool. "Jesus!"

"Easy there." Bogo said sternly.

The ram regained his composure. "You nearly made me drop my camera! The press has freedom of speech, cop! There's nothing to stop me from filming!"

"You're right. You can film… from this side of the cordon."

"Yeah, yeah. I know my boundaries. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere near that yellow tape." The ram's eyes turned down to Bogo's chest area, and his rectangular gaze brightened. "Wait, you're Officer Bogo?"
"Captain." Bogo had a sinking feeling as to where this was going. Sure enough the ram propped the camera on his shoulder and thrust a microphone up as far as it could go.

"Captain Bogo, could you make a comment on the recently exposed institutional dishonesty concerning the cause of the rampage that almost claimed your life?"

"No." Bogo said simply.

"But-"

"I said no!" Bogo snapped and began to return to his car, grabbing his radio to check on Hopps. "If you chase after me, I'll arrest you for criminal harassment and you know I can!"

"Captain, wait!" The ram wisely stayed put. "Let me just ask one more question. Just hear me out, and if you still don't want to comment, I'll leave it at that!"

Bogo slowly turned back to the reporter. "Get on with it then."

The ram was more conversative in holding up the microphone this time. "Do you consider it hypocritical that City Hall would hide the truth of that incident after all the effort they put into enforcing the TAME Collar laws on the predator population?"

Bogo cocked his head. "Let me ask you a question before I comment on that; what does your CEO think of the matter?"

The ram's ears flattened. He must have really wanted Bogo's statement, for eventually he answered. "I really don't know. Ever since Assistant Mayor Woolton died, she's taken her campaign in a different direction."

Bogo nodded, satisfied enough to indulge the ram. "I see. Anyway, my answer to your question is yes."

"Could you elaborate?" The ram asked eagerly. "What do you think of City Hall denying that violence is in an elephant's biology?"

"Fine. In my opinion, the only thing worse than a hypocrite is a shameless one. Happy?"

The ram was happy enough that he didn't bother the buffalo against as he started back to the car. Internally, Bogo had been unsettled by the direction the unwanted interview had taken. Violence in an elephant's biology? What would that kind of thinking mean for the elephant population? What would it mean for Trunchbull? Bogo turned back, intending to say a few more words to the reporter, but the ram had gone.

The buffalo turned back to the car, taking small comfort in that it was considered a hate crime to slander prey mammals, elephants included, and Bellwether was savvy enough to know that. She would focus her wrath on Swinton, and Swinton alone.

He paused when he saw a hint of colour poking out of a pile of black garbage bags that didn't appear to have been touched in days. Like a crustacean drawn to the glowing orb of an angler fish he approached the small shiny object and found it to be the cover of a Gazelle CD. He already possessed a copy of this CD, but something told him that he shouldn't leave this one in the garbage. He plucked it from where it had been wedged in between two bags and opened the case. A pirated CD, of course. The unmarked blue disk inside was a dead giveaway.

His radio crackled. Commander Cunninghorn spoke. "Bogo, you need to get to 24 Liddel Avenue immediately. There's something we need to discuss with the cheetah."
Bogo glared at the radio. "How do you know where he'd being kept?"

"Trunchbull told me. Quit griping and get over here."

His hoof slipped the CD into his jacket pocket as he strode back to the squad car. This was getting better every minute. "Prick." He muttered.

"Sir?" Hopps called through his radio. "Sir, where're you going?"

"I've been called back to the safe house. I'll see you back at the station." Bogo said as he charged into the car and punched the gas.

He stopped outside the entrance to the skyscraper to find one T.U.S.K. van and the bodies of two security guards. One of the glass doors was a spiderweb of broken glass radiating around a bullet hole.

No. This couldn't be happening.

*God damn it, I promised Ben that it was safe!*

Kneeling before one of the bodies, his feet inches from the puddle of blood forming from the hole in the unfortunate deer's head was Commander Cunninghorn.

"Cunninghorn!" Bogo shouted. "Where is the rest of your squad?"

"On their way! I'm the first one here!" Cunninghorn fired back.

"What's the ETA?"

"Four minutes!"

Bogo cursed and pulled out his weapon. "What happened here?"

"Hell if I know! I got here first to find this!"

Gun in hoof, Bogo stormed toward the building. Cunninghorn grabbed his shoulder. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Clawhauser's up there, Cunninghorn!"

"I can't let you go up there!"

"Then I've got two balls for your chin because I'm not staying down here! Let go of me!" Bogo violently shrugged off Cunninghorn's hand, opened the door and crept inside.

Behind him, the rhino snorted with anger. "Fine. I'm going with you."

"Thank god you've made yourself useful for a change." Bogo replied dryly. There were more bodies in the lobby, all security guards, but barely any bullet holes in the walls. The buffalo began to suspect that this was the work of a minimal number of killers, perhaps even one.

*Perhaps the sniper. Or Woolton's killer. God, I hope they didn't get their hands on a key card.*

As they approached the nearest elevator Bogo heard a crackle behind him, and then McHorn muttering into the radio. "That way our backup."
"What's the ETA now?"

"Four minutes."

Bogo rounded on Cunninghorn. "You already said four minutes!"

"Did I?" Cunninghorn had been looking nervous since Bogo had disregarded his demand to stay out of the building. "Whatever, let's just find that pred!"

They entered the elevator and Bogo pressed the button for the top floor. He watched the numbers on the little screen climb, his heart pounding all the while. *Four… five… six… seven… eight…*

Cunninghorn's leaf-shaped ear twitched. "Did you hear that?"

The next time the sound came, Bogo heard it; the thunderous chatter of a machine gun. *Good God.*

There was a *ping*, and Bogo was out the elevator before the doors could fully open. Something had happened to the lights in the hallway; most were off and some were flashing like dull disco lights. He looked right and saw only a window looking out into the city. He looked left and saw a familiar hulking figure in the hallway farther down, flashing in and out of existence with the lights like a wraith. The buffalo opened fire.

There was a roar of surprise and anger, and the bear in the black coat and plague doctor mask took off in the opposite direction, toward the entrance to the stairs at the far end.

Cunninghorn charged past Bogo in pursuit. "I'll find the kid!" The buffalo shouted after him. He ran past the entrance to the other penthouse on the floor and toward the light emanating from the penthouse where Benjamin was located. He became aware of a muted banging sound as he approached and aimed his gun into the penthouse. On his way inside his foot brushed against a short-bladed knife on the floorboards.

The living room was empty, and at first glanced untarnished.

Then Bogo swept the room, turned right and saw another body, the guard who had been guarding the door with a machine gun. Then he looked left and saw a trail of bulletholes along the wall leading from the entrance to the bathroom door. The bathroom door was the source of the banging; someone was trapped inside by a chair expertly lodged under the handle.

"Clawhauser?" Bogo yelled, keeping his gun raised as he approached. The trapped mammal didn't answer and kept banging. The chair was getting dislodged by the constant assault. Bogo stayed where he was, reported the situation through his radio, and waited for the mammal to break free.

Just as Bogo heard the heavy footfalls of Cunninghorn entering the room behind him, the chair came loose and went flying as the door was finally kicked open. It wasn't Benjamin.

Bogo stared at the wolf in the trenchcoat standing in the bathroom doorway. The wolf stared back as the buffalo narrowed his eyes and trained his gun on him.

Bogo opened his mouth to order the wolf to raise his paws, and then felt a sudden pain, like a fiery blade across the left side of his neck.

Bogo's hoof dropped the gun and flew up to his neck as he spun round, locking eyes with Cunninghorn. The rhino's eyes were wide as he tightly gripped the short bladed knife and gestured for the wolf to get moving. Bogo felt warmth spread over his hoof and neck and brought the hoof into view. It was crimson and dripping. The sight stunned him so much he did nothing to stop the
wolf as he ran past the buffalo and out the penthouse.

Cunninghorn watched Wilde's wolf go, then turned back to Bogo with a sneer. "Enjoy Hell." He said before following the wolf out.

Bogo's mind was telling him to pursue, but his rapidly draining body was already betraying him. His own weight sent him backward, his hip hitting the back of the couch where he'd sat talking to Benjamin mere hours before. Rage and fear filled his being even as his life soaked his shirt and arm while he tried to apply pressure to the cut across his jugular.

"BASTARD!" He howled at the empty doorway before his legs gave out and he fell to the floor.

He tried to get up, but his blood-soaked arms could only raise him a few inches before he collapsed again. He tried to find his radio, but that back-stabbing fucker had swiped it before or after cutting his throat.

_Cunninghorn_... Bogo cursed the rhino to an eternity in hell as he lay there, feeling ice fill his veins to replace the blood as it began to pool under his head. _You son of a bitch_...

Somewhere beyond his darkening vision, he heard an innocent cheetah scream. Despair tore at what little consciousness he had left.

_Ben... I'm so sorry... I couldn't protect you..._

Chapter End Notes

TO BE CONTINUED...

End Notes

What does one do when they have three ideas but with no idea what to do with them? Play Resident Evil 6 and get inspired to put all three story lines in one fan fiction!
The names of each storyline are as follows, in the order of the prologues:
A Game of Collars
The Curious Case of Benjamin Clawhauser
Skyefall

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