When the Stars Align (A Zootopia Story)

by TrentonMixLee

Summary

Months after Bellwether’s incarceration, an outbreak of savage predators is plaguing Zootopia. Only this time, predators are going savage without ever being shot with a dart. Some blame biology, though the true culprit is believed to be an underground syndicate planning to shatter the relations between predator and prey, starting with Officers Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps. Undergoing a test like never before, the two officers must try and defend their friendship amidst a city trying to tear them apart. But can their relationship emerge unscathed when exposed to acts of unexplained savagery? Once again, WildeHopps must unite to mend both their city and their relationship. (Major Themes Include: Mystery, Action, Adventure, Hurt/Comfort, and Romance)

Story also on Fanfiction.net
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Zootopia belongs to Disney.
Prologue: October

Cover art by TheWyvernsWeaver (check out their DA)  
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Prologue: October

Approximately five months after the conclusion of the Night Howlers case …

("Until October, partner. And I expect you to miss me.")

She sat swamped at her desk, swimming in an ocean of 'non-incident duties' as the official reports called them, better known by most everyone in the precinct simply as paperwork. And it was high tide, judging by the rate at which the nasty red files were accumulating on her left (unfinished work on the left, finished on the right—just six more hours, I can do this). She was heavily overworked as of late, though she knew perfectly well it was her own fault. Her past week's performance hadn't been her best, and the ratio of left-side to right-side paperwork was proof. These 'non-incident duties' were the most draining part of the job, but also the most crucial. There was one thing she was confident of—the longer she doggy-paddled in this sea of red folders and ineligible black scrawl, the later it would be until she slept. And as great a wonder caffeine was, sleep was something she desperately needed.

Yet she would often allow her mind to drift away from the task at hand, and to a much more comforting thought. She would think of him. She would try and recall just how green his eyes were when they weren't partly concealed by that half-lidded I'm still a swindler at heart look. But the longer he was absent, the less vibrant that green appeared to be. His voice, which she had once found to be so unique in the way he used his words, now appeared distant and blended with the conversations of her workplace. He was fading, and it terrified her.

Before she could set herself back on task, cursing her daydreams for being so damn obsessive, a gentle rapping of claws-on-cubical-wall caught her attention. Her ears were the first to react, standing erect atop her head. She more than willingly turned away from her cluttered desk to see Wolfard, standing just beyond the divider with that ever-present placid look on his face. In one grey paw, he held a paper cup with great care.

"Hopps," he addressed with a small nod. "You looked like you could use another." He approached her desk, cleared a space, and set the cup before her.

"Do I look that miserable?" Judy grinned wearily up at him.

"Not miserable. Just in need of a pick-me-up," he said, and made his way to the cubical to her right, the one which happened to be his own. He emerged with another cup for himself, dragging behind him his rolling-chair. He seated himself in the entryway of her workspace and took a long drink. Swallowed, sighed, wiped the back of his paw across his lips, and spoke, "How are you getting along?"

"Just fine," Judy said in a tone which neither herself nor Wolfard truly believed.

"Is that right?" Wolfard mused. He motioned towards her mammoth workload with a nod of his cup. "You're desk says otherwise."

The rabbit didn't respond, only picking up her coffee and testing the temperature. Still piping, and a
little much creamer for her liking, but she certainly didn't mind his kind gesture. "My weekend was
occupied—family matters. I'm just catching up with everything," she said with another sip. "How are
the pups?"

"Tolerable," Wolfard grunted. "Elton finally learned to play on his own, which is nice. Ayn isn't
quite there yet."

"Hmm," was Judy's only response. There was silence, but the conversation had never stopped. The
way Wolfard looked her over, with that contemplative and kept gaze of his, made her feel as if he
better understood her situation than she herself did. They both knew Wolfard hadn't gotten her coffee
so she could focus on her paperwork. They also knew that the reason for her paperwork in such
excess was not because she had family matters over the previous weekend.

Wolfard's eyes moved to the second desk fit snugly within Judy's cubicle. This one was clean of all
paperwork, clean of everything but a blank monitor and a golden nameplate, centered before an
empty chair.

"It's October," Judy said in a voice distant. Wolfard said nothing, though she knew he understood.
She drew another sip of warm coffee for her own comfort.

"They're due to return this week," said Wolfard after a long silence. His eyes never left the
nameplate.

Judy nodded and swallowed thickly. "You're right," she said, and looked down at her feet. "Thanks
for the coffee."

"If you need another, I'm within shouting distance," he said.

Before she could stop herself, a worrisome thought—one which had been plaguing her for the last
several months—slipped out of her mouth. "Not everyone makes it through the academy."

"No," Wolfard agreed and took another long drink. "Not everyone, but Nicholas will."

Judy turned to face him. "How do you know?"

"He's a fox," Wolfard said with a shrug, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. "They're athletic
little things, and I doubt he's any exception."

From what Judy had seen, Wolfard was not lying. Nick was one robust fox. And he didn't even care
for things like sports—the irony. But she was still concerned, and either her face conveyed that
clearly or Wolfard had read her mind.

"You're worrying too much," he said. His tone wasn't one of sentiment, but of fact.

"I know," Judy said.

"You should be ecstatic, if anything. The graduation is already planned for Saturday. The chief
knows you two want to be partners, so I'm certain he'd work out any problems if they arise,"
Wolfard said, and for the first time he offered a sliver of a smile. No matter how small it was, it gave
Judy a great deal of comfort. "Try and focus on your work," was the last thing he said before
leaving, dragging his chair in tow.

Judy turned back to Nick's empty desk, to his nameplate. He wouldn't like how the thing said
"Nicholas" instead of "Nick", nor that it mentioned his middle initial "P" for Piberius. When she
finally spun back around to her desk, the paperwork was waiting.
Nick Wilde had signed up as Judy's partner shortly after cracking the Night Howler case. But it wasn't that easy to sink yourself a position in precinct one. After one month off, most of which spent with the rabbit, Nick soon found himself in Zootopia's central station, a small suitcase at his side. Before him was the train which would take him to the academy. The schedule he had been given said he would return in October, a date which seemed eons from that very day. He turned his back to the train and Judy was there. She smiled, but Nick could see the worry in her eyes, as defined as print.

"You shouldn't worry about me, Fluff. I'll be back before you know it, preferably with washboard abs," he grinned, though his smirk quickly fell when he saw Judy's melancholy. He retracted the handle of his suitcase, kneeling down so that the two were at eye level. Taking one of her paws into his own, he looked into those violet eyes with as much sincerity as he could muster. "I'm coming right back, you know that. Right back."

Judy found herself tracing the patterns in the station's intricate tile-work floor. "In four months," she stated, never lifting her gaze.

"Four months, then we're partners forever. You and me, Carrots. How does that sound? You think you can make it four months without this sly fox at your side?" He nudged her and offered half a smile.

His effort to cheer her up somehow succeeded, and her expression lightened, if only a little. "I guess I'll manage. This is the only way we can work together, after all."

"Yep, no way around it. Believe me, I'd ditch my bag and walk out of here with you if I could."

Nick expected her to chuckle in that shy way she often did, contractive her outgoing nature. But she surprised him by leaning forward into him, burying her head in his shoulder. Nick's eyes widened a little, but he quickly regained his composure with a tender smile.

"Work hard for me, alright?" she said, her voice muffled by his shirt.

"Yeah. Sure."

"No really," she withdrew her head so she could look up at him, "this matters a lot to me. And to you, too, I hope."

"Do you really think I'd ship myself off to some summer camp if I didn't care?" Nick chuckled, shaking his head. He pulled her back into his embrace.

A warning chime sounded out, and the two glanced back at the train. The last few recruits were hopping on board.

"I need to go," he said, and she could feel the voice in his throat as he pulled her tighter for one last moment before pulling away. "Until October, partner," he smirked down at her, fetching his suitcase. "And I expect you to miss me."

He climbed on, the doors closed, and the train carried him away. Just as she had stared at his empty desk after Wolfard's talk, she then stood in silence in that train station, sans the train. Eventually, she forced herself to turn from the empty platform and resume her life without Nicholas Wilde.

Each day after that moment seemed to linger on past the normal twenty-four hours. The sun dragged itself across the sky at an alarmingly slow rate, though only Judy seemed to notice this. Each time she saw a couple on the sidewalk, chatting carelessly and laughing with one another, a tension would
build in her. An unsatisfactory clog in her mind—in her heart. She wanted to have just one conversation with him. Just one.

But he wasn't there.

The couple on the sidewalk would keep walking, and she would tell herself that he would come back. *I can't let this affect my performance,* she reminded herself often. This job meant everything to her, and what would be the point in Nick going away to become her partner if she couldn't keep her job? Though, while on patrol, she would catch herself staring at the ice-cream shop where they first met, or the rooftop where she caught him melting a red jumbo-pop.

("It's called a hustle, sweetheart.")

The enormous mound of paperwork had been reduced after a late night and many more coffees from Wolfard. When she returned the next day, she was glad to be assigned patrol in Savannah Central. The workload was still oppressively large, but driving away from the precinct, from her desk, made her feel much better. So she drove aimlessly, keeping a portion of her mind on the speed of the vehicles around her. She didn't say a word, after all, there wasn't anyone to speak to. Chief Bogo had attempted to give her a temporary partner, though she had quickly shut down the idea. If someone became her partner in the meantime, it would almost be like replacing him. And then he would really disappear.

It was at an especially long red-light when she caught sight of two pointed ears and a tail of familiar color. The individual wasn't in sight for long, disappearing around the street corner. She waited with anxious unrest for the green-light so she could put her suspicions at ease. *It's not him, Judy. Don't be an idiot. He'll come see you when he gets back…

…screw it.

Flipping on her flashing red and blue's, she floored through the light, making a sharp right around the corner and thankfully missing the oncoming traffic. At first she didn't see him, but as she looked further down the sidewalk, there he was. Red ears, bushy tail swaying behind him. She sped up to get a better look. Her heart was racing, roaring louder than the cruiser's engine.

The unfamiliar red fox flinched at the sight of her flashing lights. He was pudgier than Nick, slightly taller, and his snout was far shorter. His eyes were brown, not green, and he wore a white shirt under an unbuttoned denim jacket and jeans of the same material. It wasn't Nick, but of course it wasn't. The fox on the sidewalk hardly looked anything like her partner. And if all this wasn't proof enough, she knew Nick hated jeans.

Feeling like an idiot, she turned off the siren and drove away, her free foot tapping anxiously on the floorboard. All the while her mind was screaming at her.

*It wasn't him. Wasn't him. Idiot. You ran a red light. Don't let this get to you. Stay focused.*

Tuesday aged into Wednesday, which crawled into Thursday. She had no patrols that day, only more 'non-incident duties'. She sat for hours beside his empty desk, absentmindedly scanning over missing person reports and arrest files. She would later shame herself for taking such serious matters so negligently. New papers arrived on her left and piled higher and higher to seemingly no end.

Though eventually there came an end. Or, at least, a lunch break.

She didn't eat much: some crackers from a vending machine and a cheap salad, which she picked at with her fork. The one thing she did consume abundantly was the coffee. It was grainy and had the
worst aftertaste—the ZPD has more serious matters than perfecting their brewing skills — but she drank it regardless.

Most everyone had returned to their desks after twenty minutes of small talk and snacks, but not Judy. She was in no rush to return to the pile of documents due at the end of the day. Her mind was elsewhere, on matters she found mattered more to her.

Reaching for her phone, her finger shot to her contacts, then to his name, as she had done so many times before. But she stopped with her paw hovering over 'Call'. If he hadn't responded before, why would he today? He would meet her before the end of the week, in person, and that was better than any phone call, right?

*I'm going to see him. 'Patience, the greatest virtue of all wise mammals.' Don't you have a poster of that somewhere?*

But she had been patient. He wasn't back before she knew it, like he said he would be. What if he never came back on that train? What if the train never even arrived? For whatever reason, in Judy's mind, this seemed to be a more likely scenario. What if he isn't here tomorrow? Or Saturday? What if he doesn't show up for weeks? Why? The why doesn't matter. It's the *what if's* that counts. It's the *what if's* that drove her to press his name.

She waited for the monotoned voice to tell her that her call couldn't be received at the time, and to please leave a message after the beep. The voice never came, and when she withdrew the phone from her ear…

*Call rejected.*

"…What?"

She stared at her screen for a long while, allowing the words to sink in. He had not picked up. He had declined her call.

The door to the break room opened with it's usual, familiar creaking, though Judy did not lift her eyes from the phone. She was too focused on those two evil words.

"Everything good, Hopps?" said a deep, masculine voice.

She glanced up and saw Delgato. The lion was standing before the vending machine, digging his wallet out of his pocket. Judy only nodded.

He finished filling his cup and walked out of the room, and she was alone again. No, that's not right. She had never been accompanied in the first place.

For four months she had been alone.

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The worst of it came that night. Everything had built up inside her on the subway home, and she was on the verge of a breakdown when she arrived at her apartment. She kept her head down as she walked past the front desk, heading for the elevator. She was dismayed to see a sheet of paper taped between the two metal doors.

*Elevator under maintenance. Use stairwell.*

- MGMT.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, ma'am," a deer in reading glasses called from the front desk. "The
thing should be up and running by morning."

"It's fine," she mumbled, not sure if he could hear her, and opened the doors to the stairwell.

Inside, the walls were painted an ugly light green color, pealing to reveal white plaster underneath. Yellow lights buzzed loudly above her head as she started up the stairs, wondering why it was that the universe suddenly hated her.

It was a term her mother had used growing up: 'The Universe'. Some called it God, others a mysterious force, even others fate. Whatever it was, it had been so generous up until this moment. She had her dream job, in her dream city. She had better friends than she could ever imagine or ask for. The universe had selected Nick and her to meet and form an unlikely bond, which would spiral into the most absurd friendship the world had ever seen. The universe allowed for—maybe even helped her—to solve Zootopia's most threatening case in decades, one that might have torn the city apart had she not stepped in. But where was the universe now? What did she do to betray it? To anger it? To turn it against her?

She tripped on the lip of a step. Her arms flailed for the handrail, though she did not reach it in time to save her knees from bouncing on the grainy concrete step in front of her. For a long time, she didn't move, listening to her heavy breathing and allowing the pain to emphasize her question. Why? What did I do?

Eventually, she maneuvered so that she was sitting down on the steps. She curled her knees to her chest and watched as her sight became distorted. A wet drop fell down her cheek.

"Don't cry", came a voice in her head, though it was not comforting. Its tone was demanding and authoritative. "What would all the inspired little children who looked up to Officer Judy Hopps think if they saw her sobbing in an abandoned stairwell? Don't. Cry."

Her paw went into her pocket, and she did not stop it from revealing her phone. Her movements were subconscious and robotic.

Contacts — Nick Wilde — Call

She pressed the button urgently, as if it were her last hope, and waited for the phone to start ringing. Now it was Nick's turn. The ball was in his court, and her mental stability relied all on his next move. If he could decline her call last time, then at least he had his phone on him. That means he can't be at the academy, as phones are taken up before training begins.

She looked up at the winding stairs above her, not wanting to see him decline her call again. Not wanting to see his response at all. She regretted calling in the first place.

When the ringing stopped, her throat tightened. She heard a sob, and it took her a moment to realize she made the noise.

Say something. Please. Speak to me. I need to hear you.

The impatience got to her, and her eyes shot down to her phone with wicked desperation.

Call rejected.

"Dammit! Answer me!" she shouted, her voice wavering on the brink of a complete meltdown. The universe seemed to mock her with the echo of her own voice in the enclosed stairwell. Her grip tightened on her phone, and she stopped herself just before she could throw it into that disgustingly green wall. It it were to break now, she could not afford another. Besides, she had only purchased
this phone a few weeks ago, and if she broke it, that might tip her over the edge. She wouldn't be able to see Nick's face in old pictures or even read his name in her contacts.

"Answer me…" she sobbed, placing her phone down on the steps. And she cried.

"You're a police officer. One of the best in the city, the chief told you himself. Get control of yourself."

Shut up, I can't deal with you right now.

"Children look up to you."

Shut up!

"How long before they learn you're just some dumb bunny who can't control her emotions? What would Nick think if he saw you this miserable?"

"I SAID SHUT UP!" she screamed through an onslaught of tears. Her voice echoed for what felt like forever, surely waking neighbors all throughout the apartment.

I let it get to me.

She managed to her feet.

Does his absence affect me this deeply?

She put her phone back in her pocket with a trembling paw.

"Of course, it does. Why else would you be weeping in a stairwell? You're pathetic, but you're just a rabbit, so it must be natural."

She lumbered up the remaining steps, wondering why he wouldn't answer. She had waited so long for this very week, just for him to deny her calls. Does he realize what this is doing to her? Does he even have his phone at all? Did someone rob him of it?

If this can make me cry, what does that mean?

"Where are you?" her voice was now a whimper. She didn't remember climbing the stairs, only that she arrived at the top, tears drying on her cheeks.

("And I expect you to miss me.")

His voice sounded so distant. She hardly remembered his tone anymore, only that it had once sounded sly and intelligent. But dead. Like that of words on a page. Read it once, twice. It never changed. It is black and white.

It's October…

She opened the door to a dimly lit hallway, trudging along, forgetting to close the door to the stairs behind her. Then at her door, managing the key from her pocket. It took her multiple tries to fit the key into the knob.

In her room, she could let it out. She could hide underneath her blanket with all the lights out, quivering. She could call her parents, or listen to the radio. She could lock herself in there for days, perhaps. Fix herself more one-course microwave meals. She could drink coffee religiously. She could slip away from the world entirely.
But none of this happened.

She opened the door, light from outside streaming into the already illuminated room. Her keys dropped from her paw.

He was there, sitting on the edge of her bed. Smiling. Not in a mischievous or manipulative way, but a sincere smile. His green eyes were soft and seemed to sparkle, glow even, in the dim room. His back was arched as he sat—as if he had been waiting a long while—elbows against his thighs, paws folded in front of him.

She didn't make a noise. A jet soared overhead, and somehow she found herself more interested in that.

"Hey, Carrots," he said, still sincere and soft, his eyes almost saddened.

Her next words confused him. "You're not actually here, are you?" she said in a small voice, springily flat.

His smile fell into a frown. He rose to his feet and approached her with slow steps. Judy noticed he was an accurate size in comparison to the real Nick. Just about four feet, maybe a little taller. And the closer he got to her, the more he could see the detail of his fur. The glimmer in his eyes. The closer he got, the more real he felt.

But he wasn't real—he could not be real. This was all a hallucination after suffering so much stress. If she wanted to believe Nick was here, her mind would tell her he was. Why would he turn down her calls if he was in her apartment all along?

Nick held out his arms in a gesture that made her want to tackle him to the ground and never let go. She wanted to feel his embrace again. His warmth and care. The way he held her gently as if he didn't trust himself not to hurt her. She desperately wanted to feel that again.

But she didn't step closer. If she did, it would only get worse. If she stepped into that loving embrace, she would wake up in a cold sweat. Maybe he would disappear, leaving her alone in her dark, cold apartment. That would hit her the hardest, and the pillow would be wet with tears that night.

This is the part when I realize *I'm still in the stairwell, or still in the break room, finishing my fourth coffee*, she thought to herself and felt suddenly distant to this impostor in front of her. This handsome impostor that her mind had created to comfort her—how dare it do that. They were in two different worlds, or so she felt.

But when Nick stepped forward, he pulled her into an embrace with that same gentle care she longed to feel again. She could smell his scent heavy on him.

*A dream?* Judy wondered, but no dream could be so elaborate. Nothing but reality could pull such an impressive scheme. *This is real.*

Her reaction was delayed, like being shot—you don't feel the pain until you're bleeding on the ground. The dam she built to keep back the tears was ruptured, and she found herself baling into his chest. Into the cream fur that ran down his neck.

For the longest time, he said nothing. He only stood there, holding her, slightly surprised at her reaction. Had him being away really hurt her this much? It wasn't like he had left for years, or said he was never coming back.

He, of course, missed her presence too. Not having his left-hand rabbit there for him had been hard,
especially for the first week. The academy had felt longer than he ever expected. Those four months had to be the longest of his life, both due to her absence and the physical strain of the constant drills. But mostly because she wasn't there.

He was the first to back out of the hug. Not wanting her to feel small, smaller than she must as she openly wept, he knelt before her. Just as he had done at the train station before he left. The memory made Judy want to cry more, but she forced herself to stop. Crying made her more uncomfortable than anyone else on the scene. It seemed to combat everything that she stood for. It seemed to remind her that she, after all, was just an emotional bunny rabbit.

She forced the thought out of her head, wiped the remaining tears, and looked into his emerald eyes. They were so real. So much more elaborate than anything she had remembered him by.

"How ya doing, rabbit? Missed me?" His tone suggested a joke, but his face was sincere. Almost worried.

"Yes," she said quickly, like she already knew he would ask. "Yes."

"You sure? Not to guess at your emotions or anything, but you seemed pretty torn up when you walked in," he said, and grinned. "Did you miss this old fox that much?"

She chuckled weakly, glancing down. "It's been a long four months," was all she said.

"Amen to that," he chuckled. "Oh, and sorry for turning down your call earlier. Telling you I was here would've ruined the surprise."

Her emotion changed quickly, and the memories of the stairwell came back to haunt her.

She scoffed. "Nicholas Wilde—I worried about you! What am I supposed to think when my partner won't answer his phone on the week he's supposed to be getting back?"

The fox shrugged. "Maybe that I put the ringer on silent?"

"NO!" She pointed a finger at him. "That is NOT a worthy excuse!" Judy said, though no excuse in the world would make her feel any better.

"If I would have known you were so morose I would have answered. I'm sorry, okay?" Nick held his hands up in defense.

She walked past him with a sigh. "I was worried out of my mind, fox! You were supposed to be getting back this week, and so when you didn't pick up, I guessed the worst."

"Oh, come on! What's the worst that could happen to me?" He said, rising off his knees and turning towards her. He leaned casually against the wall and folded his arms. A wide grin spread across his muzzle.

"You conned for twenty years. I'm sure there's plenty of crime bosses who you haven't severed ties with. Besides, you're rather careless."

"And you're" he pointed to her, "overly cautious."

Judy glared at him for a moment, then sighed, looking away. "You could have at least answered my call at lunch. I'm sure you haven't been camping out that long in my apartment, have you?"

Nick raised a brow. "Lunch?"
"Yeah. About noon, it was."

Nick chuckled a little. "Carrots, my personal belongings were returned at six, when I boarded the train. I got here an hour ago, dropped off the luggage at my place, and came here."

"Then how did you decline my call?"

"I didn't decline your call. At the academy, the phones are kept in storage—you know this."

Judy looked down. "Someone must have heard your phone buzzing and turned it off." She offered a feeble smile. "Sorry, I didn't know."

"Don't be, fluff. I'm just happy you were so worried about me," Nick slurred.

Judy rolled her eyes, internalizing the blush so he would never know. After all, she was applying his own principal. *Never let them see they get to you*. He never gave the context, though, so it could be applied to flirts as well as insults.

"Oh, I'm sure you cried each night over me," Judy smirked.

"I'm afraid my pillow remained dry, Carrots," Nick said. "But, I will admit, in the cold, apathetic void which is my heart, something missed you."

"Really?"

"I know, I know. It even surprises me," Nick smirked, and for a while, it seemed like that would be all. Then, to her surprise, he grabbed her and pulled her to him in another hug. "But in all seriousness, I missed you, rabbit," he said into her shoulder.

"Yeah," she said, nodding into the crook of his neck. "Me too. And please, answer my calls from now on. Okay?"

"We're still mad about this?" Nick chuckled, pulling away.

"Ten minutes ago I was crying in a stairwell. Sobbing. All because of your stupid plan to surprise me."

Nick took a deep breath and hopped off the bed. "Look, Hopps." He knelt again before Judy, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I won't ever do it again, scout's honor. Now, are we good?"

"Yeah," Judy said with a smirk. "We're good."

"Excellent," Nick said, getting back on his feet. "It is — what time is it? Clock, clock, clock." Nick scanned the room, finally finding the red alarm clock and radio sitting on Judy's desk. "Aha! 9:49—eleven till' ten—and you have work tomorrow, so I should go ahead and get out of your fur—"

"Wait, I...I want to talk to you," Judy said.

"What about?"

Judy paused. "I...I just wanna talk, you know? It's been a while, and you seem to be kind of a natural at vocalization, so I didn't expect it to be a problem."

"Eh, I guess having a silver tongue comes with being a fox — I don't know. But what I do know is that some find my overall charisma," he leaned closer to her so they were only inches apart, and he
hummed, "extremely attractive."

"Sit, Wilde."

"Sitting!" He spun her desk chair around and added, "You left the door open."

Judy looked behind her to see the door, still wide open, and her keys, still lying on the floor where she had dropped them. With a flush of embarrassment and the realization that anyone outside could have heard their entire conversation, she hurried over to the door, closed it.

"I'll get the keys," Nick said.

"Thanks."

They both returned to their seats.

"So," she said, resting her head on her knuckles, "how was the academy?"

"Oh, that," he grinned bitterly. "I got some great exercise, so that's a plus. And you know what? I'm an officer now, so what does it matter?"

"You didn't answer my question." She said and crossed her arms.

He looked at her for a moment, then gave in. "It's not like you're supposed to enjoy that kind of place. It sucks, ya know."

"Yeah, it does." Judy agreed. "How were your scores."

"Oh, only one of the top few in the class. I guess it's a fox thing," he mused with a wide grin.

She rolled her eyes, and he smirked all the wider. I guess Wolfard was right.

"So, how's it for you?" Nick asked.

"What? The academy?"

"No," he scoffed, "the ZPD. How's being a big city cop, Officer Hopps? Other officers treating you right? Anyone call you the c-word?"

"Clawhauser, once or twice, but he doesn't mean to. Work's fine. Lonely, I will admit, but fine," Judy said.

Nick couldn't help be a little surprised. She was lonely at work? Why, he didn't even work there yet, so how could she miss him on the job? She had dozens of other officers she knew — Clawhauser, Wolford, even Bogo. Wouldn't that be enough?

The fox hid his surprise under that ever-present smirk. "Well, no longer, Officer Hopps. This sly fox will be assisting you 24/7."

Something in her couldn't help but wonder what he would look like in his uniform.

"Officer Wilde," Judy said, holding her paw to her mouth to mimic a voice over the radio, "we have a 459S in progress. Lower 4th and Vineyard Street."

"Copy, Officer Hopps," Nick caught on, speaking into his cupped paw. "Bringing a boot now. Parked in the fire-lane again, did they? Stupid teens, think they can get away with everything, well
I've caught those rascals now!"

"What? Nick, that's not-

"I'm kidding, Carrots," Nick chuckled. "459S. Burglary. Silent alarm."

Judy snorted and raised a brow. "And illegal parking?"

"22500. And, Carrots, there's nothing but an abandoned lot on Lower 4th and Vineyard street."

"I'm impressed," Judy mused. "I knew you'd make a good officer."

"Well let's not get our hopes up yet. I haven't even started. Not sure how the public is going to react to one of my own as a bluecoat. But hey, I'm the one with the tazor," he said, putting a paw to his chest.

Judy's ears dropped a little, and Nick noticed.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll be fine. So what, I'm a fox cop? You're a bunny cop and they said it could never be done. Now you're the one representing the ZPD on billboards and magazines."

"Yes...but-"

"But we'll change their minds. Together."

Judy sighed and smiled up at him. "I'm really looking forward to having a partner."

"I sure hope so. I'm not doing the academy again, not for anybody."

"Nick, thank you," Judy said, looking into his eyes. "I'm really glad I get you as my partner."

He smiled. It was sincere, somewhat. "Me too...but you mean you as my partner."

"No, that's not what I meant," Judy snapped, though she had a playful twinkle in her eye. "I've been an officer for five months now. You've been an officer for, let's see, oh! You haven't even received your badge yet?"

"Yes, but I'm larger than you."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It means I can do this." He leaped from his chair, pinning her back to the bed with a playful growl.

She screamed dramatically. "Clawhauser, do you read? 10-00! Officer down!"

He narrowed his eyes, and his grin. "I'm really looking forward to having you, Officer Hopps, as my partner."

"In your dreams, Wilde," Judy grinned. "Now get off me."

Nick crawled off her bed and returned to his spot in her chair. "I should probably get going. It's late."

"Nick, how did you get into my apartment?" She said, sitting up again.

"I told the front desk I was visiting a friend. I knew they wouldn't believe me if I mentioned it was you I was seeing, so I said it was a surprise for a special someone, and that I couldn't tell anyone about it. So there, I didn't lie." He explained. "And to get inside..." he gave off a guilty look and
held up a disfigured paper clip.
"You broke into my room?"

"I wouldn't consider it 'breaking in' if I know the person," Nick said.
Judy glared at him. "You could have called," she deadpanned. "No, you should have called."
"Guilty as charged." Nick raised his paws in defense.

"Call next time." She held up her phone.
Nick snatched it away. "What do we have here? A new phone?"

"Hey, give it!" Judy reached for it, but Nick held her at bay with one paw.

"Hmm, password-password-password..." he pondered, swiping his paw, and his eyes widened as he was presented with the home screen. "Your phone isn't even password protected!"

"It's a new phone! I haven't gotten around to that yet," Judy hissed. "Now give it back!"

He opened her contacts and smirked. "'Mom and Dad'. How cute. You know what? I don't think they've met me-"

"Nick, stop! Give me my phone!" she pushed his arm away, but Nick got up from the chair, holding the phone up to where she couldn't reach, still fixated on the screen. He pressed the button labeled 'muzzle-time'.

"No!"

Judy was airborne. She leaped over the fox, snatching the phone from his hands and landing in a roll. She scrambled for the phone, quickly declining the call and placing the phone face down on the door side table.

"Are you out of your mind?" she hissed.

"What? I haven't met them yet. Why not tonight?"

"You said it yourself, you should get going. It's late," she seethed, shaking her head as she walked past him.

"Fine carrots, if you insi-"

BZZZ

BZZZ

The two froze, looked at each other, then to the phone.

Judy was on the phone before Nick could react. Low and behold, it was her parents. She shot Nick an icy glare, then turned so that her back was to the wall.

She sighed, pulled a smile, and accepted.

"Hey, the parents!" her tone was spritely. She couldn't help but notice the fox smirking at her. He had resumed his 'default position': leaning against the wall with extra nonchalance. He seemed
pleased with himself.

"Hey Judy, I'm just checking in! Did you mean to call us, earlier?"

It was Judy's mother, Bonnie.

"Oh—eh—no, it was an accident," Judy chuckled nervously.

"Oh," Bonnie said, sounding slightly disappointed.

"Wait that's not what I meant! I-I was going to call you soon," Judy said hesitantly.

"Oh, well, okay then. How are you getting along in the big city?"

"I…" Judy paused, looking up. Her heart sunk. Nick had slithered his way up to her and was now leaning on the wall to her left. Judy quickly turned the camera away.

"Judy? Are you alright?" Bonnie asked.

"I'm fine!" Judy smiled through her teeth. Nick grinned in response, looking too amused. "Yeah, I… thought I saw a shooting star outside the window," Judy explained. Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Really? I didn't know you could see the stars from the city?"

"Not very clearly, but every now and then you'll get a glance at one," Judy chuckled. She wanted to tackle the fox to the ground and handcuff him.

"Oh, that's neat."

Nick reached for the phone and flipped his thumb over the lens. Judy's mouth dropped.

"Judy? Are…are you there?" Bonnie asked, seeming extra suspicious.

Nick removed his thumb, and Judy laughed, rubbing the back of her neck. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"What was that?"

"…Electrical problems! There's a ram testing the breakers downstairs," Judy explained in an anxious ramble.

"…Okay then."

Nick couldn't hold in his laughter — he finally broke, almost falling to the ground. He had to lean on the desk chair for support.

"Is there someone else there?" Bonnie asked, completely weirded out at this point.

"Oh—err—it's just the neighbors. Paper thin walls."

Nick laughed even louder.

"…Okay?" Bonnie said. "You know, surely your position, after solving that case, provides you with enough to get a nicer place."

"Uh, yeah! It does! But I've grown to like this apartment!"

"…oka—"
"I gotta' go, Mom. Love you!"

"Er-Love you t-"

Judy hung up and slammed her phone down onto the table. "NICHOLAS WILDE!"

"...I'm sorry, I..." he broke into another fit of snickers.

His laughing stopped, eyes widening. Judy was airborne.

He was on the ground before he knew it, Judy sitting on his chest.

"I oughta' pour pepper spray down your throat!" She threatened.

"Sorry carrots, I didn't know you'd be so upset," he started to chuckle again. "There was a fox in your apartment the whole time, and she didn't even know!"

"Nick, I swear-"

"What would she have said?" Nick cackled. "What if I had just leaned sloooowly into frame?"

He giggled for another minute or two. To Judy, it felt like hours.

He finally got a hold of himself. "Sorry, Judy. I just...had to seize such a perfect opportunity," he wiped tears from his eyes.

"You owe me lunch."

"That's fine."

"Anywhere I chose."

"Sure thing, Carrots."

She sighed and flopped onto the ground beside him.

"I missed you, ya know," he said, turning his head towards hers. "I really did."

"Yeah, yeah. You've only been here twenty minutes and I'm already tired of you."

"Regretting this partners thing already, are we?" Nick got up, grinning down at her. "Get some sleep, carrots. Can't wait til' Saturday."

"What happens Saturday?"

"My graduation, you dumb bunny," he said. He leaned down and ruffled the fur between her ears. "I can't believe you'd forget."

"Nick, I'm sorry-"

"Don't be," he opened the door. "Now, get some sleep. And after I graduate, we're going to see your parents."

"Wait—what?"

"Goodnight, Judy," he called and closed the door, leaving the rabbit alone in her small apartment.
Hello everyone.
I'm fully aware that Zootopia is pretty past it's prime, but I wanted to write this anyways because the movie is just s oooooo good and Nick and Judy are the best d uo I've seen in a long time. In short, I couldn't resist. WildeHopps FTW! The two are just so cute together, and I wanted to see more of them, so I created this story. The events listed in this story's description are planned to come in the next few chapters.

Thanks for reading!

- Trenton.
Chapter One: Fox in the Burrows

Nick stared out the passenger window, his gentle breath fogging the glass. Outside, a drenched city passed. "This wasn't in the forecast..." he sighed.

It was an overcast Monday morning, thanks to the torrential rain that had plagued the city overnight. The city sidewalks were dark and splotched with puddles, and currents that could sweep Little Rodentia away swept down the streets and into the sewers. With the rising of the sun, the windy rain died down a little, but not a lot. The air outside was noticeably colder, forcing the entire city — even those in Sahara Square — to search their closets for their old mittens and windbreakers they had stored away last spring. Those in Tundratown dawned their daily coats and snow boots, laughing at the rest of the city for finally getting a taste of the cold they lived with every day.

Sadly, blue-uniformed jackets were yet to exist for the officers of the ZPD, so the cruisers' heating was their only haven from the cold downpour outside.

"Well, that's November for you. Besides, the weathermammal did say a 30% chance of rain," Judy said. Her voice significantly more optimistic than Nick's, but still hindered by the bleak atmosphere.

Nick scoffed, turning to look at the rabbit in the driver's seat. "It may just be me, fluff, but that rain looks pretty 100%," He jabbed his thumb towards the window. As if on cue, a gust rocked the cruiser. The gust passed quickly and the ambiance returned to a gentle drumming of rain on the car's rooftop.

"I've always liked the rain," Judy said, and couldn't help but think back to Bunnyburrow. "Where I grew up, we'd have one or two storms like this each month. I'd always go play in the puddles, and everything smelled like wet earth..." Judy found herself daydreaming, and snapped out of it, "The worst storms were in the summer. Sometimes there were tornados."

"Fun," Nick said simply. "I, on the other hand, have never liked the rain. It's hard to melt down a giant popsicle when the contents get diluted with rainwater."

Judy rolled her eyes. "As if the old con-Nick would care would care about that," she said and made a left. "More product, more bucks."

"Officer Hopps, I'm offended," Nick said, placing a paw on his heart in an overly dramatic fashion. "I would never treat my loyal customers with such disrespect. You clearly underestimate me."

"Oh, I don't know about that, seeing you've completely abandoned your 'loyal customers' altogether," Judy said.

Nick chuckled. "You act like it's my fault. Felony tax evasion, remember?"

"Oh, I remember," Judy said with a grin. "I remember that look on your face — oh, it was priceless! The great Nicholas Wilde, con-artist and popsicle-hustler, legitimately concerned over the accusations of a mere bunny rabbit." She laughed out loud.

"Yeah, yeah. You got me, Carrots," Nick smiled. He turned his head back to the window, where the scenery hadn't changed in the slightest. That is, until his eyes landed on the warm glow of a passing café. "Hey," he said thoughtfully, "how about you and me stop for some coffee on this fine morning?"
"Thanks, but I’d like to stay dry."

"I'll go in and order for us," Nick suggested.

Judy glanced over at him. "You'd do that?"

"Sure thing," Nick said. "We passed the shop a little ways back."

Judy circled around, pulling into the cafe's parking block. She guided the cruiser gracefully between a minivan and pick-up truck, powering off the engine to amplify the pattering of rain on the roof. Nick grabbed his umbrella from the floorboard. "Shortly, Officer Hopps," The fox said with a two-fingered salute and a lopsided smile. He opened the car door and jumped out into the rain.

The sudden cold took his breath away, and the icy drops on his back felt like pinpricks. Nick hastily opened the umbrella, shielding himself from the torrent. With a deep inhale, he started for the front door, trudging through puddles in the asphalt.

He turned when he heard a car door shut. Behind him, Judy bounded from the car, ducking her head against the wind.

"What are you doing?" Nick fought to shout louder than the howling gale. He pulled the shivering bunny under the umbrella.

"I'm coming with you!" she shouted back. "You'll get my order wrong anyways."

Nick laughed. "Again, you underestimate me, Carrots. One pumpkin-spice latte for moi, and a salted caramel macchiato for the rabbit."

_He remembered._ Judy thought, and something in her stirred.

"I'm coming with you anyways," she shouted.

"Oh, alright," the fox grinned and pulled the rabbit to his side so they would fit under the umbrella.

The two entered the quiet atmosphere of the cafe, soft Jazz playing from a speaker somewhere. The aroma of ground coffee beans and freshly baked bagels made Judy's insides melt. There weren't many people in the shop — no more than a dozen. But even so, Nick couldn't help but notice the stares he received walking in at her side. Him, a fox, and her, a rabbit. The thought seemed to perturb most everyone. But he was used to it. The stares are one of the prices he must pay being friends and partners with his natural enemy. He thought such looks might fade after the two solved the night howlers case, but it didn't. In fact, it only amplified the number of judgmental eyes. They seemed to follow him everywhere, even when he wasn't with her.

The situation only heightened when a number of news channels advertised the new partnership of predator and prey after Nick's graduation last month. It was rare to find an interspecies relationship like the one he and Judy had — one that not only was a bond between predator and prey but one between natural enemies. Such a partnership was completely unheard of in the subjective eyes of the city.

Nick ignored the looks. He folded the umbrella and placed it in the rack beside the door as Judy made her way to the counter.

"One Salted Caramel Macchiato, and a Pumpkin Spice Latte," Judy recited to the badger across the counter.
"Alright, officer, that'll be $7.69."

Judy was taking out her card when she heard a beep. Nick had already swiped his card.

"Nick!" She sighed.

"Gotta be quicker next time, Carrots," Nick smirked, noticing he had gained the attention of the badger. He could easily read his expression: confused, curious, wondering if this was a generous stranger, but with a glance at his badge, then at others, he realized they were both officers, and thus, partners. Part of Nick wanted to ask "Something interest you, bud?", but he concealed it.

"I'll have your drinks in a moment. Is that for here or to go?" the badger asked, pulling a small, employee-required smile.

"Here," he replied.

The badger nodded and walked to the back.

"We're eating here?" Judy asked. "Shouldn't we be-"

"Carrots, even the lowlife don't seem to like the rain. There's really no point in patrolling today. Now relax — let's go find a seat." He said walking past her.

They settled at a window-side table for two, illuminated by a small overhead which gave off the cozy orange glow that had first caught Nick's eye while driving past.

"So," said Nick, "got any plans for the weekend?"

"Er — yeah. Why?"

"I was just wondering, cause' this is nice and all," he gestured to his surroundings, "but I had in mind a nice treetop eatery in the Rainforest District. Real nice place. Family owned."

Judy turned from the window.

"Is that a date?" she asked, ears perking, a sly smile making its way across her lips.

"Eh, make of it what you will," Nick shrugged, looking away.

"I'm sorry, Nick. It sounds really nice, but I can't."

Nick looked back at her, almost surprised. "Why not?"

"I'm going to Bunnyburrow next week — that's right — I forgot to tell you!" she exclaimed, shaming herself. "There's this harvest festival each November. It's a special thing to us bunnies, at least those of us in the burrow, and I've never missed it before. I don't plan to, either, but I'd love to go eat sometime after that."

"Bunnyburrow, eh?" Nick looked back out the window. "That's — what — two hundred miles south of here?"

"About. I-15 southeast runs right past it."

Nick pondered for a moment, paw resting idly under his muzzle as he thought.

"You know what?" he finally spoke, "I think I'll tag along."
"Wait a second. What?" Judy's ears were at full alert.

"I wanna come. I've never been to Bunnyburrow-"

"Well of course you haven't been to Bunnyburrow! It's a rabbit town!"

The badger came to their table, placing the two drinks down. The two grudgingly paused their conversation. Judy smiled weakly and thanked the employee.

After he walked away, Judy's eyes shot back to Nick. "You might be the only fox for miles."

"I can deal with that," Nick said, testing the temperature of his coffee.

"My parents are there!" she almost shouted.

"Keep your voice down, Carrots. No need to shout."

She lowered her voice. "It's just… I don't know how they'll react. They've seen you once, at the graduation a few weeks ago, but they've never truly met you."

"Why? Is that a problem?" said Nick, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the flustered bunny across from him.

"No! No, that's not what I meant-"

"I know what you meant, Judy," he said coolly. "You know I've been wanting to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hopps and company for quite a while."

"I know. It's just that… that this isn't the kind of thing you invite yourself to," Judy quickly.

"Well, I can't imagine an occasion more perfect. I'm sure your entire family will be there for this harvest festival, will they not?"

Judy sighed. "They will."

"So they'll all get the pleasure of meeting your cunning new partner."

"Yeah — that's what I'm worried about. If you think predators are antagonized here in the city, it's nothing like the countryside. Especially Bunnyburrow. Did you know that my grandfather used to say that foxes are red because they're made by the devil?"

Nick laughed, taking a sip of his coffee. "Well, I have been known as a devil's advocate."

"Nick."

"Sorry. You were saying?"

The rabbit took a cautious sip of her coffee. The heat was comforting. Not hot enough to burn her tongue, but just enough for her to feel the warmth flood down her throat.

"They don't like predators, Nick. Especially foxes. I know of one fox out there — he's a baker — but my parents are one of the only ones in the town who'll buy his goods, so he has to find other places to sell to," Judy paused for a moment, staring at seemingly nothing. She then looked up at Nick. "It's as if they imagine all predators as complete savages."

"Well then, I'll just have to prove them wrong, won't I?" there was a glimmer of determination in his
voice. It reminded Judy of her childhood.

"There's never been a bunny cop, Judy. Never."
"...Well then...I guess I'll just have to be the first one!"

She took another drink and looked back out the window. The rain had picked back up.

"Fine," she said. "I leave on Friday. After work. But I'm staying for an entire week. Are you sure you can handle that?"

"The longer, the better," Nick chimed, though his expression fell upon seeing Judy's worry.

"They'll love me, okay?" he said with an assuring smile.

"There's 275 of them, and that's just my siblings," Judy said.

"I know, Hopps. I've seen your family pictures. They have to take a panoramic just to fit everyone in."

"You still sure-"

"One hundred percent," Nick said. "So what if you have 275 siblings?" he gave a nervous chuckle, which he drowned in his latte.

There was a short silence. Only rain and jazz.

"You've never told me about your parents," Judy asked.

"Oh," Nick chewed his lip. "Honestly, there's not a lot to tell. My dad died when I was five, and I grew up with my mother. She still lives in our childhood home on the threshold of Savannah Central and Sahara Square. Not the nicest neighborhood. A lot of foxes."

Judy's ears fell. "I'm sorry about...about your father."

"Don't be, it's no one's fault. I hardly remember my dad anyways, and my mom seems to do just fine on her own. I check in on her every so often. She's made friends with the neighborhood, so they've practically become her new family. She's easy to like — I ought to introduce you to her sometime."

"Yeah," Judy said quietly. "I'd like that."

There was a long silence, which Nick broke with a much more upbeat tone. "Finish up that coffee, Carrots. I want to head back to the ZPD and make sure I can get next week off."

The week was rather uneventful. The constant rain seemed to lower the crime rate significantly, as very few citizens left their homes, if only to quickly hurry to and from work. The metro made it easy to avoid the rain, so it was more crowded than normal. Nick and Judy spent most the week patrolling the stations.

Friday came quickly.

Judy sat on the edge of her bed shortly after waking. She rubbed her still fatigued eyes, blinking a few times.

"Today's the day," she said and stretched. Rising from bed, she went to fetch her uniform but paused at the sight of her phone. It lay face down on her desk.
Her family knew she was coming home for the holiday — more like they expected her to. But she hadn't told them there would be a guest tagging along...

"You had to pick this week, didn't you, Nick?" she mumbled with a half-hearted chuckle. "You'll get to see the entire town."

She inhaled deeply and reached for her phone, knowing both her parents would be awake by now. Carrot farmers rise early, as do pretty much any other type of farmer. Besides, rabbits are early risers by nature.

She soon found herself looking out the single window her apartment offered, resting her phone on the window sill. There were already pedestrians on the streets, coming in and out of the metro, hollering for taxies and honking horns.

The city never sleeps. She reminded herself, as if she didn't already know.

Her phone wrung only once before the other end picked up. Soon, she was looking at the very much awake and rather excited faces of her parents, attempting to fit both their heads into the frame.

"Morning, hon!"

"Hey, Judes! How we doin'?"

Judy chuckled a little and suppressed a yawn. "I'm doing great, thanks. Just wanted to make sure I was still welcome for the holiday—"

"Yes, of course!" they both cheered.

"That's good," she chuckled, her eyes glancing nervously away from the phone. "I'm...I'm really looking forward to it. You can't avoid the reason you called. Just tell them already.

"So is everyone else," Bonnie said and turned away from the phone. "Hey, kits! It's Judy!" she hollered into the house, and the voices of multiple small bunnies erupted with excited remarks. They all came running into the frame, hoping and waving frantically.

"Hi!" she laughed and waved back.

"Have you tased anyone?"

"I wanna move to the city too!"

"When are you coming home, Judy?"

"Can I see your badge?"

"Are you married yet?"

"I want to ride the subway so bad!"

"Alright guys, calm down. I'm coming home for the holiday," she said and was bombarded with more excited remarks and squeals.

"Alright, guys. Give me some space," Bonnie said and eyed Stu. "Can you help me out?"

Stu nodded and herded the mass into the other room, chuckling at their enthusiasm. "So we'll be seeing you tonight, then?" He said, returning to the phone.
Judy hesitated, looking back out the window like someone on the streets below was going to help her with conversation. "Um..." she started, drumming her fingers on the window sill.

Her parents waited anxiously for a reply.

"I plan to be there around six or seven this afternoon and I...I was...I was going to bring Nick with me."

The other end of the phone was silent. Bonnie and Stu gave each other a quick glance. Judy had brought Nick up in conversation with her parents a few times before. They knew Gideon Grey, which seemed to help at least a little. But she knew they would always be nervous at the mention of his name. That is, until they met him. She didn't know how Nick would do it, but he's good with words. He got himself into this mess, so hopefully, with that cunning smile and his silver tongue, he could put her parent's suspicions at ease.

Though her parents' expressions worried her.

"Okay, hon. That's great!" Bonnie said. Her smile was fake, Judy could easily see.

"Mom. Dad. I know what you're thinking," Judy sighed. "It's just...we've been good friends for a while now, and I really wanted you guys meet him eventually. He's so nice, believe me. You'll love him," Judy's foot thumped in a rapid fusion as she waited for their response.

"That'd be fine by me, Judy," Stu said. "But...you know how many show up to the festival each year. And the parade! I know a good few people who wouldn't be very comfortable in...in his presence."

"Then they obviously haven't met him yet," Judy said, trying to lighten the tone of the conversation. Nick was always good at that sort of thing. If he was here this would be so much easier...

"Believe me, guys. He's a cop! He's my partner! You have nothing to be worried about."

"Oh, we weren't worried," Bonnie said quickly, "the thing is...there's never been a fox at the festival before. Gideon, he makes pies for the occasion, but he doesn't actually go in person."

"Just trust me, you guys. Everything will be fine," Judy tried to make her tone sound assuring, though she couldn't trust in her own words. Judging by her parents' faces, they couldn't either.

"Well, alright," Bonnie said and glanced over at Stu. Judy could see the worry in her mother's face, despite her best attempts at hiding it.

"We'll see you both tonight, Judes. Drive safely," Stu said.

"Oh, we were going to take the train," Judy said shortly. "It's faster, and less of a hassle."

"Sure. We'll see you at the station," Her mother said and smiled again. This one looked more sincere than the last, but there was still uncertainty in her eyes.

"Alright. Bye!" Judy chuckled and hung up. Her cheerful expression dropped instantly, and she collapsed onto her bed.

*This is going to be a long day.*

As it turns out, Judy was wrong. The day was rather short, as if the universe wanted to skip to the part where Nick awkwardly met her parents — how cruel of it.
Bogo had most of the officers at their desks that day, including Judy and the fox who's desk neighbored hers.

She flew through multiple packets of paperwork, as well as numerous coffees from the break room. In each room she entered, she would glance at the clock. Each time she did, the time seemed to move faster and faster until…

"Hey, you ready to go?"

Nick had stood up from his desk and was gathering his belongings. He powered off his desktop monitor and skipped his phone in his pocket.

Judy’s eyes shot to the clock.

3:04 PM

The chief allowed them an early leave at three.

Judy capped her pen and straightened the scattered papers on her desk into one neat pile. "Yeah," She breathed. "You can go — I'll catch up."

Nick stared at her, and almost laughed out loud at how easy she was to read. He walked over to her side and leaned against her desk.

"You're not the only one who's nervous, if it makes you feel any better," he admitted.

"You are the one who wanted to go," she said, collecting the last of her things before standing up and pushing in her chair.

"I never said I didn't want to go," Nick said as the two started for the door. "It's only that I don't believe I've ever been in a room, alone, with any other rabbit but you. They don't all carry around fox repellent, do they?"

"Maybe some do, I don't know. You do realize how much you'll stick out, right? I mean, not only because you're taller, and a predator, and a fox, but because you're red."

"I realize," Nick shrugged. "Give me a minute, Carrots. My bag's in the locker room."

"Alright. I'll be here," Judy said quietly and looked up to see he was already on the other side of the lobby.

Everything's going to go fine. She told herself. Swimmingly.

"Oh! Hey, Judy!" Clawhauser chirped. He leaned down behind his desk and revealed a suitcase over the counter that looked comically small in his paws. "Kept it right here. Don't worry, I didn't open it or anything."

"Thanks, Ben," Judy said as the cheetah handed her the bag. Even for her, it wasn't very large. She was going home, after all. There would be plenty of her old clothes to wear.

"So," he leaned forward, resting his head in his paws, "what's the occasion?" His voice was merry. When was it not?

Lost in thought, she was replaying another scenario where Nick was chased out of Bunnyburrow by an angry mob, wielding hoes and plows and the likes of which. The thought was absurd, as that sort of thing only happened in movies, and even in movies it was a cliche. But nonetheless, it worried
her. She could think up multiple other situations, much more realistic, where Nick was outlawed by the citizens of her hometown.

"Judy? Earth to Judy! Hello down there! Anyone home?"

She finally picked up on Clawhauser's voice and dragged herself back into her feet.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"Your reason? For up and leaving so early!" Ben said, and at that exact moment, Nick came strolling in with a more appropriate sized suitcase at his side.

Clawhauser glanced between the two, and Judy could see the dots connecting in his mind.

"Aww! Are you two going on vacation together?!"

Nick's ears dropped. He glanced to Judy. She was already looking at him with a hopeless expression. He's all yours. She seemed to say.

"Well, I guess you could say that," Nick stepped up to the desk. "Though, if it's alright with you, pal-" he leaned forward. Clawhauser leaned over his desk, attempting and failing to contain his elation, "-I'd like to keep this on the down low."

"Oh!" Clawhauser whispered, straightening in his seat. He gave them a wink and a thumbs up, but paused. "If you don't mind me asking, where to?"

Nick hesitated, so Judy stepped in.

"My hometown," she said with a nervous smile. "I want my parents to finally meet Nick," she playfully elbowed the fox at her side a little harder than she meant to. Hey, she was nervous.

"That's so sweet! The thought of you two together is just…adorable!" he squealed, but reminded himself of what Nick had said. "Right, right. Down low. You two have fun now!" He said in a whisper.

Nick already had his arm around Judy's waist and was pulling her towards the front doors.

"Bye Ben!" Judy hollered over her shoulder.

The cheetah waved enthusiastically. "Bye, you guys! Have a great time!" He shouted, and immediately covered his mouth with his paws.

Nick sighed deeply once out the doors. "What to do with him?"

"He's fine. Honestly, people will probably imagine more…interesting possibilities when they see you and me missing for a week." Judy said. Her voice was uneasy.

Nick looked down at her in surprise. "You scandalous rabbit, you," He slurred.

Central Station was a mile from the precinct, but the walk was pleasant. The sun had finally came out and the entire city seemed to be basking in it.

Nick, though, still noticed the glances he received walking at her side. They were both still in uniform, which should have stated that they were merely partners. But he could feel the skepticism heavy on his back as if he was antagonizing the rabbit at his side. Every now and then he could feel a hateful glance burning into the back of his neck. Most of the time it was the elderly. They, after all,
grew up in a time where predators and prey actually did attack each other.

A zebra, walking faster than him, looked down at the two with a glare. "Watch yourself, fox," Nick heard him mutter as he brushed past.

Nick casually adjusted the badge on his chest, then looked back up at the zebra with narrow eyes and a small smirk, watching his glare fall away. Judy somehow hadn't noticed, and Nick planned to keep it that way, else she would be handcuffing the guy to a lamppost for his remark.

They arrived at Central Station around four and waited on a bench for their train to arrive. Now that they were sitting side by side, the glances of passer-bys increased significantly. This time Judy seemed to notice.

"I wish they'd stop staring at us like that," she mumbled to him.

"As long as we're partners, they always will."

"Maybe not always," Judy said. "Someday, maybe, there'll be a hundred couples like us... or even a thousand."

"So we're a couple now?" Nick grinned down at her. Her ears fell and her cheeks flushed. He loved it when she did that.

"That's not what I meant," she mumbled.

"I know," Nick said in a sing-song tone. He entertained the thought that maybe she was right. Things could change, and it was a future he liked to imagine.

Nick observed the station, watching how the trains pulled in and out, one after another. He glanced at the large screen near the ticket counter. After reading through the various destinations it advertised, he found their train.

4:24 Bunnyburrow - Arriving Shortly

It was another fifteen minutes before a train — looking exactly like all the rest save for a sign reading "Bunnyburrow" posted on its front — pulled into the station. He knew for sure it was theirs when a small crowd of rabbits pilled out the front doors. Some, he was surprised to see, were in tuxedos and carried briefcases. Though, the vast majority were like Nick expected — standing in awe at the station and the high rises just outside.

New blood. Nick thought, and couldn't help but grin, wishing he was there to see Judy's first reaction to the city.

The fox never understood what made Zootopia so amazing. What was so astounding about the towering buildings above and masses of mixed animals on the streets below. He knew his opinion was biased, for he had been born in the city. Once in a blue moon had he left the city's limits. And it wasn't that he disliked Zootopia, for if he did he would be far from it by this point. He just wished everyone knew it wasn't the interspecies paradise most dreamed it to be.

Nick pulled himself from his conscious and playfully jabbed the rabbit at his side, "Looks like that's us," he pointed to the train.

Somehow, Judy had gotten so distracted in her own mind as well, that she hadn't noticed the mass of her own species spilling into the station. She couldn't help but imagine the one hundred — no — one thousand ways this visit could go wrong. _Be positive! Think of all the ways this visit could go right!_
She could list very few.

The fox's elbow disrupted her from her worry, and she looked up at the train for a long while before saying in a voice that was almost a whisper, "We're actually doing this."

She looked at Nick. "You're actually doing this."

The fox nodded and hopped to his feet. "Yup. Now, let's get on this train before I have any second thoughts," he offered her a paw — which she either ignored or didn't notice. She rose slowly to her feet as if she were walking the last length of the green mile.

To her surprise, as she made her way past the awestruck mass of cottontails, none of them seemed to notice her. She, on the other hand, could recognize a few familiar faces in the crowd.

As they approached the train, Nick glanced over to Judy, "Got your bags?" he asked, and stepped through the doors.

Judy held up the miniature suitcase at her side. Carrot colored.

"Suits you."

"Shut up, its the only one I have."

"We could have gotten you another." He glanced down from his act to see that Judy hadn't heard him at all. She was standing just beyond the sliding doors—soon to close—gripping her suitcase tightly.

She had grown so used to the city, even though it hadn't even been a year since she'd arrived. After such an elongated stay, what would the return to her hometown be like? How would they react when she came strolling in with an unfamiliar fox at her side. She knew any sane fox wouldn't dare visit Bunnyburrow, and any sane rabbit wouldn't bring a fox, nor befriend one in the first place.

Then what does that make her? Insane?

"Carrots? You alright?"

She blinked. Nick was looking at her with curious eyes.

She nodded, continuing forward with her suitcase rolling at her side.

Nick knew her concerns, but he also knew she wouldn't like him making a scene in a place like this. He would check in on her the next moment they were alone — which probably wouldn't be for a while. The train was rather full.

He stayed at her side as she made her way up a flight of stairs to the upper level of the train. Above this level was yet another — an observation deck. It was an elongated glass dome that emerged from the train's roof, providing a 360-degree view of the station. Nick wanted to find a more casual place to sit, somewhere less touristic and overkill, but arguing with this already anxious bunny wouldn't help a bit. So he took her bag an bound it in a compartment beside his own, returning to sit at her side.

There was silence, but not in thoughts. The thoughts were loud. Nick was analyzing what he could from the bunny as she stared out the window at seemingly nothing, deep in thought. Taking into account her ears, which fell behind her head, and her nose, which wasn't twitching nor moving at all, he could make a few assumptions. The ears suggest she isn't in the best of spirits, though he knew
that already. Her blank stare out the window was different, though. It meant that she was both
gloomy as well as in deep thought. She was dwelling inside her head, where there were no outside
voices to comfort her. Her own thoughts would only rebound and dampen her mood. But he didn't
say anything. He knew the little comfort he offered wouldn't ease her worry.

The moment he looked away, multiple eyes shot to the floor. This did not surprise him, for he could
feel their stares burning into the back of his skull. He could practically see what they were thinking
as if it were advertised in dialogue balloons above their heads.

'You're on the wrong train, fox.'

But the uniform seemed to keep their thoughts within their heads and their eyes trained to the floor.

*Better get used to that look.* Nick told himself.

A chime played and the doors closed. There was a hiss as the breaks released, and the train smoothly
slid from its halt.

Sunlight bore down the moment the train emerged from the station's cover, and Nick now *really*
wished they could have chosen a seat downstairs. Somewhere in the shade.

The train picked up speed quickly, cruising into the city and threading the buildings in a series of
smooth twists and turns. Soon they were slipping through the ever-present artificial rain of the
Rainforest District, then dividing the snow in Tundratown, and finally gliding, at top speed,
underneath the giant palm casino in Sahara Square. The train then parted from the city's mainland,
cruising along a bridge over the Zootopia harbor.

Nick glanced back at the city. The skyscrapers were blending into a mass, a mass which was
growing smaller by the second. In this mass held the entirety of his memories, so he looked forward
as if the train were offering him a fresh start. Past mistakes, ruined relationships — all behind him.

He looked forward at the forested hills ahead and knew somewhere beyond them lay a town full of
rabbits in which he, a fox, would be visiting.

He hadn't lied when he told Judy he was nervous, and something inside him wanted to train to slow
down, as to prolong that moment when he came face to face with Judy's folks' farther into the future.
But the train never slowed.

The forest gradually diminished into more of a space wood, with the occasional farm here and there.
After another hour — a very silent hour, indeed — the farms overtook the wood. Now the only trees
were strips which divided the farmlands and in the distant hills. From afar, Nick could make out an
old red pick-up truck, parked on a dirt road near a field. Nick looked closer to see three small blobs,
which he assumed to be rabbits, waving at the passing train. As they neared, he noticed it was a
father with two daughters, all three sitting on the tailgate of the truck.

On any normal day, Nick would turn around, knowing Judy had noticed and had begun waving at
the passer-byes. But, as this not being a normal day, he knew she wouldn't be waving. He looked
anyways, and his assumptions were confirmed. She wasn't even looking up from the floor.

Pulling on a casual glance, he threw his arm around the rabbit and gently pulled her closer. He
noticed this induced a flinch, though she relaxed almost immediately afterword.

"I'm nervous, too. But you don't have anything to worry about. Leave this one *all* up to me. Okay?"

Judy looked up at him, sighed, and looked down. "Nick, I know you're good with other animals.
"You have your ways, or whatever. But...things, they're different out here. Especially the here that we're going to."

"You can trust me, alright? They're not all going to like me. That's the way life goes. But your parents. Your siblings. They're going to adore me when this trip is over," Nick's tone was almost too confident.

"You don't know them. My parents," She looked up at the fox, who's confident grin fell.

"Well," Nick pulled her even closer, "soon I will. Everything's going to go fine."

Only ten minutes later, a feminine voice came on over the intercom, announcing that they would soon be arriving in their final destination.

Nick didn't believe that the farms could get more compact, but they did. Only now the occasional shop began to appear here and there. Farmers markets and general stores. A few old gas stations — he didn't recognize any of the brands.

And then there was the sign.

_You are arriving at Bunnyburrow_

Nick, for the first time, saw the town in its entirety. The train on an elevated track above the town square. The buildings were no more than three stories tall at the highest, all of which were pastel shades of purple, blue, yellow, and other soft colors. Their roofs were curved into smooth semi-circles, lined with pristine white shingles. Something about it reminded Nick of Easter eggs.

Banners and booths were already being set up in the square. He could even notice the occasional float being assembled. They displayed large pumpkins and scarecrows with bright smiles.

The first word that came to Nick's mind was "Cute", but he didn't dare say anything to Judy.

On the streets were rabbits, of course. They were strolling about, casually chatting with one another without a care in the world. Nick had a feeling that his presence would disrupt such a scene.

Soon, he could feel the train slowing. Passengers began to collect their baggage from the compartments, some even leaving their seats to walk to the door.

Nick grabbed their bags and led Judy down the stairs as the train slowed to a stop. They stood at the back of a crowd of rabbits that had gathered around the door, and Nick noticed that he was the tallest among them all. He felt a squeeze at his paw, and he glanced down at Judy. She bore an optimistic look, but the anxiety could still be seen when her smile didn't curve naturally and her eyes darted here and there.

Nick smiled casually at her as if to assure that the situation was under control. He wished he could have dawned a pair of aviators then and there.

The chime played and the doors slid open. Just as they had done in the station, the rabbits quickly dispersed like water through a floodgate. Judy was relieved to see that her family hadn't gathered at the station like they did when she had first left for the big city. The two walked out the doors once the crowd had cleared, Judy scanning the small station for any familiar faces. She found none, only an all too familiar truck.

"Alright. I see them," Judy said.
"Where? There's so many."

Judy rolled her eyes and pointed to the truck parked outside the station.

The truck was originally blue but had been warped with time into a much lighter rusted color. One of the headlights didn't work, and the bumper had fallen off multiple times, but it was a farmer's truck so what do you expect?

Though, above all, the truck held a memory from not so long ago. When she had driven that truck into Zootopia upon discovering that night howlers weren't wolves, rather toxic flowers growing all over her family farm to keep the bugs away.

Judy could see her father from afar, sitting behind the wheel. He scanned the crowd and somehow missed his daughter, who was walking next to the tallest and most vibrantly colored animal to have exited the train.

"Wait, did he bring…" Judy's already drooping ears fell flat behind her head and she slapped a paw over her head. In the bed of the truck, she could make out multiple little pairs of ears, bouncing around and peaking over the sides of the truck.

"Judy! Over here!"

It was Stu. He had finally picked her daughter, more accurately the fox, out from the crowd.

"Here goes," Judy said, glancing up at her partner. She crossed her fingers.

"Calm and collected. You got this, Officer Hopps," Nick smirked and pushed her forward. "Now go greet your father — I'm sure he's been dying to see you."

Judy forced a smile and ran into her father's embrace. Nick stood awkwardly a ways back. He noticed a rabbit sitting on a bench nearby, staring at the fox with a distrustful look. Nick smiled and gave a small wave before turning away.

"I've missed you so much."

Nick looked back to see that the two had finally separated.

"Look at you, all suited up!" Stu said, admiring her blue uniform, especially her badge. "It says your name and everything!"

"Yep. That it does!" Judy chuckled nervously.

Stu seemed to pick up Judy's tone. He looked up at her, then over her shoulder to where Nick stood. The fox stood trying to look casual with one paw in his pocket, the other drumming on his hip.

Stu stepped around Judy, his pace slowing as he approached. "And you must be Nicholas."

The fox looked up and smiled — not a smug smile — rather a sincere and polite one. He'd save the smirk for when he'd won him over.

"You'd be right, Mr. Hopps, but please, call me Nick," he offered a paw, which Stu shook. Nick noticed how light his shake was and could tell he was holding back several thoughts and emotions behind that pleasant smile. Anxiety. Curiosity. Possibly even fear…

"Nick, then. And while we're at it, you can call me Stu," the rabbit withdrew his hand.
"Well, Stu, I'd like to say thank you for allowing to come out this week. It's been ages since I've left the city," Nick looked around. "And it's absolutely lovely out here, I must admit. I don't think I've ever seen so much open space."

Stu chuckled. "We're farmers. Open space is what we do."

A hushed chorus of voices caught all their attention, and they looked over to see at least eight pairs of eyes peeking over the side of the truck, ears pointed tall. The moment they were spotted, the ears disappeared behind the truck bed, shouting at each other in whispers.

"Get down! He's seen us!"

"I told you that wasn't a good idea, Cotton! Now we're all going to be eaten!"

"Oh shut up, Elton! Keep your ears down!"

"Quit making so much noise!"

"You're the one shouting!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Stu chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Pardon the kits, a few said they wanted to tag along. I don't believe they were expecting to see you."

The fox grinned. "They're fine. And how many kits do you have, again? Judy told me but I forgot the number."

Stu laughed sheepishly. "Two hundred seventy-five, but they've mostly left home by now. Some even have litters of their own. What you're seeing are the cousins and grandkits. You got any brothers or sisters of your own, Nick?"

"Nope," he shook his head, "Only child right here. I don't think my mother could handle two pups."

"Look at his claws! I wish I had claws like that!"

"No you don't, you'd poke yourself all the time!"

"Why is his tail so long?"

"That's the way all foxes' tails are, you dummy!"

"Hey! I didn't know!"

Nick laughed. They were cute, and he would never tell Judy or her parents that, but the word fit them perfectly. Their little ears were always alert, and they bounced around like little balls of energy, rocking the truck as they did so. Nick tried to imagine Judy as a kit — wearing a police cap three sizes too large, bouncing around and telling everyone that she was going to be a police officer in Zootopia one day.

"I dare you to wave at him."

"That's easy!"
"Do it, then!"

"Not like that, he can't even see you! Stand up and wave at him!"

"That wasn't part of the dare, Jade!"

"What? Are you scared?"

Nick watched a light-brown bunny emerge weary from the truck bed. She hesitated, then waved a nervous paw at the fox. He smiled and waved back.

Seeing she had gotten the fox's attention, she jumped down and out of view, giggling the entire time.

"I almost died!"

Stu glanced at Nick and gave a 'what can ya do' look. "They're like that all the time. We better get em' home," he opened the driver's side door and climbed in.

Judy looked at Nick with a pleased smile.

"I told you everything would be fine," Nick said.

"I guess you're right. I'll be in the back with the kits," Judy said, making her way towards the truck bed.

Nick grabbed her shoulder and turned her the other way, "You, dear, can sit in the front and talk to your father. It's obvious there's an unspoken barrier between you two, and I'm guessing I'm the cause. I'll sit in the back, which will allow me to bond with the kits, and you'll have time to talk to your father in private."

Judy opened her mouth but said nothing.

"That's what I thought. Now get in the truck, Hopps." He gave her a gentle shove towards the door as he walked past.

Judy stood there for a moment, not really knowing what to say. She finally walked around to the other side, climbing into the passenger seat.

Foxes will be foxes. She thought to herself and smiled.

"He's sitting in the back?" Stu's voice was surprised as to cover up his worry.

"Yep. He insisted," Judy sighed, closing the passenger side door.

There was a long moment of silence. Judy finally reached over and put her paw on Stu's shoulder. "Dad, don't worry. He's a police officer for crying out loud! We both are. He saved my life multiple times during our first case together, and my job too. You have nothing to worry about."

Stu thought for a long moment, then sighed, "I guess you're right. Sorry, Judes, I've just got a lot of prejudice to overcome."

"You'll warm up to him, I promise," Judy said, "He's a very likable animal."

Nick made his way to the truck bed. He climbed partially up over the side of the truck, and the kits in the back all jumped back. A few even screamed.
The fox only chuckled to himself. "Calm down, little dudes. I'm not going to hurt you," Nick climbed all the way into the truck. "I'm just hitching a ride."

"Great-grandpa said foxes were evil and like to eat little rabbits!" one of the smallest kits said, hiding behind the others' legs.

Nick laughed, "Well, I'm a police officer, so I don't think I'm too evil. And I've already eaten today, so you're all safe."

A light brown rabbit emerged from the crowd, the same one who had waved to him earlier. She had a curious look in her eyes. "You're a police officer?" She asked, and Nick was genuinely surprised by the fascination in her voice. He had heard that same question many times before, though this had been the first time there wasn’t a hint of sarcasm or disbelief in the tone of the one asking.

"I sure am," Nick said, a gentle smile spread across his lips. He looked from the small bunny before him to his badge. He unpinned it with care and kneeled down before the rabbit, who didn't even flinch at his presence. "See?"

She took it gently into her paws, admiring it as if it were solid gold. In her mind, it might be.

"I work with your aunt, Judy. We're partners." Said Nick.

The rabbit ran her tiny paws over the badge, her eyes twinkling. "Whoa," Was all she could say before-

"Hey, let me see!"

"Can I hold it?"

"I wanna see it too!"

Nick chuckled and extended his paw towards the light brown rabbit. Her brothers and sisters flinched away, probably at the claws, leaving only her. "Sorry, guys, but I'm gonna need the badge back. I don't want it to fall out of the truck. But when we get home, I'll let you all hold it."

The crowd lit up.

"Really?"

"Thanks!"

"I didn't know foxes were so nice."

"Me neither!"

The rabbit gave Nick back his badge just as the truck's engine sputtered to life.

"You kits sit down!" Stu called, sticking his head out the window. "Nick, can you close the tailgate?"

"Sure thing, Stu!" Nick yelled back. He leaned over the edge of the truck. The gate squealed on rusty hinges and required Nick to slam the thing just to get it into place. He then sat with his back to the gate, and couldn’t help but notice how the majority of the kits had adjusted themselves at the opposite end of the truck. He wasn’t surprised, nor offended. They were rabbits — kits, in fact — so it was no shock to the fox. He had gotten used to the distance other animals put between themselves and him.
What did surprise him was when the light brown rabbit came to sit at his side. The others looked on with interest.

"So, do you have a name?" Nick asked with a lighthearted chuckle.

"Um...yes. Cotton," she said. She looked up at him with green eyes, not too different than his own.

"Cotton?" Nick nodded, and could list a thousand sarcastic jeers about rabbits and their farming off the top of his head, but would have to save that for when she got older. "That's a nice name."

"Thanks," the bunny said in shy tones.

There was silence, save for the burbling truck, which rattled and bumped along a dirt road. Nick took this time to take a closer look at the setting. The farms were built on rolling hills, only evident from a distance, in which they appeared in shades of blue. Fields of various condition, color, and crop bounced past. The occasional neighbor waved to Stu as he passed.

"Is that real?"

Nick looked down to his side, where Cotton was looking — with an almost concerning interest — at his holstered gun.

He pointed to the gun, hoping she was taking interest in any of the other items on his belt. After all, he didn't want to give the rabbits another reason to fear him more than they already did.

Cotton nodded when he pointed to the gun, and Nick couldn't keep the sigh from escaping his lips. "Sure is, kit."

"Whoa, really?" A grey rabbit adjacent to Nick asked with that same fascination. In a way, this rabbit almost looked like Judy, only that he had dark blue eyes instead of the violet eyes Nick had grown to love. The thought of Judy as a child made Nick want to laugh and rant to her about how cute she probably looked in a police uniform bought from a costume store or how funny a scene it would be, her chasing her siblings with a plastic revolver, shouting "Freeze! Hands up!" in a squeaky, prepubescent voice.

"Yup," Nick replied.

"Have you ever used it?" the rabbit's question was almost instant.

"Well, seeing as I've only been an officer for a month — no, I haven't — not on duty, at least. But I shot it plenty of times at the academy," Nick concealed a shudder at the thought of the academy and its nightmare-inducing training program.

"What's the academy?" Said another rabbit.

"It's the reason you don't want to be a police officer," Nick joked, but none of the kits picked up on it. He cleared his throat. "It's the required training program one takes before becoming an officer. We did plenty of target practice." Nick patted the gun but didn't dare to remove it from its holster. He could list a million ways such a scenario could go south and then some.

"Did you hit the target?" another asked.

Nick laughed, "Yes, most everyone could hit the target."

"Did you get to shoot anyone?"
"Yeah, did you?"

Nick sheepishly smiled, "Sorry kits, but I haven't shot anyone. It's on the bucket list, though."

"Have you ever been shot?"

"Not yet, and I don't hope to."

"Have you ever arrested anyone?"

"That I have done."

"Really? With pawcuffs and stuff?"

"Sure thing, kid."

"Awesome!"

"Can I try them on?" one asked.

"I don't think you'd like them. Besides, I get a feeling your grandfather wouldn't like the idea." Nick said and glanced at the front seat, glad to see Judy's father wasn't listening. Rather, he was in seemly deep conversation with Judy, and Nick couldn't help but suspect that he was the topic.

"Can we at least see them?" the grey rabbit asked with extra enthusiasm.

Nick thought for a moment, then reached into his belt and revealed the two cuffs, attached by a drooping chain.

There was a sweeping "whoa" which had a unison that could impress any theater director. They then immediately began to beg to hold the cuffs.

"Sorry, but that's a no. I can only use them on criminals," Nick paused with added suspense. "That is, unless any of you have committed any crimes your parents don't know about."

There was an immediate hush in the truck bed. The theater director would have a tear in their eye.

"Mr. Fox," a young rabbit with cream fur said, stepping forward with her hands behind their back. "I…I stole some blueberries once. Only a pawfull, but I knew I shouldn't have," She sniffled. "Do I…Do I have to go to jail now?"

The rabbits around her looked anxious as if they actually exposed their little sister to be dragged off in handcuffs.

Nick gave an amused smile, "Your fine, little thing. A few blueberries aren't going to hurt anyone, just ask next time."

She nodded and wiped an eye. Nick wished Judy was here to see such a scene.

Another rabbit stepped forward. "I broke a window, once, with a baseball. That's not illegal, right?"

"Not if it was an accident. You play baseball?"

"Yep," the rabbit said, but was swamped by the others as they pitched in.

"I broke a lamp!"
"I cut down a little tree, and now I feel bad."

"I shattered a vase!"

"I ate some fertilizer, and it tasted like weird popcorn."

Nick took a mental step back from the conversation, as now the entire crowd was admitting to all the little things they had done. "Guys, guys, one at a time. Please. None of you are going to jail."

The bunnies sighed in relief, and somewhere, someone actually let out a disappointed "Aw!"

The trucks rumbling, which Nick had grown used to, came to a stop, and he looked up. They were parked not far from a large, farmhouse. The house was three stories, all of which painted a pristine white, though the third story only had an attic window. A front porch led to the door and wrapped around the side of the house, containing a few hanging flower pots and two rocking chairs, which faced the setting sun.

Nick had never seen such a place. There were suburbs in Zootopia, and there were mansions. But it was hard to find anything in between. This house was in between, the front facing side showing off at least fourteen windows on the different stories, each of which had two black shutters on either side and white curtains, opened from the inside. And the land surrounding the home was expansive. Nick could make out multiple barns and sheds behind the house, and beyond that was an infinite farmland.

"Come on, kits," Nick said, folding the tail-gate down and hopping out. He offered a paw to Cotton, who took it with a shy giggle. He helped her down from the truck bed, while the rest all hopped down and bounded for the front door, Cotton following not far behind.

Judy stepped silently to Nick's side, not going unnoticed.

"I'll admit it, Carrots, they're sweet little things," Nick said with a grin. He glanced over to Judy, who was looking down. Her eyes were hiding something. "Judy? Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry," Judy straightened. "I'm just a little anxious-"

"No, that's not it. Your ears are drooping, and your nose is twitching," Nick said. "Come on, Carrots, you know you can't lie to me."

Judy sighed, fiddling with her thumbs anxiously. "I was just-"

A truck door closed, catching their attention. Stu walked trailed the kits inside, glancing at the two officers only once before closing the front door.

"Whatever he said, it's okay. I've probably heard worse."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"I'm assuming your father took the privacy as an opportunity to express his feelings on our partnership. I'm guessing his opinions were rather negative," Nick said.

"He wasn't rude about it or anything, but I can tell what he's thinking. I mean, he's my dad," Judy looked down again.

"It'll be alright, Carrots," Nick soothed, draping an arm around her shoulder. "I wasn't lying when I said they were all going to love me by next weekend. I've already hit it off with some of your nieces and nephews."
"You've got a lot to go," Judy chuckled. Her tone was hopeless.

"Let's go inside-"

"He said he doesn't think I should be working with a fox," Judy finally blurted out. "He…he said it isn't right for a bunny, like me, to have a predator as a partner,"

Nick looked at her with complex emotions. "Only one bunny gets to decide what is best for you, and that's you, Officer Hopps. You're a grown rabbit, you make the rules. If you wanna be partners with a sly fox, such as myself, I'm all for it. If not, I totally understand-"

"No, Nick. I never said that," Judy said. "I like being partners with you. I wouldn't want anyone else. I'm serious."

"I know you are," Nick said. "But you should know that not everyone's going to approve of this partnership we have."

"Of course I know that." Judy sighed. "...Let's just get inside."

"Sure thing, Carrots," was all Nick said.

The fox placed an arm over the rabbit's shoulder and led her gingerly up the porch steps and to the foot of the large oak door.

AN: Wow this took a while to write. Almost 10,000 words. And adding in the spaced between each line is INCREDIBLY monotonous, but I think it looks better that way.

I'm thoroughly enjoying writing this story, and I plan for it to continue. I don't want it to become just another one of those stories which publishes two or three chapters then drops off the face of the earth. I want to take this story and these characters places.

And yes, there is a story. As much as this may all seem like Zootopia scenarios, there is a storyline I am putting together, and it should introduce the main antagonist in the next chapter or two.

Thanks for the favs and follows, and I hope you enjoyed the new chapter.

Until next time,

- Trenton.
The first thing that Nick noticed upon entering was not the overly decorated interior common to most farmhouses, rather the rich scent of a home-cooked meal. A yeasty buttered aroma that surely was rising off freshly glazed rolls. Such a smell overwhelmed the undertones of a starchy odor, most likely potatoes, and a sweeter one. Carrots, of course. The fox credited his predatory nose, which could easily help him identify the rest of the meal — peas, sweet potatoes and sweet nuts, gravy, squash.

Something else drifted in, mixed well underneath the scent of the overall meal. It was oceanic, and Nick, if only for a second, doubted his sensitive sniffer.

Fish?

He reminded himself that rabbits were vegetarian, obviously. They were Prey, after all. But that still didn't explain the fishy smell that wafted in. It reminded him of olden days when his mother prepared home-cooked meals of her own.

Nick glanced down at Judy, only to see her staring straight ahead with an intensely kept expression, one that suggested she had finally calmed herself to some extent.

The house appeared larger on the inside than the outside portrayed. The front door opened up to a decorative entryway. Straight ahead was a large kitchen, multiple rabbits hard at work with pots and ovens. To the right of the entry was a cozy den, one with a fireplace that Nick was sure he would hear gently crackling if the ambiance of small talk and clanging glassware, pots, and pans were toned down. Above the fireplace, on a brick mantle, was several family portraits in various frames. Hanging above them all was a purposefully aged sign, displaying its message in a fluid cursive.

*Bless this Mess*

"Oh, Judy! You're finally here!" cried a feminine voice.
Bonnie Hopps rushed from the kitchen, dawning in a flower-dusted apron. Nick concealed his amusement when he noticed the apron had a carrot sewn into it.

The two bunnies embraced, then withdrew quickly.

"It's great to see you, Mom," Judy's voice was calm and low, though a pleasant smile was on her lips. She hid her worry well, Nick noted.

"Pardon the mess. You know how family dinners go, especially on the holidays," Bonnie sighed. "I'm just so glad you could come! I was worried that you wouldn't be allowed a week off. Business is serious in the big city,"

"More than you can imagine," Judy chuckled quietly.

"And look at you! You're all dressed up in your uniform and everything! You look great, dear,"

Judy looked down, remembering that she was still wearing her uniform. Normally, the bullet-proof vest was heavy enough to nag at her all day, though she had seemed to forget it was even there. After all, there were more pressing matters at paw.

It was at this moment that the elephant, rather the fox, in the room was addressed.

Bonnie sidestepped Judy, coming to face the fox who also stood in his blue uniform.

"And Nicholas! It's so great for you to come! Judy talks of you all the time over the phone, you know?"

Nick slipped Judy a smirk, happy to see that she had her head in her paw, a slight pink flushing her cheeks.

"A pleasure, Mrs. Hopps. For years I've needed an excuse to escape the city, and upon entering your lovely home, I've decided there's no place I'd rather spend the holiday," Nick said, extending a paw. "And please, madam, call me Nick."

The two shook paws. Nick noticed her grip was more confident than Stu's had been. He had seemed to hold back, while her shake and smile appeared to be genuine. But he did notice the nervous twitch of her nose in his presence, though it wasn't anything he hadn't expected.

"Nick it is, then," she stepped back, looking from the fox to her daughter. "So I hear you two are partners."

"Yep," Judy chuckled awkwardly. "The dynamic duo!"

Nick raised a brow, seeing that this was his opportunity to take initiative.

"All thanks goes to your daughter, Mrs. Hopps," he looked to Judy with flashing emerald eyes. "She's the one who first employed me."

"Really? I always thought you two met through the job?" Bonnie said, folding her hands at her waist.

"Mom, it's a long story," Judy said in a hesitant voice. "I'll tell you later, maybe when I get the chance to sit down and eat."

"I most certainly will, Mrs. Hopps," Nick said, looking around. The home was a cozy one, despite its large size.

"And if I can call you Nick, you can call me Bonnie. Okay?" she said.

"I suppose that's fair," Nick grinned, and she laughed.

"You two have fun now! Judy, how bout' you give Nick a little look-a-round? Supper should be ready in about half an hour." She gave a little wave and returned to the kitchen.

"It appears you're my tour guide," Nick smirked.

Judy rolled her eyes. "I'm putting my bags upstairs. You're welcome to tag along," she said, turning with her suitcase in hand.

The two walked upstairs, where there was a common room which leads off to multiple doors. Judy took a moment to compose herself at the top of the stairs. It felt like ages since she last visited her room. The last time she had been here was shortly after her graduation from the academy. The last time she was here, she hadn't known anything of the night howlers, nor Bellwether's scheme. The last time she was here, she didn't even know Nick. Never in a million years would the Judy who lived in this house only six months ago think that she would bring a fox up to her room with her. Not without believing that it was some sort of crazed dream or assassination attempt.

The two walked down the hall in silence, the sounds of little voices laughing and shouting coming from behind the closed doors on their right and left. Finally, Judy turned to the last door on the right and opened it.

Inside, a group of young bunnies, all female, were trying on various hats Judy kept inside her closet. When the door opened, they all froze, looking like criminals caught in the midst of a heist.

One of them screamed when she saw Nick standing just behind Judy.

"Judy watch out! Behind you!"

Judy chuckled a little, glancing behind her to meet the smirk she expected to see. She turned back to the girls.

"And what are you guys doing in my room?" she said in a more serious tone.

"...Sorry, Judy," one of them said, ears drooping behind a straw hat three sizes too large. It almost encompassed her head entirely. "We wanted to try on your hats."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sure there are plenty of hats you can buy at the festival tomorrow. Now get out of my room before I unleash the fox on you."

The girls glanced at each other nervously, then quickly took off the hats and scurried out of the room. The smallest one lollled behind, pausing for only a moment to give the fox a curious look before one of her older sisters grabbed her by the arm and pulled her from view.

Judy sighed deeply, walking into her old room. She sat down on her bed, rolling her suitcase to an idle rest at the foot of her bed. She looked around, familiarizing herself with the same walls she had dwelled in for years. It didn't take long for her to remember all that she had experienced in this room — in this house — and soon she truly felt at home.

"Alas, Casa de Carrots," Nick smirked, taking a look around.
The room wasn't too large, but that gave it a cozy feel. On the wall near the door was a closet, not a walk in, though there was a decent amount of space available. Inside, forgotten tops and skirts aged on wire coat hangers, while old worn shoes were piled in a box in the corner. There was one window across from the door, one that overlooked the front lawn and the hills beyond it. Pillows were lined along the windowsill, one of which bore a bright orange carrot. Adjacent to the window was a queen sized bed, made with pristine care until Judy had flopped down onto it. Countless stuffed animals sat with their backs against the headboard. There was a dresser on the far wall, one with a large ovular mirror atop it. Polaroid pictures lined the mirror's rim. Near the dresser was a clean wooden desk, though the wear was evident. It was covered with small bumps and scratches, some of which appeared to be from pencils. A gooseneck lamp was turned to shine down on the desk's surface. Dust had collected on the bulb.

Nick gave a nod of approval. "It's cozy, I'll admit."

"I prefer my apartment," was all Judy said, now laying on her back, feet lolling over the edges of her bed.

"Really? That greasy little hole in the wall?"

Judy scoffed. "It's my greasy little hole in the wall, and I like it just the way it is."

"Sure you do. Just don't be surprised when your heating, water, and electricity all simultaneously fail."

Judy rolled her eyes and pushed herself into a sitting position. She looked around, taking into account the smaller details that she knew Nick might notice but would never understand. The divot in the wall near the dresser. The small splatter of blue paint on the bottom left corner of the window frame. The tally marks on the inside of the closet door. They all held memories, unimportant ones at that, but memories nonetheless. A waft of nostalgia forced a sigh from the bunny. So much had changed since she last left this room.

"Aha! I was hoping I would find some pictures of little Judy Hopps." Nick leaned into the dresser to better see the pictures taped to the mirror. One was of nine-year-old Judy, wearing an oversized police cap that sagged on her head. She wore an officer's costume, holstering a plastic baton and handcuffs. She stood gallantly with her arms around a few smiling faces: a grey lamb, a white sheep, and a tan bunny. They were all holding handfuls of tickets and standing underneath a vibrant banner hung from the rooftop of a red barn.

Carrot Days Festival

Judy groaned, pulling the fox away from the mirror. "Quit looking at those. I don't want your opinion on how naive I looked fifteen years ago."

"Did I ever once say you looked naive?"

"No, but you were thinking it."

"Ha! These accusations!" The fox sat down backward on the desk chair, facing the rabbit just across from him. "So, you can't tell me that all of your two hundred and seventy-five siblings sleep in this house, do they?"

Judy chuckled. "Of course not. Most of them sleep in the barns."

"...In the barns?"
"In the barns," Judy repeated. "And no, it's not as bad as it sounds. Most of the barns have been transformed entirely into bedrooms. They're rather nice, actually."

"Why, then, do you get to score a room in the house?"

"Because I'm one of the older siblings," Judy said, moving the onslaught of stuffed animals aside and reclining against the headboard of her bed. "When my parents realized, after the fourth litter, that their house wasn't big enough for all of us, they also realized that they had a lot of barns. So the barns became bedrooms and I got lucky," she gestured to the room around her. "So tell me, lone fox. What's it like to be an only child? Lonely?"

"Anything but, Carrots," Nick said. "What I don't have in siblings I make up for in acquaintances. Less time dealing with younger brothers and sisters, more time I have to get to know the neighborhood."

Judy tried to imagine what a brother or sister of Nick would look like. The thought had never occurred to her. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't imagine those emerald green eyes suiting anyone else.

She realized she had been staring and her eyes darted to the floor. "I'm guessing your mother had you and decided one hellraiser was enough, am I wrong?" she chuckled.

"You are, in fact, my parents only wanted one child, or so I was told. My dad wanted a boy, so I guess he got lucky first time around."

"Your dad...what was he like?" Judy asked in a soft tone, as not to catch a nerve.

Nick looked away for a hesitant moment, and Judy quickly withdrew.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't-"

"You're fine, Carrots. His name was Nathaniel," Nick said, looking down. "I don't remember a lot about him, as I was only five when he passed. But when looking back at old pictures, he looked a lot like me. I have my mother's eyes — his were blue — but I have the same trim form as he did. The same snout and just about the same height, as it would play out," he paused with a sigh.

"Nick, you don't have to tell me," Judy said in a gentle voice.

"I would have told you at some point. Why not now?" He drummed his paws on the chair he sat in. "Mom always said he was the kindest mammal she ever met, and also a fox, which is why she married him," Nick gave a pathetic chuckle. "She said he was an idealist, that he fought directly against the trope that all foxes are sly and up to no good. He'd help out the neighbors like he had known them for years, and would always smile at others on the street, even if they glared back, she said.

"One day he was tending to the lawn when a police cruiser pulled up. It turns out one of our neighbors were part of a crime network, no surprise there, considering the neighborhood. Mom said he just watched as they dragged him out of the house. I think Redford was his name — I don't really remember. He started to fight against the officer holding him and eventually freed himself from the restraints. He was taken to the ground almost immediately, but they started to beat him with their clubs. That was when my dad ran to the scene."

Nick was silent for a long moment. It was as if he were reflecting on something he had tried to block from his mind for so many years.
"The report says that he provoked an officer, though my mother says otherwise. She watched from the kitchen window, according to her story, as her husband tried to pull the officers off Redford, who was on the verge of consciousness at this point. One of them knocked my dad to the ground. He got back up, maybe looking a little more vicious than he intended to, and started to rush back in to stop the beating when a nearby officer, a pig, fired on him. He was dead before the EMT showed up, in fact, they say he died immediately. Right between his sky blue eyes and out between his ears."

Judy was at a loss for words. She found herself staring down at her feet, though her mind was racing. How come he had never told her this before? Such an event is something that would even outshine Nick's muzzle story. She had known the fox for almost half a year, and he had never as much as mentioned that his father was slaughtered by a police officer.

A whole new sensation of question and even guilt rushed upon her when she glanced up, seeing the blue uniform the fox was wearing as he told her this.

"Nick…” but she didn't know what to tell him.

"Don't feel bad," Nick said, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "Again, I was five. As tragic as it was, I hardly remember Nathan. Maybe it's best that way."

Judy looked down, silently disagreeing.

"The trial was easily dismissed as a police officer defending herself from a hostile predator. Even if we had the money for a lawyer, which we didn't, they wouldn't be any match for whoever the ZPD could hire to defend themselves. There was a small funeral and a personal apology from a few officers, though none of the ones who were on the scene that day. For all that I know, the officer who killed my dad might still work for a precinct somewhere."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Judy asked.

"Because admit it, it's a depressing story. It's already put a damper on our holiday getaway."

Silence claimed the room, and the sound of playing kits became audible again, despite the fact that it had always been there.

"Does it bother you, being a police officer after what happened?" Judy asked.

"No, not really," Nick admitted. "I know that none of the officers at precinct one did this, so why blame them? And why let something that happened so long ago hold me back? If was my choice to become an officer, and maybe, by taking this job, I can prevent something like my dad's murder from ever happening again."

Judy looked up at Nick, into his surprisingly tranquil green eyes. They didn't look at her, but she knew he could feel her staring.

Judy moved to the edge of her bed, leaning forward to put a paw on Nick's arm.

"It means a lot that you told me," she said, looking down and allowing for the silence to retake the room. It was when she looked back up at him that her heart seemed to skip a beat.

He was looking down at her, muzzle closed, completely silent. His gaze wasn't one of analysis or humor. His face was serious, but his eyes were soft, almost curious as he gazed down into her amethyst eyes.

*What is he thinking?* Judy wondered though she didn't look away. Something about his eyes was
A smile graced his lips. Her heart climbed into her throat.

The door opened.

"Judy…oh?"

Both heads turned to see a little brow rabbit standing in the doorway. She looked at them for a moment with a questioning look, nose twitching slightly, only to snap herself out of it.

"Mom wanted me to tell you that supper would be ready in five," She said before closing the door.

The two looked back at each other, and Judy was almost disappointed to see that Nick's smirk had returned.

"Do your siblings know to knock?"

Judy chuckled. "In a house full of bunnies, there's not a lot of privacy. Better get used to it, Wilde, you wanted to come after all."

"I know. Now, let's go change and wash up. Judging from the smell alone, your mother is an amazing cook."

All the long tables in the Hopps family dining room (more like dining hall) were filled. Notwithstanding the presence of a Red Fox, the hall was filled with the ambiance of pleasant small talk. Nick sat at a table with Judy, her parents, and a few of her closest siblings. Nick sat at the far right of the table, with Judy on his left. Across from him was Bonnie, and at his right — being the head of the table — was Stu Hopps.

The tables were lined with a variety of dishes, all of which were vegetarian. All save for the plate before Nick.

"Bonnie," Nick picked at the plate before him, "you really didn't have to."

"When I said 'make yourself at home' I meant it. Though I will admit, I have never cooked fish, so I do hope it turned out well." Bonnie's eyes were hopeful yet reserved.

Nick cut a small piece from the fish, gingerly bringing it to his muzzle with his fork. He tried to remain civil, despite how uncomfortable it made him feel to eat meat around so many of the Prey kind.

The fish was cooked well — tender to the point it seemed to melt in his mouth — though it could have used some seasoning. Though Nick didn't dare say anything other than, "It's perfect, Bonnie. I really appreciate it."

The sincerity of Nick's words seemed to put her at ease, and she, for the first time, focused on the plate before her.

"So, Nick," Stu's eyes were focused down on his food, though he didn't seem to be doing much more than rolling the salad under his fork, "what did you do before you joined the force?"

Judy looked up at him, the slightest of concern in her eyes.

*Of course, I won't tell them the truth,* was Nick's mental reply to her, and she seemed to pick it up.
"I was an entrepreneur of sorts," Nick said, meeting Stu's eyes for a moment, "though my business mostly involved the production and marketing of foodstuffs. Mostly seasonal things, like overseeing hot coffee and cocoa sales in the winter, and popsicle and smoothie stands in the summer. Indeed, it wasn't the most prestigious career, but…" Nick took another generous bite of fish, "it paid the bills."

Nick was pleased to see the slightest bit of satisfaction — and thus, trust — in Stu's eyes.

"Foodstuffs," Stu nodded, finally starting at his salad. "I mean, it isn't hard to tell we're all about selling the goods around here. It's a farm after all." He washed down some salad with his glass. "I don't believe I've asked, but how did you two meet, if not through the force?"

Nick and Judy exchanged glances.

"Well, I…" they both started at once, pausing to look at each other and laugh a little. Nick gave Judy a "go on..." hand gesture.

"Nick was a key witness in my first case — a reluctant one at that. This guy gave me the hardest time at first," she rolled her eyes and jabbed her thumb to the fox on her right. "I mean, he took me to a DMV run by sloths. Sloths! It took hours just to track one plate," Judy found herself reliving the memories. Memories that, at the time, were fueled by anxiety over losing her badge and frustration with this street-smart and dream crushing fox. But, upon looking back, she wished she could turn back time just to experience it again. Going over a waterfall together. Nick pretending to go savage. All of it.

"But, after the most intense forty-eight hours of my life, I realized how good of a friend he had become, and how good of a partner he could be," Judy continued. "So, I offered him the job."

"And here we are," said Nick.

"I must ask, are you two together?" a voice from down the table piped. It was one of Judy's brothers, a brown buck with almost bright blue eyes.

The room—or at least the table—went silent.

Judy flushed vibrant colors and Nick's eyes shot to the floor as he chuckled nervously. Stu was waiting for the reply, as if he was ready to go fetch a shotgun if he had to. Bonnie didn't look as nervous, though she was watching on with interest.

"We're just friends," Nick said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Partners."

"Yeah," Judy chuckled weakly.

"Oh, sorry," the buck said, almost looking disappointed.

"About to say, I've never seen an interspecies relationship as ludicrous as a fox and a rabbit," Stu said.

"Stuart!" Bonnie scoffed.

"What?"

"Mom, it's fine," Judy eased. "Nick and I are partners before anything else. And we're asked that question a lot."

Nick nodded in compliance. "Almost every other day. Everyone at the precinct is always nagging,
"When are you two gonna get married?" Nick said in a deep, police-esque impersonation. "But, I will admit — your daughter," he turned to the other end of the table, "your sister — she's the best partner I could ever ask for. She has this almost childlike determination — one might say naivete, though I would say otherwise — which drives her to be the best at almost everything. Even at being a police officer."

"Aw," Bonnie cooed and placed a hand on her heart.

*KNOCK*

*KNOCK*

*KNOCK*

Nick hid his amusement (and slight awe) when every pair of ears in the room perked up all in perfect unison.

Stu took initiative, standing from his seat. "Everyone, just keep eating. I'll go see who it is." He proceeded to the front door, hardly in view from their seat at the table.

Nick glanced at Judy.

"Probably just neighbors who need a cup of flour," Judy shrugged. "Lots of neighbors out here."

She started at her salad plate. Nick did the same, hoping to finish off the fish before it grew too cold.

They were both interrupted when a slightly fazed Stu returned to the kitchen.

He hesitated for a moment before managing to say, "It's for you." He looked at his daughter, then to Nick. "Both of you."

The den Nick had seen upon entering the home was even cozier than he had imagined, especially now that it was evening. He sat beside Judy on a snug brown sofa, a patchwork quilt draped over its cushions. The fire that had been casually flickering had grown into a thriving flame with aid from some fresh logs. The hickory smell was thick but pleasant.

The moment was pleasant, and he would have enjoyed getting away from Judy's family to talk to her in such a serene environment. Had the mayor of Bunnyburrow not been sitting across from the two officers, Nick might have found himself nodding off at Judy's side. Due to present company, of course, Nick was wide awake.

*Something about this has to do with me, doesn't it?* Nick couldn't stop himself from wondering — no, more like predicting the ensuing conversation. *Maybe Judy was right. I'm going to be thrown out of town, not by an angry mob of cotton-tails, but by a formal meeting with the mayor herself and a polite dismissal of himself from the county — yes, this is much more realistic.*

"Officers Hopps and Wilde, it's great to see you both," the mayor started. She was a light brown rabbit dressed in a tight black suit and tie. A small patch of lighter brown hair grew on top of her head, combed gently over.

Judy smiled, though she struggled to contain her startled nature. "And you as well, Madame Mayor Buttercup."

*Buttercup.* Nick thought, and didn't know why he expected anything else. This was Bunnyburrow, after all. And bunnies, despite their hatred of other species calling them cute, just had to pick the
"No need for such formality," the mayor said in a lighthearted manner. "It's Anna to friends, and we're all friends here."

This is it. This is when it happens. Should I just leave now and make it less awkward? Nick studied the mayor, though she didn't seem to be uneasy by his presence like he thought she would.

"So let's get right to why I'm here," Anna said. "As you probably both know, the annual Harvest Festival, also known as 'Carrot Days' to some of our older residents, is occurring downtown over the next few days. We're expecting the usual turn up, somewhere around ten-thousand visitors, not including the residents."

Nick was slightly shocked. Not because of the number of visitors coming to the festival — he expected far more — but rather that the mayor hadn't yet addressed the obvious reason she was here. The fact that Nick had to leave. But did it ever occur to you that she's here for another reason?

"With so many mammals attending the festival, it would make sense for the even to be a potential target for small-scale attacks or hate crimes. Nothing major has occurred in the past, and I don't expect anything much this year, but it's always best to be on guard. And that's where you two come into play..." the mayor grinned. "You get where I'm going with this. I need the two best police officers in town — or in all of Animalia, for that matter, because don't think for a second that you two's fame doesn't reach all the way out here — to help keep an eye out at the festival. Now, I'm not implying that you're forced to patrol the streets day and night for the entirety of the festival — heavens no! I would just...I would be very grateful if the two of you could be present, in uniform, during the major events. The parade, for example. You will be paid, obviously. Thoughts?"

Judy seemed a little shocked. Nick seemed very shocked.

"We'd be delighted to, wouldn't we, Nick?" Judy looked over to see her partner in a state of confusion.

"Everything okay, Officer Wilde?" Anna asked.

Nick hesitated, looked up at her, and collected himself. "Yes, yes I'm fine. I...I just expected you were here because of me."

The mayor thought for a short moment before mouthing "Oh" and shaking her head, almost vigorously. "I understand visiting a town such as Bunnyburrow can't be easy for you, Officer Wilde, but I'm really against all this predator-prey bickering. The town itself still has some...issues to work out — probably thanks to my predecessor, Mayor Thumper. He was very, let's just say, old-fashioned. But ever since my election three years ago, I've been trying my hardest to make Bunnyburrow — despite its name — a place for all mammals, predator and prey alike. And I think your presence tomorrow at the parade would help emphasize that, no?"

Nick nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, sounds like a solid plan. And you, Carro—Hopps?"

"I'm in," Judy piped.

"Excellent," Anna said, rubbing her paws together. "Again, you two will receive payment directly from me, and now that I know you're both in, I'll be notifying the ZPD for their ultimate permission. Thank you both so much! Tomorrow, try and arrive before the parade starts. Any further questions I can answer, as I'll be attending myself. Now, I'll get out of your fur, I noticed there was a meal taking place when I appeared so unexpectedly."
Thinking back to his now cold fish, Nick internalized his groan. He liked salad, but he wasn't sure how much salad he could handle before he imploded. This week would be the test.

"Thank you, Anna, for letting us do this. I've never flashed my badge on home turf before," Judy said, rising from her chair to shake the mayor's paw.

"I should be the one thanking you — and I am! It will be great to have the first rabbit police officer attending tomorrow — maybe to inspire some little guys."

Judy chuckled shyly, as she always did when someone praised her image. The fact that the praise was coming from the mayor of her hometown was enough to make her blush.

Anna turned to Nick, who had risen from the sofa. "And Officer Wilde, thank you. It's been a while since we've had a predator visit willingly, and I'd like to be first to say we're happy to have you." Nick was surprised that her voice, nor her stature, showed any sign of hesitation as she offered her paw, flashing a genuine grin. Nick returned it, shaking her paw delicately.

She joined her escorts outside the front door, who walked beside her to a slick black car with tinted windows, standing out significantly in the gravel drive, parked next to the beaten pick up truck and an old rusted plow.

"For the mayor of Bunnyburrow, not gonna lie, I'm impressed," Nick remarked.

"Yeah, she's the best we've had," Judy said.

"Talks a lot."

"Not a bad aspect to have when mayor."

Nick shrugged, "True…"

Stu walked into the den, looking just as startled as before.

"That was Mayor Annabelle Buttercup!" Stu exclaimed.

Nick and Judy exchanged glances.

Judy chuckled sheepishly, "Yep, that's her name."

"Well? What was that about?" Stu's eyes moved to Nick. "She didn't ask you to…"

"No, she didn't," Nick replied flatly. "She offered us to show up in uniform to the festival, to which we agreed."

"Looks like we're security guards," Judy said.

"But what about the activities?" Stu asked.

Judy laughed, "Don't worry, dad, I'll participate. We're only on guard during the big events — stuff like the parade, Buttercup's speech, and longest grown carrot awards."

Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, good," Stu said. "Wouldn't want you to have driven all the way down here just to miss out on the activities. Anyways, the food's getting cold."
Dinner ended as Nick managed to get down what was now a cold fish. He chased it with some salad (what else).

The younger kits were rushed to bed, both upstairs and out in the barns, though there would be very little sleeping as they waited with anxious excitement for the following day. The aunts and uncles made their way to the guest bedrooms, making their rounds to say goodnight to the kids.

"So, you always say goodnight to all of them?" Nick asked as he walked with Judy up the stairs.

"Just the ones upstairs, and no, I normally don't. But I've been away for a while, so I need to see them. It's called being a good aunt," Judy replied with a smirk. "And, you know, you should hang around the kits more often. Talk to them. They'll grow on you fast."

Nick nodded as they walked, "…So does that mean I have to say goodnight as well?"

Judy rolled her eyes and sighed, "Fine, you can wait in the hallway."

"What? What's going to be their first reaction when a fox sneaks into their room? It'll scare them out of their fur," Nick said, reaching the top of the stairs.

"No, no. I understand," Judy said.

She stopped at each and every door, slowly creaking the door open and slipping inside to tuck in and talk with the bunnies inside.

One time, while Judy was quietly singing a lullaby one of the youngest kits, a door opened nearby. Nick turned his head, though remained leaning against the wall, his hands in his pockets.

A dark grey kit, looking to be around seven, emerged from his room carrying an empty glass gently in his paws. His ears were erect on his head, and his nervous glance portrayed that, to him, reaching the downstairs to retrieve a glass of water at such a late hour was like a scene from a Mission Impawsible movie.

His mission, however, was compromised the moment he turned to see Nick staring down at him. The bunny froze, ears lowering, his nose twitching in a frenzy. He obviously hadn't planned on getting caught, though the sight of the fox seemed to erase any other thoughts from his mind.

Nick though back on Judy's words. "They'll grow on you," she had said.

"Hey there, buddy," Nick said, taking a step forward. "You thirsty?"

The bunny's wide eyes never left the predator before him. He nodded slowly.

"Then I'll run downstairs and get you some water. Can I have your glass?" Nick said reaching out carefully, as not to further frighten the little thing. He took the glass from his paws and proceeded down the stairs, where he filled up the glass from a tap and returned, feeling somewhat like a waiter at a bed and breakfast.

When Nick returned, the kit had hardly moved from his position.

"Here ya go, kid. Two paws," Nick handed him the full glass.

The rabbit took the cup gingerly, looking up at him with hazel eyes that couldn't understand. He had probably been told about predators, and judging by his reaction, he had most definitely been warned of foxes.
"Please...don't tell my mommy I was up," the kit said in a voice hardly more than a whisper. It was more of a breathe.

"It's our secret, buddy," Nick winked.

It was small, unsure, and maybe involuntary, but a subtle smile worked its way across the kit's lips. He turned and walked back into his room. Judy reemerged from the other room just moments after.

"Whatcha smiling about, Slick?"

Nick shrugged, "You have a nice singing voice."

"Do I now?" Judy grinned.

"Yes, yes you do. You don't sing enough, and when you do it's just that Gazelle song, over and over and over again," Nick grinned.

Judy scoffed and motioned for him to follow. "Come on, fox. You're gonna want to say goodnight to this next one."

Nick followed behind Judy as they crept into the next room. Watercolor paintings were clipped to every wall and golden stars were cast onto the ceiling from a night light in the corner. Cotton's ears perked at the sound of the opening door, and she propped herself up on one arm to see who was visiting.

"Aunt Judy." Cotton's voice was drowsy but cheerful.

"Hey there," Judy laughed in a hushed voice, walking to the side of her bed. "You're still awake?"

"Yeah, kind of."

Cotton's gaze drifted beyond Judy, falling on the fox who ducked under the doorway.

"Nick!" The kit seemed to suddenly wake up. "Do you like my room?"

"It's lovely, sweetheart," Nick said in a sly yet delicate tone, kneeling down beside her bed.

"I like to paint a lot!" Cotton giggled.

"I can see that," Nick said. "Someday, do you think you could paint me something?"

The kit's cheery expression transcended to that of pure elation. "Yes!" She said, stardust in her eyes.

Judy laughed, pulling the blanket up to her neck. "Alright, settle down. You need to get some sleep, little thing."

"Aww! Aunt Judy, you're no fun!"

"Yeah, Aunt Judy. No fun at all!" Nick grinned, receiving a glare from the rabbit. His grin only widened.

Judy shook her head and sighed. "Well, unless you want to be too tired to play any fair games tomorrow, you need to go to sleep."

"Will you be there?" Cotton asked Judy.
"Of course I will, but I'll be in uniform. Nick and I have to keep watch," Judy replied.

"Watch over what?" Cotton asked.

Judy pondered, "Well…"

"We're security guards," Nick said.

Judy nodded, "Yep. Security guards."

Cotton looked at Nick. "Will I get to hold your badge again?"

Nick laughed in a hushed voice. "Sure thing, but it'll have to wait until morning. You," he gently poked her chest with a claw, "need to get some rest."

"But I'm not tire-"

"Yes, you are! Sleep-sleep time!" Nick silenced her protests by pulled the rabbit's blanket up to her neck. He then rose to his feet and headed for the door. "See you in the morning, Cottonball! Sweet dreams!" he called, walking out the door.

Cotton's eyes found Judy's.

"Cottonball," Cotton giggled.

"I know — what is it with him and the nicknames?" Judy shook her head with a light chuckle. She looked into Cotton's lively eyes, though her mind was elsewhere, reminiscing on times of old.

"You're going to want to refrain from calling me 'Carrots'."

"I like him," was all Cotton said, only her head peeking out from the blanket.

"Yeah. Me too," Judy replied, and felt a sharp twang of heartache. It almost mirrored the feeling she had felt while he was miles away, at the academy. But he wasn't miles away anymore, in fact, he was just outside the door. Probably propped up against the wall and whistling a tune she didn't know.

Heartache…

But why?

Judy forced herself back into the present, where Cotton was still staring innocently up at her.

"Alright, little thing. I'll see you in the morning," Judy said. She rose and started for the door.

"Goodnight, Judy!" Cotton called, a paw emerging from underneath the blanket to wave.

Upon returning to the downstairs, both Nick and Judy were surprised to see that a small crowd had accumulated. Mostly consisting of Judy's older brothers, it appeared.

"Perfect timing, you two," one of the rabbits approached — a buck looking to be older than Judy yet younger than Nick. He had a brownish color to his fur which made him stand out among the grey masses. "Nick, I believe we haven't met. I'm Jade." He extended a paw.

Nick momentarily marveled at how many rabbit paws he had shaken that night, and didn't stop
himself from shaking one more.

"Jade, huh? Your parents have a thing for four-letter names starting with 'J'?' Nick wisecracked.

Jade laughed and nodded, "So it would seem. Jake, Jill, Jess, June, Jane, Judy, and myself. Probably some others, but eh, I lose track."

"Understandably," Nick said.

"So what's with the activity so late? Did I forget a birthday or something?" Judy asked.

"No, at least, I don't believe so, but I stopped keeping track after mom had the fourth litter," Jade murmured. His face then heightened into a gleeful smile. "It's Friday night!"

"Oh no," Judy muttered.

Nick looked down at her, then up to Jade. "Is there...something I'm missing?"

"Oh, yes, right," Jade said, his words coming in a surge. "Every Friday, especially on holidays, the bucks all go out for drinks. There's a pub downtown that we frequent — has quite the variety of some quality beverages, might I say. The rest were wondering if you'd be willing to tag along? Never had a predator at the bar before."

"Mm..." Nick nodded, "It's not just carrot vodka and the likes, is it?"

Jade laughed, "Not unless that's what you prefer."

"Got anything blueberry?" Nick asked.

"Have they got anything blueberry?" Jade scoffed. "They've got everythin blueberry!"

Nick grinned, pausing a for a moment to think, despite already knowing his answer. "Alright. I'm in.

Jade smiled, turning to the crowd. "Hey! The fox is with us!" he shouted, and an uproar rang out. Nick was surprised to see such a reaction, though most of the bucks in the room appeared to be in college, if not fresh out of it. Nick assumed that their preconceived notions on predators, if any, had been dimmed at school. Most universities tried to pair predator and prey together as a way of forming unique bonds.

Nick wondered if any of the bucks in the room had a vixen girlfriend...

"Alright, we're pilling' into the trucks," Jade said, throwing an arm around Nick's shoulder to lead him to the door, though with Nick being considerably taller than him, this was rather difficult. "Don't worry, little sis, we'll treat him right."

Nick threw a glance back at Judy, who gave him a reassuring look.

"Do me a favor and don't get absolutely hammered," she said.

"No promises." He turned for the door, smirking.

Never in my life would I expect to drink with rabbits...how did that Gazelle song go again?

Back at the house, Bonnie approached from behind Judy. Placing a hand on her daughter's shoulder, she induced a jump.
"Oh, sorry, hon. I didn't mean catch you off guard, there," said with a sheepish laugh. "Anything on your mind?"

Judy shrugged, turning back to the door, where the last of the bucks (and Nick) were managing to fit themselves into a limited number of pick-up trucks.

Bonnie, too, looked out the door. "Don't worry, I'm sure Nick will be fine."

"Oh, I wasn't worried about that," Judy said. She was definitely sure Nick would be fine. In fact, he'd probably return having made acquaintances with most all her brothers. Hammered, yes — he would return hammered. But her mom knew how to brew up a pretty potent anti-hangover.

Bonnie looked at her daughter for a long moment, trying to understand what was troubling her, because she knew something was troubling her. No matter how hard Judy might try to cover it up, Bonnie knew her strategies, because, after all, she was her mother.

But she also knew attempting to get Judy to spit it out wouldn't obtain a good outcome, so she simply smiled. "Come join us. Your sisters want to talk to you, you know?" She directed Judy towards a table, where her sisters sat and talked.

They played a few board games, none of which were particularly engaging to Judy, but she played nonetheless. Her sisters spoke of marriage, as some already had rings on their fingers, while most had a particular candidate in mind.

"He owns a little plot out by the Twilight Hills area," one of Judy's sisters said. "A cozy little place near Crescent Lake. It's been in his family for generations. He told me now all he needed now was someone to tend it with."

There was a chorus of "aww's".

Judy tried to look interested, but the thought of settling for another farmer made her want to go back to Zootopia, where there was diversity. Bias, yes. Prejudice, yes. Vigorous stereotyping, yes.

But at least to break the mold. Society's perfect little mold, which it tried to pour each and every mammal into, according to their species. Rabbits are farmers. Foxes are thugs. Raccoons are conniving.

She wanted someone who would break the mold.

"Hey, Judy? How's your partner?" A sister asked.

"Oh, Nick? He's great — best partner I could ever ask for."

One of her older sisters, Jessica, leaned in. "When you say partner, do you mean partners as in "partners through the force"? Or is there something more behind the scenes?"

"Nope!" Judy said quickly, almost surprising herself with the answer. "We're just friends! That is all."

"Oh really?"

"You talk to him all the time!"

"Like, all the time."

"Guys," Judy chuckled nervously, "he's a fox. It's unlikely enough that we were partners. I highly
You highly doubt or you know?

Jessica! We're friends, okay? He's a likable guy, and he's fun to work with. Is there really anything more I must say to convince you?

Well, you know, if you are interested in him-

I'm not! Judy said, rubbing her forehead.

Say you were. If you don't make a move soon, surely he'll find someone else.

There it was again, that heartache. A sinking feeling in her chest, as if her ribcage was imploding.

He said he's never been much of a romantic, Judy said.

Oh please, Jessica said with a wave of her paw. That fox has vixens crawling all over him.

Will you please let up? He's my partner, nothing more. He's my friend, nothing more. If he likes someone else, so what? Her voice wavered, and the words seemed to hurt as she said them. Again, he's a fox. Even if I did like him in that way…

Well, you know, one of her younger sisters from down the table said, interspecies relationships are becoming more common nowadays.

Yes, but not pred-prey relationships, Judy said.

For natural enemies, you two seem to get along just fine.

It was true. The pair did work well together. Something about how completely different they were attracted, like the opposing ends of a magnet. He, a fox, a former-hustler, a predator. She, a rabbit, a cop, a prey mammal. These were the kinds of animals who were supposed to see each other with disgust, personal belief and bias stacked high against one another.

But, somehow, they worked. Maybe because they each faced their own prejudices. They were the most effective partners in the ZPD, to most everyone's surprise. And if they got along so well, why not go further…

Judy? You there? Bonnie put her paw on Judy's shoulder.

Yeah, sorry. I'm just tired.

She wasn't tired. Her mind was racing.

I think I'll go to bed early. Sorry guys.

A place alone where she could think. Where she could sort out her emotions and get a solid answer to the question…the question…what was the question?

You know the question, you're just too nervous to admit it.

She got up from the table.

Are you sure, honey? Bonnie said with concern.
"Wanna play another game? We got Carrots to Carrots!" A sister said.

"I'm alright, but thanks, guys."

She made her way upstairs, leaving a puzzled table to share awkward stares. Collapsing onto her bed, she had to admit that she had missed the burrow. Her room. Her parents. Her siblings, all of them.

So why did she feel so alone?

You know the question, because you've been asking yourself it for a while now.

She rolled over to face the wall, tucking her paws under the covers.

Do I like him? Do I like Nick Wilde? Do I like a fox?

His words replayed over in her mind.

"You know you love me."

And her response.

"Do I know that? Yes. Yes, I do."

But that was just banter. Friendly banter, the kind of things friends do. Friends do friendly banter.

This was deeper.

Was she willing to admit to him that his eyes were entrancing? His speech, alluring. His looks, appealing. His smile, warming. His smirk, admirable. Was she willing to admit to her parents that she liked a natural enemy? A predator? A fox? Was she willing to admit to the world that she, a rabbit, liked him, a fox? Was the world ready to accept such a statement?

Do I love you? Say I did?

…Would you love me?

For a town full of rabbits, Nick was surprised at the nightlife in the main square. A stage had been erected in the middle of the red-brick street, on which a band was drumming out a classic rock tune while a decent crowd gathered at the foot. Couples sat on the benches near the fountain centered in the middle of the square. Purple lights within the fountain lit up the water, making it appear almost magical. A street guitarist played on a street corner, his case open at his foot, loose bucks strewn about inside. Late-night shoppers and diners roamed the streets.

Rabbits, of course. He did notice the occasional deer or beaver wandering about.

All prey.

For the second time today, Nick sat at the tail end of a cramped pickup, his legs folded into his chest, arms strewn lazily over his knees. Judy's brothers talked nonchalantly, and while he felt more welcome with them than some of the older members of the Hopps household, he still noticed the slight room they gave him.

He was a fox, after all. It was only natural.
"So, your drink of choice?"

The voice belonged to Jade, who sat to Nick's left.

"Eh, I experiment."

"Then…your most recent experimental results?"

Nick stared out the truck bed for a moment, finding his eyes tracing along the pedestrian path and the shop windows. Winter coats. Overalls. Farming supplies. Purses.

It was as if the place was trying to mimic the average downtown-square vibe, but couldn't help but sprinkle in the stereotypical statement that 'We are rabbits! We like to farm!'

"Whiskey's alright," Nick shrugged.

"You said you liked blueberry?" Jade asked.

"I do," Nick said, still looking out at the passing shops. "Enlighten me."

Jade smiled, leaning towards Nick. "Blueberry vodka — and don't say you don't like vodka. I'm not Russian, either, but sometimes I wish I was."

Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Just, trust me," Jade stammered.

The truck pulled onto the side of the road next to what Nick assumed was the bar. A redbrick building on the bottom floor of a block of flats. Red neon lights cast a heated tint onto the surrounding buildings. An orange glow from inside emitted from the corners of drawn blinds. 

*O'Hare's*, spelled the neon.

Judy's brothers (literally) hopped out of the truck. Nick followed, tail swishing nonchalantly.

The door set of a small chime as they entered. The warmth of the establishment, not too intense but enough to be noticeable, suited the orangish-yellow lighting well. Nick got what he expected: pool table, glossy black counter, sports networks, whispery jazz. There was even a broken jukebox.

Eyes glanced to the entrance, where widened and stuck. Nick knew, with his height, the color of his fur, and the scent of fox (despite his best attempt to hide it with scent-mask) made him stand out from the rest like a radish in a carrot patch. There where points and whispers and distrustful gazes. There always were.

Nick leaned onto the countertop, the other rabbits filling in at his sides. Jade chose his right, and Nick knew that he wasn't escaping this rabbit (though he didn't really have a problem with that). On his left was a white rabbit he didn't know.

The bartender, a hare who looked like he had seen both better and worse days, approached. He was casually swirling an amber glass of what Nick assumed was some sort of bourbon or scotch. His eyelids drooped, and Nick made a mental bet with himself that his voice would be fittingly monotoned.

"It's the Hopps," he said, and Nick won the bet. "But more than usual…the festival, I suppose?"

"What else?" Jade said. "How about you, Charlie? You celebrating this weekend?"
"Nah, I haven't a field. Just this sore place. Good business on holidays, though...so I guess there's a reason to celebrate."

And that's when he saw Nick, Charlie's fatigued stature hesitating for the shortest moment, though Nick noticed. The fox could almost see his mental double-take, making sure his ever-fatigued eyes weren't hallucinating — they weren't. A fox, sitting at his bar, accompanied by a crowd of rabbits.

"I see you've got a friend," Charlie said, his voice as flat as before. He spoke to Nick this time, "What brings you out to the burrows, friend? Kinda seems like the last place on the planet you'd wanna be, no offense."

Nick looked down and chuckled. "None taken. I'm here for work," Nick lied, though the more he thought about it, he realized it had become the truth. He would be in uniform tomorrow.

Charlie raised a brow, "In Bunnyburrow?"

Silence.

"He's dating my sister," Jade quipped.

Charlie raised the other brow. "Judy?"

Nick shot a glare at the bunny beside him. "Not dating," muttered through his teeth, "just partners."

"...Partners?" Charlie said.

"ZPD," Nick turned to the bartender, calming himself. "Partners through work."

Charlie gave the neighboring rabbits glances. He then took a sip from his glass, eyes remaining on the fox as if he'd pounce on a turned back.

Nick sighed. Digging into his pocket, he revealed his wallet, which he opened and slapped down onto the bar, sliding it towards the bartender. In a transparent pouch was Nick's Police ID, to the bartender's surprise. But Nick knew an illegitimate ID print could be made to look almost exactly as his own did. He could list a few 'specialists' in the inner-city who could easily produce an identical card. He wouldn't confess it to Judy — not ever — but he had bought a few counterfeit documents in the past.

It had been a while, after all. He was a cop now. No longer the low-life scum he had openly accepted himself to be only a year ago. *He won't believe me. Of course, he won't believe me.*

The bartender nodded slightly, returning Nick's wallet. "Nick Wilde, a copper. Huh. Interesting choice — I didn't know they had hired any...eh..."

"Foxes?" Nick deadpanned, already knowing the answer.

Charlie let only a hint of regret show behind his baggy eyes. He nodded. Sipped.

"Yeah, I'm the first," Nick muttered, diverting his eyes as if to end the conversation.

Charlie gave half a smile. "Well, that's great, pal."

Silence, save for a growling saxophone as it flared into a lick.

"Can I mix Y'all up a little somethin'?" Charlie asked. "You? Officer Wilde?"
Nick glanced at Jade, then back to Charlie. "It'll be blueberry vodka."

Jade smiled. "Make that two!"

Charlie retrieved a tall, blue bottle from the shelves behind him, pouring its clear contents into a small glass already containing ice. He speared three blueberries on a needle, which he dropped into the glass, sliding it forward as he proceeded to gather drinks for the rest of the lot.

"So, you and Judy," Jade said, taking a sip of his own glass. His ears perked, and he looked down at his glass. "Fresh batch," he nodded approvingly, then looked back to Nick. "Anyways — how'd that happen? I heard y'all discussing it at the table, but I wanna hear it straight from the horse's mouth if that's alright with you." Jade gave a small smile, then glanced around to make sure there weren't any horses nearby.

"Not a problem," Nick said, taking his first sip of the drink before him. The stuff packed a bitter punch, despite virtually having no taste. Only after Nick swallowed did he catch the wang of blueberry, which seemed to fester and thrive on his taste buds. "Oh, damn…"

Jade threw his ears back and cackled. "What? Didn't think we rabbits could brew?" Jade proceeded to down his glass, then wipe his mouth with the back of his paw. "Told ya you'd like it, Charlie! Anotha'!"

Nick finished his glass, pulling the blueberries from the toothpick with his teeth. Charlie silently pored him another.

"I met her on the streets," Nick said, holding the glass under his nose.

"You didn't meet on the job?" Jade asked.

"You kidding me?" Nick snorted. "You think I, of all mammals, would've joined the ZPD? Judy's the only reason I'm on the force."

"And how'd that happen?"

"Long, long story," Nick said. He took another sip, both grimacing and delighting at the taste. A funny thing, liquor is.

"I've got time," Jade said.

Nick stared down at the black gloss of the bar, a darker tinted red fox staring back at him. "So, no, I didn't become an officer on my own." He paused and turned to Jade. "How about you try and guess my old carrier? Can't be too hard."

"You're implying it's stereotypical, then?" Jade said.

"More than you can imagine," murmured Nick. He took another sip.

"Okay, then," Jade readjusted himself in his seat. "You didn't work at Bugburga or anything like that, did you?"

Nick chuckled, "Nope. Think less predator, more fox."

"Mm…" Jade thought, then both his eyes opened wide and his ears stood tall. "Aha! You were… you sure I'm not offending you?"

"Nope."
"Con mammal. Con mammal for sure — you've got that way with your words."

"Con artist, actually. You should have seen my best hustles — the very definition of art. Mwah!" He kissed his fingertips.

"And there it is, that silver tongue."

They both laughed, drank, asked for another.

"But anyways," Nick continued, "I hustled Judy into buying an elephant-sized popsicle for my little boy, who's actually my friend, Finnick, dressed in a toddler's onesie."

Jade broke into a fit of laughter.

"I then proceeded to melt down the popsicle, re-freeze it into smaller paw-shaped popsicles (which I named Pawspicles), then sold around a hundred, each for two bucks. I then returned the popsicle sticks to a lumber company. A full day's work to earn an honest living."

Jade was still laughing when Nick finished his story. "Con artist, indeed." He wiped tears from his eyes, getting a hold of himself, but only for a moment, before breaking out laughing again. "I can imagine Judy's face when she found out — she found out, right?"

"Yup," Nick took a sip and laughed a bit as well. He could feel the influence influencing him already. "So she looked up my record and discovered I had been avoiding tax for years. Felony tax evasion, she told me, then proceeded to drag me into helping her in a case."

"Sounds a lot like her," Jade said. He wiped a final tear from his eye. One final chuckle escaped. "She's always been the cop around the household. She used to chase us down if we stole as much as a crumb without asking. "Freeze! Paws in the air!"

Nick snickered, happy to add one more thing to the "childhood stories and self-jokes which annoy Officer Hopps to the brink of death" list.

"So, you ended up as her partner...how?" Jade asked.

"Well," Nick sighed, sipped, then slouched, "no offense to you or any of your lovely family, but I didn't exactly harmonize well with prey mammals. Not before the case, that is. They didn't like my teeth and claws; I didn't like their assumptions they slapped on me for being a fox. So I gave up on trying to be anything other than exactly what they wanted me to be: a sly and untrustworthy fox. Then, when your sister bought me a popsicle and threatened my arrest," Nick paused to snicker a bit, "I discovered — after running plates and consulting mob bosses and going over a waterfall — that she cared. I told her of my past, which is a story for another time...and she cared."

Nick paused. He swirled the remaining contents of his glass and thought of her violet eyes. They looked at him like no one looked at him. Like a mammal. Not as a con artist, or a predator, or a fox. She saw him as an equal.

"No one, especial prey, has ever believed in me the way she did. So, when she offered me the job, I took it. Sure, the pay is a downgrade from what I had, but I did get a fancy blue uniform. And a neat little trinket called a Glock 22."

This brought about a chuckle from the rabbit at his right, who was edging past tipsy with every sip. The fox himself was on glass three, and he had room for plenty more.

"How rude of me, I never asked about you," Nick said, and the buck scoffed.
"What's there to ask? Been engaged for two years, got two litters of my own. Inherited some acres from my father's field," he finished what had to be his fourth glass. "And you think your situation was stereotypical…But I'm happy! Who cares if I'm just like all them. Screw it!"

He called for another drink.

"So, when do rabbits usually get hitched?" Nick asked after a while of silence.

Jade swallowed, shook his head vigorously, and placed the glass down a little harder than he meant. "Eh — twenty? Twenty-one? That's when I hooked up."

Nick nodded. He looked down his opposite side to see the rest of Judy's brothers. Some had graduated well past tanked at this point, while others were well on their way. Stu was the only exception, a single jug of foaming beer in one paw. Nick glanced at their paws to see that almost all of them were wearing their rings.

"I know what your thinking," Jade said, his words beginning to stick together. "Judy's the oldest in our litter to be single." He shrugged. "She never was much of a romantic. But she romanticized bout' her dream job, that's for sure. And now that she's got it, I think she's as happy as a bride."

In a strange way, Nick believed could relate. Past high school, he tried to drop the whole dating thing. All he thought about was the next hustle, the next payload, the next birthday so he could go barhopping with Finnick and friends.

…Speaking of hustles, Finnick and Friends sounds like a legitimate company name…maybe host birthday parties…'Finnick and Friends, staring Finnick the miniature elephant'…

Nick realized the drinks were getting to him, so he shook his head, as if he could shake off the wooziness like water from his fur.

"I think she'd be happy with you," Jade said.

Nick rolled his eyes. "I think that's the drink is speaking."

"Nope, I could walk a straight line for miles, coppa! Take me outside and I'll prove it!" Jade cackled for a moment before quieting down. "But really, she likes you." His voice was a coo now.

Nick tried to speak, but couldn't manage the right words. He put his glass down, deciding getting carried away surrounded by Judy's family wasn't the best idea. He had already spilled his guts to a rabbit he had only known for an hour.

Jade continued, "I guess it's a brother thing, I dunno. But I know when she's happy. Truly happy. And ever since you've shown up, she's been in the best moods," Jade said and turned to Nick. "So, Mr. Con Artist, how do you see my sister?"

"I-I…" Nick started, hesitated, reached for his drink but stopped himself. "She…She's a great partner-"

"Will you stop saying that?" Jade said, polishing off drink five. "'She's a good partner! She's a great cop!' You say that like you're nothing but employees who drive around the same car and work at the same desk."

"Well, that's kind of exactly-"

"Not my point!" Jade shouted, receiving glass six along with a few curious glances from neighbors.
"She likes you, Nick. I dunno about love, but it could get there."

Nick scoffed, preparing for a retort, but his words grew clogged in his throat.

"So you can answer my question now," he directed a finger at the fox. "Do you like her?"

_Do I like her? Come on, she's a rabbit. A prey — I mean, what predator dates a prey? When has a fox ever liked a rabbit...A very cute rabbit at that..._

"No," Nick finally said. "I mean — yes, I do like her, but only as a friend. I'm not much of a romantic either."

"Not a romantic—oh come on, Nick! Vixens have to be throwing themselves at your feet! Just look at those emerald eyes!"

Nick sighed, emerald eyes rolling. "She's cute, sure. And yes, I know, I shouldn't call a rabbit cute. It's like a cardinal sin to you guys."

Jade snorted into his drink. "It was Judy who told you that, wasn't it?"

"First day we met. She made it very clear."

"So you called her cute moment you met! That's reaaaaal sweet," Jade's chuckles were almost maniacal. He downed glass six while Nick stayed silent. He eventually polished off and refilled yet again, cursing himself as he did so.

_I can already hear her reprimanding me for this ...

"But I'm a fox," Nick said into his cup. "We're natural enemies."

"You forget I'm a rabbit, too," Jade sneered. He pointed a paw at themselves, "We get along just fine. And you and Judy get along even better!"

Nick fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. He wished he was sitting in a chair with a back he could slouch into.

He wished she was here. Sitting beside him, drinking a carrot martini or something similar. And the moment he realized this, he realized that her intoxicated brother might be getting to his head.

That or it was the drink in his paws.

"I dunno, it's just...not normal, a fox and a rabbit together," Nick said.

"Screw normal! Normal is boring. I'd know because _I'm_ normal!" Jade said, and despite the buck not looking the slightest bit normal at the moment, it struck a chord in Nick. "Don't go and find yourself some downtown vixen to have three little kids with — sitting behind your white picket fence and reading the paper and longing for the weekend! Sitting on your ass from nine to five, wanting that new wristwatch or overpriced tie that your family doesn't have the money backyard! Buying into a twenty-five-year house payment and marriage counseling and anti-depressants a-and...that's everyone else's life! That's _my_ life! You're the fox who's a police officer. You're the one with a rabbit as a partner. Hate to admit it to ya, but your not normal, Nick. So don't...don't try to be."

Jade tipped his glass to the ceiling rather aggressively, throwing back his head and downing the remnants. He slammed the glass down on the counter top and called for yet another. Nick just watched, not quite sure what to say.
"You don't have to like Judy — no, no, no — that's not what I'm implying," Jade's voice was both scrambled and slurred now, and Nick wished he had a translator at hand. "I could care less who you go out and find, Mr. starry-eyed fox. But don't feel confined to be normal. Don't ever feel that way."

Jade drained glass seven, leaving Nick to his thoughts.

He had tried before.

Trying to be unique, that is. To stand out. To rebel against the norm.

That had gotten him muzzled by his ranger-scout troop. Accused of things he wouldn't do by fellow classmates, just because he was a fox. The worst part was that the teachers believed them, nearly throwing him out of his high school. He had seen mothers pull their children closer to their sides. People cross the streets to avoid the sketchy fox sulking down the way. Store managers proceeded to publicly mock then kick him from their shops. Blinds that closed and curtains that drew and doors that locked in the presence of him.

In the presence of a fox. A shifty, untrustworthy, up-to-no-good red fox.

So why be anything but normal? Doors would lock even if he was polite, even if he was generous, even if he was trustworthy. Doors would lock and curtains would draw.

Trying to be more than just a fox would only have the city drag him down even further.

But she tried to be even more than a bunny…

And look at her now. Headlines proclaiming her victory over the evil Mayor Dawn Bellwether. Golden badge pinned to her chest. Respect from mammals fifty times her size. Inspiring children with dreams too big for their heads. She had even transformed someone who could have represented the vulpine stereotype in every aspect, into something he had once dreamed of being.

Different.

So if she had proved to be more than just a carrot-farming bunny, could he prove to be more than just a popsicle-hustling fox? Could he risk being different like she did, and gain a positive outlook by staring into the face of the negatives?

Can I be more than just this …this fox?

…

Judy, she says I can.

…

"Nick? You there, bud?"

It was Jade.

"We're gonna fire off some rounds. You're a cop, so you're good at that kind of thing, right?"

And then, he was huddled around several other rabbits, too close for comfort, but they didn't seem to care. They all had glasses in their hands.

There was one in his own, and he couldn't recall how it got there.
Nonetheless, it was quickly empty.

One.

Two.

Four.

Six.

He stopped trying to keep track.

Laughing.

He was laughing with faces he didn't know, which made it all the funnier. Their ears were so long, and their teeth so flat. And they were laughing. And he was laughing. Laughing until his throat felt constricted and raw.

Everything was funny, even if it wasn't.

More glasses. More were empty than full.

And then he was in a grimy bathroom, kneeling over a toilet illuminated by flickering overhead lights. Vomiting out his guts while Jade patted him on the back. And laughing, stomach acid burning the back of his throat. Laughing until he could hardly breathe.

And he couldn't stop thinking about her. About Judy Hopps, a rabbit.

He loved her in that moment, and he wanted to scream it to the world.

And he would, though he would soon forget. And all her friends and family would hear it, though they too would forget.

He would forget about vomiting, about laughing, about the shots. But he couldn't let himself forget about his sudden and passionate desire for her, fueled by what felt like gallons of bittersweet influence racing through his veins. Pulsing through his heart at an unhealthily rapid rate.

He was in a bumpy truck, and then at the house. Everyone was there.

Judy was there.

He loved her, even if she was a rabbit. He loved her amethyst eyes, which seemed so much brighter in the dark. He loved her beautiful voice.

"Your drunk, Nick. You don't mean that."

He didn't understand what she said, but it didn't matter. He would forget about it, along with the rest of the night.

A funny thing, liquor is.

Passed out in a foreign bed, the bitter aftertaste of blueberry vodka still lingering in his snores.

"Dumb fox." Her voice came, but he had already forgotten who it belonged to.

Only she would remember what he'd said, come morning.
And morning came quickly.

Not a cloud in the sky could obscure the blinding sunlight as it beamed down on the house, simply because there were no clouds to be found. It shone through the windows of Judy Hopps' childhood room, waking the full-grown Judy from a restful sleep. She turned for a few moments before rising, scratching an itch behind one of her ears, then hopping from the bed and dawning a pair of bunny slippers.

She made her way downstairs, where a few early-rising faces smiled and greeted her with warm good-mornings. Coffee and pancakes were being made, judging by the smell, and the morning paper had been brought in. Some of her older relatives were playing chess and making small talk, while some of Judy's sisters sat before a TV, watching a cartoon with their kits. Aunts and grandmothers talked from an elongated sofa, made to accommodate a large number of rabbits at once. In the backyard, a number of bundled-up kits played Frisbee in the brisk morning light.

Two-hundred miles away, Precinct One was alive and bustling. Her neighbors' obnoxious bickering resounded into her empty apartment — one that Judy had grown to love, despite its wear-and-tear. The cafe that she frequented daily was enduring its Saturday-morning rush, and the corner-booth which she had claimed as her own was probably taken by another mammal. She had grown to find that all of these places had become her home. But as she stood in the entry, watching as the sun poured in through the windows and into the common, Judy recalled the feeling of truly being at home. It was a sight that, to her, could not be matched by any other setting, even with that of the city.

It was when she was fetching a cup of coffee from the kitchen that she realized what was off. There were no card games. No line for the morning's dark roast. No arguments being held just for the sake of arguing.

There were, however, several closed bedroom doors around the house — doors that were normally opened by this time of morning.

And she remembered, because how could she forget.

"I'm gonna need a cup of your finest potion," Judy said upon walking into the kitchen.

Bonnie, who had her arms full of a variety of items she had just pulled from a cabinet, turned to her.

"Well, what does it look like I'm doing?" Bonnie said, placing the items beside a warming pot. They consisted of syrup from a raisin tree, lemon juice, mint leaves, and a multitude of other herbs and extracts. It was a concoction that could have been mistaken for some sort of witches' brew, but it was an excellent hangover cure. As heavy-drinking was an attribute that trailed back a long ways on the Hopps family tree, a secret family recipe for the most effective hangover cure was completely necessary.

"So, how'd you sleep?" Bonnie asked, poring some clove-extract into the pot.

"Well enough," Judy shrugged.

"Ready for the festival?" She asked, adding the next ingredient: carbonated lime water.

"Yep."

"And Nick?"

Judy chuckled and shook her head. "You're gonna need a lot of brew this morning, mom."
"Already on it."

Ten minutes later, Bonnie pored a portion of the pot's contents into a coffee mug. "Take it easy on him," Bonnie added before handing the mug to Judy.

She carried the cup to the hall of occupied guest rooms on the bottom floor. The occupants, with the rising sun, would probably be rousing by now. And then stumbling figures and aggravated groans would begin.

Judy gently opened the door, not caring to knock. The curtains were drawn, though thin white cloth didn't stand a chance against the unmerciful morning sun. Inside was a bed, a baseboard heater, and a lamp table, offering a small picture of the carrot fields outside. It resembled that of a hotel room, but so did a lot of things about a rabbit's household.

Nick had his muzzle buried beneath a pillow so that only his ears and matted scruff were visible. He was lying on his side, facing the wall, still dressed in the green button-up he had dawned the day before. His tie was draped over his shoulder, where it dangled. There were blankets, but they had been pushed to the foot of the bed during a restless night's tosses and turns.

Placing the mug on the lamp table, Judy knelt beside the slumbering fox (who had begun to snore in guttural tones) and tugged ever so slightly at his tie. Her response was a mere twitch of his ears. With a small smile, she withdrew her hand, wondering what the best way to wake a predator from a drunken slumber.

A shaky moan, hardly audible to anyone without rabbit ears, escaped from his snout—which was still buried deep in a pillow. It was enough to let her know that he was at least semi-conscious. So she spoke.

"I did tell you not to get hammered, though I suppose it's a little too late for that now…"

For a long while, there was no response at all. Then, in a voice of gravel and sandpaper…

"…juzzz…lemme sleep…"

"In case you forgot, we do have a job to do today."

"…no…thazzz 'omorrow…"

"It is tomorrow, dumb fox." She tugged his tie again. "And the longer you lay around, the worse you're gonna feel."

There was silence, then, "…letzzzz test thaaa…"

Judy snickered, placing a paw on the fox's shoulder and giving it a shake. He attempted to swat it away but missed, pawing at the air before his arm fell limply back to his side.

"And you call me adorable when I'm tired," she smirked.

Nick only grunted.

"My mom made you something that will make you feel better," Judy said. "Can you sit up?"

"…no…sleep'll make me feel betterrrr…"

"Believe me, it won't. Now," she grabbed his arm, attempting to roll him over, "sit up."
Judy flinched when Nick's teeth bared and a growl came from deep within his throat. She quickly gained her composure. "Nice try, sleepyhead, but you're not gonna scare me. Come on."

She managed to get him into an upright position. His shirt was wrinkled, stained, and smelled of liquor. His fur was even worse — sticking up in some places and matted down in others. Various spots were crusted with what Judy assumed was yet more liquor. He clutched his stomach with shaky paws, and with bloodshot, squinted eyes, he looked down at Judy with an expression she almost couldn't make out. It was almost like he had to remember who she was.

"There we go," Judy said, giving him an assuring pat on the back. She reached over and took the mug from the table. "Here. This will help ease the pain."

He looked curiously, almost cautiously down at the mug. "Whazzzz init?" he breathed.

"Er…a lot of things — it's best you don't ask. Now drink up!"

Nick's ears fell behind his head and he squinted painfully. "…don yell…" he managed to say before taking the mug from her. Upon the first sip, he repulsed, struggling to swallow.

"Ahggg…" he moaned, trying to give the cup back to Judy. She only pushed it back to him.

"If you want to feel better, you'll drink this. I'll be back in a few minutes, and I want you to have drunk that entire thing," she said like a mother nursing a cranky kit.

Nick only sat, ears fidgeting, eyes nearly closed, clutching the mug to his chest.

Judy took a warm shower in one of the many showers offered upstairs. She dried herself, brushed her teeth, flossed, and dried herself one more time before returning to her room. She changed into her police underclothes, as wearing her body armor to breakfast would be both unnecessary and exhausting. Pausing to look at herself in a full-length mirror, she smiled at the officer who stared back. She had been with the force for half a year now, which wasn't much, but she would have expected the childish joy that bubbled up inside her at the sight of her uniform to have diminished by now. In short, it hadn't.

When she returned to Nick's room, she was pleased to see him sitting on the edge of the bed. The mug was empty and had returned to the lamp table. Nick's eyes were still red, though he seemed at least a little more alert.

"You look…less miserable," Judy said.

"Maybe on the outside, Carrots…" His voice was still raw, but at least he wasn't slurring anymore.

"You don't remember anything about last night, do you?" Judy's tone was joking, but she had underlying tones of curiosity. Because, if you do, we have things to talk about…

Nick rubbed the back of his neck and let out an elongated sigh. "Not really, no." He looked at her. "What? Did I…do something?"

"Not much, other than bumbling around like the drunken idiot you were," Judy smirked.

Nick tried at a smile, though it quickly evolved into a grimace. He raised a paw to his head, rubbing his temple. "Your mother's…whatever that was better start working soon."

He slowly rose to his feet, which trembled like a fawn's. Judy was at his side when he began to stumble, helping him upright again. Like a wounded soldier, Nick threw his arm around Judy's back.
(and with it most of his body weight) and slowly managed to the door.

There were pancakes that morning, and even considering his hangover, Judy was amazed to see Nick easily resist a stack of blueberry flapjacks. In fact, the very sight of the syrup drizzling over the cakes made his stomach twist. Suddenly, blueberries didn't seem so appetizing. Nick guessed it had something to do with the lingering mix of alcohol and blueberry tones still in his mouth. Bonnie gave an understanding smile, and instead, offered another cup of her potion. Nick, not wanting to refuse for a second time, took it with a weary smile.

Soon, most of Judy's brothers had been aroused from their slumber, and the potion was pored and distributed throughout the burrow. Nick was surprised to see Jade drag himself into the seat beside Nick. They shared a drowsy silence for a moment before Jade spoke.

"So? How'd you like the vodka?"

Nick groaned. "Whatever is left of it might resurface if you keep mentioning it."

Jade chuckled, winced, and sighed. "It was a good time, wasn't it?"

"I guess," Nick said.

"No, really. I can hardly remember anything." Jade said.

"You're not the only one," Nick said.

They managed to clink together their glasses of potion with trembling paws before downing the potent liquid.

An hour later — after three cups of potion and just as many trips to the restroom — Nick was feeling at least a little better. It didn't feel like there was an imaginary paw squeezing his brain anymore, and his bowels didn't threaten to drop out anymore either.

He took a long, steamy shower, and stood motionless before the mirror for a long while before drying and dressing into his uniform.

"It's great that you and Jade get along," Judy said as they suited up in her room.

"Yeah," Nick said, slipping his utility belt into place, "he's a likable rabbit, but he has an abyss as a stomach, when it comes drinks at least."

Judy chuckled, slipping her arms through her body armor. "He's always been like that. I think he had his first beer when he was ten."

Nick scoffed, "No surprise there."

By noon, the entire household was on their feet. Somehow.

Nick and Judy, both looking like proper officers, sat in the common area. They were surrounded by curious kits, especially Nick, though they seemed more interested in his tail than anything else.

"Alright kits! It's time to go!" Stu called, and the crowd diminished enough for the two officers to rise to their feet.

"You awake, Wilde?" Judy elbowed Nick, who she had caught rubbing his eyes.

"Well, you better be," Judy said, rising to her feet and offering a paw to Nick. He took it, and she pulled him to a slightly dizzy stand. "Because this is going to be a long day."

And a long day it would be. More than either officer could ever imagine.

A/N: Wow this is a long chapter.

A few things I'd like to state before this chapter ends.

First off, to the small number of readers who keep this story on their agenda, I'd like to say I'm sorry for the lack of updates. The last chapter came out in mid-December, so it's been a month. I didn't mean for there to be such a break, but I'm trying to make up for it with this EXTREMELY LONG CHAPTER. I mean, really. I have never written a chapter this extensive.

On the topic of the bar scene, I know. It is very messy. This scene took me a day to write, as well as much caffeine (I'm shaking right now). But it's meant to be messy. I want it to portray the downward spiral into a drunken mess. And Nick, in this last bit, is most definitely a drunken mess.

I love how I make an outline for all of this, and yet, the story seems to take control and guide me somewhere else. At this point, I'm just along for the ride. But don't worry, I have the basic plot points planned out, and I will make sure the story gets there.

The next chapter will be an important one, but it most likely won't be this long. While the story seems to be a scenario-based romance mess, I actually have a thriller-esque plot based out. It's not developed all the way, but I have a major event taking place in chapter four. I have a point A and a point B. I just need to figure out how to draw the line between them.

So outline, I will! And I will do it right now and stop wasting your time!

Until next time!

- Trenton.

(P.S. - I'm planning updates to be spaced out to about once a month. This may not be entirely consistent, but I'll do what I can to get the writing done.)
Chapter Three: The Rage of the Flower

As did most of the known world, Nick knew that rabbits reproduced in abundance. It was more of a fact than a stereotype, even if stereotyping was rude. Yet still, as he arrived at the "Carrots Days" Harvest Festival on the streets of Bunnyburrow, his first thought was still Damn, that's a lot of bunnies.

Judy, however, was used to it. She had attended the festival since she could first walk. The stage, just as she remembered it, was prepped in the main square with a podium overlooking the crowd. Behind the stage was a backdrop of an expansive carrot farm, and two mammoth rabbit ears had been erected on the scaffolding near the stage lights. A banner hung above the podium, announcing the festival and all contributing parties. A number of vendors—ambassadors, if you will, of the most prestigious farming families in the burrows—had hauled in and pieced together produce stands. Radishes, turnips, peas, beans, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, and a seemingly infinite number of other crop were on display for all to see. And, of course, there were carrots.

November, in its fullest, was late this year. The sun was unobscured and warm in a clear blue sky. The only sign of impending winter was the chilly breeze, which would cut through the streets from time to time and ruffle Nick's fur. Bonnie's cure had worked miracles on him, but when the radiant sun beamed just right into his eyes, he learned that even miracles had their limits. Somewhere, in the back of his mouth, he could still taste the subtle blueberry aftertaste…

And today the eyes were on him—they were on him heavily. The occasional hateful and accusatory glance or comment he received on the streets of Zootopia were shallow when compared to the streets of Bunnyburrow. Thousands and thousands of rabbits—most of which, Nick learned, still held their preconceived notions of foxes with a tight grip.

(You can't trust them, those foxes. Stay clear of the lot. They're conniving and scheming creatures by nature, and they'll attack a turned back. It's in their biology, the lowlife scum.)

The uniform Nick wore—extra stiff and stuffy today—at least helped a little. But he knew no matter how bright his nameplate reflected the sun or how heavy the firearm on his left hip felt, it could only do so much to fend off the skepticism. He didn't blame them, not really. If he had seen a fox in blue uniform walking the streets only a year ago, he'd probably laugh aloud, approach with his vulpine grin intact, and ask where he could find a costume of similar guise.

Keeping his professional facade on the outside, and on the inside his composition, he would reveal to them his credentials. The whole process had him feeling like a single-line extra, preparing for a stage play.

"Officer Nicholas Wilde, ZPD. Badge number 62234." Nick held his identification out to the third rabbit to ask: an ancient grandmother brandishing a walking cane (equally as ancient) in a way as to space herself from the fox.

"And how do I know that's not a phony?" she spat, motioning to his ID with a nod of her cane.

Nick closed his eyes and exhaled, finding comfort in back of his eyelids. A dark and quiet room he could so easily access, though he knew that outside this room the rabbit and her biases still stood. They would not move until he emerged, so he forced his eyes open.
He was beginning to give her a superior's number, one who could confirm his identity (he chose a young lieutenant, a friendly deer he knew from the precinct, knowing the rabbit wouldn't trust anyone with pointed teeth or claws) when a voice interrupted.

"That won't be necessary, Officer Wilde."

The sound of the voice was almost, if not as comforting as the dark of his eyelids. A beautiful yet authoritative tone.

*Here she comes, swooping in to save the day, more appropriately my hide. Nothing new there.*

A cute frustration peaked through her professional veneer as she spoke. "Mrs. Cloverdale, I can assure you that Nick here's as much of an officer as I am."

Mrs. Cloverdale scoffed, her elderly eyes narrowing to slits. "The fox? Certainly a fox can't be a police officer."

Judy crossed her arms. "Well, this one is, thus you are to show him the respect you would any other officer."

The aged rabbit's suspicious gaze didn't fade, and her skeptical eyes flicked between the officers, finally coming to rest on Judy. "...Say, you're one of Bonnie's kits, are you? Mm...Trudy, is it?"

Nick snorted, looking away to hide his amusement.

Judy's nose twitched in annoyance, though her offensive stance didn't falter. "It's Judy, actually," she turned to Nick, "and this isn't the fox. His name is Nick, and he's my partner." Mrs. Cloverdale was completely disgusted, her cane trembling in one scrawny paw. She began for a retort but Judy was faster. "And! If you have any further suspicions of his authentication, you can take it up with my superior, noting that he is not one for irrelevant subject matters such as this one. Good day to you, Mrs. Cloverdale." Wheeled around and took Nick by the arm, leading him away from the sour rabbit before she could say any more.

Parting the crowd with her at his side, Nick shook off Judy's paw. "You know, I think I might just be rubbing off on you after all, Carrots."

"Eh? How so?" Judy murmured, the bulk of her attention focused on reaching a break in the crowd.

Nick smiled slyly. "You're words are quicker, sharper even. It's like you're taking on my extroverted intuition. That said, you don't have to win every battle, Carrots."

"There's no harm in trying to change people's minds. I was being reasonable." She shook her head in annoyance, both from the fox and from the forest of rabbits she had to squeeze between. Maneuvering about was much easier for Nick, the crowds parting biblically at the sight of a fox. "And being reasonable is seeing the fellow mammal as a clean slate, not as the scum of the earth without knowing a thing about them."

Nick shrugged. "Well, if there's anyone who could change the world's mind, it would be you."

Judy couldn't hold back the blush. She walked forward, faster. "Well, not the world."

"I wouldn't be surprised. You changed my mind, a seemingly impossible feat."

"Sure. But the world isn't easily persuaded as you, sick."
"Alright," he chuckled. "Have it your way then." He approached her from behind, placing a clawed paw on her shoulder, his muzzle hovering inches above the base of her ear. He spoke in a soft voice. "But I'm serious. Thank you." His tone was a far cry from his normal animation. He stared straight ahead as he spoke. "For sticking up for my tail."

The surrounding crowd was never any quieter, but between them was silence.

He looked down at her, and the grin resurfaced thin on his lips. While, yes, it resembled the signature, perhaps default smirk he always wore, there was a touch of sincerity in it today. "I couldn't do this without you."

She looked up at him, and the emerald of his eyes connected almost magnetically with the amethyst of hers. The connection was shallow, or so it seemed from the outside viewer, and there were viewers, but between their gazes was trust, hope, and a bond. And something beautiful unraveling beneath it all.

Her eyes narrowed, and then they were both grinning. "No, you most certainly could not."

"There she is," Nick chuckled, taking a step back. And so they stood together, their backs to the dark windows of a clothing retail store ("Closed for Harvest Festival — Opens at 8:00 PM after parade. Happy fall, Y'all!") Their crisp uniforms matched, their postures matched, but otherwise, they were nothing alike. Behind them was a past of ravenous discord, and before them was a future obscured in a haze. But in the present, standing together in matching blue, was only a fox and a bunny. Partners. Friends. And when Nick looked down at Judy—eyes soft and green, canine teeth revealed through a slight grin, and the sudden crescendo of his heartbeat—perhaps it was more…

Nick's grin was tainted suddenly with anxiety, and his eyes fell. "So about last night…" Whatever connection they had previously held was shattered, memories of the night before coming back in unsure tones. "I didn't do anything too stupid, did I?"

Judy chuckled and cringed both at once, "Eh…right, last night."

"Well shit. What'd I do?" Nick asked, rubbing his fingers through the fur on the back of his neck—an anxious tic of his own.

"You and Jade walked in like you'd known each other for years," she said, an oversimplification of the truth. She had watched the two stumble through the front door, bumping into the entry furniture and laughing. Their arms were thrown over each other's shoulders' for support, which wasn't very effective considering how heavy Nick was in comparison to Jade. They spoke in hysterics, a fluent tongue only the other could understand. Behind them were others in a similar state, though it appeared they held a measure of self-restraint when offered their toxin—these two had obviously not.

And then his eyes had landed on Judy, or a double-image of her, at least.

"And your parents? Did they…say anything?" Nick asked.

"Well, dad was with you at the bar." The thought terrified her as much as it did him. This, after all, was Stuart Hopps she was speaking of. The same Stuart Hopps who had purchased her fox deterrent, fox repellent, and (best for last, drum roll please!) a fox taser pre-set to the highest voltage. Sitting three stools down from him.

"Oh yeah, that's right," he said with a distraught laugh. "I didn't say anything to you, did I? You better have not recorded me again with that pen of yours—"

"No, I-I didn't," Judy said quickly. She knew she had to tell him the truth, else one of her siblings
would beat her to it. She couldn't have been the only one to hear the things he had said. *I'll be something we can laugh about a long time from now.*

Judy looked away. "Yeah, you said some things."

Nick's ears fell flat. "Like...what?"

Judy opened her mouth, and for a moment nothing came out, so she closed it. *The truth. Spit it out, all of it.* So she opened her mouth again, the truth on the threshold of her lips.

"*Attention! Can I have everyone's attention, please?*"

It was the most heavenly, most perfect deus ex machina, the kind that she believed only to occur in movies and bad fan fiction. The hero's friend shows up just in time to save the day, or the victim reaches the gun just in time to kill the murderer. Today, it was the voice was Madam Mayor Buttercup, standing on stage in a firmly pressed navy pea coat and scarf the same shade of tan as her fur. She was a savior if Judy had ever seen one. And a finely-dressed savior, at that.

The crowd noise was subdued quick, all save for the occasional cry of one of the many young kits on the premises. For the first time all day, Judy could hear the gurgling fountain in the center of the square. She leaned over and whispered, "I'll tell you everything later, okay?"

"Tonight?" Nick asked, and she nodded. *Thank you, Universe, for cooperating with me, just this once.*

The madam mayor shuffled a moment with the microphone before clearing her throat. Her smile was warm, and she gestured a paw to the banner hanging above her head.

"I, Mayor Buttercup, would like to welcome everybunny to the one hundred and twenty-second annual Carrot Days Festival!"

The crowd cheered, then was quiet.

"The many festivities held today will include, but are not limited to, the largest veggie awards, pie-eating contest, talent show, and the famed harvest parade, of course!"

Judy could recall each event, as well as the ones the mayor didn't list. Pin the tail on the bunny, a classic. The costume contest — she had been a police officer every time, improving her wardrobe each year with more toy store police gadgets to add to her belt. And not to forget the infamous spin the carrot, which was held in an abandoned barn and comprised mostly of the junior and senior classes of BBHS. This event, though, she had never participated in, to the dismay of her classmates.

"Before we begin, I would like to thank all of the families and individuals who are contributing to the foodstuffs this year. The turnout has been enormous and so far unprecedented by any past festival. And also, I will mention two very special individuals who were kind enough to keep watch over the events this year," The mayor turned to Nick and Judy, who were standing just right of the stage. "Our very own Officer Judy Hopps, returning home from Zootopia's ZPD, precinct one!"

Once again, applause. Judy even could hear some of her younger siblings, hopping and cheering her name. A year ago, such an ovation would've jump-started her pride and self-confidence. Her entire hometown was applauding her. Applauding her badge, her victory. But now, she only pulled a small smile and waved to her siblings. She wished the mayor would just get on with the activities.

Nick was clapping, though. A slow and rhythmic clap accompanied with his signature smirk. She didn't have to hide the faintest blush running across her cheeks—her fur did that for her. She only
grinned and realized, if such a simple notion from the fox at her side was enough to dwarf the competition, that it had to mean something. It had to.

"And her dashing partner, Officer Nicholas Wilde!" the mayor continued.

The applause was fainter but was touching in a sense that there had been any applause at all. It was mostly the elderly who withheld their acclaim, while the younger, more species-accepting generations were quicker to clap. A crowd of rabbits applauding a fox. *Pigs are flying*, Nick thought.

Judy smiled and nudged her partner, "Dashing, huh?"

"An understatement, Hopps," was his reply. And a smirk, of course.

The mayor then, in a rather melodramatic tone, announced, "Let the festivities begin!" And begin they did.

The largest veggie contest was held first, with winners awarded handed prizes of large crop baskets. There was a fifteen-hundred-pound pumpkin (which had to be hauled into the square via the effort of multiple trucks), a four-foot cucumber, and finally a six-foot carrot. As badly as Judy had wanted her family to give a go at the contest, her father would always refuse and give a lecture along the lines of, "Us Hopps folk are about the crop number, not crop size. Besides, I won't allow our harvest to be lopped in with GM produce—Never! How else do you think they grow carrots that large?" And so the Hopps watched the prizes be given, all save for Stu, who was too disgusted by the exploiting of perfectly good vegetables.

Shortly after was the pie-eating contest, and Nick the first to sign up. The rabbit holding the clipboard had raised her brow but scribbled down his name anyways and handed him a checkered apron. So he sat, fifteen minutes later, beside multiple other rabbits, sheep, and prey alike. The scene looked like something out of a cartoon—the prey exchanging nervous glances, and the predator, an apron tied around his neck, drooled hungrily. Though it was the pie he hungered for.

He dominated the competition, of course. Possibly because of the body size difference between him and his opponents, and thus, the stomach size difference. Possibly because he was a predator, and they were simply born to consume more. But most likely because the contest served blueberry pie.

"I can't believe they made me stop," Nick huffed as they returned to the stage. The talent show would be beginning soon, and white folding chairs had been lined up in rows before the stage. Anxious kits in costumes stood house right, rehashing lines and practicing riffs on their instruments.

Remembering they were supposed to be on watch, Nick and Judy chose two chairs in the back.

"You were going on pie six, Nick," Judy told him as they sat.

"Well, Carrots, those were some small ass pies."

"And you're a big ass fox compared to your competition," Judy smirked and crossed her arms. "The pies are rabbit-sized."

"You bunnies can do better than that," Nick scoffed and leaned back in his chair, folding his paws behind his head.

"Tell that to my mom and you'll be hauling your own one-ton pie back to Zootopia," Judy said.

Nick looked up at the sky. "I don't doubt it," he said, flicking a pair of aviators over his eyes. "She did cook me a fish platter."
The talent show was ironically comprised of rather untalented individuals. There were knock-knock jokes and puns so awful they could induce a fifty car pileup on the nearby Interstate 15, not to forget a fair share of failed magic attempts. A few notches above this was a series of "Heart and Soul" duets on piano and a couple not-too-horrible singers. In the end, only two individuals showed true talent onstage: a buck and his complex violin concerto, and a weasel who performed an impressive break dance routine that even had Nick applauding.

But to Judy, nothing was as moving as when Cotton hopped onstage with an albino tiger and a piglet at her side. Their act was a skit, one Judy could recall all to well from her youth. It appeared that Cotton had stumbled across the old family camcorder, that or her parents had told her about the play. Either way, it was a near-match of what Judy herself had acted out roughly fifteen years ago, back when the talent show was held in a vacant barn and she was only a kit. She found herself mouthing out the lines, "Fear, treachery, bloodlust. Thousands of years ago these were the forces that ruled our world." She broke into laughter when the albino tiger cautiously "attacked" Cotton, sending her to the ground where she threw her entrails, or a bundle of red ribbons hidden behind her body, over herself in a dramatic fashion.

"Blood, blood, blood! And…death!"

Nick was chuckling at her side, his eyes wide in surprise and amusement. "A little over the top," he said, shaking his head.

The skit resumed just as Judy remembered it. The only difference came at the end, after the tiger had announced his future career of an astrologist, and the piglet an actress. Cotton stood center stage, but it wasn't a police costume she had dawned. Her smile was ear to ear, and she locked eyes with Judy.

"My aunt, Judy, she said I could be anything I wanted. So I want to make this world a beautiful place," Cotton cheered. She was wearing a beret and a paint-splattered overcoat, and in one paw she held a handful of brushes, in the other a paint pallet. Judy felt too much like a mother when her vision went blurry with tears, which she wiped away before Nick could notice.

"I am going to be…" Cotton held out the palette and the brushes for all to see, her eyes bright and sparkling, "an artist!"

The skit ended soon after and was the finale of the talent show. Judy was at the foot of the stage when Cotton stepped down, giggling with the pig and the tiger. When she saw her aunt, she dropped the brushes, the pallet, and charged into her arms. She had never stopped smiling.

"How'd I do?" Cotton looked up from the embrace.

Judy gave her an affectionate smile. "You were fantastic, you little thing! Absolutely fantast—ah!"
Judy drew back, looking down at her uniform in shock. It had been splotched with various shades of purples, oranges, blues, and reds. "Cotton, is that wet paint?"

The kit giggled, looking down at her overcoat. "Yep!" She hopped up and down. "Don't worry! It's washable!"

"A nice addition to your wardrobe, Carrots," Nick said as he approached. He looked her up and down, a paw on his chin, as if in analyzing a piece of modern art. "Yes, yes. Brings out your eyes very well."

"Nick!" Cotton was rushing at him, and he caught her between the ears, keeping the giggling kit at bay.
"Whoa there, Cottonball, let's save the paint for the paper."

"How'd I do?" she asked hopefully. "I was awesome, right?"

She was a naive thing, Nick couldn't help but realize, but all youths were naive for a time. She had dreams as big as Judy's, and he could only hope she had inherited her aunt's determination as well. If she wanted to be an artist, she would need it. The artist's life was rough, and probably involved a hole-in-the-wall apartment and pricey paints that ate up money voraciously quick. The steadily accumulating stack of bills to write off—the stack on the table near the front door, the one she would try to ignore because she was only following her dreams—would only grow larger. The patronization for being small, for being a rabbit, would not bend with mercy. Nick knew this because he had been that very patronization once.

Damn, Nick. She's just a kit. Just because you couldn't follow your childhood dreams doesn't mean she can't, he scolded himself, reminiscing on the ranger-scout uniform, on the muzzle. She'll figure it out soon enough, I'm sure. If she's related to Judy, she's sure got a shot.

"An exceptional performance, sweetheart. So proud of you." He ruffled the fur between her ears, and she giggled once more. "I'll come visit when your masterpiece is featured in a wine and cheese gallery, okay, Cottonball?"

Cotton nodded, not entirely understanding what a wine and cheese gallery was, but believing it to be a good thing. She soon hurried off with her friends, apologizing to Judy one last time on her way out.

"Funny little thing, that one," said Nick, crossing his arms and watching her scamper away. She had hopped onto the shoulders of the albino tiger and together they were chasing after the piglet, laughing with childhood delight and innocence.

"You know, you can just say it," Judy said.

Nick looked at her. "Say what?"

"That she's cute, she is."

Nick smirked, "I thought that was against the rules."

"Yeah?" Judy approached so that she was standing in front of him. "Well, you're an exception. Now I'm gonna go try and wash this mess off." She turned, bound for a bathroom, quickly disappearing into the crowd of rabbits.

It's while Judy was rubbing the paint off her uniform when Nick laid eyes on the only other mammal in town with red-orange fur, sharp teeth, and pointed ears. Right away, he knew who it was.

He stood behind the counter of a modest booth, one erected farther away from the rest. It was painted a garnet red and rows of pies, pastries, and other goods were displayed on shelves inside. Outside, lists of the available foodstuffs, as well as their discounts, were written on a chalkboard leaning against the booth. And atop it all was a sign, which read "Gideon Grey's Baked Goods."

Gideon had just finished wrapping what looked to be a stack of cherry danishes, handing them over the counter to a bunny far too young to be buying from a fox, much less a predator, when Nick strolled up to the booth, paws in his pockets, eyes scanning the pastries.

"Come again, ma'am!" Gideon called to the bunny with a short wave. He turned his back, stashing away a few fresh bucks in a register.
"I don't suppose those cream danishes come in blueberry, would they?"

Gideon's ears twitched though he didn't turn. He closed the register with a chime, reaching up to a high shelf and groping for a box. "Actually, mister, they do, but'ch yer in luck," Gideon said, grunting as he finally managed to reach the item: a dish containing two blueberry danishes midst a sea of crumbs. He turned from the shelf with the dish in both paws. "I've only got—"

A glance at the orange fur was all it took. Gideon started, the dish fumbling in his paws, the danishes tumbling to the floor. With a scowl and a paw to his forehead, he dropped to all fours, picking up the danishes and tossing them back into the dish. Straightening quickly, he shoved the dish aside and folded his paws at his waist, offering a sorry excuse for a smile. His eyes shot to the floor. "Those ain't easy to whip up either, doggonit." He chuckled sheepishly, and he raised his eyes for only a glance before averting them again. "I might be mistaken, mister, but you…oh, who am I kiddin'. You're Officer Wilde, ma' right?"

"That would be me," Nick replied. "And you're Gideon? Unless all these signs are speaking of a different Mr. Grey..."

Gideon rubbed his paws together and chuckled again. It was a deep and southern chuckle, one that, for whatever reason, reminded Nick of honey. "Naw, that's my name. The loooone fox of Bunnyburrow, til' now a' least." He paused, fiddled more with his hands, then, "Uh…you work with Miss Judy, ma' right?"

"We're partners through the ZPD," Nick said.

Gideon nodded and scratched his neck. "I uh…I heard about y'all in the…in the paper. Most everybody did, I-I reckon. Judy…she's a nice rabbit."

"Heh, yeah. She's something, that's for sure," Nick and looked at Gideon. His eyes—sky blue and quick to dart away—were kind by anxious. They wanted to speak, but because they were only eyes they could not.

"Hey, uh…" Gideon smiled toothly, nervously, looking down at the counter. His paw was still scratching at his neck, and for a moment Nick thought the baker had entirely forgotten what he was going to say. Then he looked up, and Nick could tell he strained to keep eye contact. "Sorry, I-I'm sure this is commin' outta' left field, but…did Miss Judy e-ever say anythin' about me? We…uh…we knew each other in our youths…I'm just curious."

Three weeks ago, sitting in the living area of Nick's apartment on a vacant weekend's night, she had. They had developed a habit of binging their favorite films together, normally at Nick's because he had the TV. Occasionally Judy would get pick what to watch, which meant something along the lines of inspirational sports movies or animated films. But most often Nick chose because it was his place and he thought she had a terrible taste in movies. So they would end up watching some classic action or drama film, like "Citizen Crane." Though that night his DVR had refused to eject, so one of those overly-dramatic reality shows was playing in the background of their conversation.

The night was black and windy, and the occasional, guttural growl of thunder would roll overhead. The stormy air was heavy and smelled like copper, so the balcony door was closed tight and the smell replaced with that of a sweet, eggy scent. Nick had, in one of his random states of whimsy, insisted on breakfast for dinner, so they both tried their best to fix blueberry pancakes on his old griddle. Some of the edges were burnt, and there was maybe a little too much flower in the batter (Nick had lost count while measuring cups of the stuff), but they ate and enjoyed their chef-d'oeuvre nonetheless. To wash it down, Nick brewed two cups of dark roast. They sat on his couch, a fox and
a rabbit, a bottle of syrup between them. Judy had been teasing Nick about his blueberry addiction ("It's called personal preference, sweetheart, not addiction."), and Nick had been going on about how much of a messy eater Judy could be ("How do you eat a pancake and not get messy?" "Maybe hold over your plate?" "If it's so easy then I'd like to see you try!")

Nick had gone to wipe a bead of stray syrup off Judy's cheek when his paw had grazed the scar. Three ugly streaks concealed almost perfectly by her fur. She noticed his surprise and was quick to pull away. "I'll get it," she said in a sudden and serious tone, hiding her face and wiping the syrup away with a napkin. She hoped he would dismiss it and leave the subject alone. Everyone had their scars. Sure, not everyone had clawed gashes in their left cheek…

"Were those claw marks?" Nick's voice had dropped an octave, holding tones of both intrigue and disbelief. She shamed herself for not hiding them well enough, and at the same time, shamed herself for not telling him sooner. The audience (Nick Wilde) awaited an explanation, and the stage lights (his eyes) were pointed at her. And all was quiet. I can make an excuse—what's a good excuse? A farming accident involving a three-pronged fork—no, that's just stupid. He's probably already figured it out, just by reading me. Reading my silence—I've been too silent, he knows something is up. He knows, I can see it, he's staring at me. Stupid idiot, you should have told him. No one can keep anything from Nicholas Wilde, he's probably already figured it out.

She was absentmindedly balling up the sticky napkin in her paws, squeezing it like a makeshift stress ball. Nick placed a gentle paw on her knee, and she flinched. He was staring, and there was no smirk, no amusement, no con-artist in those eyes. They were somber, and as rare a sight as it was, it still made her uncomfortable.

He sighed, and said in a voice far too sincere for Nick Wilde, "You can tell me these things. It's just you and me." They became suddenly aware of the TV and Nick took the remote and muted the volume. Now there were only the soft fingers of rain, drumming on the roof.

Judy trained her eyes on her paws. She was picking at the napkin now, small pieces of it falling to the floor—she would clean it up later. "I was a kit, about nine. I was careless and stupid, but that was normal. I believed I could right all the wrongs in the world…thought I could fix everything…I would see a car accident on the news, or a fire or something, and I would think, 'I'll stop that from happening, someday.'"

"That still doesn't explain why you have claw marks on your face."

She could feel his eyes burning into the side of her head, but she didn't turn her gaze. She only stared at shredded napkin in her paws and wished the conversation would magically dissolve. She knew it wouldn't, so she spoke, "I was just as stubborn back then as I am now, which should explain everything," Judy's voice was low and her expression solemn. She chuckled pathetically, reminiscing on days of old. "There was a bully, his name was Gideon Grey…he was a fox."

The silence, which she knew was coming, arrived, and it was even more awkward than she had imagined. "Yeah," she said, only to disrupt the quiet.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Nick asked.

A wave of sympathy, of guilt, forced Judy to look up at him, only for his eyes to be averted away.

"Because," she continued, "I didn't want to give you a reason to think I was afraid of you. Any more of a reason than you already have, anyway."

Nick asked quietly, "And what reason is that?"
"You're a fox, I'm not. I'm prey—even worse, a rabbit—and I didn't want that difference to make you...distance yourself from me. I didn't want you to think I was afraid of you."

More silence, then, "Are you?"

"No."

The weather grew silent as if to listen in on their conversation. What remained of the pancakes was getting cold and rubbery, sitting neglected on syrupy foam plates. The coffee was cold.

"I'd never hurt you," he said, turning to face her. "Not ever. And really, it's okay if you're afraid of—"

"No, it's not."

"It is."

Judy shook her head. "I'm not. I'm not afraid of you." she ran her paw slowly over her scar. "Not because of this. And not because you're a fox."

Thunder clapped overhead, making the windows rattle slightly. It reverberated for a while before the gentle rain began to crescendo into a downpour, muffled to a static by the walls.

"What did he do to you?"

Judy breathed deeply and remembered the whole scene. It was the kind of memory one doesn't forget easily, because it was engraved on her face, and because she wanted to remember. "He was picking on some friends of mine...so junior-cop Judy Hopps tried to size him up." She laughed, but the laugh was sheepish and retrospective. Her eyes were far away. "...And he left me on the ground with a few scratches to prove his dominance."

The scars were still there, and they always would be. She and Gideon's relationship, however, had mended. Not healed, but mended. Because scars cannot mend—cannot forget. She wasn't sure who it bothered more, her or Gideon.

She continued, "To prove that I was just a rabbit. Just some stupid, carrot-farming, dumb bunny—I think that's what he said." She didn't expect Nick to say anything, for, in times when the smirk wasn't appropriate, he would grow surprisingly introverted. Turns out she was right—he didn't say anything. Instead, his paw found its way around her waist, and suddenly she was leaning against him, his head resting on top of hers.

"I'm sorry," he said, and she could feel his voice vibrate in his throat. "I wouldn't have asked had I known."

"No, I'm glad you did. I haven't told anyone except my parents, so I'm glad I'm finally opening up to somebody." She leaned into her partner's side, taking in the predatory scent that lingered about him. It was musky, masculine, and probably some kind of woodsy cologne. She never thought she would take refuge in such a sent, in the scent of a predator. "You know I trust you, right? I do."

("You think we'd trust a fox without a muzzle? You're even dumber than you look.")

Nick closed his eyes and pulled her tighter to his chest. He whispered, in a breath that warmed her ears, "I know."

"And I'm not afraid of you," she continued, leaning up just enough to look into his emerald-green
eyes. "Not because of some childhood bully."

Nick pulled her back to him. His lips curved into a minuscule smile, but notwithstanding, a smile. He pulled her tighter.

"Yeah, she told me some things."

Gideon bit his lip, paws still rubbing together at his waist. "Would 'some things' include…"

"The scar?" Nick stated blatantly, in inducing a wince from the fox across the counter.

"Yeah." Gideon's voice was a rasp. "I'll never forgive myself for what I did. I don' want to forget it. I-I don' deserve to live somethin' like that down, ya know?" He sucked in a breath. "A-And I don' expect you to forgive me, either. Not with you and her being so close…" He shook his head and looked away.

"Judy said you have a therapist," said Nick. "How'd that work out?"

Gideon's ears perked and he looked up when the threat he expected never came. "Oh…uh, I stopped seein' her bout' three years ago, but it helped. It helped a mighty lot, you see, my daddy never was a very good mammal. He'd drink and disappear for days atta' time. Then, right outta' the blue, he'd show up at home and yell at my mom n' me. Sometimes he'd throw things. Sometimes…” Gideon held his breath, then sighed deeply. "Never mind—my therapist helped me find the root of the problem. I'd often take out his anger on the other kits from school. All in all, I was an idiot."

Nick studied Gideon's gaze for any hint of artificial or theatrical workings in his eyes—there were none. The pain was no act, it was deeply rooted, Nick could see that from the way his eyes seemed to retreat during his confession. It was evident that the pain haunted him. And standing there, his ears pinned back against his head and his paws rubbing over one another, Nick couldn't see how this fox had ever been aggressive. Gideon Grey—who served up pies and country-style smiles to his customers, primarily rabbits—seemed anything but the antagonist in Judy's story. So he allowed for sympathy.

"We were all idiots back then." Nick's voice was nonchalant, and he let a faint smile part his lips. "Kits, in general, are idiots."

Gideon's ears raised and his eyes met Nick's. For a moment, he seemed to keep his distance, to observe if this simple grin had some sort of backlash. When he found it didn't, he smiled, and his paw returned to rubbing his neck. "Yeah, I-I guess you're right."

Nick smirked, and his eyes drifted to the chalkboard menu. "So, seeing as those danishes are out of the question, what else do you serve that's blueberry?"

Maybe it wasn't forgiveness, but it was grace. And that was enough.

Judy would come out of the bathroom a few minutes later, her uniform damp and drying from where she had rubbed the paint out with wet paper towels. She would walk around the square in search of her partner, and would have quite the double-take when she saw the only two foxes she had ever known chatting and laughing over blueberry scones.

The costume contest, like the talent show, was held in the square. Kits lined up on the sidewalks, dressed in a variety of costumes. Each kit had a basket of sorts where votes would be collected. There were the typical kiddie costumes, such as the astronaut, the explorer, and the movie star. Then there were the fitting costumes, like the carrot farmer, and the beet farmer, and the potato farmer. In
short, there were a lot of farmers.

Judy had gone to talk with Gideon, leaving Nick to wander the square alone. He had been surprised at how easily the two had struck up conversation, but it made him smile. His childhood enemies—those who had abused him in his scout troop—he didn't think he could ever forgive. But Judy appeared to be chucked-full of life's greatest attributes, forgiveness being one of them. Nick could not relate but was happy to see it anyways.

He had taken a voting ticket from one of the rabbits passing them out and was now bending it back and forth in his paws as he walked. The costume contest hadn't sparked his interest, and even if it had, the parents of the participating kits probably wouldn't let him anywhere near their children, much less to throw in his vote. So he was making his way toward what appeared to be the only bucket that would accept his ticket—the trash bin—but his attention turned to a peculiar costume before he could get there.

It was a young male rabbit, or buck, as he had heard Judy call them. He was standing alone on the corner of a busy street gaining curious looks from passer-bys. Big black whiskers had been painted over the cream-colored fur of his face, made to look like they were extruding from his nose. His long ears had been pinned behind his head by two sharper, pointed ones. Draped behind him was a faux tail, one of similar color to his matching orange shirt and pants. To top it all off, emerging from his mouth was a pair of plastic fangs.

The kit had dressed as a fox.

His container, a white, five-gallon bucket, was empty. Any hope of receiving any votes, or even any notice from the passing crowd had dwindled to the point that he had overturned the bucket and was using it for a seat. His head rested in his paws, and his tail fell pathetically over the side of the bucket. It was a sorry sight, so Nick approached him. Upon closer notice, he had even worn fake claws.

"Hey there, buddy," Nick said, and the buck's ears perked up, fighting against the fake ones which took their place. His eyes, a chestnut brown, looked up to Nick, and his bored expression quickly gave way to an instinctual fear. He stood up and took a few choppy steps back.

Nick only smiled down at him, his real (not plastic, not dull) fangs gleaming in the sun. He held up his paws in surrender, on which were real claws. "No need to be afraid, little buddy. We're both foxes here."

The buck's expression turned from cautious to curious as the real vulpine knelt on the sidewalk, revealing his ticket. His vote. Brown eyes grew wider.

Nick flipped over the bucket and looked back to the kit. "Now, I might be biased," Nick pointed the paw in which he held the ticket toward the buck, "but this has to be the best costume I've seen all day."

And with that, he tossed in his ticket.

The kit's eyes flashed, his breath hitching as he stared down at his bucket. Inside was the lonely vote, perhaps more pathetic now than it was empty. But the buck looked up at Nick and smiled, wonderstruck.

"T-Thanks, mister," the buck said.

"No problem, kid," replied Nick. He started to rise to his feet, to look for Judy, who had agreed to bring him back another of those scones he loved, when…
"Mister?" Nick looked down, and the buck was standing at his feet, looking up to him. "What is it like to be a fox?"

Nick simply continued to stare at the vulpine impostor. It was a question he had never been asked, though he knew the answer all too well. Yet his mouth couldn't find the right words. His mind could not register that this rabbit was asking him such a thing.

The buck retreated. "Sorry, m-mister. T-That was rude."

"No, no. It wasn't." Nick knelt again so that they were at eye level. "Is that why you dressed as a fox? To see what it was like?"

The buck nodded. "I...I wanted to know what it felt like to be a predator, because predators are strong and have a long tail and pointy teeth and I don't have any of that. So I thought it would be cool, but," the buck's tone, as well as his gaze, fell to the sidewalk, "everyone just looks at me weird. L-Like I'm a bad mammal or something...Did I do something wrong?"

Nick's ears fell behind his head and he sighed. "You didn't do anything wrong." He made sure to be gentle when he placed a paw between the rabbit's ears. He gave it a ruffle. "You know, kid, sometimes that's what it is like to be a fox. Other mammals think you're bad, even when they don't know a thing about you."

The buck's brown eyes were confused for a moment, but then seemed suddenly far off, as if he understood. As result, his face fell. "Oh," was all he said.

"But," Nick tried for a lighter tone, "as a fox, sometimes you'll find a special someone who doesn't ignore you. This "special someone" isn't afraid of your claws or teeth. They see you just as they would any other animal. And, as a fox, I've learned, when you find that special someone, you know you've found a real friend."

Their eyes meet, and the buck smiled. Nick smiles back and flicks one of his fake ears. "But you're not a fox, kid. You're a rabbit." He didn't mention, however, the the shit rabbits had to deal with as well. Contrary to popular belief, they don't get it much easier than foxes.

The rabbit's smile fell. "But...you're a fox."

"I am. Afraid I can't change out of this costume," he chuckled wearily and glanced over his shoulder. Judy was searching the crowd for him, and in each paw was a scone. Nick looked back to the buck and smiled. "But I think I've found my special someone."

Judy had also thrown in her vote after seeing the buck on the street corner, dressed as a fox. By the time the officers walked away, the buck had a new addition to his costume—a junior ZPD sticker on his shirt sleeve. And not only that, but a confident smile on his face, as if the two tickets in his bucket had won him the entire contest.

"You're good with kits," Judy said as they walked away, each munching on a scone.

"Well they tend to be the easiest to hustle," Nick replied through a full mouth. Judy let out a guffaw and cuffed him on the shoulder. "I'm kidding, of course. I liked the costume."

As an orange evening arrived overhead, the officers helped clear the streets for the oncoming parade. Far down the street, floats of large fruits and vegetables were being prepared. Each float brought back memories. They were the same ones that had been used year after year and were progressively getting older, receiving more patch-jobs each fall. Judy turned to tell Nick something about the floats, only to find that her partner had disappeared, leaving her on her own to mark the streets off with
cones. When he returned, she was waiting for him.

"Such a sneaky fox, you are, slipping away like that," she said, arms crossed.

"I was blocking off the street on the other side of the square, you dumb bunny," he smirked, revealing a small bag. "Besides, there was a vendor selling crickets, so I couldn't resist."

"Crickets?" She scoffed. "Not going to get much business today."

Nick threw a handful of the dried insects into his mouth. "Same thing I told him." He plucked one from the bag and held it out to her. "Want one?"

Judy rolled her eyes. "Pass."

So Nick popped it into his mouth, crunching loudly.

Judy cringed away from him. "Ugh, how do you eat those things?"

"I often wonder the same thing about you and your veggies," Nick called to her, throwing another handful into his maw.

"Veggies aren't living," she hissed.

Nick laughed, "Technically speaking, they are, considering that they grow, die, reproduce and such. Come on, Carrots, even I know that, and I'm pretty sure I failed sixth-grade biology."

"Well, smart ass, vegetables aren't sentient."

"Then it's just part of being a predator," Nick mused, smirking and waving a cricket wing at her. "It's this or rabbit."

"Oh, har-har."

It's twilight by the time the parade begins, and the moon is bright overhead. Vibrant floats wheel their way down the redbrick streets, illuminated by orange streetlights. Each float was themed after a different crop and individuals on said floats toss handfuls of the produce into the crowd.

Nick and Judy stood in the central square, motioning floats past. Nick wore his aviators, even though only the moon and stars light the sky, and it annoys Judy to no end.

"Can't you just take those off? It's not even bright out!" she cried.

"Afraid not, it's part of the uniform. Showing eyes is showing weakness, and a ZPD officer knows no weakness," he grinned.

"I can't believe you," Judy murmured and shook her head. She reached for the glasses, only for him to shoo her paw away. "Come on, Nick, you look like a douche."

He ignored her. "Oh! Are those blueberries?"

A float carrying a large blueberry (a giant blue balloon, patched up in several places with duct tape) was wheeling itself down the square. Several rabbits were aboard the float, each with a basket in hand, throwing berries to the crowd.

When the float had passed, Nick returned with two paw-fulls of blueberries and an ear to ear grin.
He folded one away in the red handkerchief he always kept handy, and casually snacked on the other. This time, when he offered some to Judy, she took them.

"This stuff's like crack," Nick commented through a mouthful. He swallowed. "So much better than the city's."

"These are the city's blueberries. Bunnyburrow is Zootopia's number one crop provider."

"Well, they sure as hell taste better. Fresher, I think," Nick said. He finished off what was left in his paw before kissing his fingertips. "Mwah! Delicious!"

Judy chuckled to herself, looking up at him. "So, just to recap, you won a pie eating contest by mercy rule, bought an unholy amount of pastries from Gideon, somehow managed to find a vendor selling crickets, and now this?"

He had gone to tell her that his stomach was a bottomless pit, but a rather ironic lurch from his gut caught the words in his throat, making him second guess the thought. He grimaced, but only a little. Judy noticed and smirked. "I see it's catching up to ya." She laughed and patted him on the back (she had to stand on her toes to do so). "Don't get sick on me, Wilde. The week has only begun."

"Oh joy," Nick mumbled. He kneaded his gut with his fist to combat a developing cramp.

More floats passed until Nick was confident that there could not be any more fruits or vegetables left in the world, and yet they kept coming. Any last traces of sunlight drained away until the dark of night was full overhead, though not without its stars. The sky above the countryside bore more stars than the light pollution ever allowed city dwellers to see. And with the fading of the light came a curious combination of headache and nausea, both taking Nick by storm. Suddenly the orange streetlights above the event appeared painfully bright, until just looking at them gave Nick a twinge of a migraine, even with his aviators dawned. He had been fine only an hour ago, and the hangover symptoms had been diminishing all day. Was it some sort of backlash? A rebound from last night's drinks? Nick had never heard of nor experienced such a thing, but couldn't find any other explanation.

The last float was an eggplant, moving far too slow on its creaking foundation. After it had passed (and with it, what seemed like a millennium) the crowd retook the streets. Fruits and berries littered the redbrick roads, and the sight of each one twisted Nick's stomach in a new direction. He blamed the pies, those damn rabbit-sized pies, which he now admitted to being much larger than originally thought. His legs felt brittle and ready to give, quite like the floats' foundations, he noted. Somewhere to rest. Hell, somewhere to sit. Something cold to hold to his forehead—not to drink never to drink—but to relieve him of his stuffy uniform. For the first time in his life he wished for the cold of November, but this year November was late.

"Now what?" he asked Judy. He had to be honest, putting the headache aside, the day had been surprisingly pleasant. Despite this, fatigue was beginning to pull at his eyelids and attempting to steer him back home. To a quiet and dark place where he could be alone with his thoughts. Or with Judy. Both the latter and former were preferable, but they remained only a pleasant fantasy. The streetlights overhead reminded Nick that this was no fantasy, and to no fantasy would he be retreating anytime soon. He was still on duty, he reminded himself. So, with aviators and an aura of forced confidence—Officer Nicholas Wilde grinned and bore it.

Judy responded, "Normally there's a band playing onstage and all the shops and restaurants open up." They walked toward the center of the square, where sure enough, a band (all prey, of course) was prepping the sound systems onstage. "Then there're fireworks, but that's around midnight."
No quiet for you, fox. You're an officer now. You wear the badge, therefore, you do not sleep. Grin and bear it, you blue-blooded son of a bitch.

After a long silence, Judy spoke up. "Hey," her voice was timid, "are you... feeling alright?" She stepped closer to him, looking up with eyes that, like the streetlights, were far too bright for Nick's liking. And he didn't like her question either. For when Judy was worried, everyone was worried. Nick, as well as most the other officers at the precinct, knew this principle by heart. And thus, you don't give the rabbit any reason to worry. Not ever.

Nick blinked a few times, forced himself into a higher state of awareness, and replied, "Yeah, I'm fine. Why do you ask?" He smiled down at her, flashing teeth. But the smile was painful, and Judy could see it when the corners of his mouth trembled involuntarily. A snarl, almost, and he failed to suppress it.

"You're quiet... and you're never quiet."

"Maybe I'm just tired," Nick shrugged, trying to sound sarcastic and failing to meet his usual quota. At that moment, a surge of nausea took the reigns and steered him to a halt, doubling him over and provoking a strong grimace.

You've done it now, he shamed himself, all the while fighting the reappearance of his food. Oh, you've done it now.

She stopped at his side, asking him again if he was alright. And again, he said yes. How else was he to answer?

"Are you sure? You've been holding your waist like that for a while now," Judy said. He looked down and realized he had been. For about ten minutes now he had been squeezing a paw to his stomach, fist curled into a tight ball. Squeezing a little tighter than he had first realized to the point that he remembered he was trying to combat the pain, not add to it.

Nick straightened himself and relaxed his knuckles. "I'm fine, Carrots," a lurch, a wince, and he added, "but... you wouldn't know of a bathroom around here, would you?" He tried for a lighthearted tone, scratching the back of his head with one paw while the other remained at his gut.

Judy looked up at him, and Nick could see in her eyes that he had worried the rabbit. It was like poking the bear, but somehow so much worse.

"Um... yeah. On the other side of that street corner." She pointed and he followed her finger to a nearby corner cafe. He thanked her and hurried off, trying to cooperate with his rebellious stomach, threatening to spill its contents (blueberries and pie, mostly) onto the redbrick streets. Thankfully, he kept it at bay, rounding the corner and seeing the small sign for a unisex bathroom. An oasis, a gift from above, it seemed.

The bathroom was unoccupied to Nick's relief, though his thoughts were primarily focused on the steady rise of a sharp pain developing in his head and south of it. The bathroom was small—meant for someone of a rabbit's size, as most of the buildings in the square were designed. With the average rabbit being about three-fifths a fox's height, the size difference wasn't too much of an inconvenience. But in the throbbing behind his eyes, the already tight walls appeared to shrink tighter.

He took off his glasses and threw himself over the sink near the door, head hanging limply, staring down at the drain. Panting. Heart drumming, no, racing.
That can't be normal. Nick thought, and his internal monologue held a humorous tone which didn't fit well with his own wellbeing. That isn't normal.

He hadn't even run to the bathroom. He'd shuffled, yes, and carried with him a slight limp. But he had never run. Despite this, it felt as if, with every beat, his heart was attempting to shatter his surroundings ribs, like breaking free from a cage. Its pulse was loud in his ears and pumped in rhythm with the deep ache behind his eyes. And to heap salt into open wound, his stomach threatened another lunch-revealing lurch.

Fighting the taste of stale blueberry in the back of his mouth, Nick tightened his grip on the rim of the sink and found himself panting over the drain like a marathoner coming upon the finish line. He cursed the rabbit-sized pies and Gideon's addictive pastries and, most of all, getting wasted with Judy's brothers. He had a feeling his throbbing brain had something to do with the amount of alcohol he'd downed the night before. A reverberation, perhaps. No hangover he could recall had ever made such a reappearance, but considering how quickly the glasses had refilled themselves in his hazy memory of last night, he didn't doubt it was somehow linked to his pain.

You idiot. Judy is always right she's always right. She warned you not to get drunk—not to get "hammered", she said. Either way, you graduated past both you stupid, wasted, hungover fox what a cop you are—what an example of your species you are, you pathetic excuse of—

A noise from his left, and he tilted his head just enough to see a middle-aged goat frozen in the doorway of the bathroom.

"A moment…” Nick panted, holding up a weak finger.

Didn't lock the door o ' smart one, useless without your partner. Judy would have locked the door, you can't even walk upright without her help. You're pathetic.

The goat was genuinely startled at the predator in the bathroom, moreso by his posture (limply hung over the sink, head drooping, panting rapid breaths). He only stepped out of the door frame and closed the door behind him.

Nick limped to the door, and with much more effort than it should have taken, locked it. He returned to his default position over the sink.

Why am I limping? Why am I breathing like this? My pulse is too fast. I wasn't even running.

And suddenly his finger was twitching. He looked down at it with a petrified fascination, which aroused many more questions to ask himself through the mirror. Why was the fox in the mirror twitching? Why was his scruff standing on end and layered in sweat? Why were his eyes pink around the corners? Everyone's eyes are pink around the corners, he told himself, but upon second glance realized that not everyone's eyes were bloodshot red around the corners. And not just the corners, but the entire whites of his eyes.

And the twitching, like a wildfire spreading through a wood of umber fur, made its way swiftly through each finger and into his paws and arms. And then he was shivering, which was queer because he wasn't cold. In fact, the bathroom was rather hot. Sweat mixing in the fur behind his ears and under his arms, Nick was sweltering. And, when he wearily glanced around the bathroom to locate a heater because surely there is a heater, he found that there wasn't one.

More than he wanted anything else in the world, in that moment he wished Judy was there. She would be standing at his side right now, running a reassuring paw over his shoulder and giving a strew of comforting lies.
("You’ll be alright. You’ll be fine. Stuff like this passes, just like any other bug, it always does.")

He found Judy's dialogue confused his own wishful thinking, and when he realized it was he who was writing this dialogue, he got a picture of just how fearful he really was. The voice, both Judy's voice and his own comforting thoughts, was lying. Whoever was speaking behind his aching, bloodshot eyes was lying.

And a flood of furious, anxious ramble filled his head I'm not going to be alright. I'm not fine. This is not what "fine" looks like. Twitching and breathing like this—not fine, anything but fine. Not at all. Sweating in November—November is too cold, always been too cold, least favorite month of the year—not fine. Will not pass like any other bug. Not alright.

(Savage.)

The word surfaced on the outskirts of his conscious, and for a moment he didn't notice. But when he did, the thought graduated to the forefront of his mind and he could think of nothing else.

No. Not that. I can't be savage, I've seen savages … Nick recalled his episode with Judy in the Rainforest District when Manchas was darted—keyword darted. I haven't been shot, have I?...No, surely I would have noticed. This is just...just a case of...of...

But no other word came to mind.

Savage. He mouthed it. The word was bitter on his tongue and appeared only to heighten his worry. The puzzle pieces were finally connecting and the grand picture being revealed. Rapid pulse and heavy breathing, like that of a sprinter mid-race. Sweating, beads of the stuff falling from under his arms and dampening his uniform. Twitching—which was the most concerning of them all. Nick had never recalled twitching. Muscle spasms, yes, but never twitching. He looked down at his paws and the involuntary trembling made it seem as if they weren't his own, but someone else's. Though he didn't believe a list of symptoms on turning savage existed, all of the above sounded like likely candidates if he had ever heard any.


But his fear overwhelmed his confidence.

Somewhere, in a violent sea of anxiety, revelation shone through. A horrifying revelation that had Nick's bloodshot eyes widening in terror.

"Oh shit," he breathed into the sink. "Oh shit, not good."

Nick wasn't in Zootopia. He thought that this fact could not be forgotten when a fox was traveling to a town of rabbits, and yet he had forgotten exactly where he was for the briefest moment. In Zootopia, there was an emergency response in minutes. Seconds, even, in places like Savanna Central. In Zootopia, medical professionals were trained for the treatment of savage predators, and the antidote was supplied in abundance. In Zootopia, the police were burly an intense and on every street corner. Because, in Zootopia, this kind of thing—a predator going savage—had happened before.

But Nick wasn't in Zootopia.

Clever bastards was all Nick could think before he vomited into the sink, blueberries and all reappearing, but it was already in his bloodstream now he could feel it.
The Bunnyburrow Police Service was a cute little gathering of volunteers and old sheriffs, with bingo-nights on Tuesdays and Saturdays at seven in the old school-gym they called a precinct. There was no antidote for savages in Bunnyburrow because Bunnyburrow is comprised of bunnies. Not foxes. Not predators. Clever bastards, indeed. As for who they were, Nick didn't know. But he did know…

They planned this, whoever they are. What did I do wrong? Doesn't matter —losing mind. Going savage. But why savage? Bellwether is gone. Maybe she had outside contacts? Or she inspired others? Other bastards—damn bastards. What did I do wrong? What did I do?

A thought came to him as his stomach rolled and sent him craning over, clawing at his gut. They, whoever they were, hadn't shot him—hey had poisoned him. That would explain the upset stomach. They had put night howler right under his nose, and he had eaten it.

Eaten what?

The overwhelming and repulsive taste of bile in his mouth answered for him. Blueberry. Pawfulls he had shove into his maw as the float passed by. His favorite —his downfall.

But now, with his stomach empty, he realized a ravaging hunger taking hold in his gut. Not for blueberries, no, the very thought of them would make him dry-heave. He wanted something heartier, something more filling. Perhaps something salty, grungy, fleshy even. Perhaps bloody—yes, that would be very filling, the coppery taste would be overwhelmingly strong and mixed with thick chunks of living meat (stop it) to create the perfect blend of that which was alive and now is only food.

Meat. Something in Nick, as well as every other predator, had always wanted to try meat. The protein insects supplied could only go so far, and while synthetic meat was always an option, it was often seen as offensive and unorthodox by a large portion of the population. Besides, it was expensive.

But, writing in that bathroom in the alley behind a cafe, Nick only wanted the real product. A product he wouldn't have to pay for, and one which wouldn't be frozen. It would be free, and it would be fresh. It would run, and he could catch—oh the fun that would be. And when caught, they would wriggle and beg and the only response he would give would come from his claws and teeth, especially his teeth, and they would sink, oh how they would sink, into that still writhing (please stop) meat again and again, ripping free all that is offered until no life remains and the blood flows freely (fight it) over the corpse and over the meat and down his throat. And that was only one morsel of many, and all of them rabbits. Rabbits, the perfect meal for a fox. The designed meal for such a carnivore. Soft fur and skin softer still, so easy to separate into bite-sized pieces, soaked in (grin and) the rusty flavor of crimson vitals. The lust, the gluttony, the sin—far too much to bear (bear it) as such a beautifully delightful temptation awaits right outside this door. The crowd, yes, they'll put up a fight, but the slower ones—the smaller ones—will be the easiest to catch, and no doubt have the most delicate meat, the easiest to rip and tear clean from tendon and bone and—

Nick threw back his head, paws draped over his face, and released an agonized wail. His head was splitting, his brain hammering against his skull, his heart against his ribs, and the hunger grew more gripping by the minute. Grotesque images of himself shredding the rabbits he had conversed with only hours before haunted him, and at the same time, intrigued him.

When Nick had first seen the predators going savage—on the evening news, half a cold beer in his paw—he had wondered if he could fight the urge if it arose. He settled on the thought that he could. As much as he disliked the majority of the prey population, nothing could ever get him to attack them, much less break his slick, vulpine facade in public. Then he met Judy Hopps, and together
they found out that the "virus" was spread via dart gun. Fighting the influence of the blue pellet seemed less realistic then, though he couldn't ever imagine himself attacking those closest to him. Never mammals like Finnick or Flash or Judy—never Judy. He knew, even when savage, he could not attack her.

But as Nick stumbled against the wall, experiencing torment in its every aspect, he wouldn't dare test it.

_I need to leave_, he told himself, and it seemed simple enough. He made for the door. The handle appeared to recede from his grasp, but when he finally found it, it did not budge. It took him several desperate tugs to remember the door was locked (he was now very glad the rabbit from earlier had not walked in on him now), and he pondered the thought of remaining in the bathroom. It could be his holding cell, to protect those outside. He rejected it when he imagined the unfortunate bunny who would decide to use the restroom before the fireworks start. They would hear the ruckus inside, unknown to them to be a savage fox, and retrieve the only officer on scene to investigate. Judy.

Suddenly tearing and shredding and ravaging and _'BLOOD, BLOOD, BLOOD, AND DEATH!'_

Nick finally unlocked the door and stumbled outside. A chilled air swept through the alleyway, ruffling his sweat-stained fur. From the street ahead he could see a vibrant display of lights thrown on the surrounding buildings. Music, classic rock, was being played, and Nick could see the crowd that had gathered at the foot of the stage.

Rabbits. A paw moved from his side, as if to reach out to them, to tear and shred and ravage, blood and death and meat and... Nick forced his paw back to his side and groaned, reminding himself of his current task. Getting the hell out of Dodge before he painted Dodge red.

But when he turned down the alleyway, the one that would surely lead to an abandoned street away from the crowd, he only saw that it ended in a brick wall about thirty feet down. And so, with nowhere else to turn (in a very literal sense), Nick staggered toward where the band was playing, where the crowd was dwelling in a nonchalant innocence. A naïve crowd, like a child, unaware of the threat edging down the dark alley. (_The lion forced into the Colosseum's center, where it would prey on the awaiting meal. Bread and Circuses. "We, who are about to die, salute you."_)

Again, the urge to pick out Judy from the crowd was strong. _She'll know what to do — she always knows what to do._ But it was the savage in him speaking, using his own mental tongue to manipulate her—how dare it. So Nick kept his eyes on the floor, paws curled in tight fists and claws digging into palms until Nick could feel a coppery warmth under his paw pads. His head was hammering worse than any hangover he could recall. It was as if a hand-held mixer had been forcefully shoved through his skull and powered on to its highest setting.

_I can't do this, I'm drowning in it! It's killing me — IT'S KILLING ME!_

He was floating now, as though all he could see was projected on a screen, and he was standing in a dark place, watching it all. Floating past rabbit after rabbit (_crush them_), all of which stared as he passed. One might have asked if he was alright, and somewhere, a foreign voice might have murmured "I'm fine," but he wasn't sure. He only knew that he was moving forward. Where to? This was another thing he wasn't sure of: why was he walking away? His prey was behind him. The meat was passing on his right and left, and he did nothing but keep walking forward.

"Nick! Hey, wait! Nick!"

Her voice pulled him back into himself, and he became more aware of his surroundings, if only by a little. He turned and peered through heavy, squinting eyes to see her in her blue inform, hurrying up
the sidewalk. Hurrying right to him—a meal scarring right into his paws.

Stupid rabbit. Please, stop running. I can't control it. I don't want it to hurt you. I don't want to hurt you, please …

"Judy?" his voice was an exhale, and somehow she still picked up on it. She stopped in front of him, and he stumbled backward, grasping for balance from a nearby wall.

Please …

"Nick, where are you going?" Her voice was worrisome, much more than before, and she looked him over with eyes of that same worry.

"I need to…leave…" He had already turned and was stumbling away when he said it, his throat arid and his tongue heavy. *Bear it…out of Dodge…*

"Leave?" Judy scoffed. Then pattering paws on the pavement and she was at his side, eyes wide with a blend of mixed and vibrant emotion. "What do you mean—"

"Get away from me," Nick hissed, and he couldn't quite tell if it came out as a groan or a growl. But when she recoiled, blinking up at him with wide eyes that screamed vulnerable prey, Nick assumed it was the latter.

*But it's okay if she's afraid,* Nick told himself. *It's better she be afraid than dead. Get away from her—from everyone—or else she'll be dead, and siblings dead, and everyone…* He thought of Jade and the rest of Judy's brothers. Of the kit on the street corner, dressed as a red fox. Of Cotton. Of the rabbit standing before him now.

"Please…" he winced as he spoke, his eyes straining from focusing on her face. He tried to say more and found that he couldn't, for the pain in his head was powerful, but smooth now. It came in heavy ripples that both seemed to soothe his eyes and squeeze them—like a forceful, massaging burn.

"You're scaring me, Nick," she said, and he could tell by her tone that she meant it. He wanted to cry, to break down right then and there, because he had imagined that sentence being that last thing she said before he…broke her.

*I won't!* He screamed within his head. *I will not! I will not lay a paw on her. No drug or biological urge or ANYTHING can make me. I will not—I will NOT. But the night howler's response was louder than his own, and he could feel himself slipping away. Succumbing to that horrible blue flower. He turned away from her, but her paw had found his wrist with a surprising strength. She wheeled him back around to face her, and had his thought process not been overridden with agony, he might have laughed at how ironic the scene was—the fox trying to evade the rabbit. *Please, let go. I can't fight anymore. I'm drowning.* He was going to snap soon, and he knew that. He could, with every second that his rapid pulse emphasized, feel himself succumbing to the barbaric voices in his head. As if being pulled down into the depths, and Judy was just above the water's surface. Her voice was audible but warbled. He was being pulled deeper, and couldn't warn her that the thing that was dragging him down was going to resurface soon, and that she needed to get far away, her and her family. Her and everyone.

"You have to tell me what's wrong," she demanded, thought her voice was becoming less like a voice and more like a wavering pitch in his ears. "Nick!" She grabbed his shoulders as best she could and shook. Frantically. "What happened?"

"Please…"
"You have to talk to me! Tell me what's wrong!"

He tried to look down at her because something told him that maybe if he saw her eyes clearly he would be able to fight it. But the lights overhead were too bright and the thing was dragging him deeper within himself. Deeper into a numb abyss of ravenous voices and…

…and a shimmering light pronged his eyes with a painful flash, one which felt—as Nick could only imagine—like being woken up by a flash bomb. He squinted sharper and saw that the thing, the shimmering thing, was a silver chain, dangling from her belt loop. On either side of the chain was a peculiarly shaped loop with several notches and a small hole where a key could fit.

**Judy's handcuffs**, which meant nothing at first, but when the voltage of his realization struck him, he understood what was to be done. For further down his sweat-soaked uniform was a pair of his own handcuffs. Somewhere inside him, even when being dragged into deeper water, a con-artist smile was present and confident, everything that he was not at that moment. But it was still there, the smile. Because he had an idea—yes, a fantastic idea. Because Nicholas Wilde always comes up with the most fantastic of ideas.

Fighting for the controls of his own conscious, he ripped his paw from Judy's with newfound strength and fumbled with the cuffs. The savage inside fought back as if understanding for the first time that it might lose. His head screeched and his heart pummeled against his ribs, but he bore it. He grinned. For the first time in years, or so it felt. Because he wasn't going to lose. Nicholas Wilde never loses, especially not to some stupid blue flower.

The cuffs were freed from his waist and he quickly closed one over his left arm. The metal was cold against his fur, but it was an assuring cold—a restraining cold, and hell did he need some restraint.

"What are you doing?" Judy cried, but Nick paid no attention or did not hear her at all. He found the other cuff with his right paw, but paused and reached back down to his belt. He revealed a small, silver key, which he held out to Judy.

"Take it," he breathed, and was reminded of his physical condition by how horrible his voice sounded. How sickly it croaked.

She looked down at his trembling paw and the key in it, then up to him. She was still afraid, he could smell it on her like strong and bitter perfume. "Nick, what are—"

"J-just take it." He tossed the key to her feet and reached back to restrain his right arm. Judy watched as he did. The cuff clicked into place, restraining him—hands behind his back—wrapped around the lamp post.

"Oh…" she said. And knew.

"Get…e-everyone away," he said through his teeth. The grin had transformed into an agonizing cringe.

Judy nodded solemnly. She bent over and picked up the key, dropping it into her pocket. She straightened and turned back to him, a thousand questions on her lips—none of which, she knew, would give answers she wanted.

"You're going to be alright," she said to him, and to herself. Her words comforted neither.

"I'll be…I'll be fine," he nodded shortly between grimaces.

"Nick."
"Call the Z—ahh," Nick craned his head upwards against the lamppost, eyes squeezed shut, and let out an agonized groan through his teeth. His claws, tight against the restraints, dug into his palms and aroused blood.

Judy went to comfort him, to put a paw on his shoulder, but he flinched away with a growl.

"NO!" he seethed through his teeth. His eyes were violent—the first to fall prey to the drug. The pupils were already growing blacker. "You can't touch...me, please...call the ZPD...protect yourse—ARGH!"

He squirmed against his restraints with the ferocity of a savage, his teeth grinding against his tongue. The flower was winning. He knew for sure when he tasted the blood in his mouth and found it delicious.

"...GO!" he screamed at her, wishing he could comfort her and explain that this wasn't him. He didn't want her to see him like this—blood staining his teeth and dripping from his lips, raging eyes that burned a fiery green. This wasn't him, this was the flower. He would so much as scratch her, but the flower would.

The flower would rip her until there was more inside than out. Until the blood inside his mouth mixed with her own. Until both their navy uniforms were crimson. Because right then, she appeared as the perfect prey. The prey meant for him. The one most worthy out of all the crowd to be devoured by him.

The thing had dragged him to the water's deepest point, and the pressure of it all had crushed him before he could drown. He had lost, and the flower had risen on top. It had emerged wearing a new skin—his skin, his uniform. It had replaced him with a savage, leaving Nicholas Wilde far beneath. Buried.

He could no longer grin and bear it, for he could no longer grin nor bear. He could only watch, from a dark place somewhere within himself, as the rage of the flower presided over what little strength remained. It was the driving force now. It was the captain of this exhausted vessel, one with teeth and claws and an evil hunger.

And Nick remained helpless in the depths, knowing somewhere above was a savage wearing his skin.

A/N: THIS WAS LONG OVERDUE! Allow me to explain why, and please forgive. Writing this chapter took me about three weeks, and normally the editing process only takes a day or two. So I spent around five to six hours editing one Friday. I have a separate software I use to upload my chapters to FF, because my writing software isn't compatible with the website. For whatever reason, on this middleman software, the save file for this document did not save my edits. So five to six hours of intense editing, fueled by determination and help from my Keurig, was lost in an instant. The worst part was that the next two weeks after were extremely busy, and I had planned to publish this chapter before those weeks started because I knew I wouldn't have the time to write much. So when the save failed, I tried my best in my spare time to make up for what I had lost. This is the end product, after such toil at the keyboard, and please be merciful if you come across grammatical errors/plot holes/inconsistencies—I tried my best.

One more thing before I get to work on chapter four a question to anyone who reads this. Should I make my chapters smaller? My average chapter is not approximately 13,000 words,
but I could shorten that to around 5,000 and update more often. Would this be a good idea? Please do tell.

Anyways, for those of you who are reading this and managed to get through the mess of a chapter above, your patience is otherworldly. Thank you. I will try to update soon, and I will never trust my middleman software again.

Until next time,

Trenton.
Chapter Four: Something Wicked This Way Comes

It was May, Bogo remembered, when he had received the call. A Sunday, a hazy one, and he was sitting at his desk during the first hour of dawn, sipping from his still-piping coffee—black, no sugar, no cream. Today was the day he would be receiving the information about the fresh batch of rookies graduating into his precinct. It was nothing out of the ordinary, or so he had heard. A number of bears, which was nothing to complain about. The ursine officers already under his command held the extent of his respect. They could take on any opposing force and emerge with hardly but a scratch, like a living brick wall. He had heard of a few new wolves as well, which he also enjoyed. The stereotype of loyalty among canines had held true, with one of his most trustworthy officers being none other than Wolford. He’d entrust his life into Wolfard’s paws, even his children, if Bogo had any. Then there were Cats—certainly useful, Hippos—one of the most powerful mammals available, Rhinos—the most powerful mammals available, and so on and so forth. It was going to be a decent lot, this one.

And then the chief’s phone, resting idly on his desk, began to vibrate.

Mayor was all it said. He picked it up.

“Yes, what is it?” Bogo grunted, his voice gruffer than usual. The coffee had yet to fully kick in.

“Good morning to you too, Bogo. I have word of your newest recruits.” Lionheart’s tone was as charismatic as ever. Something about it irked Bogo. It was still so early morning; how could anyone be so awake, let alone sound so damn cheery?

“Usual lot? Bears, felines, canines, I heard there was a rhino,” Bogo said.

“Well, yes, the usual. And there is a rhino, you’ll be happy to hear. But, you see…” The mayor paused for a moment. Bogo was about to ask if he was still there when he continued, “There’s a rabbit.”

The Chief was silent. His brows furred and he snorted a chuckle. “What do you mean a rabbit? A Secretary? Receptionist?”

“No, Bogo, an officer. Her name is Judy Hopps, and she’s the first rabbit officer.”

Bogo wasn’t so sure he needed the caffeine anymore. He was going to laugh but found that it wasn’t funny—it was absurd! A rabbit—a police officer? Assigned to precinct one? “So this is why you called?” Bogo said, a little colder than he had intended to but Screw it, this prick just assigned me a rabbit, so dammit, I have every right to bitch about it.

“I knew you’d think there was a mistake if you heard the word from anyone else. It’s official, Bogo. I’m giving her her badge at the ceremony tomorrow.”

It’s six in the morning, you damned bastard. Do you really think I want to hear this at bloody six in the morning? “And she’s assigned to me?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”
Bogo huffed out his nostrils, pressing a hoof to his temple so hard he thought it might leave an imprint. “A rabbit… Lionheart you’ve got to be—”

“I’m not. She’s top of her class, so regardless of her size, her species, or anything else, she deserves her place in your precinct. She’s yours, Bogo.”

*Like hell she is!* A bunny? Are you serious? Is that even possible? Is that even legal? “Alright.”

“I wanted to give you a heads up. Despite how this may look, I doubt she’ll disappoint you.”

“Alright,” Bogo said again, sterner this time.

“Have a nice morning, Bogo. I’ll see you at the ceremony.” And the mayor hung up, suspensioning Bogo in a silence that would resume for the next five minutes. His coffee went cold, sitting neglected on his desk. He could not believe what he was hearing.

When she arrived on stage during her ceremony, she was exactly as Bogo had pictured her. Bright eyes, determination radiating off her in dangerously high levels, ready to take on the world despite being the tiny thing that she was. He hated it, that sparkle in her eyes. She wasn’t ready. If he put her on duty, she’d be killed, and the oppressing finger of the public—of the media—would be pointing at him. If he didn’t, and instead placed her behind a desk, or down in records, or on parking duty, he’d be accused of species segregation. He’d be accused of not giving her a chance. *What chance? She’s a rabbit, not an officer. If she wants a chance she should go be a carrot farmer or have a litter of kits—rabbits tend to have good chances at all those things.* But she was here instead. Her badge pinned on by Dawn, the assistant mayor, and Bogo looked away, believing that this ball of fluff onstage was going to be the death of him.

So, deciding that him being a speciest was better than her being killed in the like of duty, the chief had assigned her to parking duty. She hadn’t liked that, and frankly, my dear bunny, I don’t give a damn. But what did she do in retaliation? She committed insubordination to her superior’s face. So he had given her two days to solve an impossible case or face resignation, and she took the case like it was one big and beautifully wrapped Christmas present. And while following leads which would certainly lead to nowhere, she had teamed up with a fox of all mammals!

Bogo didn’t like Nicholas Wilde from the moment they met. The Chief and his team of elites had responded to Hopps’ report of a savage jaguar in the Rainforest District. Upon arriving at the gondolas, they found no jaguar. Instead, a fox and a rabbit, tangled up in a mess of vines. They never found the jaguar, and Bogo, feeling that Hopps had been given her chance (besides, her forty-eight hours was nearly up), demanded her badge. She was not ready for the job. She was not worthy of it.

And then the fox had interjected, talking down to Zootopia’s Chief of Police as if he were a troublesome toddler who deserved a scolding. He made his point with his surprisingly sly tongue, and the two of them rode away on the gondolas, Hopps with her badge. The chief had watched from the platform below. Angry was an understatement, he was *livid*. But for a moment, he couldn’t help but watch them with the tiniest bit of awe—the rabbit and the fox. It wasn’t long before he tore his eyes away and furiously drove back to the precinct.

Bogo never liked to admit he was wrong, and rarely had to. He was the Chief of Police at Zootopia’s most prestigious precinct, so his word was gospel. But he had never been so wrong as when he had underestimated Hopps. The day after the scene in the Rainforest District, Hopps and Wilde would crack the case wide open. The chief had assigned her to the missing mammals case not because he thought she could solve it—*of course she can’t solve it, I’ve had my elites on the case for weeks and there isn’t so much as a lead*—but because at the end of the forty-eight hours he had given her, she would be forced to resign. So Bogo was feeling good that night. The weight which was Officer
Hopps was soon to be lifted from him, and he was enjoying this nifty new Gazelle app that could photoshop your face onto one of her feline dancers. Yes, things were looking up.

Then Clawhauser, the receptionist and a flabby cheetah, had burst into his office and given him the news. The Chief would ask him is he was serious, and Benjamin would assure him that he was. Hopps had found all the missing mammals. Not long after this, she would discover that Zootopia’s very own assistant mayor, now Madam Mayor Dawn Bellwether, had been orchestrating the savage attacks to come off as random and biologically-induced. Hopps had brought the whole thing crashing to the ground, and soon, Bellwether and her comrades were receiving their extensive sentences in the pen. The case had been Zootopia’s most threatening decades, one which, had it not been subdued, could have torn the great city apart. She figured out the whole thing in two days—this little ball of fluff dawned with a badge. Her and her partner, that is.

It only seemed like a day later when there came a tapping at his office door. Bogo had looked up from his computer to see no one through the door’s translucent window, and yet came the tapping again. He leaned forward in his chair, recalling with increasing dread a similar scene from Edgar Allen Doe’s The Raven. Finally, once peering over the lip of his desk, he saw the minuscule silhouette of Hopps standing outside.

“Chief? Chief Bogo?” Her voice came lightly through the door.

“Come in, Hopps.” He said, his voice calm. He now felt as if he could speak to the rabbit with respect—she had earned it. She was the best on the force, somehow. He had been wrong.

Hopps’ silhouette bounced up and clung to the door knob, her weight pulling it down enough to crack open the door. She clung to it a moment longer before hopping down and pushing it closed behind her. Bogo snorted at this comical scene, but his respect for her did not waver, even despite her size.

“Good afternoon, Chief,” she said with an easy smile. “May I have a moment of your time?”

“Sure.” Bogo closed the lid of his laptop and motioned to the client’s chair sitting in front of desk. She hopped up onto it. “What is it you’d like to discuss?” He asked, folding his arms.

“An issue of employment,” said Hopps, standing on the chair so that her head could be seen over the desk. “You see…if it isn’t too much to ask…” She chuckled and looked away for an awkward moment.

“Out with it, Hopps.”

“Um, okay. Yeah. I’d like a partner.”

“Mmm.” Bogo nodded.” That can be arranged. I have word that there is another mammal about your size entering training soon. He’s a hare, and he shows great promise.”

“Really?” said Hopps, looking up with interest.

“It seems you’re quite the inspiration,” said Bogo, smirking.

Hopps nodded, looking down for a moment. “…While that would be great, sir, I already had someone else in mind.”

“As much as I’d like to partner you with an experienced officer, say Wolfard or Grizolli, they would have to be someone within your size class. Otherwise it would serve as a great inconvenience to the both of you while on duty. If you’d like me to look, I could try and find an otter or weasel from
another precinct. I’m sure they’d switch over right away if they heard Judy Hopps was looking for a partner.”

Hopps’ mouth hung open for a moment. “Actually…I was considering Nick.”

Bogo raised his eyebrows. “Wilde?”

Judy nodded. “He’s proven to be plenty athletic, he’s street smart, and he’s good at detective work. After solving the case together, we’re quite close, actually. I had mentioned the job before and he showed interest.”

Bogo sighed, leaning forward on his desk and folding his hooves. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

Judy stared. “…Yes, why wouldn’t I be?”

“As good a friend he might be, your...how am I to say this...taxonomic ranks don’t exactly align,” Bogo said slowly.

“I know it’s strange, me being friends with a fox. My parents have already driven that point home and...destroyed home with the point driven.” Judy chuckled sheepishly. “But he’s a great guy and I really like him.”

Bogo gave her a suspicious look and she realized her words. “I mean ‘like’ as in friends—he’s a really great friend.”

She was blushing now.

“I can tell. You two, somehow, make quite the team.” It was another thing he admitted to being wrong about. His first thought when he saw Wilde working with Hopps was that he was deceiving her somehow. In reality, it appears that opposite ends really do attract.

He pursed his lips. “But I’m not sure…”

Forty-four percent. Out of all the crimes committed in Zootopia, a city of eight-million mammals, forty-four percent were somehow linked to a vulpine individual. Maybe they were the get-away driver, or the middleman, or the one who supplied the gun. Needless to say, it wasn’t uncommon to trace whatever leads were being searched back to a fox. And then a number smaller, but when projected on a colorful pie-chart, it took up quite the slice: thirty-five percent. This was the number of crimes which were directly associated with a fox. In these cases, the fox was the murderer, the rapist, the arsonist, etcetera. This being said, the prisons within the city limits were often littered with foxes. One can try and be unbiased, try to accept everyone as a blank slate, but thirty-nine percent is a large portion and somewhat backs up the stereotype.

Foxes are, let the statistics show, often shifty, sly, and untrustworthy creatures. And here the Chief sat, before him a rabbit proposing the idea of his very own fox officer. *Throw in a shrew and we’ll have quite the carnival,* Bogo mused within his head.

He still didn’t like Wilde, not much anyways. He had disrespected the authorities, had hindered his number-one officer in her rather hopeless investigation, and had, if the gossip around the precinct was true, called the Chief ‘buffalo butt’ behind his back. But he had also served the ZPD a great service, had worked alongside his number-one officer and helped her crack the case, and had turned away from the oppressive thirty-five percent. And when he had seen Wilde and Hopps together, he had seen a unique kind of bond beyond the norm. It was the kind of relationship that only occurs on the rarest of occasions—when the stars align, if you will.
Hopps awaited his response with an eager anticipation, her ears on high-alert. The hopeful sparkle in her violet eyes was none the brighter than it had been the day of her graduation. Ever since she had proven herself—ever since the case had been blown open—that sparkle had seemed less naive and more intelligent as Bogo considered that maybe she did know what she was talking about. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe she was prepared after all.

Bogo stared at Hopps for a long while, and Hopps at Bogo. Her eyes sparkled, her nose unmoving, her ears erect.

From him, a sigh. “…He’ll have to attend the academy, of course.”

Judy hopped into the air a good three feet, pumping her fist. “YES! Thank you, chief! Thank you so much!” She looked like she wanted to hug him, but knew she would be receiving the not-so-loving embrace of a resignation form if she dared try it. So instead she only beamed.

“But listen here, Hopps,” Bogo said, pointing a hoof down at her. Her smile faded to an attentive stare, nodding her head before she even knew what there was to listen to. “You are to keep him in line, got it? His record isn’t exactly squeaky clean, and the only reason I’m even considering his employment is because of his play in solving the missing mammals case. He is on a short leash, and with you as his partner, you are too. Do you understand?”

She said she did, and was soon out of his office with an employment application form in her paws.

The next day the form returned all filled out. With it came the fox of interest.

“Wilde,” Bogo had addressed upon the fox’s entrance.

“Chief,” Wilde smiled toothily. “You are looking lovely this morning.”

Bogo grunted and pointed to the vacant chair. “Sit,” he said, and Wilde obeyed. “This is concerning your employment, is it not?”

“Oh, it is,” said Wilde. He fished a folded application form from his breast pocket. “Right here,” he held it up before tossing it onto Bogo’s desk.

The Chief took it into his hooves, unfolded it, and looked it over. “Nicholas P. Wilde—what’s the P stand for?”

Wilde chuckled, biting his lip as he did so. “Eh…while we’re at it, do you have a middle name, Chief?”

“Wilde, if you hope to secure this position as Hopps partner, you will answer to me and you will do so truthfully. Even if the matter is trivial. What is your middle name?” Bogo’s voice was stern and his eyes cold.

Nick held up his paws in defense. “It’s P for Piberius. Don’t ask me why—my father enjoyed his scotch and probably had a little too much while filing my birth certificate.”

Bogo snorted—the closest thing to a laugh as he would offer. He looked back at the sheet.

“Night vision?”

“Excellent sense of smell?” Bogo looked up at the fox with a raised brow.

“I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this,” Nick grinned and stretched his paws out before him, his fingers interlaced. “You like your coffee black, no cream, sugar is odorless but I doubt you use any considering your domineering physique. Your deodorant is Yaxe, and the scent is... lemme see... oh!” Nick let out a guffaw and wiggled his eyebrows. “‘Dark temptation’— Someone you’re trying to impress?”

Bogo’s snout wrinkled. “You’re applying for an officer, not a comedian, Wilde.”

“Understood, sir. My apologies,” Wilde said, though he was still grinning.

Bogo looked at the form for another moment before placing it face-down on his desk. “Well, putting aside your cunning, you look to be in adequate health for the academy. And saying you make it through the academy, it’s Hopps’ partner you wish to be?”

Wilde nodded. “Yes. And I will make it through the academy.”

“Don’t let whatever confidence you have get to your head,” Bogo said, staring him straight in the eyes now. “Now, Nicholas, do you understand what it is to be an officer?”

“Eh, can’t say I’ve ever been one.”

“My patience, Wilde, is wearing thin,” Bogo deadpanned.

“Okay, my bad,” Wilde nodded. “Being an officer is being selfless. Don’t think I’m taking this job for the fancy gadgets or patrol car or shiny badge—I’m not.”

“So what is your reason, then?” Bogo asked.

The fox thought for a moment, then, “I want to be there for her.”

“Her as in Hopps?”

“Yes.”

“While that may be a reason, I will not give you this position just for you to be closer to your... your friend.”

“That isn’t the only reason,” Wilde said. “I hate this city, sometimes. But I know nowhere else—this is my home turf. And not only mine, but eight-million other mammals as well. So while this city hasn’t been particularly nice to me, if my employment means breaking the stereotype and improving the city’s beliefs in doing so, then I’m all for it.”

“Yes, but would you lay down your life for a random civilian?” Bogo asked.

“I believe I would.”

“What about a prey mammal? Would you do it for them?”

“Yes.”

“An especially speciest hare who is publicly denouncing predators. Say a bystander, a predator, gets angry and tries to attack this individual. Would you step in?”

Wilde looked down, chuckled a little, then looked back up to meet the Bogo’s eyes. “You see, Chief,
while I imagine this scenario in particular is meant to be the most difficult choice, I believe it is the easiest. Me protecting this ‘especially speciest hare’ just might change their mind about predators. So yes, without a doubt, I would interfere.”

Bogo didn’t show it on his face, but he was impressed. It appeared that Judy was rubbing off on him.

The buffalo sighed. “I hope you mean those words. The academy begins in July. Further information will be given as the date arises. Let’s hope you make it through.”

Wilde lightened, smirking. “Oh, I will.”

And he had. Bogo had attended his graduation ceremony like he had for the rest of his officers. The fox’s results in the academy weren’t the top of his class, like Judy’s had been, but they were still impressive. The most impressive thing, Bogo found himself thinking, was that his written test scores. They had been higher than his physical scores. The thought that a fox couldn’t do well on the final exam was rather speciest to think, but he didn’t mind being proven wrong this time.

The partnership between Wilde and Hopps was, again, like none the chief had ever seen before. They were completely compatible partners, and not only this, but they excelled when together on duty. Each time they found another suspect or stopped another burglary, Bogo would try and give them something more challenging. Though they had never fallen short of his challenges.

A word for their partnership began to spread around social media—Wildehopps. The rabbit and fox, a team, fighting against prejudice and against crime. To some they were an inspiration, to others they were a disgrace. To the majority they were only the police. But to Bogo, they were his two best officers, and by far, the best team he had ever witnessed. So when Judy had come to his office and asked for a week off for both her and Wilde, he had given it to them.

“Are you sure a week isn’t too long? I mean, we could always come back mid-week, on Wednesday or so,” Hopps had suggested, both trying not to sound pushy and to hide her excitement in his consent.

“Relax, Hopps. The both of you deserve a bit of rest,” Bogo said in about the most sentimental tone he would ever offer, which wasn’t much. “Just make sure you’re back Monday, not this week but the next. This city needs its two best officers.”

“Thanks, Chief! We both really appreciate it, even if Nick isn’t present,” Hopps said.

“So where is it you two are going?” Bogo asked.

“Oh, my hometown. There’s a fall festival each year and—”

“Bunnyburrow?” Bogo cut her short.

Judy paused and nodded. “Yeah. Is that going to be a problem?”

Bogo chuckled a little and scratched his head with a hoof. “Well, not for me or you, it’s not. But Wilde…”

“It was actually his idea, Chief,” Hopps said.

“Really?”

“I know, it’s a shock to me too. But he’s been wanting to meet my parents for a while, and I’ve been wanting to take him,” Judy said and shrugged. “Hey, I’m not complaining.”
“…Well, if it was his idea, I assume he’ll manage,” Bogo said. “You’ve gotta stick up for him while he’s there, though. I don’t imagine the public being too nice to him.”

“Don’t sweat it, Chief. I’ll keep the crowds at bay. Everything will be fine.”

Bogo had believed that, and hadn’t worried. He trusted Hopps, perhaps now just as much as he trusted Wolfard. She was a good mammal, one of the best. And Wilde…he was sure the fox could keep his head above the water.

So they had left that Friday, and Bogo had dismissed Wildehopps almost entirely from his mind, expecting them no sooner or later than Monday, not this week but the next. In fact, the only thing on his mind was his awaiting bed. He had the late shift that Saturday, which meant he would be in his office until midnight. This was nothing new, in fact it was he who enforced the late shifts. They were necessary when considering crime was only amplified after sundown.

But this night, the crime was surprisingly absent. The intercom, with the steady glow of its red button, was suspensively silent. He expected, at any minute, to hear Clawhauser come through, informing that there was a pair of officers who needed assistance in the Nocturnal District, or gang activity spotted in Tundratown. He had left his office but once—for a cup of coffee around nine-thirty. That was an hour ago, and the precinct remained placid. Downstairs, in the break room, the Delgato, Wolfard, and Grizolli were playing cards. Their radios were on, but silent. Clawhauser was on his phone behind the receptionist’s desk, memorizing the lyrics to Gazelle’s new album. In the offices, dozens of employees typed up reports, but received no new ones. All was eerily silent. The calm…

And then it happened—the storm. It was not his intercom which alerted him, but his phone. A steady vibrating pattern as it lay face-up on his desk.

_Hopps_, was all it said. He picked it up.

“Ye—”

“CHIEF! Oh, Chief—thank goodness! I need you and your best officers down here, now!” Hopps shouted through the phone, her tone sporadic and desperate.

The Chief had never found talking to be a difficult thing, but right then, he couldn’t quite find the correct words to say. For a short moment he wondered if this really was Hopps, and not some prank call. But he could recognize her voice easily, and despite its unusually intense tone, he knew it must be Judy speaking. But even if it was his number-one officer on the phone, her demanding such rash and immediate actions without any explanation revealed a sample of potent anger within Bogo.

“Hopps, are you joking? It’s ten-thirty and you’re two-hundred miles—”

“DO I SOUND LIKE I’M JOKING!??!”

Her voice came through so deafeningly that the speakers of Bogo’s phone crackled under its volume. He would never admit it, possibly not even to himself, but it was the first time that the rabbit, let alone _any_ rabbit, had ever sparked fear into his heart.

“Alright! Alright! I believe you!” Bogo said sternly, taking a moment to regain his composure. During this moment he could hear Hopps’ rapid breath coming through the other end of the phone.

“Brief me. What going on?”

“It’s Nick!”
And that was all he needed to know.

A surge of worry had Bogo at a loss of words, and his first thought was *Oh shit, they shot him. Some deranged rabbit shot Wilde*. He had heard from the Mayor of Bunnyburrow that the two officers would be guarding the harvest festival, and he assumed it happened right in the middle of it. Some old rabbit with potent prejudice approached and shot one of his best through the torso. And the fox, that stupid son of a bitch, never liked to wear his body armor under his uniform; “It hinders the thrill of the moment,” he had told the chief one day during a scolding. And now he was injured, judging by the tone of Judy’s voice. He could be dying this very moment. He could be dead.

Bogo was up and out of his office in an instant, making his way for the stairwell down from the upper deck, his phone still pressed tightly to his ear. “Hopps, you’re going to have to be more specific. Is he hurt?”

“Well…I don’t know, I—”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” the chief barked, gaining the attention of all in the atrium. “You said it was an emergency!”

“It *IS* an emergency!” Judy cried from the other end, her voice swelling with emotion and tears, yes, probably tears. “He’s…he’s savage.”

Bogo’s breath hitched in his throat and the buffalo wasn’t sure what he felt. Relief that one of his best officers wasn’t gunned down by an anti-pred supremacist? Dread that one of his best officers had just gone primal in a town of rabbits?

“Savage…are you sure?” Bogo was surprised at how calm his voice came out, despite his inner world being a scribble of worrisome thoughts.

If the officers downstairs weren’t already listening in, they were now.

“Chief, what’s going on?” Clawhauser shouted from his desk. A mummer of compliances from other officers followed, all of which Bogo ignored.

“Yes! Yes, I’m sure!” Hopps continued, and Bogo took notice of the ambiance of a particularly startled crowd in the background. “I don’t know when or how it happened, so I can’t explain it! But he *is* savage, sir…it’s obvious, he’s growling and slobbering and-and his eyes are black and his paws are all…oh, Chief, please! For heavens sake, get down here!”

It’s right about then that a doe from the administrative offices burst into the lobby. “Chief, this is serious. We are receiving word from multiple PSAP’s concerning a case of savagery in Bunnyburrow,” she spoke in a stern tone. “With all respect, sir, whoever is calling you can wait.”

Bogo removed the phone from his ear and growled, “It’s Hopps, she called me about it.”

“Oh, very sorry, sir. Would you like me to—”

“Get Higgins to round up my squadron and prepare for departure in five minutes. Contact medical services and tell them to prepare for savage containment,” Bogo said.

“On it, sir,” the doe nodded, hurrying away.

Bogo resumed his phone call. “I’m coming, Hopps. Get you and as many as you can somewhere safe. We’ll be there—”
“Chief, Nick’s already restrained.”

Bogo gave the phone a confused glance. “He is?”

“He did it himself, just minutes ago.” Her voice was no longer a shout, but was no less rushed. She was trying not to sound panicked, but was failing rather miserably. “Before he went…he’s cuffed himself to a lamppost. I hope the cuffs can hold him.”

“They’ll hold,” Bogo assured. “Keep everyone, and yourself, at a distance. I’m sure he’d try and bite if he could.”

“Oh, he tried,” Hopps chuckled pathetically, almost mournfully.

“Try and stay calm, alright, Hopps?” Bogo tried his best to sound sympathetic in spite of his worry. “No predator who has ever gone savage has failed to make a full recovery. It’s the civilians you should be worried about. Understood?”

“…Yeah. I understand.”

“Good.” The chief sighed deeply, descending the stairwell into the atrium’s ground floor. “I’ll have my unit over there in no less than two hours—can you manage that?”

“I-I believe so, sir.”

“Alright, Hopps. I’m heading over there now.”

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Bogo would arrive in Bunnyburrow at one in the morning, his knuckles white on his steering wheel. With him came the rest of his unit, all tailing in red and blue flashing patrol cars. A savage containment unit was deployed as well. They had been exceeding speeds of 130 mph coming down the mostly-abandoned Interstate 15. When they arrived, the Bunnyburrow police and fire departments were on the scene, but were lacking the proper resources for such a situation. Bogo didn’t blame them, though was sure that somewhere they had some tranquilizers.

It wasn’t long before Judy found Bogo.

“Thank you,” she said to him, though her voice was quieter than it had been over the phone. This worried Bogo even more. It was almost as if she had run out of hope—and Hopps was believed to be the eternal fountain of the stuff. “I know you’re probably tired.”

“This is a matter more important than sleep, Hopps. No need to thank me,” Bogo responded in a flat tone. He scanned over the crowd of rabbits that had remained on the scene, which was about half of the original amount who had attended the festival. The other portion had returned to their homes and locked their doors. “So, where’s Wilde?”

Neither of them spoke as Judy led her superior through the square. The scene there reminded Bogo of a case he had been called on while still a rookie. A nuclear reactor had exploded in a city a dozen miles out from Zootopia, and the ZPD was deployed to aid in the evacuation efforts. The reactor had only exploded hours before they arrived, but in that time the place had already gained a ghost town atmosphere. Cars and bicycles, fit in size for elephants and for squirrels alike, sat orphaned on the
streets. Newspapers, which had been sold only that morning, still remained in racks on street-corners. Doors were left open. Radios and TV’s were still playing. Even some of the cars were still humming, keys in the ignition. It was as if, in an instant, all mammals had evaporated from the town, leaving behind their residue of daily life. Downtown Bunnyburrow had acquired this same look.

Remnants of the festivities were scattered about, booths for games and foods were abandoned, cash and half-drunken glasses still resting on their counter tops. Smashed berries and fruits littered the roadway. Abandoned instruments and sound equipment remained still on the stage in the center of the square. The only action taking place in that area was a group of local reporters interviewing Madam Mayor Buttercup near the fountain, which was still gurgling. Above it all was the banner, the one announcing the festival, hanging like a grim reminder of better times.

And then there was the savage. Not Nick. Not Officer Wilde. Not even ‘the fox’. Only the savage.

Bogo did not—could not—recognize this creature as one of his own officers, as one of his best. The officer who had verbally-spared with time and time again. The one who had walked in and out of the precinct at Judy’s side, each and every day. Nick was somewhere else, somewhere deep. Nick was not here.

His paws were cuffed behind his back, wrapped around a lamppost of orange luminescence. Whatever fight he had first put up had died down by now, but the savage was still certainly conscious. His head hung forward, his entire body leaning against the weight of the cuffed paws at his back. Unsteady breath whistled in and out of his clenched teeth. The fur under his mouth was dry with blood from when he had bitten his tongue. The shoulders of his uniform were shredded and bloody, likely the workings of his own teeth. The once glimmering silver cuffs were now crimson-splashed, along with the umber fur of Nick’s paws. It was clear that, in his futile attempt at escape, he had tried to tear away from his restraints—from the cuffs that he himself had applied before the savage took control. His wrists were left sliced from his struggle against the cuffs and were bleeding at an unsettling rate. The crimson stuff was splattered like some kind of sick art around the base of the lamppost, which illuminated the whole scene more than anyone wanted it to.

“Wilde…” Bogo breathed, managing to keep a stoic expression. He stopped about ten feet in front of the fox. “Damn.”

“Can we please get him out of those cuffs,” Judy said solemnly, staring at Nick with eyes far away. “His wrists…”

“He’ll have to be tranquillized—heavily tranquillized,” Bogo added. “Then yes, we’ll get him out.”

Judy nodded, never taking her eyes off the fox.

“How long has he been like this? Still, I mean,” Bogo asked.

“For a little over an hour.”

“You could have tranquillized him,” Bogo said, looking down at Judy’s belt. But she wasn’t wearing it. “What happened to your belt?”

“I took it off. And the rest of my uniform, if that wasn’t already obvious.” Judy answered. She was instead wearing a thick, grey, ZPD sweatshirt and baggy black slacks. “My parents brought me a change of clothes after I told them I’d be staying on the scene. After it…happened. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You’re fine,” Bogo responded. “You’ve been through enough tonight. You deserve at least a
change of clothes.”

“Chief Bogo?” a feminine voice called.

They both turned to see a tan leopard in a light blue medical uniform approaching.

“Speaking.” The chief stepped forward.

“I’m with savage containment,” the leopard said. She glanced at Hopps, then at the fox, then back at Bogo. “We’re ready, if you are.”

Bogo looked down at Hopps, who nodded. He turned back to the leopard. “Go ahead.”

A moment later came the savage containment unit, driving in what appeared to be an all black ambulance with bright blueish-white lights inside. They drove right down the middle of the square, groups of rabbits parting to the sides, and right up to where Nick was cuffed to the lamppost. And out they filed, each of which wearing a light blue uniform like the one the leopard wore.

“We’re going to use a simple sedative first,” the leopard explained to Bogo. “This will immobilize him for the time being. Then we’ll get him out of the cuffs, bind his paws, his feet, muzzle his snout, then administer both a stronger sedative and an opioid to maintain cardiovascular stability and—”

“Muzzle him?” Judy interrupted.

The leopard looked down at the rabbit, forgetting for a moment that she had been there. “Yes, it’s a necessary precaution for the whole ordeal. To prevent a member of staff, or even victim himself, from being injured.”

_He can’t be muzzled_, cried Judy’s conscious. _No, I won’t let them do that. Not after what he’s gone through with that horrible thing—no, I won’t let them! What if he woke up? What would he think if he woke up to a muzzle, strapped around his snout? What would he think when…when he found out that I stood idly by while they put the thing on him? No, I won’t let them! They can’t do that! But so far as Judy knew, Nick had only told her about his past experiences involving the ranger scouts—the muzzle. And even if Bogo or the medics heard the story, surly they would do it anyways. ‘A necessary precaution’, the leopard had said.

“But won’t the sedatives keep him asleep? Why must he be muzzled?” Hopps said, her voice edging on angry.

“It’s only to be safe, officer. If it’s such a problem, then once the heavy anesthetics have been applied, I’ll have the muzzle removed,” the leopard replied, never loosing her professional tone of voice.

“You don’t understand what happened to him,” Judy pointed to the fox, who was beginning to stir again at the medics nearby. “He was muzzled as a kit and…and if he realized that he was being muzzled again, he—”

“Hopps, enough,” came Bogo’s gruff voice. “It must be done.”

“Officer,” the leopard said calmly to Judy. “I’m sure you know Nicholas better than anyone else here, and I’m sure you understand how he’d feel if you or anyone else were to be injured while he was—”

“Oh, don’t you _dare_ do that!” Hopps growled, sounding rather predatorial at the moment. She jabbed a finger up at the leopard as she spoke. “You don’t know what he’s been through! I will not
let him be muzzled tonight, even if it costs me my job! I don’t care if he’s savage, I don’t care if—"

“Hopps!” Bogo shouted, and both the leopard and the rabbit flinched. He took a moment to calm his voice before continuing. “You’ve had a long night, and I know you’re worried about Wilde, but he’ll be alright. Right now, the most important matter is public safety, and that includes the paramedics.”

“I’ll do it,” Judy muttered.

Bogo squinted. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll give him the sedative and whatever else is needed. But he will not be muzzled. If I’m injured in the process then it’s my fault and mine alone.”

“Don’t be a fool, Hopps. Don’t let your stubbornness get you killed,” said the chief.

“Let me do it, Chief.” Hopps growled back.

“You’re being an idiot. You need to think about this.”

“I am thinking about this, and I will not let you put a cage around his snout,” Hopps hissed. “Let me do it,” she said slowly and clearly, pronouncing each and every syllable.

There was a long moment of silence before the leopard knelt before Hopps, making the rabbit feel awfully patronized. “If you were to inject the sedative and the opioid prior to the tranquilizer, you would have to inject it into the median cubital vein. Not to offend you, officer, but I doubt you know where that is. If you were to miss, the drug could be improperly administered and Nicholas could awaken during transport back to Zootopia. If you were to miss and strike an artery, you could severely damage the tissues around the capillaries. Are you understanding my point?”

Judy did understand, but couldn’t keep the boiling anger from twisting her face into a scowl. “Yes,” was all she could say.

“And, I apologize again,” the leopard continued, “but I will not have my team give injections to an unmuzzled savage. Nicholas won’t remember a thing about any muzzle, and if you want, no one will speak a word about it when he wakes up.” She sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. “I’m not trying to be the antagonist here. I know you care for your friend, but right now—”

“He’s more than a friend,” Judy deadpanned, and realized what she was saying a moment later. But it didn’t effect her. To her, he was more than a friend. And she planned to tell him that the moment he regained consciousness, whenever that was.

“I’m sure he is, officer. But he’s not all there right now. I know Nicholas would never hurt you, but a savage would. And no one tonight is being injured while on my watch. Now, are we clear?”

Judy nodded and looked away. “Yeah.”

“And we can start?”

“Yeah,” Judy repeated, quieter this time.

The largest member of the savage containment unit, a lumbering black bear, approached Nick with a hand-held tranquilizing gun. As the bear got closer, a steady, guttural growl escaped Nick’s throat, one which chilled Judy to the core. The fox’s snout wrinkled harshly, revealing his bloody teeth. Luckily the blood was only his own. The growl transformed into a terrible combination of a bark and a scream, and Nick lashed forward, only for the cuffs to catch and induce a painful yowl. But this did
not stop him, for he continued to thrash against the cuffs’ hold, irritating the wounds around his wrist even more. He was making these terrible throaty noises.

There was a rather quiet *THOONK* and suddenly there was a red dart Nick’s leg. The savage hissed, thrashing even more, and for a moment Judy didn’t believe that the tranq was going to work. Then his movements began to slow, and the noises Nick was making turned into whines and heavy breaths. He fell back against the lamppost, sliding down into a sitting position. He almost looked normal for the tiniest moment, breathing in whines and bleeding from his wrists and mouth, but sitting still nevertheless. Then his head rolled on his shoulders and fell onto his side, his wrists still suspended by the cuffs.

They wouldn’t approach with the muzzle until Nick had been motionless for several minutes. The same bear came back and knelled down before the fox. In his hand was the muzzle. It wasn’t actually a cage, like Judy thought it would be, but that didn’t make it appear any less evil. It was made of heavy-duty polyester fabric and had three straps, one which would slip under each ear, and one which would run between the ears and down the snout. The bear slipped the straps over Nick’s limp head, and there was the faintest growl as he did so. The bear paused, but resumed when Nick made no further noise. He slipped the end piece around the tip of his muzzle. He then tightened the strap there was another growl, and Nick’s head lolled to the other side.

“Quickly, he’s stirring,” called the bear, turning to a deer who emerged from the truck in gloves. In his hooves was a thin syringe. He knelt down at Nick’s other side while the bear revealed a key, one which Judy had given to the leopard after their little skirmish, and unlocked the handcuffs. “I need a bandage!” the bear called, and an otter ran out of the truck with a thick, white rapping. The bear wrapped each of Nick’s wrists with the stuff, the bandages turning a pink color with all the blood. He then secured both of Nick’s paws over his chest, binding them with a thick black strap. A similar strap was wound around his ankles shortly after, all the while the deer thrummed through the fur on the inside of Nick’s elbow, no doubt searching for the alleged ‘median cubital vein’. He found it and injected in the fluid. Nick’s drunken rebellion died to a sleep-like still.

Judy had stopped watching after she had seen the bear carrying out the muzzle. She was sitting on a curb, her back hunched over, her elbows wresting on her knees. Her left foot was thumping in a rapid fashion.

Bogo approached her side and was silent for a long while. When he began to speak she beat him to his question.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

There was silence. The bear lifted Nick onto a stretcher which had rolled out of the back of the black ambulance.

“So, Nick has a history with muzzles, does he?” Bogo said. “I’d like to hear the story.”

“No. He wouldn’t want me to tell you,” Judy said flatly. “…I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant. He wouldn’t want me to tell anyone.”

The chief nodded and they were silent again. Judy stopped tapping her foot. Her ears were drooping behind her head.

“Is your family still about?” Bogo asked.

“No, my parents took the kits home.”
More silence. Wolfard and Fangmeyer were interviewing a group of witnesses nearby. One of the rabbits was speaking about how he had walked into the restroom “Right over there, behind the cafe,” said and he pointed to a nearby alleyway, and had found Nick hunched over the sink. Fangmeyer nodded and offered his verbal condolences, all the while Wolfard madly scribbled down notes on a notepad.

“You know, if you’d like to stay here with your family, I’d be willing to give you the time off,” Bogo said. “First, you’d have to answer some questions about tonight, but then you could stay down here. For up to a month, if you’d like that. Perhaps by then, Wilde will be better and you two could start working together again.”

Judy simply shook her head. “No…I wanna go back to the city. But…if I can…I’d like the time off. I want to be there for him.”

Bogo nodded understandingly.

“So, how long will it take? Until he wakes up?” Judy asked.

Bogo pursed his lips and shrugged. “After you solved the case, it took about a month for complete rehabilitation for the affected predators. As for the larger mammals, only about three weeks. But considering the lack of details, we can’t assume anything yet.”

Judy nodded. She exhaled a shaky breath, watching it vaporize before her eyes.

Bogo continued, “You need to go tell your parents you’re leaving. Grab your stuff and meet us back here. We’ll get you back to the city so you can get some sleep. Hell, you can sleep on the drive, if you want.”

Judy looked up at him and gave a faint, but hopeful smile. It felt so long since she had last smiled, and since the sun had last shone, and since she had last talked to Nick. This night was a year in disguise, or so it seemed.

And as if to further prove her point, a horrible, shrill shriek rang out into the cold night. Both Judy and Bogo both jolted from their conversation and into a reality just as cold. Judy scrambled to her feet, both her and Bogo communicating almost telepathically. It was Nick—it had to be Nick. Not the scream, the scream, feminine and icy, was of a mortified soul, one that perhaps had just come face to face with death. Surely Nick had broken free of his restraints and attacked a bystander, or a medic, or an officer.

But something was…wrong.

The scream wasn’t from her right, which was where Nick remained motionless on a stretcher. It was from her left, from where the majority of the remaining crowd had been standing, emphasis on had. The crowd was now alive and swarming in every which direction, like an aggravated nest of wasps, or perhaps, an escaping mass of rabbits.

She was running into the scene, the flocking crowd dodging past her right and left. Not far behind, Bogo, Wolfard, and Fangmeyer were in haul. The closer she got, the more she could hear the voice from which the scream had come. She was still shrieking, but it was fainter, almost more of a whimper.

Judy finally found the source. A white rabbit, laying on her back and dragging herself away… away from what? Her right leg blended in with the redbrick road, making it appear as if she had no leg at all. To Judy’s relief, when she got closer, she could see that she indeed did have a leg. But it was
bleeding so profusely that any given wound could not be made out.

The white rabbit was whimpering, dragging herself backward, leaving a fresh trail of copper-wreaking crimson liquid that was hardly visible against the redbrick road. For a horrible moment, Judy wondered that if whatever had wounded her were to resume its work on her entire body, would she just blend in with the surrounding road entirely and disappear? She heaved the thought from her head and focused on the rescue, on the wounded mammal before her. Somehow, even the scene with Nick now was in the background of her mind. *Make the world a better place. This is what you signed up for.*

But she stopped when she laid eyes on the other thing. The thing which had stirred the crowd. The thing which had evoked the scream. The thing which had mutilated the white rabbit’s leg.

The thing was Gideon Grey.

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised. First Nick, now him. Why not every other predator in Zootopia next?

Gideon was down on all fours and there was blood in his snarl. Judy didn’t believe that he had bitten his tongue. The pink apron, which was still tied to his neck, was torn and bloody…and perfectly fitting for a predator who was about to claim his meal. Remnants of the crowd were huddling inside the locked doors of nearby stores, watching the horrid spectacle illuminated by the orange street lamps overhead. They shown down on the scene like a play in which they were the spotlights, illuminating the two stars.

‘*All the world’s a stage, and all the mammals merely players.*’ What was that, Shakesbeare?

From her belt Judy groped for her tranquilizer, only to realize that she had no belt, and thus, no tranquilizer. She had given them, along with the rest of her uniform, to her parents when they brought her a change of softer, warmer clothes. But even if she had her tranquilizer, and even if she had managed to hit Gideon with a dart, it would have been too late.

He sprang forward, a growl (sounding deep and guttural, much like Nick’s had—only Nick was restrained) growing into a primal scream as he landed over her. She held up her arms in defense, and they received the blunt of the attack. He clamped his jaws over her left forearm, razor teeth easily digging into the soft meat under her white fur. He thrashed his head back and forth, blood flying in an almost comical fashion. The rabbit’s scream was nowhere as loud and shrill as her first had been, in fact there was no sound. Her mouth issued a silent scream, her eyes clenched shut like fists, her face frozen in a state of uttermost agony. Gideon continued to enjoy his meal.

The scene was so horrific that Judy found herself frozen in place, watching on with disbelieving eyes—how can she keep bleeding —how is there any blood left to bleed? She reminded herself that she was an officer, even if she wasn’t dressed like one, and that with every second she stood frozen, this white rabbit would loose even more blood. But if she could distract him, she could give the remaining officers enough time to rescue the white rabbit.

So she ran forward, screaming, in hopes to get the fox’s attention. She was successful, and it lifted its head from its meal, blood dripping, almost flowing from his lips. His eyes were dark, like his pupils had dilated to the point that they were nonexistent. He hissed a terrible something, blood and saliva flicking from his mouth as he did so. And then he was scrambling toward Judy at an impossibly quick rate.

For a moment, Judy did not react. She was having a flashback to roughly fifteen years ago, back when she stared down Gideon’s aggressive snout as she did now.
“You better watch out, cause’ I’m a fox, and killer-instinct is still in our DNA.”

Only that time she had left with a few trivial scars down her cheek. This time the end-result could be much, much worse. And she had no plan on sticking around to see just how many scars that end-result would offer.

She leapt to the side, thanking her ancestors for the quick reflexes blessed to every rabbit. She rolled onto her feet, only to find that Gideon had slid to a stop and was accelerating again in her direction. You ’re named ‘Hopps’ for a reason, aren’t you? She thought, and jumped into the air as the fox barreled underneath her.

She landed into yet another roll, though in the adrenaline and terror of the moment, she tripped and fell onto her back. That’s when she realized the other three officers behind her. Wolfard and Bogo both had their handguns trained on Gideon, while Fangmeyer was calling to the other officers nearby for backup.

“Don’t shoot!” Judy screamed, holding a paw up to them.

“Hopps! Get behind me! You’re unarmed!” Wolfard shouted, his eyes (as well as the business end of his gun) never leaving the fox.

“He’s not in his right mind! Don’t—”

“HOPPS!” Bogo screamed, and Judy turned just in time to see Gideon storming towards her, his snout bared back to reveal the bloody teeth behind it.

In that moment everything seemed to slow to a stop. Judy could feel the late-November wind being channeled through the streets in a chilly gust. It ruffled her baggy clothes, her fur, her ears, and it was rather comforting, she realized. She could feel the redbrick pavement beneath her paws, the divots between each and every brick. Before her, only a few feet away, was Gideon, who she had conversed casually with and bought pastries from only hours earlier. He was now going to kill her. If he didn’t succeed in this, either Wolfard or Bogo (or both) would shoot him dead from on top of her.

It was obvious. Someone was going to die. Right here. On this street. In the next few seconds.

“Judy, promise me you’ll be careful,” her father had told her earlier that night. He had brought her a spare change of clothes after Nick had gone savage. He had thought she would need them. He had been right. The night had proven to be cold and windy. Her uniform was thin and offered little warmth. The clothes he had brought her were the kind she would sleep in on a cold night, or lounge in on a lazy afternoon. Judy knew that she would be neither sleeping nor lounging any time soon, but took them anyways.

“You don’t need to worry, dad. Nick restrained himself in his last moments of consciousness. He tried to stay away from me, in fact he was trying to run away until I caught him…I just wish there was more I could do.”

“You can keep yourself alive and in good health. For me, and for your mother.”

“I will, dad.”

She took the bundles of clothes.

He smiled wearily and hugged her.

She had gone into the bathroom to change. And that’s when she found it. Wrapped within the folds
She had been crying, but had laughed aloud when she pulled it out. Did he really trust her so little? She said that she could take care of herself, did he not believe that?

Well, either way, he had packed the fox taser in with the clothes. It was the one she had refused to take with her to Zootopia during the day of her departure. Stuart Hopps did not, at that moment, realize that his simple gesture to keep her save would ultimately save her life that night.

How could I forget? She wondered while the world stood still. Dad, I'll thank you later, when I’m almost not dying. Gideon, I’m sorry, but this is going to hurt. Something tells me, when you wake up, you won’t mind.

The fox pounced, flecks of slobber and blood visible in the orange glow of the streetlights. Judy revealed the fox taser and pressed the big red button. An arc of purple electricity exploded from its two prongs. She drove it home, right into the fox’s creamy under-belly as he landed over her. His jaws enclosed on her shoulder, but the taser beat him to the punch. He yowled and scurried backward, stumbling onto his back and twitching as the electricity finished coursing throughout his body. When the appropriately-named taser had done its work, the fox laid trembling on his back.

Bogo and Fangmeyer were quick to restrain him. Bogo pressed Gideon’s snout firmly shut against the pavement, holding him there despite the kicks and squirms.

“Hopps!” a voice cried. Judy looked over to see Wolfard hurrying to her aid. “Jeez, don’t scare me like that!” He knelt down beside her and looked her over. “Are you hurt?”

She tucked the taser back into the pocket of her sweatshirt and shook her head. “Just…startled is all.” She got to her feet and followed the trail of blood to the white rabbit, who was being loaded onto a stretcher far too large for any bunny. It made her look weak and fragile, not including the fact that she was already bleeding out.

“I didn’t know you had a taser on you,” Wolfard said wearily.

“I had almost forgotten about it myself,” Judy responded in a distant voice. She was still watching the white rabbit, who could easily be mistaken now as the red rabbit. She was still writhing in pain, with the medics at the sides of the stretcher trying their best to comfort her. “Will she be alright?”

“Heh. Do I look like a doctor?” Wolford responded with a sorry laugh.

Judy breathed deeply and turned to face Wolfard for the first time. “Sorry…just worried.”

Wolfard nodded. “Aren’t we all.”

“Have you…ever seen anything like this? I mean, two savages in one day! Both foxes, keeping in mind the only foxes in town,” Judy said. Her foot was thumping again.

“This couldn’t have been an accident.” Wolford shook his head. “No, this is a message. It has to be.”

The two were silent, allowing for Wolfard’s words to marinate.

The black bear who had tranquilized Nick approached Gideon and performed on him the same ritual. Sedative. Bindings. Muzzle. Word came that savage containment would have to wait until another transport vehicle arrived to take Gideon back to the city. Though they gave the go-ahead for Nick’s transport back to Zootopia, and Judy was invited to ride in the black ambulance with him.
Soon she was riding away from Bunnyburrow with her partner strapped to his stretcher, entirely unconscious. Her parents did not know of her leave, to prove it her suitcase still remained in her room, right next to Nick’s. All she had was the baggy clothes she was wearing, her phone, and the fox taser. But this did not concern her—her mind was on more significant matters.

Her partner had gone savage and no one knew why. Her reformed childhood enemy had also gone savage and had severely injured someone in the process—had almost killed Judy herself. Her hometown was terrified. She was terrified. Soon the press would take hold of and expand upon the story. Everyone would know, but no one would know why. And then everyone would be terrified.

Judy silently watched what remained of her partner, which on the outside seemed like everything. But she knew Nick was hidden away, beneath the straps and the muzzle. Beneath the savage. She never took her eyes off him as he rested, for he almost looked like nothing was wrong. Like he was only sleeping.

The ambulance made its way back towards the city, a savage predator in haul. Upon their arrival into the Zootopia, the innocence of the city would be shattered. But this did not slow the driver.

Outside, the icy wind blew in chilling gusts. So it appeared, November in its fullest had finally arrived.
Chapter Five: In the Wake

The chair beneath her was cold and uncomfortable, not to mention made for mammals thrice her size. She wished it were only slightly closer to the table, though wishes would certainly not make the chair budge, for it was bolted to the floor. The same went with the table before her and the chair on the opposite side. The room, the table, the chairs—all of it grey, hard, unmov ing, unmerciful, and grim—a theme which paralleled Judy’s emotional state with near-perfect accuracy.

On Saturday, around ten-thirty, her closest friend had given way to an unexplained act of savagery. Nearly three hours later—Sunday, around one-thirty—Gideon had done the same. A small-time had passed and it was now the start of a new week, and hell did it feel like a Monday. The sky outside was not overcast and depressing, as predicted Judy’s envision of the next month. Above the metropolis was what appeared to be an inverted sea, blue and vibrant and beautiful. The mid-day sun was full, and though the air was brisk, the warmth which the sun offered was comfortable and almost reminding of spring. Not that any of this mattered—Judy was two stories deep in the earth, sitting alone within one of the precinct’s eight interrogation rooms.

The interrogation wing was found two levels below the ZPD’s ground floor, neighboring the high- security holding cells on one side and deep storage on the other. It was nothing much—a bland hallway with eight isolated rooms—four on the right, four on the left. Each room had its own recording studio, connected only by a door and a thick sheet of one-way glass. To Judy, who had only seen the precinct’s modern, abstract design of the place’s ground levels, it was an entirely new world. With interrogation being outside her job description, she found sublevel-two alien and dreary in a rather threatening sense. Her drab surroundings certainly didn’t ease the rising dread within the pit of her stomach. She was about to relive the most unpleasant, most terrifying few hours of her life, and not only relive but describe it in its every detail. It’s the duty of the interrogee, after all. And as for the interrogator…

Bogo entered the room, standing just within the doorway. Judy looked up from where she had been analyzing the patternless tile floor. She didn’t smile.

“Good morning, Chief,” she said in a voice as depressing as her surroundings. “Get any sleep?”

“Hardly. I was going to ask the same of you,” he said, approaching the other chair and seating himself. There was no need to close or lock the door—no one present posed such a threat. It was only Bogo, Hopps, and a polar-bear sitting in the connected room, recording their conversation on both on camera and speaker.

“Yeah, I slept,” Judy said.

“You’re lying.”

She chuckled humorlessly. “I am.”

“You need your sleep, Hopps. Especially in times like these,” said Bogo. The thought of needing extra sleep in times of trauma seemed to be an evil, created by nature to pick fun at the mortals. By no means did Judy plan on abiding by its cruel rules—she’ll sleep when she wants to, at a time when such luxuries were available to her.

Now was not such a time, so she asked, “Can we just get this done?”

“Sure.” Bogo clicked a pin in his hooves and held it idly over a blank, yellow notepad. “This is not a
formal interrogation, so I doubt I need to go over any of the usual introductory statements. Saturday, November nineteenth. Did Wilde show any unusual behavior?"

“He got drunk the night before, and was hungover in the morning…” her mind trailed off track, and she was recalling the things Nick had told her when he returned from the bar that night. Don’t let it get to you. Stop it. Keep your head above the water. “Nothing unusual.”

“You never noticed any potential threats during the parade?” Bogo asked.

“No.”

Bogo nodded, scribbled something short on his notepad, and looked back up. For a moment he was considerably silent, then he broke the ice. “Do you remember the hour before Wilde went savage?”

“Yes.” Judy was surprised with the speed of her answer. Her direct tone made it appear as if the subject wasn’t bothering her.

“Can you recite to me the events leading up to his savagery?” Bogo asked.

“Yes,” she said again.

“Take all the time you need.”

Her answer was quick and decisive. They were on the sidewalk during the parade. Nick got unusually quiet as the parade was ending, but she wrote it off as fatigue. Possibly a symptom of the hangover he had been fighting that morning. Then he asked to go to the restroom, and she pointed one out to him.

“So you thought he was nauseous?” Bogo asked after jotting down a few more notes.

“Yes. He had eaten a lot, so I thought he was getting sick.”

“Can you recall what he ate?”

“Blueberry pie, blueberry scones, blueberries thrown from the floats—he really likes blueberries,” she said flatly. Nick and his ‘unhealthy blueberry addiction’, as Judy called it, was something she had often teased him about. But as of now, the subject only made her sickly nostalgic and knotted something like grief in her heart. For a moment, she had to remind herself that her partner was even still alive.

“Do you believe that something he ate had to do with him going savage?” Bogo asked.

“That would make the most sense.”

During the hours she should have been sleeping, both Sunday morning and Sunday night, Judy found herself pondering the cause of both Nick and Gideon's savagery. She had already dismissed biology from the question, and even shamed herself for considering it for even a moment. As for the food he had eaten... "My first thought was the blueberries he ate from the passing floats were somehow the cause. But the same berries were thrown to the rest of the crowd, and yet only Nick was affected.”

“Isn’t it possible that one of the individuals throwing the berries to the crowd could have targeted Nick with some sort of…night howler catalyst disguised as a blueberry?” Bogo asked.

Judy shrugged sluggishly. “I know the mammals operating the floats, some are even siblings of mine.
If Nick was being targeted with a certain kind of berry, it would be nearly impossible to get it to him individually without accidentally giving it to one of the others on the scene.”

“You mentioned other foods. Pies. Scones. Could either of those have caused it?”

“I don’t know what else it could be,” Judy said. “But the scones he ate—bought them from Gideon, actually—were served to many other mammals as well. And the pies were a part of a pie-eating contest, one that no one had expected him to participate in.”

Bogo wrote on the pad for a while, then looked up at the rabbit across from him. He noted, not literally, that she looked horrible—her fur ruffled and proofing in multiple places, a sign of showering without hardly drying. She wore her uniform, despite having no real reason to. The atmosphere about her was somehow so miserable that her ears stood at drooping angles without falling all the way behind her head. They looked like broken antennae.

“How can you tell me when Wilde left the bathroom?”

Judy swallowed thickly and nodded. “He was trying to run away when I found him. It had only been twenty minutes, but he looked so much worse.” Judy shivered, finding it impossible to recite the story without mentally reliving it—the sights, the sounds, the emotions. She forced herself to continue. “He was sweating and panting so hard he could hardly speak. Limping too, I’m not sure why. His eyes were pink and his pupils had dilated…”

“And then he bound himself to a lamppost?” Bogo added, and the rabbit nodded. “He gave me the key and told me to get everyone away from him…and to call you…and to call you…it was about then when I figured out what was happening.” She was tracing the tiled floor again. When she tried to speak, she found her mouth dry and cottony. “I’m sorry,” she managed to say, and couldn’t fight it when a single sob escaped her, surely prompting with it tears and an emotional breakdown before her chief. She was quick to restrain herself, and said again, “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been through a lot, you have no reason to apologize,” Bogo sympathized as best he could. A silence reclaimed the room, all save for Bogo scribbling down a few final things on the notepad. It occurred to Judy just how quiet this place was, and she remembered that the walls were meant to keep out all external noise. This only allowed her to better hear the hitch in her breath, threatening to break into something far more sappy and pathetic if she let it.

“Alright,” Bogo said once he had finished writing. He clicked his pen closed and set it down. “As for right now, there’s not much we can do. I only hope that Wilde can remember what happened when he wakes up. He is, after all, our key source of information on this subject. He may know exactly what went down that night, but we’ll have to wait until he’s back in good health to ask.”

”…Chief?” Judy had done a fairly decent job at concealing her emotions, but now she had begun to falter. Her voice was far weaker, almost hopeless, and the sudden change caught Bogo off guard.

“Yes?”

“I…” she found her voice frail and an octave too high. Clearing her throat, she continued. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t believe anyone understands, not yet,” said Bogo.

“Why did this happen?” Judy asked, not so much of a question as it was a verbalized thought.
Bogo stammered, “Well, a thorough investigation is being—”

“No, not like that.” Judy cut him off, waving her paw dismissively. "What I mean is... why? Two savages on the same night. Both foxes—the only foxes in Bunnyburrow at the time...what does it mean?"

"It couldn't have been a coincidence if that's what you're afraid of," Bogo assured her. "It has already been concluded that mammals can't truly go savage. Not any more, at least."

“That’s not what I’m implying,” Judy said quickly, to justify herself. “I know they didn’t go savage instinctually.”

"Whatever did happen that night, it was obviously planned in advance. I suspect someone somehow knew of you and Wilde's residency in Bunnyburrow and took advantage of the opportunity to enact something horrible."

“Who would do that?” Judy whispered, and Bogo was surprised again, this time by the undertones of icy rage in her breath. Her distant eyes reflected that same rage.

“I suspect an anonymous prey supremacy group. Maybe some sort of underground syndicate.”

“Like Bellwether,” Judy said, and Bogo nodded.

“Yes, like Bellwether. But much worse.” Bogo took in a deep breath, fixing his eyes on his best officer. “Dawn’s ‘attacks’ were staged randomly, as to appear biological. These new attacks, if we can call them that, are meant to be obvious. *They*, whoever they might be, are trying to separate prey from predator, but in a much more straightforward way.”

“So what can I do?” Judy asked.

“In your current state, not much,” Bogo said. Anger flashed in Judy’s eyes, and he was quick to clarify, “You’re managing an enormous amount of stress, Hopps. Everyone here is worried—I'm worried,” he didn’t lie when he said this, “but none of us as much as you. You know Wilde best. You’re his closest friend.”

Judy had eased, if you could call it that, to a pathetic grey lump in the chair opposite Bogo. The chief softened his voice. “So I'll tell you what you can do. You can stay at his side during all of this, and you can be there when he wakes up.”

The interview was over, and Judy didn’t need to take Bogo’s words to heart. She had already planned on being there with him during his recovery, and to be the first face he saw on the day he woke up, whenever that would be. And so she didn’t waste any time.

Both Nick and Gideon were being held in the depths of Savannah Central’s most impressive hospital, not but a block from the precinct. And all it took was a block’s distance for her to receive the curious and pitifully looks of many passing by.

One individual—a giraffe, who despite being young, still had to double over to see Judy clearly—went so far as to offer his sympathies while waiting for the signal at a crosswalk.

“It’s horrible to hear what happened, Officer,” he said, trying to look casual even as he craned his neck down to better speak to her. “And I thought the savage outbreaks would end with that lamb thrown behind bars.”

Judy looked curiously up at him. “How do you know about that?”
The giraffe laughed and placed a hoof on his chest, “How would I not? It’s in the headlines everywhere!” He pointed to a newsstand parked near the crosswalk, and Judy was horrified to see—bulging between an article about a groundbreaking for a new skyscraper downtown and an announcement of Bugburga introducing a new and extra-healthy line of products—a black and white image of her savage partner, restrained to a lamppost.

*Famed Cop Goes Savage at Bunnyburrow Harvest Festival* read the headlines above a snarling Nick.

Judy found herself both disgusted and awestruck as to how quickly the media had found the story. So far as she knew, the ZPD was doing their best to keep the accident under wraps until a suspect was identified. She shouldn’t have been surprised that even the most powerful police force in the city couldn’t keep the reporters’ grubby paws off some fresh bloodshed and savagery.

The crosswalk received the go, and the small crowd gathered there began across the street.

“Hope things get better, Officer. I’m a Wildehopp’s supporter at heart,” the giraffe said with a wink. With that, he straightened his posture and walked away.

Judy had to tear her eyes off the article—especially the image. From any outsider’s point of view, Nick would appear villain-ish as he struggled against his restraints, bearing his teeth as whoever had taken the image that night. Somehow, this would be seen as a predator’s wrongdoing—Judy knew it already.

She finally turned away from the newsstand and walked the remaining distance to the Zootopia Municipal Hospital at Savanna Central, better known by some as the ZMH. Despite gloom being the overarching theme of her day (and the article only amplifying said gloom) she couldn’t keep her eyes from gazing at the hospital as if it were a world-rebound landmark. For all she knew, it might be one.

The hospital’s mere five stories appeared to be nothing in comparison to the towering skyscrapers surroundings it, but the place was absolutely mammoth in size nevertheless. Especially from the eyes of a rabbit, standing no more than two feet tall.

The exterior of the place was a creamy white with a seemingly infinite number of tinted windows. These windows ran the length of the entire complex, which consisted of six long wings—three on one side, three on the other. Each wing was connected by a central atrium, which emerged above the rest of the building as a fluid wave of smoothed steel and blue glass, running from the front door onward. While each wing contained five stories in total, the atrium was open from the glossy floor to the glass-steel weave of the roof. Balconies from the upper four floors stretched on either side of the bustling lobby, and on them walked patients, nurses, and visitors alike.

The six wings were curved in a series of s-bends as to suit the abstract theme which applied to the entire hospital. Large fabric canopies surrounded the building’s perimeter, made to look like a current of flowing water frozen in place. To top it all off, the rooftop of the wings had been made into a park, with patients navigating winding trails between lush green trees.

The place had only been completed a year prior and had since earned the title ‘Zootopia’s Most Prestigious Hospital’ both by efficiency and design. It was a marvel of modern engineering, even she, in her degraded mental state, would admit this, but the design was not what she had come to see. All it took was a flash of her badge to the receptionist and Judy was being led down a hallway,
diverging from the atrium, by a young otter in medical whites.

“Right through here, Officer Hopps,” the otter said giddily. “Gee, never imagined I’d get to say that, much less see you in person. Here am I, Oliver Otto, intern of six weeks—chaperoning the Judy Hopps around campus—Ha! I guess medical school did pay off!”

The hallway which they traveled down appeared to be for employees only, connecting to janitorial closets and security bullpen. At the far end of the hall was a single elevator which had a sign atop it reading “Staff Only” and required a key card. The otter produced his card, swiped it, and the door opened.

“If you’ll follow me, Officer Hopps—gee, that will never get old!” the otter laughed and stepped into the elevator, motioning for Judy to follow. “Savage Containment operates on sublevel one. Are you claustrophobic?”

Judy began to answer, only for him to continue with the speed of an auctioneer. “I am, and I hate the place! No windows or anything—but not like there could be windows when its underground. Then all you’d see outside was dirt. Dirt and worms—ugh worms, filthy creatures. Hermaphrodites too, which is just nasty. But I love windows. Gotta love a good window, isn’t that right?” He turned to Judy with expecting eyes.

“Er…yeah, I agree,” she said, trying to sound casual. Perhaps this is what I need right now. Some comedic relief.

“She agrees! Splendid! So anyhow, how’s the force treating ya?”

Judy had not consented to a second interrogation, in fact, she hadn't even had her morning coffee yet. But she had to admit that this otter, Oliver, was quite the adorable figure. So she figured a smile wouldn't hurt.

“The job is great, just busy—”

"Oh, gee! Can I relate! Mammals just can’t stop falling down stairs or contracting STDs or getting old and sick. They come running, or rather hobbling, through the front doors until I think this place is gonna burst!” Oliver laughed hyperactively and pressed the button -1 on the control panel. The doors closed and the elevator began its smooth descent. "But I love the job," he said, his tone quieter, and he issued a dreamy sigh. "Best and only one I've ever had. Never wanted to end up working at some fast food place all my life, no ma'am! I mean, maybe if it was a breakfast place because I absolutely love waffles. Speaking of which, how’s that partner of yours?”

Judy's mind was lagging behind like an overworked computer processor, a processor which didn't understand how the subject of waffles was in any way related to Nick, but she smiled anyway. A simple response, like ‘doing great!' was about to escape her lips when she swallowed it back down and remembered that Nick wasn't ‘doing great!' In fact, he was anything but great at the moment. But the fact that not everyone knew about the savage attacks was comforting anyway.

Enjoying the otter's oblivious nature, Judy decided to allow him to keep his pity, and she settled with a simple, “He’s doing well.” She realized, with the unusually high pitch of her voice, that it was hard to lie about something so mainstream in her life. With much effort, she internalized the emotional tidal-wave and grinned. “Best partner I could ask for.”

“I’d have to agree with ya on that one, Officer Hopps! I don’t think there could be a better representative of the police force in this city than a fox and a bunny solving crime together. And before you ask, I’m totally pro-interspecies relationships. Don’t think for even a teeny-tiny fraction of
a millisecond that I’m some speciest hill-billy, no ma’am, certainly not!”

The elevator chimed and the otter grinned, clasping his paws together. “Oh goody, we’re here! I’ll take you straight to Doctor Fulgens, speaking of which, why are you visiting savage containment in the first place? This unit hasn’t been fully operative in half a year,” Oliver said, showing the first crack in his cheerful facade: suspicion.

“Oh, I’m just here to talk with…” Judy hesitated a moment, then, “…with Doctor Fulgen. It’s police stuff. Top-secret information and such, you know how that goes.”

“I actually don’t, but I can imagine,” beamed Oliver with no further questions. “Come on, the doctor is right this way. I’m sure he’s dying to discuss that top-secret information so I’ll have no time to show you around. Chop-chop!”

Stepping out of the elevator and into Savage Containment was like stepping from a sweeping plain into deep space. The aura about the hospital’s ground floor, now above them, was bustling and alive—like that of an airport prior to Christmas. This new floor, however, seemed more akin to a high-security government facility, perhaps the ZIA. The room before her stretched far back from where she now stood. The floors, walls, and ceiling were all the same brown, glossy marble, which arched in a smooth curve from the corners of the room. Fluorescent strips hung above a single carpeted walkway, which ran straight down the middle of the cavernous place, splitting the numerous desks on either side of it. Behind each desk was a mammal hard at work, beating a keyboard at 120 wpm or reading off reports to their coworkers.

“Wow, I haven’t seen this place so busy in, well, half a year!” Oliver exclaimed, beginning down the walkway.

Eyes looked up from their monitors as she passed, though unlike those on the streets of Savanna Central, these eyes had better things to do than pry and pity. Judy appreciated this for what it was worth and took her time soaking in the alien complex which rested just below the hospital. On the far wall, she could see two floor-to-ceiling maps of Zootopia and its twelve districts. Pins, lines, and scribbled notes covered the majority of one, while the other had printed faces of numerous canines, felines, and other predators pinned to certain areas of the city. Centered between the two maps was a large glass window, stretching from floor to ceiling, allowing a view into a well-kept office.

“No one really knows what they do down here—none of us medical folk, that is—but if you ask me, this place reminds me of something from Paw and Order SVU,” Oliver said with a chuckle. “Anyway, this is Doctor Fulgens’ office. Privacy is out the window—get it? Because the entire wall is a window? Gee, windows are great! Too bad there aren’t more down here.” the otter snickered to himself. Judy was less than amused, coming to the conclusion that the only real humor that Oliver could offer was completely unintentional, such as his overuse of ‘Gee.’

Upon approaching the doctor’s office, Judy noticed that Oliver was correct, even in his awful joke; the entire wall was a window. Even the door, which displayed the Zootopian Public Safety emblem, was entirely made of glass. The interior was a minimalistic office full of modern, spotless furniture. A black office chair was turned from the door, sitting in which, Judy assumed, was this alleged Doctor Fulgens.

Oliver stepped up to the glass doors, which appeared to be automatic. When they didn’t open in his presence, the otter bounced up and down, waving his arms in an attempt to trigger a motion sensor which wasn’t there. It was only Judy who noticed the small button beside the door. She pressed it once, and a chime sounded from inside the office. Two pointed ears—predatory ears, Judy noted—perked at the sound from behind the black chair. The ears were a reddish-orange, lined with a white trim, and Judy quickly identified them as vulpine.
Fulgens is a fox?

Though when the doctor peered around the side of his chair, it was not the long, narrow snout which turned, nor the cunning eyes of a fox which met Judy’s own. The muzzle was shorter and a creamy hue, the same color as the trim around his eyes, though the rest of his face was covered with that same reddish-orange fur on his ears.

Judy’s first thought was that this mammal was, despite the biological impossibility of such a creature, the offspring of a raccoon and a fox. Some type of cross-breed or hybrid, one of such color and features she had never seen. The fur beneath his muzzle—or as much as she could see from underneath his crisp, dark suit and slacks of similar color—was a brown so dark it could be mistaken for black. His eyes were the same color: dark brown, so much so the pupal couldn’t be told separately from the iris, at least not from the distance at which Judy observed all this. The feature she found to be most interesting, however, was his bushy tail, which peaked up curiously behind him, striped with the same cream and orange colors featured on his face.

He looked from Judy to Oliver (still trying to activate the nonexistent sensor) then back to Judy. He nodded shortly and fished something out of his pocket. It looked to be a small, handheld remote. He pointed it, pressed, and the glass doors slid open.

“Gee,” panted Oliver. “They need to fix that door. The trials of being two-foot-two in a city of elephants. Am I right, Officer Hopps?”

“…Yeah,” said Judy, her primary focus still on the mysterious creature, which had come down from his chair and was now approaching the doors.

“Miss Hopps,” Fulgens greeted. His voice was pleasant, though he never smiled. “Or is it Officer?”

“Judy is fine. I assume you’re Doctor Fulgens?”

Oliver laughed, “Yes, of course he is! I already told you that. I get that we’re not all elephants here, but everyone can remember some things.”

Fulgens looked down at the Otter with an unreadable look before turning his gaze back to Judy. “That would be correct. Do come in.”

Judy entered the office, in which a single desk was centered at the back of the room. Multiple monitors, buzzing with script Judy could never hope to understand, sat atop the desk. A mouse pad, mouse, ball-point pen, and a cup of tea all sat perfectly aligned on the desk’s clean surface. Fulgens motioned towards a small sitting area in the corner of his office—two chairs, between which was a table, all sharing the same cleanliness of his desk.

Judy sat down on a sleek, black chair, maintaining a rigid posture, almost afraid not to. Oliver began for the chair beside her.

“Ahem. You.” He pointed to Oliver, who froze in his tracks. “I believe you’ve outlived your usefulness. I’m sure you’re needed upstairs.”

“Oh. Oh, yes, I’ll be on my way,” Oliver rambled. “Top-secret, that’s right.” He scurried for the door, pausing only a moment to turn and wave to Judy. “Hope to see you again, and soon, Officer Hopps!” he called before hurrying out the door and back down the walkway to the elevator from which he came.

Fulgens returned to his desk, closing the doors with the press of the remote. He returned to the sitting area with his tea clasped between his paws, sitting in the chair opposite Judy.
"I do apologize for the intern. A jittery thing, that one. Talks an unsavory amount. I should have sent one of my own to retrieve you," said Fulgens. He took a long, silent sip of tea before resuming. "Anyhow, welcome to Savage Containment. As you’ve already guessed, I am Felix A. Fulgens, the head of this department. I will be overseeing Wilde’s rehabilitation."

“What about Gideon?” Judy asked.

“Pardon?”

“Gideon Grey,” Judy clarified. “The other fox who…went savage.” The term still felt so raw, so vile on her lips.

“Ah, Grey. Yes, he too will be under my operation. Though Wilde will be my main focus, considering he was exposed to far more toxin than Gideon was.”

Judy’s ears perked at this. “He was exposed to more than Gideon?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Overexposure can be fatal if not treated accordingly, so Wilde is, as of now, my primary patient,” Fulgens said with another sip of tea.

“Will he be alright?” Judy asked. “I may be mistaken, but haven’t all the savage predators made full recoveries?”

"The predators who went savage under Madam Mayor Bellwether’s control, yes, that is correct. But Wilde’s savagery is a part of a whole new development. The methodology is completely different from that of Bellwether's. No known external point of entry. Even the stool samples show nothing out of the usual. If kept on close watch, Wilde should make a full recovery, but when he should first regain his conscious mental state, I do not know. It took roughly three weeks, sometimes a month, for the first savages to wake, and they were exposed to two milliliters via a soft-shelled capsule, fired with enough momentum to rupture on contact with skin and soak into the bloodstream. Wilde was exposed to somewhere around six milliliters, according to his blood tests, and we do not know how or in what form, and that is a major factor in determining how quickly he will recover.

“In short, Judy, we do not know how smoothly your partner’s recovery will be. Time alone will tell.”

His answer didn't comfort her like she hoped it would. Some part of her believed that Fulgens was going to tell her that she had no reason to worry—Nick's rehabilitation would take time but would prove effective. The reality of his answer was disquieting to her. The one mammal who knows more about savages than anyone else in the city did not know if Nick would be alright.

“What can I see him?” she asked, knowing that if she only saw him breathing, even if he wasn’t in his right mind, she would feel a little better.

"If you wish, though I cannot promise you you'll like what you see. Containment quarters is off-limits to the public, though, for someone of your stature, I will make an exception," said Fulgens. He rose from his chair having finished his tea and returned to his desk where he set the cup in the exact place it had been before. Then he leaned his muzzle into his left shoulder, pressed something on an unseen device within the confines of his suit, and spoke, "Have Ms. Spott report to my office ASAP. Tell her Judy Hopps is wishing to see her partner."

Taking advantage of his turned back, Judy studied Fulgen closer, trying to place her finger on what type of animal he could possibly be. His striped tail was what interested her the most—it was like nothing she had ever seen on any mammal before.

Her eyes widened when she noticed that Fulgens had turned and was looking at her with emotionless
eyes, and she was quick to look away with an embarrassed flush. Fulgens returned to his seat without a word.

Upon sitting, he asked, “Tell me, Judy, did you ever study Taxonomy in school?”

Judy’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion. “Yes, though I doubt I’d remember much.”

There was a moment of silence between the two, one which Judy found to be most uncomfortable. Judging by Fulgens’ expression—his dark eyes devoid any animation other than the occasional, slow blink—this seemed to be his intention.

“Ailurus fulgens,” he finally spoke.

Judy looked at him with curious eyes.

Seeing as it rang no bells within her head, Fulgens clarified. “Red panda.”

From the countless reports she had filled at the station, Judy recalled a select few which mentioned such a creature. The red panda: some interesting species between bear, raccoon, and fox. She had always wondered some rookie in the precinct had made a mock species as a joke, though here before her was living proof that such a mammal existed.

“Ah,” was all she said.

Again, there was silence. The worst part was that Fulgens seemed utterly undisturbed by it.

Trying to make pleasant conversation until this ‘Ms. Spott’ arrived (because she had a feeling Fulgens wouldn’t be the first to break the silence), Judy asked, “So, you’re a doctor?”

"Yes and no," Fulgens replied. "For over ten years I served as commissioner at Zootopia Presbyterian, a mile or so northeast of here. Then, when the attacks began, the idea of a task force set aside for the sole purpose of containing and understanding the savages was proposed by Zootopia Municipal. I wanted a break in the routine I had grown accustomed to after ten-plus years, and this place was looking for someone with a deal of medical experience to lead the operation. I took the job, transferred, and they moved me down to this place. It's cold, there are no windows, sometimes gets kind of drafty: I couldn't ask for a better place to work."

"What about when mammals aren't going savage? Certainly this place doesn't shut down, does it?" Judy asked. The bustling room outside his office could never be dormant, at least, so Judy believed. To her, it was like a train station, or an airport, or even the plaza in Savanna Central proper—the place would only stand still after the end of days.

Fulgens shook his head. “No, no, we haven’t closed since the division was first created. When animals aren’t going savage, the focus shifts to researching the deepest confines of the savage mind. During the window between the end of Bellwether’s attacks and Wilde and Grey’s recent savagery, we were working on an antidote to hasten recovery. Those in the laboratory are still hard at work on it, but we’ve improved far beyond what was being used six months ago, you’ll be happy to hear. Besides the antidote, research is being conducted to see if there might even be any possible positive uses for midnicampum holicithias, such as harvesting in such a way as to produce new pharmaceuticals, most likely painkillers. There is even a possibility that the plant could be used to produce something of a truth serum. Of course, these new drugs would only contain very minimal, very dilute amounts of the serum. It's still in the works—ah! Here comes Ms. Spott."

Fulgens retrieved the remote from his pocket and opened the glass doors to the office, and in walked a familiar face.
"You called, sir?" said the leopardess at the door, the one who had been on the scene of Nick's accident. For a short moment, she locked eyes with Judy, though there was nothing less than professional in her expression. Exactly the same as before.

"Yes, I’d like you to take Judy here to Wilde’s holding cell,” Fulgens instructed, then turned to Judy. "I'll allow you to come down and visit him often, though under one condition. You mustn't interrupt any operations being held when you’re present. If we’re clear, then you can go.”

Judy nodded. "We’re clear.”

“Good. Now, off-off,” Fulgens said, shooing the two from his office.

Now outside the office, the leopardess beckoned for Judy to follow her down a hallway leading off from the main corridor. The two walked side by side down a hallway made from the same smooth marble used in the corridor.

The absurdity of Judy’s words to the leopardess the night of the attack hadn’t occurred to her until she had returned to the city, to her apartment, with direct orders from her Chief to get any sleep she could. It turned out that sleep wasn’t even a possibility for her, and she sat upright in her bed, thinking about the night’s events. At some point, her thoughts diverged from worry about Nick and to her fight with the leopardess from savage containment. Regret was the first emotion she felt, though behind it rose anger. Why should she be regretful of defending her friend? From trying to stop him from being muzzled? She reminded herself that the leopardess was only trying to do her job, and the muzzle was just as she had told her that night: a necessary precaution. Then she felt horrible for giving the feline hell, at one in the morning, for trying to keep her and her coworkers safe.

That same regret followed her down the hallway towards Nick’s holding cell, and the anger she had felt before never rose again to combat it. When she finally told herself that an apology was in order, the leopardess seemed to read her thoughts and beat her to it.

"Hey, I believe we got off on the wrong paw Saturday, or, Sunday morning," Spott spoke, looking down at Judy as they walked. Her expression was just as professional and kept as it had been the night of the accident. "You were worried about the well-being of your partner, which was completely understandable. I'm the head of my own department down here, and if anything ever happened to one of my teammates while under my command…all I'm trying to say is that I shouldn't have been so unsympathetic."

"You were only doing your job," Judy responded. "In the same way, I shouldn’t have been so simple-minded.”

“Don’t expect to be on your best game moments after your partner goes savage,” Spott spoke with half a smile. “Anyway, if you’re going to be down here often, it’s best we start fresh.” She offered her paw to Judy as they walked. “I’m Melody Spott, commander of Savage Containment’s elite response team.”

Judy returned the shake, her entire forearm being swallowed by the feline’s paw.

“Melody, huh? That’s a nice—”

“Horrible, you mean. You can come right out and say it, I don’t mind,” Melody scoffed.

“It’s not ‘horrible’,” Judy said with a chuckle. “It’s miles better than Laverne.”

Melody looked down at Judy with a raised brow. “That can’t be your real name, right?”
"It almost was. My dad was in favor of it until my mother knocked some common sense into him. Still my middle name, though, so it still haunts me," Judy said with a chuckle.


"Judith, actually," Judy said. "That’s what the birth certificate says, at least."


"That’s not a bad thing, is it?"

"Not at all. My dad was a lawyer."

Once the two reached the door at the far end of the hallway, the beginnings of a friendship had been formed. Any and all mentions of Saturday’s events were left at the door.

"This," Melody said, swiping her card and opening the door for Judy, "is the response team."

The room beyond the door was not dark marble like the rest of the complex. It was perfectly square, the walls a pasty white, with one door on each of the four walls, including the one they were entering through. The place didn't appear to be much more than an intersection of passageways. In the middle of it all was a clump of desks at which sat four mammals, a few of which Judy could recall arriving on the scene Saturday. The black bear who had restrained and muzzled Nick, the deer who had given him the injection, and two unfamiliar faces: a meerkat and a reindeer. Even as the two entered the room, no one looked up from their work.

"We're as busy as we've ever been, now that there are two new savage cases to be dealt with. You can meet the team later, maybe during lunch," Melody said, leading Judy through to a door on the opposite side of the room. "The holding cells are in here, through security. We can't have savage mammals running amok down here, after all."

The door opened into a small median room between response HQ and what Judy could imagine was Nick’s cell. Linked to the side of the room by only a window was a security kiosk. Beyond the glass was a hippopotamus in a security uniform. He appeared to be about halfway through "The Big Book O' Sudoku" when Melody tapped on the glass and flashed her ID. The hippo said nothing, only peering over his book and pressing a button on the control panel he had made his desk.

There was a monotone beep, followed by the heavily-reinforced door on the other side of the room gliding open. Beyond it, a dimly lit corridor, and somewhere inside, Nick.

Melody and Judy started through the door when someone behind them cried out, "Keep that door open, Potts!"

They turned to see a badger in a lab coat, wheeling a cart in front of her. She had dark grey fur with a fainter grey underbelly, running from her snout downward. All her fur appeared to be grey, save for a white patch atop her head. Her eyes were focused and—dare she say it— articulate, a light green, edging on hazel. She flashed her ID to "Potts" at the Kiosk, then turned towards the two already in the doorway.

"Morning, Commander," she said in a brisk voice, never making eye contact, though not at all in a shy way. "Make way, if you will."

"You've got a knack for perfect timing," Melody said to the badger, stepping aside for the cart. Judy stood near Melody's side, going unnoticed by the passing badger. Within some challenger-deep crevice of her memory, Judy could recall the badger's face, though without any context.
"What do you mean by that?" the badger asked in a preoccupied (and rather uninterested) tone, wheeling the cart into the corridor.

"We’ve got a visitor today. Who better to show them the rehab process than you?" said Melody.

"Visitor?" The badger turned her focus to the two at the door, her eyes finding Melody first, then trailing down to where Judy stood. The badger’s eyes twitched for a moment, then she regained whatever composure she had lost. “Ah. Judy Hopps.”

"You know her?" Melody asked.

The badger was silent for a short moment. She stared at Judy with a look like she expected the officer to speak first. When Judy was silent, she said, “I watch the news. Missing mammal cases, the Bellwether scam, now this,” the badger turned her head to the holding cells behind her. “Of course I know her.

“In any case, I’m Doctor Madge Honey Badger, or just Honey. Are you here to see Officer Wilde?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Judy replied, taking another moment to try and link a profile to this familiar face. No such profile was found.

“Well then, I guess I do have a knack,” Honey snorted. “I’m the one who’ll be giving Wilde his anti-howler over the next several months, or however long it is until he clears up.”

“Anti-howler?" Judy asked.

“Just what we call the antidote,” Honey said, starting down the corridor. “Right this way, if you wish to watch.”

Judy followed Honey as she pushed the cart further down the corridor. Melody trailed behind, her paws folded behind her back. The holding cells weren't too different from those of the savage mammals at the Cliffside Asylum. The walls were blue-grey and padded, and a thick sheet of glass separated each from the outer corridor. A bed and toilet were provided in each cell, though the inhabitants would probably prefer the floor for both.

"Mind the gloomy atmosphere," Honey said to Judy as they walked. "The light has to be dim and the temperature cool, else the 'patients' get worked up."

"On that note," Melody added, "I don't recommend bringing a flashlight down here. That is unless you'd like to see the savages having a frenzy."

Judy nodded in compliance.

Honey stopped her cart before a cell, and when Judy looked inside, she believed to see Nick. He was prowling towards the back of the room, masked in darkness, bared white teeth being the only thing she could see apart from his silhouette. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, and to realize that this savage was larger and huskier than she remembered Nick to be.

“Before I get to Wilde, I need to tend to our other patient. Do you know Gideon Grey?"

“Yeah,” Judy responded. “We grew up together."

"Ah. Sorry to hear that," Honey said, pursing her lips. She then turned to a control panel mounted on the wall beside the cell. With a few buttons and a swipe of her paw on a screen, a series of lights illuminated the cell in a faint orange glow.
Honey returned to her cart, flipping open a series of latches on a case which rested on top. She looked up at Judy. “Wilde’s right over there,” she said and pointed to a cell across the hall, then went back to the case.

With one last glance at Gideon, Judy made her way over to Nick’s cell. Something inside her was afraid of what she would find there, though courtesy of the dark lighting, she could hardly tell the cell apart from the others. As she leaned up against the glass, she could barely make out his form in the back corner, laying on his belly. The fox’s ears peaked upon seeing her, and he slowly rose into a crouch, as if preparing to pounce on his prey. Keeping this posture, he crept towards her. The closer he stalked the more audible his growling became. He only stopped a few feet before the glass, where he sniffed the air for her scent, his teeth bared behind a wrinkled snout. Now in close proximity, Judy could see that he was wearing nothing but a pair of hospital-blue shorts. Everywhere else his fur was ragged and damp with sweat.

Soft footsteps were approaching her side, and Judy looked up to see Melody, now standing beside her, staring into the cell.

“So,” Judy started, turning back to the growling savage, “all the previous savages have made full recoveries?”

“You’re correct, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t dangers. Just because no one has yet to die on the moon doesn’t mean it’s a safe place. In the same way, rehab is rocky terrain, especially when dealing with the antidote.”

“How so?” Judy asked, her eyes never leaving the savage.

“Not to assign any stereotypes,” Melody drew her paws in defense, “but I assume you’re at least a little familiar with plant husbandry?”

“More than I’d like to admit.” Judy offered a frail grin to the glass.

“Then you probably know just how potent midnicampum holicithias can be in the wild.”

For a moment, Melody studied Nick, noting how his claws were digging scratches into the floor. “Whoever did this to Wilde—and to Gideon as well—they concentrated the already potent flower into something completely debilitating. With a serum so powerful it alters the mind for months at a time, you can imagine how the antidote would have to be strong in response.

“The real issue, though, is knowing just how concentrated the serum is. That is, the one used on Wilde and Gideon. Blood tests can give a pretty good idea of the potency and the amount internalized, but without having a sample of the serum in question, slight estimations must be made. And ask any pharmacist or anesthesiologist for that matter—estimations are not ideal. When dealing with the antidote, we need to know how much to administer, all down to the decimal. Round up, and we have atrial dysrhythmia. Miscalculate the amount administered, and we have cardiac arrest.”

Judy shrunk within herself. Something similar to instinct caused her to look to Nick for comfort, only to see the savage and to be reminded that Nick wasn’t here. Her closest friend, the one she trusted more than anyone else in this city, was now no better than a predator from the stone ages. Only days ago had she stood mere feet from him, had she looked at him with an affection she had tried to hide.

If not for the glass sheet between the two, the fox would pounce on her right there. He would end her on the cold floor on which she stood.

“So you’re saying he could die,” Judy said. The stability of her own tone concerned her.
“Yes, he could,” Melody responded earnestly, “but only if there is a mistake. You see, the reason rehabilitation takes so long is because we cannot use the full strength of the antidote. Hell, if somehow downing a bottle of the stuff didn’t result in immediate heart failure, Wilde could do just that and walk out of here tonight in the right state of mind. But that would kill him, and this being a young field of medicine, we aren’t willing to take any risks. The antidote is toned down significantly and administered once every twelve hours. The result has its pros and cons. No chance of overdose, no cardiac arrest—Wilde walks free in roughly two months. But there’s the con right there: two months.”

I’ve survived four months without him before, Judy reminded herself. It was that optimistic side of herself coming to the rescue at just the right time. “Two months, but no one dies.”

“Approximately two months,” Melody added. “A little something for the record books: Wilde has been exposed to more raw night howler than any other mammal in the modern age. The savages during Bellwether’s reign of terror took around one month to achieve complete rehabilitation, some even two to three weeks. With these two, however,” she pointed her paw between Nick and Gideon, “there’s no real way to know when they’ll come to.”

“My bet is late January,” came Honey’s voice from across the way. Judy turned to see her come strolling out of Gideon’s cell, closing the door behind her as casually as one would a car door. “Maybe twenty third or fourth, I dunno. Wild guess.”

The badger turned from securing the door’s locks to find Judy gawking at her.

The badger scoffed and sighed. “Inhalation sedation,” Honey explained before Judy could ask how she had just entered a locked room with a savage predator. “Cutting-edge technology—it even rhymes,” she said, rolling the cart to Nick’s cell now.

Upon seeing that Judy’s baffled expression had hardly faded, Honey only shrugged and waved her over. “Come and see for yourself.”

The badger approached a control panel identical to the one operating Gideon’s cell. She entered a pin into a keypad, scanned her paw print, then swiped a finger along a pad, and the lights in the cell grew to a dim orange. The already irritated savage began to pace along the length of the window, hissing and making guttural noises.

Honey pressed another series of buttons, entered in a percentage into the keypad, and hovered her paw over a button. She turned to Judy. “Prepare to be impressed.”

She pressed the button, and Judy could faintly pick up on a hissing noise emanating from within the cell. She rooted the sound to its source, finding a vent on the ceiling of the cell emitting a white mist. It wasn’t long before the savage’s movements began to slow, and his lips closed back around his teeth. He rather graciously lied down where he had been standing, his head lolling for a moment before falling slack to the ground.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Honey said with a smirk.

Judy looked over to where the savage was now dozing, and she found the whole thing rather anticlimactic.

Melody seemed to pick up on this and sighed. "It's the newest development in a new field of herb-based sedatives," she explained. "The anesthetics used upstairs are extremely pricey and sold in minuscule amounts. This new sedative isn't quite as costly and is sold in large amounts. All it takes is a little spray to induce unconsciousness, then the rest is filtered back through the ventilation."
Honey returned to her cart. She revealed a syringe filled a quarter of the way with a clear liquid. "Don't think we’ve been sitting around on our asses since the last of the savage cases wrapped up. This whole place practically turns into a freelance research center during the off-season. I and a few others took the time to hunt down the most cost-effective anesthetic we could find."

All it took was another sequence of buttons and the locks released on command. Honey opened the door—a hefty slab of structural steel with two-inch thick locks—and walked in without hesitation. Judy decided to wait and watch from behind the glass, even if it was rendered useless with the door wide open. Honey knelt next to the snoozing savage, stretched out his limp arm, and gingerly guided the needle into the crook of his elbow. All was quiet. Judy realized she was holding her breath, and yet did not exhale.

An eternity passed until Honey finally rose to her feet, the now-empty syringe idle in her paw. She retracted the needle into the syringe and made her way back to the door. She began to close it when she paused and murmured, “Almost forgot,” walking back to the cart and revealing what looked like a hamburger patty in a plastic wrapping. “Even savages need to eat.” She walked back into the cell, stripping off the plastic as she did so.

Judy turned to Melody. “That’s all you feed him?”

“The sedatives’ limit is ten minutes, so you’d be risking it. No risks, remember?”

Honey came out from the cell and secured the door with its many locks. Inside, as it dosed, the savage almost resembled the real Nick. A few inches from his snout was an unwrapped patty of meat, which—Judy would admit—appeared rather repulsive and made her wonder How can anyone eat that stuff? Though she had a feeling the savage wasn’t a picky eater.

"And that's all there is to it," Melody concluded, taking a step back like an artist would after the final brush stroke. To observe their hard work in its entirety. "The rest of the team and I are swamped, so best I get back to it." She turned to Judy with a closed-lip smile. "Glad we could make amends, officer. Honey's your go-to for any further questions." And with a simple "See you," she left.

Judy felt rather out of place, standing there in silence next to the cell door while Honey disposed of the syringe in a red container labeled BIOHAZARD. The rabbit turned her attention back to the savage, who hadn’t moved. In a sudden surge of desperation, she asked, “Could I go in? To see him?”

Honey turned from the cart and shook her head. “The sedatives’ limit is ten minutes, so you’d be risking it. No risks, remember?”
“Yeah,” Judy nodded solemnly. “Got it.”

Honey flipped the latches of the case atop the cart closed and paused for a length of time. She finally let out a snort of laughter and turned to look at Judy with a belittling look. “So,” she began with a scoff, “do rabbits have poor memory or something?”

“Excuse me?”

Honey chuckled, turning now not only her head but the rest of her body towards Judy. This was the first time Honey had devoted her entire attention towards Judy. "This face doesn't ring a bell?"

Judy fumbled over her words. “Well…no. Should it?”


“Um…” Judy thought hard, ultimately to no avail. “Are you…famous or something?”

The badger exhaled heavily through her nostrils. “Here’s a hint, I’ve worked with savages before.”

The hint wasn't very helpful, in Judy's opinion, as a wide majority of public services worked with the rehabilitation efforts after Bellwether's darting-spree. Though the mischievous hint in her tone made Judy reconsider. An associate of Bellwether was Judy's first thought—that Honey was revealing her true identity now that they were alone, and in trade, she wouldn't allow the rabbit leave the floor with her life. She quickly dismissed the thought as a result of her love for crime-thriller films.

It was when she remembered Lionheart’s scheme, and how he had an entire team of researchers working under him before a certain fox and rabbit blew his operation open.

“You worked for the mayor,” Judy said, hardly able to believe her words. Honey was the badger she had seen arguing with the mayor while she and Nick were hiding in the asylum, back when she had first met the fox.

“About time you realized,” Honey huffed. “You were there when I was escorted out of that place in cuffs.”

“Oh,” Judy said, not sure what other to say than, “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be. I was let off easy, mostly because the whole idea of keeping the savage predators captive was Lionheart’s plan, and I was only following his command. Don’t get me started on that brute—I don’t understand how someone so arrogant could ever be mayor.”

“And you got here…how?” Judy asked.

"Fulgen hired me for my prior knowledge of savage predators, despite the circumstances thereof. The people here are nice. Much more organized than that feline I called my boss—may he drown in a never-ending sea of lawsuits, the bastard!" Honey called, raising her middle digits into the air with dignity. "Sorry, I get pissed easily—note this," she jabbed a finger at Judy, "for future reference."

Judy nodded quickly with eyes wide. “Noted.”

Honey relaxed. "Anyway, you can stay here as long as you'd like. Potts can't keep you from leaving, though I doubt he'll notice your presence over his crossword or whatever, and if Fulgens has a problem with you staying late…well…when doesn't he have a problem? A weird fellow, that one. The guy has OCD or some shit like that. Some days he'll be cracking the whip around here, and other days he'll come running from his office, screaming that he won a match of chess against his
computer. Isn't that, like, impossible? On another note, if you're here tomorrow, I'll let you in the cell while I give Nicholas his anti-howler."

“Really?” Judy brightened in an instant. “Wow, thank you. That really means a lot—”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get mushy on me. I hardly even know you, so don’t think we’re friends or anything,” Honey said with a humorous smirk. She spun around to her cart and called, “I’ll leave you to your fox. Just exit the way you came, and don’t mess with the control panels. Not that you could figure out how they work—you’d have to be Etham Hunt just to work the lights,” Honey quipped, making for the entrance, the cart in tow.

"Bye, now. Don't get eaten," she said and was gone. With her departed whatever light-hearted atmosphere had existed before, and now it was only Judy and her former partner, the savage fox.

She sat down on the cold tile before the glass. Inside, the savage was slowly stirring back to life. In five minutes, Judy hadn't moved, and he was back on his feet, scratching and hissing at his prey on the opposite end of the barrier. After realizing the everything-proof glass would not give way to his mere claws, the savage turned its attention to the insect-patty and made work of it in a fashion so vigorous Judy couldn't help but watch. The patty was gone in under a minute, and the hissing and scratching resumed promptly afterward, as if the savage was now sure the glass could be fooled into shattering.

Judy turned so that her back was to the savage, and she leaned up against the glass. The barrier absorbed the brunt of the scratches and lunges, though ever so faintly could she feel it quiver from the impact. In a sense, it was soothing, like some bizarre back massage.

Did she plan on falling asleep right there on the floor, deep within the bowels of the ZMH with her former partner, the savage, yipping up a storm in his cell—probably not. Though the tremors of the glass doubled as a massaging factor on her back, and the cool, dark, silent atmosphere that was common in subterranean environments was far more relaxing than her place at the Grand Pangolin. Finding her eyelids straining to remain open, she sat upright as to wake up, though it wasn’t long before she was slouching again, eyelids drooping all the more. I can’t fall asleep here...what will Honey think if she sees me like this...if she finds me asleep here...Will she care? The peaceful invitation of sleep, offered from the dark of her own eyelids, easily won over any reasoning. So yes, she might have fallen asleep right then and there, mere inches from her natural predator, had her parents not decided to give one of their routine checkups on their traumatized daughter.

“~I WON'T GIVE UP, NO I WON'T GIVE IN, TILL I REACH THE END, AND THEN I'LL START AGAIN~”

Judy started upright, any and all fatigue leaving her in an instant. The sudden flare of movement and song seemed to awake the savage as well, as it began to growl in low tones.

After a moment of coming to her senses, she exasperatedly groaned like a moody teenager. Climbing to her feet, she removed her phone from her pocket.

“How many times have I told you guys,” Judy muttered, accepting the muzzletime call and pulling the corners of her lips into a smile, “I’m perfectly fine.”

The line connected, and she was met with the already sympathetic faces of her parents, both
“Hey, bun-bun.” Bonnie was the first to speak.

“Hey guys,” Judy said, hearing her fragile tone though doing nothing to correct it. “Before you ask, I’m alright.”

Both laughed, though their voices remained soft and certainly skeptical. She didn’t blame them—she knew she was lying, too.

Stu leaned in closer, his eyes traveling beyond Judy. “Say, where are you? It’s almost pitch black.”

“Oh, don’t tell me your apartment lost power again!” Bonnie groaned.

Judy shook her head. “I’m not at my apartment.” She glanced over at where the savage stirred on all fours and made sure to keep him out of frame.

“I’m at the precinct,” she finally said, “in the locker room. It gets pretty dark down here.”

Bonnie’s expression hardened. “You’re telling me they made you go back to work?”

“No, I’m just…just getting the last of my stuff out of my locker, that’s all. To take back to my place.” Judy ran a hand over her ears, looking away. "The Chief is allowing me a temporary leave, though, from the way he put it, I can stretch temporary as long as I’d like.”

Stu snorted. “I was about to say, if they put you back to the grindstone after nearly getting your head bitten off—”

“Stu,” Bonnie snapped. “Sensitive. Subject.”

“Right, right. My bad, Jude. Er…speaking of that, where’s Nicholas?”

The savage made a rather loud snarl, as if trying to introduce himself. Judy laughed nervously. "Um, right! Nick!" she said in a raised tone, trying to hide the savage’s noises, "he's under rehabilitation right now. I went to see him earlier today.”

“Ah,” Stu said with a nod. “Well, I sure hope you figure out what happened. I mean, people around town are starting coming up with rumors, which I’m sure is all they are—rumors. But some are beginning to think he and Gideon both got excited and, well, lost control of their—”

“What your father is trying to say,” Bonnie cut him off, shooting a glare at her husband, “is that we hope he gets better soon.”

“Wait, wait. Back up,” Judy pressed a paw to her forehead, squeezing her eyes closed. “They think the attacks were…biologically induced?

“Not everyone,” Bonnie assured. “We don't believe that kind of thing just happens,” she glanced at Stu with squinted eyes and murmured, "do we?"

“Er, no, of course not.” Stu stammered. “I never said that I believed it was true, but…you’ve figured it out by now, right Jude? The cause, I mean?”

Lying to her parents about her whereabouts was trivial, and yet was hard enough a thing to do. Lying about this, though… You goody two-ears. Dammit, I can already hear Nick laughing at me.

So she told the truth. “Not yet.” The words crept out of her mouth. Both her parents’ faces fell.
“But! I can assure you it isn’t biological. Two foxes didn’t just up-and-savage in the middle of a primarily-rabbit festival.”

“So, you’re saying this was like a-a terrorist attack?” Stu blurted.

“That’s actually a pretty good way to put it, yes.”

“The mammals in this world,” Bonnie sighed, shaking her head sadly. “Who would do something like this?”

“A prey-supremacist group,” Judy said. “At least, that’s what we’d like to believe. So far there aren’t any actual suspects. But concentrated night howler was found in both Nick and Gideon, so it had to get there somehow.”

“Right,” Bonnie nodded rather solemnly. “Right, well I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it. Heck, you’ve already done it once.”

Judy smiled, not having to force it this time. The smile turned sour. *Yeah, but I didn’t solve it alone... * "My luggage is coming, right? Sometime this millennium?"

“Oh!” Bonnie’s ears perked up. “Yes, that’s actually why we called.”

“Yes! Sent it in the mail yesterday all by myself,” Stu beamed. “Should arrive by tomorrow, or so my phone claims. I still don’t understand how an app can be trusted to know these things.”

Bonnie gave him a pitifully look. "Anyway, Hun, we called just to give you a little heads up on when it would be arriving. Considering you two weren't here for very long, it wasn't hard to collect all your things. Yours is the blue suitcase if I'm remembering correctly, and Nicholas has the fern-print one, right?"

Judy chuckled to herself. “Sounds about right.”

“And all the fern-print button-ups, too?” Bonnie asked.

“Still yes.”

“What is it with him and Hawaiian dress?”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Will we ever know?”

She made her goodbyes—which were starting to seem irrelevant due to the frequency of their calls—and promptly ended the chat after assuring them, one last time, that she was going to be okay. In a way, it was therapeutic to both parties. The more times she told herself those words, the more she began to believe they were true.

She resumed her position, sitting with her back to the glass, and this time did not fight the fatigue when it came rushing back. And yet—just as she had when she was sitting amidst her sea of non-incident-duties and Nick was away at the training academy—even when there were more pressing matters at hand, like sleep or upholding emotional stability, she could not think of anything but him. Thinking about how, only days ago, Nick had stumbled through the Hopps’ front door, wasted to high heaven. Was this situation not too different from then? On that night, the alcohol had revealed within him the secrets he wasn’t willing to tell. And now, the serum had revealed the instinct that had dominated the world in the stone ages. Everything that he hides, now being brought to light. And the consequences of these recently-surfaced truths...
Judy turned to look at the creature behind her, the creature that was very much not Nick, and yet she spoke to it as if it were. “The trouble you get yourself into,” she murmured to the other side of the glass. Whatever sarcasm she intended was smothered in the melancholy of the moment, and her words surfaced as longing and hopeless.

“And to think, I was falling for you…”

The savage gave a single swipe at the glass, followed by a grunt. It bared its teeth at her, and she only stared.

“…you dork.”

It had taken the attack on her partner to bring new parts of herself to light. Parts which she had tried and bury because of how unorthodox they seemed. While sitting on her bed after returning from Bunnyburrow, she had plenty of time to think these things over. Sure, sleeping was what she should have been doing, though she knew it would not come easy, if at all. So after a few sleepless nights of consideration, of tears and questions asked to the wall, the conclusion she had reached seemed so simple that she didn’t understand how she hadn’t seen it before. She was drawn to him, both figuratively and literally. Landing a seat at his side during bullpen. Meeting at the station to walk to work together, to vent to each other about whatever was on their minds. Finding herself lost in his stare. In his personality.

So what if he was a fox? So what if the world disapproved? Her feelings for him—they were blind to such things.

“**You know you love me.**”

But in the savage's eyes, there was no intuition. No articulation. No Nicholas Wilde. As hard as Judy tried, she could not find what had drawn her—not while he was feral. Not while he was growling at her.

Her only comfort was the thought that, soon enough, the real Nick would return. The rehabilitation would be long but would prove effective, and he would wake in full health. The smirk, the eyes, the terrible Hawaiian shirts and mismatched ties—all of it would return. The ZPD would find the source of his savagery and would choke it out. Savage Containment would no longer need to focus on the real savages and instead could return to their research on the serum.

The world would go back to the way it was—the way it should be. As an officer of the Zootopia Police Department, Judy would make sure of it. Nick would wake up, and she would be there. And by that time, she will have analyzed the flustered knot of her emotions and drawn from them a conclusion. A conclusion to conclude all conclusions.

He would wake up, and she would be there.

He would wake up, and she would have an answer.

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The burger joint was nestled underneath a towering highway overpass, on which traffic roared with no reverence to the time of day. Located on the south side of downtown—edging on Northwest Sahara Square—the restaurant wasn't in the best part of town. Surrounding the elevated highway were tenements of a dark red brick—appearing brown in the fading light. Each car parked outside
them had its own sizable dent or spider-webbed windshield. The remains of shattered glass bottles, cigarette butts, and crumpled newspapers littered the crumbling sidewalks. Not far from here, the beach of an inlet suffered the same conditions, while the water itself was a murky brown. In short, very few mammals stopped to wander in this particular side of the city. Those driving overhead on I-23 North would simply keep going, ignoring the restaurant and the neighborhood surrounding it. To the common mammal, this part of town might as well be invisible, as well as those who dwelled there.

It was for this reason that Arvi loved it so much.

He had taken a close-to-abandoned train to an aged station two blocks from the restaurant and walked the distance in between. By the time he reached Samson's Burgers and Fries - Delicious Eats for Predator and Prey Alike, she was already seated at their usual table outside the joint, occupied with her phone.

Approaching with his hooves in the pockets of his jeans, he started to speak—to make his presence known—when she beat him to it.

“Told you long enough.” She never looked up.

Arvi grinned, his gaze falling to his feet. “It’s not like I can control how fast the train moves.”

“Future reference, buddy, that’s why you get a Zuber.”

Arvi shrugged. “The subway’s free.”

“And slow. And creepy. And you could totally get mugged or shot or something, especially around here.”

“And you’re advising me to, instead, hitch a ride with a complete stranger?” Arvi said, his expression flat though still humored.

She paused for a long while, then sighed and placed her phone face down on the table, looking up to meet his eyes. “Just sit.”

“What about the food?”

“I already ordered it. Fruit salad and a tea, right?”

Arvi nodded and sat down across from her. For a while, they listened to the hum of the road above them.

Arvi finally sighed, his head coming to rest on his hoof. “So, what comes tomorrow?”

"I suppose that’s what we’re here to talk about,” she replied, and before either could continue, a mammoth figure came waltzing out from behind the counter. Atop both his paws were two trays of food for the establishment’s only two customers at the moment.

“Friends!” his voice bellowed. “Good evening, my two favorite customers! Good evening!”

The voice belonged to the owner, Samson, a lumbering brown bear with a grease-stained apron tied around his portly middle. On his lips was his usual warm and rather contagious smile he wore tighter than the apron.

The two paused their conversation and turned to the bear, who knelt to be level with the table.
“I have here a honey lime fruit salad and a green tea,” Samson said, placing the plate before Arvi. “And Myra, your bug burger with swiss, tomato, lettuce, a dusting of red onion, of crickets, and the mayonnaise held. Not to forget, pop with extra vanilla, or should I say vanilla with extra pop.” Samson handed her the tray. “Did I get it all right?”

“Word for word,” said Myra, wasting no time to start her meal.

Samson leaned on the end of the table, his head now supported in both paws. His gaze flickered between the two, close-lipped smile still present. “It’s what, quarter of six? Why so early? Cooperate being generous for once?”

Myra and Arvi shared a thoughtful look over their food, all the while Samson awaited a reply from the end of the table.

After a thick swallow, Myra shook her head. “Quite the opposite, actually. We got fired today.”

Silence.

Samson’s eyes widened, and his smile faltered. Both seemed too occupied with their meals to care about their current unemployment. Myra stole a blueberry from Arvi’s salad. Arvi glared at her.

“Can you not?”

“They’re my favorite, too.”

“Then get your own salad.”

“Who do you think I am, a prey mammal?”

“I’m sorry to hear about your unfortunate circumstances,” Samson added, seeming to break up the argument. “Anything I can do?”

"More than offering a fresh meal, I don't think there's much," Arvi said, digging through his salad with a plastic fork. "But thanks, Sam. If only the world were filled with mammals like you."

Myra hummed in agreement.

“Then everybody’d be fat,” Samson said with a soft chuckle.

“Fat and happy. One cannot refrain from lightening up around you, it’s like some frickin disease,” Arvi said flatly, lifting a forkful of salad to his mouth.

“Well, that’s real nice of you,” the bear said, rising to his feet. “I’ll leave you two be. I hope everything turns out alright.”

Arvi nodded thankfully, and the bear made his way back to the kitchen. As kind a gesture it was for Samson to care, Arvi had his doubts that there were clear skies and rainbows in his foreseeable future. Only three hours ago he had a steady job—a job that he hadn't planned to leave until arthritis seized up his fingers or until his stock investments finally paid off.

At least she’s here, he thought.

It had all started with a rough wave of downsizing roughly two years ago. The accounting branch wasn't as affected as were the other branches were, though enough to have the remaining accountants moved to the seventh floor for the sake of concentrating the workforce. Arvi found himself working with a few unfamiliar faces, one of which was Myra, who had the desk to his left.
For the first week, neither spoke to each other. It probably had something to do with him being prey, and her being a predator. Then one day, the head of management of the fourth-through-seventh floors, Director Alce, walked in on an intimate moment being held between a gopher and a ferret in a supply closet. The director had already been known to have a particularly long stick up his butt the majority of the time, and this was the straw which broke the moose’s back. The entire accounting branch, including the guilty party, promptly received a stern lecture concerning the unacceptability of workplace relationships, as well as addressing what considered to be the very scum of the earth: interspecies partners.

In the middle of it all, Myra leaned over to Arvi and murmured, “I’ll bet he’s just flustered that he’s still a virgin at forty-five.”

Arvi let out a snort of laughter, and Alce immediately singled in on him.

“Is there something funny, Mr. Fallow? Because it’s been one helluva Monday and I’m sure we’d all like to hear your little joke.”

Arvi was quick to seize up. He stammered over a reply, only for Myra to speak up in his place. “It was nothing, director. I was—”

“Did I ask you, fox?” Alce spat.

The room was silent, and the silence was nauseating.

Finally, Alce turned his glare back to Arvi and seethed, “We will have no further interruptions, will we, Mr. Fallow?”

Arvi nodded, and Alce exhaled a heated breath, resuming his lecture.

After it was all over, during a lunch break, Myra would come and sit down across from Arvi. She would issue a short apology to him, to which Arvi would accept. Both would buy a can of blueberry-sparkling (Myra’s favorite) from the vending machine and agree that Alce was an asshat, and Arvi would laugh once again at Myra’s joke.

"He shouldn't have called you that," Arvi would say after the laughter had died down. "Using one's species as a derogatory term—it's a terrible thing to do."

Myra shrugged and downed the last of her can. “No big deal. I'm not a fox.”

“Oh…er…my apologies,” Arvi cringed. “If I might ask, then…”

“Coyote.”

“Ah…”

“Don’t feel bad, it happens all the time.”

From that day onward, the two accountants, despite being predator and prey, bonded quickly over their ironic hate of mathematics (and of course, Director Alce.) After a few lunch breaks spent at the same table by the vending machine and a few purposefully-lengthy trips to the copier at each other's side, the two began meeting outside of work. To get away from the prying eyes, they found a place in the rougher side of downtown, near Sahara Square. Myra, having grown up in the general area, suggested Samson's Burgers and Fries for their interspecies acceptance policy. Upon their first meal there, a ewe behind the cash register even remarked that they were cute together.
Those around the office had very different opinions.

Arvi had believed that the worst of predator-prey dichotomy was in the past. Zootopia, after all, was founded to allow a mass of various species to coexist, regardless of biology. So then, what was so wrong about a growing relationship between a white-tailed deer and a coyote? The director had made it very clear in his response—everything.

It was earlier that day, before they had been practically thrown out of the building’s front doors, that one of Alce’s kiss-ass assistants had seen the two making out in the corner of the empty break-room. Neither of them noticed anyone’s presence until Director Alce came lumbering in, staring daggers down at the both of them, still wrapped in each other’s arms.

He had used many expressive and creative words to show his feelings toward their relationship—“utterly disgraceful, that’s what it is! Disgraceful to every mammal in this city—in this world! Parents should hide their children from the likes of you! And here you practice this filth in my office? MY office!!”

Myra responded with her own sense of creativity, claiming that the director was a “stuck-up old prune! You’ve never had even a chance at a relationship, and judging by your age, by that ugly-ass pinstripe you probably sleep in, and by this hellhole of a job you manage, you never will! Have fun dying a virgin, you uptight prick!”

Not ten minutes later were they standing outside the towering office building, their possessions hastily gathered in two boxes—paper bins which Alce had emptied and shoved into their faces with orders to leave before he called security. Myra offered both her longest fingers to the approximate area where the seventh floor was located, and they left. Both ditched their long-despised uniforms and dressed into something casual, knowing exactly where to meet that evening.

So now they sat across from each other, eating the same meals and sitting in the same seats they had so many times before, now sans the occupation.

Arvi speared a portion of his meal, lifting the fork to his mouth and pulling the contents off with his teeth. "You know," he swallowed, cleared his throat, "there's a call center not too far from my apartment. Aren't those places always hiring?"

She scoffed like she had been insulted. For a moment, Arvi wondered if he had done something wrong. Then she spoke, more like spat, “Yeah, hiring twice-divorced all-time-low’s and failing businessmammals,” a pause, then adding, “and crackheads, considering through the phone you can’t smell their basement’s harvest lingering in their breath.” She plucked a blueberry from his salad and promptly tossed it in her maw.

Arvi stared down at his salad, an almost insulted expression on his face. Blueberries were his favorite. “Myra, I’m serious about this.” Arvi put his fork down and looked at her. “We’re out of a job. In three weeks we’ll be on the streets. Maybe a month, if we’re lucky.”

The coyote pursed her lips. “I guess you have a point. Can’t afford this place when you’re homeless.” She chuckled to herself.

How can she be so upbeat at a time like this? Arvi thought, sending Myra a scowl.

Her mirth transformed slowly, nevertheless transformed, into a somewhat serious expression—the kind Arvi was originally hoping for. She nodded, pursing her lips. “I know, I get it. Times aren’t looking up. It’s my fault you don’t have a job, so I’ll do all I can to fix that. Just…not at a call center.”
“It’s not your fault,” Arvi said. “It’s that jackass Alce’s fault.”

Myra paused thoughtfully, then, “Fine, I’ll agree with that. But if I hadn’t dragged you into this to begin with, you’d still have a salary. And I, well, I was going to rebel eventually. Doomed from the start.”

“If you hadn’t dragged me into this I never would have met you,” Arvi said, and the thought of living a life separate from her made him quiver. He had known what it meant to be alone, though the feeling had become distant after meeting her. Returning to that loneliness was, in his eyes, an unspeakable horror. The kind of a horror that leads to the rope, or the bridge. He shivered again.

"Maybe that would have been better," Myra murmured, taking a sip of her drink. "If we had never met."

"Don't say that. It's not true."

“What? That you being with a predator isn’t screwing over your life? Come on, Arvi, open your eyes. Get real. I’m the reason you’re sitting here now and not—”

“And not what? A sedentary office worker, bound for a single apartment, an eternal nine-to-five, a late retirement, and an ill-funded, closed-casket funeral?”

There was a silence between them, allowing for the highway overhead to be heard, roaring in all its might. Mammals passing, ignoring, not seeing, not caring.

“If you’re so insistent that this is meant to be, then let’s find a job together,” Myra said. The amount of genuine intent in her words was revolutionary by her standards—no sarcasm, no swears, no jokes. “Or better yet, let’s make a job.”

This caught Arvi’s interest. He lifted his head from where he had been intently studying his salad. “Make a job…You mean start a business?”

"Yeah, that’s what I meant. A place like this," she gestured to the restaurant in a swinging motion, "with people like Samson, who don’t judge you by your species, or by whichever species you hang out with."

“O…okay? But, putting aside how difficult it is to start a company without proper funding, much less the correct degree, what hobbies do we even have? We eat food like this all the time, so that crosses off any chances of a modest bakery.”

“Hey, watch your mouth!” Samson’s voice rumbled from the kitchen. “My food’s just as good as anyone else’s! You wanna up your standards, go ahead, but you two still owe me twelve thirty-five!”

“I didn’t mean it, Samson! Your food is practically my religion!” Arvi shouted back without turning his head. Myra smirked at this, picking another blueberry from his salad.

“I didn’t mean it, Samson! Your food is practically my religion!” Arvi shouted back without turning his head. Myra smirked at this, picking another blueberry from his salad.

Anyway,” the deer resumed, taking a moment to pause and glare as yet another berry was stolen from the bowl, “neither of us have any musical talent, or artistic talent, or specific interests in film or literature, unless you…”

Myra shrugged. “I like Stephen Kingfisher.”

“Me too, actually, but what are we gonna do, start a horror-blog?” Arvi scoffed.

“It was your idea,” Myra said. “But since you mentioned it, why not something online?”
Arvi raised a brow. “You mean like a Ewetube account or something?”

The coyote sighed. “No, you idiot, we aren’t vloggers. We’re middle-aged accountants recently fired for an interspecies relationship. Who would ever take...take interest...in...that...” Myra’s eyes widened wider than Arvi believed to be natural. She struck an instinctual, prey-driven fear into his heart when those eyes shot to him and she clutched the sides of the table, leaning forward. “That’s it! That’s it! That’s what we can do!”

He had known Myra to be an eccentric individual, and her having lightbulb-moments wasn’t something new to him, though never had he seen the coyote so fascinated with anything. Not ever.

“Well...are you sure—”

“Yes! Yes I’m sure, of course I’m sure! Half the people on Ewetube have no life whatsoever and yet all these viewers—poor, mindless souls—take interest regardless! And what do the viewers bring with them?” Myra asked, like a game show host presenting the million-dollar question.

“...A fanbase and over-the-top erotica?”

“Add revenue! I thought you were a computer-pussy—I thought you knew these things.” Myra said, still smirking. “Though, I assume a fanbase, as well as a porn page, would be natural as well.”

Arvi shrugged. “Rule thirty-four.”

Now it was Myra’s turn to be confused.

Arvi sighed. See how the tables have turned, he thought. “If you build them, they will come. If it exists—there is porn. And dammit, I’ll have you know I am a computer-pussy. With pride.”

Myra sighed, a glossy, far-away look coming over her eyes. “I love you so much right now,” she sighed—nearly moaned—then proceeded to climb over the table, grab the deer by his antlers, and pulled his lips to hers. Arvi dug his paws into the scruff running down her back, a hue of sienna and sandy tan. He kneaded it firmly, while she worked her way down his back with her paws, pulling him closer and closing the space between them.

And at that moment, everything seemed to be alright. There was now a plan, paved with an unstable, unsure walkway, put a plan nonetheless. And they had each other to navigate it.

And then Myra violently drew back, taking a few steps away from the table while holding her paw to her mouth.

Arvi (rather unsatisfied with their short-lived intimacy) let out a sigh and wiped his mouth. “What? I swear it isn’t my breath. I’ll have you know—”

“That you brush and floss three times a day, I know,” Myra hissed, still covering her mouth. She made a gagging noise. “I got so excited...I think I’m gonna throw up.”

Confused, though not entirely, knowing the coyote’s rather unpredictable personality, Arvi made his way to her side and threw an arm over her shoulder. “Come sit down,” he said simply.

“It’s this weird combination of exhilaration and arousal and...and...” Myra drew away in one swift motion and vomited onto the concrete.

“...You weren’t joking,” Arvi said, slightly astonished as he stood there. Realizing that he was standing idle while she heaved up the extent of her meal, he rushed to the scene, not knowing what
else to do other than rub her back and offer shallow condolences, like a mother to her sick child.

Samson emerged from the kitchen, a concerned look on his face. “Twenty years running this joint,’” he said, fetching a grocery bag and hustling as best a burly ursine could to the scene, “and never once have I heard of food poisoning from my kitchen.”

“Today pigs fly, Sammy,” Arvi said, running his paws through her scruff lightly. Samson handed the Coyote the bag, which she clutched tightly in her fists.

Myra emerged, if only for a moment, from her heaving to add, “I don’t care, Sam…I’ll still eat your food…too good to not…ugh—” she keeled back over and somehow managed to dispel even more bile, though now there were hints of green and yellow mucus appearing as well. The sight made Arvi look away, struggling to contain his own lunch.

“We’re gonna forget about that twelve thirty-five, right?” Arvi asked Sam over Myra’s hunched back.

The bear cackled. “I’ll give ya twelve thirty-five, and a few extra if you’ll refrain from spreading this around.”

“Only if you agree to clean your kitchen and throw out whatever ingredients caused this,” Arvi said.

The bear sighed, placing his hands on his hips and looking up to the dawning twilight. “You see, that’s what’s troubling me. I clean my kitchen twice a day, and all my ingredients as wholesome as could be. The insect-based meats and other carnivorous foods—direct order from the Bugburga-plant just up the road, and last I heard they were coming out with a new line of fresher product, too. All the crops are farm-fresh, non-GMO, preservative-free—you name it. Some of those berries and such yous was eatin’, fresh crop from Bunnyburrow or even Deerbrook—I imagine you’re familiar with the place.” Samson shook his head and let out a low-toned sigh. “Food doesn’t expire, not in my kitchen.”

Arvi gave him a skeptical look, to which the bear rolled his eyes. "I know, I know. Pigs are flying," he grunted. "I'll do everything I can to assure this doesn't happen again, you have my word." The bear put a paw to his portly chest as a tribute.

It was about this time that Arvi became aware of a parallel between his current situation and that of many horror novels and films (and yes, even the works of the beloved Stephen Kingfisher.) It was a trope that he had always been skeptical of because he was a mammal of science, not the supernatural. So when he would read that something ‘wasn’t quite right,’ he would refuse to believe that it was anything more than a form of anxiety festering the main characters’ own mind.

The sense of impending doom. That ‘something isn’t quite right.’ It was strong, and potently putrid, and made him feel nauseous.

Something wasn’t quite right.

As to what it was, he was in the dark, but he could sense it. With regards to all science, all reason, all common sense—it was prevalent. It was impending. The sour undertones, somehow louder than the cars barreling overhead on I-23 North, were so strong he could gag, or even vomit.

And that’s when he had his own lightbulb-moment.

“Myra? Are you alright? You’re never this quiet,” Arvi said, still running his paw through her scruff, though he began to realize that she was developing a shiver.
Myra said something along the lines of ‘oh no,’ though it was interrupted by a series of dry-heaving into the grocery bag she clutched with white knuckles.

Arvi had stopped massaging her scruff, and when he looked over to Samson, the deer knew he could sense it too.

Something wasn’t quite right.

“Myra, are you alright, dear?” came Samson’s voice, though much softer than Arvi had ever heard it. Arvi could already sense Myra’s retort rising in her throat—“I’m the canine, he’s the deer,” and with it, Arvi would know she was alright.

Though it never came.

“Something isn’t right,” Arvi said.

Samson said nothing, though both were in silent agreement.

“Myra?” Arvi began to shake her shoulders, gentle at first, then violently. If only she would speak he would know she was fine. So speak, please speak. Dammit, say something. Anything! Speak to me! "Myra, you're scaring me. Haha, funny joke, I know you feel sick but please, don't milk it."

“Arvi, stop,” Samson grunted. The deer heard, though did not listen.

“Myra, this isn’t funny.”

Shivering, her only response.

“Speak to me. I need you to say something. Just tell me that you’re alright.”

No words, only quivering.

"Where's the sarcasm? Huh?" His tone was lighter, and also more fragile. On the verge of falling and shattering into hysteria. "Haha, I'm prey and therefore a pussy, haha. It's funny, I know, you make fun of me all the time for it! Haha! I'm weak! I'm a computer-pussy, remember? It's funny, you remember? Laugh, come on, laugh with me! It's funny! Haha DAMMIT, SPEAK! ”

A large paw came down on Arvi’s shoulder, and he looked up to see Samson, looking down with a stern, though frightened look. The deer came to his senses and seemed to cry for help with his eyes.

"Hey, Sam!" called a ewe from the kitchen. "What's all the fuss? Does she need another bag?"

“Sarah, call the police.”

“…Huh?”

“You heard me. Nine-one-one.”

Arvi grabbed the bear’s mammoth paw. “What’s happening? What are you doing?”

“Do you read the news often, son?” Samson asked.

The question took him totally off guard, and for a moment he doubted the reality of all this. It seemed so backward—so dream-like. Is that what this was? A dream?

“Not really. Sometimes, maybe—why does it matter?” Arvi’s tone began to rise again. His eyes shot
back to Myra. She had dropped the barf-bag and was leaning—not casually or smugly—but completely leaning on the table they were sitting at, clinging to it as if it were the only thing left existing over a voracious void. The shaking was now convulsing, and Arvi could see that her claws, which she always kept sharp, were scraping claw marks into the stone table.

“What are you doing?” Arvi breathed. He took a step closer, went to place a paw on her shoulder. “Myra, what—”

The claws ceased from digging into the bench and replicated their same horrible art across Arvi’s cheek, just below his eye. The pain was immediate and so hot that his entire face became numb in a flash of white. Then his nerves became able to register the response, and he could not scream, only scramble backward. The cars were roaring extra loud now and somewhere, someone was screaming. It was probably the ewe in the kitchen.

Someone was shouting his name, then a large brown paw made its way around Arvi’s torso, and he was yanked backward from the source of his pain—an all-too-familiar coyote who was now staring at him with horrifyingly feral eyes. They were the last thing he could see before feinting—a coping method for the overload of sensations he was undergoing. The paw around his waist lugging him away, the hot and runny pain dripping down his face, and the petrifying black eyes of a savage.
From somewhere outside the realm of her slumber there came a flat buzzing. In response, a groan—faint and mostly subconscious—escaped her lips, and one of her ears flopped into an upright position, angled in the direction of...approaching footsteps? She began to wake. A raspy exhale and the scrawl of stirring claws from the other side of the glass barrier suggested she wasn't the only one rousing.

The footsteps came to an abrupt halt, and the silence that she had fallen asleep to—the dank and muffled quiet of the subterranean complex—reclaimed the floor.

Then, a scoff.

"You've got to be shitting me."

The footsteps started up again, marching right up to where she lay. A surprisingly firm paw gripped Judy's upper arm.

"Come on. Get up."

Against her will and still half-asleep, she was hoisted to her feet so suddenly that it sent her scrambling for support. When she opened her eyes, she found herself clinging to the lab coat of badger with a particularly annoyed scowl on her lips.

"Oh, er, I'm sorry," Judy scrambled to say, pushing herself off Honey.

The badger sighed and straightened her coat. "Let's not make dozing off in top-secret research facilities a habit, officer." She turned from Judy and began for an empty cell neighboring Gideon's. "It's already a miracle Fulgens let you in here. Don't push your luck."

"Yeah, yeah, got it," Judy nodded, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "I just haven't caught much sleep recently. It won't happen again."

"It won't," Honey agreed. With one paw she began to work with the empty cell's operations panel, and with the other revealed what looked like a radio from her belt.

"Found Hopps, sir....Where, you ask?" She huffed and shot Judy a sneer over her shoulder. "Sleeping on the floor in front of Wilde's cell....Yeah, you heard me right....I know....You're the boss, not me. Do what you want....Of course, already on it....Booting up the systems now....Alright, I'll have it done."

She returned the radio to her belt and shook her head, no doubt smirking with her back turned. "You've got an angry panda waiting for you in the corridor."

"Oh joy," Judy muttered, leaning against Nick's cell for support. She was completely and utterly exhausted, even with however long she had been asleep. How long had I slept? Hours, she was sure, though they only felt like a number of minutes in sleep's cruel and distorted version of time.

"Best of luck to you, bunny. He's a scary little thing when he's worked up." Honey entered a series of buttons on the panel in a fashion so fluid Judy was mesmerized. Whatever sequence she had
entered raised the lights of an empty cell to a dim orange glow. The hum of what Judy imagined to be a heater emanated from within.

Honey turned. "Come to think of it, you don't even know what happened." She snorted a sharp bark of laughter. "You slept right through the whole damn thing."

"...What?" Then the gears in her head—rusted over with fatigue—finally began to turn. Why is she prepping a new cell? What happened? Jeez, how long was I asleep?

"While you were drooling on the floor, someone else went savage. Somewhere in between Sahara Square and downtown. A coyote, or so I've heard. The response team was rushing out the door so quickly I didn't get the whole picture. Melody was too preoccupied to acknowledge my existence, much less my questions. She gets that way when stuff like this happens, all strict and bitchy."

Judy groaned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "And I slept through all of it?"

"Well, most of it, but the response team's at the scene now."

"When did they leave?" she asked, checking her pockets to ensure her belongings were still on her person. Phone. Wallet. Badge—not that she would need it while off-duty, or even the uniform she was still wearing from her interview with Bogo.

"What, are you planning to tag along?"

"What else is there for me to do?"

"Stay out of everyone's way," Honey suggested with a shrug. "If you were needed surely you would've been called to the scene by now."

Judy ignored this. She asked again, "When did the response team leave?"

"While you were fast asleep on the floor, there."

The rabbit groaned. "What help you are." She was nearly out the door when she paused.

"...What time is it?"

"What you should be asking," Judy could hear the grin in Honey's tone, "is what year is it."

Judy sighed and fished her phone out of her pocket. At least it wasn't capable of sarcasm.

8:49 PM

Relieved to know she hadn't slept through the day (as appealing as that did sound), she hurried out the door, past Potts, who was still enveloped in his Sudoku puzzles.

When she emerged from the hallway and into Savage Containment's cavernous corridor, Fulgens was already marching towards her, his beady eyes turned icy. Judy did not stop walking and instead turned for the elevator, dismayed when the slightly taller red panda fell into step beside her.

"Snoozing on the floor of the most dangerous government facility in Zootopia..." Fulgen's voice was the same slow-paced yet orchestrated tone that she remembered from earlier. "Well done, officer. You've surprised me."

She could feel his bitter gaze burning into the side of her head, so she kept her eyes on the approaching elevator. For someone so quiet and seemingly introverted, the intimidation that radiated
off him nearly rivaled that of Chief Bogo.

"I can assure you it won't happen again, sir."

He was silent for a moment, and at that moment Judy hadn't the faintest idea as to what was going on inside his head. Any hint at his thoughts was tightly caged inside his mind—the mammal had no body language at all.

"I'm already allowing you a great deal of leniency. If not for your record, you wouldn't know this place existed. The majority of Zootopians don't."

She could only nod.

"If you wish to be allowed down here in the future, you must keep an attitude of utmost professionalism. This is a place of rehabilitation and nothing else, especially not sleep."

As she reached the elevator his pace slowed to a stop. Judy pressed the upward facing arrow several times for good measure, almost as a plea for help, then unwillingly turning to meet Fulgens' eyes.

"Don't surprise me, Miss Hopps," Fulgens sighed, his eyes now locked on hers. She found that she could not look away. "I don't like surprises."

He stepped towards her. She naturally flinched away, only for him to reach over her shoulder.

"And this lift needs a key card."

Fulgens swiped the card in a slot Judy had missed, and the doors automatically drew back.

Feeling impossibly small, Judy muttered a brief "Thank you." She stepped inside, then asked hesitantly, "Are you not coming?"

"I have my own operations to attend to," Fulgens said with a nod of his head towards the bustling crowd of workers in the corridor. "Do I look like the type who could subdue a savage predator?"

Judy assumed the question was rhetorical, though Fulgens remained quiet with his eyes locked on hers, as if weighing her with his mind.

"No," she finally said.

"No is right. There's a reason we have a savage response team." The doors began to close, though Fulgens stepped into the doorway causing the doors to retreat. He observed her for a short moment, a moment which, to Judy, felt like a small eternity.

"You need sleep," he finally concluded. "Tell me you'll get some. Just not here."

"Yes sir, I will."

"The attack occurred at a small fast food restaurant named "Samson's Burgers and Fries" just off Interstate Twenty-Three in northwest Sahara Square. Don't get in the way of the response team."

"I won't."

"Right, then. Ta ta," Fulgens spun on his heels, making down the aisle and back towards his office. The doors closed hesitantly, as if waiting to ensure that he had nothing else to say.
It being nearly nine o’clock on a Monday night, the subway was eerily abandoned, especially when en route to a place such as west Sahara Square. Judy arrived in roughly ten minutes—record time when traveling trans-district—and wasn’t surprised to find that the station on Dry River RD was abandoned all except for a security guard near the turnstiles.

As one of the officers with the highest marks at ZPD precinct one, she had held herself to quite the standard when it came to her job. One such standard was getting a feel for the city she would be protecting, which included knowing which areas could be deemed as ‘slums’. West Sahara Square was one such area. The price of living in the district was significantly cheaper than any of the neighboring districts, save for the luxurious blocks surrounding the Palm Hotel, but that was far east of where the train had left her. Heat, another factor, didn’t sit well with most mammals, especially when the majority had fur of one kind or another. The low-rate residential that constituted the majority of the district was a result of this. Those who preferred it cold resided in Tundratown, moist in the Rainforest, dark in the Nocturnal District. Most everyone else fell into the category in between, meaning they would take up residence somewhere in Savanna Central or maybe the Meadowlands for the moderate climate there. That left those who had no choice but to live in the places with the cheapest accommodations, regardless of the heat. Places like northwest Sahara Square.

The region was a neighbor of downtown and all the activity accruing there (including underground markets and the overlords of such ordeals). Combine this with the cheap housing and you get a hot spot of criminal activity filled with bottom-of-the-bucket mammals.

It seemed to make sense, in Judy’s mind, that something as unfortunate and terrifying as a savage attack would befall a place like this. Good things rarely came of places like this.

She had looked up the burger stop Fulgens had mentioned on Zoogle Maps and had taken the train to Dry River Road, still several blocks from the location in question, but it was the best she could do. This left her to walk the distance between, which was comprised of mostly bleak tenements and their many windows, looking all too much like hundreds of scheming eyes staring down at her, observing the discrepancy that was a rabbit, alone, in a broken neighborhood.

Still three blocks away, she could see the scene. A flair of flashing red and blue, reflecting off the interstate overpass. All the authoritative colors flashing about gave her the answer as to why the streets appeared so empty.

The burger joint was a small in question was a small, bland building with grimy cinder block walls and yellow neons running the perimeter of the roof, attracting moths and the like. A neon sign, also yellow, rotated atop a pole and read ‘Samson's Burgers and Fries - Delicious Eats for Predator and Prey Alike.’ Beside the name was a cartoon bear wearing the cliche chef hat and bearing a toothy grin. It was the kind of place that served greasy fried okra and onion rings in plastic red dishes lined with wax paper, normally run by the same mammal for several decades.

Nick would like it here, Judy thought. The fox knew all of the city's hidden jewels when it came to cuisine, and most of the places he would drag her to on lunch breaks were either unassuming or dilapidates. And he would insist that he knew the chef from high school and would go on and on about how incredible the burgers were. Too bad she wasn’t a predator and couldn’t try the burgers for herself.

Too bad Nick was imprisoned in a cell underground, out of his mind.

Too bad he was savage.

A line of ZPD cruisers formed a barricade around the scene, along with a black van which must belong to Savage Containment's Response Team. A perimeter of police tape circled the small plaza
in front of the restaurant, around which gathered a decent crowd of bystanders.

Unable to see through the legs of interested onlookers, Judy approached one of the larger cruisers and had no difficulty walking right underneath it.

Beyond the tape were several familiar faces. Francine Pennington was the nearest to Judy and was somehow managing to share one of the stone benches in front of the establishment with a stunned ewe, despite the incredible difference in size. The elephant was trying her hardest to interview the ewe—who looked to be an employee judging by the company apron bound around her neck—though it didn't seem the sheep was doing much talking. Her stare was that of a soldier having shortly returned from the front lines. Judy could practically see her replaying in her head whatever horror had occurred here.

Judy picked up on their conversation with ears too sensitive not to eavesdrop.

"Would it help if I got you something to drink? A glass of water?" Francine's tone was sympathetic, almost maternal.

The ewe shook her head, clearly still in some foreign recess of her mind. "I'm not thirsty."

Judy had been experiencing a similar shock recently. Every night since the accident at Bunnyburrow, there had been a reoccurring nightmare where Nick had not restrained himself to a streetlight. The pain, when he tore into her throat, felt so real.

The rabbit rubbed her neck with an absentminded paw and wished she could comfort the ewe. For one thing, they could share the bench far easier.

Beyond them, Officer Bob Johnson, a lion who Judy didn't know particularly well, was standing near the restaurant's service bar with a legal pad in his paws. His interviewee—a hefty brown bear—was sitting on the ground with his back to the building, as if protecting it. It didn't take Judy long to make the connection: this must be the Samson portrayed on the revolving neon sign. He wore the same apron the ewe was wearing, only several sizes larger and sprinkled with blood.

A member of the response team—a nameless deer Judy had seen at Savage Containment—was kneeling beside Samson and tending to several nasty cuts on his arm. One could only assume when standing at Judy's distance, but they appeared to be the result of sharp claws. Or teeth. Considering the context, probably a combination of both.

Notwithstanding the circumstances or the blood rusting on his apron, Samson spoke amicably with Johnson, not even wincing as the doctor dabbed at his cuts. "Long time customers, those two. Never saw them individually, they always came together." His voice somehow managed to be both gruff and polite at the same time. "Two peas in an unlikely pod, but my place attracts a strange lot. The sight of a sheep and a grizzly working in the same kitchen keeps most the public away, thank God."

Johnson consulted his legal pad, speaking without looking up. "As for the savage in question, you don't know of a history of violence, substance abuse, affiliation with any gangs or radical groups? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"Her mate's a deer, but with that out of the equation, I doubt it. Has a rather feisty personality but stays on the right side of the law's my guess. It's no chef's business to know the customers' personal lives. If you want answers, that's your mammal over yonder. The name's Arvi." Samson points to a scene nearby where Wolfard shared a bench with a hysterical deer.

Seeing as Judy herself was on a quest for answers, she crept closer, hoping Wolfard couldn't catch
her scent.

Wolfard spoke, "So I assume you came here to calm your nerves?"

The deer, Arvi, exhaled and winced like it stung to do so. "Something like that. It was her idea and we like this place...Samson's a nice guy, doesn't ask any questions..." He went on mumbling to himself things so quiet even Judy and her leporine ears couldn't make them out. "...I thought it was safe here..." Every other second he would glance over Wolfard's shoulder. Judy followed his eyes to where the response team's ambulance was parked. Inside, the victim, or the perpetrator? Neither—the savage. Strapped to a stretcher, already sedated. One of the response team, a female kangaroo, was attaching wires and tubes to the savage like a telephone operator.

"You said her name was Coyoson?" Wolfard asked.

"Yes, that's right. Myra Coyoson."

"Coyoson as in Coyote? She's not a vixen?"

"She's not a fox!" Arvi snarled—the best snarl any prey can muster, that is. "Everyone calls her that like it's some fucking disease! I'm not even a predator and I can tell the difference!"

Wolfard kept his expression placid, allowing the situation to settle. It took almost half a minute until the shouting had diminished to soft sobbing, which faded to incomprehensible muttering, and finally him rubbing his hooves against each other without a word. "I..." he began, and swallowed, blinked away lingering tears, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap." He is head falls into his hooves like a bowling ball. When he speaks, he's weeping again. "I'm just...still processing all this shit."

I could help with that, maybe, Judy thought. The impact of Nick's savagery had developed deep roots in her wellbeing, and like a broken finger or stubbed toe—the injury was numb, though easily inflamed. She guessed it would be the same for this poor deer. If he could talk to someone who was undergoing a similar streak of bad luck, someone like herself, maybe that would ease the pain for both of them. Not end it—no, that would take an act of God, or more likely a night of shots at the tavern across the street from Judy's apartment—but talking just might lessen it so they can focus on the important matters. Matters that had no sympathy for poor fellows in times like these. Matters like eating, sleeping, surviving one more day.

She's thinking about going to speak with him, because Wolfard doesn't seem to be getting anything out of the deer and probably won't until he's taken to the station and interrogated there, but before she could approach...

"Figures I would find you here, Hopps."

It appeared that Judy had emerged too far from under the cruiser, because Bogo's wrath had left his radio and had approached her, his arms folded tightly across his middle. "What's your business here, Lieutenant? Last I checked you were supposed to be on break."

Judy was quick to defend herself. "I got word there was another attack. I had to come."

Bogo snorted. "You very well could have not come. You should be sleeping, recovering, as I've allowed you a gracious sabbatical to do."

Judy laughed, feeling belittled, almost insulted. "I'm not so wracked with grief that I can't leave my apartment. Yeah, it sucks what happened in Bunnyburrow, but do you expect me to stand idly by while another predator goes savage?"
"Yes, that's exactly what I expect you to do! Only a matter of days ago you were nearly mauled by a savage fox, not to mention watching your partner go off the fucking rails. Things like these require coping, and coming back here is not in any way coping."

His rage reminded her of her first day on the force, a day of patronization and parking duty. Even after all she had done to prove her worth, to prove she wasn't the fragile little bunny rabbit everyone took her for, did he still think she needed TLC when things went south? What next, a therapist? A stress blanket?!

"My coping isn't going to prevent this," she gestured to the scene with outstretched arms. "Three times now, a predator has gone savage. It's been only two days! How long before a forth?"

"It doesn't matter how long—" Bogo began, only for his radio to speak first.

"Chief, I'm already receiving word that ZNN has its buzzards on the way. It's only a matter of time before others catch on. Would you like me to send your reserves?" The voice was Clawhauser's, who sounded cheery as ever.

The buffalo exhaled out his nostrils. "Bloodthirsty pricks," he muttered and brought the radio to his snout. His eyes never left Judy. "Hold that thought," he said into the radio. Then to the rabbit, "Listen here, I don't have time to quarrel with you about this, and if we did have time, believe me, I'd go all twelve rounds. What you do on your free time is out of my hands, so by all means, deprive yourself of sleep and sneak your way into crime scenes to your little heart's content, but do not get in the way, or we'll have issues." He began to turn away, then glanced back and grimaced. "And change out of that bloody uniform. You're off-duty." The ground shook with his retreat, his booming voice demanding the radio tell him which officers were in his reserves and who in the seven circles of hell had the audacity snitched to ZNN.

With the chief gone, Judy could breathe again and turned to see that Melody was closing the back of the ambulance while the rest of the response team piled in. Around the ambulance, though, was a gathering crowd, who was blocking the exit route. Despite the flashing lights and blaring horn, the crowd swarmed, banging fists on the sides of the ambulance.

"Why is this happening? We want answers!"

"Who even are you guys? Clearly not the police!"

"We have the right to know what's going on!"

Swimming in all the delirium, Arvi's voice was the one Judy heard the loudest. He was on his feet now, and the only thing keeping him from tailing the ambulance down the road was Wolfard, holding him back.

"Let go of me! Where are they going? Tell me where you're taking her! Please! You can't just—let GO OF ME!" He squirmed against Wolfard's grip, his screams as close to a growl as a deer could manage. "This isn't fucking legal! Where is she going? I have the right to know! I should be with her! I should—"

"Easy, buddy." Wolfard's voice remained calm. He had wrapped Arvi in a restraining embrace. "She's safe. There's no reason to—"

In a swift instant, Arvi thrashed his head back. He bit Wolfard on the arm. The wolf only hissed, but it proved to be enough of a distraction for Arvi to break free of the officer's hold. The deer was now high-tailing it after the ambulance, ducking under the police tape and slicing through the crowd of
bystanders. No one tried to stop him. The ambulance was now well down the frontage road and making it for the interstate, flashers and sirens all the way.

"You good, Ryan? Did he bite you?" Johnson asked, jogging over with a bemused look more than a concerned one.

The wolf half-grimaced, half-smiled. "Yeah, the little bastard did."

Johnson sneered. "Oh, he's gonna regret that one—"

But Wolfard held up his paw. "No harm done. See? Teeth too flat to draw blood." He chuckled and rubbed his arm. "Bitten by a prey…that's a first."

"Should I go after him? He's not far, I could catch up. Bite him back for ya. Give him one he'll remember."

Wolfard waved him off. "Unless he can run sixty, which I don't believe deer can, he'll slow."

"Jesus, Ryan, the guy bit you. Even with no blood that's still assault."

"I don't blame him. His friend just lost her sanity, and now she's being tooted off to who knows where. If that were my mate I very well might bite someone. I'm not shot. Bruised maybe, but nothing more. Give him some leeway."

"I can catch up to him." It was Judy speaking now, making her way under the police tape without having to duck. "He probably just needs to sit down and talk away from all of the commotion."

Both officers looked down in surprise. Wolfard tilted his head to the side in a very canine fashion. "Hopps? I thought you were off duty?"

"What, your extended vacation get too dull?" Johnson mused.

Wolfard shot the lion a disapproving look.

"I get it. I shouldn't be here," Judy admitted. "Bogo's already barked my ears off. Should be resting, he says, but…"

"But you can't," Wolfard finished for her. "Not when these things happen."

"Yeah." Judy nodded. At that moment, a mutual respect passed between them. If there was any officer Judy favored second to Nick, it would definitely be Ryan Wolfard. Something about his silent understanding of other's thoughts….

"I should catch up with him before he gets too far," Judy said, jabbing a thumb in the direction the deer fled.

"Sure. Just say you'll take some melatonin tomorrow. Even you need your sleep."

"Everyone keeps telling me that."

Johnson smirked. "Maybe because you look like you could pass out on the floor right here."

"Easy, wise ass," Wolfard muttered.

Judy only laughed. wouldn't be the first time today... "No, you're right, I wouldn't put it past me."
"You better get going if you want to catch him before he makes it to the harbor," Johnson said. "But just know, I'd down a vial of night howler here and now if it meant I'd get paid vacation. Do us on-duties a favor and spend your sabbatical away from work."

"Noted."

Arvi hadn't made it more than a block. When Judy caught up, he was sitting on the shoulder beneath a single orange streetlight with his head in his paws, muttering again. Something about lawyers in his pocket and "suing their asses til' they can't sit down."

Before she could reach him he heard her approach. Eyes red from rage and wide with fear assessed her. All it took was the uniform to get him on his feet, backing away and pointing an accusing finger. "I'm not talking! Not with you or any of your friends, so don't get any closer!"

Judy stopped and raised her paws to her defense. "I'm not trying to make you angry."

"Yeah, then what? Trying to take me in for assaulting an officer—hey! I said don't come closer!"

"I'm not taking you in. That's not why I'm here," Judy said, expecting him to give her another earful. He didn't, so she changed the subject. "Your name's Arvi?"

He stared for a long time, like confirming or denying this would get him killed. Finally, a nod. "And who the hell are you?" His voice had eased, though was still on edge. "I didn't know the cops took in rabbits."

This was a relief to Judy, who had grown sick of her recent publicity. First for that disasters press conference (which still gave her nightmares, sometimes), then for the arrest of the former Madam Mayor, Dawn Bellwether, and finally her partnership with the ZPD's first fox, Nicholas Wilde. She was surprised that no one in the crowd had yet to pick her out as "that rabbit from the news"; if it were a predator, they'd be accusing her of her words at the press conference, if prey then praises for the same thing. But in the eyes of this mammal, if only this one, she was still a blank profile. It gave her hope.

"I'm Judy Hopps, first rabbit on the ZPD." She took a cautious step forward—he gave no objection this time—and offered her paw.

Arvi hesitated, considering something behind his eyes. For a moment, Judy thought he was going to connect the dots and recognize that she was the rabbit from the news, the one who had brought down the Bellwether scandal, the one partnered with the fox. But he only swallowed and gently shook her paw. His own was trembling. It was cold, after all, but Judy didn't think that was the main reason.

"Again, I'm not here to upset you, or accuse you of biting a fellow officer." She chuckled, hoping he would do the same, but he didn't. Instead, a look of growing horror materialized on his face.

"Oh shit. Oh shit! Just perfect! That's assault, it's gotta be!"

"I think you'll be fine," Judy said. "Wolfard, the officer you…attacked, he laughed it off. No one's blaming you, Arvi."

"Oh, don't say that. Don't lie to me, you're just trying to take me in."

"Arvi, stop putting words in my mouth. I'm not accusing you of anything, an I've already told you I'm not taking you in."
"You...you promise?"

"Of course I promise!" She raised her right paw. "You have my word as an officer."

"Like that means anything."

"To me, it means a lot. So take it or leave it."

He studied her, saying nothing.

"Look, I know you've been through hell. Your reaction, though...admittedly dramatic, was justified." She laughed. "So relax, dude! I'm not taking you in, not accusing you of assault or anything else."

Still, silence on his behalf. His eyes weren't so angry now as they were curious.

"I promise you, Arvi. I'm here for you."

Finally, he sighed. His breath vaporized in the air. "Well, I guess you seem nice enough." He chuckled in spite of himself.

"I'd like to believe I'm morally in line, yes," Judy smirked. "So, I'll take it you trust me?"

"Trust you? I just met you!"

"And yet you aren't backing away anymore."

He considered this and shook his head, defeated. "Fine. I trust you."

The rabbit smiled. "Here," she sat down on the shoulder where he had been sitting before and patted the asphalt beside her, "sit with me. I wanna talk with you." The deer hesitated and she clarified, "Not 'police talk' with you. Friend-to-friend talk with you. I'm actually off duty right now."

"Then why the...you know...the blue?" He pointed to her vest.

"I had business the station this morning. Forgot to take it off." It was the truth, despite how clumsy it sounded, and yet the deer seemed to take comfort in it.

"Right," he nodded. "Right, okay." He sat down, still uneasy, but certainly better than before.

After a moment of shared silence—during which Judy glanced down the road to see Wolfard, watching on with interest though far out of earshot—she began. "So you and Myra were pretty close, I take it."

"Yes, we are." No hesitation in his reply.

"Huh," Judy grinned to herself. It wasn't every day—or week, for that matter—that she came across another interspecies couple. This, though, was the first she had seen between predator and prey outside of her own relationship—scratch that—friendship with Nick.

"Please, don't try and lecture me on how unorthodox it is—a deer and a coyote. Oh, and don't tell me you think she's a fox."

"I don't." Though she had only seen the feet of the mammal on the stretcher, they had been large enough to prove that they didn't belong to a fox. Coyotes rivaled wolves in size. Foxes rivaled raccoons.
"I've already heard it all, from parents, friends, my boss—no, my old boss. Yeah, did I mention I got fired today? We both did, me and Myra. That is…before she…you know…"

"I know," Judy nodded. And she did. Savage was such an ugly word, and relating it with someone close was like swallowing a bolder.

"By now I get it. I've been told it so many times I can't help but believe them. Predator and prey aren't meant to be in a relationship. It's nasty and unnatural, and I don't need anyone else to tell me that."

"No, no, that's not at all what I'm saying," Judy hurried to say, seeming to take Arvi by surprise. "Just because it's unorthodox doesn't mean it's nasty."

Arvi looked down. "You don't have to lie. I know the way most mammals think of me."

"Well I'll have you know, I'm not most mammals."

Silence again, and Judy didn't mind it. Further down the darkened street, two more squad cars pulled up next to the three already present. Bogo's reserves had arrived.

"In a way," Judy finally spoke, looking at Arvi (though he refused to return the favor), "I might know how you feel."

For a while, he didn't say anything. Then, he scoffed. "Did your only friend lose their mind, too? Get carted away in some unmarked ambulance, probably to some government bunker for testing or some shit?" He scoffed again, and whatever warmth had been growing between them died in a chilly gust of wind.

Then, Judy started to giggle.

Arvi turned to look at her for the first time since they had sat down, and there was some concoction of anger and confusion on his face. "It's not funny."

"I didn't say it was."

"Then why are you laughing. It's rude."

Judy's mirth ended with a sigh and she nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're right. Sorry. But really, I can relate."

"Really, can you?" Arvi said, thick with skepticism.

"My partner, on the force, he's a fox."

He blinked. The sarcastic frustration drained from his face, and a Judy knew he was feeling the same intrigue she had felt upon hearing that he and Myra were a couple. A relief that there was someone else out there besides themselves. That they weren't the only ones walking against the current.

"If you don't think I know the hell interspecies relationships have to endure every day, then just imagine a red fox and a cottontail rabbit on patrol together. Or even worse, on lunch breaks at the local cafe."

Arvi considered this, then asked, "Are you two just friends, or…"

"Friends," Judy said. "But we were close."
The deer's expression turned empathetic. "...'Were'?

"Oh, no, Nick's alive," Judy said, and the brief thought of a world where he wasn't sent an icy spear through her beating heart. "But, you see, Myra wasn't the first predator to go savage since Bellwether's arrest."

To the surprise of the officers and bystanders who had witnessed Arvi flee the scene in pursuit of an ambulance he would never catch, Judy and the recently hysterical deer returned to Samson's at each other's side. When Wolfard asked how she had done it, she had responded, "I just didn't let him bite me."

Arvi had cooled down several degrees and had even agreed to ride with Wolfard back to the station for an interview. There was no objection on the deer's part. No one was bitten. Arvi gave Judy a thankful glance, now that the two understood each other's unfortunate and similar circumstances, and climbed into the back of Wolfard and Johnson's cruiser.

It wasn't long after they departed for the station when Bogo approached Judy, who had been listening in on Francine and the ewe cook (it seems the elephant had finally managed to get her to speak, and she was reciting her point of view on the matter in every detail). He was about to speak, but on a more striking note, a bystander had just come to the realization that she looked exactly like that rabbit from the news. And just when she'd believed she'd go unnoticed, too.

"That's right, you are that bunny cop from ZNN! Ha! Fuzzy bunny working with the fuzz!" It was an overweight badger, though his remarks weren't without malice. "Was it fun, dragging us preds through the mud and shit on live TV?"

"Why, I'll be damned to hell and treated to a popsicle!" This one, standing near enough to the badger to hear what he was going on about, was a red fox. "I've always wanted to have a chance to give you a piece of my mind. Oh, I could write you manuscripts, honey!"

Judy recalled a certain day of her training when Ursula, the bullhorn of a polar bear, had instructed them on dealing with verbal abuse. "As an upholder of justice," she had said in the gym one day, "in a city full of just the opposite, you will have to deal with some shitfaced locals who want to start up a verbal sparring match. And to that, I say feel free to indulge! But know that it is ALWAYS best, even if this shitfaced local REALLY has a bone to pick, to keep your voice level and, even better, ignore the loudmouth in general! I'm hoping that after a select few of you graduate this place I call academy and you call hell on earth, you'll have had your share of verbal abuse already from yours truly!" And Judy had, especially when her ears were twice as sensitive as the rest in her squad.

Keeping Mama Ursula's advice in mind—it had been the polar bear's favorite sobriquet—Judy allowed the rowdy crowd no more than an uninterested glance. The memory of her brief but monumental one minute on the air still haunted her, and she knew the repercussions affected these predators personally. They had a right to hate her, and though it stung her insides, she knew she deserved it.

She would die still regretting the things she said that day. Others would die still hating her for it.

The badger was shouting now. "I know you can hear me, rabbit! Your ears are taller than your whole fucking body!"

Don't look at them. Just let them hate you, that shouldn't be so hard.

"You've got a partner, haven't ya?! A fox, yeah, that's right!"
This caught Judy's attention, and she turned. It was the fox, and Judy was thankful he didn't look like Nick, else she might start to cry, or lose her mind. He wore a hooded sweatshirt that read POWER TRIP on the front, along with a green baseball cap, the bill sticking out from under the hood. If that wasn't enough to convince Judy that this was not the fox she had befriended, his far-darker shade of fur did the trick.

"Oh, struck a nerve, have I?" the fox grinned toothily.

"Hopps?" came a voice from her side of the police tape.

She turned to see Wolfard, whose eyes said everything she needed to know. *Don't be afraid to ask for help, for once in your life.*

"I'm fine," she said.

"Is he your doggy toy?" sneered a tiger wearing a maroon beanie. "I thought your ride-of-the-week was that fox you work with, huh?"

"No, she's vacant ever since he went off the rails in Bunnyburrow!" the badger laughed.

A hot fury swelled somewhere in Judy's chest, but she swallowed it back, managing to take control of her temper before she lost it. She, however, didn't manage to control her outward expression, which was one of shock and hurt.

"Don't be so surprised, cottontail! Some of us preds watch the news, too!"

"Bet she didn't think we could afford cable!"

"You want a real ride, you come to me! We clear?" said the maroon beanie.

"Sir, I'm going to ask you to keep your voice down."

"Hey now, get your ears in a knot! I'll be gentle!"

"Sir, we are in a public place. I'm asking you to please—"

"Take this someplace private? S'that what you're saying?" Following this, a series of hoots, hollers, howls, even some sarcastic slow-clapping.

The badger cupped his paws to his muzzle and shouted, "She's a pred-chaser!" to which followed even more laughing and cat-calls.

Hot anger was pooling in her stomach like— and her scale of authority began to lean less towards 'officer etiquette' and more towards 'kick ass and take names.' Though before she could say anything more, something far more furious and terrifying than whatever she could muster came storming up behind her, and she watched as the badger's grin fall.

"You sorry bastards, you watch your fucking mouth around her, else I'm taking you all in for verbal abuse on an officer! Now get your asses out of here! Now!"

It was Bogo. She was off duty, and that such things as verbal abuse could not be charged in defense of an off-duty officer, but the chief neglected to mention this.

The members of the bickering crowd reluctantly turned away. The fox stared at Judy for a while with a glimmer in his eyes and a toothy sneer before falling back with the rest.
Bogo only tuned to face Judy when they were a good distance away.

"Next time you should defend yourself."

"It would only—"

"Strike that, next time you should be at home. Asleep."

"I know, Chief."

The voice of the hooded fox, now a distance away from them, cried out, "Howzabout you keep your dirty cunt away from my kind, ya hear rabbit?"

Bogo turned, an immaculate rage in his eyes.

"Chief, don't." The buffalo shot her a questioning glance but could read her mind when he saw the guilt in her eyes. Guilt where there should be anger, no doubt. "In a sense, I deserve it. After what I said at that conference—"

"No." His answer was swift and ultimate, like a judge declaring a guilty party innocent, no further questions asked or allowed. Amen. "Any mammal who has ever lived and died has screwed up somewhere in between. Not everyone makes up for their mistakes but I'll be damned if you haven't. You've done so much for this city, uprooting the injustice that only you could see. You even altered my moral compass, but you didn't hear that from me. If anyone still holds a grudge against you, they're the ones in the wrong. And that's final."

Judy knew it would be final, so she didn't try and object.

"In any case, I meant to tell you—before we were," he glances in the direction of the retreating harassers, "so rudely interrupted—that while you were talking with that deer who bit Wolfard, I got in touch with Fulgens and we've agreed to assemble a meeting tonight back at the precinct. I'm taking my elites and Fulgens is bringing his response team, who he said had just finished locking up the savage. Seeing as you're here, and would be considered one of my elites if you were on duty, if you'd like to attend you can ride with us back to the station. We're simply addressing what we know so far on the three savage attacks, and you certainly know a great deal about two of them. Though I understand that you're off-duty, so I won't pressure you."

A small grin made its way across Judy's face. "You know what? I'd be honored to come."

"Honored?" Bogo grunted something, either a scoff or a chuckle, Judy couldn't tell which. "I only ask because you're here, and you're a first-hand witness on two savage accounts. There's no honor in it." And so it seems, Chief Bogo was back to his normal self.

"It's not that, just that you'd even consider inviting me. Thank you, Chief."

"Don't think I'm inviting you back on duty—"

"—Never said you were—"

"Believe me, I'm enforcing your sabbatical as heavily as I would the day-to-day work of any other officer. But you'd be a useful asset to...well...we're considering calling it the 'Savage Task Force.'"

Judy considered this. "Has a nice ring to it."

Bogo rolled his eyes. "You were right in what you said earlier. There's no reason it won't happen
again, and it's about time somebody takes action. In most cases, we're that somebody."

"And... I would be a part of this task force? After the sabbatical ends, that is?"

"Of course. You and Wilde both, when he wakes up."

Though he probably didn't think twice of it, Bogo's use of 'when' instead of 'if' revealed in Judy a fragment of remaining hope, one she didn't know was there. The if's had gotten to her as of late, and they were about as comforting as jagged rocks. If Nick ever wakes up. If he doesn't die in the "rocky terrain of savage rehabilitation," to quote Melody Spott. If she would ever breathe a breath of air not tainted by bitter regret and grief again.

In times like this, when the utterly mammoth shit hit the utterly massive fan, she had to remind herself that she was a natural optimist. Always has been, or so claimed her parents. Clinging on to this optimism might be the only thing that could get her to the end.

"Alright, Chief." She captured a breath of brisk November air and released it, having found a new sense of determination. "I'll go. I'm in."

"Splendid, but on one condition." Bogo stuck an accusatory finger in her direction, and she crossed her eyes to look at it. "A little birdie who bore a striking resemblance to a certain red panda told me you were found sleeping outside Nick's cell." He folded his arms over each other and let the shame pile up until it nearly smothered her. Then he continued. "After this meeting concludes, you're going straight home and to bed. So you claim you don't need your coping, well I'll be damned if you don't need your sleep. I don't care if you're off duty—it's an order from your superior. Are we clear."

Judy made no hesitation. "Crystal."

"Brilliant. Then we're off. I've instructed Higgins and Delgato remain here until the investigators show up."

The meeting was held in one of the precinct's many rooms built for just such a purpose, all members of Bogo's elites and the response team accounted for. Despite the many familiar faces of her fellow officers (most of which greeted her with the same pity she was growing sick of), she couldn't help but feel out of place. Perhaps because she had to sit on the table to be seen by everyone else. Perhaps because she hasn't slept in well over twenty-four hours.

Judy surmised that it was a little of both.

The room was long, and so was the table. Several swivel chairs lined the table on each side, as well as the one at the head and foot. An entire wall of the room was a floor-to-ceiling window, though a series of automatic blinds had secluded the room upon Bogo's pressing of a button.

The buffalo himself now sat at the head of the table, Fulgens at the foot, and all their best officers in between. Bogo's 'elites', as he liked to call them, were an unofficial group of the highest-performing officers in the precinct. It consisted of Ryan Wolfard, Bob Johnson, Phillip Rhinowitz, Kiara Fangmeyer, Francine Pennington—and Judy Hopps and Nicholas Wilde, when the former wasn't off-duty and the latter not savage. The rest of the seats were occupied by the response team, out of which Judy knew only knew Melody. There as also a gentle-eyed female kangaroo, a meerkat with a smug grin, a quiet black bear who sat with his paws folded on the table, and an equally quiet white-tailed deer.

Shortly after ten PM, Bogo began the meeting.
"Thank you all for arriving on such short notice. I realize that it's late and you're all exhausted," he gave the members of the table a thoughtful glance, "though I don't care. We meet tonight to discuss pressing matters, and if you have any complaints, I don't want to hear them. I believe Doctor Fulgens feels the same way?"

"Of course," Fulgens said from the opposite end of the table. "If you're tired, you should have bought yourself a coffee downstairs."

The ZPD officers shared a glance, a series of grins. It was an unspoken rule not to drink the precinct's coffee, else befall a terrible series of symptoms, believed to end in death. Or, at least, a migraine that left you wishing for it.

"On that note," Bogo looked around the room, "this isn't much more than a briefing session, though you are allowed to comment and bounce some ideas. Nothing too formal. Any opening remarks?"

"I'll begin," said Fulgens, raising his paw. "The attack tonight was the third of its nature since Saturday, November 26, when Officer Nicholas Wilde of the ZPD and local baker and resident of Bunnyburrow, Gideon Grey, both went savage within three hours of each other. This was at the annual Bunnyburrow Harvest Festival, which—I believe Miss. Hopps here can back me up—is comprised predominantly of prey mammals?"

"Yes, that's true," Judy agreed. "If Nick and I hadn't been in town, Gideon might have been the only predator, and definitely the only fox in attendance."

"And therein lies my theory." Fulgens revealed a stack of manila folders (seemingly from out of nowhere) and placed them squarely before himself. "Taking into account the most recent attack involving one Myra Coyoson, it is reasonable to believe that this trio of savagery is all connected."

"Connected how?" Fangmeyer spoke up, then noticed the attention of all the unfamiliar faces of SC Response, and cleared her throat. "Officer Kiara Fangmeyer, requesting permission to speak."

"No need to request," Fulgen said, folding his paws atop the stack of folders. "Go on, Miss Fangmeyer."

"When it comes to the mammals behind all this, are we talking a couple of bastards with their hands on some night howlers? Or a full-on criminal organization, similar to that of Bellwether and her minions?"

"The latter, if I were to guess. It is obvious that there is a great deal of orchestration behind these attacks. No suspects as of yet, no traces of any mind-altering substances found at any of the scenes, and worst of all no understanding as to how the victims were exposed. The perpetrators in question are covering their tracks astonishingly well, so it is likely to believe that this isn't the work of 'a couple bastards with their hands on night howlers,' no." A pause, perhaps for the sake of suspense. "The most plausible culprit, I would assume, would be an underground prey-supremacy organization. A 'syndicate,' if you will. Bellwether did a fine job inspiring the prejudiced among us, and I'm sure this syndicate is attempting to follow in her footsteps and further pin the blame on predators, using savagery as their main resource."

It was Johnson who spoke up this time. "And how do we know it's night howlers we're dealing with? I mean, hell, wasn't that stuff banned in widespread, alongside Heroin and PCP?"

"Officer, we're fairly confident this is savagery we're dealing with, not the common cold," Fulgens responded in a patronizing tone of voice.
"Oh yeah, certainly, for sure," Johnson said. "I'll be damned if it isn't savagery, but how do we know it's really being caused by night howlers if there are no traces of it in the savage?"

It was Melody, this time, who answered. "No offense, officer, but that would be like assuming someone who had gone swimming in Tundratown snow melt doesn't actually have hypothermia, it's just that their fur is naturally blue."

Pennington, sitting left of Johnson, guffawed and nudged the lion with her trunk. "Big smart, pussycat."

"Shut it, Francine," the lion sneered.

The leopardess ignored this. "Because there are no entry points visible on any of the victims, it is assumed that the serum was administered orally without the user's knowledge. And it is fairly obvious that these mammals are savage—if you don't believe me just come and visit Containment sometime."

"Er, that won't be happening," Fulgens added.

"My *point* is, these mammals shit where they eat, and they eat anything that moves. I don't need my doctorate to know that's savagery. Besides, the *real* symptoms are found in the savages' minds."

Melody turned to the silent deer at her side and elbowed him. He flinched. "Antlersen here's our neuroscientist, he can tell you all about it."

Antlersen was seeming quite like a deer in the headlights.

"C'mon, Cole," the meerkat on the other side of Antlersen sneered. "You could lecture this shit in your sleep. Drop some knowledge."

Cole's eyes flitted up towards the room of spectating officers and scientists, and quickly averted his gaze back down at his hooves. "Uh…Cole Antlersen…of…savage rehabilitation." He gave a short wave, no smile, his eyes still trained on his hooves. "Like Doctor Spott stated, when comparing the…the physical effects of the most recent patients to that of…well…the several dozen who went savage during the Night Howler Crisis, everything aligns perfectly. It is *Midnicampum holicithias* we are dealing with here, in one form or the other. You see…the…" He took a moment, outstretching his arms as if literally grasping for words, "…the *evidence* of the presence of these 'night howlers' is found in the mind more than anywhere else. It increases stress hormones, like cortisol for example, which in turn increases blood pressure and can lead to many other negative responses, but I won't get into that now….The frontal lobe is commandeered almost entirely, causing the victim to lapse into a dream-like state where one's sense of reality, of personality, of common sense et cetera, is completely overridden by other, stronger urges. Instinctual urges, released mostly by an excessive demand for cortisol…adrenaline, in other words. You can see all of this in the brain activity any savage, anyone at all! Rapid neuron firing like nothing we've ever seen before. Like some kind of…neurological firework show!"

The ZPD side of the table looked as lost as kindergartners in a calculus class, in which this deer was the overly-passionate prof. Cole seemed to realize this, how his enthusiasm had crescendoed throughout the entirety of his lecture, and he seized up.

"A-Anyways, I digress…i-it's obvious when someone is under the influence of the serum, especially when looking at brain activity. This *is* the work of night howlers…no doubt."

"We just haven't any explanation as to how it entered the mammals afflicted," Fulgens finished, taking control of the room. Cole gladly passed off the baton, and now sunk back in his chair,
seeming embarrassed. "You can read more on this in these synopses I created, covering the extent of what we know and my theory as to how it is all connected."

He passed the folders down the table until everyone in the room had one. Judy thumbed hers open—they were all the same size, and far too large for any rabbit to hold comfortably—and found a few sheets containing blocks of text, as well as a few images. One of them, she recognized, was from the scene in the Bunnyburrow Square. A savage, but sedated Gideon, being loaded onto a stretcher by the Melody and the bear across the table from her.

"So now that you have the material," Fulgens said, "I'd like to present my theory, which is that these attacks are connected, as I proposed earlier. Though we know little about the mammals behind it all, we can surmise their goal by looking at the locations of the savagery. The first was the Bunnyburrow Harvest Festival, which, as Miss Hopps confirmed, is primarily attended by rabbits, if not prey in general. If there was any place to publicly exploit predators, it would be at a largely-prey festival with few predators in attendance, so few I could count them on one paw. Now we look at tonight's attack, which occurred at the small restaurant "Samson's Burgers and Fries: Delicious Eats for Predators and Prey Alike," emphasis on the motto. The only two customers present at the time were an interspecies couple: a deer and a coyote. Is anyone seeing any connections?"

"Predators are going savage at events and establishments where predators and prey are expected to coexist," said Wolfard, earning an approving gaze from Fulgens.

"Precisely. Or so we believe. It would be easiest to pin the blame on predators when there are few present—like at the Harvest Festival in Bunnyburrow—or at locations which invite predators and prey to mingle—like Samson's. And that is the abridged version of my theory. I've written out its extent in the folders I gave to you, as well as all the current disposable facts concerning the three attacks."

Fulgens looked across the table and met eyes with the Chief. "Now I turn over the floor to the Chief of Police, who I'm sure needs no introduction. He will be introducing the other side of the 'coin', which is how exactly we are to take action against—"

"The point of turning over the floor, doctor, is to allow the other party a chance to speak," Bogo cut him off. "You said it yourself, no need for introduction."

The red panda went silent, giving the Chief of police a blank stare. Judy found that she couldn't tell rather the stare was expressionless or icy—all emotion seemed to become unclear with those beady eyes of his.

Bogo didn't wait for any more from the doctor. "You are here tonight because all of you are entitled to be public servants. Police officers, EMT's, medics—it is your job to clean up whatever shit this syndicate decides to dump on us. And so, the doctor and I have agreed to create and assemble the Savage Task Force. This will be made up of both Savage Containment and the ZPD's Precinct One, and the real reason I called you in tonight is because you are the chosen few who qualify for such a position on the team."

The room was silent, but the sideways glances exchanged were very loud.

Rhinowitz finally spoke, "Chief, is this mandatory?"

"No, it isn't. Speaking of which, I have a few papers of my own to hand out." Bogo revealed a small stack of pages. "These are contracts confirming your consent to join the task force. I'll try and make this brief. Signing means you are temporarily leaving your normal duties to focus on this specific venture. As for the officers in the room, notice that your partners are present as well. This was
intended, and partnerships will continue after signing, though if you don't wish to join you both will be reassigned a new partner until the task force is disbanded. Again, this is only temporary. The force will only be disbanded when the culprit is caught or when the investigation becomes fruitless, though I intend to see the former through.

"As for the members of Savage Containment," his gaze fell upon the other side of the table, "you will still be under Fulgens' command, just as my officers will be under mine. We are simply forming an alliance to bring down a potential threat to this city. If you are interested, which I hope you all are, I'll pass out the papers and pens. If not, don't sign, and you'll return to your normal duties tomorrow."

"And will Savage Containment be required to meet here, at the ZPD?" Melody asked.

"So far as I see it, we won't need a combined center of operations. Savage Containment will operate from wherever the hell you guys are located now, and the ZPD from right here in the precinct."

"What about when there's another attack?" Judy asked.

"I believe you mean if there's another attack," Bogo flatly responded, "in which case, the task force will be called to respond immediately, no matter the time of day. There will be investigations, too, but that is only assuming that the attacks continue.

"And Hopps, I don't believe you'll need to know any of this now, considering your sabbatical has only just begun."

"Understood." Judy nodded briefly.

"Good. Now, the papers…"

The forms were passed out, signatures were scrawled, and pens returned.

In the end, everyone signed.

Bogo collected the papers with a self-satisfactory smile. "I am pleased with your decisions. As of now the Savage Task Force is live and will be the first responders and investigators of any further incidents. Doctor, anything else?"

All eyes turned to the opposite end of the room. Fulgens composed himself, taking a deep breath. "Please, take time to know your enemy. Know his eye color. Fight for a greater peace in Zootopia. Do whatever it takes, with whoever it takes. After all, peace is the foundation of all lasting civilizations." He stood up, straightened his jacket, and looked back at his audience.

"Let's try and make this one last."

---

A dreary morning in early September, approximately three months before Nick's savagery…

He watched the steam dance above his tea, and let himself smile, just this once.

Alone. In his element.

The building was several decades old and had seen many failed attempts at business in its time, the most recent of which being a public chess club. Schedule matches with friends, or just sit, in his case, and wait to see if an opponent would arrive. So he sat in the quiet studio, sharing the small room only with an empty chair and a table between them, on which was a game waiting to begin.
Outside the window and two stories down, Zootopia was waking up to a downpour. Appropriately, it was Monday. Why in living hell, the average mammal might ask, would anyone be here of all places, especially at this ungodly hour? Well, call it his comfort place, per se. To each their own, and to this specific mammal, the chair by the second-story window of the chess club, a cup of piping tea in hand.

The likelihood of anyone else arriving in the place was seemingly nonexistent, considering the hour, the weather, and the fact that chess as a whole was dying thanks to the online revolution of entertainment.

So, it was a great surprise when the door clicked open to reveal an opponent, wearing an unassuming smile. Such a surprise, in fact, that the cup of tea trembled in his paws, nearly spilling in his lap. He set it down on the table.

Without so much as an introduction, the opponent sat in the opposite chair.

They locked eyes, and the opponent smiled. "Hello there." His voice was silky. "Can I join you."

He placed his cup down on the table between them. "These are public tables."

"This is true," the opponent hummed, grinning. "Should we play a quick round, then?"

"Quick?" One corner of his mouth twisted up into a smile. "That is assuming you'll win so easily?"

"Oh, no, no, of course not," the opponent laughed with a confident mirth. "I expect you to win."

His grin drew back into a placid expression, a mask to hide the blooming confusion. Who is he? Do I know him? No, I've never seen this mammal. Yet, he talks like we've known each other since childhood. He tried to keep his composure, to keep eye contact, but something about the opponent's smile...it was dripping with an assertive nature, like he plans to push an agenda. Like all of this was scheduled. "I don't believe we've met."

"No, I don't believe we have, but regardless, Algernon, I know exactly who you are," the opponent spoke, his gregarious attitude well maintained despite the change of subject.

He was very glad the tea was not in his paws at that moment, for surely it would have spilled all over him. He strained to keep the staid mask over his face as he tried to comprehend all of this. There's something he doesn't know that his opponent does, and he just can't connect the dots. It's infuriating. "...Al...Algernon... Why, it's been years."

"Since?"

"That name," now straining to meet his eyes, "I thought I buried it."

"Nothing in this age is buried too deep to unearth, I would expect a mammal of your position to understand that. Everything about everyone, especially someone of your status, can be found online. Rather easily, if we're being honest." The opponent said all of this as if it were politics over breakfast. The smile—a blinding, toothy white—never faded.

"Are you implying that you're stalking me?"

"No, Al," the opponent laughed. "I'm telling you that I did."

Complete silence.
Outside, a police siren resounded from somewhere within the concrete forest.

"Let's begin, shall we?" the opponent said, gesturing to the checkered board between them, all the pieces already laid out in proper order on either side like two armies before a battle, studying each other, sharpening the last blades and gathering all the arrows in their quivers. "I'll let you have the first move."

Al stared at his opponent for a long while. If he knew the game well, he would know that by rule, the white pieces make the first move. Regardless, he reached over and moved a black pawn forward.

"I've been meaning," the opponent said, advancing a knight, "to get back into this game. It was a favorite of my father's, and he'd make me play on the daily, insisting that it would raise my intellect." He chuckled to himself, shaking his head. "Though I simply enjoyed watching how the different pieces moved. Especially," he placed his finger atop the queen, "this one right here."

"Is that so?" Al said, not knowing what else there was to say.

"This board is flat, wouldn't you agree?"

The question took Al by complete surprise, but added to his growing curiosity."…Yes, it is."

"And none of the pieces are fixed, now are they?"

"No, they're not."

"Then why, despite the board being flat and the pieces being free of it, can't the bishop move one meager step forward?"

Al sighed. "Well, I suppose it could." His self-confidence was returning. dChess eased his nerves, it always had, even in situations as bizarre as this. "But that would be rendering the board to that of a dollhouse, and all the pieces dolls. It wouldn't be chess. The pieces have their respective roles and methods. That's just the order of the game."

"Yes!" the opponent's grin grew wider, broader, sharper. "That's what I want to hear. This whole game is dictated by its own universal rules. What keeps the pawns from moving right or left are the established rules that the pawn can only move ahead, or at a diagonal when attacking."

"Or two spaces off the starting square."

"Al, may I ask you, what would you consider to be the strongest piece of them all?" the opponent asked.

"The Queen, and it's a fact, no my opinion."

"Of course!" the opponent cheered, elated. "My favorite piece. So much potential, this one." He ran a finger down the side of his queen, tracing the grooves in the wood. "Answer me one last thing. Which piece is the most abundant?"

"The pawns, and the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Your point being?" All this tease from a complete stranger was beginning to feel patronizing. He hid his impatience, his confusion behind his tea.

"I'm getting there, don't jump ahead," the opponent laughed. "Right, so you see, isn't it strange that the queen is kept locked behind all these pawns? Isn't it strange that she doesn't make the first move? Instead, normally the pawns begin the game, or maybe the knights, or the bishops." The opponent
was staring at the queen now, his voice slowing, but growing potent. His words, they've sharpened. "The Expendables. The weak."

"I wouldn't call them weak," Al said. "Each piece is unique and therefore has its own advantage."

"You could say that, sure, but it only applies to a certain extent. You see, as diverse the abilities of these lowly pieces may be, the queen is ultimately dominant. There is no rival for her. She is the true power. And yet, the majority of the game is focused around these other pieces, like this one here, the castle, who can only—"

"The rook," Al said. "It's called the rook."

The opponent laughed, nodding. "Yes, yes, do pardon my inexperience. Did I not say I expected you to win? Anyhow, there are, what…?" he counted the pieces quickly on his fingers, "thirty-two pieces on the board, and yet only two have true potential. That's an 8:1 ratio." He moved another pawn forward. "The powerful are withheld, they are contained while the weak advance." He looked up, his eyes examining all that they could. "Would you say that's fair, Al?"

"It's…it's only a game. With no rules, there is no game. The rules are all that enable the pieces to move in the way they do. It's not that it isn't fair, it's just—"

"Just the way that it is?" the opponent suggested.

Al hesitated. "Well…yes. Just the way that it is."

"Yes, that's good. Very good." The opponent adjusts his chair so that he is closer to Al.

Al only stares up at him, finally addressing the most pressing question. "Who are you? Why would—"

"But what if the rules were rearranged," the opponent interrupts, "such that those who possess the power are the center focus. Because wouldn't you say that they deserve to be?"

"Can you answer my question?"

"If the, how did you say it, 'order of the game' was altered so that those with potential weren't hidden away, wouldn't that be fair? If those who have power were allowed to move first, to play according to their ability, to shine! And as for those who are weaker, despite their numbers, they would live as inferiors because that's all they are in the end. Inferior."

Al's tea has gone cold. "…But then it wouldn't be chess."

"Let's exceed chess, if only for a moment."

Al watched as his opponent rearranged the board. Now, the pawns were lined up behind what used to be the back row.

"What if we made a new game?" He advanced his queen one space forward. "Here. Doesn't that seem fair?"

"But…now you've exposed your queen."

"Yes, exposed to its equal—the rivaling queen. They deserve to reign on top, above the pawns, the bishops, the rooks, even the king. If anyone is to fight, it should be them. Fair, no?" The opponent looked at Al, who found himself speechless. "I digress, do you remember research projects from
grade school?"

"...Yes, I do."

"When assigned to an important mammal, take Abraham Lincolt as an example, did you ever have to consult a library for research material?"

Al scoffs. "You think I'm that old? We're probably about the same age."

"Regardless of age, I believe you're far wiser than me. And if we are about the same age, we can surely both recall a time before all the research material one could ever need was available on the Internet." The opponent smirked. "A time before some random stranger could look you up and easily learn your real name, despite however hard you tried to have it erased."

Al tried to say something, anything, but only an exhale escaped. He was somewhere between frustrated and concerned and awestruck. But at what? "Sure, there was a time when calculators took up entire rooms."

"Yes, that's what I am referring to. And do you remember scavenging the library for that perfect book, the book that would have all the knowledge on the topic you need for your essay?"

"Well, I assume so, sure."

The opponent grinned wider than he had ever before. "Al, this is why I am here," he said, drawing out each syllable. "You are my perfect book. My research material. You know more about the subject I desire to know than any other mammal in this city, maybe even because you've studied it firsthand."

"Studied what? What is it you're talking about?" Losing his composure, mask slipping off....

"They got you wrong. Just like everyone else in your childhood, they misunderstood you. All your life you've been ridiculed for standing out. They thought you were a queen when really you were only a pawn."

"Enough of this! I demand you tell me who you are!"

His opponent smirked. "Easy, Al. I didn't come to anger you."

"Then clearly, you've failed."

"Are you familiar with Botany?"

"...Excuse me?"

"Botany, the study of—"

"Yes, yes, I know what it is," Al scowled. "I'm familiar. Vaguely."

"And Latin?"

"Somewhat...As in botanical nomenclature?"

"Yes, exactly," he draws the words out and leans over the board. "So, tell me if this rings any bells in that brilliant mind of yours."

He placed a clawed palm in the center of the board, knocking over a duo of pawns in the process,
and leaned forward, whispering into Al's ear the two words that made everything from his nonsensical speech become clear. Two words that would shape, scar, perhaps even break the city.

"Midnicampum holicithias."

A/N:

Before I say anything else, I would like to apologize for the fact that it has been half a year since my last update. Many of you probably thought I gave up on this story, and to be honest, I almost thought I did too, but in the end, here I am, trying to continue on with it. Over the summer I did a whole lot of outlining (and I mean an UNHOLY AMOUNT OF OUTLINING) which resulted in an outline longer than the current word count itself. All of it really exhausted me on the storyline. I won 't list out a million excuses for my unannounced hiatus, but I will say that life got hella busy, and it's only getting busier, so I'll do my best to stay on top of this story, but I can never promise anything.

On another note, in the last chapter, I made a grave mistake. I tragically mis-wrote Judy as a character in a scene, undermining her character-arc from the movie entirely, but don ' t fret, I quickly changed it after a few comments pointing it out. Thank you for that, by the way. I won't go into too much detail about it because it's fixed now, but for those of you who did notice the mistake, I'd like to apologize for making such an obvious and ugly screw up. I can assure you that it won't happen again.

Anyways, this chapter was originally 21,000 words, but sweet cheese and crackers, that 's too long for a chapter. So I cut it in half, and now half of my next chapter is already written, and thus should be released sooner than I planned. Yay to overwriting, but not really, because it's a massive pain in the ass.

Before I go I 'm going to try and share a youtube playlist with you guys (I say try because links on this website rarely work). It's my writing playlist, which I listen to constantly while constructing this story and while writing other things on the side. If you're interested, I think it's some great music, but I'll let you be the judge of that.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHFvRRZq7aOzw0-KIoMfdFrAW3maxBC79

Until next update, you lovely people.

- Trenton

P.S. - The character Cole Antlersen is my author surrogate. The anxiety is real.
Chapter Seven: Something Warm

She was almost successful in leaving the conference room. Almost, if it weren't for the hulking obstacle of her commander and chief blocking her exit. Her ears fell.

"You know what I'm going to ask of you?"

"I was on my way home, sir. That is, until…" she motioned up at him. His figure took up the entire doorway. He was practically a watertight seal.

"Straight home. Straight to bed."

"Of course, of course. Now if I could just—"

"Ah, ah, ah. I need to hear you say it."

She sighed. "Straight home. Straight to bed. I'll try and catch some sleep, I swear."

"Try' isn't good enough," the Chief grunted. "Sleeping pills, curtains, earplugs. Whatever you have to do to ensure—"

"That I go straight home, straight to bed. I know, Chief. Believe it or not, I'm actually pretty tired," she chuckled.

"Believe it or not, I don't believe you."

_Damn. Nothing gets past him._

The buffalo glanced away for a moment. When his gaze returned, it was softened, which took her by surprise. "Listen, Hopps, I've seen this before. You and Wilde aren't the first shattered partnership under my watch, and despite what you might think, he's a rather lucky fox. He's still breathing, still recovering. Take comfort in that. Not everyone in your situation can."

"Alright. I will."

"Now go get your rest. That's an order."

She did as the Chief asked, but she didn't do it for him. Somewhere in the dark corners of her conscious Nick was there with her. Nick's voice, at least, accompanied by his wit because the two are inseparable.

"C'mon, ya dumb bunny. You can't catch the bad guys without a good night's rest, that's common knowledge."

She did it for him.

One short train ride later, she was unlocking her apartment door. Inside all was dark, and she knew what a mess it would be when she turned on the lights. But tonight she'd do nothing about it. Tonight was for sleep, "you dumb bunny, you."

The uniform came off, finally, and was replaced by a t-shirt and pajama bottoms, the warmest she
had. The shirt had been a gift from him.

"World's best carrot farmer," she read it aloud, smiling, aching on the inside. The look on his face when he had given it to her. Of course, he would pick the ugliest one. Just for her. Because that was Nick, after all. The loveliest asshole in the whole world.

He had sneered at her that god-awful grin, the one she hated and loved simultaneously, and held it up to her. "C'mon, carrots. Show some family pride."

She had planned to get him a t-shirt as well. A Christmas present. "Worlds Best Con Artist: By the time you've read this, I've already stolen your wallet." She had found it online, had died laughing at the keyboard for nearly half an hour. She was oblivious to the fact that the one meant to wear it would be locked in a subterranean cell long after the holiday season had passed.

"Stop it, Carrots. Don't think these thoughts. It's not healthy."

Nick, you're not actually here.

"Be that as it may, you'll never get rid of my voice."

Your voice isn't you. It's just my head, trying to entertain me, like when going into shock or dreaming.

"If that's true, then why are you blushing? Jeez, Carrots, you're turning into a strawberry."

And she was. Fully pink.

"Gotcha, rabbit. Even as a figment of your imagination I'm irresistible."

Oh shut up and let me get some rest.

But she was smiling.

That smile lingered, even in sleep.

---

She slept well for a change.

Having no reason to be anywhere else that crisp Tuesday morning, Judy dawned a scarf and a sweater and went straight to Zootopia Municipal, only stopping for a pick-me-up at Snarlbucks. Honey had previously promised her that she could enter Nick's cell the next time he was sedated, and that would be this morning at nine. Both of Nick's injections were given at Nine—one in the morning while Honey was on shift, one at night by a doctor working graveyard hours. She didn't plan on missing her one opportunity to see Nick sans the glass barrier, so she was there at half-past eight, energized from her light roast and warming up from the inside. She was glowing. This was her plan, of course—remain optimistic forever and always. Stick to this plan and the whole thing will blow over quickly.

Reality, however, wasn't constrained by something as naive as a mere bunny's schedule. Thus it was proved when Judy entered and saw the deer from the night before, Arvi. He looked just as miserable now as he was, sitting next to Wolfard on that bench.

Oliver, the otter and intern (and apparently receptionist), was on the top of the desk, trying to rationalize with a deer undergoing a significant amount of grief. And everyone in the lobby was watching.
"No, you don't understand! I'm her emergency contact, I know her ancestry and her middle name and her personality type and loads of other worthless shit. Hell, I could write her autobiography for her! Do you get what I'm saying? I'm the closest thing to family she has!"

"Sir, please," Oliver seemed worked up in his fruitless attempt to diffuse the situation, "I am very, very sorry about what happened. I am. Really! But this is a public place and you are making a scene. If you could keep your voice down—"

"Oh is that it?" Arvi took a step back, addressing the whole lobby this time. "You want me to keep my VOICE DOWN? Because THIS is a PUBLIC PLACE and I'm making a FUCKING SCENE?!" He was panting, nearly hyperventilating, and halted his rant for these reasons only. He leaned on the desk for support, eying those who watched. "Great show, isn't it?" he sneered at them. "Don't forget to buy popcorn next time!" Then, quieter, to himself, "Great. Just... just marvelous." His head drooped. Defeated. Close main curtain.

A small paw found Arvi's wrist. It was Oliver's. "If there is anything I can do for you, I will see to it, but I cannot disclose the location of your partner. But she's safe, you can trust me on that. We're doing everything we can to make her recovery quick."

"Yeah, yeah," Arvi gritted his teeth, "you stick to your script."

Oliver looked offended. "N-no, that's not at all what I..." He paused, and for a brief moment he noticed Judy. He looked back down. "What's your name, sir?"

Arvi glanced up at him with eyes deprived of two vital things next to oxygen and water: sleep and hope. "Arvi Whitetail." He shook off Oliver's paw. "And dammit, if I don't see her by the end of this day, I'll find a way to sue this place until even the surgeons are scavenging for lost pennies."

Enter Judy. "Arvi, that won't be necessary."

He turned and his eyes widened. "Officer! Oh, this is perfect. Please tell this otter, here," he jabbed an accusing finger at Oliver, who's eyes pleaded for help, "that must be illegal to keep the whereabouts of a patient hidden from friends and family. Surely there's some kind of law prevents this. Last I checked, this city was not totalitarian."

While it was illegal to hide a patient from friends and family, Savage Containment itself was hardly legal. Separate from the operations and regulations happening upstairs, the whole organization was underground—both figuratively and literally—and regulated by the innermost city council. In short, SC was an exception to democracy and its demands. This, Judy knew, wouldn't rub the deer the right way, but luckily she knew a certain Felix A. Fulgens who worked one story below her feet.

But it wouldn't be an easy job convincing him. Damn near impossible, actually.

"Arvi, take some deep breaths. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes okay, mother, but breathing is one thing—grieving is another. You, of all mammals, should know that, too. Now is there anything at all you can do?"

Concerning grief....

In a flash of light that no one seemed to notice but her, Judy was back in the stairwell of her apartment block, but not in the first person. There, on the hard steps, was a pathetic thing she could hardly recognize as herself. It was on its knees, sobbing because her partner—like oxygen and hope and every other vitality—was being snatched away from her.
Breathing is one thing, grieving is another—the former persists so the latter may continue. This was a realization she had made in the months Nick had been gone. She had learned that is possible to asphyxiate while still breathing.

And then she was back in the lobby, and Arvi was staring down at her in desperation, not to mention the majority of the lobby. His eyes were bloodshot and large as cue balls. She could see he was coming to terms with a reality he could never accept: a life, much less a day, without his beloved. Judy drew the parallel—a life without him, without her sly fox—and found that she and this mammal were fighting the same internal war.

"Well?" Arvi cried.

"...How about you take a seat in the waiting area. Let me try and work this out."

"I'm not moving."

"Okay, you're not moving." Judy sighed and looked up at where Oliver stood, peering over the top of the desk. "Can you get Fulgens up here?"

Oliver chuckled. "Gee, you sure about that, officer? I can try, but he won't be very happy."

"I know he won't, but just tell him it's Officer Hopps and the blame will fall on me."

The otter considered this for a moment, then shrugged, smiled, and disappeared behind the desk. A few dial tones later and he was on the phone. "Yes, front desk speaking. Doctor, Officer Hopps...she's asking to speak with you. We've sorts got a situation...what kind of situation, you ask? Haha, well...just pop on up here and you'll see...yes, I would say it's worth your time...yes, Officer Hopps, though maybe I shouldn't say officer, she isn't in uniform, but she is wearing a rather lovely scarf, not cashmere or anything but at least one more reason for you to come up here and...hello? Doctor?" Oliver reappeared at the corner of the desk and scoffed. "He hung up on me. Not a very charming fellow, that one. No siree!"

Not more than a minute later, the doctor appeared walking toward them down the corridor leading to the elevator. He eyed the otter atop the desk, then the rabbit, then the deer towering over them both, and sighed. "This better be good, I'm in—no, was in the middle of a very important business meeting with a client. Spare me the formalities."

"This is Arvi," Judy gestured up at the deer, whose glare implied he had already assigned the blame of his partner's disappearance on this doctor, "and he's a good friend of—" Lover, Arvi corrected.

"Yes, he's close to your recent patient, Myra Coyoson. Now, I know you've told me before, but—"

"My operation does not have visiting hours, that is final. Thank you, Officer; this has been a waste of my time."

Fulgens turned for the elevator.

"Wait, sir!" Judy pursued him down the corridor. "Please, if you could just give him a few minutes! He just wants to see that she's alright."

Fulgens spun around, his eyes expressing the first strong emotion Judy had seen: jagged, cold rage. "Does he want to see her dead?" She stammered, taking a step back. She couldn't find her words. "Do you want to see your own partner dead?" The rage pierced her. Deflated her. "How am I to
rehabilitate such dangerous mammals when I have visitors wondering Containment like it's an art
gallery? I made an exception for you because I thought that an appraised officer such as yourself
would understand the importance of my work. If you wouldn't like your privileges stripped from
you, I suggest you go home, Officer. Good day."

At this, the doctor turned and made his way for the elevator. Judy, this time, didn't try to stop him.
She understood. She was embarrassed. She was a throbbing pain in his ass when all he was trying to
do was rehabilitate her partner.

*I'm sorry Arvi. You didn't deserve any of this.* Then again, who did?

He reached the elevator, though the doors opened before he could swipe his card. They all looked up
to see that the carriage inside wasn't empty.

"Fancy seeing you, doctor."

The doctor groaned. "Madge, what in the hell are you doing? It's five-till."

"The injections can wait five more minutes," Honey said. "I'm sure the savages themselves aren't all
to eager to have me poke and prod at them."

"You're joking."

"I'm not." Honey blew a gum bubble and popped it. "Ollie rang me, briefed me on the situation." All
heads spun to the otter, who blushed and waved from his desk. "Hey, Ollie!" Honey called. "It's
been a hot minute! We should talk sometime!"

"Oh, uh, we should!" Oliver agreed from a distance.

"Madge," Fulgens spoke only to her, "you know the policy on visitors."

"Yes, but Lionheart held fourteen savage mammals in containment without the families' knowledge,
and look where that got him. A short prison sentence, impeached from his position as mayor, and on
a political downward spiral from which he will never recover."

"You compare me to that canine?" he spat. "You think I'd ever allow myself to make his mistakes
with this place?"

"My point, doctor, is that the least we can do is allow the friends and family to see, for themselves, in
person," she slowly added, "that their loved ones are safe. At least once."

Arvi threw his paws up in mock-victory. "Finally, someone with an ounce of common sense!"

Fulgens ignored him. "You're saying we should open containment to the public so that anyone can
just wander in and have a look-see," Fulgens said, now rubbing at the bridge of his snout. "A savage
zoo, is that what you're suggesting?"

"No, that would be stupid."

"Then, pray tell, what is your fantastic solution?"

The honey badger popped another bubble. "How about a compromise, huh?"

Despite the feral coyote scratching and snapping at the glass, Arvi stood with his face pressed against
it. He hardly moved. Hardly breathed. For the first time since Judy had met the deer, he seemed
comforted and calm. There was even a faint smile on his lips, though bittersweet. A tear fell down his cheek, but there was no sobbing.

Judy was leaning against the wall nearby (something she had unknowingly picked up from time spent around Nick). Despite the circumstances, most prominently the savagery, Judy enjoyed the reunion.

One cell over, Honey was preparing Gideon's injection while Melody stood on watch—as per Fulgens' reluctant orders. She, too, was enjoying Arvi's reaction. Everyone in the room seemed just a little content. Everyone save for Honey, who was too busy humming to herself and preparing a syringe to offer a smile.

Arvi exhaled, tried to speak, only for his words to crumble away. He took a step away from the glass. "Doctor, I can't tell you how thankful I am."

"Thanks won't spare me the earful I'm gonna get from Fulgens, but sure. Don't mention it."

Melody chimed in. "I'm sorry about the glass, but it's a necessity when dealing with savages."

"Yes, of course," he chuckled pathetically. "The glass is good. Don't get me wrong, I love her, but I wouldn't want to share a room with her at the moment."

They all laughed, except for Honey, who muttered something like, "Might be kinda cool to watch….

Judy's glance traveled across the hallway, where she saw her savage, who was lying near the barrier and watching the scene. To her surprise, no growling or bearing of teeth. It just laid there. If it weren't for how black its dilated eyes were, she might have mistaken it for Nick.

"And you, officer, you were the only one who seemed to care last night." Arvi dried his eyes. "I'm sorry I was such a complete ass to you. You didn't deserve any of it."

"Please, we've been over this. Don't blame yourself," Judy said. "You had every right to be scared, but not to feel guilty. That there," She nodded towards his savage partner, "is not your doing. Your reaction last night was completely justified."

The deer laughed, not holding back. "Completely, you say? I bit an officer!"

Judy began to chuckle as well. "Alright, maybe not completely justified, but—"

"I, a deer, bit a wolf!" he laughed with heartfelt mirth, seeming to make Myra scratch harder at the glass. "Talk about role reversal!"

Turning around, Judy looked at Honey, who was raising the lights in Gideon's cell. She would thank her later, despite the inevitability of sarcasm in her response.

By some miracle or form of black magic, Honey had convinced Fulgens to agree to her compromise. Arvi would be allowed to visit Myra, though only for fifteen minutes—Fulgens insisted that he had to be out by the time the injections were ready. "They're already behind schedule," he had hissed as he returned to his office. In return, Arvi would have to agree to remain silent about Savage Containment. On top of this, no further visits from him. He agreed, though only on the terms that he would be contacted immediately when Myra was ready to move to a room upstairs, one without glass barriers or triple-bolt door locks.

Fulgens was not happy, and that was putting it very lightly, but Judy wasn't banished from
Containment and Arvi got to visit Myra. Ultimately, a success, all thanks to this moody badger.

"Alright, you pathetic lot," Honey said, flicking at the syringe she held gingery in her paws, "in the words of Francesco Satori, time to say goodbye, paesi che non ho however that goes, you can't expect me to be fluent in Italian."

"Right, right." Arvi approached the glass again, where Myra continued to throw everything she had at the barrier. He pressed his paw to the glass, gave his lover a longing stare, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'll get out of your fur."

"Nothing personal," said Honey.

"Never is."

"Good," she approached him, hands on her hips, the syringe held loosely in one paw. "Now, the for the terms that Fulgens forced down my throat. Don't mention this place to anyone, under any circumstances, else you could face federal punishment, including prison time and fines and a plethora of other fun things. And you aren't allowed back here, that's an obvious one. But save your tears, your beloved coyote should be up and in better health in two to three months. I'll make sure someone gives you a call the day she's promoted upstairs. And with that, I believe we are done. I'll show you to the exit, kind sir."

Arvi was still staring at Myra. He did not move when Judy approached and took his paw into her own. Looking up at him, she could see the worry in his eyes, a worry which she herself shared. He was getting one last look at her, just in case something went wrong and Myra never made it upstairs alive. "Listen, these guys down here, you can trust them. They're the best of the best, right Melody?"

"No doubt about it," she confirmed.

"I know, it's scary to entrust someone you love to a bunch of strangers, but you aren't alone in that boat."

Arvi broke his gaze with Myra, looked down at Judy, up at the two doctors. Then, with one last glance back at his lover, to take a final mental picture, he followed Honey out the door.

The corridor, or 'feral floor' as the badger had named it, was silent and dark again. As Arvi left, Myra's onslaught on the glass ceased. Judy, thinking optimistically, swore it was a remaining fragment of romance in the savage's corrupted mind that made her stop.

"The worst part of being a doctor," Melody interrupted the silence, "isn't med school or the long hours, though both are unpleasant, I'll admit. The worst part, and I'm speaking only from my experience, are the families. Sometimes they're annoying, like when a mother believes her son with a sprained ankle might not make it. Other times, they're just heartbreaking. I have to go in there and face a group of mammals hardly know and tell them, 'Well, we've tried our best, but your child-slash-parent-slash-lover is dead. Feel better soon, here's a Hallmark card and some flowers that'll die in a week.' It's truly terrible, though I'm sure, as an officer, you can relate in some sense."

"Well," Judy pursed her lips, "you know, I've only been with the force for about six months now."

"Really?"

"Yep. Joined in May." She laughed to herself. "The worst I've had to do is return a drunken, loud-mouthed, under-aged ocelot to his parents, who clearly didn't realize they were in the presence of a rabbit with sensitive hearing."
They laughed. It fell flat in the heavy silence.

"I'm sure my day will come, though," Judy said.

"Hopefully not."

"Yeah." She nodded. "Hey, so, how did the lab results come back?"

"Well, it takes a while to analyze a full sample, but all we've found thus far has been clean. No trace of any outside substances. Just synthetic burger meat."

"That's a shame."

"Eh, who ever said this would be easy?"

The savage in Nick's cell exhales loudly, almost a sigh, as if finally coming to terms with the wall separating it from its prey.

"Do you think the attacks will keep up?" Judy asked, though already knowing the answer in part. "Three savages in three days. What does tomorrow hold? Or today, much less?"

Melody considered this. "Two attacks, technically, one of which involved two savages, but that's not to say there won't be a third. With no leads, what's stopping them?"

"The task force, hopefully. If it even works."

Melody snorted, and Judy turned to look at her.

"What's so funny?"

The leopardess sighed and rested her paws on her hips. "The whole idea was Fulgens', and you're questioning whether or not it will succeed. That's what's funny. The Doc can practically predict the future."

"Yeah, from what I've gathered he seems...productive."

"That's saying the least of it."

"I'm sure." Judy paused. "Hey, since you're a doctor, how's Gideon's victim doing?" Melody raised her eyebrows, and Judy chuckled. "Yeah, maybe victim wasn't the best term. The rabbit he attacked. She's a snow hare, I think?"

"Dwarf rabbit. I don't know too much because upstairs and Containment are operated separately, but I think she'll live."

Judy cringed. "That bad, huh?"

"Well, on the optimistic side, it certainly could have been worse." Melody stole a glance at the savage in Gideon's cell, who stalked the darkened corners in silence. "Don't be swayed by their size—foxes' jaws are powerful, and their teeth are as sharp as any other canines'. They can pierce skin, break bones, especially—you'll excuse my bluntness—when you're a rabbit. She's lucky to have held up her arms, else he'd have gotten a hold of her shoulder or—god forbid—her neck. Believe me when I tell you, if those jaws find their way around your neck, it's the worst case scenario. You'll be dead before you can scream."

Judy had a curious feeling of awe, the kind one does when they make it out of peril by the tips of
their fur. The kind that makes one tingly with adrenaline. The skit she and Nick had put on for Bellwether at the Natural History Museum had been very similar to Melody's "worst case scenario." She could still recall how nervous the idea—initially proposed by Nick in the heat of the moment—had made her feel.

"I swear, I brush and floss every night," he had told her in a hurried voice, fumbling with the dart gun and replacing its contents with blueberries. Those berries had saved both their lives. "I won't leave a scratch, I promise. Now come on, up you go. It's show time." A fox had gotten a hold of her neck, and here she was, living and breathing and still the proud owner of her larynx. How many rabbits spanning the length of time could say that?

Judy's gaze moved to Nick's cage, where the savage was laying on its belly, seeming to pose no threat whatsoever. Its eyes, however, were two impossibly-black beams of desire and vicious intent. Whatever content feeling her little anecdote had brought her quickly drained away, leaving only an instinctual chill that ran the length of her spine. She looked away.

"That's not Nick. He wouldn't hurt me. He promised, and I trust him." But she still had to look away to escape those eyes. "So, then, he only got her arms?"

"Thankfully, yes, though at a cost nevertheless. Several deep and messy lacerations in her left forearm, thanks to the thrashing. Ulna broken in one place, Radius broken in two. Amputation seemed likely at first, but the surgery to save her limb seemed to repair it fine, for the most part. She lost a lot of blood, though, so that's the main concern right now. The doctors upstairs have her on all the fluids she can get. Her fur's pretty stained, with it being white and all, but it's nothing a warm bath can't fix. Nerve damage is likely, and a story to go with the wicked scars she'll have, but otherwise, as I said, she'll live."

"All of that from just one bite?" Judy marveled. "I mean, he almost bit me! On the shoulder, which is pretty close to the throat."

"You better watch yourself, officer." Her grin was there, but her voice grave. "Some say a rabbit's feet are lucky, but I wouldn't test it if I were you."

Judy approached her savage. There was no glass separating them.

Honey had returned from escorting Arvi out, now it was time for morning injections. The badger held true to her promise with only one condition: Judy stayed out of the way. And so she did, standing this time on the other end of the glass. She could feel scratches, though faint, forming an abstract lattice where the savage's claws had fought the barrier.

Honey crouched before the sedated fox and removed the piece of gum from her mouth, sticking it behind her ear for later. "If they keep turning feral at this rate, hell, I won't be able to keep up with all of 'em." She groaned. "I'll have to drag Antlersen in here, the skittish little toothpick. Heh, who am I kidding, I love him for the skittish little toothpick he is, but Melody would be easier to work with. Anyways, where was I…Anti-howler!"

She held up the syringe of the antidote—a simple, transparent fluid—and flicked it a few times with her claw to ensure it leveled to the correct amount. Then into the crook of the savage's elbow and she was done.

"Right," Honey straightened, stretched, retrieved the gum from behind her ear, removed a stray fur from it, and popped it in her mouth. "He's all yours. But for five minutes. You can hear me with those big ears, right? Five minutes!"
"Loud and clear."

"Good. I don't want you in here when he wakes up on account of what Fulgens would do to me, and you really don't want you in here on account of what he'd do to you." Honey jabbed her thumb at the snoozing savage, who's torso rose and fell steadily.

"Very caring of you," Judy deadpanned.

"Let's just say we'd have to repaint the walls."

"That's disgusting."

"At least you wouldn't be the one having to clean it up."

Judy scoffed. "I'd be the one you were cleaning! Does that sound any better to you?"

"Well, considering you wouldn't have a brain left to register pain, I'm sure you'd be just fine."

Judy rolled her eyes. "I'd haunt you with a fiery passion."

She actually managed to get a laugh out of Honey. "Whatever, lieutenant ears. You're already at four minutes."

Realizing that this fox was not her Nick, she approached with caution. Part of her waited for it to spring to life and go for her throat. When it didn't happen, she sat down. A hesitating paw ventured out, hovering just above its fur. First contact.

It was coarse. The fur knotted in clumps, bound with stray saliva and general filth. It fought Judy's attempts to straighten it out.

"Hey, Honey?"

"Hmm?"

"How often do these guys get a bath?"

"Pfft," Honey shrugged "every night, right after you leave, I haul in a clawfoot tub—a beautiful thing, really, you should see it, truly the piece de resistance of the Victorian era. I help em' in, throw in a bath bomb or three, and let em' soak for an hour or so."

"Yeah, yeah, sounds like heaven, now spit it out."

"Eh, we don't bathe them."

Judy stopped petting. "You're not serious."

"In fact, I am. They don't need a bath—they're savage! Not like they mind," Honey pointed to the savage fox by Judy's side, whose tongue was lolling sleepily from the corner of its lips. "We only wash them if one gets an infection or rolls around in its own shit, which actually doesn't happen as often as you would think." Judy gave Honey a disgusted look, and the badger laughed and waved a paw at her. "Oh quit your worrying, he'll get a bath when he goes up to rehab. His own bed, too."

"And when might that be?"

"Three weeks to a month? Hard to tell, considering we don't know how the new savages were exposed. They go to rehab when they're deemed 'safe, but not stable.' They get a bed, a post to
wander around, and a shower."

"Three weeks…" Judy grimaced.

"Three weeks at least. But I'll tell you what, officer. I kinda like you, mostly because you're the only one down here not ordering me around. So give Wilde three weeks. If he's not better by then, I'll wash him myself."

"He'll be disgusting by then."

Honey scoffed. "I try to be nice, just once."

"And for that, I thank you, but…" and idea. Her ears rose. "What if I do the bathing."

"You'd really wanna do that?"

"Well, of course I would!"

"Of course you would," Honey muttered.

"Oh, shut up. If I don't, he's just gonna get filthier by the day. They might be savages to you, but they're still mammals to me. So what about this? Every time I come in, I'll give him a wash. That'll be my five minutes. You won't have to do a thing, and he won't be downright disgusting. Win-win, no?"

Honey considered this, biting her lip. Finally, she sighed. "Fine, so long as you run the idea by Fulgens. He already gave me hell for letting you fall asleep down here."

"Never gonna live that down, am I?"

"I don't intend to let you." She smiled devilishly. "So yeah, feel free to bathe him all you'd like, just make it quick." She looked down at her watch and hummed. "Speaking of which, you've got about two more minutes before I gotta kick you outta here. In the meantime, I'm gonna close you in while I'm preparing the newbie's injection. Can't just leave the cell doors open around here, ya know?"

"Gotcha."

"Right, then I'll leave you to your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend," Judy scoffed. "What is this, high school?" Despite this, it stirred something in her. Something warm, but only for a brief moment.

"Someone's in denial," Honey said, singsong.

"Oh really?"

"Listen, I don't care what you say you are or aren't, but a fox and a rabbit, c'mon, it's adorable. Let me ship it just this once."

Before she could respond, Honey was out the door, and three simultaneous locks later, she was alone with the savage.

She looked at it and signed. "What do you think, huh? Wanna be my boyfriend?" The savage didn't respond. "Yeah, I thought as much."

Again, she ran her fingers through its coarse fur, quickly forgetting where she was. There was
something entrancing about the intimacy of the action—two polar species in contact with one another with no bloodshed or fear involved.

"Well, whatever I'm feeling, it's not towards you," she poked the savage. After all, it would be hard to love any savage, no matter how handsome they might be. Nick, on the other hand...

Well, if you could get past his snide remarks...

Something warm. She couldn't ignore it. This intimacy, it warmed her heart to a faint red glow, like heated iron.

*Whatever it is, I'll tell him when I wake up. By then, I'll have figured it out. Because there definitely was something to figure out. She could feel it, a tingly feeling. An itch. Even if it's nothing, I'll come clean the day he wakes up. Mark my words.*

So she petted the savage, rummaging through her feelings like a handbag. Come to think of it, she never touched Nick. Never *touched* him. Once in a while, they would bump up against each other or share playful high-fives after conquering a long day of pencil-pushing. He liked to pull her into over-the-arm buddy hugs once in a while, but they never *touched*, certainly not in the way she was now.

*Except ...come to think of it, we have, haven't we?*

As it turned out, there had been a time—a night, more specifically, only a couple weeks ago, before the end of the world as she knew it—when she found herself touching him. Petting him. Examining how her fingers split his fur, just as she did now. And to recall the memory while sitting so close to the shell of her best friend was equally as comforting as it was nostalgic.

It had been a Friday night, a cold and rainy one, and they were at his apartment. They brushed their teeth in front of the bathroom mirror. Nick was at her side—her head hardly reached his shoulders. He had been humming, tapping his foot.

Movie nights, especially after the conclusion of a four-day shift, had become a common ritual between the two partners. This particular week it had been the award-winning *La La Lamb* at Nick's place. With the credits still rolling in the living room and the empty popcorn bucket sitting abandoned on the couch, it would appear that the night was over. But that's where the rain came into play.

Despite the nearest station only being two blocks away, Nick refused to let her go out in the frigid rain when there was a perfectly warm and dry pullout with her name on it. Besides, his apartment was all-around nicer than hers—having a kichenette and its own bathroom, courtesy of his two hundred bucks a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, since he was twelve—so she didn't protest. The day had been a long one and she had nearly fallen asleep on Nick's shoulder during the movie, so let it be known: Hopps was exhausted and didn't like the idea of trekking out into the rain either.

"*City of staaaaaaaars, are you shining just for meeeweeelee?*" Nick leaned over and spat into the sink. 
"*City of staaaaaaaars...*" He elbowed Judy.

"Whaa?" she managed between her toothbrush.

"Finish the line, dumb bunny."

"Na youh finiss it."

"But it's Mia's line," Nick whined.
Judy groaned, spat into the sink, and with her toothbrush held like a microphone, "You never shined so brightly. There. Happy?"

"Mm, where were you when they cast Emu Stone?"

She shrugged. "You're not so bad yourself, slick."

He laughed. "Alright, whatever, Fluff. Scoot over, will ya? You're hogging the sink."

As she worked a string of floss between her front teeth, her eyes wandered to Nick's reflection in the mirror. Apparently, pajamas to his standard were black basketball shorts and a faded yellow t-shirt with a palm-tree pattern.

The fox had a way with clothing. To quote what he had said once, "I don't wear clothes, no. Clothes wear me." And in some strange way this statement was very true. He could be wearing a burlap sack and manage to pull it off like a pinstripe suit. Pajamas were not omitted from this, Judy noticed. The yellow t-shirt made the fur on his scruff, face, and arms pop in contrast, so bright that it looked unnatural. A painted orange, vivid as a sunset.

"How is your fur so nice?" She tried to phrase the question to sound offhand when in actuality she was rather serious.

"Huh?"

"Your fur. It's so…bright. Looks nice."

"Oh, this?" Nick said through his brush. "Well, I can't help having flawless qualities, darling. It runs in the blood."

"I'm trying to compliment you, don't spoil the moment," she scowled.

"Fair point, you don't compliment me nearly enough." He ran a paw through the scruff on the side of his neck and grinned.

"You little—"

"Kidding, dear." He ruffled the fur between her ears. "You've never asked me this before. Why do you suddenly care?"

"I'm curious, isn't that enough? Do you use, I don't know, some kind of product?"

He put a paw to his chest, scoffed. "I'm wounded. Product? You wound me!"

"Yeah, product. You know, highlights and such. Mammals use it all the time to liven their fur."

"I'd never."

"You seriously don't add anything to it?"

"No!" He was still grinning. "These accusations, Hopps! Who do you take me for?"

"I'm just asking, is all. It looks…really nice. You look really nice tonight, that's all."

"Oh," the grin faltered, "thanks, Carrots. That's nice of you." He looked away, twirling his toothbrush. For another year—or rather a moment, it was hard to differentiate—the silence resumed. Then, with a fleeting glance to her, "Where'd you put the floss?"
She handed it to him, and it took an awkwardly long amount of time for him to tear off a piece. When he finally did, he put it down on the counter.

"The color's genetic," he said. He was scratching his scruff. "That is, it's from my mother's side. Most red foxes have darker fur, but when it comes to the Wilde's…as luck would have it…." He shrugged.

"I'll have to meet them sometime, to see for myself."

He looked at her. "Who? The parents?"

She nodded. "I'd like to meet them sometime, as long as you're down."

He seemed to buffer for a moment, like a faulty browser. "Yeah, sure, Carrots. Sometime."

Judy looked up at her, her eyes concerned. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, pfft, yeah." He waved her off. "I'm fine."

"I'm sorry."

"No, Judy, don't—"

"I shouldn't have asked."

"Stop," he grabbed her shoulders. "Don't be sorry. I'm glad you asked. Just don't feel sorry about everything, alright? It's not good for you." She looked away from his eyes and nodded. "We clear?"

"Yeah. Clear."

They wrapped up dental hygiene and Judy soon found herself curled up on the pullout. She could feel the springs through the mattress, but it beat the walk to the station through the torrent outside. Perhaps to compensate for the couch-bed he already knew to be stiff, Nick had collected an array of spare pillows from around his place, practically building her a nest to curl up in. He had but one spare blanket, which was actually a spare sheet for his bed, but Judy didn't mind. The whole time he insisted she stay put, leaving her feeling unnecessarily glorified, but she didn't protest.

Finally, the TV was turned off, then the lights, and he retrieved her a glass of water even when she said she wasn't thirsty. With a "Sleep tight, Carrots," and a 'Make sure to wake me if you need anything,' he left her in the dark of his living room to become acquainted with the muted sounds of the city outside.

Everything was fine at first. It wasn't long, however, until the cold crept through the windows and under the door. The spare sheet doubling as a blanket wasn't much of a competitor against the chill. It's November now, after all, and she was learning that, though the city was warmer than Bunnyburrow, Zootopia still froze over during the winters.

She tried to ignore it, clutching the sheets tighter around her and folding her knees up to her chest. One of her relatives was an arctic hare, she reminded herself, but as the minutes grew colder she began to ask herself where that arctic-fur-coat gene was and why it wasn't working. Getting up to find and dial up the heater might wake Nick, and after all he had done to make her feel at home she just wanted to let him sleep.

It wasn't too much later, however, as she was listening to the steady humming of Nick's fridge in the kitchenette, when she heard padded footsteps making their way down the tile hallway. She pretended
to be asleep, sure that Nick would be able to see her in the dark. The tile gave way to carpet, but her keen hearing made audible his approach, right up to the edge of the pullout, where he stopped.

He cleared his throat. "Hey." Then, a little louder, "Hey, Carrots?"

Judy pretended to stir, then open her eyes. Rabbits have weak eyesight when compared to most predators, so he was but a faint silhouette looming over her. However, she didn't have to have stellar vision to see the two glowing green eyes peering down at her. Her stomach twisted into a panicked knot. She couldn't repress the gasp fast enough. She had forgotten how his predatory eyes glowed.

"Ah, my bad." She could hear his smile. "Didn't mean to scare you there."

"Didn't mean to be scared. It's just…you know."

"I know. Brink of sleep. Big scary predator. You're fine, Carrots." The dark obscured rather his words were embarrassed or sincere.

After an awkward period of nothing, she chuckled. "So, you came to watch me sleep?"

"Er, no." The straightforwardness of his answer caught her off guard, especially when she prompted at one of his usual sarcastic remarks. Juxtaposed to this, he actually sounded nervous.

"Then, what? You can't sleep? Need to watch another movie?"

He laughed this time but avoided the question. "Hey, so…it's kinda cold, don'tcha think?"

"Eh," she shrugged into the dark, "it's not that bad. I'm fine."

"You're shivering."

\textit{Dammit, night vision.}

He sighed, sounding disappointed. Then it was only his humming refrigerator, and somewhere, a stray car horn. "It's too cold in here for you to get any sleep, I should have thought of that earlier. Though I do have one of those nifty space-heaters in \textit{my} room. Warms the place right up. And I have a king mattress, so there's plenty of spare room. Not to mention the walls are better insulated in there —"

"I'd be much obliged."

"Oh, alright."

"You can relax, slick. We're not twelve." She climbed out of bed and stretched her arms over her head. "And I don't have to have night vision to know that you're blushing."

The fact that he only stammered confirmed it.

So, she followed him into his bedroom, which was \textit{far} warmer than his living quarters. She climbed up onto one side of the bed and smothered herself in the comforter, a far cry from the lumpy couch mattress. She could feel Nick's weight hop into bed on the other side.

"Right, so there's plenty of room, well, especially for you, considering it's a king-size for medium-sized mammals, and you're edging on the smaller size. Maybe a little too big, but that never bothered anybody."

"You can stop being awkward now. It doesn't suit you."
"Heh, you're right….See you in the morning, then."

"Right. Night, Nick."

"Night."

…

"Oh, and Carrots, just to give you a heads up, I have a tendency of flopping around like a mad- mammal in my sleep, so feel free to push me back to my side if I'm too close for comfort. M'kay?"

"Yeah, will do. Goodnight."

"G'night."

…

"Are you too hot? Cause' I think it's a little hot in here. Should I turn down the heater or—"

"Goodnight, Nicholas."

It was still dark when Judy was roused by something moving right beside her. A sudden warmth pressed up against her back. Keeping in mind the ungodly hour at which this took place, it was a hot minute before Judy's sleep-muddled brain could register that this warmth was her bedmate. Suddenly she was very awake.

Oh …oh sweet cheese and crackers—Nick!

But she didn't move, in fact, she found herself quite paralyzed. Something tingly was fluttering around inside her. She could hear the blood pounding in her ears.

Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god, he's wearing clothes, right? Right?!

She was pink in an instant and no longer paralyzed. She was up on her elbows in an instant. To her relief she found Nick wearing the basketball shorts he considered his pajamas. But even with his pants on she found herself staring, not necessarily wanting to because of how taboo the whole situation felt—a fox and a rabbit in bed.

If dad could see me now ....

Staring at him, it was like watching fireworks or a car crash—there was no looking away.

For someone who apparently slept like a fish out of water, the way he laid there was almost angelic, like that of a figure sculpted in stone, whose every contour and angle was precisely coordinated to make up a breathtaking image of a graceful fox in sleep. Like he was designed to look this graceful. His face was turned away from her, arms folded in a picturesque fashion behind his head, his tail gracing his legs, which were strewn near Judy's feet. And his back…well, it appeared that the academy had fine-tuned his already limber form with just the right amount of muscle. Shoulder blades angular, split between a perfectly arched spine that rose and fell with a memorizing slowness. Judy could hear the faintest trace of his tone of voice in every breath, that witty charisma on his lips, like she expected him to mummer something sarcastic in his sleep.

Had she ever looked at him like this before, like a critic who finally found a worthy piece of art to admire, to study, to try and notice the elegant brushstrokes of red-orange that, even in this dreary moonlight, stole her breath from her lungs? Had she ever looked at anyone this way?
She was touching him before she realized it, running her fingers through the concave of his back, parting his fur like the annual summer winds in Bunnyburrow would shape and swirl the fields of grain. It was stupid. Stupid and violating, so she felt, but she had to know if the touch of him was as perfect as looking at him. The way his fur gave but pushed back with just the right amount of bristle eclipsed only looking.

*Rabbits don't have fur like this, all fluid and smooth. Why can't rabbits have fur like this? Why can't rabbits be like this? Why does he have to be a fox? This would be so much easier if he weren't a fox. If he were a rabbit, there would be no explaining anything to mom and dad, or anyone for that matter.*

But another part of her didn't want anything about him to change. Screw the boundaries, who set them up anyway?

Beneath her paws she could feel him alive, his breath being drawn in and out, the heartbeat, all of it symphonic and organic and—on top of it all—all of it *him*. All Nick, all of was more than a graceful form, dozing like a giant. It was Nick. All the personality that made this fox so damn irresistible and aggravating and wonderful was embodied in this slumbering creature Judy now found herself stroking, and that fact made the experience so utterly enthralling, so personal, so intimate. It gave her cold chills.

That was until Nick made a small grunting noise, pulling away from her paw and rolling back over in the opposite direction, where he came to rest out of her arms reach. Though disappointed, she had been given that small, perfect fraction of time just for her to enjoy. He would never have to know.

She laid back down and rolled so that she was facing Nick's slumbering expression and couldn't fight the smile. Not that she really wanted to.

"Officer Hopps!"

…

"Officer, do you read me? Earth to rabbit!"

…

"For Chrissake, Judy!"

A strong grip on the rabbit's shoulder pulled Judy from the moment. Back to the grim reality were savages stayed savage, where she found herself sitting on the floor of a gloomy cell, petting the sedated, feral fox who wore Nick's skin.

She shook her head, blinked, then smiled stupidly up at the looming honey badger. "Sorry. Got carried away there."

"Carried away? Jesus, I called your name like five or six times!" The badger shook her head, her paws finding her hips. "You can't be down here if you're gonna lapse in and out of a fugue state. You'll get eaten, and I'll get fired, and we can't have either of those things, especially the latter. Now, get up already, it's been almost ten minutes! Your partner here's about to wake up and find it's breakfast still petting it."

The rabbit was soon hurried out of the corridor by a peeved badger, who, after a few routine glances to make sure the sedated patients were beginning to stir, dimmed the lights and made for her desk. Judy, on the other hand, was off to buy the supplies she would need to get to the bottom of this
mystery. She planned to go about it the classic detective way: a corkboard, thumbtacks, and a lot of red string.

Meanwhile, in the heavy silence of the feral floor, the savage resembling Nick Wilde began to stir. A scratch at the air. Another. A twitch and a swish of its tail. Two eyes with voids for pupils soon opened to the most intriguing scent it had ever smelled. Oh god, it was a beautiful scent. And the savage was ravenous. In an instant it was on all fours, scanning the surroundings for the prey, the rabbit that must be there. The mouthwatering musk was still heavy in the room, even on its own fur.

Alas, the room was empty. The savage snarled, saliva dripping from its bared teeth.

It decided to release its rage on the glass.

A/N:

Before anything else, I'd like to address something asked multiple times after the publication of my last chapter. YES, Nick will be in this story. I realize how painful his absence is in the story at the moment, though it is a necessary element of the plot. Trust me, Nick Wilde is my favorite character in Zootopia, so don't think I would just push him to the side. As of right now, the story is revolving around Judy, and that is only momentary. Believe me, there are some great scenes I have planned with Nick as the lead.

This is a shorter chapter than what I normally post, though that's intentional. My chapter lengths have been steadily rising to absurd amounts, so I'm going to take a step back (a 10,000-word step, to be specific). The more I write this story, the more I realize what I got myself into. My outline calls for quite a massive story, so I have a lot of writing to do. I'm not talking as large as "When Instinct Falls" by Upplet (go check it out, if you somehow haven't by now), but the final product will be up there. This whole story is a constant battle for me. I'm fighting to keep my motivation, and as of now I'm succeeding, but I have a ways to go. I fear that, by the time I finish the story, the fandom will have died out to the point that no one is there to read the final product. Every comment I get gives me the strength to continue on with this project, to grin and bear it. I'm doing it for you guys, because judging by the messages I receive, there is a number of you who do enjoy this story. That alone gives me my motivation. Thank you.

A final note, there is a story concept (concerning Zootopia) that I've been mulling over in my mind for a while now. I would be far shorter than this one, and it's an idea that has never been done before in the fandom. Nothing groundbreaking, but worthwhile if I were to write it. But with this story in the works, I need to know what you think about managing two stories at once. I've seen authors do it, in fact, there are a number who write dozens of stories at the same time. I just need to have a second opinion on the matter.

Thanks for your patience, and I'll be working on chapter eight, which introduced a new, important character. I'm excited to see what you think.

Until next time, you lovely people.

- Trenton
Chapter Eight: Not Quick Enough

As November transitioned into December and the last of the leaves came down, Judy found a schedule developing in her daily life. Every morning, at nine on the dot, she walked into the Zootopia Municipal Hospital with a pick-me-up latte and a scarf to fight winter's crescendoing strength. Ollie was always the first to greet her with his unending enthusiasm. Even after dozens of interactions with the otter, he still acted like a hyperactive fan meeting his idol for the first time. He checked her into the elevator with his key card, and one decent later, she's in Fulgens' territory.

With the coming of winter, most of Zootopia had welcomed the holiday vibes with open arms. The Square in Savanna Central had erected a four-story Christmas tree, bending under the weight of tons upon tons of garland and ornaments. Reefs appeared on shop front doors, and lights were strewn over the tops of the streets downtown. A canine street violinist played holiday melodies in downtown, where in places her music could not reach, speakers in the shops compensated with festive music. The whole city, it seemed, had adopted the winter spirit overnight. Even such a place as Savage Containment was no exception. To Fulgens' begrudging consent, a small tree had been put in the main lobby, along with a Menorah, not yet lit. A few employees wore Santa hats at their desks. To top it all off, someone had the audacity to put a reef above Fulgen's office.

Though there were places which the holidays could not touch, such as the Feral Floor. Just after the morning injections, Nick, or the savage that looked much like him, was treated to a bath. Honey thought the whole ritual was rather cute, and voiced that opinion rather often, to Judy's embarrassment.

"I would say get a room, but it appears you've already found a cozy cell that'll do!" she would call from outside the cell. "Just make sure to finish scrubbing before he eats you!"

The savage attacks did not stop at three, much to Judy's prediction. As per result, Savage Containment got all the busier, despite its brief holiday makeover.

The latest incidents—there had been two of them—were very similar to the three which came before, so much so that patterns began to take shape. Any establishment in the city that endorsed, or even tolerated predator-prey relations were possible targets. Seeing as Zootopia was, overall, a very tolerant city, pinpointing the next attacks wasn't going to be easy.

The first incident was at "The Mammalian," a widely-accepting nightclub in the downtown party-stripe that attracted predators and prey from everywhere. On one of its busiest nights, a particularly peeved (not to mention tipsy) lioness demanded to see a manager about her nausea, blaming it on one of the many appetizers she had ordered that night. Not long after, she was down on all fours, which—to the onlooking mammals in and around the dance floor—appeared to be an eccentric, yet seductive dance move. She even received some applause, that is, before she had pounced. Everyone was screaming over the sound of blaring dance music, and it took a while for the entirety of the club to realize that something was terribly wrong, not that something new had fired up on the dance floor.

She had pounced on a lemur, who was critically wounded and so drunk that he didn't need any sedatives when the response team arrived.

Myra gained a new friend. It was the largest predator to go savage since a polar bear had been darted the previous summer, during Bellwether's term.
Only a matter of days after—the city still coping with the prospect of a new wave of savage outbreaks—when the fifth attack occurred, which was most likely a result of the prior attack.

A public statement was given about the unknown nature of the attacks, and it was on every news channel. In hours, every mammal with cable TV knew exactly how unsafe their city was. This caused many reactions, some similar to those which happened during Bellwether's short but catastrophic time as mayor. A number of small mammals, especially prey, evacuated the city with hopes that it would blow over in a matter of weeks. Politicians and pop-stars alike were stating their sides on the matter, and the ZPD was scrambling to control the many riots and protests that broke out in Savanna Square. It was at one such protest—ironically one of an emerging movement named "Pred-Prey-Peace"—where a weasel found that he was feeling queasy, but these were desperate times for Zootopia, and going home sick wasn't going to put an end to this savage nonsense. So he stayed and rallied as best he could until the pain in his stomach—seemingly now in his blood, pounding in his head like rhythmic thunder—was too much to handle. Pred-Prey-Peace's attempts at harmony were shattered in an instant when the crazed weasel went berserk in the middle of the crowd. It took the officers on the scene several minutes to catch the scampering savage. One officer had to snatch it off a goat who was being mauled. The officer received severe bites on his hands, "Nasty little bugger, almost gnawed off my fucking thumb!" and Honey was begrudgingly given a fifth patient to sedate twice-daily.

After the number of savages rose to five, Judy felt that bathing only Nick would be unfair, despite however many times Honey reminded her that "the savages don't give a shit about their hygiene!" She washed Nick first, then Gideon, who had thinner and darker fur than Nick. After the two foxes, there was Myra. Despite how similar a fox and a coyote may appear, to the touch, Judy was discovering that they were quite different. Myra's fur wasn't anywhere as soft as Nick's. Instead, it seemed to have a mind of its own, and it fought back when Judy tried to scrub it one way. The lioness was massive when compared to her, so she had to climb the savage like a breathing hilltop just to reach the uncleaned spots. The weasel, however, was far easier and even made cute mewing noises once in a while when she was lathering its fur.

With each new attack, Judy had an entirely new research project to complete at her apartment. She'd get a picture of the savage and dig up all the background information she could—there didn't appear to be any similarities between victims other than all of them being predators. To add onto this, she investigated everything that breathed on the crime scenes, from local shop-owners to passing pedestrians. This was difficult, seeing as she couldn't officially request any investigations, seeing as she was off duty, though most locals were nice enough to give them their part of the story. She requested a copy of all the food being sold in the area, noted down the most unusual circumstances, and haunted her local library for their printer. What had began as a corkboard was now growing off the borders and onto her wallpaper, where it did not stop but continued to spread like a weed of articles and red string.

Despite the hours of researching and entire pots of coffee that she downed in a matter of hours, the similarities between the savages were close to none. The food, she kept thinking to herself, like a mantra to keep her going. It must be the food. That's the only thing that makes sense. But it was hard to track down a stranger's previous meals, and harder to find any similarities in them. Especially when she couldn't flash her badge, nor ask for any of her fellow officers to help without Bogo getting word. A salad here, a soup there, a couple sandwiches in-between. Among all the food, from salads to synthetic meat, there was no connection that she could find.

And hell, did it leave her exhausted.

Every breathing moment she was either in Savage Containment, trying to help Honey by bathing the new savages, or she was back at her apartment, scavenging the history of suspected restaurants as far
back as the times of Prohibition. Her caffeine intake was unholy, she needed a bath more than the savages did, and the few hours of sleep she managed to get were riddled with nagging thoughts of the case. If Bogo could see how she was using her sabbatical, dear god, even the residents in northernmost Tundratown would feel his thunder.

Her only respite was Nick. Or better put, what was left of him.

When she sat with him, which she often did after scrubbing him down, she would run her fingers through his red fur until it was grooved. It seemed that, in those moments when she sat with him, she could remember their every interaction back to his hustle at Jumbeaux's. The nostalgia was sharp, but just see him was a temporary relief. Just to see him was enough to keep her fighting through those days.

Then, there came an abrupt discrepancy to this schedule of savagery and sleep deprivation. It came one brisk Saturday morning in early December, as Judy was being checked into the Feral Floor by the ever-stoic security guard, Potts the Hipposcopamus.

"Is that a new crossword?" It was a pathetic attempt at conversation, really, but she saw the hippo daily when clocking in and out. It would be rude not to try and be nice.

Potts's eyes never left the booklet. "Astute observation, detective."

Judy forced a chuckle and put her paws on her hips. "You know, I was always more of a word-search kinda gal."

"Is that so?" Potts muttered. His voice dragged like his tongue had to heave a crushing weight with every word. He grunted, shifted forward in his chair, pressed a button, and the door in front of Judy unlocked.

"Nice talking to you too, Potts."

She was on her way when, "Wait. Bunny."

Judy's ears rose, and she turned. "Hmm?"

"I should probably warn ya, another rabbit came through here not long ago lookin' for you."

It was the longest sentence she had ever heard him say. She was honored.

"Really? Who was it?"

"Didn't catch his name, but he was wearin' an officer's uniform."

This was news. As far as Judy knew, she was the only rabbit on the ZPD. Whoever it was, they would have to be of good status for Fulgens to approve of yet another visitor. "What'd he look like?"

Potts snorted. "Do I look like I've got photographic memory?" Judy wasn't sure if that could be discerned from outward appearance alone, but he answered for her. "No. He's right in there, hasn't gone anywhere. Go see em' yourself."

Judy looked through the door, and in the dim light of the corridor beyond she could make out a silhouette with two tall ears and a limber form. He was squatting before on the cells, peering inside.

"Thanks for the head's up, Potts," she called, her eyes fixed on the mysterious new visitor.

"Mm," Potts grunted, having returned to his crossword. The door locked behind her with a
The first thing she noticed was his voice. He was talking to someone. She looked around the corridor, though didn't see anyone, further piquing her interest. So she crept closer, listening in.

"Can't be that bad," the silhouette said. His voice was soft and held undertones of gleaming charm. "Don't have to take public transport, or worry about rent, or do anything for that matter. Just sit here and—"

"You talk to the savages?" Judy inquired, crossing her arms with a small smile.

The silhouette's ears perked at this. "Oh, well, I suppose I do. When you're down here all alone, who else is there to talk to?"

"Fair enough." Judy failed to mention that she often had one-sided conversations with the savages as well.

She went to ask his name, but he spoke first. "And you're Judy Hopps, then?"

"Who's asking?"

He stepped forward and the faint overhead light illuminated his features. His fur was a dusty color, maybe cream, though hard to discern in the lighting. His eyes were a yellow-brown, his ears taller than hers, and, for some reason, his chin stood out to her. It was more defined than most rabbits, much in the same way that his entire form was more defined, more trim. In fact, he wasn't a rabbit at all, but a hare. That would explain the height advantage he had on her—not much more than a few inches, but too tall for any rabbit. Nearly as tall as Nick.

"It's Harvey Jamison." He extended his paw to her with a pleasant smile. "And while I'm no fan of handshakes, I'm told it's the proper thing to do in social greetings."

"Jamison…" Judy played with the name in her mind. "Sounds familiar. You even look familiar. Do I —"

"You just might." His smile was sheepish, like he expected this. It was obvious he was hiding something, but it seemed he wanted her to figure it out.

There was something familiar about his golden eyes. The way they were just bright enough to stand out against his fur, which was similar in color. That compiled with his being a hare—it clicked.

"Harvey Jamison!" Judy cried, now hopping up and down. "Sweet cheese and crackers, I remember you!"

He snickered. "Yes, yes, only hare in BBHS's class of 09'. You were a Sophomore when I was a Freshman."

"You were on the basketball team!"

"Point guard."

"And drama! I was in drama with you!"

"Zoosies*, right? You were Sarah Jacobs."

"And you were Crutchy!"
"That I was." He grinned, and his teeth glimmered in the low light. "How on earth can you remember?"

"How can I not? Oh, wow. Jamison. Jamison. Look at you, you're an officer!" She gestured to his uniform, a pristine navy much like her own. "How'd that happen, huh?"

"Same as you, I suppose." He squatted back down, catching eyes with the savage he had been conversing with—the weasel. "I always wanted to be a detective, ever since I was first hopping. You know, Sherlock Holmes and the likes of them. Majored in criminal justice one year late of you. The Mammal Inclusion Initiative brought me all the way up here, landed a spot in Precinct Twelve, the docks at Sahara Square. Still working on that detective thing, though. Maybe someday."

Judy rubbed her forehead. "Wow, that's just…insane, right?"

"What? Small world?"

"Well, that, and you're the only mammal I've seen in the city that I've known before."

He grinned and looked up. "You should have seen my reaction when I learned you were the one out solving that whole Bellwether scandal. You became my idol. Weird, I know, but true. Everything I wanted to achieve, you had achieved it." He scoffed, still smiling. "Hats off to you, Officer Hopps."

"Please, enough about me. How'd you get down here? This place is tight."

"Oh, I'm aware. Got a briefing of all the rules from the doctor, I think his name was Fergus?"

"Fulgens."

"Ah, yes. He's quite the staid individual, to put it kindly." Harvey rubbed the back of his head.

Judy chuckled. "I can second that."

"Anyway, I'm only here on Bogo's instruction. He said I'd find you here."

"Bogo?" Judy cocked her head.

"Yeah, I've got quite a lot of filling in to do. Just recently, Bogo requested to talk to me in private."

A matter of days before, in Precinct One

A knock at the door.

The buffalo looked up from his desktop. Through the door's translucent window, he could make out the outline of the hare he was expecting. "Come in."

The hare did just that, glancing around the office as he entered. All of it was massive in his eyes. He even had to jump to reach the door handle.

"Do sit down," Bogo asked, motioning to the chair set in front of his desk.

"Yessir," Harvey said. He had to leap to reach the seat.

"You must be Lieutenant Harvey L. Jamison?"
"Indeed, sir."

"Chief Bogo," he extended a hoof down to the hare, "and enough with the 'sir' nonsense. I'm not your superior."

"Sure thing." Harvey smiled, shaking the chief's hoof. It engulfed his arm up to the elbow.

"Now, to business," Bogo said, revealing a file on his desk with the hare's name on it. "So you graduated from ZU Savanna Central, attended the academy, decent marks, Precinct Twelve, where you've been for…"

"About four months," Harvey replied. "Quick thing, chief. I've been wondering, could this meeting have anything to do with Officer Judy Hopps?"

Bogo's eyes met Harvey's for the first time, a hint of intrigue breaking through his austere demeanor. "It would, in fact. You know this how, lieutenant?"

"Just an educated guess," Harvey shrugged. "She's been all over the news lately, she works at this precinct, and we even attended High School together back in Bunnyburrow. Our parents knew each other through the whole farming business. We simply share a lot in common. Just an assumption."

"You assumed correctly," Bogo muttered. "Are you up to date on the current events surrounding Miss Hopps?"

"I am. It's tragic, what happened in Bunnyburrow. She must be undergoing plenty of emotions."

"Correct, yet again. I've allowed Hopps a sabbatical until Wilde, her partner, is rehabilitated. She and Wilde are real close, so his savagery made quite the impact on her." He paused for a moment. He flipped the file closed and leaned forward on his desk. "I know Hopps. She's not gonna rest while there's an unknown party at large, making predators go savage again. I've tried to tell her she needs her rest, but I get word she still checks in on her partner daily." Bogo sighed, rapping his paws on his desk. "She's an ambitious little thing. I couldn't stop her if I tried. So that's why I need you."

Harvey raised a brow. "You, couldn't stop her. So you call for me, a hare?"

Another sigh. "That is correct, yes."

"Could you elaborate, chief?"

"Brute size and strength only amount for so much. I can't talk to Hopps the way a hare, such as yourself, could. Seeing as you already know each other, I don't assume it would be too difficult for the two of you to get along."

"And you're asking me to…what?"

"As of right now, Hopps needs a partner. Wilde and Hopps are inseparable, so with Wilde down, for the time being, she needs someone she can rely on. Someone to keep her in check, and to make sure she gets her rest and recovery. In short, she needs someone to work with that she can talk to."

"Chief, pardon me, but I'm sure Hopps could take care of herself just fine."

Bogo crossed his arms and chuckled under his breath. "You would think that, but she has a tendency to work herself thin. She's excellent at maintaining everyone else, that's for damn sure, but not so much when it comes to herself. In times like these, if someone's not taking her out to eat, she's not gonna eat. That make sense?"
"I guess it does. I'm being transferred, then?" Harvey asked.

"Yes, I've already discussed it with your superior, Hornsmith. You'll be an officer at the precinct as of next week."

"What about my apartment."

"We can get you another. There's plenty of places available around the square."

"Places I could afford? With an officer's salary?"

"We'll cover it for you, Jamison. I should also mention that you will be a member of what we are calling the Savage Task Force, the group we've assigned to respond to and investigate the developing savage attacks. This way, Hopps will have someone who she can better relate to on the task force, thus making this difficult period for her more manageable. Sound reasonable?"

Harvey nodded. "I'm game."

"Splendid. Now, one last thing I should tell you. You know the Municipal Hospital not far from here?"

"I believe I know the place. What about it?"

"This conversation stays between us, clear?"

"Of course."

"Underneath the hospital is an organization known as Savage Containment. It is where the current savages are being held and researched. I've been informed Hopps goes down there daily, at nine in the morning, to bathe the savages. That's where you can find her."

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**Present Day**

Judy flattened her ears back with her paws and groaned. "Are you kidding me? This was Bogo's idea?"

Harvey held up his paws. "Just following orders. I'm sure you can understand."

"I know, I know, I'm not blaming you. But really, the chief?" She turned to him. "Do I look like I can take care of myself?"

Harvey nodded with added enthusiasm, partly in genuine agreement, mostly in fear of poking the bunny. "Just look at you. You moved up here all on your own, tackled your job at the ZPD, and solved the whole savage crisis. If anybody can take care of herself—"

"It's me," she finished. "But it seems that I'm the only person to believe that."

"What does that make me, then? Chopped liver?"

Judy looked up to see a smile she could still recall from high school. Though she didn't know Harvey personally way back when, he had always been distanced from the majority of the student body. The kind of student who sits in the back corner of the class, or waits until everybody's out of the locker room to shower. His smile, all lopsided and insecure, it suited his demeanor with striking accuracy. She couldn't help but return it with her own gleaming grin. "Thanks, Harv. That's nice of you. Can I
call you Harv?"

He shrugged. "Sure you can. If anything, it's better than Jamie. Or Harvey-Davidson."

Judy snorted. "Harvey-Davidson?"

"Yes, yes, I had many an alias back in grade school. Besides, my dad owned a Harley and would
give me a ride to school once in a while, which didn't help."

"Hemp-y Jamison," Judy snickered.

Harvey groaned with added drama, pressing the back of his paw to his forehead. "It was only once,at that stupid Halloween party, and nobody lets me live it down" he chuckled, rubbing his forehead
like reliving it all gave him a headache.

"That's because you went totally berserk and started dancing on tabletops," Judy laughed, recalling
the memory. It had been a shock to everyone at that party when the quietest kid in school suddenly
 gained so much bravado.

"Besides, if I were a stoner, how could I land a job at the ZPD?"

Judy shrugged. "Just ask Delgato."

"Who now?"

"Oh, never mind. Just an officer at the precinct you probably won't run into." Her eyes lit up, ears
perking in delight. "Oh, oh! Homo-Harvey!"

Harvey stopped rubbing his head. "Sorry, what?"

"Homo-Harvey! You don't remember?"

"Er…no. No, I don't."

"Dude, everyone thought you were gay!"

The hare turned pink in an instant, rising from the crouch to his feet. "Really? They did?"

"What rock were you living under?" Judy scoffed, though she quickly corrected her tone. "Not that
there's anything wrong with being gay, of course."

He turned a brighter shade of pink, somehow. "Well, of course. And I'm not gay."

The universe truly had a charming sense of humor. It was at that very moment that Honey came
strolling in with the cart of syringes. She stopped, both officers turned, and all was silent between the
three of them. It appeared that even the savages were watching on with interest.

The badger smirked and focused her eyes on Harvey. "Not gay, huh?"

"Er, no."

"That's not the question I should be asking. Who the hell are you and how'd you get down here?"

"Well, I was sent here by the Chief of Police at precinct one. He cleared it with Doctor Fergus."

"Fulgens," Judy and Honey said in unison.
"Yeah. Him. I'm here to see Judy."

"You're here to see Judy?" Honey repeated, raising an eyebrow. "You sure? 'Cause I just passed Rem in the hallway and he's hella hot."

Harvey buried his head in his hands. "I'm sorry, whoever you are, but I'm not—"

"It's Honey, sweetheart."

"Honey, then. I'm not..." he laughed anxiously to himself, "I'm not gay."

"M'kay," Honey said, sing-song, as she walked past him, "but lemme tell you, sweetheart, it's dark in that there closet. Out here," she made circled with her paws, "it's a lot nicer. Fresher air, if you're asking me."

Judy did a double take. "Hold on. Honey?"

"I didn't tell you?"

"Well...no."

"C'mon, you're an officer, you're supposed to be good at picking up clues," Honey said, flashing a devilish grin. "You didn't catch me sneaking glances at your ass? You've got serious curves, sweetheart."

Now it was Judy's turn to be pink. "Wha...!"

Honey pushed her cart to Nick's cell and entered the code, cackling the whole time. "Hey, no shame, bunny-boy. You got me? Nothing worth hiding."

"I'm a hare, actually," Harvey said, seeming flustered.

"Pfft, same difference," Honey waved a paw at him. The sedative mist was released into Nick's cell. "Just groom the fur on your head, gain a little confidence, and you'll be a buck-magnet, mark my words."

"Oh my god," Harvey groaned, taking a step back.

Now that the savage was sedated, Honey unlocked and entered the cell. "Oh, and officer!" she called, reappearing in the doorway. She smirked, winked, clicked her tongue, and slipped through the door.

Despite the million thoughts whirring through the air at that moment, all of them loud and turbulent, Harvey and Judy were both too dumbstruck to do anything more than stand there in their communal embarrassment. They made eye contact, then quickly glanced away.

Harvey cleared his throat. "Did I, by chance, just envision all of that or—"

"No, I saw it too."

More silence.

"You know," Judy said, "I don't care if you're gay."

Harvey sighed. "I know."
"And I'm sorry they called you those things in high school. I swear, I didn't contribute."

He chuckled. "Who cares. It wouldn't be high school without the grade-a assholes."

Honey exited the cell. "Alright, officer ears—or maybe I should be more specific—Officer Hopps, you've got five minutes. Here's the bucket." She lugged a five-gallon bucket of soapy water off the cart, then disposed of the syringe she held in a red container labeled "Biohazard."

"Bucket?" Harvey inquired.

"Oh, yeah, I'm in charge of bathing the savages," Judy said.

Honey scoffed. "You say that like you didn't ask my permission to wash them."

Harvey's eyes bulge. "You'd do that willingly?"

"Same as I said," Honey called, pushing her cart on to the next cell.

"I know, I'm weird." Judy shrugged as she walked. "But I care about these guys. They're still mammals, just like us."

"That's not weird, it's just…a little freaky, right? Being so close?"

"Well, they are sedated." Judy picked up the bucket with a grunt and turned back to Harvey. "Here, wanna see?"

"Oh, well…"

"C'mon, you already talk to them. They know you!" She sneered.

Harvey shook his head, grinning. "Fine. Here, you need help with that bucket?"

"Nah, I've got it."

From one cell down, Honey called, "Hey Hopps, you should let the new guy scrub down Wilde!"

Harvey slapped his forehead so loud Potts looked up from his crossword.

"Leave him alone, Honey!" Judy called back.

The badger's snarky laughter echoed down the corridor. "Hey, just trying to help out!"

Not more than half an hour later, she was sitting in the response team's break room with Honey, between them a Caesar Salad and a Bugburga Original. Harvey had left not long after Judy had finished washing the savages, saying he must "go acclimate into the precinct-one environment," or in other words, settle into his new desk. Above the two—on a mounted TV that had no sound, only subtitles—a canine ZNN reporter was at the scene of a Pred-Prey-Peace retaliation rally in the Tundratown Main Square. There was a hellish blizzard blowing the reporter off balance time and time again. In the background, the protesters somehow managed to keep their signs in the air, though most had been coated with ice, making the actual message unclear.

On a more pressing note, only ten minutes ago the entirety of the response team had shuffled out in an instant. Melody was out the door before she could answer Judy's questions as to what the hell was going on, but asking was unnecessary. Both she and Honey knew exactly what had happened. They were just waiting for it to surface on the news.
"At this rate," Honey said in between bites, "you're gonna need a lot more soap."

Judy was picking at her salad. It was dry and impossibly average, but the only thing she had eaten since lunch the day before. "My schedule isn't exactly tight, as of late."

Honey hummed disapprovingly. "Even so, you can't possibly wash an entire facility of savages as quick as I can vaccinate them."

"Is that a bet?" Judy grinned.

"No, it's a warning. Washing Wilde is one thing, but the more of 'em you wash, the more likely it is that something goes wrong. There's a reason I'm in and out in twenty seconds. Maybe one of them wakes up a little too early."

Judy shrugged. She speared a spinach leaf. "Occupational hazard."

"Uh," Honey chuckled, then with sudden deadpan, "no. No one's paying you. You aren't required to be here. You could be sleeping. Just think about that."

"Somebody has to bathe them."

Honey just snorted.

"Yes, they do," Judy insisted. "They're still mammals. It's the least they deserve."

"Don't choke on your generosity, officer ears."

Judy rolled her eyes.

"Oh yeah," Honey scooted forward in her chair, leaning towards Judy and smacking loudly, "about that hare. What's the scoop?"

"Don't get me started," Judy groaned.

"Oh, you two got beef?"

"No, no, not with Harvey. He's fine. It's my chief," she murmured, then violently shoveled a forkful of salad into her mouth.

"Spill, sweetie."

Judy swallowed and cleared her throat, preparing her throat for a rant. "He assigned Harvey to be my partner until Nick gets better."

"So? That's not so bad."

"But that's only from face value. He doesn't think I can take care of myself." She emphasized each syllable with a stab of her fork into the salad. "In his eyes, I'm too grief-stricken to do…well…anything! He implicitly pinned Harvey to me as my babysitter."

Honey shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe he's got a point."

"Wait, what now?"

"Officer, let's cut the shit, m'kay? Let's cut the shit." Honey set down her burger and met the rabbit's eyes. "To me, it looks like your chief really cares about you. It's kinda his job, right? To look after
his officers? So why is that such a bad thing?"

Judy laughed, but her voice was pained. "Because I'm doing just fine. I don't need some guy to swoop down and fix all my problems."

Honey rolled her eyes.

"What?" Judy scoffed.

"Look. Judy." The mention of her name caught the officer, formerly known as 'officer ears,' off guard. "Half the time you come down here—no I take that back—pretty much every time you show up in the mornings, you look like shit. You've got bags under your eyes, your voice is strained, you drift off, sometimes even when you're in the cell with your partner. These are things that, believe it or not, coffee cannot fix. And now look at you. You're absolutely pulverizing that salad. What did it do, murder your whole family? To add on that, I never see you eat. Hell, this is the first time, and it's a pathetic salad from that there vending machine." The badger paused, letting her point permeate the moment. Judy didn't respond, but her eyes had fallen to her feet. "So yeah, I said it. Maybe your chief is right. Maybe, just maybe, you need somebody to be there to catch you once in a while. No, not some guy to swoop down and make all the pain go away, but maybe some guy—whose definitely gay and adorably weird—to help you along." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "That's all I'll say about that."

Judy put her fork down in the salad, or what was left of it. Honey's eyes burned into her skull, but she still did not look. These were what Bonnie Hopps had liked to call "Down to Earth Talks." The first she remembered was when she had scaled a massive tree as a kit to retrieve a kite that had been stolen away on a windy day.

"You could have died, Judy. If you had slipped you could have died. You can't keep doing these things," Bonnie had told a nine-year-old Judy at the massive Hopps dinner table, just the two of them.

"I'm sorry," Judy responded, both to her mother then and to Honey now.

Honey sighed, arms still crossed. Her gaze softened, though, and it was almost motherly. "Hopps, I hate to say it, but you're a good mammal. You're nice, even to others who deserve to have their teeth knocked in with your fist. But you've gotta extend that niceness to yourself." Honey's eyes never left Judy's. She did not smile. "You damn well deserve it. Be nice to yourself. Take days off just for you. Oh, and eat your damn food without killing it first. Did you catch that with those antennae of yours?"

A laugh escaped Judy, and she nodded, feeling a little better.

The badger did not let up so easily. "I wanna hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"That you'll take care of Judy Hopps for me."

Judy stared for a moment, then chuckled. "Okay. I'll take care of Judy Hopps."

"Not good enough. Repeat after me. I will eat well, sleep well, and take care of myself. Because I deserve it, dammit."

Judy was fighting a smile. "I will eat well, sleep well, and take care of myself. Because I deserve it, dammit."
"Say it again."

"C'mon, Honey. I feel like I'm in self-betterment therapy."

"Good. Say it again. I will eat well—"

"Sleep well, and take care of myself." Feeling stupid, she rubbed her temple. Lucky, savage containment was out for the moment. She wouldn't want Melody to see her like this, or she might join in. "Because I deserve it, dammit."

Honey stood up, and she was grinning now, her arms still crossed. "Louder."

"Honey," Judy sighed. "Fulgens might—"

"Don't give a fuck about what Fulgens thinks. Give a fuck about what you think. I'm not gonna leave you alone until you say it louder."

Judy laughed to herself. She felt absurd, stupid, but warm inside. Warmer than she had. With an increase in confidence, she shouted. "I will eat well! Sleep well! And take care of myself!" She was giggling now, for some reason. And she couldn't control it. "Because I deserve it, dammit!"

"Louder!" Honey cried.

By now, Judy had adopted an attitude of Oh, screw it. She didn't argue, because, for the first time in weeks, she felt alive. Living. It was just her and Honey in the room, and that gave her the last bit of strength she needed. In an instant, she was out of the chair and on top of the table. She kicked the salad aside like it had murdered her whole family. With a dangerous lack of shame, Judy yelled, "I will eat well! Sleep well! And take care of myself! Because I…"

Honey stared at Judy expectantly. "Don't just stop, officer. Because…?"

But Judy wasn't paying attention to Honey anymore, in fact, she had completely forgotten that she was standing atop a table. She was staring at the TV. Frozen rigid. Reading the subtitles.

"—receiving urgent news from the Acacia Street Mall in Savanna Central. This just in, three mammals have been killed and two others hospitalized by a savage cougar. This is the first savage attack that has resulted in casualties since those which followed former Madam Mayor Bellwether's mayoral term. The ZPD has now arrived at the scene, though I'm afraid, not quick enough to prevent this catastrophe. The savage in question has been subdued and is now being—"

There was a gripping silence. The kind that's more physical than it is audible. It slipped down Judy's ear canals and throat and to the pit of her stomach, where it pooled, dark and heavy, making her want to dry heave.

Down the hall, the savages were snarling and barking. They had been stirred by Judy's shouting, but in the moment, in Judy's head, it was as if they were cheering. Applauding wildly. Three mammals had died. One new savage. No leads. No suspects. No answers.

No noise. The barking faded into nothingness. Everything faded along with it.

"…three mammals have been killed…"

"…not quick enough to prevent this catastrophe."

"…not quick enough…"
"…not quick enough…"
And like a dam holding back all the oceans in the world, it breached in an instant and filled her head with horror.

*I could have been there.*

*I could have been quick enough.*

*I'm quick.*

*I could have made it.*

*Oh god, I could have made it.*

*Oh god.*

*I was talking to Harvey.*

*Eating lunch.*

*Eating a salad.*

*They died.*

*I was eating a salad.*

*I could have made it.*

*Acacia Street Mall.*

*That's not far from here.*

*That's not far from the precinct.*

*I would be on duty.*

*I would have made it.*

*Oh god, I would have made it.*

Honey turned the TV off, having caught on to what Judy had seen. She tossed the remote onto the table and fell into her chair. "Fuck," she breathed. She started to say more, but it fell short.

"If I was on duty, I would have been there." Judy was still looking at the blank TV. She could still read the subtitles. "*Not quick enough.*" She knew it would haunt her. Keep her up at night. Maybe for the rest of her life. She joined the ZPD to save lives, and right when she's off duty, she misses her chance.

"Stop it," Honey snapped. "Don't do that."

"I'm a rabbit," Judy said slowly. "Rabbits are faster than most animals."

"Stop that. That's bullshit. You hear me?"

Judy didn't say anything.
"Get down from there," Honey mumbled.

Judy flinched but didn't move.

Honey growled, much like a savage would, and leaned forward, easily plucking Judy off the tabletop and setting her down in a chair next to her own. "Look at me." Honey snapped her fingers in front of Judy's eyes. Snapped hard. "Look. Not your fault. Do they have cheetahs at your precinct?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Yes, they do. Cheetahs run seventy miles an hour, and they still didn't make it in time. And I promise you, no one was running. They were in their cars, hauling ass over there, and they didn't make it in time. Do you get it? Those mammals died, and it was no one's fault. No one's fault. Especially not yours."

"Not true," Judy growled at the floor. Her fists were balls. Her right foot was hammering on the floor.

"Bullshit! Judy, listen to yourself!"

The rabbit's eyes connected with Honey's. They were savage themselves. "Someone did this to that cougar. He didn't just kill three mammals on a whim. Someone made go savage. Someone made him kill them. Someone." Judy seethed for a moment, her breath constricted. "I will find that someone. They're out there, breathing the same air as us. The same air those three innocents were breathing just an hour ago. That's not fair."

"You have to calm down. You're shaking."

Judy stood up and pulled her scarf tighter around her neck. "I can't calm down until I do something about this." She made for the door.

Honey swore under her breath and stood in her way. "C'mon, you're being unreasonable. You're not some super-bunny."

Judy closed her eyes. "Honey, thank you for trying to help me, but I have things I have to do." She tried to brush past the badger in a fruitless attempt, considering Honey was near twice her size.

"Hold up. Stop." Honey put both paws on Judy's shoulders, looking the rabbit dead in her lavender eyes. "Even with this newfound determination, what do you expect to achieve?"

"Please, let go of me."

"No, you haven't finished your lunch yet, and that shredded salad isn't gonna do the trick." Honey fished her wallet from her pocket, grabbing Judy's wrist and dragging her to the vending machine. "Now," she said, revealing a pawful of ones, "what do you want. My treat, m'kay?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You know that's not true."

Judy pulled her wrist free from Honey's grip, glaring at her feet. "I don't have time for this."

"You don't have time to eat?"


Honey sighed, turning to the vending machine. "What did we say about taking care of yourself?" She fed in two dolors, buying a protein bar and a veggie drink. "Eat well, sleep well, and take care of
yourself. Because you deserve it…” she trailed off.

Judy was gone.

"…Dammit."

She was in her apartment until the streetlights came on outside, only leaving to access the printer in the local library once every few hours. In that time, the weed of red string and full documents typed in the smallest readable font spread to engulf almost an entire wall of her apartment.

There were six "branches" on the wall where the information as most dense, each of which covered a different savage predator. There was an image of each savage, along with a short report Judy had typed up herself, summarizing all the info she had gathered in her hours of web-surfing.

Nick and Gideon's branches nearly merged into one, with the savagery having occurred at the same location on the same night. Myra's was the first to occur in Zootopia, at Samson's, a joint serving predators and prey in a friendly atmosphere. Next was the lioness, Rana Leodora—at an all-accepting nightclub. Then Ivan Mustellan, the weasel who had sent a Pred-Prey-Peace rally into cohos. Finally, Theodore (Theo) Catamount, the cougar who had gone savage that morning.

He had been an employee at Suitopia, an outlet store at the Acacia Street Mall that provides formal wear for mammals of all sizes, from rodents to rhinos, felines to canines. Predators to prey. A fellow employee at Suitopia and acquaintance of Theodore said that he had been on break an hour before he sent savage. Not long after returning to his work, he vomited behind the cash register. He then excused himself to the food court to get something to drink, to ease his nausea. It was there, at approximately 9:35 AM, that he was reported crawling on all fours and snarling. There was a mass exodus from the food court, though due to all the mammals attempting to flee at once, there was a clog at the exits. By the time the court was evacuated, three were dead. One had been a member of mall security, failing to cover for the ZPD, who showed up only minutes later.

The similarities were obvious. Every savage had been present at a location that accommodated or even publicly supported both predator and prey customers. By targeting these locations, the bonds between predators and prey—already weak and recovering from the Bellwether scandal—were stretched thinner. They would snap if nothing was done about it, and such a fact left Judy feeling obligated, as an officer of the Zootopia Police Department, to protect her city.

But much like Honey had told her before, no matter how much she wanted to save the city, wanting and actually doing something were polar differences. She also didn't regard Honey's advice from earlier, the mantra that she had Judy repeat about eating, sleeping, and self-care. Judy hadn't eaten, and though her stomach continued to growl she disregarded it, almost to the point that she didn't notice the nagging hunger. There was a sandwich shop neighboring her apartment building, though every time her mind drifted to such thoughts she would remind herself of how long the line would be if she went. She couldn't bring herself to waste time, waiting for her Italian sub, while mammals were dying at the claws of savages. So she kept at it, growing more exhausted with every hour she put behind her.


Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

Her exhaustion reached a point that the words on her document weren't words anymore, rather small groupings of pixels that were as foreign as ancient glyphs to her bloodshot eyes. Despite the occasional optimistic comment to herself about persevering in the face of fatigue, she couldn't fight
the way her eyes wouldn't focus anymore, or how her eyelids had become back-breakingly heavy. Even the Nick in her head was too exhausted to encourage her, and that was saying something.

She hit the wall at hour nine, around seven thirty in the afternoon. And literally, she hit the wall. The corkboard was frustrating her. It was making faces at her that she didn't like. So she punched it. It bruised her knuckles and alerted Pronk next door.

"What's the fuss, rabbit? Facts not lining up?" his voice came through the wall.

Judy swore under her breath. "Don't you have something to do other than listen in on me? Where's Bucky?"

"He's at his fitness course!" he called.

"And you aren't with him?"

"Look, rabbit, I don't feel exactly comfortable letting you in on my personal life," Bucky said, though Judy had heard around three carbonated cans hiss open in the past few hours, so she drew her own conclusion as to why he stayed home.

"Oh, my bad," Judy mumbled under her breath, "didn't mean to intrude or anything."

"I heard that!"

She offered no apologies. Her aching knuckles were more pressing.

It was about time she allowed herself to close her laptop. It was her work-issued one, and no doubt there would eventually be a report given from one of the managers in computer resources to the head of the IT department, who would have a secretary shoot Bogo an email that one of the officers under him had spent nine hours researching private police material. He would know exactly who it was, and wouldn't be too happy to know how she had been spending her sabbatical.

But that was the future. This—sitting on the floor, her back to the wall, above her a mess of research with no ultimate conclusion—was the present. For a long while, she only sat. It felt good not to think.

After ten minutes of that, Judy's phone buzzed, and she was alert in an instant. Shifting her weight, she dug her phone from her pocket.

Mom: Heya, darling. Haven't heard a peep from you in a few days. How are things?

It was Bonnie Hopps' obligation to check in on her daughter at least once every three days, despite Judy having proven she could adapt to the city life just fine. Now, with Nick under medical care, Bonnie's routine checks became more frequent. Judy had been dismissing the texts and voicemails as of late, always coming up with a new excuse for what she was busy with. Normally, she wasn't lying. Tonight, though she still insisted to herself that there was more information to dig out, she couldn't bring herself to press another key on that keyboard, else her sanity may vacate to find a more stable mammal.

Besides, mothers have a queer sense—almost supernatural—of knowing when things just aren't right with their children. It appeared that Bonnie had been honing in on this sense and had picked up a distress signal.

Judy: Don't worry, I'm doing fine.
The response was near instantaneous.

M: *Fine is a cover word.*

M: You're worked up, aren't you?

J: Alright, you got me.

M: What's bugging you?

J: I've been working on this case for hours and I'm getting nowhere. I haven't come to any new conclusions. At all.

J: Other than the fact that I hate not having a printer.

J: That's what's bugging me.

M: I thought you were on break?

J: I'm off-duty, but that doesn't mean I don't have things to do.

M: :( 

M: Sorry, hun. You should give yourself a break once in a while.

J: Currently on it.

M: Maybe get a wink of sleep. It's late.

M: Is it later or earlier than Bunnyburrow in the city?

J: Zootopia's in the same time zone as BB.

M: Well it's late nevertheless.

J: I've still got work to do.

M: Maybe if you go to bed early tonight and get your rest, you can wake up tomorrow and be ready to finish your work.

J: Maybe so.

M: Honey, please take care of yourself. You seem worked up lately.

J: How so? I haven't really talked to you since I visited last month.

M: That's exactly my point.

M: You aren't talking to me.

M: Or your father, whose dying to see you sometime. You should give him a call once in a while.

J: I'm sorry.

J: I'll do that.

M: No need to be sorry. I know you're busy. Just please, don't let your work consume you.
M: Also, how’s Nick doing?

Judy stared at the text for a while before responding. It warmed her a little, the fact that her mother cared for her partner enough to check in. There was a large portion of her family that would rather forget that the fox existed.

J: Just as savage as ever.

J: I visit him every morning.

M: That’s a sweet thing to do.

M: About when will he recover?

J: The doctors expect it to be another month at least.

M: Then maybe we can have him over for New Years?

J: I’m not sure he’ll be better that soon.

M: Well, whenever he’s back on his feet, remind him we’d love to have him back at the burrows.

Though that may be the case for her mother, Judy had heard of some pretty violent backlash to the incidents in Bunnyburrow. Despite the progressive Mayor Buttercup, the public hadn’t reacted well to the two savage foxes in their town square. She remembered hearing reports of a few local predators being beaten on the streets by gangs of locals, and shops refusing service to predators that they didn’t know personally. It had gained decent media coverage, showing that the unrest between predators and prey was extending far beyond Zootopia alone.

J: I’m sure he’d like to visit again. The kits took to him quickly.

M: Some of your siblings still talk about him. Especially Cotton. She wants to paint something for him and send it through the mail.

J: That’s adorable.

J: Tell her I can get it to him if she decides to.

M: Sure thing.

M: I’ll get out of your fur, only so long as you go to bed now and save the work for the morning.

M: You’re off duty. You can afford it.

M: And the morning offers a fresh mind.

Sleep had already tempted her many times that night. Working right next to her bed didn't help either. This was the breaking point, though, and she convinced herself that she had done enough today. The wall above her spoke for itself.

J: Okay, I will.

M: Pinky promise?

J: If that were possible over the phone.
M: :P

M: Alright, then. Goodnight, darling. Get sleep for me.


She had almost closed out of her messages when it caught her eye, and immediately she wished that it hadn't. Emotionally, she has been treading on thin ice for quite a while, and something like this might be a little too much weight.

Ultimately, she was unable to stop herself.

She opened a new contact and scrolled through the messages.

Nick (Blueberries)

Fri, Nov 26, 9:56 PM

N: whyd you have to grow up in the middle of nowhere

N: I looked up bunnyburrow on zoogle to get a grasp of where im going

N: and I only got carrot fields

J: You can still return your ticket, you know.

N: please tell me there are actual buildings there

N: and not just holes in the ground

J: There 's a little bit of both, actually.

N: you grew up in a house right?

N: not just some hole in the ground

N: carrots

N: ?

N: paging dr cottontail

J: Sorry, had to prep dinner.

N: carrot stew perhaps?

J: Lasagna.

J: You 're a whole bag of laughs tonight.

N: I do try ;)

N: anyway my question

N: please tell me you grew up in a house

N: and not a hole
J: Yes, actually. Contrary to the trend of most leporine families, my mother wanted a house. A country-style home with a big wrap-around porch had been her dream since she was a teen.

J: Also she's claustrophobic, so holes don't go over well with her.

N: a claustrophobic rabbit

N: isn't that an oxymoron?

J: Shuddap.

N: didn't think natural selection would even tolerate claustrophobic rabbits

N: if it were ancient times and I saw a rabbit too scared to burrow up for the winter

N: dinnertime ;)

J: You're not funny.

J: And didn't foxes hibernate in the winter?

N: im funny when the other person can enjoy morbid humor

N: and no, foxes don't hibernate

N: all the better to hunt down claustrophobic rabbits

J: If you get too annoying, I can and will blackmail you. :P

N: ooooooo blackmail

N: I've trained you well young one

J: I could leak your little secret.

N: which one

J: You know which.

N: I really don't

J: I'll give you a hint. It involves the sensitivity of your tail.

N: carrots you wouldn't dare

J: Don't test me, Wilde.

N: if you tell anyone id have no choice but to kill you ;)

J: What if I let Bogo in on your little secret?

N: not even funny

J: What if he revealed that you were ticklish in the middle of bullpen?

J: How do you think the others would react?
J :)

N: don't speak of such horrors

N: also I know what you sleep with 100 stuffed bunnies every night

N: and you know all their names by memory

N: we even?

J: Even.

J: Alright, I need some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow, slick.

N: but it's only ten

N: the night is young

N: oh right you rabbits aren't nocturnal

J: Goodnight, Nick.

N: alright alright

N: night carrots, sleep tight

Sat Nov 26, 8:33 PM

J: Get over here, the parade is about to start.

N: here?

N: very specific

J: Lamppost.

J: Corner of Main Street and Cottontail Lane.

J: By the fountain.

N: coming

Sat, Nov 26, 10:18 PM

J: Dude, it's been like twenty minutes.

J: How long does it take you to use the restroom?

J: Everything okay in there?

The longer she stared, the deeper her stomach sank.

Then, an idea. Not one that she particularly liked, but again, she couldn't stop herself.

Nick (Blueberries)

Today, 9:21 AM
J: I miss you a lot.

J: Why does stuff like this happen to mammals like you?

J: Or to anyone?

J: There have been five attacks now.

J: I promise I’ll find out who did this.

J: Until then, please get better soon.

J: And when I say soon, I mean SOON. Because I need somebody to buy me coffee, and I’m practically broke right now. I'm a police officer, not a neurosurgeon, and I can't afford nice things 24/7.

J: You know, I never thought I’d want to hear your sarcastic quips as badly as I want to right now.

J: Or to hear anything.

J: It’s too quiet without you here.

She shut off her phone. For hours she could go on like that, spamming her savage partner, and it would get her nowhere. It was a trap she couldn't fall for, especially when the one behind the present mess was at large.

"Alright, mom," she picked herself up off the floor, "I'll heed your advice if only this once." And she made for her bed.

Sleep didn't come easy. The unused red string was like an itch that she couldn't reach, but she wouldn't let herself out from under the covers. When sleep did come, the string was still there, and it was coiling around her legs. It slipped its way up her middle and around her neck, where it squeezed tight. Tighter still. She could feel the blood in her head pooling with nowhere to go, pushing at her eyes and throbbing in her ears until she thought she just might pop.

Only seconds before exploding, her phone wrung, and she was sitting up in bed as if she had never fallen asleep at all. She rubbed her neck and swung her feet over the side of the bed.

On her bedside table, her phone chimed. Next to it was her alarm clock, reading 3:02 AM. At least three hours until dawn, and thanks to the nightmare, sleep had much lost its appeal.

This wasn't to say that she wasn't tired. Fatigued to her limits, in fact.

She picked up the phone, expecting the worst. It always was the worst when receiving a call this late. Her mother, perhaps, explaining in that panicked yet maintained tone of voice that something had happened to one of the kits. Or Bogo, just having received the report of her hours of scavenging private ZPD documents while off-duty and telling her that she needn't bother in coming back in at the end of her sabbatical, just to leave her badge with Clawhauser later that morning.

Fortunately, it was an unknown number. Her brothers and sisters were safe in their beds. Her badge would remain hers come daybreak.

She went to decline, but considered the effort it would take for her to fall back asleep, and thought Why not? If they, whoever that might be, are calling this late at night, it must be important.

So she accepted the call and brought it to her ear. "'Ello?" The gravely sound of her own voice
The audio was faint, but she could discern a conversation, just close enough to audible that she might have been able to make out a few words if the sound didn't repetitively come in and out.

Clearing her throat, she spoke again. "Hello, who is this?"

Nothing about the audio changed. She heard what might be a laugh in the conversation.

"This is a private number," she said.

Still nothing.

With a sigh, she hung up and tossed her phone back onto the night table. Sleep wouldn't return easily, this she knew.

All because somebody butt dialed me in the midst of their late night...uh... What could anyone be doing this late? Even the most seasoned of bar-hoppers had turned in for the night by now.

She knew her father's two cents would be, "Nothing good ever happens past midnight." It was something he had started telling her once she received her license as a teen when a curfew was being established.

Whatever the purpose of the call, frankly, Judy thought nothing of it. She laid back down, at least satisfied that the call offered respite from strangling red strings. When sleep returned, it was shallow, but Nick was there this time.


In her thin sleep, she smiled back.

*Zoosies is Zootopia's version of Newsies, the Disney Musical. This pun is shown in depth in "The Many Adventures of St. Zoo High" by lTT4k3sTw0, though since I'm only mentioning this briefly, I believe that I haven't stepped on anyone's tail. Though if I have, please inform me.

A/N: As with most of these chapters, I'm sorry I didn't get this one out sooner. Me making any kind of update-schedule is like trying to predict the end of the world: it will happen at some point, but nobody knows when the hell that will be, and trying to plan for a date is a waste of time. Nevertheless, I write. The updates will come.

I feel that the ball has officially gotten rolling with this story. This chapter was so much easier to write than the first few. My last chapter received some of the most positive reviews out of anything I have ever gotten, and to that, I'd like to thank everyone who took the time to write me. It is ALWAYS appreciated, and the feedback keeps me going, both positive and negative. I'm just glad I've written something worth responding to.

I said this in my last chapter's AN, though I'd like to say it again just in case you missed it. Nick will be returning in this story and will play a significant role—just as he did at the start of the story—further on in the plot. I promise I haven't written him out of this. I'd never do such a thing—he is my favorite character. There will be more of him, and I can't wait to get to it. I'm sure you can't wait either, so I'll write as quickly as I can for both our sakes.

In the meantime, I hope that the story isn't slowing down too much. There's a lot of middle in
this story. If you don't like the meat in the middle, you best stop reading, because I've written a lot of it already and there's plenty more to come before the conclusion. And on the topic of mid-story elements, thoughts on Harvey J? I'm loving his personality, really fun to write. Expect more from him. Also, the question of the day: is Harvey gay? More, after the break!

(If anyone has any problems with LGBT+ elements in this story, know that this story won't revolve around such elements, though will include them here and there. If you're not a fan, I'm afraid we might not get along too well, as I'm a member of the LGBT+ community myself. Again, don't feel that anyone's being gay will become a prime plot point in this story—it won't, and none of the main characters from the movie will have any changes in their sexuality—though an occasional OC might be a part of the community. Not your cup of tea? This is a diverse fandom, and I'm sure you can find a story that better suits your fancy.)

One last thing, in my previous AN I asked if it was a good idea to begin writing a story I had planned and was excited to write. As much as I love the idea (and as much as I think you readers would like it too), for the sake of this story and the one to come, I have decided to continue writing only When the Stars Align as to not overexert my already lenient work ethic. I'm afraid that another story might make writing that one and finishing this one an impossible task to do simultaneously. I do plan to reach the end of this story, though, and if (as one of my reviewers said) Zootopia 3 is out by the time it happens, I'd probably still have the desire to write more. As long as you guys are there to read, I'm here to write.

I hope all of you have had a lovely time reading, and if you enjoyed it, have any criticism, or thought I could do better, please let me know in the reviews.

Until next time, you lovely people.

- Trenton.
It had been two weeks since she had met Harvey, and never once had she seen him angry. The guy seemed like the type to never lose his composure, let alone allow that lopsided, half-hearted smile to falter. Despite this, the hare appeared to have concealed another side of himself almost equal in fright-factor to Fulgens when he was heated, and Judy was getting the full force of it.

Not to say she didn't deserve it.

"I'm taking you home." His tone left no room for rebuttals.

"Harvey," was all she could think to say. "I'm really—"

"Stop." He didn't look at her while throwing his coat over his shoulders. "I'm not going to hear any of it." He turned around now, and his yellow-gold eyes seemed darker than usual. "My whole purpose here is to ensure this never happens."

"But it wasn't your fault," Judy tried to reason with him, though found it much like reasoning with a thunderhead not to rain.

"No, it wasn't." He said matter-of-factly, bordering on self-righteously, which was valid given the circumstances. "But if I don't do something about it—now that you've nearly killed yourself—then it will be my fault when you do get yourself killed." He turned for the door without a glance at her. "I don't wanna have to tell Bogo I let his best officer die under my watch, so we're going home."

Judy stumbled over her thoughts, still trying to wrap her mind around this new side of a hare she thought she had pinpointed. She jogged to catch up with him. "You don't even know where I live."

The reply was easy. "You'll give me your address in the car."

For whatever reason, this frustrated her more than anything else. She had only known the hare for a fortnight, and yet here he was giving her orders. Sure, she should have gotten more sleep recently, should have put off the dead-end attempts at research until the next day. The sleeping pills at five in the morning probably weren't the best idea either, she was still feeling their effects. And the headache it had given her when she downed double-shot espresso only two hours later that morning could have been better timed, or at least saved for lunch.

She turned around to where Honey was standing outside Nick's cell as if she would defend her—but from what? From the one guy who was trying to take care of her when she wasn't doing a good enough job herself?

When she met Honey's eyes, she saw something like motherly disappointment in them, and whatever anger had been stirring inside drowned in guilt and embarrassment. Her ears fell.

"You heard the hare," was all she said, giving a small nod towards the door where Harvey was waiting, his foot thumping much like Judy often did herself.

She had fallen asleep in a savage's cell.

Harvey's alert nature had been the only thing to save her life because Honey was sedating a
wolverine two cells over. It hadn't been more than a minute or two that she had dozed off, but it had been enough. Savage Containment had been getting busier by the day, and the steady flow of savages being carted in was both unsettling and overwhelming, especially for Honey, the head of the savage-rehabilitation effort.

On an average day, the process of washing each a savage would take no longer than two minutes. She'd then return to the door, give a good hard knock, and Honey would come to unlock the door. However, there had never been a good hard knock because she had been washing Nick, which meant she usually took a few extra minutes to sit, pet, and even enact one-sided conversations with the savage—what could she say, she had a bias for her fox. He got special privileges.

The disturbing lack of sleep this week, however, did not bode well for her. Especially when taking into account the dim lighting on the Feral Floor and the relaxing, almost sleep-inducing action of repetitively running her fingers through the fox's crimson fur. At least, on the optimistic side, some earlier savages—Nick included—were showing signs of their rehab. There was less hissing and growling when they were awake and more sitting around and watching. Their stares had become more curious than malevolent. Not that they were safe to cuddle with, but that Judy had allowed more leniency around Nick, Gideon, Myra, and the earlier savages. Honey predicted around two more weeks until they would no longer be hostile and could go upstairs to a room with a bed, and that complete consciousness should follow a few weeks after that.

She had been thinking about work, or the research she had come to call work, but there wasn't much new to think. Same parallels, no breakthroughs, not to mention she got another call from an unknown number—different number, same audio. There had been a faint conversation, something about waiting it out. She hadn't been paying much attention until something along the lines of "… take it easy…fear run its course…” piqued her interest. She'd tried to listen closer, though the audio was shot to shit, as her brother Jade loved to say about anything breaking or broken. She eventually hung up, deeming her trying to comprehend it a hopeless case. However, she had told Harvey about it when she'd first walked in. He had told her to notify Bogo if it happened again.

"Could, I dunno, be some kind of hint," he had said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Possibly a threat, it's too little info to be sure."

She'd been trying to make sense of it when she heard dull banging. A muffled voice was calling her name, and she wasn't sure why. She wasn't sure of anything at that moment, though once her mind had thawed, she realized she had fallen asleep. It was only a few minutes. I hardly knew that I had dozed off in the first place! What's he so worked up about?

Harvey was standing on the other side of the glass. His face contorted into a frightened grimace. He was pounding on the glass with both paws. Her mind still foggy with fatigue, she didn't quite connect the dots as to what he was so concerned about until she felt something independent of her own will. Something moving under her arm. Something damp and soft, smelling kind of musty, and it was twitching, and swelling and falling, twitching more, and kicking now, and—Oh sweet cheese and crackers—Nick!

The mental fog lifted in an instant. Nick was moving. One of his eyes—it was the only one she could see from how he was lying on his side—fluttered open, looked ahead, around, then found and locked onto her with a sudden, ravenous fascination.

She had drifted off with one paw resting on Nick, and this seemed to be equally shocking to both parties involved.

"Doctor!" Harvey was shouting. "Doc, get over here! He's awake! No, not that kind of awake! Judy's in there!"
Honey came into view in an instant. She assessed the situation in a split-second glance. The badger's fear scared Judy the most—she had never seen Honey break her smooth, easy-going facade. The fresh horror in her eyes was more terrifying than the savage behind her.

Honey scrambled to enter the passcode. She never said a world.

Judy stood up on wobbly knees and backed towards the door. "You can't just open it, he could get through!" she shouted. Part of her regretted it, especially with the savage now growling, slobbering, fighting the anesthesia. She had seen the savages rise before. The anesthesia made rousing slow, so much so they usually just laid there on the ground, half-conscious for up to twenty minutes. This, of course, was when they didn't wake to find a perfectly vulnerable rabbit in the cell with them. The savage was fighting the sedative hard, its eyes never leaving Judy.

"You'll die if I don't, Hopps," Honey said, her voice raised to be audible through the glass. An odd thought crossed Judy's mind at that moment—Honey would make a spectacular instructor at the police academy. She had the authoritative voice down to a science. "Get as close to me as you can. No running, nothing sudden. And stay calm, whatever you do."

The savage had just stood up on all fours, disoriented though quickly regaining his bearings. The growling was louder, more ferocious than before, its canines bared. Its dilated eyes never left its prey.

"He's up!" Harvey shouted

"I see that!" Honey called back, flustered, her collected facade crumbling. "Hopps, get to the door. I'm ready to unlock it."

Right then, the savage charged from only feet away. Its bared teeth were open, no doubt to manage the throat.

"Open the door!" Harvey cried.

Honey did just that, though only enough so he could slip through. A key factor in Judy Hopps' survival was the slight advantage of a hare's speed over a fox's.

Harvey dove on Judy, practically tackling her to the side as Nick pounced, one claw grazing Harvey's uniform just enough to split the fabric on the shoulder. Both officers followed through on their training, rebounding back on their feet, though the savage was quick to recover as well. Back on all fours, he was ready to pounce again.

Harvey gave Judy a shove towards the door, and right as the savage lunged, he took a sudden stride towards the fox and leaped. Both were airborne, the savage with his claws extended, and Harvey, his legs retracting. The kick was delivered in a flash, so fast Judy could hardly register it. Nick recoiled, still airborne. He stumbled to the ground where he rolled into the wall with a whine. Harvey landed in a sprint for the door.

The power of a hare's kick was something Judy had heard a few times during her childhood. She remembered that, in a boxing class she had taken her junior year at BBHS, her instructor had been a hare. He always had the students practice among themselves, never involving himself, and for good reason. Just to demonstrate, the guy would tell one student to throw something at him—something like a water bottle. He could send it airborne across the room and into the wall like he had thrown it himself. None of the bucks had ever matched his kick, and the instructor explained that they needn't worry, that a hare's kick comes genetically.

The savage was pawing at its nose, stumbling back onto all fours. Still in shock, Judy lurched when
two paws found her shoulders

"Go!" Harvey hissed, shoving Judy towards the door. She reached it easily, though the whimper behind her had turned back to growls, even more fierce than before. The savage was angry and quite literally hungry for vengeance.

The door wasn't far. Judy made it through the doorway where Honey was waiting to pull her through. Honey was there waiting and pulled her through with surprising strength. She turned around just in time to see Harvey brought to the ground.

Inside the cell, there was a groan through gritted teeth.

"Harvey!" Judy screamed. Her instinct might have led her to sprint back into the cell if not for Honey stopping her.

The hare was on the ground with the savage latched to his leg, just above the ankle. There was blood on the floor—whether it was from the savage's mouth or from Harvey's leg she couldn't tell.

Harvey turned onto his stomach mere inches from the door. "Get back," he said to Honey through his teeth. "I can make it." One paw found the door frame, then the other, and he held on with white knuckles. The savage growled, unrelenting. If it gained enough of a grip, it would thrash.

Honey reached through the door. "Give me your paw."

"I said get back. He'll get through!"

"Give me your paw," Honey demanded.

The two met eyes for a small moment-interchanging trust, perhaps—then Harvey heaved himself forward, arms outstretches. Honey grabbed both his wrists, though now the savage was pulling back. Honey looked over her shoulder and hissed, "Make yourself useful, officer." Judy joined Honey, pulling on Harvey's arms while the savage tugged back.

It was a morose game of tug-a-war, played with a living rope that could easily snap under enough strain. This, however, didn't stop the savage from tugging harder.

Harvey, remembering he had a free leg, looked back at the predator latched to his ankle. He kicked its snout once. A growl—it bit down harder. Harvey stifled a yell, biting his lip, and wasted no time in kicking again. Then again. There was blood on his foot. Blood on his leg, on the savage's snout. Blood dotting the floor. Another kick and the savage released enough for Harvey to pull his leg free.

The savage sulked away drunkenly. It shook its head back and forth, flecks of blood splattering on the glass. With a final pull, they dragged Harvey through the door. Honey heaved the door shut, firing all locks and staggering backward.

For a moment, Honey, Judy, Harvey, the savage, everyone panted.

Then the doctor remembered her place. "Lemme see it. Roll over," she said.

Harvey maneuvered as to expose where a full set of predatory teeth had left a bloody semi-circle around his ankle. Honey said nothing, surely she had seen worse.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Harvey said. For seeming so insecure, the hare appeared surprisingly collected for just having escaped the bloody jaws of a savage. "Couldn't get a very good grip."
"I'll get you cleaned up," Honey said, making for an emergency first aid kit fastened a nearby wall.

Judy said nothing, in fact, she was embarrassed to think, to even breathe too loudly in fear the others might notice her. She hadn't felt this insecure since junior high when someone had leaked footage of her younger self wearing a police uniform two sizes too large and posing heroically in the bathroom mirror.

Her mind was a knot she was still untangling. Everything had happened too fast for her to catch up. Had it not been for Harvey's notice, it would have been her blood speckled on the glass.

_Though because he noticed, it's his blood_, she thought, and sunk with guilt.

Honey cleaned and bandaged Harvey's wound, all the while he dug his nails into his palm, clearly not mentioning that it was more painful than he let on. Judy watched, feeling somehow like a third wheel and the center of attention at once. Feeling watched, though not by Honey or Harvey, Judy turned and sure enough found the savage glaring at her, if a feral could glare. Its sunken, black eyes never left her. She never saw him blink. It was a horrifying image, one that would burn into her brain and stay there for days, though especially nights. _The one that got away_, its eyes seemed to say, panting, its muzzle wet.

_Not Nick_, she reminded herself. _Nick isn't like that. He would never hurt me._ But she was forgetting what Nick was like. His voice wasn't as clear in her mind anymore, and whenever she heard him talking, it most often sounded like the voice of the last mammal she had talked with, or even her own voice. She would go back in her camera roll just to see that smirk on his face because all the mornings of seeing that savage stalk and growl had deteriorated her spirit. _I can't forget him. If I forget, I'll die._

She followed Harvey to his car without a word passed between them or to anyone else. Luckily Fulgens hadn't noticed the two on their way out, though he would certainly receive word of the incident soon. Oliver had been the only one to notice the two, though too occupied with two skunks at the front desk and only had time to offer Judy a short wave as she passed.

When they got to Harvey's car, a black hybrid with a "Pred-Prey-Peace" bumper sticker, he wasted no time in getting in the driver's side and closing the door. Judy had not been so fast. He only acknowledged her when she did not open the door and join him.

The passenger window rolled down. "Well?"

Judy looked away. "I can just take the train."

"I'm burning gas."

"Harvey, you don't have to."

"I'm fully aware, but I will see that you get home. I don't care that it's still morning. I don't care where you live or how long it takes to get there. You're getting your sleep."

"I'm really sorry." She didn't know why it only came out now, not when he was sitting on the floor, a bleeding bite-wound around his ankle. Mammals passing by were picking up on the drama—some rabbit, shivering in the cold and, colder still, the guilt. She felt them watching. It made her want to curl up somewhere dark and small and stay hidden until everyone forgot about her, though unoccupied spaces were scarce in Zootopia, and the hare wasn't going anywhere.

"I..." she considered her worlds cautiously, "I don't know what I was thinking. Really, I don't. I'm always full alert down there, I swear, that never happens. Not ever. And I'm so sorry, Harvey."
"It's fine. Just get inside," Harvey sighed, rolling the window back up.

She listened this time, getting in and silently buckling her seat-belt. The car soundlessly pulled away from the parking lot. The morning rush was over, so it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to reach the Grand Pangolin Arms.

"Tell me where I'm going," was all Harvey said. She sheepishly gave directions, and they were at her apartment minutes later.

"Here?" He seemed to have his doubts. The Pangolin was cramped between several larger residential buildings, its red brick orange in some places where the air-conditioners that hung out each window had dripped. A small mountain of black trash bags lay frozen near the front steps. The once-elegant angelic armadillos acting as gargoyles on the roof had lost limbs and heads with time.

"You're an officer too," Judy muttered, "you know the salary."

He looked up at the building and hardly stifled his cringe. "You could find better."

"I'm just gonna go inside."

"Hold on, I'll park."

Judy began to thank him for the ride, planning not to forget one last apology that still wouldn't compensate for the bloody bandage around his calf, but the hare was already stepping out of the vehicle. "You coming?" he called from outside.

She climbed out. "You really don't have to. I can make it from here."

"You told Honey the same about washing the savages, didn't you?"

"Yeah, well, this is different. My room's right there." She pointed a few floors up.

"And I'll walk you there."

Even bearing the guilt, she couldn't help the annoyed groan.

"Look, have you been taking care of yourself recently?" He didn't wait for her answer. "No, you haven't, in fact, you've been compromising your own safety by proceeding to do a very dangerous job on little sleep. I can see it in the bags under your eyes, you're running on maybe two hours a day? Three? That's not enough to do anything, Hopps. That's not enough to survive.

"I know you don't want some guy like me to have to swoop in and save your ass, believe me, I wouldn't either, but if you can't care for Judy Hopps, then somebody's got to. Bogo assigned me to you because he knew you were in a tough place. He expected you to give yourself a hard time and was right. You almost died this morning. Think about that—died. Dead. All for what? Not enough shut-eye?"

She couldn't find it in herself to argue. Having dozed off in a cell with a savage mammal, what was left to defend? This morning had been the proof—she could manage everything but her own needs. Not to mention, she was tired. Weak and exhausted. Guilty as charged.

So she followed him to the elevator and up to her floor, then to her door, where she took an awkwardly long amount of time for her to fish her keys from her tight jeans pockets. She opened the door to a dark room, afraid to turn on the lights and expose the mess to anyone but herself. Cleanliness hadn't been at the forefront of her mind for weeks.
When she didn't go for the lights, Harvey passed her, finding the switch and, in doing so, trudging through a pile of neglected clothes and nearly losing his balance.

The lights flickered on to reveal an unholy mess. Papers had completely overtaken one wall. Excess string, crumpled up balls of tape, highlighters, and even thumbtacks were haphazardly scattered along the base of the wall. Her office chair was hardly recognizable underneath the hoodies and old garments thrown over it. Coat hangers adorned the arm-rests like ornaments on a queer tree. Her desk was a war-zone, a battle of space and priority between heaping mountains of papers and old takeout boxes, used utensils, and empty cans of espresso. The sheets on her bed were draping over the sides and onto the floor, the pillowcase worked halfway off the pillow. To top it all off, the window was open a little, though only a little was enough to make the room just as cold as the outside. This was the first thing Harvey noticed.

"My god, it's freezing," was Harvey's first remark. He walked inside as if he were perusing through a ludicrous art museum, trying to take in and understand every detail of disarray. He made for the window and heaved it closed, locking the latches and turning to Judy like she had grown antlers in place of her ears. "You leave your window open? In December? Are you mad?"

"It…kept me awake. The cold." Judy stepped inside, closing the door and making her way around the heaps and piles to her bed, where she sat and shivered.

Harvey scoffed, and went right on to the next "exhibit," her nightstand. "What are these?" He asked accusingly, taking a small orange bottle full of white tablets. "Are these sleeping pills?"

Judy just nodded. What else was there to do, lie and say she had problems with gas reflex?

He put the bottle down and made for the desk, sifting through page after page. Judy didn't stop him. Not like he could make any worse of a mess with what he was given.

"Half of these aren't even finished. Jeez, Judy, look at all of this. You left off halfway through a sentence. Why'd you even print all this out?"

"For…I dunno." She had honestly forgotten most of the content she had written. The reports on local restaurants or establishments affected by the attacks seemed reminiscent of the time-filling assignments she used to receive in high school. "Research? It's something, at least."

"Something, hmm?" Harvey looked at her like the pills on her bedside had been anti-psychotics, and that she had been neglecting them. He turned on her desk lamp with one paw, reading a page he had selected with the other. "'Ham's Grill has a history of recalls going as far back as'…what? As far back as what? I wouldn't call this something. It's a waste of your time. Hasn't the doctor told you that the people at the lab are already doing this research? You could be resting, and cleaning your room, and eating real food," he picked up one of the empty cans and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket, "instead of this. Look, half of the words aren't spelled right. Were you sober when you wrote this? 'Locals says the establisment strugged from a lack of empolyment due to it's proximity to Police Staion no.34'? You've got spelling errors out the wazoo, and that's not counting the grammar."

"You come all the way up here to be my spellcheck?" Judy sighed, flopping back onto her bed. The mattress was cold and stiff and about as comfortable as a rock.

Harvey tossed the page away. "This is a problem."

"You've made that very clear."

"No, I'm serious. I mean, come on Judy, you see this?" He walked over to a pile of clothes near the
"You've got clothes dangerously close to this space heater. Have you ever seen an apartment fire? Like, on the news or something? The whole place goes up and the surrounding buildings too if it's not contained. You've got mammals stranded on the roof, others trapped in their rooms waving out open windows. You don't wanna be responsible for something like that." He kicks the clothes aside and turns down the heater's power. "And over here," he went back to the desk and picked up a paper bag with the logo "Salad Shack" warped from where a nearby paper cup had sweat enough to soak it. It dripped when he picked it up and tossed it too into the bin. "I can see your dietary history going back, what? Two weeks? This isn't normal. Hell, Judy, this isn't safe!"

"This isn't like me." She said, both to him and to herself. She wanted both to hear it. "I swear to you, I'm one of the neatest mammals you'll ever meet." She stared at the ceiling as she spoke while Harvey cleaned off the remnants of old meals from her workspace. "I used to drive Nick crazy at his apartment, trying to tame the messes he made." She chuckled a little. "He used to tell me I had undiagnosed clinical OCD." Her laugh quickly fell flat.

Harvey cleared off the war-zone—it appears the leftover food lost the battle for desk space, her trash bin choking with paper bags and soggy cups—and made his way to her bed. He sat near her feet.

"I know we just met," he said, turning to meet her eyes, a deeply sincere, deeply concerned tone in his voice, "but I care about you, Judy. You're supposed to be my icon, remember? First graduate of the ZPD academy to be a rabbit, or anything smaller than an otter for that matter. Seeing you succumb to this, it scares me."

They sat in silence on her bed. His eyes drifted away from hers and found the floor.

"I'm sorry about today," Judy said. "I really am, and I can't apologize enough to make up for it."

"You can make up for it by promising you'll sleep. And that you'll clean tomorrow. I'd help if I weren't on duty."

"I'll do it. Promise. I just got so caught up in everything."

"It happens sometimes."

"Yeah, but this time it went too far. Just looking around is enough to see that," she chuckled wryly, "things were getting to me. All the reports I've been doing, they don't make sense. It makes nothing better for me, after ten documents written in the style of a police report and nothing but new faces and frustration to take away from it. Whoever is doing this isn't having a hard time clearing their tracks. Would have found something by now, surely," she trailed off.

"Are you okay? After today, and what happened in containment." He was treading lightly over his words. "Seeing your partner…you know…"

"It doesn't get to me like it used to," Judy said, speaking plainly. She didn't want to linger on anything she said. Her emotions had a recent past of overruning her, and she strained not to let it happen. Not in front of Harvey. "At first, I still saw him as Nick. Then I realized that Nick wasn't I was seeing. If anything, what happened today made that even more clear. I know Nick would never hurt me."

Harvey nodded. "I'd like to meet him. When he wakes up."

As always, Judy took comfort in the when. "You two would get along. That is, assuming he doesn't think you're into me." She laughed, then came to a realization that should have been more obvious from long ago. It was practically hanging under her nose. Nick never liked it when she got too close
with anyone else, even though her only relationships were platonic, if not familial. In the past, she had written it off as a kind of protective nature common between partners in blue. That had made sense to her, as she was often safeguarding Nick too, but it made little sense anymore. In fact, it seemed more like jealousy than anything else.

That’s…very interesting…

Harvey had laughed too. "I didn't think that would be such a problem, with the whole Homo-Harvey thing you resurrected."

Judy smiled and shook her head. "Sorry, that was rather insensitive of me."

"No, no, you're fine. I've been known to date around in the past."

"So, boys then?"

"Boys and girls." He shrugged. "I don't like the whole labels thing, but if I had to go by something, then I'd be bi."

"Hmm," was all Judy said.

"Anywho, you shouldn't worry about your partner. All savages have a 100% recovery rate, and the staff at containment knows what they're doing."

"Honey said he'd be up not long after New Years."

"You can welcome him into the new year, bring him some party-poppers and champagne in the hospital."

Judy laughed at this more than Harvey expected, though it was because Harvey didn't know Nick personally. Judy knew exactly how much of a ball the fox would have with a paw full of confetti poppers and a bottle of champagne, even in a hospital.

"It wouldn't be the most illegal thing I've done," she could hear the Nick in her head say, and she was happy to hear him. It had been a while since he had last appeared.

"Thank you, Harvey." Judy sat up. "I needed a little tough love, as you can obviously see." She gestured to the room in shambles.

"Anytime," he said, smiling. "I'm happy to help." His eyes weren't so dark anymore. They glimmered in the morning light coming through the window.

And then he did something she didn't expect. Leaning forward, he gently wrapped an arm around her shoulder and, perhaps testing the waters, pulled her into a soft embrace. His scent was something like vanilla and orange, probably cologne, and it was just light enough for her to catch a whiff before he drew back, smiling. A hint of insecurity had crept back into his smile, but it was cute.

"I'll get out of your fur." He got up from the bed. "Just, please, don't set anything on fire."

"I think I've learned my lesson, thank you, fire marshal."

"Hey, I'm being serious," though he was grinning. "Wouldn't wanna torch a grand ol' place like this."

"Oh, never."
Before he went he straightened out some clothes and turned up the heater, now that it was a safe distance from anything remotely flammable. With a final wave over his shoulder, he left. His soft footfalls faded into the radiator's faint ticking.

She slept soundly. For the first time in a month, she had a good dream.

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A brisk evening in late November, hours before Nick's savagery...

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The opponent was waiting in his chair when Al entered the room. It appeared he had set the board as usual though Al doubted there would much time for a game.

"I must thank you again," Al said, sitting down promptly. "I realize time is not a cheap commodity of yours."

"Advanced notice would be nice, I will admit, though I'm sure you mean business. And speaking of business, let's get down to it." He advanced a pawn.

Al advanced his knight. He wasn't feeling much for chess today. There were more pressing matters at hand than the upright status of his king. "Of course. It has to do with Bunnyburrow."

The opponent frowned. "Bunnyburrow? Is the target still in range? Oh, what was his name again, that baker?"

"Gideon Grey, sir, and he's still in town, no need to worry."

"Then what? Was the ticket confiscated? God, you know, I never should have trusted a weasel." Al watched a sudden fire ignite in his opponent's eyes. It was frightening and came out of nowhere, especially considering how large his opponent was compared to him. "If this goes sour, I'll have him ground into little bite-sized pieces."

"No, no. All's well in Bunnyburrow. I wouldn't consider grinding the weasel into anything, considering he's just reported Nicholas Wilde to be on the scene."

For the first time, it appeared that the opponent had been genuinely surprised. "And his counterpart?"

"Yes, Hopps is there too," Al said, absent-mindedly pushing a pawn two spaces forward.

The opponent laughed aloud. "Ah ha! Isn't this getting fun! Wildehopps has stepped up to the plate!"

"Sir, I realize where you're going with this, but we should consider—"

"I'll have a second ticket sent down there ASAP." He was beaming now. "Two savages in one night! It's Christmas!"

"Sir—"

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! You tell that weasel I'm promoting him to the big leagues as soon as he does the job."

"Sir, do understand that if we follow through with this, we'll be involving two of the ZPD's most promising officers in recent history."

"I know. Perfect, isn't it? Now we're in it with the ZPD. We're gonna be red hot!"
Al shot his opponent a questioning glance. He had forgotten about the game. "Is that really such a
great thing? We could always leave Wilde out of it and keep the police off our tails for the time
being. If we target one of their officers, it'll be mainstream news by morning."

"Oh, I realize, and that's exactly the point. I want every mammal within a hundred miles of this city
to know that two foxes mysteriously went feral in one night. Well, it's not like they haven't heard of
savages before, but I'm not trying to evoke questions. I want fear. I don't care if they know how it's
happening, they won't know why. Take the why from them, you take the comfort. And in
Bunnyburrow of all places! What a spectacular place to begin. Imagine the panic. No one will feel
safe."

"Keep in mind the last time Hopps and Wilde were provoked they brought down Lionheart and
Bellwether."

The opponent shrugged. "Maybe if we're lucky, they'll get us too. Put our names up there with the
greats."

Al felt himself gawking rather stupidly. "I'm sorry?"

"Getting caught is the acme of any mass-criminal's career, Al."

"Please don't use that name."

"Personally, I'd like to be caught," he placed a paw to his chest, seeming almost blissful in
fantasizing over the thought. "It's how you get your credit. But don't worry, my friend. My time to
fall from this position is coming, and when I do, you're first in line for the throne."

"You never told me how that's going to work."

"Ah ah, no need to get ahead. You'll see in time. For now, we have two unsuspecting foxes about to
lose their minds and I have just taken your rook."

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A/N: To everyone reading this on the publication date, March 4th, 2019, happy third
anniversary of Zootopia! I'm glad to see the fandom is around to celebrate.

This chapter is significantly shorter than most of the others, I'm sure you've noticed, though
simply put, I weeded through the chapter's content and found most of it to be unnecessary. I
even cut an entire chapter, which I was sad to see go, though it had little to no relevancy to the
plot. I hope you can forgive me. On the bright side, the shorter the chapter, the quicker I can
write it. The quicker I write, the sooner Nick returns. I wouldn't like to spoil anything for the
story's future, though I can ensure this one thing: that Nick will be back.

I write for quality, not quantity, which is why it has taken me so long to reach 100,000 words.
I hope the quality is clear to see; I try my best. Even though spelling will occasionally K.O. me.

Have a spectacular day, and until next time, lovelies.

- Trenton
Chapter Ten: Fragile

After weeks of a standstill at the ZPD, Chief Bogo couldn't help himself. He missed Hopps.

The rabbit brought with her a life to the building that none of his other officers, not even the jovial Francine, could replace. Besides, she was one of his best at making inferences and finding details, two things which had been in short supply.

He could not help his relief when Hopps herself appeared at his office that morning. A small part of him wanted to break out into celebratory dance, though all the other more prominent parts of him rejected the idea quickly and in unison.

He greeted her with a simple, "Morning, Hopps. You seem more sprightly than usual."

"And that's saying something, isn't it?" Her response was far more chipper than he had expected, and he supposed that was saying something.

"I'm sensing good news," he said. Why else would she be here, and in such high spirits? The chief had seen it before in Judy—she got this aura about her, like honing in on a sense only she could receive. She became fiercely, almost frighteningly determined in everything she did—even something as trivial as pouring the correct amount of cream into her coffee. It was just as amusing to watch as it was efficient in solving the toughest cases.

"No promises yet, but I've got something," she said.

"Do tell."

"Before anything, though," she winced, "I should admit I've been doing some research lately." Bogo frowned. Judy scrambled to right herself. "And sleeping, too," she added, chuckling.

"I would have my doubts, if not for your…" he gestured vaguely in her direction, searching for the word, "gusto. You're hopping off the walls, Hopps."

"What can I say? It's good to be back. It's energizing to finally hit a breakthrough after weeks of dead-end research. Might not be anything revolutionary, but it's something."

"Well then," Bogo crossed his arms, "no time like the present."

"Blueberries."

"…I'm sorry?"

"Blueberries," Judy said again, as if her saying it twice made it all the more clear.

"You're going to make me play a guessing game?"

"Okay fine, you're no fun. This morning I took a step back from all the recent cases and look at the original two that happened in Bunnyburrow. I thought maybe by looking at the starting point, I could find something I'd overlooked. Turns out, I was right. It was right in front of my nose the whole time, yet I couldn't sniff it out."
"Blueberries, I presume?"

Judy grinned. "Yes. You see, Nick loved—loves—blueberries, and so I distinctly remember him gorging himself on all sorts of blueberry-related foods the day he went savage. Blueberry pie, blueberries thrown from parade floats, my brother even said he'd had his fair share of blueberry vodka the night before."

"Get to your point, Hopps."

"Yes, yes, I'm working on it." Bogo gave her a disapproving look but allowed her to continue. "None of this meant anything until I remembered the scones."

"The scones?"

"The scones. The day of the parade, Nick met Gideon Grey, the baker who would go savage later that night. They conversed and shared—drumroll please…" when it became clear that Bogo would do no such thing, she finished, "they both shared blueberry scones. I watched them, right over the counter of Gideon's booth. It's the first connection between their savageries I have found, and I think it has weight."

"And yet you didn't inform Containment on any of this earlier?"

She laughed. "Chief, I didn't remember myself until I picked my brain this morning. That night had been so much for me to digest that I had pushed the little details aside, and only recently did I get back to them. Case in point, Nick and Gideon both ate blueberries the day they went savage, more specifically the scones from Gideon's bakery. If that doesn't warrant an investigation lock me up with the rest of the savages and call me crazy."

Bogo nodded to himself, pursing his lips. A promising lead. A viable story. He expected nothing less of Hopps. A part of him was proud to have her in his precinct. "I'm not easily impressed, but you're not easily wrong either, so…an investigation is in order."

The bunny leaped into the air and pumped her fist. "Thank you, chief! I knew you'd see my—"

"Not too fast, Hopps," Bogo raised a hoof, and she fell silent. "Last I heard, you weren't doing so well in taking care of yourself. I realize you seem in perfectly good health this morning, but I can't deny my intel."

"By intel, you mean Officer Jamison?"

The chief sighed. "Let's face it, you needed someone to look after you. Don't think I didn't hear about your little accident in Containment earlier this week."

She grimaced. "You should have heard the phone call I got from Fulgens. As he put it, I can't return to containment until I can contain myself."

"I don't blame him," Bogo grunted. "So then. Where does that put you? Can I really trust you can hold your own weight so soon after your embarrassing little slip-up? Jamison told me you had been surviving on sleeping pills and caffeine. He said you looked more like a zombie each day, even said he'd expect you to come down into containment one day groaning with your arms outstretched and all."

Judy snickered. "Well then, if Harvey is our go-between, I'll tell him to tell you I'm doing just fine. Fine enough for an investigation if you would allow it. Besides, having grown up in Bunnyburrow and all, I could aid in leading the investigation."
"When you put it that way," he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms, "it almost seems you wish to be back on duty."

"You betcha."

"I'd have to rework the patrol schedule," he mused. "Have to find you a temporary partner as well."

"Why not Harvey?" Judy suggested. On patrol, there'd be more than a few looks, maybe a few amused grins, a pawful of snide remarks, but she's the one with the handcuffs. And the taser. And the concealed firearm. "Who's his partner now?"

"I've paired him with Wolfard. They match well."

"Couldn't Wolfard go back to his old partner?"

Bogo grunted. "I'm starting to wonder who's the chief of police here and who's the subordinate."

"My apologies, sir."

The chief checked the clock. "Bullpen's in ten. I'll see what I can arrange with the others. If—and only if—I allow you to attend, you won't be going as an officer. Technically, a citizen can partner with an officer to aid an investigation, though only if the citizen consents to it, which you no doubt have. If you're lucky—if can find time in my schedule—I'll have your badge back to you by next week."

"Thanks, Chief."

"Are you positive you can hold your weight? Emotionally? I don't mean to sound demeaning, but I can't give you your badge back if you're unstable."

"I understand, chief, and I am ready."

He examined her for a moment, despite already knowing she had improved. This was a Hopps he hadn't seen in a month. She almost resembled that eager, two-eared ball of sunshine that marched into the ZPD last spring with a fresh badge and something to prove.

He was more than glad to have her back.

"Real comfy place you've got back here. Kinda like a prison cell on wheels."

Harvey shot her a grin through the rear-view mirror. "All convicts may remain silent."


"Convicted of ruining my plans this evening with a trip to your family's dusty old farm."

"How dare you insult the pride of the Hopps lineage."

"You two are insufferable." Until this point, Wolfard had been silent in the passenger seat.

"Ease up, Ryan. Least you're not riding in the cage," Judy said.

The wolf ignored this. He looked out the window at a dreary skyline. There were flurries in the forecast. Depending on how heavy winter laid it on, the three might be stranded in Bunnyburrow overnight.
"Your family grows blueberries?" Wolfard asked to the back seat. 

"Among many other things. The Hopps farm is one of the largest in the Tri-Burrows."

"Do you suspect your parents? Is that why we're going."

Judy guffawed. "Bonnie and Stu Hopps? Please. They'd burn down the entire farm before they'd lace their precious harvest with anything."

"I meant accidentally," Harvey continued, "like bad fertilizer or something."

"Impossible, my parents are cut-throat with what goes into their crops. They get their fertilizer from a trusted local supplier. Besides, if fertilizer is the problem, then why didn't everyone at that festival go savage? Nearly half the produce was from Hopps farms."

"I read somewhere that midnicampum holicithias is a popular insect repellent among farmers," Wolfard suggested.

"Was. The moment Bellwether's cover blew and night howlers were deemed the cause of all the savage cases, farmers everywhere were uprooting them from all over their fields with gloves and gas masks. My dad even burned the ones he pulled up. I guarantee you won't see a single night howler at any of the farms."

"Then what's this all about?" Harvey asked. "It seems you've just debunked all the theories."

"Take my words with a grain of salt—I haven't any clue how the berries could be poisoned, but they are the first correlation we've found between the recent savageries that holds any water. You were asking if I trust my parent's produce? I do, but my parents aren't the ones who gather and transport the crops.

"Harvest season in Bunnyburrow is almost as hectic as rush hour in Savanna Central. They hire farmhands from all over the Tri-Burrows to clean out the largest farms. Then the raw produce is gathered, sorted, and dispersed at several markets all around the surrounding counties. All it takes are a few specially hired farmhands with a sinister agenda to push, and a pawful of blueberries. If we can find any spare supplies of blueberries sold around the time of the festival, we might trace them back to their sources. I don't know if we'll find anything at all, but it's something, and there's been nothing for weeks now so I'll take it. Either way, we'll be taking a lot of samples for the lab."

The trio arrived in Bunnyburrow around noon, just as the first flurries blew in. Bogo had contacted Madam Mayor Buttercup of Bunnyburrow in advance, telling her to expect the officers. She had asked them to meet at the courthouse, a four-story, deep red building made of sandstone and limestone from the Crimson Foothills south of Bunnyburrow. They hadn't needed to leave the warmth of the cruiser, however, because the madam mayor had met them on the courthouse steps, fighting the elements in a heavy black pea coat that dwarfed her entirely.

Harvey rolled down his window and shook her paw. "Should we get out?"

"Oh, no need. We'll be convening at the Hopps residence, yes?" she asked.

Harvey turned to Judy. "That sound about right, chief?"

Judy gave the go ahead. The mayor made haste in piling into a waiting town car. It was obvious she hated the cold.
Judy's parents ushered the three officers plus the mayor into their home the moment they arrived, Bonnie promising warm tomato soup for anyone who wanted it and Stu heaving the door closed against the icy wind. Judy had given her parents a heads up about their arrival while on the road and, in the time between driving and arriving, Bonnie had already fixed enough soup to feed the whole town twice over.

"You guys are fantastic," Judy said upon smelling the warm meal waiting for them. She embraced both her parents in a bunny hug full of fluff and ears and genuine love. When she pulled back, their eyes moved to the guests—more specifically the hare and the wolf.

"Hoopin' Harv!" Stu called, chuckling as he pulled Harvey into a tight over the shoulder hug.

"Good to see ya, Coach Hopps."

Judy blinked. "Am I…missing something?"

"Oh hon, you don't remember? Your father was the assistant basketball coach of the BBHS basketball team," Bonnie said.

"Well I knew that, but you knew Harvey?"

"How could I not?" Stu beamed. "He was the best point guard the Bunnyburrow Bullets had ever seen." He gave the hare a noogie, which he playfully fought off.

Judy and Wolfard exchanged a confused glance, though couldn't share it for longer than a moment before Bonnie shuffled them all into the dining area, where a table had already been set.

"Do we have time for this?" Wolfard whispered to Judy.

"It's my mother's meal," Judy said. "It's impossible to say no. Don't try."

They all ate soup and shared greetings. Some kits came downstairs and waved shyly at the officers. The mayor talked of the city in a very optimistic light when asked, despite the ongoing turmoil between Bunnyburrow's predator and prey populations. She neglected to mention the many hate crimes, the ambushing of predators on street corners and in alleyways, the intense bullying of predators in the schools.

Wolfard introduced himself politely, thanking Mrs. Hopps for the delicious soup.

"I apologize that it's all vegetarian. I could have made fish stew if I knew you were coming."

"No need, Mrs. Hopps. This hits the spot," he offered a small smile.

It wasn't long before silence and the clinking of spoons gave way to the one thing everyone wanted to talk about.

"I've got bags upon bags of reserves from each week's harvest in the eastern barns. It's one heck of a walk, especially with that cold front from the north," Stu shivered as he spoke, "but with this stew in our bellies I think we'll survive." He shared a thankful smile with his wife.

"And that's all the blueberries you have in stock?" Harvey asked.

"Well, son, Harvest has come and gone. All the produce has been sold and shipped off already, and any other than the reserves we ate for ourselves. If there was anything wrong with the crops, surely we would've found out by now."
Wolfard spoke up. "Judy told me you've cleared your farm of all night howlers."

"Oh, yeah, we got rid of all midnicampum holicithias back in August. Took a week to weed em' all out."

"And you burned them all?"

"Sure did, every last one. Even the neighbors chipped in with what they removed."

Wolfard looked at Judy, who just shrugged. "We still must see the reserves. Maybe the lab can pick something up in the samples."

"Judy, you said there was a direct correlation between what the savages ate?" Harvey chimed in. She nodded. "The crepes."

"The crepes?"

"From Gideon's bakery. Nick and Gideon both ate crepes from his pastry stand."

"Then if we go to the bakery, would there be any chance of finding…I dunno…leftovers?"

Judy laughed a little at that. "Surely any leftovers from the festival would be out by now, if not for cleanliness then for superstition."

"Funny thing, Gid's place hasn't been open since he…well…since the festival," Stu said solemnly. His tone quickly picked back up. "Place's been locked up for a month now, anything inside hasn't been touched since."

The three officers met each other's eyes, all thinking the same thing. It was the kind of instinct four months at a police academy made as keen as a rabbit's hearing. To sense a good lead.

"I don't believe you'll be able to access the inside, with it being locked up tight and all," the mayor said, sipping her stew. She hadn't touched it much.

"Oh, problem solved!" Stu smiled ear to ear, digging through his pocket to reveal a very large, very full key ring. He flipped through them, one by one. "Gid gave me a spare key for deliveries and whatnot. We can get in through the back."

"And you said the place has been closed since the festival?" Wolfard asked Stu.

"Yessir. Sealed it up tight so those darn teenage rascals wouldn't go vandalizing the place."

"That's a lead if I ever heard one," Harvey said, standing up. Judy downed the last of her bowl and stood up as well, slinging her coat over her shoulders.

"Leaving so soon?" the mayor asked. "We just sat down. The soup will get cold."

"Don't worry about it," Bonnie waved a paw. "It was just a quick warm-me-up, nothing I can't do again in half an hour."

"We're off, then?" Wolfard said.

"I suppose so." Stu finally found the right key, kissed Bonnie on the cheek, and stood up. "I'll go get my truck."
The bakery was on the corner of a shopping center near downtown with a large pink sign above the door reading *Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff*. The town car, the cruiser, and the truck parked nearby, the mammals inside braving the elements as they made their way down the sidewalk. The mayor walked faster than them all, insisting they get inside before their tails froze off.

Though the day was frigid, Bunnyburrow had a heaping population, meaning the downtown was never deserted. They received many looks from pedestrians, from the windows of cafes and shops. Judy couldn't help but notice, in only the time it took to walk one block, that most of these looks were ones of disgust, fear, and annoyance, and all of them were directed at the lone wolf in the pack of rabbits. A mother with two kits by her side nearly leaped out of her fur when she rounded the corner. She practically dragged the kits with her as she walked. ("Look, mommy! Look, he's so tall!" "JJ, don't talk so loud. Stop staring at him." "But—" "No buts, take my paw. C'mon, hurry.") Whether her father or Harvey noticed she did not know, though it was impossible for Wolfard to miss all the stink-eyes and nervous glances. He had no reaction, remaining stoic as he leaned into the wind.

At one point, a shabby truck with three equally shabby rabbits riding in the front cab came clunking down the street. "Get lost, ya fuckin' pred!" the driver shouted, while another displayed an exceptionally shameful remark with his paw. This time, everyone noticed.

Stu glared daggers at the truck as it drove away. "What's this place coming to? Sorry 'bout that, officer. They don't deserve the time of day."

"As an officer, I've heard much worse right to my snout," Wolfard said.

"Has it been like this?" Judy asked her father, who nodded, pursing his lips.

"Unfortunately so. Ever since that festival, the town can hardly sleep at night. I don't see what the fuss is all about, everyone knows the attacks aren't biological or anything. Still gives 'em the creeps, I suppose."

"Let's just get inside, shall we?" the mayor said. "I deeply apologize, officer. That was unacceptable."

"It's alright, miss," said Wolfard.

"Take the next ally," Stu said.

The side-door opened with ease once Stu unlocked it, though it wasn't any warmer inside than outside. Walking in, the pungent, sickly sweet smell of rotting fruit hit them. The kitchen was completely neglected. Mixing blades were resting in bowls of rock-hard dough. Jars and cans were frozen solid on shelves. A knife was still laying on a cutting board near a pile of rotten strawberry tops.

They made their way into the main room, which had a long countertop with several displays of now rotten, frozen pastries. Chairs were neatly pushed into the tables near the front door. The bell on the door hung idly, collecting both dust and frost.

"Are we gonna be able to find any samples that aren't frozen or molding?" Harvey asked, inspecting an assortment of rotten pies, crepes, and other pastries from where they sat in a display case.

"Depends. Did anyone see a freezer on their way in?" Judy asked.

"He's got one back here," Stu called from the kitchen. "Still running, I think. Electricity must still be on. Must've turned off the lights on his way out."
"And the heater," the mayor shivered. Wolfard gave her a look. "What? Rabbits don't get a winter coat."

Judy opened the freezer to receive a rush of somehow even colder air. It was still humming with life. "Harvey, get the lights," she called. The lights came up in a series of flickers, revealing bag upon bag of frozen produce.

"There are your samples," Stu said, looking over Judy's shoulders. He reached over and pulled out a bag. "This one's blueberries. Straight from the farm. Looks like it's already opened."

"Is that the only bag?" Wolfard asked.

Judy doubled over and scavenged the depths of the freezer, coming up with nothing. "Looks like it," she sighed.

"Will it be enough?"

"I'll have to be." She took the bag of berries from her father and tucked them under her arm. "Let's get outta here. This place is creepy."

"Hold up, shouldn't we look around a bit more? Maybe the guy hid something," Harvey suggested.

"By something you mean night howlers?" Judy snorted. "Do you really think Gideon would make himself go savage?"

"We should at least look."

"All the night howlers in town have been done away with a long time ago, and I highly doubt Gideon, of all mammals, is hiding any in here."

"Actually, Jude, now that you mention it…" Stu trailed off. He turned to the mayor. "What about those plots? In the fields?"

"The ones under high security?"

"Yeah, I've got two of 'em way out in the northern farms." He looked down and bit his lip. "You don't think…" he trailed off.

"I'm sorry, what's going on?" Judy asked.

Stu beckoned everyone towards the door. "C'mon, I'll show you. We've got one more stop to make today."

Having grown up on and around the Hopps Family Farm, Judy knew every square inch of the place by memory. She had spent the bulk of her childhood playing intense games like hide and seek on the massive property. If given a pen and paper, she could freehand the entire 1,500 acres with every creek, every ravine, and all the best climbing trees accounted for.

The northern fields were normally off limits for her and her brothers and sisters during her youth—it was the farthest away from the farmhouse and nothing surrounded it but an endless and impossibly flat horizon. Despite this, Judy immediately knew a new structure when she saw one, and she was sure the nine-foot barbed wire fence hadn't been there in her childhood. It stood out on the horizon from a mile away, and Judy was the first to notice it. The closer they got—the cruiser and the town car trailing her father's pickup—the more she could make out a square fence built around what
looked to be a greenhouse. The entire structure couldn't have taken up more than a hundred square feet. She had a hunch about what the greenhouse was housing, but she wouldn't believe such a thing until she saw it herself.

When she exited the cruiser, her suspicions were, unfortunately, confirmed.

"Way back in August," Stu explained, "I was approached by what looked like a group of scientists. A funny lot to see way out in the pasture, but they looked like they meant business. These guys explained they were in charge of the research over midnicampum holicithias in the wake of the savage incidents in Zootopia that summer. To make a long story short, those guys needed a place a safe distance away from the city to grow a supply for their research. Seeing as Bunnyburrow is Zootopia's source of almost everything that grows, the shipping tax is a lot less and the crops they planned to grow could be transported back to the city with the rest of the produce.

"I ended up agreeing to the whole thing, signed their forms, and received a brief thanking by the leopardeness in charge. Later I would discover some of the neighbors—the Longears, Thumpers, and the McBurrowers—had been approached by the same mammals and had similar greenhouses built on the outskirts of their properties. There was some suspicion at first, but most of us had grown night howlers all over our farms in the past so it wasn't anything new. Maybe two, three times a month, a big white truck drives right up this road—you can see the dust the thing tracks up from back at the house. From there, I suppose they plant and harvest what's grown—I wouldn't know, I've never seen them do it. But I don't have to water or fertilize anything and we get a fat check in the mail every month for it, so I'm not complaining."

Judy approached the fence without touching it—she didn't want to be the one to discover it was electric—and gazed inside. Despite the horrid weather, the flowers appeared to be in good health, housed neatly inside the fogged glass in a grid-like pattern.

The structure looked to be self-sustaining. It had a series of sprinklers at the ready, a humidity and temperature gauge, and a solar panel to power a small generator also inside the fence. Finally, a security camera kept a watchful, oscillating gaze from the top of the fence, shifting left to right and back again.

"And you forgot to mention this when we asked about the night howlers?" Judy asked her father, who simply shrugged it off.

"To be frank, I forget these things are out here. The scientists, or whoever they are, take care of everything. There are only two greenhouses on the entire property, see, the other one's over there."

He pointed to a small obstruction on the horizon a few miles away.

"There have been no breaks in security since their construction," the mayor said. She shivered as she spoke, and she spoke like this whole matter was the cause, not the cold. Like this entire investigation was a waste of time. "I was the one who suggested Bunnyburrow when the agency in charge was looking for a safe place to plant. If there had been any problems with vandals, they would have notified me, and I would have notified the BBPD," she said shortly.

"Maybe the problem isn't vandals, but the organization itself," Wolfard suggested.

The mayor laughed. "I seriously doubt it. Savage Containment's a government-run organization back in Zootopia. They're real-deal scientists, not the type to sell their produce on the black market."

"You said Savage Containment?" Judy gaped. She looked at the other two officers to see they were reacting similarly.
"Yes, that's the agency in charge. Why? Do you know of them?"

Judy couldn't find it in herself to nod. "I…I had no idea. Honey never told me, I—" she turned to Harvey, "I always thought they grew them in the lab."

"We should get out of the cold," the mayor suggested. "Whatever you're looking for, you're not going to find it here. These night howlers aren't going anywhere. If someone is poisoning berries, they must have their own supply, and I suggest you start your investigation looking for that."

"She's right, Jude," Stu said. "These are on high lockdown. Those scientists don't play around."

Harvey approached Judy with such quiet she never noticed. The purple flowers growing on the other side of the glass entranced her. Something so seemingly innocent, beautiful even, that hid its terrible power just beneath the veneer. Even when Harvey put a paw on her shoulder, she couldn't register it. She could not look away.

These flowers locked away Nick. They killed and injured. They were the weed of fear growing in an otherwise brave city. They were the bringers of pain and fear and death, the epitome of savage instinct.

A violet flower.

Harvey spoke to her softly, close to her ear in a warm breath. "The mayor's right, we should return to the house. Your ears are all red and this weather's not getting any better."

"Okay." She shuddered, though not because it was cold.

On the way back to the cruiser, she took one last look at the greenhouse, like it was the one looking at her now. Sure enough, she was correct.

The camera was no longer swiveling. It was staring right at her.

The snowstorm arrived mere minutes after making it to the farmhouse and all its warmth and freshly prepared cocoa. The windows offered no view of the horizon, only an opaque white beneath which nothing could be seen. The white void sang to them in ominous tones as it blew against the house.

"Looks like we're not making it back tonight," Harvey said, peering through the blinds at the torrential white outside. He couldn't even see the cruiser where it was parked in the driveway.

"We could make it back into town," Judy suggested. "I know a doe, a classmate of mine. She runs this cute little bed and breakfast. Might even give three ZPD officers a discount for their service."

"Fine by me," said Harvey.

Wolfard gave a thumbs-up as he sipped his cocoa.

The mayor was the sole objector. "I dunno, just look out there. You sure you can make it to town?"

"Aren't you returning to city hall tonight?" Judy asked.

The mayor thought for a moment, then smiled thinly. "I suppose I am. Even so, I'm simply looking out for the officers. I wouldn't want anyone getting injured in commute. Not in my town."

Judy was sensing more than simple concern. Apparently, Lapine-intuition ran in the family, because her father seemed to sense it too.
"You know," he said, pointing an accusing finger "I'm sensing some baloney, pardon my language misses."

"Er," the mayor chuckled sheepishly, "what?"

"C'mon, I'm not stupid, you've been on edge all day. You just don't want a predator to be seen in town again."

Wolfard only sighed, quickly resigning himself to the table where Bonnie offered him a refill of his cocoa. He happily obliged, downing it like the contents were far heavier than simple hot chocolate.

The mayor scoffed. "That's quite the accusation, Mr. Hopps. I'll have you know that running a city isn't a walk in the pastures, especially when all your citizens are scared and confused."

"And so you don't want him even driving back into town?" Stu guffawed. He always had been the type with a short temper. "Well, that's mighty high of you. 'Looking out for the officers' my tail. You're just as scared as the rest of them!"

The mayor placed a paw to her chest. "Excuse me? Do you know how much effort it takes—"

"Stop. Both of you," Bonnie said, storming in, apron dawned, a soup spoon held in one paw like a weapon. "We're not gonna make a fuss over spilled milk. You three officers are welcome to spend the night here, we've got plenty of spare beds upstairs. Miss Buttercup," she turned to the mayor, "if you need a place as well, I can arrange it." She then added, with a little wit that might make her daughter's partner proud, "Wouldn't want anyone injured in commute."

The doe had spoken, and the implicit matriarchal rule in this particular household decreed that was the end of it. The mayor left in a hurry, pulling her coat up to her nose and shuffling into the blizzard. The remaining rabbits, hare, and wolf returned to the table where Bonnie had fixed up one last serving of soup to fight off the shivers.

Not long after the meal's end, the three were shown to their rooms upstairs—two vacant bedrooms from the kits who had already left the nest. Judy stayed in her childhood room. Harvey appeared in the door not long after, doing a full circle as to take in all the posters, photos, and other paraphernalia that adorned her walls.

"I feel like I just entered your head."

Judy shot him a funny look. "That's an interesting way to put it."

He shrugged and came to a stop underneath a poster pinned horizontally to her ceiling—three officers in navy uniform: a cheetah, a hippo, and a buck. They were leaning against a ZPD cruiser with an ease that suggested there was nothing to the job. "Eyes on the prize, huh?"

"Woke up to it every morning." Judy sat on her bed and laid back with her head to the pillow. She wanted to see the poster the same way she had seen it every morning. If only she were wearing her uniform as she stared up at it, then perhaps all those years of staring at the three officers in admiration might have been perfectly satisfied.

Harvey's gaze fell to the hallway. "Hey, don't look now, but I believe you're being stalked."

Before she could get up, the stalker in question dove onto the bed, landing sprawled across her in a fit of giggles.

"Hey there, little thing," Judy smiled up at the kit. "Getting strong."

As if to punctuate that, Cotton pinned Judy further to the bed. The officer played along. "I've been working out with Tommy!"

"Have you? Tommy's pretty strong."

"Yeah, but I'm even stronger," Cotton beamed. "I wanna be a footballer!"

Harvey snorted from across the room.

"Is that right?" Judy grinned.

Cotton nodded enthusiastically. "Tommy's a footballer. He's on the junior high team, and he can tackle real hard—he made me be his dummy. So that's what I wanna be, but Tommy said does can't play football."

"Then I guess you'll be the first one," Judy said.

Cotton smiled. Her eyes twinkled in a way Judy found familiar. She knew the kit would go places, and if that meant the first doe on the BBHS football team then look out world, the bullets are getting a new quarterback.

"Then I'm sure you'll be the finest footballer in all the land," Harvey said, stepping into the conversation. "Then you can make this punk Tommy your own tackling dummy."

Judy sat up, setting the kit on the bed beside her. "Cotton, this is Officer Harvey. He's—" She had no time to finish before the kit leaped off the bed on all fours. She hit Harvey in his middle and clung onto him, tipping his balance just enough to send him sprawling. She landed on top of him, giggling, delighted to have just brought down a police officer. "You just got sacked!" she shouted in his face.

Gaining his bearings, the hare couldn't help but laugh either. "Didn't know I was QB," he said, rubbing the back of his head.

"You're tall! You have to be quarterback!" she exclaimed, still pinning him to the floor. A sudden curiosity overtook her. "Why are you so tall? You've got really long ears."

"That's 'cause I'm a hare."

"What's that?"

"It's like a rabbit, but a little taller."

"And easier to tackle," Judy added.

"At least you got a heads up," Harvey said wryly from the floor.

Cotton finally let the hare up, returning to Judy like she hadn't just pounced on anybody at all. "Where's Nick? He's not still sick, is he?"

Judy felt Harvey's eyes on him. He approached the kit and knelt down to her level. "Let's…not talk about that right now. Alright?"

"Harvey, it's fine," Judy said. Then, to Cotton, "He's still getting better, sweetheart."

"So he's not here?" The twinkle in her eye dimmed to a distant glow.

"Afraid not, little thing."
The kit looked away. "He was funny," she said to the air in a very pensive tone for an eight-year-old. "Heh. I miss him."

Harvey was assessing Judy with his eyes. She returned the glance, communicating an air of Don't worry. I can handle myself. I've been doing better, haven't I?

"He called me Cottonball, remember?" Cotton said.

Judy laughed and scuffed the fur between the kit's ears. "Sure do, kit. Calls me 'Carrots,' too." She pointed at Harvey, "And you're due for your own Nickname as soon as he wakes up."

"Hoo-boy, I've already got enough as is."

Judy hopped off the bed and took Cotton's paw. The kit looked up at her, and she smiled down. "Don't you worry about him, alright? Maybe he can come over for the spring festival."

This seemed to raise her spirits. "And we can plant blueberries together!"

The two officers exchanged a wary glance. "Maybe blackberries for a change," Harvey suggested.

"Ugh! They're sour!"

"Then raspberries," said Judy.

Cotton considered this thoughtfully, then nodded. "I can do raspberries." Then, finding the silence boring, the kit turned and charged at Harvey again with a valiant "GRAAAAH!"

Harvey was prepared enough not to fall this time. "You're one of the crazy ones, that's for sure."

"Was I scary? I'm working on my growl?"

"Your growl?" Harvey guffawed. "I'm petrified," he said and placed a faint paw to his forehead.

"I wanted Nick to teach me to growl like a fox. Then I could scare Tommy, he's afraid of predators. And I'll be the scariest footballer on the field!" She grabbed Harvey's uniform and looked up at him, the life returning to her eyes. "Can you growl?"

"Can I growl?" Harvey tugged at his collar. "Well, I can't say I've ever tried."

Judy's phone vibrated in her pocket. She fished it out to find an unknown number.

"What about you, Officer Hopps?" Harvey asked. "Can you growl?"

Judy raised a paw. "Shh, shh. Look." She held out her phone.

He studied the number. "This again?"

"Third one in a couple weeks," Judy replied. Something wasn't right about those calls. She could sense malevolence in the static, and she didn't want to deal with it around her niece.

"It could be a telemarketer. Didn't you say you only got those calls late at night?"

"Maybe you're right. Stay here with Cotton. I'm gonna step into the hall for a moment."

She walked out of the room—Cotton's questions following her ("Where's Aunt Judy going?" "She's taking a call, serious police business." "Like top secret stuff?" "Sure. Like Mission Impawsible.")
Judy closed the door. Only then did she answer the phone.

"Hello? Who is this?" Expecting no reply, she didn't know why she asked. There would be no reply. Only the audio coming in and out in an obscure, inconvenient rhythm.

"Judy?"

She recognized the voice right away. A voice she did not expect. A voice she did not expect to be calling her by her first name.

"…Doctor Fulgens?"

She had received a call from the red panda the day Nick nearly had Harvey for breakfast. She had expected the earful and the ban from containment. He had told her Honey would keep her updated on Nick's status and that she wasn't to return until they moved Nick upstairs. But that had been the end of it. She couldn't think of any other wrongdoing she had committed since, if anything she had been getting better. More sleep, more food, taking a break from the cases until today.

"Is this about Monday? I haven't been back to containment."

"I realize, it's not about Monday. Are you out of town?"

She hesitated. "Yes. I'm in Bunnyburrow. Why? Who told you?"

"Chief Bogo—it's not important. I realize the weather isn't permitting but you need to get back to the city."

"Back to the…" she paused. "Did something happen?"

A flustered sigh from the phone. "Are you busy?"

"We're conducting an investigation."

"Call it off. There was an… an incident…you should get on your way as soon as possible."

Judy didn't ask why. "What kind of incident?"

"Officer, this is no time for questions." The doctor seemed very unsettled, almost short of breath. "You can ask all you'd like once you get here."

"Here as in Containment? I thought I wasn't—"

"I'm overriding your expulsion, just hurry."

"Alright, alright. I'm on my way." Still holding the phone, she stepped back into the room, where Cotton and Harvey were practicing their growling. She was ready to tell Harvey to get Wolfard from his room and go to the cruiser when the dots connected in her head. Up until now, she had expected some kind of new attack on the city, maybe one of a larger scale. She had been speculating if the anonymous party which Fulgens called the syndicate would ever target more than one mammal at a time, perhaps this was the case. Multiple savages. But it would be Bogo making that call, or Clawhauser, or someone else at the station. Fulgens didn't work for the ZPD, he worked for Savage Containment, and the only kind of incident he would report is one occurring at Savage Containment, thus by extension, an incident involving a contained savage. But not just any savage—why else would he call her?

"It's Nick, isn't it?" The calm of her own voice shocked her. In fact, it sounded nothing like her voice
at all. The emotion was walled off.

Fulgens' moment of quietude only confirmed it, even before he said so. "Yes, it's Nicholas."

"Judy, what's wrong?" Harvey was on his feet. "Who is it?"

She didn't answer, nor could she. Her body was in the same kind of shock that numbed the immense pain of a serious injury. She didn't know what to think. Panic? Excitement? Dread? Fear? All of these things she wanted to feel, but all she felt was warm, and that was odd because the weather had kept the house rather cool.

"Should I call the chief?" Harvey was on her wavelength now, something in her expression must have given her away.

"No, no," she said in a distant voice. "Just get Wolfard."

He didn't ask questions. The hare was down the hall and barging into the wolf's room in an instant, leaving a progressively confused Cotton in the doorway.

"Aunt Judy, what's wrong?"

"Judy? Judy, are you still there?"

"…Yes. I'm here."

"Don't panic. Drive back, mind the speed limit, and drive carefully."

"Okay."

"Don't jeopardize anyone's safety. And use your siren."

"Okay."

"I'll be waiting for you at the elevator."

"Okay."

He hung up, suspending her in a reality that was fuzzy and numb. Cotton was staring up at her with curious eyes, not a wink of concern or understanding in them.

"I…need to leave," she said to the kit. "Police business."

"Like Mission Impawsible?"

Judy only knelt, kissed her forehead, and walked. Somewhere between Cotton's room and the cruiser, there were her parents, and they had a lot of questions. But she had no time to answer them. Harvey filled them in to the best of his ability, thanking them both for the hospitality. Outside, even the cold of a December snowstorm didn't sting her skin.

"I'll drive," she told no one in particular, though Wolfard heard her.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes."

Wolfard got in the cage, which must have been wickedly cold with its metal trim and plastic seating,
but the wolf didn't say a word. Harvey sat down in the passenger. Judy started the cruiser. No one spoke.

Her parents watched from the doorway as the cruiser set off into the all-consuming snowy dark, becoming a faint red and blue glow, then nothing.

The cruiser was almost to the city when the wall holding back her emotion breached.

It started small, with shallow, difficult breaths. Her heart was beating harder. Her paws were sweating on the wheel. It grew until moisture was pricking at the corners of her eyes. She blinked hard. She squeezed the steering wheel with both paws and kept her eyes on the road. It wasn't until she sniffled that Harvey noticed. The faint red-blue flashes had been enough for him to make out the glint in her eyes.

He only exhaled. It was enough of a response.

"It's just a cold," she said, but her throat was tight when she spoke. "I'm fine."

"You shouldn't be driving. If you pull over up here, I can take over."

"I can see the skyline, we're not far."

"Judy…"

She never took her eyes off the road, but that didn't keep the tears from rolling silently down her cheeks. Other than the sniffle, she never made a noise.

"Hopps, please," Wolfard spoke up. "You're not fine. Let him drive. Or me. You need to relax."

"I need to drive," she seethed, gripping the wheel tighter. Her voice cracked. The tears spilled, though she did not sob.

So they let her.

Fifty minutes later, they arrived. The snow had not let up.

Doctor Madge Honey Badger had asked Cole Antlersen, the EMT of the Savage Response Team, to aid her in administering the evening injections. As with all things, Antlersen was wary, but begrudgingly agreed, maybe to remind himself that all those years of med school was worth something.

Savage number twenty had been a hyena. It giggled when it first woke up in its cell, and after a few minutes, when the giggles turned into maddening chuckles, Honey knew she couldn't do any more of this on her own. She'd never tell anyone, not even herself, but she missed Hopps' company. Stubborn and irritatantly passionate, sure, but better than the echoing laughter of a savage.

"Aren't there only twenty-eight cells?" Antlersen asked. He had been silent up until this moment, having injected a Wilde, Grey, and a neighboring lioness. He was moving on to the weasel. "If this keeps up…"

"It will," Honey called from the other side of the corridor.

Antlersen gave her a look.
"What? Why would it stop anyhow? Not like the bastards behind the curtain are gonna call a mercy rule."

"Here's hoping," Cole murmured.

"Fulgens is already talking with some firm about making a second location, this one in a better place than downtown. Probably somewhere across the sound, the Nocturnal District, maybe."

"Is that even affordable?"

"That's where your tax dollars come in. Those conspirators with their tin hats have it right for once—their hard-earned money is going into a government owned underground organization, and probably into a new one soon. Lucky everyone's too ear-bled with their constant bullshitting to take them seriously."

There was what sounded like a cough from down the corridor. Both mammals froze.

"What was that?"

"The hell'd I know? You're closer, go give it a look."

"Maybe it was just Potts."

"Nah, when Potts sneezes you can feel it through the floor."

"I already sedated the weasel here."

"Look, Antlers," Honey snickered, "sure, they might be savages, but they've gotta sneeze too. It's fucking degrees outside, everybody's coming down with—"

There was another cough, though this one was more of a phlegm-filled hack.

"I'm looking. You can give this one the antihowler," Antlersen said.

"Yeah, sure, alright. You better bring 'em some tissues."

Cole found his phone and turned on the flashlight to get a better look. The hack had come from the end of the corridor closest to the entrance, the side he had begun working from. His fear was that someone had slipped past Potts, but there was nowhere in the corridor to hide but in the cells, and you'd have to be mad to do that. So of course it was the savages, just like Honey said, even they were no exception to the common cold.

It didn't stop him from looking, just to make sure. He was that kind of mammal after all. If he could have a mantra, it'd be "Just in case..."

The lioness and Gideon Grey were both rousing, with the latter already pacing around the cell on all fours, though rather groggily. Then, he noticed something. Something that seemed like nothing until he thought about it. Then, it was something very, very wrong.

"Oh...oh shit."

"What is it, Antlers?"

"Uh, er, I'm not sure."

"What do you mean you're not—"
"He's not moving. Wilde's not moving."

"Yeah, calm down, he's still out. Perfectly normal."

"No, no, not normal. I'm not an idiot—he was the first one I sedated. He should be—"

He watched as Wilde hacked again, sputtering this time from where he lay sprawled. Now, he could see foam around the savage's lips. Its eyes were turned up in their sockets. It kicked, sputtered again.

"Overdose," was all Cole had to say. With shaky hooves, he scrambled to enter the cell. "I'm going in."

Honey understood in an instant and didn't object. She marched to the cell, took one look, then ran for the exit. "I'm getting Melody," she called. "Overdose is mouth to mouth resuscitation—"

"I know, I'm an EMT," Cole shouted back, completing the passcode. *I know what to do. I've trained for this, I know what to do. Deep breaths, one, two, three. I know what to do.* Three locks fired. He pushed against the heavy door enough to slip through. He was kneeling by the savage in an instant with no regard that this could all just be some kind of deep sleep. If so, the savage would wake, go for his throat, then get out the door to go for the other throats that would be coming for backup shortly. But he wouldn't let himself think about this—right now was not a time for "just-in-case's".

He pulled one eyelid back. "Constricted pupils," he muttered. He pressed a finger to the savage's neck and waited. "Irregular pulse." There was another sputter. "Irregular breathing. Check, check, check."

With a grunt, Cole rolled Wilde onto his back, tilting his snout upward.

Melody and Honey burst into the corridor with the rest of the response team on their tails. Melody hurried into the cell, though gave the deer his space.

"I've got it under control," Cole said, then blew his first exhale, trying to ignore the savage's putrid breath. Its chest rose with the second-hand breath. Cole could hear his instructor barking in his mind, *"Two short breaths, then wait five seconds, then one long breath every five more seconds."* Despite having been an EMT for three years before they formed Savage Containment, the deer had never been the one to perform any kind of resuscitation on the scene. Normally the ones who made the emergency call had been the one to administer it, and he would arrive either to rush the mammal to a hospital or to pronounce the time of death.

*Not today,* he thought to himself. He had seen the news of the two unique ZPD partners back in November: a fox and a rabbit. It was a beautiful thing, in his mind, and he didn't want to be the one to tell the bunny—*Hopps, I think?*—that her partner's life had slipped through his medically trained hooves. *Not. Today.*

"I need an antagonist, quick!" he called over his shoulder, then bent over to deliver the second breath. While the mouth-to-mouth breathing was necessary, it was only to get oxygen to the victim. The main issue, however, was the very thing that caused the decreased air-flow to begin with: an internal overload of foreign substances that, if not treated, would inevitably cause cardiac arrest.

"Harry's on her way," Melody called back. Right then, the kangaroo herself burst through the door and took no time in slipping into the cell.

"How long has he been like this?" she asked, filling a syringe with clear fluid Cole knew to be Naloxone.
"I'm not sure. I found him like this a minute ago, foaming and everything." He pressed his lips to the savage again—its chest slowly rose.

Harriet found the savage's shoulder and parted the fur—clumpy and matted—enough to see the skin. She made no hesitation in her injection.

That was when Cole checked Wilde's pulse—something he was instructed to do every few breaths. He searched, pressing harder on the fox's neck, sure he would find something if he searched hard enough…pressed hard enough…surely…

"Nothing," Cole stammered, "I've got nothing, no pulse."

Harriet withdrew the needle. It would take several minutes for the antagonist to take effect, and Wilde would need oxygen and a beating heart in that time.

"Get an AED," he called over his shoulder. "An AED! Now!" The deer tilted the savage's head back, folded his still trembling hooves over the fox's heart, and began the compressions, counting in a mutter as he did so.

Rem was in the cell only a moment later, a defibrillator in his paws. The meerkat situated himself on the other side of Wilde and unpacked the AED with surprising speed. Working his paws around Cole, who was still performing CPR, Rem placed two pads on Wilde—one on his upper chest, the other on his side. A red button on the defibrillator lit.

"Positive there's no beat?"

Cole checked once more for a pulse. Once more he found none.

"Positive."

The meerkat wasted no time. "Then clear, Antlersen."

Cole stopped with the CPR and scooted away, panting. Honey and the rest of the response team watched with unblinking eyes from behind the glass. Rem pressed the button and the savage's chest tensed for a moment, then relaxed. Cole went right back to the compressions.

Three minutes ensued. Three minutes of sweating, panting, biting claws, and 3,000 volts of electricity straight to Wilde's heart. Three minutes of no pulse. No breath. Right about this time, two hundred miles south, Judy Hopps was finishing the last of her cocoa around her parents' dining table.

On the fourth minute, there was a breath. Raspy, thick with phlegm. It was the most beautiful sound Cole had ever heard.

"He's back," Rem shouted through the barrier, stripping off the AED pads. There was an uproar from the other side of the glass. Even Honey was smiling. Only Melody remained stoic. She approached the scene and squatted next to Cole.

"Well done," was all she said, giving him two firm pats on the back.

"I was the one who…who gave him the injection today," Cole said so painfully it seemed he was confessing to murder. "I've done it before, a-and I had no problems with—"

"Not your fault, Antlersen."

"But maybe—"
"I know you can give a shot, I've seen you do it many times. There must have been something wrong with the dosage."

Cole scoffed. "But how? It's impossible, it's not...you'd have to double, even triple the potency just to cause a negative reaction. How can that just happen?"

"I...I don't know." She stood up. "You should sit down."

He nodded, but he didn't move. He kept staring at the savage. "Shouldn't we get out of here before..."

"The Naloxone will keep him drowsy for a few more minutes. He's breathing, that's all that matters. I'll keep watch over him, you need to sit." She pulled him up and gave him a light push towards the door. "You did well, and I'd never blame you."

Cole stopped just short of the door. "It doesn't make sense."

"No. It doesn't."

"Who can make that big of an accident?"

"I don't know. No one, maybe."

He stared at her for a long time, the words permeating the silence, then he exited without a word, receiving a few more pats on the back, a few more compliments. He didn't hear them as he walked to the break room, where he would sit for another hour, trying to rationalize the irrational.

Judy found Fulgens at the elevator just as he had said. The first thing he told her was, "He's alive." It was the two most beautiful words that had ever graced Judy's ears. She didn't care that the more correct statement was, "The savage is alive." It was enough to grant her respite, if only for a moment.

"Cardiac arrest," Fulgens explained as they walked down the main corridor, past his office, and down the hallway to the feral floor. "Antlersen performed CPR on him for nearly five minutes before he came to. Took the AED two tries."

Judy kept her gaze on the floor as she walked. "Any long-term effects?" Her voice was flat and tired, but relieved.

"The resuscitation was almost immediately after they couldn't find his pulse, according to Melody. There shouldn't be any issues, mental or physical."

"So what happened?"

"That," Fulgens sighed disdainfully, "we're still investigating. The symptoms indicated an overdose. Lab reports show no irregularities with the dosage or potency of the administered antidote. One possible theory is Antlersen. He may be medically qualified, but no one saw him give the injection. It's impossible to know anything for certain, but he's on my radar."

"Antlersen's the buck, right? The timid one?"

"I realize what you're thinking, and I agree. He's not the type to try to kill Wilde, but he will still be under investigation. I'm sure you understand."

Potts let the two in without a word—even he seemed shaken up, no crosswords tonight. The corridor beyond was nearly empty, save for Melody and the meerkat Judy believed to be Rem. They were
standing outside Nick's cell. Judy glanced inside, almost nervous at what she might find, though the savage was laying near the glass, fast asleep. Chest rising and falling.

"Officer," Melody said as she approached. She offered none of the same pity Judy had been receiving since Nick first went savage—her eyes were emotionless, her lips drawn. The situation was grim and Melody's expression didn't mask that fact, something Judy found somewhat honorable. "I'm sorry to put you through this. There wasn't much time for communication."

"I understand," Judy said. She stole one more glance at the savage. Its chest still rose, still fell.

Melody followed her gaze. "He's just sleeping."

"And majorly doped out," Rem added.

"Honey gave him some gentle anesthetics to keep him resting."

"Where is Honey?" Judy wasn't sure why, but the badger was the first mammal she wanted to talk to.

"Eh, I think I saw her go up to the loading dock," Rem said. "Behind that far door's a stairwell," he pointed across the room. "Head up and to the right."

"Thank you."

"Not a problem, sweetheart," he said and winked. Judy shot him a glance, to which he just shrugged. "What? I do something wrong? I'd expect a doe like you to be used to the compliments."

"Remington. Not the time," Melody said flatly.

The meerkat shut up, all save for a grin. Judy issued only a short "Thanks for the directions," as she made for the stairs.

The stairwell opened into a fenced-in courtyard behind the hospital filled with dumpsters and rotting wooden crates. The all-black ambulance belonging to the response team was parked near a large service elevator, which was more of a one-story lift than anything else. Staring vacantly up at the towering buildings that obscured the surrounding horizon was Honey, leaning against the elevator platform's guardrail. She wore not much more than her usual lab coat.

The door squealed behind Judy as she shut it.

"Who is it?" Honey called, not bothering to turn. Judy didn't bother to answer. She approached and found a place beside Honey on the rail. Only now did Honey turn to see her. "Officer Ears," she hummed. "Who compromised my little hideout?"

"That meerkat. On the response team."

"Huh?"

"Rem. He and I designated this spot a leisure area, and we're pretty chill about it. He comes up here to toke sometimes, I come here to smoke, and if he doesn't watch his fat mouth, Fulgens will bury us up to our necks in reprimands." Her tone changed to something lighter. "Did he try to flirt with you?"

"Matter of fact, he did."
"Little bastard!" Honey guffawed. "Don't think you're lucky, he does the same thing to everyone he meets. The next time you see him, just flip him off and he'll know I sent you. Hopefully, then he'll consider your a friend more than an interest."

Only then did Judy make out the faint glowing ember between her lips. "You smoke?"

"Have been long as I can remember, and I probably won't stop 'till it kills me. Tonight, though…if any night ever needed a smoke then it'd be tonight. You?"

She pulled a pack from her pocket.

"No, I…I don't smoke."

"Right answer," she said, stuffing the pack back where it came. She exhaled a cloud of smoke and vapor into the air above the elevator shaft, where it was hastily swept away in the vertical snowfall. "This is how they get the savages to the lower level," she said, nodding to the shaft with her cigarette. "But that's only a few times a week. Other than that, this place is abandoned. Nothing but discarded hospital sheets and little ol' me."

"Fulgens doesn't like you smoking, I presume?"

The badger grinned. "Does an underground, secret government lab sound like the place to casually light up?"

"That's why you're always chewing gum."

"Astute observation, detective, and yeah, it curbs the impulses better than patches. Besides, helps my breath not smell like an ashtray," she scoffed and took another drag.

"You seem pretty opposed to smoking," Judy noted.

"I'm a doctor for chrissake, of course I'm opposed to it. Think I heard a song once call it "hiring a hitman for five dollars a day," and that's the most accurate description I've ever heard. But we've all got shit we can't let go of, to each their own, and to me, I've got this."

"Anyway, enough of that. How you holding up, ears?"

Judy said nothing.

"Tough night, I take it?"

"He…almost died."

"Yeah, and you owe Cole and Rem a big thanks for that 'almost.'"

"Fulgens suspects Cole."

"And Fulgens is wrong," Honey said indignantly. "Sure, nobody was watching while he gave the injection, but Cole? Cole Antlersen?" She blew out another plume of smoke, shaking her head. "Might as well accuse Oliver. Or you."

They were both silent. A bus roared past on the other side of the fence, blowing through a snow buildup in a burst of white. Judy couldn't fight her shivers anymore. To Honey, however, the cold seemed to be but a second-hand thought.

"Ya know, officer, I'll admit, I was suspicious before, but this…" She chuckled anxiously, her breath
vaporizing. She dropped the cigarette into the snow and crushed it. "Something about tonight puts me on edge, I won't lie. In times like this, Fulgens goes full robot. Ever since he got word, he's been in his office, sitting and analyze the lab samples. The results were just as clean as the rest. The antihowler is kept in an industrial fridge in the lab with one hell of a passcode lock, and small dosages are sent over here in regular intervals to be kept in yet another locked-up fridge. We even lock up the damn syringes. What I'm trying to say is that no one's getting in that isn't authorized."

This sent fresh goosebumps down Judy's spine—a shock far colder than the December air. "You're proposing it's someone on the inside."

"Not directly, no. Several things could've happened, and I have a history of being skeptical. There could have been some mistake in synthesizing the drug, or something in Wilde's breakfast, or even some sort of natural backlash we hadn't encountered with the other savages before. Keep in mind this is infant research. A year ago, no one knew concentrated night howler could make a mammal lose their mind, and we're still making discoveries. Like for example, did you know that if not treated, the effects of night howler could become permanently ingrained in the savage's brain?"

"No, I didn't," Judy said, wishing she hadn't heard it in the first place.

"Case in point, this field is open to mistakes, and as much as I don't want to admit that the recovery process mostly trial and error, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't. But that doesn't keep that good ol' alarm bell from ringing in my head."

"Why Nick, though? Of all mammals, of all savages."

Honey scoffed. "You and that fox are one of the most mainstream interspecies partnership in this city. If you've seen the reports, then you'll know this syndicate isn't a fan of predator-prey relations. Put two and two together, officer."

"But wasn't making him savage the first time enough?"

The badger thought about this, then only sighed. "Jeez, ears, do I look like the culprit to you? You're the officer, not me."

Judy watched her sigh vaporize and disappear into the flakey precipitation. "I'm just…I'm scared, Honey."

Silence on her end. Then, "Me too." She pointed out to the city in a circling motion. "Everyone's scared, everyone out there. But if ever there was a hardheaded bunny rabbit to take on the job, then it's you, ears."

But would I be so lucky to pull off the job twice? After all, a rabbit's luck can only go so far before running dry. Bellwether didn't go down easy, and this time she didn't have so much as a promising lead. There weren't any spectacular breakthroughs with the investigation in Bunnyburrow, and now this new development of an overdose had the ZPD and Savage Containment scratching their heads and pointing their fingers.

In the end, she was sure of only one thing. If she would ever find answers, she couldn't go it alone.

Judy didn't leave Savage Containment that night, and no one made her. Not even Fulgens, who had gone back to his office, no doubt to do more of his robotic research. In the case of another accident, she wanted to be present, so she sat in the break room and watched idly as the response team clocked out for the night. Harvey and Wolfard departed not long after. The hare made no move to insist that she go home like she expected he would, instead offering to find a blanket if she was going to spend
her night in a chair by a vending machine. She said she was warm enough, and he took her at her word. A few new faces came in for the night shift, though no one spoke to her, which was very much her intention.

She expected sleep to come at one point or another, so it was no surprise to find she had dozed off around midnight. Sitting alone in the dark break room—Honey had turned off the lights on her way out—Judy had her first nightmare since Harvey's intervention a week earlier.

Nick had a negative reaction, just as he had only hours before, and she was here this time to watch it, though not actually present on the scene. Invisible confines left her helpless to watch as the repeated attempts at CPR and AED revival failed time and time again. Cole's arms grew more tired with every pump, but he kept going. He kept going for half an hour before Melody walked in and stopped him, his arms trembling at that point. She had to drag him off the body.

The body…

Don't give up! Judy was screaming. Please! Please, keep going! Don't give up, please!

"Time of death," was all she had to hear before the scene descended into chaos. Reality distorted around her. She swam in mid-air, trying desperately to get to him, but she couldn't move and no one could see her. The savage was laying with its head lolling to the side, lifeless eyes gazing at the wall. No, it wasn't the savage. The savage was still alive in the cells next door, and the savage would remain living in the form of innocent predators in days to come. It was her partner who had died.

They brought in a body bag, and she thrashed harder. She couldn't let them put him in that thing, couldn't watch Nick disappear behind a zipper. But she couldn't do anything but watch, and that was exactly what happened.

Time of death…

Time of death…

…death…

…death…

And then a paw found her shoulder, and she was back in the break room. Her eyes were warm and wet. She had to blink just to see the figure standing over her.

"…Doctor?"

Fulgens pulled a chair from the table and sat down across from her. "You were having a nightmare," he said, rather bluntly. "I could hear it down the hall."

"R-Really?"

"You kept saying something about not giving up. And you were whimpering. I didn't want it to distract the employees next door, so I woke you."

"Oh," she said. She didn't want to look him in the eyes, though it was obvious she'd been crying. "I'm sorry. What are you doing still awake? Don't you ever go home to sleep?"

Fulgens shook his head. "There's too much to do. I'll sleep when I can, but tonight isn't one of those times. So I drink tea."
"Maybe that's a better idea," she chuckled pathetically to herself. If going back to sleep meant going back to that dream, then she'd buy all the tea necessary to get her through the night.

"It is for me, but not you. Your chief informed me you'd be returning to service next week. If you're going to be a member of the task force, you must be properly rested."

"I know, I just can't stop thinking about…well…I can't stop thinking."

"Yes, there's much to think about right now, isn't there."

Judy nodded. "Still trying to wrap my brain around tonight."

"You were in Bunnyburrow, you said. Did the investigation yield anything new?"

She shrugged, then smiled wryly. "We've got blueberries."

"Blueberries…"

"Samples. From the crop sold during the Bunnyburrow Harvest Festival. Nick and Gideon both… never mind, that's a long story. We've got berries for the lab to analyze."

"I'll have them sent to the lab first thing tomorrow morning. Perhaps you're onto something."

"Eh, I don't know about that. I'm not sure what I expected to find other than a bunch of berries, probably like the rest."

"Perhaps not," Fulgens suggested. "It's worth testing." He glanced at a watch he was wearing, came to some kind of conclusion, and promptly stood up. "I've been away for long enough."

"Wait."

Fulgens turned in the door frame. "Yes?"

"Savage Containment is growing night howlers. In Bunnyburrow."

He paused for the briefest moment, then curtly asked, "And?"

"Well, someone could have gotten their paws on the night howlers you guys grow there. They were the only ones in the town during the festival."

"With round-clock surveillance, weighted sensors, and electrified barbed wire, your theory seems quite impossible."

"But where else could they come from? Of all the places for the first night howler incident to take place—Bunnyburrow, the same town that also has multiple plots growing night howlers."

The doctor bit his lip. "Officer, I realize you are only putting two and two together in your head, but it's more complicated than that. A coincidence though this may be, no one could get inside those plots. Armed delivery trucks take the produce straight to the lab bimonthly and everything from the number of crops harvested to the number that arrived is documented. There have never been any inconsistencies, I would know if there were and I would fire the mammal responsible. I'm no officer, but I believe you're looking in the wrong places. If anyone has their hands on night howlers, they must grow them somewhere secret, similar to Bellwether's suppliers. It's a possibility they're being grown outside the region and being moved by a black market. That's what you should look for."

"But, how…?" Judy trailed off. "Where do I even begin?"
"I'm not sure. That's your job, detective."

Overnight, the blizzard died to snow, then to flurries. Only in mid-morning, when the sun had reclaimed the sky, did Judy return to her apartment.

She had tamed the mess to a casual clutter. Even so, she didn't feel comfortable. The walls seemed smaller than usual, the ceiling lower, her window narrower. The adjustment from Bunnyburrow's wide-open spaces to Zootopia's ever-condensing residencies was anything but subtle. She wondered why this was only now bothering her—she had lived in the apartment since the previous spring, she'd made it her own.

That fact didn't keep the walls from constricting. The air felt denser, like a firm and invisible grip around her throat.

The conclusion was obvious: she needed to get out. Far away from the redbrick's grasp. But she couldn't go alone.

All it took was a quick scan of the ZPD's directory to find Harvey Jamison's number. He answered on the second wring.

"Hello? This is Harvey Jamison."

Despite her stupor, she couldn't help but snicker. "…And this is Judy Hopps."

He stammered on the other end.

"Do you always answer calls like that? Full name and all?"

"How could I have known it was you?" He paused, and his tone changed. "Wait, is something wrong? Do I need to come over, I can be there in a few minutes."

"No, nothing's wrong." It was a lie, so she rephrased it. "Nothing's urgently wrong. I just need…are you free today?"

Any mammal in their right mind would have chosen a seat far away from the restaurant's frost-lined windows. Judy, however, wanted a view of the waterfall, even if the thing was still thawing from the night's freeze. Besides, the nightmares hadn't allowed her to sleep much, so the cold was a pleasant shock to her system.

Zootopia's downtown riverwalk* was a popular tourist attraction, often showcased in brochures and on the city's website. Architects from several decades ago had taken the natural flow of the river into the Zootopia Sound and, in an unparalleled feat of hydraulics, transported the water to the top of city-center hill. This allowed for a scenic series of waterfalls that eventually tapered out into the canals that fed into the sound. Downtown parks and rec had a fair with creating a park along the riverbanks, and around that park was built the riverwalk—a series of shops, theaters, and restaurants that overlooked the flowing water. It was one of Zootopia's most picturesque scenes, the kind you would find on a variety of postcards—a series of grand waterfalls surrounded by green banks and greener trees, which were then surrounded by the towering skyline all around it.

It reminded Judy of what she was protecting. Her new home.

Harvey joined her at the table by the window not long after she showed up.

"Hey," he said, flashing a smile.
"Hey."

"You look—"

"Exhausted, I know."

He frowned. "Not what I was going to say. What did we say about getting your rest?"

Right then a waitress appeared and took their drinks. Unsurprisingly, they both ordered something warm—coffee for her, green tea for him.

"Black tar coffee?" he said after the waitress had left.

"What? Don't think I can handle it?"

"No, no," he displayed both paws in mock surrender, "you just seem more like the latte type."

"Didn't you grow up on a farm, too? Most farmers live on black coffee."

"Not my folks."

"Huh. My dad was practically bottle-feeding me the stuff since I was a kit."

They both laughed at this.

"And anyway," she said, "desperate times call for desperate coffee."

"…About that."

She looked outside at the waterfall. A trickle of sun-glinting water was coming from underneath the frozen face of the nearest falls. The ice couldn't resist the sun's warmth—the whole structure would be liquid soon, despite it only having frozen overnight.

"I don't know what I expected to find in Bunnyburrow," she said to the window.

"Take it easy on Judy Hopps, she's only doing her job."

"Not very well, it appears."

"Not all investigations uncover anything. That's why it's not called trial and instant success."

"I should have been here, last night."

It was a sudden change in topic, but Harvey could tell it was all she was really thinking about. "You can't beat yourself up over everything, Hopps, especially not this."

"I was always down there in weeks past. If I had been there for the evening injections, maybe I could have prevented it. Or at least have seen something that would make this whole situation make more sense."

"You can't live in this world of hypotheticals. They're not going to get you the answers you want. Besides, Fulgens banned you from the place, remember? It was nice enough of him to let you back in last night, or to even call you."

Their drinks arrived. Judy immediately took to her coffee. The waitress offered cream and sugar. She raised a paw to decline.
"I'm trying," she said when they were alone again. "I've really been trying to get better this week. And a lot of that is thanks to you. But…now this."

"It's difficult, I know. But Wilde's alive, you're back on duty next week, and the world keeps spinning. Giving up will only help bastards orchestrating this."

"Did I ever say I was giving up?" She took a long swig of her coffee. It burnt her tongue. "I'm just fragile right now, is all."

"Then handle yourself with care."

This got a smile out of her. She found it easy to smile around him.

"You're gonna make it, Hopps."

"You think so?"

"Without a doubt. I believe in you."

She laughed. "That's real corny."

"So what? I do."

"Then you've picked the wrong bunny to believe in."

"No, I don't think so." He seemed so sincere. Everything about him was wholesome and honest, everything out on the table beside his piping tea.

She didn't know what to say, so she took a long sip.

She felt very warm inside, though it could have been the coffee. It was short-lived, quickly replaced with strong and instant guilt. *What would Nick think if he saw me here?* Not thinking, she looked around to ensure there weren't any familiar faces.

"Something up?" he asked.

"Oh, no, I'm just looking for a bathroom."

"I saw one near the door, by the gumball machine. This place doesn't strike me as the gumball type."

She laughed and briefly excused herself. She walked fast. No one was in the bathroom, but she locked herself in the farthest stall anyway. To get her bearings.

*I'm an idiot,* her internal voice groaned, then aloud when she remembered she was alone. *He probably thinks this is a date. Why would I pick a place like this? For casual coffee? God, I'm an idiot.*

But a part of her wasn't so sure. In fact, she *did* pick the most impressive place she could find on the riverwalk, and on purpose. There was a glimmer of confidence somewhere in all that anxiety. A glint of warmth she could not ignore.

*So what? So what if I like him? I shouldn't have to feel guilty about it.* But she still did. She wasn't sure entirely why because she and Nick had always been friends. Only friends. Sure, he had gotten drunk and said a few things she couldn't forget, but everyone says dumb shit when they're drunk. He couldn't have meant any of it. He wouldn't mind. He wouldn't care. Even if he knew, surely he would understand that a fox and a bunny in a *relationship* was absolutely unheard of. Surely he
wouldn't be a fan of the idea.

But she had to tell herself this over and over—*he wouldn't care, he's not like that, he doesn't think of me like that*—and for that she hated herself.

By the time she got back, the waterfall was more stream than ice.

"Better hustle with that coffee. Nothing's more disgusting than good coffee gone cold."

She just nodded. "Hey Harvey, if we ever decided to do this again, would you be opposed to the idea?"

"To what? Coffee?"

"Yeah. Or food, if you'd like."

He stuttered for a second, then brightened, all warm and peppy. "Sure."

"Alright. Consider it a plan."

"...You know, I could go for some food right now since you mentioned it."

"Me too," Judy grinned. She allowed herself to brighten. To melt. Things would get better. She would make it. She and Nick would be partners again, and the task force would get to the bottom of these cases.

And she just might be happy, if she allowed herself to be. So she smiled and spent the rest of the day with Harvey.

Outside, the last of the ice fell from where it had frozen overnight. The water retook the falls.

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*Meanwhile, in a chess club merely three blocks away...*

"I must admit, Al, I never knew you had such wit."

Al was in the midst of moving his rook three spaces, though he paused on the second. "I'm sorry?"

"C'mon now, you know what I'm talking about. Last night. You made an excellent judgment call. There for a second, I was worried our little bunny rabbit might catch onto something."

"She's fiercely determined to figure us out, though if there's one thing she cares about more than her investigation, it's Wilde. She cares so much about that damn fox it's almost aggravating."

"Is that jealousy I'm hearing?" the opponent grinned.

"What? No, don't be stupid."

"Only a joke, Al," he waved a paw, then pointed directly at him. "*However, you got very close* to killing Wilde."

"I never meant the dosage to be lethal. I measured it out in correlation to his weight. I couldn't have known he was that sensitive."

"You took a risk, and it almost backfired." He shook his head. "Gotta anticipate these things,
Algernon. Keep in mind the level of business we're conducting here. Mistakes are as lethal as land mines, so tread lightly." He chuckled, then sighed. "If anything were to happen to Wilde, then I wouldn't be so surprised if something were to happen to you."

"Your jokes are not funny."

"Oh, you think I'm joking?" he said, then beamed to Al's growing discomfort. There was silence, and he seemed to relish it, play with it in his paws. Al had to remind himself the mammal across from him was just as manipulative as he was. Tread lightly is right.

The opponent continued only after his point had firmly settled in the air, like a suffocatingly thick coat of dust. "It's only business, I'd expect you to understand. Uphold your half and I'll do the same. Keep in mind that when you take these risks, you're risking your own fur as well. Wilde's needed alive, the bunny too. I don't intend to go around murdering police officers—not yet, anyway."

"Right," is all Al could find it in him to say.

"Did Hopps see anything more than she should've?"

"In Bunnyburrow? No, nothing much. She's now aware that there are multiple plots of night howlers, but I doubt she suspects much from it. Even if she does, she's got nothing to go on."

"And we're gonna keep it that way, clear?"

"Of course. I'll make sure she doesn't wander too far."

"Good," the opponent said, not giving the game much attention. He advanced a single pawn. "It would be a damn shame to put my favorite detective out of the game so quickly."

A/N: While this chapter could have been split into two (or even three) chapters of their own, I've published longer in the past. If you can't tell already, I'm an over-writer.

I had a few comments asking me just how long I intend to keep up the slow burn. If you can't tell already, I'm a sucker for a slow-cooking story, but for those who have more instant-cooker preferences, you'll be happy to know that our favorite fox is returning soon (as in two to three chapters). While some may consider this a spoiler, this is, after all, a Wildehopps fanfic, and it couldn't live up to that standard without one of the two most important characters. So in this way, his return is a given.

Thank you for all the support, and stay tuned for chapter eleven. I'm sensing some action sequences coming up...

- Trenton

*The Zootopian Riverwalk is partially inspired by the San Antonio Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas. The images on google are beautiful enough, though do one better and visit it for yourself sometime, if you're ever in the area.
Chapter Eleven: The Bluff

A brief warning: this chapter contains gore.

It was nearly Christmas when Judy reclaimed her desk at the ZPD, a desk previously occupied by a scrappy intern—an ocelot, she guessed, though was never entirely certain when it came to cats—who asked for nothing more than a photo, an autograph, and fist bump before clearing his things. Judy didn't mind this much—it was nothing compared to being tackled into a two hundred pound cheetah-hug in the lobby that morning. After that, she was just glad to be alive and still the proud owner of her in-tact ribcage.

Bullpen received her with a standing ovation and a barbaric mix of howling, whistling, and table-drumming that made her ears rattle. She made her way between the desks, giving and receiving fist-bumps and mock salutes, until she found none other than Harvey. He was trying—and failing—to look casual as he leaned against one of the legs of the monstrous chair that once was hers.

He offered a welcoming smile, though riddled with sarcasm. "Aren't you popular," he said and uncrossed his arms to give her a high-five.

"Just wait until Wilde gets back," Judy snorted. "That'll be a party." She elbowed the chair that towered over them both—ears included. "You steal my seat?"

"Oh, this was yours?" He showed genuine concern. "My bad, I haven't exactly been an officer here for long and—well, now that I think of it, I'm sure the chair will fit us both, though only if you'd like, considering it's made for mammals much larger than..." he paused to find Judy snickering. "You're messing with me, aren't you."

"Yes and it's so easy, you're too damn easy Jamison," she socked him in the arm. "You really think I care where I sit?"

"Well...no."

"Take a breath. You should worry more about getting sat on, that's the real danger here. Now c'mon." She leaped to the top of the chair. "Nick and I shared this seat all the time, it's perfectly large enough for both of us."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"Why would I?"

Though as she said it, she felt as if she were violating some unspoken agreement with her previous partner. It was her and Nick's seat, and though neither of them had ever acknowledged it, that's the way it had always been.

Temporary rearrangements never killed anybody, she thought. She hoped. He wouldn't mind anyway, given the circumstances.

The chief was welcomed with his usual chorus of hoots and pounds, only this time he didn't seem quite as annoyed by it as usual. Once behind the podium he called for silence, put on his reading glasses, and briefly met her eyes.
"Today, as I'm sure you all know, we have one of our officers joining us again. Officer Hopps—" he was cut off by another round of cheers. McHorn, sitting beside them, elbowed her chair in what was meant to be an amicable gesture, though nearly toppled the thing over. Bogo called for silence. "Her sabbatical was well needed, but we're all glad to have her back." Though said with a tone utterly lacking emotion, the chief's words made Judy's heart swell.

"Moving along. Today's assignments are as follows…"

Now officially declared temporary partners, Harvey and Judy were assigned to patrol a section of downtown named Flock Village, not far from Jumbeaux's Ice Cream Parlor. On their way out, Judy pulled Harvey into the hallway outside Bullpen and waited until the last officers had filed out.

"What's up?" Harvey asked, then was bombarded with a hug. "Where'd this come from?" he managed in her grip.

"Dude, I haven't seen you in like—"

"Two days?"

"Yeah! And I'm totally psyched we're on patrol together. It's just so good to be back. And it's so good to see you. Ugh, I missed everyone here!" she shouted to the hallway.

He started to say something, stuttered, sighed, smiled, and returned her squeeze. For a long moment, they leaned into each other's warmth.

"Hopps! Jamison!"

The two officers separated as if one had contracted the plague.

The chief was standing down the hallway, peering over his glasses. "I've dismissed you two, why aren't you at the motor pool?"

Harvey laughed timidly. "I'm just briefing Judy—Officer Hopps, I mean—on the latest developments around the precinct."

Judy nodded. "A lot can change in a month."

The chief stared. "Mm-hmm. You two can do all the briefing you want in your cruiser, just don't let it get in the way of the job."

They both looked away, flushing.

"We're off, then!" Judy said and hurried past the chief with Harvey in tow.

Patrol was largely uneventful, which left plenty of time for conversation. This was difficult, seeing as the two had kept in touch despite her sabbatical. Soon enough it was evening, and the two were returning to the precinct, where, when clocking out, they were scared out of their fur by a group of large animals jumping out from behind the bullpen door.

"Surprise!"

Harvey hopped so high he nearly hit the door frame.

Judy recovered, her instincts a blaring siren in her brain. "Wha…What's this?"
"You've been out for over a month!" Francine hollered. "You didn't suspect we'd throw a surprise celebration when you returned?"

"...No?" Judy said, her heart rate slowing. "Rhinowitz was gone all summer and he didn't get a… a cake?" Judy noticed the iced mammoth of a cake on a nearby desk. It was larger than her and Harvey combined and then some—three tiers of blue and gold icing.

"To be fair, no one notices Rhinowitz even when he is here," Wolfard commented.

"My sister," Francine said, "she's a baker at this little joint near the sound, Elefandue, you heard of 'em?"

"...No."

"Yeah, well she whipped up this thing overnight, no problem. Chocolate, vanilla, and something called mystery flavor, I dunno, we'll have to find out."

"That's for me? That whole thing?"

"Hell no, that's why we're here," Snarlov said, already dishing himself a slice with a server large enough it would take both her and Harvey to lift.

"Wow, you guys, I—"

"Don't mention it," Fangmeyer said, though she seemed to be here more for the free cake than anything.

Judy received a Judy-sized piece of cake, and Harvey one not much larger, and they both sat on the table top surrounded by officers helping themselves to comically large portions.

"Weird third date," Judy noted. "Or is this the fourth? Do we count Snarlbucks?"

Harvey chuckled, but his voice was tight. "Let's go with fourth."

Judy sighed, setting her plate down and scooting closer to him. "Look, Harvey, I know you want to keep this on the down-low, but these are our co-workers. Why does it matter if they care?"

"It doesn't, but you and Wilde were pretty close partners," he said, looking down at his feet hanging off the table. "I just don't want to give anybody the wrong idea about me. I don't want to replace him, if you know what I mean."

Judy stared for a moment, then scoffed lightheartedly. "I love Nick, I really do, but we're just friends and that's...all it's ever been, alright?"

"You seem hesitant on that front."

"Harvey, I'm not lying to you. If there had ever been any chemistry between us we would've already realized it, so don't feel guilty. Besides, half of these guys probably already suspect you and I are together. Just look at the two of us, we're partners, we're roughly the same size, they'll assume you're just a tall rabbit unless you correct them. It won't be long before people start cat-calling, believe me, I've been through this with Nick. These guys don't let up."

"What was that, Judy?" Francine leaned into the conversation, looming over them both with an intrigued sparkle in her eye.

Harvey cleared his throat and grinned. "Oh, it was nothing, we're just—"
"I asked her, rabbit-boy."

"Told you," Judy whispered to him, then spoke up. "We're just catching up is all."

"Catching up, is that right?" she mused. "Good friends, methinks. Yes, yes, good friends indeed, judging by how close you're sitting together."

The two separated, having hardly noticed they closed the distance in the first place. Judy's smile had grown painfully wide. "Oh, no, we—"

"Nah-ah-ah, you can't hide the blossoming chemistry I'm seeing here, you guys are about as subtle as a hippo in skinny jeans."

"Francine, please," Harvey said.

"Oh, I see. So you two wanna keep this way down low." She guffawed, "Well you're off to one helluva start, leaning on each other and talking all quietly."

"We just want to avoid the drama is all," Judy said to her, looking at the group of chattering officers sitting not too far away.

"Alright, alright, I get it. My trunk is tied, that's a promise."

Judy gave her a look.

"I know I've got loose lips and I've sunk a number of ships in my years—it's genetic, you should hear my sister—but a promise is a promise, I promise. You two carry on now, I was never here." She loudly shuffled her chair away, returning to the other officers.

Not very subtle yourself, Francie, Judy thought and turned back to Harvey, who was looking more timid than usual.

He laughed pathetically to himself. "All hope is lost," he muttered, shaking his head.

"No it's not, don't be melodramatic," Judy sighed and scooted closer to him, maintaining a friendly distance. "Francine's sincere, you haven't known her as long."

"I just don't want a repeat of Precinct Twelve. Or high school, for that matter."

"Precinct Twelve?"

Harvey glanced around, then leaned closer. "Word got around about me and this other guy—he was an otter, we went through the academy together. Somebody heard us talking in the locker room when we thought we were alone. The next morning the rest of the guys knew and were either way too interested or all standoffish. It was like that until I came here—a fresh start, no labels or rumors—and I'd like to keep it that way. Does that make sense?"

"Of course, I can respect that. And besides, this is Savannah Central. The heart of Zootopia. It's not like other parts of the city. Not like Precinct Twelve—where's that, the Meadowlands?"

"The docks."

"Oh yeah, not like the docks. Even if these guys knew, it'd be no big deal, there have been bigger scandals in the past that would blow your mind, believe me."

"Alright," Harvey said, composing himself, then turning to the mostly untouched piece of cake.
"This weekend we're going somewhere. This is not a date."

"Pssh, anywhere can be a date. A freaking rooftop beer can be a date."

"That actually sounds nice, but this is bullpen. We can do better than this. How does Friday night sound?"

Apparently when Harvey said "better than this," he meant the five-star French cuisine restaurant and winery near the tourist-trap called the Watering Hole. Formerly a coastal spring, the Watering Hole had been drained when the water table discovered beneath Savanna Central had been converted into the source of the region's tap water. Present day, an artificial waterfall fed the hole, which was hardly a pond, where nearly a millennium ago, two local tribes—a pride of lions and a herd of zebras—had met and made a treaty, though it would be broken time and time again over the centuries, had been the starting point for mammalian coexistence as Zootopia saw it today. And around it was built City Center, including the winery.

From her seat next to the second-story window, she could see the weekend's surge of activity in the square. After perusing the entrees, Judy sighed and tossed the menu onto the table. "Is there anything on this menu less than twenty bucks?"

"Not unless you want an appetizer as an entree," Harvey said and shrugged, "but you don't need to worry about that because I've got the bill."

She laughed. "Haha, no. No way."

"Yes way, this was my idea and I'm covering the bill."

"Your meal alone will put you in debt—we have the same salary!" she cried, somewhere between amused and frustrated.

"I'll manage, this is a special occasion."

"What occasion?"

"You're back on the force, of course!" he guffawed, then quieter, to himself, "Ha, that rhymed."

She ignored this and ordered a house salad when the waitress came by. Only $14.99, not including the dressing. Harvey also bought a bottle of wine to go with their meal—Judy didn't dare look at the price, though she did accept a glass. And then another.

This is amazing, she thought to herself as she sipped it. Having only grown up on backwoods homemade wine from the neighbors' farm several acres over, this was a more than subtle improvement. Oak, salt, a minuscule hint of cinnamon—which was never easy when using cinnamon in anything, it had a tendency to be overpowering—and whatever else had aged for no doubt many years in the wine came together into something she could only describe as liquefied winter. Cozy, warm, smoky, and not too strong.

Harvey thought otherwise—he sputtered upon taking his first sip. "Hmm!" he looked away and cleared his throat. "Wasn't ready for that."

"What, this?" Judy grinned. "This is too much for you?" She now couldn't help but imagine Harvey going drinking with her brother Jade, who known for his bottomless stomach, and couldn't help but laugh aloud.

"No, I just swallowed too much at once." He proceeded to take another cautious sip, slower this time, and if he didn't like the taste he masked his distaste.
Judy's eyes drifted out the window where, in the middle of the square, a Pred-Prey-Peace protest was being held amidst the Friday night bustle. The only commonality among the protesters was the same black shirt bearing the protest's label, three P's interlacing like a chain link. Other than that, mammals ranging from Little Rodentia's smallest to hulking elephants had gathered, some holding paws in large rings of mammals, others raising signs and approaching those passing by, handing out pamphlets and wristbands and the like.

"If there was ever a target for the syndicate, it's them," Harvey said, sipping his wine as he stared pensively out the window.

"I think they know that," Judy said into her glass. She looked harder and sure enough, she picked out the police from the crowd. They were scattered thin enough throughout the square to be somewhat hidden but she knew a protest patrol when she saw one.

"Do you think this will just…keep happening?" Harvey asked.

"The protests?"

"No, the attacks." He set his glass down and cleared his throat. "I mean, the police haven't made any breakthroughs, Savage Containment hasn't figured out what originally poisoned the savages, only that it's likely through food, which isn't much help." He sighed, still staring down at the protest with a distant gaze. He pursed his lips. "What if this becomes normal?"

"It can't," Judy said firmly, though mostly because the thought scared her and she wasn't prepared to face that reality. "It won't, nothing like this ever keeps up for long."

"But Judy, Zootopia's never seen anything like this before. I mean Bellwether was one thing, but the police had leads to follow and you followed one right to the source! This is different, this is on a whole new scale."

"We're officers," Judy looked at Harvey, who wouldn't meet her eye. "This is our job. Just accepting that this is the new norm is…is cowardice."

"What are we supposed to do about it, then?"

Judy stammered. "We…keep looking, we have to."

"We've been looking, Judy. We traveled all the way to Bunnyburrow looking and what did we find? And the task force, and all the research at the lab, constantly searching for something to follow. We've been looking for a month now and there's nothing new. Nothing. We're at a dead end."

She was gripping her glass with an intensity that threatened to shatter it in her paw. "Then what? Give up?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"I'm pretty sure it was, what else do you mean by 'dead end'?"

"No, I…I'm not giving up, I just need…we need something. Anything at this point." He paused for a long while, and Judy thought he might be finished when he turned back to her. "But what if there is nothing? This isn't some movie where the villain is sure to fall eventually—in the real world, villains win. They kill the good guys and get away with it. They tear the city apart. They win."

"Harvey, shut up. You were the one just the other day telling me that it's not easy, that the world keeps spinning, that you believed in me. This isn't helping anything."
"Yeah, well neither are welcoming parties, or trips to the family farm, or standing out there in the square, waving signs like sitting ducks as if it's going to make a difference."

Judy slammed her fist on the table making the silver wear clatter. A million words. She had a whole dictionary-full of words she had to say to him right then, but not a single one passed her lips. The tables around them paused to watch if they weren't already. She only looked at her paws, gritting her teeth, wishing she had just gone home after her shift. Wishing she had gone home and gotten some sleep.

Slowly, the restaurant ambiance resumed, though not between her and Harvey. They were silent until the check came, and Harvey covered it without a word. Judy didn't stop him.

All she wanted was sleep that night. Respite from it all. Hopes that her dreams would be less problematic than her reality, or even better, no dreams at all. The void was easy—it never argued or presented problems. It was the lack of all these things, good and bad alike. She wanted the void more than ever that night.

So it figures that her phone would wring at three that morning, right as she was settling into a thankfully dreamless sleep. She groaned and rolled over, burying her head in her pillow to block out the phone's glaring light. Only after the fifth or sixth wring did she realize the nature of a call at three in the morning must be urgent, and she was out of bed before she could find her balance.

"Hello?" It was as if her brain was one of those old computers that took up entire rooms and needed several minutes to start up, the systems coming back online one at a time. Sure enough, she was sitting in her office chair, rocking slightly, shivering though not caring to find a blanket or coat.

There was no response, which was all the response she needed.

She looked around for some way to record the call, settling on a notepad and pen off her desk. But then she saw the pen—the carrot one—in the light of her phone. She slid the notepad to the side and set the phone and the pen on the desk beside each other, putting the call on speaker. She began recording, hoping the pen's recording capacity was long enough for the call.

For several minutes, a faint conversation between a few mammals would come in and out, interrupted by a scratchy static that reminded her of an old crank radio she used to have in her bedroom as a kit. Only there was no antenna for her to fish out the window in hopes of finding a better signal. She leaned as close to the speaker as her sensitive ears—even more sensitive from sleep—would allow, trying to discern what came through between the bouts of static.

"*PFFFFFFT*—way out here—*PFFT* *PFFT*—not like any of y—*PFFFFFFT*—ask him or anything—*PFFT*—paranoia, I bet—*PFFFFFFT*"

She tried to string together the bits and pieces she heard, though the static was too prevalent for any sentence to reach her whole. Though, after several minutes, the reception seemed to miraculously clear in an instant.

She could now make out voices, a wide variety of tones from different types of mammals. And she could hear every word they were saying. She went for the notepad, remembered her pen was recording, and stood up, staring at her phone in disbelief. She sat back down quickly and leaned in, listening like an adamant fan of a TV show who's final episode had just been released after long last.

"Going by this, all understand the conduct?" asked a strangely high and tinny voice—Judy recognized it immediately as a voice changer.
"Clear," said several voices.

"Remember," continued the tinny voice, who seemed to be conducting the conversation, "that I can only trust you as far as I can see you, and seeing as this camera greatly limits my field of vision, that is not very much."

"Clear," spoke the voices.

"You all understand the gravity of our talking? The penalty for those who do not respect the conduct?"

"Clear."

"Understood. We will begin with the proposals. Begin, proposal one."

"Clear," spoke only one voice, masculine, rather gruff. "The Soundfront Meadow Park, southern Sahara Square. The Unity Statue makes it a common tourist hot spot. Often populated by picnicking visitors and a number of food trucks in the warmer months, by which Golden Tickets could be distributed safely and precisely."

"Soundfront Meadow is within close proximity to Precinct Thirty-Nine's Station One, is it not?"

"Clear."

"I will consider the risk. Begin, proposal two."

"Clear," spoke yet another voice, this one higher in pitch, slightly nasally, as if fighting a cold. "The Goldentusk Building Observation Deck, the Rainforest District, near the Fruit Town Market. Known for the being one of the first skyscrapers in Zootopia, the building now prides itself on the diverse community which built it from the ground up. Photos on the deck show workers of all species sharing lunch at great heights while the building was under construction. The building prides itself on being one of the first public works that unified a diverse range of species for its construction. Golden Tickets could be sold from the gift shop on the building's roof."

"Intriguing. Is there heavy security in the building?"

"On the ground floor, there are armed guards at the metal detectors. Other than this, close to none on the roof. Guards assume that anyone who passes through the detectors and x-ray kiosks is safe to visit the deck without further notice."

"This sounds very promising, well done. Begin, proposal three."

A similar pattern continued all the way up to proposal twelve. Judy noted that each mammal, when giving the initial proposal, spoke as if they were reading off something. Their words were too carefully formed to be improvisation. Proposal nine appeared to be the closest in proximity to the phone calling Judy, close enough even to be on the mammal's person.

The conversation continued on after the twelfth and final proposal. "Tonight brings several promising proposals," spoke the tinny voice that appeared to be conducting the conference, "though none more so than proposal five."

Proposal five, Judy recalled, spoke of the Christmas Festival happening next week in the Sahara Square Plaza. It was one of Zootopia's largest public celebrations all year.

"This will undergo serious consideration. In the meantime, all will continue on schedule. Savage
Containment should reach maximum capacity by next week's end, after Christmas."

Judy's ears were at full alert, though she remained quiet in fear that somehow, any noise she made might be picked up on the other end.

*How could they know about Savage Containment? Isn't it a government secret?* She leaned even closer to her phone.

"Yes, three?" the facilitating voice asked.

"What is to become of the inmates after reaching maximum capacity?"

*Savage Containment is constructing a new location in the Nocturnal District of massive proportions under the guise of a detention center."

"So, a prison then?" asked Three. Proposal Three, if Judy had to guess.

"No, a holding facility much like the one in Savanna Central, only larger."

"Clear," responded three.

The conversation wound down quickly, obviously not meant to last longer than it must.

"All of this has been noted," the facilitating voice said. "I thank you for your participation. Do not contact me for our next meeting, I will contact you. Clear?"

"Clear," said all.

"Dismissed."

For a moment there was the sound of scraping metal on concrete like chairs groaning and being moved. Then, the call ended abruptly, leaving Judy holding a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. She remembered the pen and ended the recording.

The task force was her first thought. The morning would be too late. Tonight would have to do. Her first instinct was to call Harvey, though there was little he could to unite all the members of Bogo's Elites and Fulgen's subordinates. So she gritted her teeth and called the one other number she knew would take her seriously.

The chief answered after only a few wrings, though he didn't sound particularly happy about it. "Hopps," he murmured and exhaled loudly, slowly. "What is this?"

"I found it. The breakthrough or something, it's something. I found something, and I need the entire task force to meet ASAP."

There was a long silence on the other end. For a moment, Judy believed that he was going to hang up without a word in response, or even lecture her over the phone. He sighed, long and begrudging, then the sound of a mattress creaking. "Alright. I'll get Fulgens on the line. Hopps, please tell me this is worth my time."

"It is, sir. Well worth it, I assure you."

Only an hour later, the entire task force was gathered around a long table in one of Precinct One's many conference rooms, the carrot pen in the middle of it all. It was comically small in comparison to the table and surrounding mammals, though holding everyone's attention as if it were a live bomb.
No one spoke a word until the recording ended. Despite this, the conversation held between all members at the table was loud and only spoken through their eyes. It was clear that everyone was just as hungry for answers as Judy had been, and now they all gorged themselves on the recording.

Harvey sat at Judy's right. Like everyone else, he said not a word, though the hare didn't meet Judy's eyes once, much less lift his gaze up from the table. Frankly, Judy was too fatigued to care much about the fallout she and Harvey had the night before. But is he really this upset? After stealing a glance, Judy saw more embarrassment in his downward-trained eyes than anger, and for a moment she didn't care about the recording. She just wanted to pull him aside, as he had in the hallway outside bullpen, and tell him that an argument this petty doesn't deserve any grief.

The recording ended and still, no one moved to speak. Bogo cleared his throat loud enough to make Cole Antlersen jump from where he sat nearby. He turned to Judy. "Hopps, when did you receive the call?"

"Just after 3:00 a.m., sir," she responded, now addressing the room. "I started recording only a couple of seconds after I picked up. I didn't miss much in that time, just more static. I've received two other calls of a similar nature in the past few weeks, but I never listened long and wrote them off as bad reception or someone butt-dialing me."

"We're going to need that pen," Fulgens said. "The audio will need to be recorded onto something compatible with the computer system at Containment, from there we can run vocal analysis and a number of other tests."

"The pen aside, who are these mammals? What are their motives?" Bogo asked the room, much like an English professor encouraging his students to delve deeper into the subject matter, to dissect with their minds and observe what they find.

"Whoever they are, the conversation didn't appear particularly hostile," Rhinowitz noted.

"We don't know that," Melody spoke up. "The conversation was too cryptic to gauge any immediate intentions, but the very fact that they're speaking so strangely might indicate something more to this. Not to mention the way they talked about security or the lack thereof in certain locations. The voice conducting the meeting made it clear there are strict rules about the whole ordeal. No names were given, everything said was in a very formal and straight to the point fashion, as if it were premeditated and planned. The anonymity, the selective language—there's obviously a lot more to this meeting than the recording conveys, and I don't think any of it is good."

"Notice the distortion of the leader's voice," said a black bear from Savage containment—Judy believed his name to be Crispin. "I don't think he or she is actually in the room. Why else would they need a voice distor...er?"

"This must be the leader, then," Fangmeyer said from across the table. "This particular mammal's anonymity seems to be more crucial than the rest, which would only make sense if this mammal were a higher-up."

"Higher-up of what organization, though?" Crispin said.

"I think it's safe to assume this is the syndicate," said Judy, gaining the immediate attention of all in the room. The sudden shift of all eyes on her nearly threw her off, aided by her fatigue, but she continued. "Melody already pointed out how the secret nature of the meeting seems more hostile than anything else, but I think the real key is in the location of the proposals. I noticed that two of the proposals given—the Watering Hole and the Soundfront Meadow—had something very similar in common."
Judy had just been to the Watering Hole the previous night with Harvey, though the mention of the place alone wasn't enough for the pieces to fit together. It came to her on the train here, researching the aforementioned locations. Soundfront Meadow stood out immediately. The Meadow was a large public park bordering the seawall of the Zootopia Sound, a common attraction in Sahara Square for its towering sandstone sculptures, the largest of which was the Unity Statue. The statue was of a broad-maned lion and a water buffalo, hand in hand, dancing in mid-step. It was only after she had seen the statue on Zoogle images that she could see the commonality.

"You all know the legend behind the Watering Hole—the meeting of Lions and Zebras to share the largest source of freshwater in the region almost a thousand years ago. Compare that with the Unity Statue in Soundfront Meadow, the one of a lion and a buffalo dancing."

Wolfard was the first to latch on. "It's predators and prey."

Judy shot him finger guns. "Bingo. And I'm sure if you do the research on the other proposed locations and their history, you'll find they all are places of emphasized unity between predators and prey. I think it is very possible these proposals result in the attacks we see every day around the city—attacks which have been occurring in areas of predator-prey compatibility."

There was a hush as her words permeated the room. Only Bogo broke the silence.

"I think Hopps got it right." He shared a brief moment of eye contact with her, and in that moment Judy could detect a glimmer of respect and even pride. Pride that she worked under him. "I believe we've found our syndicate."

"More like they've found us," Harvey commented, all eyes on him now.

Bogo crossed his arms. "Care to explain, Jamison?"

"Well, Hopps did mention that she received the same calls before, so it's safe to assume that on at least two previous occasions, there had been meetings like this one. It is obvious someone at the meeting is calling secretly. Whether or not it's a member or someone listening in we cannot know, though one thing is clear. Somebody outside the ZPD and Savage Containment is trying to contact us. Somebody we might be able to consider an ally."

"He has a good point," Wolfard said, "after all, Hopps is one of the most prominent faces of the ZPD. If someone were wanting to contact us, she would be the main candidate next to the chief himself."

"Then why remain anonymous?" Fangmeyer said from beside Wolfard. "Can't the caller communicate with us outside these midnight calls?"

Wolfard considered this, scratching his muzzle. An idea seemed to click in his mind because his eyes brightened and he continued with a newfound enthusiasm. "Possibly because the caller is part of the syndicate. If this were true, talking to the ZPD directly might be too much of a risk."

"But why a risk?" Fangmeyer said. "There's always protective custody, not to mention several other safety precautions for those willing to drop a hint, especially on a case this mainstream."

"Maybe…" Judy said, drawing all attention to her. She paused, almost losing her words because of how outlandish and insane they would seem the moment they left her lips. "If it is too risky for the caller to contact the ZPD personally, then there must be a threat in the ZPD itself."

"What are you saying?" Bogo asked.
"What I mean is if the caller has to remain anonymous while contacting the ZPD, it must be because the syndicate is in the ZPD, or at least somehow affiliated."

A curious murmur broke out in the room, only silenced when Judy cleared her throat. She realized she now was holding the entire room on her every word.

"Think about it," she continued, "whoever was leading the conversation—the high-pitched voice—knew about Savage Containment. And when they mentioned the new location being built in the Nocturnal District, the rest seemed to understand like they already knew what Savage Containment is. I think it's pretty clear that somebody inside the ZPD or Savage Containment was at that meeting. If this is true, the caller can't speak to the police personally, because that somebody will know." A thick quiet fell over the room. No one dared to speak, as if that would immediately deem them a suspect. "All things considered, it could even be someone in this room."

"That seems a little dramatic," Fulgens said.

Bogo held up a hoof. "No, I think she has a valid point. It is obvious that somebody who has access to insider information involving Savage Containment is relaying that information to the syndicate. Is it true, doctor, that Savage Containment is opening a new location in the Nocturnal District?"

Fulgens gravely nodded his head. "The construction team is working double-time to have it finished before maximum capacity is reached. We simply can't handle the growing rate of savagery in this city."

"It's true, then," Bogo said, scanning the room very slowly and carefully. "Somebody, either at the ZPD or at Savage containment, is in cahoots with the syndicate." For the first time, the eyes of Bogo's elites and of Fulgen's subordinates crossed one another not in amiability, but in distrust and accusation. The chief sensed this. "However, this knowledge cannot divide us, after all this city is already being split down the middle. If we are divided too, what left is to remain whole? Granted, extra precautions will have to be made to ensure the privacy of this task force, but pointing fingers will only delay us. As Zootopia's main defense against this growing threat, we must put our suspicions aside and focus on the task at hand. Remember the leader of the syndicate seemed extra interested in the proposal at the Christmas Festival. That's in Savanna Central Plaza in four days, on Christmas Eve, and if we all have our wits about us, there will be several armed ZPD officers and the Savage Containment response team at the ready during that festival's entirety. Do you agree, doctor?"

Fulgens considered it. "...I will have to re-arrange my schedule."

"I think you'll survive," Bogo said.

Fulgens sighed and took a long while considering it. "We meet Christmas Eve morning. In the meantime," he turned to Bogo, "may I speak with you in private?"

Bogo nodded curtly, then turned back to the rest of the task force. "Thank you all for assembling on such short notice, tonight's progress was monumental. Before you are all dismissed, I must add one thing." His voice took on a colder tone, more often used in putting the pressure on hard to crack interrogees than on a room of his best officers. "Assuming anyone on this task force is in contact with the voices heard on Officer Hopps' recorder, then I strongly suggest they turn themselves in tonight, before matters get out of hand. That is all. You are dismissed."

Later that morning, in a chess club downtown…
The opponent was waiting calmly when Algernon stumbled into the room, out of breath.

"You said it was important," the opponent said, holding a fresh latte in both paws for warmth. "I came as fast as I could."

"I apologize for the short notice," Al panted.

"Don't worry about it, I'm a morning mammal by nature," the opponent said, his gaze falling on the window where dawn's light was beginning to work its way down the height of neighboring buildings and into the dark streets below. He went to advance a pawn.

"Don't," Algernon said. "There's no time, the game can wait."

His opponent stared for a moment, then withdrew his paw and shrugged. "If it's that pressing then, by all means, sit down and tell me."

"Someone leaked last night's meeting."

The opponent returned his gaze back to the window as he considered this. "To whom? The task force?"

"Yes, the task force, who else is there to worry about? They all know about Christmas Eve."

The opponent maintained an unreadable expression. His paws idly went to his latte for a sip. "What a shame. Ruined our holiday surprise."

"Not entirely, they don't know everything. Location and date, nothing else."

The opponent grunted at this as if it were a minor inconvenience—an untied shoe, or perhaps the loss of a pawn.

"Aren't you even a little concerned?" Al said, his voice strained by exhaustion.

"No," the opponent shrugged with his paws, "not really. They've got a foothold, I'll give them that much, but their knowledge is limited and can be easily warped. It's a simple fix, really."

"How so?"

The opponent took another long sip of his latte, nearly driving Al mad in doing so. He sighed, put the cup down, and spoke in a refreshed voice, renewed with determination. "They don't know that we know that they know."

Al blinked. "…Elaborate?"

"They think they've got our plans all figured out, that they've got the jump on us when in reality it's the other way around. Sure, one of our pawns went blabbing to the police, I can deal with them later, but the force doesn't know our hierarchy. They assume they've found someone on their side. They don't know that we—the kings and queens of the operation—know that they know."

"And in their ignorance, we have the upper hand."

"Good, now we're thinking alike." He took another sip and, feeling that urgency had now been demoted to mere inconvenience, advanced a pawn two spaces. "Any ideas on the talkative one? We can number it down to the twelve who were present plus the guards, can't we?"

"Yes, though I think reviewing security tapes of the building would be wise, in the case that there
"were any intruders." Al had relaxed somewhat as well, enough to hop his horse over his front line of pawns.

"And about the Task Force? How's our rabbit?"

Al's expression became grim very fast. "She's recovering quickly."

"Even after the trip to Bunnyburrow?"

"Let's just say she's found a new acquaintance for emotional support."

"Anyone to worry about?"

"Not as of yet."

"Keep tabs anyway, best to be safe. And as for Hopps," the opponent's bishop cut across the board, a move that took Al off guard and captured one of his pawns, "make sure she's there for the Christmas surprise. I don't like her confidence."

Christmas Eve, Savanna Square Plaza

Judy had never worn tactical gear before, but it was heavy and cumbersome and she didn't like it. Bulky dark grey body armor with pads at her shoulders, knees, and elbows. On her head was helmet similar to riot control gear, with a radio piece, a faceplate, and two nylon stockings on top designed specifically to enable the ears of leporine* wearers. It gave her the ninja-esque appearance of all black ears. Held in both her paws was the tranq gun she was to use on a savage. Fulgens' briefing in the precinct not long before the officers were deployed throughout the square still rang in her head, making the weapon feel heavier in her fingers.

"The most important action you'll make today is the simple adjusting of your weapon's potency. In this adjustment lies either the balance of the savage's life or your own, though preferably neither if you are cautious," he had instructed the Task Force from behind Bogo's podium. "There is a movable piece on the underside of the muzzle with four settings. The closest to the handle is the weak setting, used on all mammals under eighty pounds—that's weasels, otters, raccoons, foxes, etcetera. The second and third settings are relatively similar, ranging between eighty and two hundred fifty pounds, so adjust accordingly. The fourth setting, and listen very closely, is used for mammals exceeding two-hundred and fifty pounds. That's lions, bears, leopards, even elephants and rhinoceroses though I doubt it will come to that. If you miscalculate the setting and give a male adult lion the second or third dosage, the tranquilizer will slow, though not stop the savage. At setting one it will hardly feel a thing. If you miscalculate the setting and give, say, a fox the fourth, or even third setting, that mammal will go into cardiac arrest and will most likely be dead before it can reach the municipal. This weapon is lethal if used incorrectly, so please, don't be an idiot and ask for help if you don't understand how to work it."

She had the panda show her exactly how to use it after the briefing had ended, and even after the one-on-one the weapon still felt alien in her paws. She was more the taser type, and even that she considered a worst-case scenario.

Though the heaviest of all her gear was actually a small, lethal firearm concealed on her left hip. It was far smaller than the rifles and semi-automatics she had worked with at the academy, and for that she was thankful. It was a rabbit-sized gun, but even with its size, the bullets could pierce an elephant's hide—all else was practically tissue paper.
It felt hot holstered onto her waist. For most of the time she stood at her post near the plaza tram station, she tried to ignore it. Tried to think about less pressing matters, like how she must look like a very small elephant in all this gear, maybe even like a small Finnick Fox she knew, aka "Little Toot-Toot." At that thought, in spite of everything—the cold, the gear, the gun, her fatigue, the looming threat—she couldn't stifle her snickers.

Harvey glanced at her with only his eyes, confused, but said nothing. Fulgens had assigned them together, most-likely due to the similarity in size. Only then, after nearly half an hour of bitter cold and crowd ambiance, did he decide to talk.

"About yesterday," he paused, considering his words. Judy didn't fill in for him, only staring ahead, watching the parks and rec team tediously wrap lights around the massive tree in the Square's Center. He pushed back the faceplate on his helmet. "I was scared," he admitted, which was much more blatant than she expected. "And I'd be lying if I told you I'm over it."

"It's cold enough out here. Please don't make it worse."

He blinked and fumbled for his words. "Look, I didn't mean…I didn't…"

"Harvey."

"What you did in Bunnyburrow wasn't a waste of time," he said, quickly, as if the sentence would fall apart if he didn't get it all out at once. "Whatever I said, it doesn't mean it was true. It wasn't, and you're a good cop, a better one than I'll ever be. So don't let some sad case like me bring you down."

Still hidden behind her faceplate, she didn't respond. The crowd was merry, walking with warm drinks while bundled in scarves and beanies. Smoke from a large bonfire on the other side of the square rose in a steady column as high as the surrounding skyscrapers. Despite all this, Judy felt very cold.

"You know I'm a coward, right?" he said and laughed. "Always have been, ever since a little kit, afraid of the farm equipment, afraid of my big brothers, of my parents, of predators, of the fucking full moon. And then I see the ZPD—the epitome of bravery and perseverance—and for a second I think I can be like them, like you." He sighed, his breath vaporizing. "So I take this job, trying to break out of my comfort zone, and I shatter it. Outside, I'm climbing the ranks, becoming stronger, breaking down barriers and making new friends. But inside, I'm," he chuckled, "I'm trembling all over, just managing not to scream, not to lose my mind. Like a savage, sort of, but not in the same way, because instead of going savage on others, it's my mind going savage on myself. Feral thoughts that rip me apart with fangs and claws that only I can feel." He stopped himself, looking very much like he could go on for another hour, squeezing out his brain until even a seasoned therapist would be begging for a vacation. His cheeks were red, most likely from the cold, but he also seemed embarrassed, like he wanted to shrink deeper within the armor and hide there.

"You may be a coward," Judy removed her faceplate, "but you're a coward that saved my life. And that seems a little contradictory, doesn't it?"

Harvey looked away, surely blushing now, not because of the icy wind. "Fair point. And I'm sorry."

"Well, I also lost my temper, so…fine. I'm sorry too." She spat into her palm and offered her paw.

Harvey grimaced. "You really had to do that."

"Aw, are you a germaphobe? That's cute."

"No, it's just not necessary. Shaking isn't necessary, I accepted your apology, you accepted mine."
"No apologies accepted until we shake on it, the Bunnyburrow way," Judy said, a small smile breaking on her lips.

"Damn you," he muttered although grinning. He spat and shook her paw firmly. "Now, enough of this. Don't forget we're under new management."

"Don't anger the panda, you're right," Judy said and scoffed. "New management, what's with that anyway? Bogo could have led the task force fine."

"Unlike Fulgens, Bogo has a whole precinct to run. The Task Force shouldn't be his first priority. Fulgens has the time and the resources to run everything, besides, he knows more about savagery."

The transfer of power had happened at the briefing that morning when all the members of the Task Force—Bogo's Elites and Fulgen's Response Team—in the usual conference room for what would surely be a big day. That is, if the voices in the recording were truly the syndicate and not those of elaborate pranksters. The team discussed the gear they'd all be wearing, though most of the elites were already familiar with riot gear, which was similar save for the riot shield. Then, each pair of officers were given a post around the square spaced out enough not to draw the public eye, while the Savage Response Team stayed in an obscure white van parked in an alley not far from the precinct. Three code-words had also been established that morning: oddball, hunter, and reaper. Mammals acting strangely in public, not complete lunatic, but definitely not normal—these were oddballs. Hunters had graduated to a new level of lunacy—dilated pupils, not speaking or responding, growling, drooling, crawling primally on all fours—clearly savage. There had only been one reaper in Zootopia—a savage cougar who had killed three in a mall several weeks prior. That attack had sent Judy plummeting into the deep end and she wasn't sure if she could handle another plunge. "It's a reality we all must face," Fulgens had said, "if attacks continue at this rate the likelihood of another fatality is almost guaranteed." The Task Force had stiffened at this, though it also served as a blunt, if not necessary reminder of their job description.

Judy had silently come to the conclusion that if anyone was to die with savage fangs around their throat, it would be her before any civilian.

"I take it you and Fulgens don't mix well?" Harvey asked.

The thought of fangs on the soft skin of her neck had almost been enough to silence his voice, but she shook it away before she began imagining it too deeply. "We haven't reached chummy quite yet, let's just say that."

Harvey's laughter vaporized in the air, it still being morning. "Well, you're not alone. I don't think any of the officers were too thrilled about the shift."

Two squirrels approached them, tourists Judy guessed by the rolling suitcase and slight sparkle of awe in their eyes, asking for directions to the northbound train. To Judy's surprise, Harvey crouched down and gave step-by-step instructions including landmarks and oddly shaped buildings.

"If you see the feline fiddler—least that's what I've heard him called—you'll know you're in the right place. Then again, might be a little cold to fiddle, but keep an ear out for the Orange Blossom Special just as a failsafe. All else fails, most mammals are nice enough to point you in the right direction, just keep an eye out for big guys cause they don't always keep an eye out for you, one little fella to another. Right then, stay warm," he said, pointing them in the right direction. He hollered before they were out of earshot, "And welcome to Zootopia!"

It took him a moment to realize she was staring. "What?"
"Since when are you street-savvy?"

"I like to know my way around, especially in a new city."

"Don't you have a car?"

"Yes, but I've come to learn that cars aren't as convenient here as they are out in the sticks. So I memorized the train lines." When she continued to stare, he looked even more confused. "What? It's nice to know. Besides, it's fascinating once you get a map in your head. Gives the city a whole new light."

Not knowing what to say, Judy laughed.

He laughed too, though still taken aback. "What?" he cried, again, "Don't tell me I'm weird, I get that enough, that whole 'Jamison, you a strange sonovabitch, you know that?' Yeah, I get it. I know I've got my quirks. I also know they won't be laughing when they're lost in the concrete jungle with no mental map to follow."

"Harvey Jamison," Judy said, shaking her head and grinning. She didn't know quite what to say, but she knew what she felt. She pointed, "I'm gonna slip away to that coffee stand over there, you stay on guard. I'll bring you back something warm."

"You sure? I can cover—"

"Don't even try."

"Do you even know my order?"

"Green tea, you've gotten it everywhere we go."

He surrendered. "Right, then. But be quick about it."

"Always am!"

Harvey watched her jog off in heavy gear. He smiled at the pavement, sticking his gloved paws into his pockets and let out something between a sigh, a laugh, and a whisper. Drink or not, he was feeling plenty warm now.

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Everyone on the Task Force expected an attack. It was right there in the recording, after all, and the location made sense as to make a scene. No matter how quickly the savage was contained, the publicity was inevitable. ZNN would know as well, with their reports on every attack prior, they probably sensed the threat far before Judy received the call. Hell, maybe even some of the civilians knew. Judy had never seen Christmas in Zootopia, but she overheard some of the other seasoned officers talking over the com-system about how dead the festival was compared to previous years. To Judy, it looked busy enough, more packed than Savanna Square on an average day, but she guessed she couldn't yet sense when something was off in the city like the other officers could.

By noon, some of the officers began to discuss lunch over the coms. By one, all were in agreement for a quick snack, and by two agreement turned into grumbling to one-another about the strict nature of their new management. When three came, the griping actually subsided a bit. The real punch was at four. That was when the paranoia set in heavier than the hunger.

Finally, someone outright said it.
"If somebody doesn't go savage soon I think I will. Take one for the team and get this thing over with." It sounded like Johnson, the lion partnered with Fangmeyer near across the plaza near city hall.

"Shut up, Bob, that's nothing to joke about," said a feline voice that was definitely Fangmeyer's.

"C'mon, you can't blame me, you're feeling it too, just look around. They've stationed food stands all around us. This is cruel and inhumane torture!"

"Do you hear me bitching about it?"

"Ooo-hoo," chuckled a deep voice most likely belonging to Rhinowitz, "Bob that's your cue to can it."

"Oh piss off, Phillip, you could eat a whole food truck for an appetizer."

"Hey, howzaboutchya go fuck yourself."

"C'mon, Phil, you know you want to, don't deny it. A whole food truck all to yourself."

"I'll drop a whole food truck on your ass, Johnson, try me."

"Look, I know it's just one truck, but I'm sure we can find another round here somewhere."

"Jesus Christ," Fangmeyer muttered, "we're all hungry, but we're not deaf so let's keep one thing going for us."

"I second that, Fang," Judy said.

"Whoa, Hopps? You still alive over there?" came Johnson's voice. "Thought you'd just died or disappeared with that other long-eared friend o' yours."

"Just because I don't update the group on how badly I need to eat or piss every five minutes doesn't mean I'm dead, Bob."

Snickering from several lines.

"Right, right, I get it, I'm an ass, but seriously," said Johnson, taking on a tone still lingering with humor, but faded, just enough for the uneasiness underneath to show it's head for a split second,"it's nearly five in the fucking pm. Someone shoulda gone crazy hours ago."

"I don't think savagery keeps that strict a schedule," Judy said.

"Yeah, well maybe that recording was only a suggestion, ever thinka that? They never outright guaranteed it to happen here. They know about Savage Containment after all, maybe they learned about this operation and called the whole thing off and we're out here with ice sickles on our whiskers for a goddamn bluff."

"Johnson, cool it," said Fangmeyer, her voice colder than the skies above them.

"Oh I'm cool," he said with an exaggerated chuckle. "I'm cool."

The conversation tapered off from there. Judy occasionally shut her mic off so she could talk to Harvey alone, though the hours of cold and the festering hunger in their collective bellies didn't leave much room for comfort, much less conversation.
The skies were darkening. With gentle sleet descending down in a fleet of swirling precipitates a billion strong, sunset came hours earlier than predicted. Street lamps not on timers but on solar power activated early, accompanied by thousands of festive lights strung in an intricate web over the entire square.

But where's the spider? Judy wondered on occasion, feeling like it might descend on her at any moment in a dark mass of hairy legs and eyes and fangs. She wondered if they all felt like that, even Wolfard, who hadn't said a word over the coms the entire night. She wondered if even his fur was beginning to stand on his neck.

Snow. It was going to be a White Christmas. She watched individual flakes dance intricate swirls in the lamplight. Millions of them, each dancing something new. White Christmases in Bunnyburrow were a treasured rarity. She could remember a few, maybe one or two from her childhood when Jack Frost and Saint Nicholas both arrived at just the right time. Thought it had been years.

"All officers to the ZPD motor pool immediately!"

So sudden she hardly noticed, not while watching the snowflakes dance. Then she was running and Harvey was already ahead of her, gear clunking, legs stiff with cold. Snow stung her cheeks and nose. She remembered to close her faceplate. In her paws, she held the taser, her forefinger on the safety. Ready. Ready in an instant's notice. She'd fire and maybe she'd even kill, but she wouldn't let them take anyone tonight. Not on a White Christmas.

She, Harvey, and Wolfard were the first to the motor pool, though now that she thought of it, why the motor pool? Then she realized there had been no codeword given, no hunter, not even an oddball. She looked to Bogo with hopes of some explanation but he was busy shouting into his radio.

"Just because the precinct is in the square does not mean there are officers at the ready. Some should stay here, just to ensure—" A faint and inaudible voice holding the placidity of Fulgens' tone said something that made Bogo very red in the snout. "No, that is not how it works, especially when the threat was originally called on the square. It would be unwise—" Fulgens said something very short and final, as if telling a child "No, you aren't getting any ice cream. Now eat your veggies."

Bogo started to bark back, noticed something on his radio, and slammed it back into the holster on his hip. "Dammit."

The other officers had joined her and Harvey, some listening in on Bogo's beef with his radio. That was when she saw the van—no, vans. There were two of them, one just parking near where they gathered. Before she could process why, Bogo was dividing them, barking orders louder than she had ever seen him shout. Harvey was shoved towards her, an obvious pair even in the heat of the moment, and then they were being coerced into the back of the vans. She hadn't had time to notice if they were police vans or not, but why wouldn't they be?

But why would they be herding us like cattle? Where are we going? Why are we going?

The doors closed and the engine roared to life with a lurch. Judy nearly tumbled over in a heap of pads and guns, though Harvey found her forearm and righted her. He guided her to a bench on the wall where they sat.

She opened her faceplate, brushing away clinging snow.

"What's happening?"
"I'm not sure." He looked the other way, towards the driver, an officer she hadn't seen before, but Harvey couldn't get his attention over the roar of the engine and the roar of questions and the roaring in his own head. He turned back to her. "Just stay calm."

"Shouldn't I be the one telling you that? You're the self-professed coward."

He grinned and they hit a bump, then a sharp turn.

"I think that was a curb," said Harvey, and for some reason, this explained everything. What Bob had said over the coms about a bluff. The cold hours of inactivity. Bogo being somehow louder than normal. She realized he must have been covering fear—something she had serious doubts existed within the chief—by raising his voice to mask his unease. This coming from the physically and emotionally rock-solid cape buffalo who was her chief, it was downright terrifying.

"They know," she murmured, road noise drowning her voice. They must be speeding. She connected the dots.

*They know that we knew.*

*So they tricked us.*

*They tricked us even tonight, right here in the square.*

*But how?*

*The Task Force is tight under wraps, even within the ZPD itself.*

*How did they know?*

*They must be…*

"Oh god."

*They know because they are us.*

The air that rushed at them when the van doors opened was somehow colder than the freezing hell in the square. Judy didn't understand how that could be until she noticed a nearby building, then another, then an overpass bridge—all of which were coated in snow and adorned in ice sickles.

"It would be Tundratown," Johnson grumbled, shuddering. Even he had been quiet on the drive. "They're trying to fuck with our heads, that's my theory, sending us here in the dead of winter."

*And in the midst of a blizzard,* Judy thought, observing how the dusting of snow in Savanna Central had transformed into a whitened void into which her fellow officers were disappearing. It wasn't long before it was her time to leave the haven of the van's interior, and when she did the wall of wind and pellets of snow charged her with enough force to topple her balance, gear and all. A paw caught her by the back of her vest before she could be swept away, if such a thing were possible in the middle of a city, and righted her. She looked up to see pointed ears and a snout protruding from the mask. She gave Wolfard a thankful thumbs up and trudged on in a line, blindly following the officer in front of her.

The line approached a strip center already surrounded by the flashing patrol cars of local police. The source of the flashing lights seemed to come from a local cafe called "The Overlook Brewery." They filed into the cafe one by one, tracking snow and dirt in with them, to find an atmosphere far too
serene to contain a savage.

The cafe glowed with warm light, jazz humming over the wailing storm outside. Even through the mask, Judy could smell the earthy scent of fresh coffee grinds. Then she noticed a few upturned chairs and one table leaning on one side. She flipped up her mask to get a better look.


In the far corner of the restaurant, several unfamiliar officers were gathered. When she got closer, she realized two of them were on the floor, pinning a no doubt savage lynx to the floor. One of the officers had a fresh slash in his pant leg that was just beginning to seep through with blood.

"You guys the specialists?" one of the unfamiliar officers, a polar bear, asked.

"No, but they should be right behind us," said Fangmeyer.

"Thank Christ, we've hardly been able to hold this fucker down," the bear said, watching the savage disdainfully. "He likes to squirm, almost got away when you came in. Musta startled 'em."

"Is he alright?" Judy asked, pointing to the scratched officer.

The polar bear assessed the bunny in tactical gear for a long moment, then responded, "Sure, he'll live. Long as it ain't contagious or nothing."

"It isn't," Wolfard said, and then the Response Team hurried in.

Melody took immediate charge, getting the officers who weren't pinning the savage to clear the area. Then, with the efficiency of a pit-stop crew, the Response Team took action. Cris, the black bear, traded places with the officers on top of the savage. Antlersen approached with a syringe. The savage snarled, snapping at his feet before Cris secured its head to the floor with one firm paw. Rem the ferret secured its arm and Antlersen gave the tranquilizer, all the while Harriet the kangaroo tended to the injured officer's leg at a distance. The savage became slow and eventually drooped, its tongue lolling, eyes upturned. Then Melody descended with a second syringe—the antihowler, no doubt—gave it into the crook of the savage's arm, and Cris got off him. Rem secured both the paws and feet of the savage and when a stretcher was provided, he and Cris carried the snoozing lynx off in a jog.

During all of this, Judy simply watched from near the overturned table. She took off her helmet and set it beside her, feeling like a kid who had finally mustered the strength to ride an infamously scary roller coaster, only to discover it was terribly boring. All this gear, all the waiting, all the cold—for what? To scare the syndicate? If savages could be contained this easily what use is the ZPD to the Task Force at all? The Response Team had already proven to be more than prepared at their one job. What were Bogo's Elites, then? Insurance?

When she snapped out of her inquisitive gaze at the floor, she realized Wolfard was watching her. "I'm guessing you feel it too?"

"Huh?"

"That detective sense the academy drills it into you." He waved his paw in the air, searching for the correct words to portray what he knew she was sensing. "Like there's something missing, something gone awry that we haven't noticed. This is…anticlimactic."

This helped her pinpoint the source of her unease, for she had been sensing it too.
"Yeah," she nodded, "I think I can understand that. Just look around. Normal coffee shop, normal location, normal mammals for all I know. There's nothing different about this attack."

"What were you expecting, then?"

"First off, this isn't the right location. Tundratown isn't anywhere remotely near the plaza in Savanna."

"Remember the plaza was only one of twelve proposed locations on the recording," Wolfard said, kneeling to make the conversation easier. "Maybe they changed their minds. Why? I don't have a clue, but what's stopping them?"

"The Christmas Festival is open season for potential savages. There's enough predator-prey mingling to put it on the syndicate's radar, why wouldn't they take this opportunity? Remember the deep voice in the recording, the presumed leader?"

Wolfard nodded.

"He seemed in favor of the attack on Savanna Square, even outright said it sounds very promising. Not to mention I've listened to that tape more times than I can count since it was copied from my pen. This coffeehouse isn't one of the proposed locations."

Wolfard looked at her, though it was more like he looked through and beyond her, his focus retreating deep into his head where the light bulbs were proposing one idea after another. His gaze scanned the abandoned cafe. "Nothing about this place seems to promote predator-prey relations either."

"Normal coffee shop!" Judy cried. "Why here?" She could feel something deeper in this intentions of this attack. Something she wasn't seeing yet, but certainly was feeling, like the rumbling of an underwater river on the ground above. *Something here. Must be here. Think. Dig. Figure it out.*

Wolfard sighed, "Don't overthink it either. These are sinister, psychopathic animals, not buisnessmammals who follow a strict calendar."

"They can be both, you know." *Or maybe...not here? "Or..."

"Or?"

"They could've tricked us."

Wolfard at first seemed amused, then those light bulbs flashed behind his eyes and he didn't seem so lighthearted. "How do you mean?"

"I've been thinking, and I think the plaza was a trick. They led us on to believe they'll attack at point A, then reveal point B, leaving us unprepared and arriving late to the scene."

Wolfard bit his lip. She was noticing he had a habit of rubbing his paw pads together while in deep thought. "But the cops here had the situation under control before we even arrived. No citizens injured. If the goal is to cause chaos and civilian casualties, wouldn't the Christmas Festival be a prime target? Even if we're monitoring the area, think of the publicity of an attack on the city's heart."

"It's the most wonderful time of the year, too," Judy mumbled.

"Exactly. It's the perfect opportunity. So why wouldn't they take it?"
Maybe not here. Maybe the answers are somewhere else. Maybe this is all just…

A light bulb behind her eyes.

Judy blinked.

"A bluff."

Wolfard wrinkled his nose. "What?"

She looked up right as the chief stormed in. All heads up, all ears perked, all conversation dead with no time for silence.

"Back in the vans, all of you!"

No one argued. Judy grabbed her helmet in one paw and made for the door, Wolfard behind her. Outside, the storm waited to receive them with unparalleled ferocity. The wind was screaming. It was earsplitting to a rabbit.

"Judy?" Wolfard called over the storm. She wouldn't have heard it if it wasn't her first name. His look was still one of confusion, waiting for someone to fill him in. She had sensed the problem, he knew that, for he had too. But she had broken through sensing and now knew.

Nothing's stopping them.

"What is it?" he shouted, his voice one of a thousand howls.

They piled in the van and the back doors closed. She looked around and noticed Harvey was absent, though Wolfard was with her. There wasn't enough time to sit before the engine roared, tires spinning, desperate to find traction. They did, and Judy was slung into the back of the van, the back of her head connecting with the metal door. There was a resounding thud.

A kaleidoscope of dancing colors filled the van, osculating in wide circles, intertwining and folding in on themselves, then bursting out again in brilliant fireworks that danced all the more. All Judy could grasp at the moment was that fireworks didn't belong in a moving van and that somewhere else, something was very wrong.

There was a paw. It was grey. She took it. The paw found her seat and her seat was cold.

There was a voice. No, not just one voice but a whole chorus screaming in her ears. But there was also a singular voice, familiar and gentle, and it was asking if she was alright. Then it was asking if she could speak. Then it was asking for the first aid.

"Do you know what you're doing?" A new voice, motherly.

"I've had basic training."

"And I'm a doctor. May I see her?"

"Sure."

"No, I don't need that. I need a phone, does anyone have their phone on them?"

Shuffling.

"Thank you."
Another chorus of growling asphalt rose up to meet the screaming wind.

A white-hot pain reached first her eyes the penetrated further into her brain, exploding against the back of her skull and filling her entire head with searing light. She felt air escape her lungs.

"Judy, can you hold still? I need to see your eyes."

Gentle fingers opened her eyes further. More light. Less air.

"O-Oh god…"

She felt this voice in her throat, vibrating, then realized it must be her own. She realized she must be herself. Then she wondered why she was so panicked.

The white pain receded and a darker world formed. Transparent fireworks still blossomed and shrunk, blossomed and shrunk, though behind them was a face with patient eyes that watched her.

"Judy, can you see me? Do you know who I am?"

"…Y-Yes."

"What species am I?"

Her brain was squeezing. The outline of the motherly voice shifted and overlapped. She could make out two small ears, tan fur, and a long snout with herbivorous teeth so white it nearly hurt her eyes. "Deer?"

The motherly voice laughed, though it was tense and short. "I'll forgive that. Let me try again. How many fingers do you see?"

Three fingers appeared, but they grew and overlapped into four, then shrunk and folded into two.

"Two?"

The motherly voice sighed. The fingers became less.

"How about now."

"One."

"Good." The fingers were gone. "Do you remember where you are?"

"I'm…moving." The words moved like sludge. Slow and thick. Hard to get over her tongue.

"Moving where to?"

"To…something…"

Another tightly-reigned chuckle. "Can you be specific?"

"Something bad." The words became thin and runny and warm. "Tastes like metal."

"That's normal, dear, you banged your head pretty hard. You've also bit your lip. Now tell me, what do you mean something bad?"

"There's another one…another…second…the second one…"
"Second what?" the motherly voice sounded even tenser.

"I don't know…a bad thing…a trick. Nothing's stopping them."

The motherly voice turned away to a gentle voice that she knew, this one masculine. "She's likely concussed."

"Should have been wearing that damn helmet."

"And where's your helmet, officer?"

A sigh.

"Can you stay in here with her?"

"Probably not. We wouldn't be driving so fast if there weren't a problem, and I'm the trauma specialist. I have a bad feeling I'll be needed."

"What kind of problem?"

"Do I look like I know any more than you? Containment, maybe. Honey could've been injured or god forbid a savage makes it out."

"I've been down there once, I've seen the fortifications. It couldn't be possible."

"Well, assuming the problem is at Containment, they wouldn't be calling us back if a savage hadn't escaped the security kiosk that guards the cells. If that's the case, it's an absolute worst scenario. Fulgens would've already set the entire facility on lockdown, even if there are employees still inside. I'm afraid that's where I could be needed."

Judy was staring at the painfully white vest the motherly voice was wearing because, even though it hurt, the longer she stared the more grounded she became.

White jacket.

Hospitals have white jackets, but hospitals don't move. Nurses can move—I'm in an ambulance.

Oh god, what happened?

No, it can't be an ambulance, there are too many others. Why are there so many others? Why is there a nurse? Why are we moving?

Because nothing's stopping them.

Nothing's stopping who? Who's them?

Something bad. We're moving because of something bad.

Something requires a nurse and many others, and we have to get to that something fast.

We...

I must be an other, then. Others…

Officers!

Others—officers. Officers—others.
But why the nurse?

White jacket.

Because officers, because something bad, because nothing's stopping them—

Savage Containment.

Savages.

A bluff.

Her bearings came rushing back so fast she nearly lost her seat.

The kangaroo from Savage Containment. Harry, I think.

Her thoughts vocalized.

"Harry?"

Both she and the gentle voice—Wolfard!—turned to attention. Surprised, the kangaroo in the white jacket replied, "Harriet, actually, but Harry to my friends." Snapping out of her shock, she asked, "Now Judy, think hard for me. Do you remember where you are?"

Judy's voice was strained and she herself could hardly recognize it as her own, could hardly hear it over the unpleasant choruses battling for the loudest place. But she knew what she knew now, and when she said it there was no hesitation, even if looking at the kangaroo in the white jacket stung her mind.

"Nothing's stopping them from attacking twice."

In Harvey's van, trailing not far behind the one in which Judy came to the same shocking conclusion Bogo received over his radio while in Tundratown, the question as to where they were going and why had not yet been discovered. This aside, it didn't take detective training for Harvey to sense when something was wrong—something worse than before—and that it had something to do with the savage in the Tundratown cafe.

When the van began to slow, the helmets went on. Bogo, who happened to be riding with them, didn't have to call their attention—they were already watching, listening, waiting to be filled in.

"Are we close?" the chief shouted through the driver's window.

"Only a matter of blocks away."

"Right then," he turned back to the cabin of answer-hungry eyes, all ravenously trained on him. The cold night had infiltrated the van's cabin. All was dense and tight and silent, so silent for Christmas Eve in Animalia's largest city. "Officers, check now to ensure you're all carrying."

Harvey groped for the firearm, finding its handle. It felt so solid, so heavy in his palm, and he had yet even to draw it. His worst marks at the academy came from the shooting range, and then his hands hadn't been trembling.

He'd never shot anyone, and he didn't want to start tonight. Even though all cadets were warned at the academy to be prepared to use a gun to kill, he'd been ignorant enough to believe he could get by on his taser alone. That had only been months ago, before the savages, before tonight, before Judy—
who he planned to find the moment the vans were unloaded. Quite honestly these were the longest
two months of his life, and tonight would surely follow suit.

The driver of the van honked, snapping his mind back to his weapon.

"Keeping the business end pointed to the floor, arm your tranqs to the fourth setting."

The road noise became extra loud at this. More honking. Exchanging glances ranging from dread to
determination, each officer changed the setting on their tranqs with four clicks—*first, second, third,
fourth.*

In four clicks, every officer knew why they had left in such a hurry, and what they were about to do.

Bogo leaned into the driver's window. "Tell me we're close."

"I'm within sight of the square."

"Can't you go any faster?" the chief hissed.

"I would, sir, but I'm trying not to hit anyone." At this, the van slid to a stop, the driver laying on the
horn harder.

Bogo sighed, or growled—it was hard to tell the difference—and turned back to the officers with a
sentence that Harvey believed would follow him until he died.

"It's a reaper, be prepared."

The van made a hard left and slowed, the back end drifting on the ice for a moment before
screeching to a halt.

"Same drill as planned. Everybody out," Bogo ordered. He himself had procured one of Fulgens'
high-tech tangs. "I'll be behind you."

Doors opened to no snow. It appeared that while a blizzard was raging in Tundratown, in Savanna
Square the snowfall had died out entirely. This, however, did not mean it was silent.

Distant at this point, Harvey could detect crowd noise, but not what he had grown used to from the
city. A panicked crowd, and closer still, there were screams. Sparse, but cutting the frigid night air
when they came. Raising Harvey's fur when they came. Animal shrieks.

Outside the van, the entire plaza was covered in thin snow, though there were tracks of every kind
leading in all directions—the snow's retelling of whatever absolute hellscape had happened in this
place moments before they arrived. Onlookers who dared to stay were perched at street corners
nearest the square, the rest having fled.

Blood was easy to spot in the snow, and there were occasional trails of it leading off with the tracks.
Some splats here and there. Others places where the bloodshed had been heavier it was smeared in
with the snow, trampled underfoot, creating something more pink than crimson.

Paw prints in rapid succession. Larger divots where someone had fallen. Drag marks. More blood,
stark against the white.

Harvey and the other officers in his van jogged to catch up with Judy's van, who had already
marched into the snowy, desolate plaza. Harvey noted there weren't as many of them as he
remembered, in fact, there were only six: Wolfard, Fangmeyer, Francine, Melody Spott the director
of the response team, the black bear from the response team, and upon closer inspection, the meerkat Harvey remembered to be Rem, riding on the bear's shoulder.

*Judy?*

Harvey turned around only to have Bogo nudge him forward. "Keep moving."

"I don't see Judy."

There was a momentary pause, a minuscule moment where the hardened chief turned soft, then something like rationality and bravado topped with several years as a Chief of Police overrode whatever concern he had. His eyes hardened, focused ahead. "She'll be fine."

"You don't know where she is, how do you know she's fine? She's not with the others."

"Keep moving, rookie, that's an order."

Not far from where the vans had parked, a body. The kangaroo from the response team was checking for a pulse, though it was painfully obvious that this had been the reason for code reaper. A caribou or a moose, though Harvey didn't know the difference. If not for the horns, Harvey wouldn't have been able to tell what the mammal even was because the entire front was in tatters beyond recognition. He only caught a glance as he shuffled past, though it was enough to cause his throat to constrict and his stomach to lurch dangerously. One look at the intestines—they were strewn about like macabre tinsel on this brisk Christmas Eve—threatened to empty his stomach.

He didn't know what mammal this had been, but it had been big. And it was opened like a pinata.

"Francine, Johnson, Wolfard, there are mammals treed near the fountain," Bogo pointed out as they moved steadily across the square. "Get them down and out of the square." The three split off towards the grove of trees near the fountain in the plaza's center.

From ahead, screaming. An accompanied growl that edged on a roar.

Harvey couldn't see the source from behind the larger officers. Everything was cold and heavy, especially the weapon in his arms.

Judy was all that was on his mind.

"Safety off!" Bogo ordered.

With the group now reduced to five other than himself, he could see the source of both the growl and the scream, and immediately wished he had stayed in the back. It came from near the base of the trolley station where he and Judy had been on watch earlier. A shaggy black wolf in a beanie had tried to escape onto the station's awning. The wolf had failed and now lay in the red snow with the largest brown bear Harvey had ever seen crouching over him. A she-bear, covered in the tatters of a waterproof, was feasting on seemingly everything below the wolf's head, for that was all Harvey could or had the stomach to see.

The wolf had well passed the point of screaming, now only whimpering, eyes too wide, still eager for an escape he would never make. In those eyes was also a silent and futile plea for help to the approaching officers, despite both parties knowing it was no use.

An urge unlike anything Harvey had ever known struck him, and now he did think he could kill a mammal. He could easily shoot this wolf in the head right then, if only it meant he stopped staring, stopped whimpering, stopped having to endure being devoured because *oh god, how is he not dead.*
How can any mammal looking like that still be alive? How can he still stare at me?

Bogo, Rhinowitz, and Fangmeyer—seemingly all on one wavelength—opened fire into the bear with their tranquilizers. Three darts with bright yellow fins found their target in the heavy grey waterproof the savage was still wearing. There was another roar—definitely a roar this time—and the thing reared its wet jaws. It had black eyes nearly as wide as the wolf's were still.

"Hold!" Bogo called. "At the ready. We don't want to kill her, she's a victim just as much as the rest."

Harvey simply could not agree when locked on with those pitiless eyes, like wells that saw no bottom, no end. The Void. The madness plaguing the city like a bloodthirsty epidemic, all right there in those eyes, those pits in the skull.

"When will he go down, Chief?" Fangmeyer asked, panic creeping into her tone.

"At the ready," the chief repeated, he himself seeming suddenly uneasy.

The bear charged. Its limbs were as thick as tree trunks and when it lumbered, the entire plaza seemed to concave and rebound, concave and rebound, as if the savage was too heavy for the planet's crust to manage.

"Oh Christ!" shouted Rem. Then they fired.

They all fired. A fleet of silver and yellow descended on the bounding savage and they all knew it wouldn't be enough. The darts landed all over the bear's front and did not seem to catch the savage's attention, despite one of them sinking into the flesh below its right eye and another in its throat.

Harvey found his firearm, aimed and squeezed only to remember the safety was on, but by then the other officers had the same idea. Rhinowitz fired a bullet and hit a front paw. Bogo fired on the back hip. When Harvey squeezed the trigger, the gun lurched downward. The snow to the side of the bear erupted, followed by a sharp impact as it found the concrete below. Feeling like he was wrangling the weapon, he fired another time, this one missing the savage entirely and gliding into the snow several yards away. The third grazed its shoulder, taking off a scrap of the waterproof.

"Hold fire!" Bogo called. The bear had slowed to a trot that veered off into a groaning retreat. Only now it was facing the center of the plaza, where Wolfard, Johnson, and Francine were helping citizens down from the trees. There weren't many left up there, though once they got to the ground, the officers sent them running out of the square. The movement must have drawn the savage's attention, and with blood in its paw prints, it lurched with just as much vicious energy towards the fleeing citizens as before, as if the bullets were mere bee stings. Its eyes had found a new target—an escaping zebra with an elderly limp.

Even from afar, Harvey could see the point of meeting getting closer and closer—the zebra was simply too slow for this predator.

The officers at the trees opened fire with their tranquilizers, yet to receive the memo that stage four was entirely useless.

"Bullets!" Bogo shouted. "Shoot to disable!"

But he was too far off, the bear had nearly cleared the plaza by now, and the snow had begun to fall again.

The zebra, stealing glances over her shoulder to find a mammoth beast in tow, took a sweeping turn
which wouldn't do much to distance herself, especially with the limp. She had begun to gallop, and even with the adrenaline, she'd obviously not run this fast or far in years.

"Ryan, stop!" It was Francine's voice, distant and desperate.

Wolfard had broken away from the trees and was piercing the snow in pursuit of the savage, his firearm drawn at his side.

"No," Harvey murmured as if the wolf would hear him and realize it was a bad idea. The somehow still dying wolf nearby, now attended by the kangaroo medic, served as a grim reminder what this savage could do. And the elk or moose or whatever it had been was almost twice as large as that. "He's going to get himself killed!" Harvey shouted at the chief as they ran toward the scene.

Bogo said nothing in response, only continued to charge into the snowfall with gritted teeth.

The wolf closed the distance faster than both the predator and the prey, though the latter and her pursuer were only mere feet apart now, the savage's strides becoming lunges as it tried to reach a leg. That's all it would take—a leg and the zebra would be gone. But the wolf was faster.

Just as the bear's steaming snorts could be felt on the zebra's hooves, Wolfard lunged, leaping and finding a hold on the bear's neck where, having lost his helmet long ago, he sunk his teeth into the savage's shoulder.

There was a baritone howl as the bear stumbled on its bleeding paws and collapsed in a rolling heap in the snow. In the explosion of white and the tumbling mass of bear, Wolfard could not be seen.

*He's gone. There's no way, no fucking way.* The wolf who had been Harvey's partner before Judy was lost in the snow. The zebra galloped away, as if still able to feel the savage's breath down her back, finding refuge across the street and out of the square, where a gathering crowd received her. There were crowds watching now from every street and alley leading to the square, though none dared cross into the square itself.

"Hold your fire!" Bogo shouted as they reached the cluster of trees where the two remaining officers stood, guns aimed at the ambiguous collapsed heap of brown fur and settling snow.

"Shit, he just—just charged and he was gone, I couldn't stop him. I almost went after him, but—" Johnson stammered, the ever-present humor in his voice no more.

"Stop talking and get the rest of these civilians out of here," Bogo said in all the authority of a hulking commander, though even he couldn't keep his gaze from the savage for too long.

"Chief? Chief!" Fangmeyer called. She had her gun trained on the savage, a good distance away in the snow, still groaning and rolling about. "What do we do?"

"Don't fire, there's not a good shot, you could hit either of them fatally."

"He'll die, sir," she cried.

"I'm not counting on it. He's strong."

Harvey noticed the bear and Rem standing a distance away from the others. Rem had revealed a syringe from his boot.

"Cris. A little help, please?" Rem called, and the Crispin placed the meerkat on his shoulder.
"You know what to do," Crispin said.

"Righto."

And the two were off into the snow, towards the focal point of seemingly the whole city.

"Look," Harvey pointed at the two.

Bogo stared for a moment, squinting, then muttered, "Well it's about fucking time."

When the bear stumbled and the snow rushed up to meet him, Wolfard was sure that was it. Rather unconscious or dead, he was riding a savage bear—surely this is where all the white went black. His shoulder hit first, then his back—elbows sinking through to the concrete beneath it—and he was rolling ass over teakettle until he was face down in the snow.

Tremendous pressure on his left arm made it clear he was very much still awake. The pressure was followed by a sudden warmth up to his shoulder that—even if the nerves themselves had yet to catch up—unnerved him. Opening clamped eyes, he blinked the snow away, finding himself pinned to the ground with his snout in the snow. On a speaker somewhere near, festive music full of sleigh-bells and swelling violins rang out across the vacant plaza.

Still blinking snow from his eyes, Wolfard turned to find not his arm but a bear. Oxygen forced itself down into his lungs where it gathered and swelled until he thought his innards might burst. And there it held. He awaited the inevitable bite.

A groan escaped from deep in the bear's throat, though nothing more.

Wolfard tried to move, though his arm was pinned in such a way that moving his shoulder anymore would break it, if it wasn't already broken. The savage, in all its hulking entirety, was on laying its back with his arm pinned underneath. Its eyes were closed. He saw his chance. Finding that his firearm was still clutched tightly in his right paw—"a miracle I didn't shoot her, or even myself in the commotion"—he twisted his free arm around and brought the barrel to the underside of the savage's jaw, knowing, just knowing it would go for his paw. With claws that large, it wouldn't take much to disarm, perhaps even dismember him.

The savage did not move. Another wet breath managed from between its jaws. Wolfard's finger was heavy on the trigger, so heavy a passing gust of wind or a stray car horn could provide the final hint of adrenaline needed to propel a bullet through the savage's skull.

All remained quiet. Wolfard's grip on the trigger loosened. He didn't dare move the weapon from where it was, but instant relief that he had not fired flooded warmer than the blood in his pinned arm. Now that he looked, his shoulder was obviously dislocated if he could lean up this far with it still pinned. The arm underneath probably broken in multiple places, maybe even crushed.

Is it possible to realize you're in shock when in shock? he thought, hoping that the inevitable agony would remain at bay if only for a few more moments, just long enough to assess this situation.

"Deep breaths," he made himself say. "That's right, you stay right there. Nice and still." He kept the gun trained at the soft spot beneath the jaw.

His arm was growing warm enough to be hot, hot enough for him to feel it through the numbing cold. He groaned, gritting his teeth, noticing there was fur in his mouth.

"I bit you, didn't I," he said to the savage conversationally, then chuckled despite himself. This
thought permeated for a long moment, that he had bitten a savage. "Not that you didn't deserve it—you definitely had one coming." More breathing, panting, trying to ignore the heat radiating from his shoulder. "Nothing personal, just police business."

The savage growled something thick and guttural. The worst part was that Wolfard could feel it. Heavy snorts vaporized from its snout, becoming more frequent until it lifted its head. Dark eyes moved drunkenly about—the tranquilizers, the bullets, the cold—all of it finally seemed to be catching up. But not fast enough.

Dark eyes landed on him, pupils lost in a sea of swirling black rage. Another growl, deeper, and its lips parted to reveal a wet, toothy maw. There was blood on its teeth and in its drool.

Wolfard was about to scream for help—for anything really, perhaps just to scream to release the surging adrenaline at the sight of those teeth, or to delay the inevitable murder he would have to commit in the following seconds—when dark and heavy paws clamped the savage's jaw shut from behind and shoved its head into the snow. It was the bear from the response team, Crispin. He pinned the savage's head to the snow and nodded to someone out of view.

"You can put your gun down now, officer," he said.

The savage was squirming now, flopping about with his paw still pinned, singeing waves of hot pain coursing up Wolfard's arm. Crispin noticed this and gave Wolfard a look that told him to hang in there for only a bit longer.

"Can you keep 'er still?" said a voice from out of Wolfard's sight, small but hoarse.

Crispin used his elbow to pin the savage's arm while Rem appeared, crawling on top of the bear down to its elbow. He was holding a needle almost as large as himself that he wielded like a spear. The savage, seeming to realize this was its last chance, squirmed even harder, though Cris was unmoving and the needle found the crook of the arm. Squirms turned to twitches, then faded to light stirring, then nothing at all.

"God, man, she got your whole arm," Rem said, giving the empty syringe to Crispin and scampering over to inspect. He knelt right in front of where Wolfard's head was helplessly pinned. The ferret inhaled through his teeth then laughed. "That'll be real pretty. Got enough friends to sign your cast?"

Wolfard growled, which surprised both him and Rem. "Some medic you are."

"I ain't the medic," Rem cried like this offended him. "Besides, does it look like I can pull you outta there?"

"Then get someone who can."

"Remmy, leave him be. You would've been crushed to nothing if you were in his position." Crispin came into view, looking more like a savior than anyone Wolfard had ever seen. "I lift, you roll. Got it? Unless you can't—"

"No, I'll be fine."

The bear nodded. He crouched and heaved, lifting the savage—massive, even next to him—just enough for Wolfard to roll onto his back, pulling his arm free.

"Gah!" Wolfard seethed, both in pain and shock. Even beneath the coat and tactical gear, he could see his arm bend downward at the elbow. "That's not right."
"Coulda' been worse. That could be your whole fuckin' body, had she flopped over on ya," Rem noted offhand. "Hey, Harry! Get over 'ere, we've got a live one!"

"You're an asshole," Wolfard hissed. He was realizing that the pain and shock had made him almost aggressive, but even more shocking: more talkative.

"Understood. I'm reminded on the daily."

"Yeah, well maybe you should heed the reminder, wiseass," Wolfard muttered. "What do you even do, anyway?"

"I'm the tech-savvy one. Who do you think located tonight's second attack, 'cause it sure wasn't your chief, cadet."

"Rem, leave him alone, you're not helping." The kangaroo who Wolfard recognized from the van squatted at his side. "Nice seeing you again, officer," Harry said. She had a bag slung over her shoulder, inside which must be a painkiller somewhere. The heat had swollen in his shoulder and spread until it was icy cold fire lapping at his torso.

Harry gave him a once over, which was all it seemed to take. "I'm seeing two obvious breaks," she said as she knelt. "Hard to tell through the sleeves but there might be more."

Wolfard wanted to tell her it felt like countless breaks, that every bone felt like it was shattered into dust and shards, white-hot shards. Instead, he only nodded. "Definitely more. Got painkillers, doc?"

She dug through her bag and revealed a strip of capsules.

"Sure, but it might not do much but ease the pain. You'll have to wait until we get you to Municipal, they'll get you on morphine. Can you dry swallow?"

"Yeah, I can fucking dry swallow," he snapped.

Harry stared for a short moment, seeing something in the wolf she hadn't before. She wasn't scared, far from it, but her eyes gave off a matronly distaste, all from behind the blank professional stare. It made him feel small and his arm not worth her time.

"I'm...sorry," he said, swallowing to give him something else than his shoulder to focus on. "Just the shock."

She offered the painkiller, and he took it. "If it were shock, you wouldn't be asking for the aspirin."

He bit his lip, settling into the silence he knew from himself. A comfort zone he'd known well and severely missed.

"Don't apologize, the panic is natural. At least you didn't bite me."

"You've been bitten before?"

She stood up. "I'm getting you a stretcher." Then she was gone.

Nearby, Melody gave the savage a final injection to ensure it would remain a silent and motionless heap. Crispin had gotten Fangmeyer to help him roll the now heavily sedated and muzzled savage onto a stretcher of its own. Even with the combined force of black bear and tiger, the two shuffled through the snow at a snail's pace, grunting all the way.

Harry returned with Antlersen and a stretcher roughly wolf-sized.
When she knelt down with the stretcher, he asked, "How's Hopps?" He had nearly forgotten about the rabbit, though the more he thought about it, he was glad she hadn't been out on the field with the rest of them. She would've charged the bear long before he had, and his broken arm could have been her whole broken body.

"She nearly turned savage herself when I told her she couldn't leave the van, that is until I gave her something for her head. She settled down quickly after then. I've got her riding back to the Municipal for an evaluation."

"She's not going to be happy about this."

"Well I don't give a damn what she's happy about, she's got a grade two concussion. If she was in the field she'd shoot one of us or even a citizen god forbid. She'll need rest."

"You'll find out she's not so great at that."

"What, resting?"

Despite himself, Wolfard laughed. "You'll need restraints if you plan to keep her in a bed."

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The night had become a series of pauses, skips, and overlaps resembling that of restless dreams. The ceiling of the van with its circular air-vents and metal rivets. Gusts of heat, bursts of cold. First there was a van, then there was a cart. The wheels squeaked like an old shopping basket. The sound twisted and ground itself into her ears. Moaning. Lights passed overhead.

Nick was all that was on her mind.

He had been there. She was too confused to rationalize the why or how, only that he walked beside her while the cart was being wheeled. Come to think of it, he was there in the van too, sitting on the bench beside where she lay. His orange fur glowed in the haze of everything else, and unlike all other glows this one did not require her to strain her eyes to see. Someone gave her an injection. Gentle paws held open her eyelids and a familiar feline face gazed in at her. She hardly noticed, still watching him watch her with a sad smile. He had been there, no one else mattered.

The first time she truly came to was in a dark concrete room smelling of cleaning product and flowery laundry detergent. For a long while she only floated, not fully grasping her consciousness until her eyes found something white hanging on one of four hooks on the opposite wall. The collar and buttons gave it away as a white jacket. She clung to this thought—white jacket, white collar, white cuffs, a doctor's jacket, an empty jacket.

Then she faded out again because focusing too hard on one object, especially one so blindingly white, squeezed her head tighter. Closing her eyes was her only respite from this squeezing pain, and sleep took her not moments later.

Then there was a voice.

"Officer Hopps? Can you hear me?"

When she opened her eyes the white jacket had materialized as a being in front of her. This terrified her straight out of her shallow sleep and into a sharper reality that wreaked of antiseptic and blinded her.

A paw found her shoulder. "Easy. It's just me."
"Melody?"

She found faint amusement at this. "So you do remember me. Harry said you were worse off than you really are."

"Harry?"

"Harriet, the nurse. She got caught up in the commotion in Tundratown and ended up riding in one of the ZPD's vans with you—thank god she did."

She tried to look around but her head was a lead weight. "Where am I now?"

"You're in Savage Containment. We have a small number of operating rooms just in case someone was injured by a patient. Can't exactly rush them upstairs, seeing as they aren't supposed to know what's down here. A suspicious injury from the sub level 'electrical rooms' would raise too many eyebrows."

Judy tried to raise up to get a better look around. Her head was heavy like her brain was made of lead, and she let it fall to the pillow. "Where's Nick?"

"Nick?" Melody tilted her head slightly. "Nicholas Wilde is still where he has been for a month now, in his cell."

She sunk. The orange had glowed too bright for reality after all.

"Don't worry about it, Hopps, he's in his final stages of recovery. He'll be upstairs in another week tops."

"That's good...can I see him then?"

"I don't see why not. He won't talk or remember you, but he'll be awake and docile."

"Will he ever remember me?"

She seemed shocked. "Well yes, of course. It just takes a little time for the memories and basic functions to return."

Judy allowed herself to sink into the pillow. The dark behind her eyelids numbed her lead-coated mind.

"On another note, do you remember anything from yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" she asked groggily. "What happened yesterday?"

"That answers that," Melody muttered. "You had an accident in a moving van. You hit your head."

She went on to explain everything that happened in the plaza that night, from the details she could pluck from her foggy recollection to the events she had not witnessed. Two mammals were dead in the square, a few more found injured in the surrounding streets, one critically. Wolfard's arm had been broken in three places. Savanna Central Plaza had been blockaded off from the public for the first time in Zootopian history. Shops surrounding the square were being investigated and witnesses were being interviewed. The mayor had declared a public state of emergency. Two savageries in one night. It was also Christmas.

Unsure what to grasp onto—because there was so much to grasp, to gawk at, to mourn, to pour over and scrutinize—she looked around for a window. There wasn't one. "What's the time?"
Melody stared for a moment until the question registered and she glanced at her wristwatch. "Eleven-thirty in the morning. Look, Hopps, don't be mad at yourself. There's nothing you could've done in your state. No one was fully prepared for last night's events, even Fulgens seems to feel guilty. It was his call, and he hasn't left his office all day."

Judy didn't respond. She found doing nothing hurt less, so she gladly took that avenue instead.

"I expected you'd be more worried than this."

"If I let this get to me, the syndicate gets what they want." She swatted her paw. "But I'll think about it when I'm not concussed. Thinking hurts."

"Then don't." Melody moved from where she had been perched at the side of her bed. "You've got a week's rest ahead of you. By then, you can go see Nicholas upstairs. For now, I'll leave you to your sleep."

"When can I see the real him?"

Melody stopped at the door. "Not long, now. Just get your rest." She switched off what little lighting there was and all the room became the back of Judy's eyelids. She slipped into shallow sleep no less restless than before.

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*Leporine - (adj.) referring to rabbits*

**Keep in mind ZPD's Precinct One, City Hall, the Natural History Museum, and the train station all surround Savanna Central Plaza with a grassy park full of trolley passages and a fountain in the middle. All of this is canon except for the ZMH (Zootopian Municipal Hospital) which is unique to this story and only a block away from the square, underneath which lies Savage Containment Headquarters.**

A/N: With this chapter being longer than any other I've written thus far (just short of 18,500 words), I hope you can forgive me for the lack of updates. Between school and my personal life, this chapter took me three months to get down, coming in sudden bursts instead of the methodical writing schedule I strive for. Stephen King (and his tireless muse who writes 2,500 words a day) would be ashamed. Nonetheless, I've practically dropped a novella at your feet. Maybe it's a suffice repayment for my inactivity, maybe not, either way I hope you enjoyed this helluva chapter.

Until next time, all you lovely people.

- Trenton

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.fanfiction.net) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!