### Exhibit A

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### Exhibit A

**by** [Yeah JSmith](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary**

Nick and Judy get a look at the dark side of BDSM when a case sends Judy undercover.

**Notes**

I have decided that being intellectually honest is better than simply showing the best face for something that is so dear to me. BDSM is a fulfilling lifestyle, but I'm not going to pretend there aren't people who do it unsafely, or who use it as an excuse to mistreat others, and I highlight the contrasts in this story; although Nick and Judy are still solid, please mind the tags. They apply to the investigation. If this entry to the RS series feels a little preachy...well, it really fucking is. Stay safe, dear ones, even if your relationships are as vanilla as can be. I can't even begin to describe how shitty it is to recover from an abusive relationship, romantic or otherwise. Updates to this will be infrequent, because it makes me sad to write it, but it still needs to be written.
If she kept worrying at her lip, she was going to bleed.

It wasn’t, Judy knew, a case that she’d normally be assigned, even though she was finally a zoicide detective as of 3 months prior. She wasn’t fully trained on undercover assignments, and her partner, Penelope Hirsch, wasn’t a suitable match. Judy had gotten this assignment purely because she was the only officer at Precinct 1 who had the experience, contacts, and understanding to pull this off. Hirsch would be acting as her handler during the course of the investigation, of course, but…

...Well, if she could convince him, Judy would be working directly with Nick. Otherwise, she’d be working alone.

The suspect, an Arctic fox, was an active dom on FetLick who seemed to prefer fox squirrels – and there were plenty of groups on FL dedicated to interspecies relationships and size kinks, so that wasn’t enough to raise any eyebrows – but he ran through them quickly, and several of his former subs had entered the community with him and left once they were no longer together. Still not completely uncommon, but his latest sub’s body had been posed in shibari (with the word carved viciously into her chest) post-mortem and he hadn’t been the one to report her missing. Two of his former subs had recanted reports of domestic violence, and on top of it all, he seemed to enjoy seducing his employees. In short, he was a bad dude, but even if he hadn’t killed his latest partner, he was their only lead. The biggest problem was the secrecy of the community itself; after so many times being unfairly accused of domestic violence because of their ethical, negotiated, SSC or RACK activities, they didn’t like speaking to cops, and they surely wouldn’t sell out one of their own. Especially since that someone was, on the surface, sweet, benignly sarcastic, and affable to everyone he met. Without evidence of problematic behavior, nobody in the community would even cop to knowing him outside a safe venue or without permission from the fox himself.

Zoicide needed someone on the inside to do some discreet investigating. Judy was surprisingly the only one on the force with enough experience in kink to fit in. The task of actually convincing Nick was overwhelming, however, and the reason Judy had chewed her lip raw. This wasn’t like the Bellwether case, or like the other two cases Nick had consulted on. Nor was it like the haunting case or the cheating husband case she’d assisted him with. This could perhaps cross their private lives with their professional ones, and in a way that they could never take back. It was possible that by the end, they’d be fully public. Could they live with that? The cop in Judy said it was worth it. The romantic in Nick had always wanted to go public. But they needed to make this decision with their brains, not their hearts.

“I have some important news,” she said suddenly, jumping into it with both feet. It was no use getting worked up over it without his input anyway.

“I figured you did, when you sat in the client chair and proceeded to think so hard I could taste the smoke from here,” Nick replied, sounding amused.

She rolled her eyes. “They’re sending me undercover.”

His smile fell. “But that’s not part of your job.”

“Not normally,” she acknowledged, “but in this case...I’m the only one suited for the assignment.”

“Will I – will I have to cut off contact with you?”
“It depends. I asked the Chief if I could bring in outside consult, and he gave me the go-ahead after hearing my reasoning, but this is kind of a big decision. It could change the way we interact with others.” She fiddled with her paws in her lap, hating the look on his face. He always looked like that when she knowingly put herself at risk, which was more common than either of them had expected when Chief Bogo had welcomed her to the precinct by punishing her for her species. “Nick, they want me to investigate a zoicide in the kink community. We’re pretty sure we know who did it, but we have nothing on this guy, no concrete evidence, no reason to hold him. We do have reason to believe the suspect has a history of domestic violence, but you know how secretive the community is. And if it’s not him, it’s a pretty good chance the culprit is in the community because of the way the victim was killed and posed.”

“And if they send in a bunch of cops they’ll get nowhere, but if they send in someone who’s familiar with the lifestyle…”

“Right.”

“Obviously I’m coming with you,” he said.

“Even though we might end up being completely exposed? My investigation will be a matter of public record, and that means our relationship will be, too. And it might end up severing our ties with the few mammals in the community we do talk to.”

Nick reached across the table and laid his paw down in front of Judy. She took it and he squeezed a little. “I’m not dumb enough to ignore the risks, Carrots. But you’re going to do this with or without me, and I don’t want some know-nothing handler being your only line of defense. We’ve always had each other’s backs, practically since we met. I don’t see any reason to change that now.”

She didn’t think she would ever not be grateful for Nick. In the years they’d been together, they’d had some pretty big fights and some weird experiences, but their emphasis on communication had always made those things so much easier to deal with. She knew that she’d be safer, and more successful, if she had Nick backing her up. And if he was willing, she’d accept his help, despite her desire to protect him from harm.

“I’m going to have to change my appearance,” she warned. “I’m too recognizable after doing the fluff circuit after Bellwether’s arrest.”

He grinned. “Please tell me you’re going for an Agent Savage look.”

“...Only if you try for an Agent Frost look.”

“Who’s Agent Frost,” he asked warily.

“Right, you looked up the series before we did my first case together. They added in a regular love interest for Jack in the reboot, Skye Frost.” She snorted. “Skye, with an e. She’s a leucistic red vixen. Very fetching. Some fans adore her because she makes Jack happy and brings him out of his brooding loner persona, other fans hate her for the same reason. The current author’s from Zootopia; he said he was inspired by you and me during the Bellwether case. So if you want me to go white and blue, you have to do it too.”

He stood, let go of her paw, and leaned back, cracking his back loudly. It sounded painful. He groaned rather obscenely. “You overestimate my ego, but we’re supposed to be undercover. I’m thinking you go black and I’ll go...silver. Not quite a common mutation, but at least I’ll be pretty.”

“I’m going to love you until the day I die,” she promised, because it was true. Every interaction with
him, even silly ones like this, felt like a gift.

“I’ll keep that in mind when I’m ancient and creaky,” he snarked. “So tell me the details. Who, what when...you know the drill.”

She took a deep breath and hoped this wouldn’t backfire.
Engagement

Chapter Summary

Judy interviews a witness who isn't part of the community before she and Nick establish their temporary identities. Somewhat surprisingly, kink parties aren't all fun and games.

Chapter Notes

I have tags, but I want to give a very firm warning here before we get to the meat of the story: this particular entry is not lighthearted. It deals with dark subjects, primarily sexual violence and the concept of consent (and lack thereof). It deals with domestic abuse. They're investigating a murder. I do not shy away from the realities of any of these things.

One of the reasons I felt compelled to write this is that we don't talk about rape and abuse the right way. In fanfiction, there's a lot of "rape/abuse/assault as a vehicle for character growth or relationship development," which is disgusting, especially because you don't ever see the character actually dealing with it. There's a lot of "love from and/or sex with character A heals character B who was previously raped/abused/assaulted" which is equally disgusting, especially when written by people who have never experienced that kind of trauma. Furthermore, we as a society think "victim" is a dirty word. If you talk about your trauma at all, you have to emphasize a silver lining: "Here's what I learned from my experience." "It made me stronger." "Now I know what red flags to look out for." "I got over it because I'm THE BADASS SURVIVOR." Well, fuck that noise. It's fine to be a badass survivor...and it's okay to be traumatized. It's okay to be a victim. It's okay to talk about it like it's still affecting you. Strength is not measured in how well you can minimize your trauma. Nobody should have to put on a happy face when their life is falling apart. I have brushed on this concept plenty in my previous entries, but this story is in-your-face about it. I will not apologize for that, but I will restate the content warning. If your triggers include descriptions (not depictions) of rape and abuse, please don't read this entry. I want to convey a point, but I don't want to indirectly add to your struggles.

This chapter is kind of short, because the two scenes set up the rest of the story and it feels weird to try to push them together with anything else. Next chapter will be of usual length though, and have much more detail and character interaction.

While Nick went through basic procedure training with Quinn Fangmeyer, Judy decided to visit and interview Danielle Tailor, the suspect’s first known ex-submissive. She was a fox squirrel, like the others, and quite a bit older now than she had been when she had reported him for domestic abuse (and almost immediately recanted, citing misunderstandings). Judy wanted to get a sense of what she was headed into, and therefore, she needed to keep Officer Hopps and Luna Evergreen as separate as possible. So she knocked on Tailor’s door, in uniform, and hoped that the squirrel was in the mood to receive visitors.
The door opened a fraction. Judy saw an eye appear just below the latch chain and heard a low voice ask, “Who are you?”

“I’m Detective Judy Hopps,” Judy replied. “Is this the residence of Danielle Tailor?”

“Hang on.” The door shut. Judy heard the latch slide and the door opened fully to reveal the fox squirrel, wearing sweatpants and an old tank top. “Yeah, I’m Dani. Is this about Cornelius?”

“I…” Judy blinked. “Who?”

“Guess not. Good. I’m not bailing his crusty tail out again. What are you here for, then?”

“I’m here to talk to you about Nathaniel Snow,” Judy said carefully. She saw Danielle tense up in preparation to shut the door, so she added hastily, “I’m trying to figure out who killed his girlfriend. I just want a sense of who he is.”

“He’s a son of a whore, is who he is. That was 8 years ago, Detective. I don’t know him anymore.”

Pointedly, Judy countered, “But you know his patterns. You know how he treated you. That stuff is important.”

“All right,” Danielle said with a hefty sigh, “come on in. But I’m warning you, it isn’t going to do you any good. Whatever you’re looking to pin on him, it isn’t going to stick.”

“I’m only looking for the truth.” Judy hustled in and stood awkwardly to the side as the squirrel locked the door again. “That’s really all I want, Ms. Tailor. The truth.”

“That’s better than your colleagues,” Danielle muttered, and gestured to the couch. “Make yourself at home. You want water or something?”

“No, thank you. Just your story, if you’re okay to tell it.”

“I oughtta be, after 8 years.” They both sat on Danielle’s oversized sofa. “What do you already know?”

Judy shrugged. “Not much. Just that he was your boss before you entered a romantic relationship, and 6 months later you left him – and the job – and got hired on at Horizon.”

“That’s how it looks from the outside, I guess. You have to understand, Nate is the name in cybersecurity. A reference from him is the golden ticket. So when I took a job as his personal assistant, I wasn’t just getting a starting-level job for above starting-level pay, I was getting a chance to work closely with this amazing genius of a guy. I knew I could learn so much from him, and yeah, he was...eccentric...but that’s kind of a genius thing, right? He was also so cool. He could always get me excited about learning something new.”

“But he wasn’t just interested in working with and teaching you,” Judy surmised.

“Right. At first I was so mad to hear it,” Danielle confessed, almost shamefaced, as much as she didn’t deserve to feel that way. “I had been taking his shit pretty gracefully, running his errands even outside of work, doing homework projects that were supposedly for “training” purposes, and – and he was basically getting off on it! I mean I did learn a lot, I’m not saying it was useless, and I’m solid in my own business because of what I learned, but it’s creepy, you know? It didn’t seem right to be, ah...technically subbing for him, like psychologically, without even being asked if I was okay with it, even if he swore up and down that wasn’t what was going on. That’s exactly what it felt like. And then he had to go and proposition me. It wasn’t enough to make me uncomfortable about the
minutiae of my job, he had to...I mean if I said no I was pretty sure he’d fire me. Maybe that would have been better. But when you’re living paycheck to paycheck and you’re getting valuable training for your fucking dream job…”

“He shouldn’t have done that,” Judy told her quietly, trying not to be disturbed at the picture being painted. “It was wrong.”

“I know. And I should have quit, even if it got me kicked out of my apartment...but do you see how ridiculous that sounds? Enter a BDSM relationship with your fucking boss or be homeless and jobless right out of college. There were no good options. He told me he could smell my interest, but I wasn’t interested...but if my body said I was, and he could smell it...then maybe he was right?”

“You can get turned on and not be interested in someone,” Judy said, only just managing to hide her disgust. “That was manipulative and cruel on his part. You didn’t owe him anything.”

Danielle snorted. “Well, whether I owed him or not was beside the point. He wanted me, and there was an implicit understanding that he was going to fire me if he didn’t get what he wanted. Oh, he gave lip service to how it was unethical and how he wouldn’t be able to keep it professional if we continued on like we were, but you hit the nail on the head, Detective. He manipulated me. Nate’s really good at making you feel sorry for him, too. It’s a fox thing – and I don’t say that to be speciesist, I mean that literally. Foxes get the shaft, especially back then, and Nate does this thing where he pretends to hate himself while making these...allusions to the way society treats foxes. Not anything overt, just enough to get a stupid ambitious girl just out of college to make the right connections. I felt bad at the idea of saying no to this sweet awkward genius who maybe just had some weird kinks, even without the threat of losing my job. He was handsome enough, and I’d liked him as a boss before I learned how creepy he was, so I picked the one that would keep me fed. You do what you have to.”

Judy did not flinch, but her heart broke a little. She remembered what it was like to worry about rent and utilities and food, to worry about choosing between paying student loans and replacing her refrigerator. Nick had just moved in with her and nipped the problem in the bud, but she wasn’t so sure she’d have had the willpower to quit a well-paying job if sticking with it meant never having to make that decision again. Even if it had meant giving up her dream. “So...you committed, then. What broke it off?”

“He did. Said I was breaking too many rules and punishing me for all of them would break me. That was birdshit. I followed all of his stupid goddamn rules to the letter. I just think he got sick of me. And I realized right then that he’d been using me the whole time. I was just...too dumb to see it, too blinded by his attention and my own ambitions to realize it was abusive until he spelled it out for me.”

“But you recanted your statement?”

“When I realized he could ruin me, yeah. How was I supposed to fight back when this old pro in the business could and probably would tell all of his colleagues that I wasn’t hireable? He didn’t say he’d ruin me, he only said he’d give me a good recommendation if I stayed quiet, but the implication was there. So I did. I recanted. Stayed quiet. I was new to the profession, I was young...maybe I was stupid, but I made the decisions I did based on what would keep a roof over my head and my career on track. I don’t regret that. I won’t. I just can’t forgive him, either.”

“Nobody’s expecting you to, Ms. Tailor,” Judy promised. “Do you mind if I leave my card with you? Just in case you think of something else to add. I don’t think you’re the only mammal he’s hurt like that.”
“Yeah, there was a new version of me licking his heels two weeks later,” Danielle said with a roll of her eyes, and Judy got the impression that it was a sore spot. Making a note to write down her thoughts in the car, Judy smiled sympathetically and hoped Danielle was exactly what she appeared to be: an abused (and then scorned) ex-lover rather than somehow involved.

Judy had never been to a kink party before. She and Nick had always been fairly private, and while they had online contacts through FetLick and blogs (like Madame Moon), they hadn’t bothered to integrate. It had never seemed important. Fortunately, that meant they were unknown in the local kink community, and they could get into that weekend’s party at the Jungle, a dedicated guest house belonging to a fairly well-off couple, with the cover fee and Nick’s most charming smile. Madame Moon – or to her intimate friends and family, Emilia Birch – had agreed to sponsor them, fully understanding the risks involved. She was a good mammal, and Judy was glad to have stumbled across her blog while researching subspace.

In the spirit of getting into character, she and Nick had decked themselves out in a much more ostentatious fashion: Nick in an all-black outfit so tight it made Judy want to just take him home and tear it off of him, an actual *leash* attached to his collar, and Judy herself in a cork leather corset and skirt combo that made her feel overexposed walking around in *private*. But they weren’t Nick and Judy. They were Luna and Oliver Evergreen, a married couple who’d just moved to Zootopia from Arcadia. She didn’t have to be embarrassed about showing off the bottom of her butt, and she didn’t have to be uncomfortable with the leash, either. Oliver *liked* being on a leash, according to Nick, who’d crafted his own character.

(It wasn’t degrading. It *wasn’t*. Plenty of mammals liked that. And their characters would disappear after this case was over. They could have a talk in private, work out whatever problems might arise. *She was fine.*)

The area wasn’t dark, like Judy had expected. She looked around curiously as the owner of the house gave them a tour; it looked a lot like her apartment.

“In here’s the kitchen,” said the guide, a tigress wearing a comfortable sweater and leggings combo. Behind her, Judy could see two wolves talking; one had on a bright red corset and frilly panties, and the other was wearing a ratty Wonder Wombat tee and khaki cargos. Clearly, there was no dress code. The tigress continued, “We have snacks in here, but don’t get into the fridge. Moving on, down that hall is a bathroom and a bedroom. You’re free to use both, but that bedroom door doesn’t have a lock, so don’t go lookin’ to get lucky unless you’re an exhibitionist. Though if you are, go wild, I’m sure there are some voyeurs who’d love it if you did.”

Judy gripped Nick’s leash tightly, wishing she could hold his paw instead. This was already out of her comfort zone and they hadn’t even made it to orientation yet! He didn’t notice her stress. All of his attention was focused on their hostess.

“Through that door is the actual party,” the tigress said. “We’re not going there just yet, though. There are two other bathrooms, one in the basement between the sex swing and the medical gurneys, and one in the garage just past the suspension rig by the saltire. There’s a bathroom in the main house too, but my cubs are asleep, so hold it if you can. Follow me back here and we’ll do orientation.”

Judy led Nick through a plain doorway made for large mammals. The room was empty save for a projector screen and a few beanbag chairs, so she snagged a small one and sat in Nick’s lap. She needed the comfort for a minute, and if it served to make her look possessive, that was a bonus. When the door closed behind the last mammal in the group, a male tiger flipped on the projector. On the screen were the words WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE.
“Okay, cubs. I’m Gage, and you’ve already met my wife, Nisha. This all is probably old hat for most of you, but we take our responsibility as hosts seriously; since you’re newbies you have to suffer through it anyway.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Perfect for the masochists among you, am I right?”

There was some laughter from the other attendees, but Judy didn’t feel like laughing. She kind of felt sick. Nick laid his muzzle across her shoulder, and it didn’t quell her anxiety, but at least she had him at her back. Literally, in this case, but she knew she could rely on him no matter what the situation.

“Rule number one,” said Gage, changing the slide to show a picture of three cartoon tigers covering their eyes, ears, and mouth, “whatever you see here stays here, unless you have permission from the mammal in question to discuss it privately with a specific third party. You might want to tell your open-minded friends about a cool suspension scene, and I guess that’s fine if you’re saying Oh, yeah, the other night I was sitting by this couple doing a suspension and while he was prepping her we all had a pretty heated discussion about whether Deep Space Nine is underrated or just bad, but don’t mention names, don’t mention species, don’t mention identifying markers. Just don’t. This is a safe place for you kinky fucks and there’s actual danger to the community if you spoil it.”

Nisha took up the narrative. “Rule two, this is a kink party, not a tea party. You might stumble upon some things you’re uncomfortable with. That’s fine, you’re allowed to leave if you’re overwhelmed, or just go outside and have a smoke or whatever, but you can’t have alcohol or drugs here, because informed, sober consent is mandatory. If you have certain triggers, ask someone to point out the areas you should probably avoid. What you absolutely can’t do is kink shame the mammals who are doing the thing. We don’t tolerate that and you will be asked to leave.”

“That said,” Gage said seriously, looking around the room, “kink is risky. You know it, I know it. There are two tiers of kink that are acceptable here: your good ol’ SSC, safe, sane, and consensual, and its kissing cousin RACK, risk-aware consensual kink.” Judy briefly read the slide, which showed descriptions of each, but it wasn’t anything she hadn’t already known. SSC referred to heavily-negotiated scenes in which safewording out was easy, mostly, where RACK referred to the types of scenes that might use gags or muzzles or perhaps played with consent. “If you’re a bonded master/slave pair, that’s fine on your own time or at a party for that dynamic, but if you’re doing a scene here, it needs to be negotiated. Sorry, but like I said, kink is risky, and we don’t want the Jungle to be a haven for wannabe rapists. See this shirt I’m wearing? You’ll see other mammals wearing this shirt as well. We’re tonight’s DM’s, and if you get a bad feeling about a scene – not a squick, but you’re pretty sure it’s nonconsensual – come get us and we’ll talk to the participants. It’s not your job to police each other, so don’t go up to them and start a scene. Don’t abuse this tattling system either. If it becomes a pattern and you’re narcing on mammals who are just fine, you’re out.”

“We have a medical station down in the basement, but it’s not a first-aid station,” said Nisha. “We ask that you only use it if you know what you’re doing or you’re being supervised by someone who does. Bloodplay is fun, but accidents happen. If you’re using a gurney, make sure it’s covered in plastic and you sterilize the area after. If you didn’t bring your own supplies, you can purchase them from our kinky vending machine, which is a box clearly labeled “kinky vending machine.” Nobody’s supervising it, but don’t be that douche who steals stuff from the host. Throw everything in the biohazard bin when you’re done; don’t be gross either.”

Gage grinned at her. The slide changed to a somewhat gross picture of a cartoon penis spewing ejaculate inside a red circle with a diagonal line through it. “Speaking of, sterilize everything you use. We don’t want our spanking station smelling like toe fungus. And we have a metric fuckton of free condoms, so if you want to get extra freaky, use ‘em. Doesn’t matter if you’re fluid-bonded, we don’t want your cum on our beautiful yard-sale chairs. The theme here is don’t ruin it for the rest of us. We’re all here to have fun, and that means playing nicely with each other. You’re in our house, you follow our rules. Got it?”
“Got it,” chorused the room, Judy included. After hearing the orientation speech, she did feel a little better. Madame Moon had told her not to worry too much, but she and her partner were much more hard-core than Judy and Nick.

“Okay then, go have fun,” said Nisha.

Deciding to establish her character with the mammals who would hopefully become part of her intimate social circle for the duration of the case, Judy tugged gently on Nick’s lead and approached a lost-looking lynx whose latex outfit and flashy shawl made her look like she’d been photoshopped into an astronomy photo. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Y-yeah,” she replied, looking between Judy and Nick and playing with her paws. “It’s my first time at anything kink-related though, and my sponsor is...somewhere in the fray. Um. I guess you two are, uh, pretty established?”

“It’s our first kink party too,” Judy assured her. The lynx looked relieved at the statement. “We just moved here from Arcadia, and there wasn’t really a scene there. C’mon, let’s go find your sponsor. Or if we don’t, you can stick with us and we’ll be weird newbies lurking in the shadows together.”

“I...okay, yeah, thank you. I’m Star by the way.”

“I’m Luna, and this is my husband Oliver. Say hello, Oliver.”

“Hello, Oliver,” Nick said cheekily, making Star laugh.

Judy rolled her eyes. “He’s the king of dad jokes. Don’t make any puns around him.”

Nick scoffed. “Excuse me? Dads have nothing on me.”

“Okay, okay,” Star said. Her smile looked much realer, which Judy suspected had been Nick’s intention. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

“It’s very nice to meet you as well,” said Judy as they reached the door that led into the main portion of the house. She took a deep breath and pulled on the sexy smirk she’d practiced for hours in the mirror. “Now, who wants to go and brave the Jungle?”
Deviation

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy experience their first kink party and establish themselves as Luna and Oliver Evergreen with the help of their old contact Madame Moon and their new friend "Star." The Jungle is a wondrous and dangerous place, and they learn a few lessons.

Chapter Notes

I didn't drink a single drop of alcohol during the writing of this, so we'll see how it compares. I think it's a little rambling. Everything that happens at the Jungle is taken directly from my own experience, except that the scene with Judy, Madame Moon, and Shane had me in Madame Moon's position and a friend of mine in Judy's position. Kink parties are wonderful, but you still have to be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The living room wasn’t bright, like the kitchen, but it wasn’t dark, either. It was almost a mellow kind of lighting, a friendly ambiance despite the purpose of the event. With such a robust mix of eye shapes and sizes, this was a good compromise. Judy, Nick, and Star were all from species who were ancestrally crepuscular, and although that wasn’t generally a factor anymore, her eyes did tend to feel better in dimmer light.

Along the walls and corner on her left, there was a comfortable-looking sectional couch made for tigers just behind a coffee table holding a big bowl of condoms. Several mammals were sitting there chatting with one another. On the other side of the room was a raised platform; there was a dance pole on the left and a silks rig on the right, and it was obvious that it was an exhibition stage, or near enough. Three ocelots were sitting in a loose circle around a fourth, who had swirling patterns shaved out of her fur. One of the other three had a violet wand in her paw, tracing the patterns carefully. Judy recognized the conductive glass cylinder, which the ocelot was using to gently shock her partner, only from her idle online research; she had never seen real electric play, nor had she ever been interested in it, but she had to admit that the small arcs were pretty. Finally, in the far left corner, a tiger was kneeling in front of a tigress, who was digging the stiletto-style heels of dance shoes into his thighs. Shoes were highly uncommon and expensive; she’d never considered a possible use in BDSM, but based on the tiger's arched back, the shoes heightened the trampling experience.

“Huh,” Nick said, scratching his wrist. “For some reason I expected something a little more…”

“If you're looking for something more hardcore, you’ll have to go down to the basement or into the garage,” said a familiar voice from behind them. Judy spun around to smile at Madame Moon, a wolf wearing a sheer black tulle skirt and tight red shirt that spilled off her forearms in bell-shaped curves. “This is where mammals do most of their negotiating...although, as you can see, they also do some mild play up here as well. Hello, Luna. Oliver.”

“It’s so great to see you,” Judy enthused, giving Emilia’s leg a brief hug. “Star, this is Madame
Moon. Madame, this is Star, our friend. She’s new to the scene.”

“Hi,” Star said shyly with a wave.

“It’s a pleasure.” The wolf looked at Star with – not interest, exactly. Curiosity, perhaps. “Is there a meaning behind your name?”

Star shrugged, grinning slightly. “I’m an astrophysicist in real life, but I couldn’t call myself General Relativity, could I?”

“We could’ve called you “Gr” for short. Really it was a missed opportunity,” Nick cracked halfheartedly. He looked distracted by the electric play by the stage. Judy didn’t blame him. Neither of them had any desire to practice it, but the ocelots were clearly having fun.

“Well, you’re in good company with Mistress Luna and Oliver,” Emilia said. Oh, great.

Nick never missed a chance to mess with her, so Judy knew he was going to call her Mistress all night. It was a good addition to their cover, but really? Ugh. Titles like Mistress made Judy uncomfortable as a rule. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment to beat the stuffing out of my husband. Come find me later, will you?”

“Sure, we will,” Judy said, and Nick waved vaguely. He was watching the trampling scene now. They both had done extensive research before really delving into BDSM, including stumbling onto some websites that were so horrible she wished she could arrest the owners, but it was something else to see it up close. They were the only experience each other had.

“Hey, Star,” he said presently, “what’s your sponsor’s name?”

“Spencer? I met him at a munch last month. He’s a lynx, like me. He’s been in the community for ages.”

Judy wasn’t aware of any lynxes named Spencer, but it was impossible to get reliable intel on such a secretive community anyway. Half of the local kinksters on FetLick left their profile pictures blank, just in case a coworker or boss – or worse, family member – came across their profile and saw all the “deviant” stuff they were into. Judy had already removed all of the photos that had her face in them to protect herself professionally; she wanted to reduce the risk of being blackmailed by a perp. Not that it would work; she wouldn’t be brought down by a few private photos of Nick draped over her lap, but he would probably be hurt by it.

“Spencer, like Spencer Tuft?”

Right, because Nick knew everyone, at least everyone worth knowing. Star shrugged. “I don’t know his last name. It’s not like we’ve known each other for very long. He’s, uh...now that I think about it, he’s probably at their medical station. He said he’s going to do needle and string art on his girlfriend’s back.”

Judy bit her lip and hoped Nick wouldn’t notice. That was something they hadn’t discussed at all; he didn’t seem interested in the idea, and Judy wasn’t knowledgeable enough to be confident trying it, but...well, she’d read about needleplay, and she’d watched a lot of videos. There was something appealing about the precision involved in carefully puncturing the skin with hypodermic needles; everything she did with Nick helped her refine not only her BDSM, but her life as well. She had to think about the damage every move could do, and it helped her be a better cop. It helped her value her own life and safety, which she hadn’t always done. It was a tempting thought to let Nick lace her back up like a corset, too, differently-sized needles spaced just right to let the ribbons make a pretty pattern. She liked having him inside of her, and she liked being inside of him. Was needleplay really
“Well, come on, then,” Nick said brightly, rushing to the stairs. Judy’s whole body jerked with his movement and she stumbled gracelessly after him. “You’re being such a slowpoke, Mistress Luna!”

She narrowed her eyes and tugged gently on his lead to slow him down. He tossed a grin over his shoulder and said, “It’s imperative that we help a lost Star find her way!”

“Oh, great,” Judy groaned, because now she knew why Nick had been so insistent on crafting Oliver’s character. He didn’t usually brat much anymore, now that he knew on an emotional level that she wasn’t going to leave him, but bratting was the BDSM version of internet trolling. He was going to do it until he got the response he wanted, and he knew exactly how to press her buttons. Did Nick want to do a public scene? At their very first party? ...

Would she be okay with it if he took it that direction? He was better than she was at reading a room, so she trusted him not to lead her into a situation she’d be unreasonably uncomfortable with. She probably would be okay doing a less-intense scene, but only with him.

She plastered an indulgent smile on her face and followed him down the stairs, going a little faster than she wanted but not so fast that she’d need to run (or worse, fall). Sneaky. She’d give him a few minutes to lead her around like an excited kit before putting him in the place he’d chosen for himself. That was probably the point of this whole thing anyway. If she brought him to heel in front of enough mammals, they wouldn’t have to establish Luna’s and Oliver’s dynamic; they could lurk in a dark corner for the rest of the case, if they wanted.

Or could they? She’d need to do lots more research on how to be accepted into such a secretive community. Would they accept the Evergreens just because they’d showed up? Or was it like Fight Club, where they’d have to do a scene if they wanted to establish legitimacy? Not knowing was frustrating, and as much as she knew about the individual mechanics of kink, she had no idea how communities worked regionally, historically, or...anything like that. There was too much conflicting information on the internet. In fact, she’d almost denied Nick when he’d suggested a dynamic, because she’d found a few sites dedicated to the idea that you had to “break” a sub before you could “use” them properly – on these sites, the sub had always been female, never male – and there were blogs that talked about how doms (always male, never female) had an obligation to ignore their subs’ safewords. Homoromantic BDSM was rare to find. There were prey who believed predators were born to serve, and there were predators who believed prey were only good for satisfying predators. Bunny dommes didn’t seem to exist on the internet at all, though the fetish sites were distubingly abundant, not to mention mostly inaccurate.

As prejudiced as it might have been, other kinksters made Judy slightly uncomfortable, because she didn’t know which ones practiced responsibly and which ones would ignore her autonomy as a female bunny in the lifestyle. She had her police training, of course, and if that somehow failed she had Nick to come to her aid, but she didn’t want to have to face a situation like that in the first place. Kink had become a big part of the intimacy she shared with Nick, and she didn’t want a bad experience to cast a shadow on something they valued so much.

But they were there to solve a murder. Problematic elements aside, the only way to do it would be to get involved with the community, and the case was more important than Judy’s personal misgivings and fears. And who knew? Maybe they’d make friends who would accept them as Nick and Judy once they stopped being Oliver and Luna. That would be pretty neat.

The second level was somewhat busy, with the majority of the space taken up by impact play equipment. There were spanking apparatuses with and without restraints in various sizes, spreader bars, manacles, and free ropes on shelves next to a few clear bins of impact play tools. Judy felt
somewhat guilty for wondering if they had a tawse; it had become something of a favorite over the
years, even if they didn’t use it often, but she wasn’t here to enjoy herself. She couldn’t allow her
own interests to supersede the case.

To her left, two gazelles were in the middle of an intimate scene: one was lying still on the floor
while the other was dripping hot wax along a shaved pattern on her chest. In the far right corner was
a bathroom with the door open – as Nisha had said, immediately to the right of three unoccupied sex
swings, all different sizes – and immediately to Judy’s right…

Oh.

A male lynx was standing next to a gurney, upon which a female hare was stretched out, each limb
secured to the corners of the gurney with thick straps. The scene was already long underway; a
circular area of the hare’s back had been buzzed, but not completely shaved, and the lynx had
inserted hypodermic needles into her skin and out again, end to end, to make a circular pattern. With
precise, practiced motions, he was weaving colored threads around the needles and the other threads,
creating a dreamcatcher pattern. Judy’s mouth went dry as he took a surgical stapler and pressed it to
the hare’s back, eliciting a pained squeak followed by a breathy moan as the sharp ends snapped
together beneath her skin. The two threads he’d been winding together now could be separated and
woven with new ones without unraveling the whole pattern or pulling too hard on the frame he had
made with the needles.

“That’s Spencer,” said Star quietly, and Judy only didn’t jump because she was mesmerized by the
sight.

“Looks like we didn’t need to go far to assist the lost Star,” Nick joked. Judy felt him jab her side
with his elbow. “See something you like, Mistress?”

The teasing name drew Judy out of her head and she gave him a stern look. “Yeah. Her butt is way
sexier than yours.”

Star put her paws over her mouth, failing to hide her laughter, but Nick didn’t even try. “You just
have tail envy. Come on, let’s go look around! Star, want to come? Mistress, can my new friend play
with us?”

Judy brought her right palm up to her forehead. He was such a goober. How was she supposed to
take the night seriously when he was acting like this? On the other paw, making friends in the
community was an important part of the investigation. “Yes, Star can come – if you want to, that is,
we’re not about to make you – but you need to calm down, Oliver.”

“Sweet! Hey, let’s go look at the swings.”

Nick tried to race off, but Judy dug in her heels, looking at Star with a somewhat apologetic
expression. “Sorry if we’re making you uncomfortable. Would you like to join us or would you
rather wait here for your sponsor to be done?”

“Honestly I’m interested in how this is going to end,” Star replied, throwing a glance at Nick, who
was pulling lightly on the leash to get Judy to follow.

“I think we need to take a seat for a just minute;” she told them both.

“C’mon, Mistress,” Nick whined – and yeah, he was definitely bratting now. She’d never found it
particularly attractive; he’d never done it as part of their play, but rather as a method of self-assurance
back when he’d worried that she’d find a reason to leave him.
“Ollie, stop,” Judy said, giving a reluctant tug on the leash. Nick pulled harder, and Judy decided it was time to put her foot down. In a much more commanding tone, she said, “Oliver, sit.”

Nick stopped short, faced her, and immediately dropped to his knees. She knew that it must have been his goal from the beginning. Her heart jumped a little. He looked torn between pride (probably at successfully razzing her) and guilt (probably for riling her up in a way she didn’t like), but as adorable as he was, she couldn’t back off now, so she stepped forward and took his muzzle gently between her paws. “Are you really that eager for a spanking?”

The guilt erased itself entirely from his face. “We are at a party, and we haven’t touched any of their toys yet.”

“Oh great fires above,” she muttered. It was a relatively short negotiation, but the point was to leave the ball in his court, so she stepped back and told him, “I’m going to sit over there on that chair. When you’re ready to stop being a brat, bring me one of those implements, whatever you think you deserve, and we’ll get you in line.”

By the time Nick replied with a quiet “Yes, Mistress,” Judy was already walking toward the chair with shaking paws and a knot forming in her stomach. She looked over at Star, who was grinning; at least one mammal didn’t think she’d messed that up. The lynx followed Judy and sat down on a stool a little too big for her. “You really have him under your spell, don’t you?”

“There’s no spell. We’ve just been together for a long time.” Judy’s eyes widened. “Almost 7 years now. Wow. Time goes by so fast.”

“Cripes. Have you been in a dynamic for that long, too?”

“We didn’t really start a dynamic until a year after we were together, but our first scene was...maybe a few months after we had our first date.”

“So is he – your slave? Your pet?”

“No,” Judy said firmly, shaking her head. “Nothing like that. I mean, he likes being on a leash, but I suspect that’s more to troll bystanders than any sort of pet thing. You’ve seen how mischievous he can get. Ollie is my partner. That he’s also submissive is secondary to that, at least for me.”

“That...sounds sweet,” Star said with a small smile. “I’d like to have that with someone, someday. But all the dominant females are either straight or taken, it seems.”

Judy tried not to think of her friend Angel, because she wasn’t here to play matchmaker, but she couldn’t help it. Over the years, Evangeline Harfang – a vixen who lived and worked as an actress in the Nocturnal District – had become a pretty close friend, and had often lamented her lack of opportunities as a queer switch in a competitive career, once she’d learned about Judy’s dynamic with Nick. It made Judy wonder how many other mammals she knew were hiding a secret life.

“I’m sure you’ll find someone,” she settled on. “It looks like the community is pretty big. Are you on FetLick?”

“Not yet. I – oh, look, your boy’s back.”

Nick’s ears were wide and flat, and his posture was the picture of repentance, but Judy knew his tells. He wasn’t at all sorry for the scene he’d made. That was all right; it had been an effective way to show at least a pawful of mammals the kind of relationship Oliver and Luna had, even if it wasn’t the relationship Judy enjoyed with Nick. He dropped a tawse in her paw and stood in front of her, awaiting her decision.
“A tawse? Really?” She tried not to look too pleased about it. She knew he’d chosen it because it was her favorite. He could have chosen a flogger; that would have been embarrassing for everybody. She still, after all these years, couldn’t figure out how to hit him with it. More often than not, she just ended up hitting her own arm. “Any particular reason?”

“You said to choose a punishment I deserve,” he answered with some oddly warm note in his voice. “I was a brat, which I know you hate. But I was doing it because I know you hate it, so I don’t just need punishment for being a brat, I also need it for being mean and pushing you when I could have just asked.”

“Okay, I can accept that. How many strikes do you deserve for this?”

He folded his expression to hide his smile. “Thirty.”

She blinked and asked, carefully, “Thirty? With this? You do remember how long the pain lingers, right?”

“You asked what I deserve, and that’s my opinion. Of course, as my mistress, it’s up to you whether that’s too much or too little.”

She couldn’t help but rub her thighs together, although she tried to hide it as much as she could. Nick knew her. He knew what she liked and he knew exactly what to say to get to her. The way they traded power was perhaps more subtle than many other mammals preferred; Nick was always in control when he subbed for her, but the illusion was enough to make her feel strong. In return, the illusion of having his power taken gave him a rush, she knew, because she’d felt it herself. “I accept your proposal. Now pull down your bottoms and lie across my lap.”

Judy wasn’t sure if his speed was about getting to his desired punishment or hiding his pelvic area from onlookers, but it didn’t matter. Before she could fully process how sexy it was to see his tight pants slide down and pool around his ankles, he had positioned himself properly. He was being too good for his earlier bratting to have been anything but deliberate. Rubbing his upper back, she asked, “Do you deserve a warm-up?”

(Did he want one, was what she was asking, and she knew he’d pick up on it.)

“Not remotely, Mistress.”

She rolled her eyes. Of course he’d say that. Usually a harsh spanking without a warm-up was unpleasant for the spankee, but they were hardly doing a long scene. She pushed more heavily on his upper back, making sure his tail was out of the way, and said, “I want to hear you count them.”

“One,” he said steadily as she brought the tawse down to snap against his right thigh. Usually, with a warm-up, she’d hit his cheeks first, but this was supposed to be a punishment, not a playful exchange. All of her strikes would be in the more tender areas, and he wouldn’t be able to avoid sitting on the bruises. He obviously wanted to reap what he’d sown, and she intended to help with that.

She snapped the thong against his left thigh and listened to him say, “Two.” Movement in her peripheral vision caused her to look up and see that they had a couple of spectators. Nick, from his position over her lap, would have seen them, albeit upside-down. It was...exciting. She also felt pressure to put on a show, but she was Luna Evergreen, and Luna Evergreen liked to perform. So she grinned and snapped his right thigh again for her third strike, doing her best to land the tawse in the same area. Nick’s voice sounded a bit more strained as he counted, “Three.”
She waited a few moments to increase Nick’s anticipation before snapping harshly at his left thigh for her fourth strike. He didn’t yelp, exactly, but it was a near thing, and he twisted in what Judy thought was surprise. Had he thought she’d take it easy on him just because they were out in public? For some reason, the thought made her smile. The laugh building up didn’t come out of her mouth, but it felt good resting there in her chest.

Her fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth strikes, she landed in quick succession on his left thigh. She wasn’t hitting as hard as she could, but she wasn’t exactly keeping her strikes light, either. His voice, now raised much more loudly than she’d expected, drew more attention as his count trailed behind her rhythm. She considered calling him on it, but he couldn’t be expected to follow her exactly. Interestingly, during her ninth and tenth strikes on his right thigh, she felt the beginning of sexual arousal, the tip of his penis not quite emerging but obviously preparing to. She bit her lip when she realized it had corresponded with one of the onlookers saying, “Wow.”

So that was it. This was going to be interesting.

She kept the angle of her snaps precise, but varied the rhythm. She never went softer than the first strike she’d laid down, but her final four strikes were harder than the rest; he was gasping and shuddering above her legs and below her paw as he cried his count, and the laugh in her chest had turned into a white hot ball that sank through her stomach and into her pelvis. Nick tensed up and whined in his chest when she rubbed his thighs. He did it again when she leaned forward and said, “Oh, you’re such a good boy, Ollie. My good boy.”

“Heh,” he said, but nothing else came out. He was on the edge of subspace, she could tell, but fortunately he hadn’t dipped into it yet. Whether the presence of other mammals was blocking him or the reason he’d gotten there so quickly, she didn’t know, but she could always ask him later.

Vaguely, she heard Star tell one of the mammals close to them, “I’m going to go sterilize this for them; will you let Luna know I’m going to hang out with my sponsor?”

“Sure thing,” came the reply. That was sweet of Star to do. Then again, judging from the heavier breathing, she’d enjoyed the show.

“I heard. Thank you, Star,” Judy said, and then turned her attention back to Nick. He was still shuddering, and he was still aroused, and he was amazing. The greatest, really. She stalked him, ruffling the fur on his thighs and covertly knuckling his testicles, listening to his appreciative noises. She kept up the rubbing and affirming murmurs until their audience had dispersed, at which point she said, “Okay, let’s get your bottoms back on.”

“I...don’t know if I can,” he said very quietly. He slid off her lap, facing her so that nobody would see that he was halfway out.

“Oh, I think you can,” Judy challenged. “Unless you want to jerk it in front of all these strangers?”

He wheezed, but did as he was told, wincing as he pulled the silky underwear and tight pants up and fastened them in place. She gripped his leash and pulled on it, wordlessly directing him to his knees so that they could be eye to eye.

“You like it when they watch, don’t you,” she murmured, running her nails through the fur on his damp cheek. His eyes were bright. She felt bold, bolder than she had felt since they’d taken on this case, and because she was someone else, she added, “It turns you on. Filthy little exhibitionist.”

Nick whimpered and shifted on his knees while heat flooded through her once again. Crackers, she hadn’t even known she liked the kind of secret thrill of public humiliation. Clearly, Nick liked it a lot.
She’d always suspected that about him, though; before they’d moved to a larger, quieter apartment, he’d always gotten harder faster when Bucky and Pronk had complained about their noise during foreplay, and she very clearly remembered the blissful expression on his face when she’d sucked him off in a tea shop a few years ago. It was one of her favorite memories. She supposed it was functionally similar to his particular sense of humor. Nick was not a nice mammal; he had the ability to read others on a deep level and figure out the best way to be unimaginably cruel, and it was only because he was a good mammal that it came out in the form of trolling others rather than actual cruelty.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” she whispered into his ear. It was an awkward position for her, but the intimacy of the whisper added to the appeal of the situation. “I want to get you off in front of everybody. Do you want that?”

“Oh my God,” he replied, leaning his head forward to rest it on her shoulder.

“But there’s a catch.”

“Anything.”

“You have to keep your pants on. You can’t let on what we’re doing. Someone might guess, or everyone here might be too busy to notice, but it has to be our little secret.”

She grinned when he moaned, “Oh, fuck.”

“Now, because it’s a secret, you don’t even need to safeword out, okay?” She dragged her foot up his thigh and rubbed at his groin softly with the tops of her toes. He jerked, but stayed quiet. “Good boy. You don’t even need to ask permission to go to the bathroom and finish yourself there if you hate this or get overwhelmed.”

“There is no chance of that.”

“Well, keep it in mind. Now let’s go find Madame Moon.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he said, and she didn’t bother to correct him, riding the high of their scene as she was. There was freedom in being Luna Evergreen; Judy had never felt comfortable with dirty talk, but it came naturally to the character she was pretending to be. It was almost like she had permission to indulge in the less restrained side of their dynamic. All the dark, sweet little thoughts she’d ever had and discarded as too intense or not right could be explored here, because they were surrounded by fellow kinksters who would understand if she or Nick stalled and had a problem. There were probably mammals who’d be willing to help them work through something; Emilia certainly would. She didn’t have to be as vigilant here, because it wasn’t just the two of them. The freedom was intoxicating. She felt light-headed and powerful.

This time, it didn’t feel weird when she led him to the door that led to the outside. There was a cement path between the basement stairs and the garage door, which opened into a large, almost barn-like area with very high ceilings and plenty of mammals. A large area had been cleared for suspension scenes, but again, there were plenty of chairs for spectators or simply to take a break. In one corner was a station Judy suspected was for milder bloodplay and genital torture; no one was using it, but along with some tools Judy only recognized from internet reading, there was plastic sheeting ready to be used and a sterilization center similar to the one in the medical station. Along the wall next to that, there was a row of restraints meant to keep someone suspended off the ground, but not true suspension; it was for impact play, not for rope work. In the corner closest to them, there were three saltires, X-shaped restraint posts meant for heavy flogging or full-body torture, meant for different-sized mammals, next to the promised bathroom.
Judy spotted Emilia in a strangely alluring position: on her knees behind a male wolf, holding his head still as another male wolf thrusted into his mouth, effectively fucking his throat. He had a mouth guard on, a stiff plastic ring that fit over sharp fangs and provided a circular hole, but Judy suspected that it was only there to add to his sense of helplessness. He wasn’t giving a blowjob, he was being used. Even from the door, Judy could hear the sounds of gagging and see glistening streaks of saliva leaking out of the corners of his mouth.

She looked back at Nick, whose eyes were wide, fixed on the sight. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but when she pushed him to his knees near the chair she’d decided to sit in, he still looked uncomfortable in his pants. While she softly carded her paw through the headfur between his ears, she sneaked her foot between his legs from behind and began rubbing his testicles with the top of her foot. His yip of surprise sent fire through her.

“Keep watching,” she told him, “and tell me what you’re thinking.”

“They’re – they’re both her submissives,” Nick replied, trying not to show that he was breathing heavily. “The one ffffah, fucking the – the other – keeps looking at Madame Moon, and she keeps nodding at him.”

“Very good,” she praised. She hadn’t actually noticed that, but it wasn’t the point. Nick loved being praised. He was more or less beyond his former self-loathing, most of the time, but he still liked being told he was good. And she liked telling him that, because it was true. “What else?”

“They’re together. All th-three of them. Their collars all match. Like wedding rings.”

That was likely, as well. She scratched behind his ears and put a little more pressure on him with her foot, making him jerk again. “Do you find it arousing?”

“Sooh, God, sort of?”

“You want to fuck my mouth, Ollie?”

She didn’t know where this was coming from, but she liked it; she liked the feeling of being dirty, of arousing Nick in this way. “No.”

She bit her lip and then asked, “You want to suck a dick then?”

The tiny shake of his head wasn’t a surprise, but his next words were. “Not anyone else’s. I’m thinking about how it would be if you had one.”

Truthfully, she’d never thought about it. They’d played with strap-ons of various sizes, and that had been enjoyable, but she’d never really imagined herself with a functional penis. She didn’t know if that was an enjoyable thought, or if she was simply enjoying the idea of having another way to dominate him, but she took the opportunity that playing a part had offered her and jumped in feet-first. If it sounded stupid, it sounded stupid. It would be Luna saying it, not Judy. “It’d have to be bigger than yours to reach your throat, which means I’d have to be bigger, too. I’d cuff your wrists to your ankles so that you couldn’t touch yourself, and I’d put that ring in your mouth, and I’d stand in front of you just like they’re doing. I’d grab your ears.”

Here, she did so, massaging the backs of them with her thumbs. Nick’s shoulders arched backwards and he whimpered again. “With your head free, it wouldn’t be easy to fuck your mouth, so I’d have to move your head toward me. Tug on your ears, like this. I’d make you choke on me. You’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” he rasped, although Judy wasn’t sure that was true. Fantasy was different from reality. It was
also possible that he was only into the fantasy because he was already aroused, and after he came, he’d roll his eyes at how cheesy and cliché this was.

The standing wolf was moving his hips faster now, obviously about to climax, and Judy held Nick’s head still while she rubbed him faster with her foot. “Watch. That’s what I’d do to you. You’d be able to breathe, but you’d feel like you couldn’t with my cock hitting the back of your throat so hard. And your gagging would only make it more intense for me. You’d be helpless, unable to do anything but wait for me to finish – just like that – and you’d have to swallow, because I wouldn’t pull out of your mouth until you did.”

It was an impressive picture, the kneeling wolf’s eyes watering as the standing wolf’s hips twitched. Emilia looked as smug as could be, but Judy quickly turned her focus back to Nick, who was moving his own hips against her foot. She leaned forward, pulled his head back, and murmured into his ear, “I want you to cum for me. Be a good boy.”

His eyes closed and he tensed up, trying (with limited success) to hide his groan. The background noise was enough that Judy very much doubted anyone had heard it, but he had the same blissful expression on his face that he’d had in the tea house during his very first PI case, and it would be obvious to anyone looking what was happening. She felt a rush of satisfaction as she realized what had transpired: with minimal stimulation, she had talked him into orgasm.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, and shifted so that he could lean against her leg, resting his muzzle on her lap. She massaged his ear with one paw and caressed his muzzle with the other, prompting a sigh from him. Her toes curled as she thought about the sticky mess that must be inside his pants. She couldn’t wait to clean him. Would it be impolite to leave without saying goodbye?

Emilia took the choice away from her, sitting heavily next to them. She looked between them and smirked. “Having fun?”

“Absolutely,” Nick replied, his words somewhat muffled by his position. “I have the best mistress ever.”

Judy glanced at the two male wolves, who had taken the larger but lower seat next to Emilia and were curled in an easy embrace. “I didn’t know you and your husband had an open marriage.”

“We don’t,” Emilia replied. “We’re all together. Adam, Eric, meet Luna and Oliver, my friends. Luna and Oliver, this is Adam, my husband, and Eric, our partner.”

“Nice to finally meet you,” said Eric, at the same time that Adam said, “It’s a pleasure.”

Nick waved, apparently still recovering, and Judy smiled brightly at them. “Good to meet you as well.”

“They’re the most important mammals in my life,” Emilia told Nick and Judy, “for obvious reasons.”

Judy nodded. “So you’re...a triad?”

“...Yes. Initially we didn’t want to be,” said Emilia, watching Eric and Adam cuddle for a moment. They were in their own world, completely blissed out. Judy doubted they even knew they were being talked about, even though they were right next to Emilia. “Not only does it not usually work, but we didn’t want to be that couple, the unicorn hunters. We’re both bi, so it was a legitimate worry. But...we found Eric and it just happened.”

“How do you make it work,” Judy asked curiously.
“What do you mean? Poly in general or our triad?”

“The second.”

Emilia shrugged. “We communicate. Not that there’s much chance of us not communicating, considering our lifestyle, but relationshipping is more than just talking about limits and aftercare. It’s not that Adam and I are dating Eric; we all date each other individually. We don’t have threesomes very often. All of us are free to date other mammals, if we want. We try not to have expectations of each other. And from the very beginning we refused the hierarchical model; Adam and I happen to be married, but Eric is an equal partner. None of that primary, secondary birdshit in our relationship.”

“How do you manage time,” Nick asked.

“I imagine the same way you do.”

He shook his head, but it was slightly ineffective, since his head was still in Judy’s lap. “No, I mean...don’t you get jealous if they spend more time with each other?”

“I only ever get jealous when I’m worried about my relationship with one or both of them, which is a signal for me to take a look at what’s going on in my head. What am I anxious about? Usually it’s something I’m imagining rather than a real problem, so all it really takes is a good spanking from one of both of them to get my head on straight. It’s hard, I won’t lie. Having a relationship with one mammal is hard, and on top of that we’re all into BDSM, so there’s that aspect to juggle. But really, do you get jealous when your mistress spends time with other males?”

“Okay, fair. There’s really only been one time I got jealous, and you’re right, it wasn’t because I thought she was going to steal my...wonderful, amazing, beautiful mistress…” Judy gave him a hard look, in response to which he just smiled, pleased with himself. “…but because we had become a little distant.”

“Exactly. Why do you ask, anyway? Are you interested in poly?”

“Not for me,” he replied with a laugh. “It’s just...in my old business, before we left Arcadia, I didn’t see polyamorous mammals, I mostly took photos of cheating spouses. It’s kind of nice to hear about something less cruel. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that not everyone sucks.”

“I imagine that goes for both of you, considering your respective professions,” Emilia mused.

“Less than you’d think,” Judy put in, leaving his ear alone so she could run her fingers through Nick’s ruff just above his collar. He was so fluffy; it was hard to keep her paws off of him, especially after such an intense experience. “No matter how bad things get at work, I have my husband to come home to. So long as we leave work at our respective offices, home is an oasis. A safe place to just be. The rest of the world can wait. But Ollie here overthinks everything.”

He snorted. “Right, I overthink everything. Who’s the one who does weeks of target practice before trying out a new toy?”

“I just don’t want to accidentally maim the fox I love,” she teased, and then because she was Luna and not Judy, she added, “If I maim you, I want it to be deliberate.”

“Aw, you old romantic,” Nick gushed, lifting his head a little to look at her directly, and she thought she might explode. He gave her a hard time about being cute, but frankly, no bunny had anything on his big bright eyes and beatific smile.

She was about to say something when a musk deer beelined toward them with a wide grin and quick
steps. He seemed a bit undersized for his species, closer to 4 feet than 5, but he still towered over Judy. Emilia leaned her head back, seeming irritated, but by the time he was next to the small group, she had a pleasant smile across her muzzle. “Hello, Shane.”

“Hi, Madame,” he replied. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Shane, you know what I told you about parties,” Emilia said sternly.

“Well, yeah, but I thought maybe this would be different. I want to beat you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“I mean.” He faltered for a moment, before drawing himself up to his full height. “It wouldn’t be a business exchange, because I wouldn’t be paying you, and you wouldn’t be paying me for my services.”

“For your...services?” Emilia seemed to not quite comprehend Shane’s suggestion, and Judy realized what the problem really was. Shane was one of Emilia’s clients from her business as a professional dominatrix. Her jaw almost dropped at his gall, but she kept her mouth closed and gripped Nick’s fur tightly. He hummed happily as he watched it all play out. He would get a kick out of it. Their friend seemed to come to a conclusion. “You have no right to proposition me. Our relationship does not and will never include a scene where you top me. In fact, I’m seriously considering scrubbing you from my client list.”

“But it would be totally different. There wouldn’t be money-”

“You clearly lack decorum,” said Emilia, “but worse, you lack respect. If – and that’s a big if – we have another session, that will be the first thing on our agenda. I have told you before not to ask to scene with me at parties. I won’t ask you a third time.”

“Sorry,” he sulked. He seemed about to back off, but then he faced Judy instead. “Do you want to scene with me? You love getting flogged, I bet.”

Nick’s ears perked up and he whipped his head around to stare at Shane with eyes narrowed. The musk deer put up his hooves. “Hey, I’m not trying to steal your snack, but like, everyone knows bunnies are perfect subs.”

Despite the anger building up in her chest, Judy kept her voice impassive when she suggested, “Because we’re such sluts?”

“Right! Exactly,” he answered, clearly oblivious to the general mood of the group. Eric and Adam, previously off in their own little world, had taken an interest in the exchange, looking rather more irritable than they had just a minute prior. It was probably in response to the change in Emilia, who was snarling slightly. Nick looked about ready to rip Shane’s eyes out. His protective streak was sweet, and kind of hot, but she didn’t need him to do anything that would get him in trouble (or sabotage their cover).

She smoothed his fur, hoping that her increased petting would calm him. “I’m going to have to pass. Not only are you one of my good friend’s clients, but I’m in a closed relationship with my sub here. You’re really ruining the mood right now. Please leave us alone.”

Shane looked like he’d just been dipped sideways, expression slightly lost. “…Oh.”

“And,” Emilia added, “you are definitely off my client list. That was completely inappropriate.”
He slunk away, looking much less confident than he had been before. Judy felt a shake in her paws and a rush of cold in her chest; it had been easy to stand up to him when he had been aggressive, but now that he was gone, everything that could have happened rushed into her mind. She jumped at Emilia’s gentle, but huge, paw on her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“I…” She didn’t know what to say. She was all right, but without the immediate anger, she felt actual fear. She didn’t want to be there anymore. “I’m tired. I think it’s time to go home. Oliver?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty beat,” Nick acknowledged, rubbing her thigh with his muzzle. Thank goodness for Nick. She wasn’t sure she’d have been nearly as composed without him there. “It was good to see you though, Madame Moon.”

“Hey. Call me if you need anything. We’re never too busy to help out a friend,” Emilia told them, and it meant more to Judy than she could say.

Allowing Emilia to call a Zuber for them had probably been a bad plan, but the alternative had been taking the train. Nick winced at every turn and every bump; now that they were out of the Jungle and the adrenaline had worn off, Nick would be feeling his earlier spanking, and Judy couldn’t help but lean against him, playing with the end of the leash just to do something with her paws.

She felt sick again. She had really enjoyed the party for a while, and she knew that they should have stayed longer. They should have talked to more mammals. But after the confrontation with Emilia’s client, Judy knew that she wouldn’t have been able to continue with the same enthusiasm and energy. She’d been...legitimately scared, and she wasn’t sure why. She’d faced down far worse. She’d taken down far worse. She’d been surrounded by mammals who wouldn’t tolerate harassment or disrespect.

Was it just because of what he’d said? Maybe. She didn’t know why the stereotype was so pervasive, but bunnies weren’t nearly as promiscuous as other mammals made them out to be, and even if the stereotype had been true, Judy didn’t think it would be something to be ashamed of. She was a bit of a prude even by her own family’s standards, but that was less to do with sex and more to do with the body issues she’d been trying to overcome since she’d become aware of them. She had always felt ugly compared to other bunnies. Nick looked at her like she was the most beautiful thing in the world, and that was nice, but she still struggled sometimes. The approval of her partner, while appreciated, was not enough to erase more than a decade of backward thinking.

Maybe that was it? She would have to sleep on it. There had been no reason to feel endangered at the party, but she had, and she needed to figure it out so that it wouldn’t happen again. The case was too important to allow any more of that to stall her, especially once they attended a party with Nathaniel Snow.

The car pulled over next to their apartment building. Judy slid out, followed by Nick, but she paused a short distance away when the driver, a wolf, asked Nick to wait.

“I know you’re a fox,” she said in a hushed voice, “but you don’t have to – answer to prey.”

“Madame,” Nick replied, almost overplaying it, “I’m not sure you’re qualified to comment on my relationship, but I assure you, I don’t, quote, answer to prey. What my mistress does for me is no less than what I ask her for, and furthermore, I don’t appreciate your speciesism. So please, kindly go fuck yourself with something rusty and sharp.”

“Excuse me? I was just trying to help-“
“I’m twice her size and my kind used to eat hers,” he said flatly. “I wouldn’t be on her leash unless I wanted to be.”

Put in such concrete terms, Judy felt like she’d been smacked in the face by just how unconventional her relationship was. She was never unaware of what he was or the nasty history between their species. She had grown up on the old stories, and the ancestral fear of predators – although pointless in modern society – had been **necessary** for a long time. But Nick was Nick. Whatever predatory tendencies he had, she found more endearing than anything, and sometimes, she was a little disappointed that he was so gentle with her. She trusted him more than she’d ever trusted any bunny. And he trusted her just as much.

It felt like this stranger was spitting on their bond, and Judy knew she should be angry, but she only had a cold hole in her stomach. This was reality. At the Jungle, nobody had batted an eye, but in the real world, it looked like she was taking advantage of Nick. Usually, she didn’t care what other mammals thought of her, but she cared – maybe too much – about how they made Nick feel. This wolf’s incorrect assumptions made Nick out to be some kind of helpless victim of a prey supremacist or...something. It hurt to know that he would always be judged for being a fox, and doubly so for submitting to a bunny.

“Come on, **Mistress,**” Nick said sharply. “We have better things to do than stand here and listen to some jerk shit on our relationship.”

Judy followed him, allowing herself to give into the urge to hold his paw. Like this, she wasn’t leading him by the leash; they were holding it together. She didn’t want to touch it anymore. It made her feel cold, too, and she felt colder in the lobby, and even colder when they entered the elevator, but by the time they had made it up to their door and Nick had opened it with his new key, she felt hot, hot, hot. She was burning inside, angry about the driver, angry about the way the night had ended, furious about the lead Nick was still wearing.

With a snarl, or what passed for one on a bunny’s face, Judy unclipped the leash and threw it at the corner, vaguely aware of the loud **thok** of the hook hitting the wall of their temporary apartment. It would probably leave a dent, but she was so relieved to see it gone that she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Nick frowned and brought one paw up to her cheek, looking wary. “You okay, Carrots?”

“No, I am **not okay,**” she snapped, and then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It wasn’t Nick’s fault, and it wasn’t right to take it out on him. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled at you. No. I’m not okay.”

“What’s going on, then? Don’t take that driver seriously, she was a moron.” She opened her mouth, but the words wouldn’t come out. How could she even begin to explain herself when she wasn’t even fully sure what her problem was? She closed it again. Foolish. She was overreacting. Wasn’t she? She tried to say something, but again, nothing would come out. She was angry and embarrassed and ashamed of both. Nick knelt down in front of her, bringing them eye to eye, and she felt even worse. “Sweetheart. Talk to me.”

“I hate it,” she said. That wasn’t enough explanation, she knew that, but she couldn’t make her mouth work.

“The leash?”

“Yeah.”
“Oh, Judy.” Nick leaned forward and pulled her close in a hug that felt like he was trying to meld them together. She only wished he could somehow cover her completely. She felt overexposed, even though it was only the two of them in their apartment. “It’s just a prop.”

“It’s not, though,” she replied, hating the way her voice was wobbling, hating the fact that she was about to cry. If Nick didn’t have a problem with it, why should she? What right did she have to hate the way he’d chosen to have fun with his character? For cripes’ sake, it was fiction! Nick wasn’t Oliver, just like Judy wasn’t Luna. Why couldn’t that knowledge be enough?

“Please explain it to me,” he murmured into the back of her neck, where he was resting his muzzle. “I don’t get it, and I want to.”

She blinked over and over, swallowing several times, in an attempt to cut off the crying before it began. It didn’t work; before she could even begin to speak, she already had tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes. “I don’t like – I don’t like being – I can’t explain it, Nick, I just hate it. It’s degrading and gross and...I don’t know.”

“You’ve degraded me before,” he told her calmly, almost carefully, and it made her angry, even though she knew he was only trying to choose the right words and not being condescending. “I loved what you did tonight. Why is this different?”

“Because I don’t want to control you! When you submit to me it’s always by choice, and I know it’s not real but it feels like the leash takes that choice away, and I don’t want you to follow my orders because you have to, I don’t want to feel like I’m restricting you, I don’t want our intimate relationship to be so…and you heard that wolf, she thought – she was wrong, but what if – I don’t want to ever feel like I’m threatening you, like Shane – it’s stupid, okay? I’m stupid, and I need to get over myself, but it feels slimy and I can’t explain why.”

He breathed in and out slowly. She tried matching his breaths, because she was dangerously close to hyperventilating, but she couldn’t, so she just held on tightly and shuddered along, hoping he knew what to say. She sure didn’t. “Is this like the mistress thing?”

“I…” Oh. “Yes. It’s exactly like the mistress thing. It’s part of the mistress thing, and it hurts my heart.”

“I…” Oh. “Yes. It’s exactly like the mistress thing. It’s part of the mistress thing, and it hurts my heart.”

“Then I have an apology to make. I didn’t realize teasing you like that would hurt you.”

Judy didn’t like being called “Mistress” for a lot of reasons, but the foremost reason was that it felt restrictive in a way that even physical restraints did not. The incidents with Gideon and Kevin were closed chapters in her life, but their effects likely would never go away, and she didn’t like the idea of making anyone feel the way they’d made her feel. Trapped, helpless, afraid. When Nick gave up his power to her, it was always voluntary. It was a choice he made, a deliberate deviation from conventional social interactions, and he always had the option to take it back. Calling her “Mistress,” even in a scene, felt to her like forced respect, forced power exchange. A lot of mammals liked it; in fact, there were plenty of forums dedicated to rape fantasies and how to fulfill them in healthy ways. There were no inherent problems with most power exchange dynamics, so long as everyone was fully informed and a consenting adult. But even dommes were allowed to have hard limits, and although she hadn’t understood it until just then, that was one of hers. She had ignored it, allowed the rush to overwhelm her discomfort, tried to write it off as Nick playing a role, and the words of their Zuber driver had finally broken her little bubble.

Submissive mammals were not powerless. Requiring a sub to call her “Mistress,” with the promise of punishment if they didn’t, felt like theft of power, even if other mammals had fun with it. A tug on a leash felt like theft of power, even if the wearing of the leash was voluntary. One of the reasons Judy
had become a cop was to help mammals whose power had been stolen.

“You don’t owe me an apology,” she sighed, trying to get the shakes out of her voice. “It’s my fault for not saying anything. I was too focused on the case and didn’t take care of myself. That’s not your job.”

“You’re right. Being your partner isn’t a job, it’s a privilege.” He leaned back and licked her cheek, getting a taste of her tears. It was absurd enough to make her laugh. “We chose to take care of each other, right? We promised to be responsible for one another. God knows I’ve had some weird requests over the years, and you’ve been a total rockstar. I want to look after you like you’ve looked after me. Not because it’s my job, but because I love you, and you shouldn’t have to do anything alone when you’re working with a partner.”

“You...you’re so sappy,” she said, not quite managing the teasing tone she’d been going for.

“You’ve apparently taken the role of “brooding loner haunted by the past,” so one of us has to be the perky go-getter in this case. Obviously, I’m no Judy Hopps, but I’d like to think I do a pretty decent impression. This may surprise you, but I’ve known her since before she was cool.”

She bit her lip, but the smile bloomed anyway, and she was left with the curious combination of shaking breaths and aching cheeks. “Okay, okay, I’m being dumb-”

“Not what I meant-”

“-and you’re the best partner a mammal could ask for. I...obviously have some hangups that I need to resolve, but overall I think my own comfort is less important than investigating a zoicide, so...be patient with me.” She wiped her eyes and met his, hoping he understood how important this was to her. “I might get emotional or whatever, but I’ll tell you if you’ve done something. The only thing you’re guilty of in this case is being a good detective and establishing your character with panache.”

“I have a feeling this case will be hard on us both,” he admitted, and stood. Instead of leaving her to stare at his chest, he picked her up and held her, bridal-style, as he walked into their shared bedroom. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired. All I’ve wanted to do since we did our scene is cuddle with you, but I feel gross after sitting on chairs that have seen things in a kink dungeon that was full of mammals working really hard, not to mention the mess in my pants I fully expect your help cleaning up, so I propose a nice shower and then bed afterward.”

“I think I can manage that,” she said, and decided to just enjoy being carried instead of demanding to be put down because she had two good feet of her own.

Nick was right. She didn’t have to do it alone.

Chapter End Notes

There's a difference between a professional dominant and a lifestyle dominant. You should run the fuck away if your top refuses to bottom. Not only does it indicate a massively inflated ego, but it also means they don’t respect you, full stop. Listen, not only do I domme people professionally, but I also have PTSD and trust issues. You know what I still do in my intimate relationships? Switch things up. Because I give a shit about my partners. It doesn't always look the same; I'm okay being tied up, but I have issues with impact play that make it impossible for me to enjoy the way it should
be enjoyed. When we switch it up, instead of me beating my sub, she blindfolds me and teases me until I'm begging for an orgasm or six. Our first scene ever, she topped me because she was new to the lifestyle and needed to be shown that I trusted her as much as she trusted me. I was the one established in the lifestyle and she was a complete novice, so it was my responsibility to bottom for her first. When I was training to be a prodomme, the theme was "You're not ready to be a domme until you understand how to bottom." And yeah, it was terrifying and difficult because of the aforementioned PTSD. My trainer was a goddamn saint. She taught me so much just by showing me how a good domme deals with past abuse, safewords, aftercare, etc., and everything I do to my clients or subs, I've had done to me. I've been bound and beaten, cut and suspended, jabbed with needles and gagged, any and all manner of kink that didn't violate my hard limits. If a dominant tells you they "don't bottom," even if they use past trauma as an excuse, leave them. Seriously. That's not okay. Not ever.

That said, being a professional dominatrix isn't the same as being a lifestyle domme. My clients never top me, for obvious reasons. There's money involved; we necessarily don't have a romantic relationship, they are my clients. They are paying me for my services, and beyond that, nothing else matters. The second money changes hands, even outside of BDSM, a relationship is completely unethical, inappropriate, and based on an unfair power advantage. A client could fall madly in love with me and that's just too fucking bad, it cannot and will not be anything other than professional. I am, in essence, their employee. We don't have sex (even if I occasionally dominate them "sexually" they're not allowed to touch me and I don't touch their genitals), and the majority of what I do is emotional catharsis via physical punishment and/or bondage followed by unofficial talk therapy. Madame Moon is a professional dominatrix, and she has dedicated subs. This is an important distinction because the way she dealt with Shane is not the way she'd deal with Eric or Adam. Please don't confuse the two. Please, please, please. Keep yourselves safe, whether you're into kink or not.
At six sharp, Judy kissed the back of Nick’s shoulder and left him sprawled out on his belly, asleep in the bed that had been issued to “Luna and Oliver Evergreen.” It wasn’t as nice as the one they had at home, but this apartment was temporary. Going undercover, even for a case with so little danger that it might as well be considered a fluff assignment, required certain precautions. At least they could still have their tea.

She put her earbuds in as she set the electric kettle. She had a whole set of conversations to go through before her meeting with Hirsch, and she didn’t want to be caught by surprise by anything too late to process it. Being undercover, Judy wasn’t allowed to have any contact with Nathaniel Snow until they ran into him at a munch, class, or party, but the same did not apply to Penelope or her temporary partner, Flora Del Valle. Del Valle was a fellow deer who worked well with Hirsch; so well, in fact, that Judy thought they might be a better match.

No use dwelling, though. She pressed play and slipped her phone into her pocket.

“I’m a little surprised that you didn’t report her missing,” came Hirsch’s voice. It had a dry but thick quality; it was the kind of voice that made Judy want to confess to everything from the harsher parts of her secret dynamic with Nick to putting a slug in Josh Longfoot’s lunchbox back in preschool after he’d pushed Sharla in the mud.

“Well,” said a male voice. Nathaniel Snow. He sounded legitimately shaken, wobbly in all the right places, but he had a nice voice all the same. She’d hoped it would be as unpleasant as the rest of him, but no such luck. If only all abusers were unclean, ugly, and unlikable. Then again, there wouldn’t be much domestic abuse at all if they didn’t have domestic partners. “She was on vacation. She informed me three weeks prior, like
she was supposed to. I didn’t even know she was missing until they found her body.”

He was crying. Actually crying! As if he actually missed his victim! She clenched her paw into a fist. What a creep. She took a deep breath and relaxed her paw, trying hard to not allow the case to affect her mood. The act of jumping to reach the cupboard for the mugs, at least, gave her something to do, and the lavender scent of the brew was calming on her nerves.

“It’s true, we have record of that,” said Del Valle.

“You see how it’s hard to believe you’re uninvolved when you forced your own employee into an...let’s say unconventional relationship, yes?”

“Force…? You mean because she’s – she was – my assistant? I know it looks bad. God, I know, I’m so disgusting. It was a gross violation of ethics. But there wasn’t any force. I told her to do research; we didn’t even talk for the two weeks while she was studying up. I offered to stop paying her and just take care of her. Let her do as much or as little work as she wanted, just for fun, just for the experience, because she was brilliant and could get a job anywhere even if she didn’t want to be with me. I recorded that conversation; you can have the recording. She chose to continue as we were. She was fully informed and consenting. It doesn’t excuse the initial – the initial conversation, but I explained it, I swear I did. I gave her a choice. She wanted to be mine. She loved me. And now she’s gone.”

“And you have recordings of all of these conversations?”

“BDSM is taboo, to say the least,” he said softly, sniffing. “There’s a lot that can go wrong. I had a – an ex who tried to ruin my life by reporting our dynamic as abusive. I started recording everything after that, to protect myself; I trusted Sarah enough to open up to her about it, but I’m also not an idiot. You can have all of the recordings, Detective, if it helps.”

“Yes, we’ll take them.” Hirsch paused, and then said, “You have a history of seducing your assistants. All female fox squirrels, all young, all apparently submissive and attracted to you. You can see how that seems unlikely, especially with this death hanging over you?”

“Yes.” His swallow was very much audible. “I have a type, I know, but if you look at the numbers, there are more fox squirrels in computer science than in any other field. The saturation is crazy. I remember how hard it was to establish myself in this field; it’s equally hard for them, albeit for a different reason. I have a weakness for go-getters who want an edge, and I send them off with references after six or eight months once I’ve taught them what I know. I’ve had other subs who didn’t work for me and plenty of assistants who weren’t submissives.”

“And how do you explain the trail of exes left behind?”

“I’m a lot to deal with,” he admitted, self-deprecating. Judy felt a roll of dread in her stomach. “I’m not going to pretend I’m not. When I give an order I expect it to be followed, and I punish failure as much as I reward success. I enjoy rope work and spanking and a lot of mammals underestimate the intensity of both of those. Being in a dynamic with me can be exhausting; I’m a perfectionist, and I hold everyone else to the same standards I have for myself. I’d never try to convince you I’m not a piece of shit, because I am. I’ve never stopped anyone from leaving, though; I thought I’d found the perfect partner in Sarah, but...”
“I’ll take those recordings,” Hirsch said crisply.

Judy felt sick. He sounded like…

She felt Nick’s arms snake around her from behind and she jumped, but she didn’t attack like she might have if she had not expected him sometime soon. She knew his scent and his shape by now anyway, the distinctly fox characteristics that made being with him such a unique and pleasurable experience. He leaned down to rest his muzzle on her shoulder, and she didn’t mean to tense up, but she couldn’t help it. Snow’s narrative was so normal. So typical. How many dominants would have said the same exact thing, whether or not their partners had been killed? She knew without question that the recording of Snow’s first negotiations with Sarah would sound a lot like the first conversation she’d had with Nick. He didn’t sound like an abuser, he sounded like…

Nick plucked the earbuds out of her ears and teased, “You look like you’re about to stab something.”

“Just...just doing some research for the case,” she replied lightly, pressing stop on her phone and wrapping the earbuds around it before putting it back into her pocket. “Hirsch and Del Valle went to talk to Nathaniel Snow last week. They sent me a recording of their conversation late last night.”

“Yuck.”

“No kidding. Why don’t you sit down,” she suggested, and began pouring the hot water into the two mugs she had gotten earlier. “I’ll bring you some tea.”

He detached from her so slowly that by the time she turned around, he had only just gotten to the table. He lowered himself onto the seat just as slowly, wincing and shifting as he did so. Right. Their scene with the tawse had only been two nights ago. She had hit him so hard...she had been unreasonable. Why hadn’t she gone easy on him? His bratting hadn’t been that bad, had it? Why – a lot to handle – had she allowed him to goad her? Why had she been so dumb?

“Something weird is going on,” he observed. His words pushed her into moving instead of staring at him in guilt.

She set his tea down and took the seat across from him at their small table. All of the furniture was sized for him, but that was normal for them; he couldn’t fit on many bunny-sized things. “I’m sorting through some stuff, I guess, but I’m not really sure what it is or how to say it. Like – when you have an idea that’s on the tip of your tongue. I’m not really sure why, but I’m kind of scrambled this morning.”

“How can I help?”

“You ca-” She paused. That wasn’t true. He could help her. She just wasn’t sure he’d be open to it so soon after their last scene. “There is a way, but it’s...probably going to annoy you.”

“Please don’t ask me to strip to Gazelle again,” he quipped with a wink.

She grinned into her mug, remembering that night fondly. He may not have enjoyed shaking his hips to Me Enamoré, but it had been very sexy. The image made her bold enough to say, “No, no. It’s just...we haven’t switched things up in a while. I was thinking maybe we could...ah, maybe you could. Restrain me. And force me to figure it out.”
His sudden concerned frown made her feel slimy, although she could not fathom why. “You’ve always been really reluctant to use force on me. Is that actually going to help?”

“Nothing else has,” she told him. “It doesn’t feel right to hide anything from you, but I can’t tell you what I haven’t been able to puzzle out.”

“Then we’ll do it,” he said with a darling smile that made her want to kiss him senselessly equally as strongly as she wanted to run away and not look back. Trusting Nick had always been easy. Now it felt dangerous, and she wasn’t sure why, but she hoped it wouldn’t backfire.

After tea, toast, and their usual morning cleaning routine, Judy was on her back on their bed, naked, watching Nick sort through their box of goodies. The well-padded cork-and-steel cuffs secured her arms crossed at the wrists above her head, and although she could move her legs freely, she didn’t. Or, well, she tried not to, but Nick was attractive in nothing but his fur, even if it was silver for the duration of the case, and she rubbed her knees together.

He looked sideways at her and grinned as he held up one of their toys, a medium-sized vibrator that had two parts. One of them was supposed to go inside of her, and the other was positioned to vibrate right against her clitoris. It could be intense, under the right circumstances, but what Nick was planning with it, she had no idea. Giving her pleasure was counter to the point, wasn’t it? He had carte blanche as far as she was concerned, except her hard limits, so she hoped he would be hard on her.

“Okay,” he said, setting the toy to the side and settling on his knees between her legs. She felt thrilled and disappointed all at once when he ran his fingers over her labia; she had assumed he would get creative, as was his wont. This wasn’t exactly what she had expected. Sex was fun, but…

...well, did she really deserve it?

Unaware of the thoughts that were only barely registering in her head, Nick continued, “For some reason you don’t know what’s wrong, which is weird, but we can work with it.”

She felt like a moron for not understanding her own hangups. Guilty, too, because he had to work for the honesty that should have come naturally by now. “Maybe I’m just being stupid—”

“That’s a limit,” he told her, softly circling her clit with the smooth pad of his index finger. Her hips circled counter to his paw. “Don’t call yourself stupid. You say it again, we’re done here.”

“Okay.” Because she could do that. She could handle that. It was just a word. It didn’t mean anything. She only used it because she’d been called a dumb bunny by lots of mammals – sometimes even other bunnies, when they found out what she wanted to do and eventually did for a living – her whole life. If she said it enough, it was a joke, not an insult. “I can agree to that.”

“Good, because I’ve been wanting to do this since the party,” Nick said, and then he circled in earnest, taking care to get close enough to her little bud to make her feel it, but not quite touching yet.

Judy tried not to gasp, but he knew her body too well. He knew when and where to swipe his pad to make her melt, and he was good at it. With her head nestled in the pillows, she had the perfect view of his look of concentration, which was arousing enough, but then, he started talking. She loved it when he talked. At the academy, she had occasionally touched herself to the sound of his recorded messages, and had always come hard.

“I love watching you like this,” he said, a sort of mild rasp in his throat. Just enough to make her think of sleep and sex, and her chest heaved as the pressure of his fingers held her pelvis somewhat
in place. “You’re never this expressive in our daily lives. I don’t know why. You never seem impressed by much. It’s too bad you’ve had to temper your enthusiasm just to be taken seriously.”

She closed her eyes and whimpered when he leaned forward and licked her. His tongue was rough, wet, and almost prehensile. It didn’t feel like a lick, it felt like an all-encompassing hug. He swirled his tongue and moved his finger downward, tracing the edge of her vagina with the pad of his third finger. She felt as though she were going to come apart at the seams – his silver fur glistened in the soft light, and he did not give her time to consider; she was riding waves of pleasure, intense heat pulsing under his gifted tongue, awareness flaking away as he found a good rhythm.

She didn’t know what cunnilingus had to do with anything, but if he thought it would help, whatever, and what was she thinking again? His tongue. His paw. His eyes, green and pretty and predatory. He did not look like the fox she had talked into orgasm two nights ago, eager and pliant and hungry for affirmations. He looked like a hunter, and whatever his quarry was, he was going to find it.

And then he stopped.

“Nick-”

“You’re gonna have to earn it,” he told her. His voice was hard, nearly to the point of cruelty. “Tell me what’s going on with you.”

“I – I don’t know! Nick, please don’t stop.”

He dipped his tongue inside her vagina. A nice feeling, to be sure, but it didn’t provide enough stimulation to do more than keep her hyper-aware of him. He licked at the edge and pulled away.

“Say it.”

“Say what,” she cried, frustrated. She was losing it, except not really; her arousal was waning, but it also wasn’t. Judy had never liked edging, as eager as she tended to be. Nick was getting creative after all, and her request would be pointless if she said the safeword out of impatience, so she held her tongue as he teased her again, the very tip of one claw tickling her outer labia.

She strained against the cuffs. Nick rolled his eyes and pressed her hips down against the bed as he licked at her, enough to bring her creeping toward orgasm, and backed away again just as her thighs and belly began to quiver. “Say what’s going on.”

She wriathed, her legs straining against his forearms to no avail. It was so easy to forget that under his flippancy and tendency to submit, he was strong, and being over 3 times heavier than she, he could easily pin her with his body weight alone. She only had the advantage when she had a full range of motion.

“Please, Nick,” she begged, trying to press her hips up to meet his muzzle.

“Please, Nick,” he mocked, blowing on her vulva but otherwise ignoring her arousal. “You know what to do to get what you want.”

“Oh God – just – Nick!”

“Tell me,” Nick said forcefully, digging into her hips with the very tips of his claws, a growl in his chest and a dark expression on his face, “what I want to hear.”

He licked lightly around her inner labia, and as her vision went sideways, a piece of the dam broke. “I’m scared, I’m terrified, I don’t know how to handle a case like this, Nick please please.”
“Keep going,” he said, and – oh – pressed a kiss to her clitoris. “Maybe I’ll think about being nice if you give me what I want.”

She keened, a high note she couldn’t even be ashamed of. “I’m so bad at being suspicious! Really bad mammals know how to be charming and I fall for it! I fell for Lionheart, I fell for Bellwether, I fell for Mr. Big, I-I fell for you! I knew what you were and what you did for a living and I was still charmed by you, and it worked out but I could do the same with this guy, I could fall for an act and mess it up and another victim would appear, I’m so gullible, I’m a bad cop and I shouldn’t have made detective and lives are at stake, riding on my shoulders and I’m not good enough to – to – Nick, nnn.”

She halted, shuddering, feeling Nick’s eager, flexible tongue circle her most sensitive spot, swiping and sucking and spreading the heat up into her belly and chest. Her consciousness stretched and narrowed at the same time, and with her wrists in cuffs and her hips pinned by his large, warm paws, all she could do was crunch her toes over and over and wait for –

There. There. It was indescribable, colorful, and he rode it out with her, licking against the tremors. Judy tried to catch her breath, waiting for him to release her hips.

He didn’t.

“Continue,” he said, and dragged his tongue against the breadth of her vulva.

“There’s nothing else,” she protested weakly. It was so intense that it was almost painful.

He raised an eyebrow. Her stomach clenched at the implied condescension. “Then safeword out.”

She almost did. If she had, he would have released her, respectful of her limits but disappointed in her cowardice. Because that wasn’t all. It wasn’t everything. She just…

“I don’t know how to say the rest.”

His predatory smile was absolutely wicked. “Then we begin again.”

She was incredibly sensitive after her orgasm, so even the flick of the tip of his tongue against her clit had her shaking. He jerked her legs up, pushing them against her chest and pinning them there with his long forearm, and inserted the toy he had chosen. She had no defense; he had folded her like a chair, locked her hips and thighs in place. Even kicking did no good, so she was entirely open to him. He had complete control over every relevant part of her body as he flicked on the vibrator. Both parts of it pulsed, weakly enough that it kept her where she was without allowing her to go further.

And he bit her thigh, and she whimpered, struggling ineffectively against his grip. She could feel his smile against her leg before he said, “If you tell me what I want to know, I’ll increase it.”

“I – Nick, I don’t.”

“Say it, or say the safeword,” he said. Commanded, really, despite the placidity, and his tone sent a wretched fire through her pelvis.

She breathed, breathed, breathed, feeling his fangs scraping her flesh, feeling his gentle kisses soothing away the trail of fire, and allowed herself to let go of it, to feel and want and submit to her own desires instead of contain herself.

“I don’t want to be him.”
Six words, six syllables, one tiny sentence. Nick pushed the button to make the toy vibrate harder, and she said again, “I don’t want to be him.”

Again, the intensity increased and the timing changed. Short pulse, short pulse, long vibration, over and over again. She was insensible, her own chest collapsing in on itself as heat radiated outward from that point of contact, and she babbled without censorship, saying the first thing that made it onto her tongue and hoping it made some semblance of sense. “I tell you what to do, and I love you, but I’m just as bad because we only met because I wanted someone to break up with me and you said you didn’t want payment but I offered, I hired you, you were basically my employee and I fell for you and I’m a hypocrite and I suck and I don’t want to be him but I already am! I’m already the same kind of garbage he is and I didn’t even know it! I shouldn’t have this life, I took advantage of you, I love you and I don’t want to lose you but I sh-sh-should because – shit-”

She whined when the toy turned off, unable to find her voice due to disappointment. Nick removed it gently and murmured, with his lips just brushing her fur, “Continue.”

“I don’t know how you can love me like this. I’m worse than Shane. I’m just like Nathaniel Snow, and I don’t know how you can even stand to look at me.”

“That’s my girl,” he told her, and licked into her while tears streamed down her temples as her back did not arch properly.

This time, her climax was heavy, simmering coals instead of raging fire, dragging her eyes into her skull. He was still pinning her, legs wide open, knees to her chest. It was a slow power, paws curled into fists as her arms wrestled at the sturdy cuffs. Nick suckled at her clitoris like water in a desert – aftershocks and firm, wet strokes tying her stomach into what felt like liquid knots – and –

Quiet.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he murmured.

“I – don’t s-say that.” Even her tongue felt heavy and thick. “I’m not.”

“Normally I’d agree to disagree, but not about this. You’ve been carrying that around for so long. Longer than you’ve been on this case, that’s for sure. Hang on.”

He dropped her legs and got up on his knees, reaching for the cuffs, but she shook her head. She felt like a little cockroach, about to skitter off into the darkness. “Please don’t take them off.”

“Uh...why, exactly?”

“Because it hurts when you look at me, and if you let me out I’ll run into the bathroom and lock it,” she admitted. It was stupid. She couldn’t look him in the eye, but she could keep herself from fleeing. Or, Nick could keep her from fleeing.

“Well,” he said, pitching forward to hover over her on paws and knees, “I’m going to keep looking.”

“I don’t see why.”

“I know. God, I can’t believe I didn’t see it.” She could see, peripherally, a shake of his head. She was very aware of the lack of hard-on against her hip. He didn’t even want her. “You and I remember things very differently. Let me tell you how I remember it.”

She eyed him. It hurt, so she looked away again. “Okay.”
“I met this bunny in a pub one night. She was...I was tongue-tied as soon as she sat down in front of me. I recognized her scent; she was the one who’d been following me for three days, watching me. I had been freaking out about maybe being followed by someone from the Big operation, but I couldn’t even care, because she was smart and quick and beautiful and she managed to look me in the eye, even with fresh marks on her cheek from being clawed by a fox. And she had this...absolutely absurd business proposition for me. Long story short, a fox was the most not-a-bunny mammal I could think of. So now I need a fox to break up with me and make me look like a jerk so nobody will want me. I was too caught up in her to realize I was talking shit, per usual, so she left. You left, Judy. You never hired me, I came after you. You were so insistent on compensating me for services rendered – your words, not mine – that I made up a number. Surely you didn’t think I had a standard “stupid but hilarious labor” fee?”

“Um.”

“I never intended to collect. Call it altruism, call it a crush, call it whatever. I convinced myself it was just business. I told Finn you’d hired me. But I liked you from the moment I met you. You were annoying and kind of scared of me at first, but you had this grit that I couldn’t help but respect. Your dress was too old to be yours and your purse was a repurposed toolbelt, but you talked to me like we were both high-class gents and sold me on my own goddamn worth. I am very good at reading mammals, but every time I thought I had you figured you’d surprise me. The inside of my head was like a pinball machine the first time I was allowed to hold you. This isn’t the same situation. I never felt indebted to you. I never had a duty of care. And I was never your employee, Carrots. At most I was a volunteer agent who never did what he said he was going to do. Nathaniel Snow is a piece of shit. Don’t take that on. You’re not him.”

“I…”

“More importantly, you’re not okay. You’re still not okay, after all of that. Something is really, really wrong, and I’m starting to suspect it has nothing to do with this case at all. I’ve seen you go downhill before. You get better at it every time. But you’re not getting better, are you? You’re just getting more graceful.”

“That’s not true,” she protested, rubbing her knee against his groin. Nothing, not even a noise. He didn’t even want her.

“Then why do you want to run away from this?”

“I don’t know. I’m just being st – du – silly.”

“Oh, for the love of-” Nick sighed. “I could spank you for that.”

“You could,” she agreed softly. Maybe she wanted him to. That wasn’t usually part of their dynamic, but if he didn’t want her, at least he could take it out on her. Hurt her instead of fuck her. Hurt her like she deserved to be hurt for being so...undesirable to her own partner.

“Not really. It wouldn’t work. You don’t respond to corporal punishment the way I do. I never got spanked as a kit, Judy. When I got in trouble, Mom would send me out and not let me back into the house without at least 20 bucks in my pocket. You have a negative association. How long did it take you to stop feeling guilty every time you spanked me?”

“That was so long ago,” she stalled, trying to focus on what he was saying instead of the knot-tails of self-loathing. He didn’t even want her.

“Six months. I know, because you finally really went to town on me like I had asked. It felt so
amazing I thought I might die from too much pleasure, but even then...just as I thought I was being lifted into a new state, you stopped. Even after you stopped letting the guilt get to you, you couldn’t allow yourself to go past that point.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ugh. I’m not asking for an apology. I’m just trying to explain the difference between you and me. Your parents hurt you. And don’t get me wrong, I love your mom, and I had to convince your dad not to write me into the will. But even if your parents had never hit you, corporal punishment doesn’t work on you; some part of you just gets all knotted up when you make mistakes.”

“How would you know?”

He snorted. “You have a history of self-harm. And not just cutting, either. As much as you practically get off on proving mammals wrong, that’s predicated on the bad things they think about you in the first place. You aren’t motivated by pain to change, you accept it. You let it settle inside of you. It becomes part of you, and at best it only creates scar tissue. Do you know why I ask you to spank me when I’ve done something wrong?”

A history of self-harm. She blinked the tears out. She wasn’t sure she agreed, but in any case, that was an easy question. “Because you think you deserve it.”

“What do I deserve?”

“The pain.”

He dropped his head to her chest and breathed deeply. “No, Judy. I ask you to spank me because I want to move on. It’s not about the pain. It’s about being forgiven. It’s about being close to you. I know you love me because you punish me. I know you love me because if you didn’t, you’d let me sit in it, torturing myself. The pain is a vehicle, not the destination.”

So...for years, she’d been getting it wrong? She’d been punishing him for the wrong reasons? She bit her lip. She was a terrible partner, and a terrible domme –

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop thinking it,” he said. He nuzzled her neck with his nose. With his teeth that close to her, and with no way to stop him...it should have been terrifying. It wasn’t even thrilling. She just felt safe, despite everything, and wished he would tear into her instead of pretending he still wanted her. “I know that look. Don’t clam up on me, just talk to me.”

“I thought you liked the pain.” She forced herself to look at him directly, even though it felt like he was crawling into her brain through her eyes. “We’ve been together for seven years and I never considered that it might be something else. I’m sorry I didn’t do better.”

“You’re perfect, Judy, don’t go there. I do like it, sometimes. It gets me off more often than not. I guess I’m kind of a masochist, even if I never really put it like that. You know that little voice in your ear? The one that tells you that you’re stupid, you’re worthless, you can’t do anything right?”

She nodded. She wanted him to stop talking, but a bigger, sicker part of her wanted him to keep talking, to make her hurt.

“You helped me get rid of it. Most days, my head is quiet, where before that was all I could hear. I bet yours sounds like your mom and dad, doesn’t it?”

“I…” He wasn’t wrong, but she’d never made that connection. “My parents love me.”
“They do. They love you so much that they begged you not to try. They love you so much they tried to make you think your passion wasn’t worth anything. To a kit, that doesn’t feel like love. It feels like they don’t believe in you. It feels like they think you’re worthless. When they, shit, when they tell you to settle for less, it sounds like they’re saying you can’t achieve your dreams. How many times did you get in trouble for doing something that your siblings got away with?”

How had he known that? “Uh…”

“And it never dissuaded you. Because pain, for you, only teaches you to try harder. To be sneakier. For you, pain is an obstacle to overcome. A mountain to climb. Someone calls you a dumb bunny and you become valedictorian.” He laughed quietly. It didn’t sound happy, and his expression was certainly more agonized than amused. “And then later, you call yourself a dumb bunny until it doesn’t hurt anymore. But that stuff sticks, even if you don’t mean for it to stick. You call yourself stupid and you say you don’t believe it, but I can see pieces of it sitting in your speech. It breaks my heart because I want to take that off your shoulders, but I can’t fix it, only you can. I think we made progress, though. Do you?”

“Ask me again after you get off too,” she replied, in lieu of answering the question. She wasn’t sure, and she didn’t want to lie. What could she offer instead of another hollow apology? She had an idea, something that would help her feel better. Would help them both feel better, probably. She could make it up to him. It was embarrassing to say, but if she could just push it out, he’d surely jump at the chance.

He still looked upset as he responded, “That’s not really the point of this, is it?”

“I want you to cum on me, Nick,” she blurted, before she could lose her nerve.

He gave her a flat look. “What.”

“I want you to put one leg on each side of my chest, and I want to watch you get yourself off. And when you cum, I want you to do it on my face.”

“But I...what?” He now looked lost. “Why?”

“What, that’s not something you’ve ever fantasized about? I thought all males were into that,” she teased, though the teasing was halfhearted. That hadn’t been so hard to say aloud after all.

“I don’t think anybody fantasizes about that,” he said skeptically, “because it’s weird.”

She scrunched her face, frustrated by his response. He probably wasn’t averse to it, or he would have stopped the conversation before this stage, but the conversation wasn’t going as she’d thought it would. “There is a whole genre of porn dedicated to it. Trust me, Nick, it’s a thing. It’s a thing I want you to do to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I think it will feel good, and I’ll get a front row seat for the show – you’re pretty when you cum, I hope you know – and I think you’ll like it.”

She couldn’t imagine that he wouldn’t like it. She’d overheard enough talk – and read enough internet forums – to know that on a very visceral level, males liked it, because it was a mark of ownership, a specific kind of humiliation that could be as public or private as they chose. Why wouldn’t Nick want to humiliate her, after everything she had put him through? After being so scatterbrained and difficult? After hurting him so much? She deserved it. She bit her lower lip as she thought about how it might go; she hadn’t lied when she’d said he was pretty during sex. He always
looked focused, and perhaps a little pained, but it was always intense. Nick tried to keep his intensity locked away behind a persona made of jokes and observations, but not there. Not when his walls dropped. She wanted to take his orgasm head-on, spurt of semen landing on her face as he played with his knot, maybe. It would be an act of pure degradation that she could be grateful for – clarity – a logical extension of the things she had long ago promised never to tell herself – paradigm shift – she had broken that promise every day, accepting casual humiliation as jokes until she couldn’t tell the difference. Internalizing it so that it wouldn’t hurt. It would feel so good to have a physical representation, for her insides to match her outsides.

(Freedom?)

“You could take a picture of me with it all over my face,” she said, watching him consider her. Like an insect, her brain went. The image would be striking, strings of ejaculate painting her temporarily black fur with arms secured above her head. Nick looked...not hesitant, exactly, but not not, either, so she added, “Please.”

“Again, I ask why?”

Another idea formed. “Or, you could put your dick in my mouth and get a shot of that.”

“Judy-”

“Please? Don’t you think it would be fun?”

He eyed her, and then sighed. She knew what he was probably thinking, but it wasn’t the same. It was always uncomfortable to suck him off, as she had to be careful of both her jaw and his sensitive penis. It wasn’t exactly erotic to have his cock on her tongue, but having a photo of it – a memento of a moment when she was entirely vulnerable – would be very much so. She knew that he wouldn’t take advantage of her, but the fact that he could, he could use her and hurt her and she’d be powerless to stop him, made her feel…

Powerful. Safe. Because he never would. Even if a large part of her wished that more of her insides matched. Maybe he would show it to Finnick and Ian and maybe Angel, and they would laugh at how pathetic she was, such a stereotype that she would beg to be painted like a basic porn star. She clenched her paws around the tips of her ears as her whole body shuddered, digging her nails in to keep herself in check. The thought was too appealing. As the picture of Nick bringing all of her hidden shame to the surface (and exposing her as the sick and disgusting thing that she knew she could easily be) made her mouth water – as she thought of him using her up and discarding her like he should have done already – she moaned, digging her nails in further to keep from falling completely into the fantasy, and he backed up carefully, eyes wide. “Okay, that’s enough of that. Let’s get you out of there.”

“But-”

“I don’t like this,” he told her quietly, and unbuckled the cuffs around her wrists. “I’m really not okay with this.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, the sudden disappointment becoming something heavy in her chest. He didn’t want her. He couldn’t even stomach that basic fantasy. She was so cheap.

Nick slid off the bed and picked her up bodily. She curled up and tried not to hyperventilate; each step carried away the opportunity to make this up to him. As he carried her toward the bathroom, he muttered, “Yeah, that’s the problem.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” She’d meant to sound stronger than that, but her voice was too quiet. Blood rushed in her ears. Nick didn’t reply; instead, he set her down on the counter, took a washcloth from the rack above the toilet, and wet it with warm water. She frowned. “Answer me.”

“You’re amazing,” he said, wiping her left ear with the washcloth and continuing gently with the right. It wasn’t a real answer, and she wanted to tell him so, but she felt so far away as he kept talking. “You’re brilliant, and capable, and clever. You know how to be kind and how to be cruel, and you can tell which one to be at a given moment. You’re worthwhile, okay?”

Her voice wobbled when she said, “Nick.”

“Shh.” He put aside the washcloth and kissed the scars on her cheek. It was a funny sensation, being so far away but still kind of feeling his lips. She knew she should feel something about the blood on the washcloth, too, but she didn’t. She felt like the world was crashing into her lungs. “You’re worth respecting. You’re worth loving. You’re worth protecting, even from yourself. You don’t have to hide from this stuff, because you’re not alone anymore. This was never just about me. This was always about us. I knew there was something wrong; I knew you had doubts about Snow and this case in general. I didn’t know you hated yourself.”

He needed to stop. He needed to stop. “I don’t.”

“Really? Then tell me I’m crazy.” He sounded angry, maybe. Or not. Who knew? “Tell me I don’t know you after all these years together. Tell me you didn’t want me to harm you.”

“I didn’t – I mean…”

Nick raised an eyebrow as she faltered, crashing into herself in a jolt of color and unwanted emotion. She felt as though she could choke under the phantom paw around her throat. He didn’t have the whole picture! He hadn’t been inside her head, he couldn’t possibly know how she’d felt about the matching outsides, there was no way for him to understand why she had wanted him to –

Oh.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, eyes wet and chest hot with shame. She wanted to go back to that far-away place. She was sick of feeling bad. She was sick of half-crying. But something, even if she wasn’t sure what yet, was seriously wrong. So she let it come, the pain of trying to breathe again warring with the relief of real sobbing, even if it meant looking ugly and gross and sounding pathetic and actually allowing herself to stop being un-put-downable.

“You should be,” he murmured, and pressed his nose to her neck. Against her collarbone, he added, “I’m not unsympathetic. I just wish you’d been honest.”

“I wasn’t lying, I swear.” She reached out to grab pawfuls of his fur, worried that he would leave her before she could explain herself. “I didn’t even know, I didn’t, it’s just that all this stuff came up all of a sudden. It wasn’t even there before. It’s probably not even real! You know bunnies, always overly emotional–

“And see, there you go again. You are allowed to acknowledge your own problems. Pretending it isn’t there doesn’t make it go away. The hell is going on, Judy? I feel like I’d get it if I had something – there’s some piece missing, and we can’t let this go because it’s just going to build up again. Come on, just say it. No, don’t shake your head, I’m not an idiot and I don’t appreciate being treated like one.”

“Well neither do I,” she fairly shrieked, and immediately put her paws over her mouth.
“That’s it,” he encouraged. She felt trapped with Nick between her legs, her back against the wall as she sat on the counter by the sink. He ran the washcloth over her left ear again, holding it there, presumably to staunch a flow of blood that she couldn’t even feel. “Get mad, if it helps.”

“It doesn’t. It never does, it never has. You get mad and it gets worse, because not only are you whatever they say you are, but you’re also a target,” she said darkly, and all the ugly words came tumbling out, all the little things she hadn’t allowed herself to acknowledge for fear of spinning out when she couldn’t afford to. “Everybody knows I can hear them, Nick. But nobody ever thinks I can understand them when they – it’s like that Zuber driver. How could a dumb bunny pick up on what she meant? And if that were it, if that were the only thing, I wouldn’t be so...I don’t even know what I am!”

He switched to her right ear, keeping his face remarkably neutral. “Just keep going. Just talk it out.”

Another little piece fell away. “I’m not a bad cop. But every mistake I make isn’t a normal cop making a mistake, it’s a reflection on bunnies. The MII gave me the opportunity to do what I’d always dreamed of doing, but being the token bunny – the cute little affirmative action project – means never being taken as seriously as everybody else. I’ve solved cases! You and I brought down a terrorist when everyone was against us! I earned my badge and I earned my shield, and still mammals...even some of my coworkers... make these snide comments about – about only making it on the merits of others, and Spottson even told me to my face that I was too stupid to see when I wasn’t wanted.”

“Wait, what?”

“And I should be grateful that the Chief dragged him for that, but it sucks that it took bringing down a terrorist for him to see me as anything but a political nuisance,” she continued, ignoring him. He wanted her to talk, she’d talk. “Even now there’s this sense that what I do isn’t important. Captain Fangmeyer’s generally on my side, but they can only do so much even as my superior; I only got to take lead on this case because literally no one else was qualified. I’m nice, I work hard, I never freak out when I overhear these...really speciesist things that everyone passes off as “jokes,” I’m always ready to take on assignments that nobody else wants...and somehow, even though everybody else is allowed to blow off steam by punching the bags or drinking like fish, the minute I stop smiling I’m apparently an emotional wreck! I know they’re wrong, I know it, except why would so many of them be saying this stuff if it weren’t true? They know me. Me, personally. They’re not generalizing, they’re talking about me, so...you say I’m not, but I think I really am just a stupid mess.”

“Judy, you-”

“I keep hurting you. I’m a nightmare. I’m not Nathaniel Snow. At least he’s smart enough to know what he’s doing.”

“Stop-”

“The only thing stopping me from doing harm to you is – it’s all the reminders that I’m too dumb to properly read anybody.”

“Stop,” Nick yelled. She flinched from him like she hadn’t in years, and he obviously noticed, from his guilty expression. It wasn’t his fault she was a disaster. He took a deep breath, relaxed, and held her shoulders gently. “You know logic and rhetoric. Ad populum, really? That’s beneath you.”

Even through her heavy, angry tears, she couldn’t let him misunderstand. “Just because it’s a logical fallacy doesn’t mean it isn’t also true.”
“And just because *some* bunnies are dumb doesn’t mean anybody should be stereotyping you that way,” he countered. “There are foxes who are total birdbrains, but somehow we don’t have that reputation.”

“It’s not bunnies they’re talking about, it’s *me*. I am part of the reason bunnies seem dumb. I *am* a mess, and I’m sorry I’m getting my mess on you, but-”

“That’s the thing you’re not *getting*. It’s not you. It’s a judgment based on what they *think* they know, nothing more. Hey,” he murmured, giving up on her shoulders and hugging her tightly instead. She hated that she was so receptive to it. Her body always molded to fit his. “The world was not ready for someone like you, and it’s been pressuring you since you were just a kit to hop inside the bunny-shaped box. You couldn’t, and you wouldn’t, and you didn’t. But that meant you had to hide how much that pressure was hurting you, even from yourself. You should be apologizing, but not to me. You’re the one you hurt, Judy. You should be apologizing to yourself. Every time you focus on someone else’s problems in favor of your own, a little piece of you scars. Every time you let a speciesist joke go, some part of you takes it on. Every time you smile and pretend you haven’t heard whatever gross comment someone’s said behind your back, you believe more and more that it’s true. It’s not healthy.”

“I just thought-” She tried not to try to stop the sobs, but it was routine by now. *Dumb bunny,* she thought, and yeah, maybe he wasn’t so far off. “I thought if – if I was good enough, if I was strong enough – then maybe…”

“Maybe you could make everyone see you as something other than an emotional wreck? They’d see how smart you are? How resourceful and capable you are? The sex jokes and the dumb jokes and the cute comments would stop? You would have respect outside of being Detective Hopps?”

She nodded against his chest. She wanted him to push her away in disgust. She wanted him to hold her forever.

“That is *never* going to happen. There is going to be prejudice until we die, and until the next generation dies, and so on until the entire world is lifeless. You can’t change it and you can’t stop it. The only thing you can do is make damn sure everyone knows that judging you is wrong. You know who taught me that?”

“Your dad?”

“You. *You* taught me that. Every time you got angry on my behalf. Every time you stood up for me. You didn’t stop the judgment, but you make sure everyone knows they can’t get away with saying what they’re thinking. You were strong for me when I couldn’t be.” Nick pulled away and looked at her, determined and angry. “I should have done the same for you.”

“You *did*, you helped-”

“I helped you get better at hiding.”

A quiet hung between them underneath the sound of Judy’s harsh breathing. Nick had a point. She’d gotten so good at hiding that she hadn’t even known all of this was festering inside of her. She put 110% into everything she chose to do...up to and including *not letting anyone see things got to her.* Even herself. He was right; it wasn’t healthy. “I’ve been so-”

“If you say dumb, I will gag you,” he said. “Look, Carrots, I get it. I’ve been there. We can trace this back further than Gideon Grey. Further than the day you first decided to become a cop, even. Society decided what you were before you were even born, just like they decided I was a shift
lowlife. The ancestors of Zootopian mammals – my ancestors, I’ll own that – decided you were dumb because yours didn’t adopt the trade tongue soon enough. Since the beginning we’ve silenced you, bullied you through fear and ridicule into settling for less, and used that as an excuse to exclude you. We turned it into a vicious, self-sustaining cycle. Don’t do what you’re doing right now – I bet you’re thinking of the way society treats foxes. Am I off base?”

She shook her head. That was exactly where her head had gone, even as she was attempting to stay on topic. But…Nick had it worse, didn’t he? How could he be going on about her stupid problems when – how could she be upset about her stupid problems when –

“It’s true, foxes were and still are treated like shit. The way you’ve been mistreated looks different, but that doesn’t make it less important. You’re one of the smartest mammals I know, but I don’t think you ever actually got that. And it’s by design. Everybody fucking falls for it. Speciesism…it’s like a retrovirus. It copies itself into your thinking without you even noticing until it starts informing how you function. Enough mammals say it and you start to believe it, no matter what your head says, because it hurts too goddamn much when it’s unfair, but at least if it’s true then it’s your fault. But they’re wrong. They’re wrong about me and they’re wrong about you, and what I want more than anything is for you to understand that. Not on the surface level, but deep in your gut. I want you to be angry. When it hurts, I want it to be because you know it isn’t true, not because you think maybe it is. You showed me that self-worth is the only weapon any individual has against systemic problems like this. Stop me if I’m wrong here, but it looks like you’re so afraid of getting your power stolen again that you’re just giving it away.”

It was like a punch to the solar plexus. Nick knew her. He knew how to get to her. In fact, that was probably why they hadn’t left the bathroom; she had outright told him she wanted to be in there. The bathroom had always been her safe place. At the farm in Bunnyburrow, the bathroom had been the only place she could have privacy. In college, there hadn’t been enough bunny-sized mammals to keep her from having that same privacy. At work, she was the only one who used the recently-installed bathroom in her size. She could cry in the bathroom, look at herself critically in the mirror and harden herself against her ugly scars and too-small curves until they no longer bothered her. Nick was insightful and empathetic and he was not a nice mammal, but he was a good one. Nick was probably the only mammal who could get away with saying that to her…not because she would harm anyone else, but because she wouldn’t listen to anyone else. Nick had the advantage of both experience and understanding. He wasn’t giving her platitudes, he was giving her the truth.

Nick put his paws behind her head, circling his thumbs at the bases of her ears, and pressed their foreheads together. “You never stopped cutting. You just stopped using a razor. And you’re such a bright light in this shithole of a world that nobody even noticed. I have an apology to make, too. I failed you.”

He did want her. He just didn’t want her when she was hurting so much. She was being such a jerk. “No, no, no, you didn’t. It’s not your fault, it’s mine, you can’t possibly be responsible for-”

“Judy, it’s okay.”

And the last of the dam fell away, sick sludge dribbling out and getting carried away with everything else. “I don’t want it to be okay, Nick. I hate being treated badly, but I don’t know how to be good at things when it isn’t a contest of wills. I don’t want to scrub out. Everything I am is motivated by challenges. Who would I be without that?”

“You’d be Judy Hopps,” he replied. “You’d still be you. It’s just that you wouldn’t be under so much pressure all the time. You wouldn’t be watching your back all the time. Trying new things wouldn’t be mandatory, it’d be an option. You would still be the mammal who saved me from
myself, but you wouldn’t carry anyone’s burdens with you. You’d be able to get to sleep at night without hearing the ghosts in your head. Don’t you want that?”

“I do,” she realized. She wanted to think of herself individually, not in relation to others. She wanted to be all in, all the time. She wanted to be the kind of partner Nick needed without feeling guilty for what he believed was nothing. She didn’t want to be scared of herself anymore.

“Then start by being good to yourself.”

She winced, finally able to feel the pain in the tips of her ears. Why had hurting herself seemed like a good idea? At least his thumbs were helping the physical pain, even if it hurt to have to admit, “I – I don’t know how.”

“Sure you do, Sweetheart. You’re good to me.”

She took a deep breath, eyes closed against the headache her tears had caused. She had a thousand answers on her tongue – among them, that’s easy, you deserve the world – but that was the point, wasn’t it? She was just as mammal as he was.

She had a lot to apologize for, starting with their earlier scene in the bedroom. That had been so inappropriate of her. She did not find degradation thrilling or satisfying in the same way that Nick did. She had asked him to hurt her for the sake of hurting her, not because she would have gotten any pleasure out of it. Nick had been insightful enough to know that; she had convinced herself it was the same, but they weren’t the same. It wasn’t okay to use someone else as a tool for self-destruction the way she had attempted to use Nick, and looking back on their scene, she could see the stark difference between his approach and hers. But she could learn from this, and Nick wouldn’t let her get away with it. Until she could trust herself, she knew that she could trust him to keep her safe. All she needed to do was allow him so love her, the way he’d allowed her to love him. It wasn’t an easy thought, but it was the right thing to do, and Judy wanted to do the right thing.

“I don’t want to be Nathaniel Snow,” she said again, this time with greater clarity.

Nick brushed her cheek with the side of his muzzle, a small sign for the rest of the world to know he’d chosen to stay with her. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she didn’t feel self-conscious about it, even though she was completely naked, all of her scars and imperfections and strange thinking on display for Nick to see and accept. If he accepted her, if he still wanted to mark her, then he wasn’t furious with her. Maybe he should have been, and maybe he would be later, but he still loved her. “I’m sure he’s a charming little shit. They’re all really good at that. Abusers, I mean, but fox culture values that trait too. And there’s crossover, I won’t deny that. We’re undercover in a community of mammals who use the same lingo and at least pay lip service to the same set of principles and ethics. But whatever it is that made you see similarities, that’s where it ends.”

“He talked like he knew seducing his assistants was wrong and felt guilty about it. He was crying over Sarah. It’s more than just being charming, Nick, he really sounded like he’d lost someone he loved. I’m worried that he did love her. Maybe he even loved them all. It doesn’t seem like it could be possible, and I really don’t want to sympathize with someone like him, but I don’t feel like I can trust myself not to fall for his act when he sounds so much like me. I love you, Nick. And you submit to me. And I’m demanding and I just tried to use you in the worst way. He said he’s a lot to deal with, just like me. It’s more than just the lingo.”

“And you’re more than just a role. Do you really think a guy like that would have allowed the victim to restrain him and torture him and tell him what to do? Do you think he would have been receptive to any part of the conversation we just had?”
“He did pretend like telling her about his proclivities was some huge act of trust, so probably not.”

He snorted. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” she replied, and she could see why he was laughing. “Oh rain and hail, that’s so ridiculous. He really thinks telling someone who works for him that he wants to tie her up and do unspeakable things to her is an act of trust.”

“Please allow me to ruin our working relationship by mixing my intimate preferences with what I pay you for. Now, don’t laugh or run off. I’m trusting you not to tell anyone that I’m a disgusting little creep.”

His affected upper-crust accent and the wrist held delicately to his forehead really set her off, and it felt good to laugh along with him. It was absurd to think she was like Snow. She did have her own issues, and she certainly wasn’t perfect. But she could at least face their suspect without feeling like a hypocrite. She could immerse herself in her character without feeling guilty. Nick wasn’t some fainting flower; she could trust him to let her know what he wanted and what he needed, and to stop her if she went the wrong direction.

“Nick, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I worried you, and that I...tried to get you to hurt me and humiliate me when it wouldn’t be constructive, just harmful. And thank you. For not letting me get away with it, even if it might have seemed appealing.”

“I mean the jury’s still out on how much of this is going to stick, but on the plus side – well, plushish – congratulations, you just bratted for the first time, which, way to be better than everyone at everything to a terrifying degree. And I learned why you hate it so much. I’m never going to stand by and watch you self-destruct. You can lean on me if you need to, okay?”

“I trust you. You tamed me;” she said, pulling him close once more. She sighed into his fur and hoped she could remember this moment next time she got twisted up in thoughts that didn’t make a lick of sense. Their conversation hadn’t fixed anything external. He was right that there would always be prejudice, and he was spot on about the crossover. She needed to stop internalizing things that ought not be internalized, even if it meant being in more pain more often, and one single crying session wasn’t going to fix decades of disorder. Maybe she couldn’t trust her own self-image. But...she could trust him. She was his domme, and she needed him. Those two things didn’t need to be separate; being strong for him did not preclude needing his support. They were partners. They were lovers. They were, above all, friends. It was important for her to not forget that. They had long ago made a promise to support each other and care for each other; they had tamed each other. Everything else, the dynamic involved in the minutiae, was extraneous to that central point.

You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed, Nick had told her years prior, and she thought she finally appreciated all that it entailed.

Chapter End Notes

The original version of this chapter is super fucking dark, and although it ended up in the same place...I think this milder version is much better. For so many reasons I could write a whole essay. I really believe that BDSM or not, this is where canon Judy would end up, especially if she didn't have Nick as a work partner. Only, without a dynamic, she'd probably just burn the candle at both ends until she eventually either burned out completely or managed to get wise after some kind of shock. In canon, Judy tortured
herself into situational depression. This was in a Disney movie, so even though it got surprisingly dark, it still didn't address the sinister effects of microaggression and the way prejudice doesn't magically disappear because a terrorist got caught doing her thing. Obviously Judy manages to thrive under pressure most of the time, but where's the line? I see this all the time in my clients. They're good people who generally want to do the right thing, and there's a shit-ton of pressure on them, and they eventually get to their breaking point, at which point they seek out...well, it's not therapy, but you know. Nick already went through this, as we saw in earlier installments. The attitude behind (healthy) power exchange doesn't ever really change, it's only the mechanism that looks different.
Evidence

Chapter Summary

Judy and Nick listen to more recordings and attend a munch. Nathaniel Snow continues to be a problem. Nick selects the first class Luna and Oliver will attend, much to Judy's delight.

Chapter Notes

I'm still kinda raw from chapter 4 and annoyed at how little healthy kink I can find in fiction, whether it's fanfiction or otherwise. So I'm definitely going to write a fluffy pegging one-off and post it before I get to chapter 6.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nick was being cautious with her, but Judy forced herself to accept it as the gesture of love that it was instead of getting annoyed with him. He was her partner, and she was hurting; maybe it was embarrassing, but he wasn't giving her a hard time about it or forcing her to talk about anything she didn't feel comfortable bringing up. He wasn't asking her to quit her job or abandon the case, or hiding important things from her. He wasn't treating her like she was made of thin glass, either. He was just…

He was just being nice. Treating her well. Going out of his way to show that he cared. It reminded her, a little, of the way they had prodded each other at first, testing themselves in relation to one another. Back then, Judy had never dated a fox and Nick had never seriously dated anyone at all, and they had so desperately wanted to do right by each other. It was like that. She could appreciate the effort because it wasn’t condescending.

...She didn’t think she needed it, all the same. Yesterday she had been in a funk, spooked by the familiar tones in Snow’s delivery and overwhelmed by everything. It wasn’t as bad as she had felt it was; things had piled up, little piece by little piece, until she had collapsed under the emotional weight of it, but she had plenty of good experiences to balance out the bad. Being a cop wasn’t the only way she could help make the world a better place; she chose to stay because it was worthwhile, even when it was hard. Nick took her at her word when she bothered to complain about life stuff, though, and no amount of explaining would stop him from treating her, so she endured his overly tactile fussing with grace. His apparent mission to hug or cuddle her in every possible area of the small apartment was kind of adorable, anyway.

That morning, they had dragged the extra bedding out of the closet and arranged a little nest on the floor in front of the couch, and for the past few hours they had been marathoning a series they hadn’t seen yet. It wasn’t great, and Judy was glad to move on from generic romantic comedy to work. They both were still lying on their stomachs, her right foot entwined with his left as they listened to another recording, this one of Snow and Sarah.
“I hope you did your research,” came Snow’s voice.

“I did.” It was, obviously, Sarah, whose voice was lower and more confident than Judy had expected. “I chose not to dwell on some of the more vulgar blogs, but you might have thought to warn me that not all kink sites are created equal.”

“I expect you to use your critical thinking skills.”

“Yes, because everyone is perfectly capable of determining truth from fiction when the subject is completely unknown. I wrote some of the nastier ideas down to use on you in retaliation.”

Judy liked her already, but she didn’t want to. Sarah was dead. Judy needed to either find evidence that Snow had killed her, or on the off chance that he hadn’t, find out who had. Shibari done that well was not a common skill set, so it was highly possible that they could wrap up the case within a couple of months. Maybe less, if they caught that unlikely lucky break.

Snow scoffed. “I am not a submissive.”

“I read a book on being a dominant and spent a lot of time looking through Mistress blogs, to help me figure out where you’re coming from. General consensus is that a dominant who refuses to sub is untrustworthy.”

“Well, you’re missing a big piece of the picture.” Snow’s voice softened. There was a shift of fabric. “I have...some trauma in my past. It left me, ah. It broke me, I think. I...I trust you enough to let you into my world, but I can’t sub. It’s not a reflection on you.”

“Birdshit,” Nick jeered. Judy pressed pause. It probably wouldn’t be the only time one of them had an outburst, by the end of this case. One thing was certain: Snow was good at making bad things sound reasonable.

She cocked her head to the side. “You don’t think he was traumatized?”

“An Arctic fox who was raised by koalas in an affluent neighborhood, and went on to become a big name in a competitive field? I don’t doubt he has something in his past to whine about, and trauma is relative. It’s just bogus. If you’re too traumatized to sub you’re too traumatized to have a dynamic. What a douche. I’d love to see you take your tawse to him. His brain would stutter-scream like a cicada.” Nick’s expression became something mischievous. “He’s dumb enough to accept a challenge for dominance, I’d bet.”

“Good thing you don’t have strong opinions,” she cracked, and then shivered happily as he reached over and ran his paw through the fur on the back of her head. The tips of her ears were still sore, prone to throbbing under the bandages when she let them droop for too long, but Nick had figured out that spending time on the bottoms of her ears made the pain manageable. He probably would have taken the opportunity to run his paw through her fur anyway, though. For some reason, he loved how soft she supposedly was. If Judy had his fluffy body, she’d get in trouble for touching herself all the time.

“Not at all. I have no comment on anything. Want to continue?”

She nodded and pressed play again.
“Isn’t that a little...um...not good, though?”

Snow’s voice dipped into a growl. “Who of the two of us actually has experience?”

A gasp, probably Sarah’s. Then a giggle. “You do, Nate. As I said, not all kink sites are created equal. How am I supposed to know what point of view is legit?”

“You’ve made your point.”

“Really, though,” Sarah said, sounding wistful. “You’re not even going to consider letting me tie you up or spank you or anything? That doesn’t seem fair. I’m supposed to trust you completely when you don’t trust me?”

“I do trust you, love. That’s why I asked you to explore this with me. I wouldn’t have said anything if I didn’t trust you.”

“You’re asking me to put everything on the line, my safety, my job—”

“No, it’ll just be impossible to continue, knowing what we know about how each other feels. You initiated this, Nate. Knowing that as your assistant, it would put me in an awkward position. You never said that a non-BDSM relationship with you was an option; is it?”

“No, I always incorporate it into my relationships.”

“See, I was already at a disadvantage; what if I’d done my research and been absolutely disgusted? And I don’t think you could keep it professional; you already weren’t, what with the – the crazy assignments and whatnot. You were already treating me like a sub before you even confessed to me.”

“No, no, business and pleasure are always separate.”

“Telling me what to do and not telling me why?” Silence. “You sent me to that conference in your place. Told me to take notes on everything. I did. You never read my notes. It was just to watch me scramble.”

“No, Sarah, no, it was to teach you.”

“Then you could have asked. You could have said, Oh, by the way, I believe you might be interested in a conference. Would you like to go? And I probably would have gone, because yes, I did learn a lot. But you ordered me to go, without telling me why, and in order to keep my job I had to obey. That doesn’t seem inappropriate to you? At all?”

“I-”

“And furthermore, Nate, furthermore, you locked me in a closet! A closet. You told me I couldn’t come out until I’d figured out what was wrong with the code you wrote down on paper. I begged you to let me out. You laughed at me.”

“And then you got to work and figured out the problem, faster than anyone I’ve met. Was it not an effective method of teaching?”

“I didn’t ask for a lesson. I asked for a job.” A deep, heavy breath. “I don’t think you
really understand how it feels to be treated like that. It hurts. I kind of feel violated. You didn’t ask, you just assumed, and you ignored me when I told you I didn’t want to be in there.”

“But I was just trying to teach you.”

“And you went about it in the worst way. I didn’t apply to be your submissive, Nate, and it took me the whole two weeks to figure out what I wanted. I should turn you down, quit, and blast you on social media for the stunts you pulled. But...I like you. I might even love you. That’s why I’m asking you for equal trust.”

“I trust you more than I’ve ever trusted anyone,” Snow said quietly. “Soon you’ll understand.”

“Assuming I agree.”

“Don’t you?”

“I agree to...see where this goes. Only a complete idiot would agree to a whole lifestyle change without testing it out first. I don’t even know what my hard limits are. I don’t even know what you like, other than bossing me around and apparently tying up sweet little fox squirrels. And that trust thing is a requirement, Nathaniel Snow. If you can’t trust me, then I can’t trust you.”

“I promise I’ll prove myself to be trustworthy,” Snow said.

“Then we’re in agreement for now. But I need to go and help my sister with her homework. Walk me out?”

It was not a commitment for reciprocity. Judy wondered if Sarah had picked up on that, or if she had assumed it meant what she clearly wanted it to mean.

“So, that was disgusting,” Nick commented, pushing up to kneel next to Judy so he could better knead the base of her ears.

She closed her eyes in pleasure and stretched her legs and back. “I agree, but why do you say so?”

“Coming from a sub’s perspective...you heard what she said. He trapped her. He gets off on tying up his submissives. He sent her out without explaining himself. He gets off on domination. It’s not difficult to see that she’s right; he was treating her like a sub when she was his professional assistant. I know if I were in her place, “violated” would be the nice way to say how I’d be feeling. What’s your take as a domme, Carrots?”

“I couldn’t do what he did, that’s for sure. It’s like upskirt photos or putting software on someone’s computer to spy on them. They may not know it at the time, but you’re – yes, violating them – and even if you keep it to yourself, you’re being a creepy piece of garbage. Imagine if I spanked Hirsch for getting sloppy on a case.”

“Corporal punishment is an acceptable practice in the ZPD?”

“No, but locking your assistant in a closet isn’t an acceptable practice in computer science, either. Hirsch wouldn’t tell anyone. She’s too proud to admit she got spanked by a bunny. She’d probably thank me if I spanked her, just to mess with me. She’s kind of like you in the humor department. But knowing that I enjoy spanking, it would be extra inappropriate.”
“So do you ever feel weird about putting perps in cuffs?”

“Sometimes,” she acknowledged, and sat up, turning and catching his paws in hers as she did so. It was dumb, but for half a second she worried that her affirmative response would drive him away – it wouldn’t, though, it wouldn’t. She kept hold of his paws anyway. They were so big she could hardly hold them, but he helped by turning over his paws. His expression was soft. She felt better for his lack of judgment. “It helps that they’re strangers. And that they’re not you. And that they’re not usually very good mammals. I’d never even want to proposition any of them, non-sexually or otherwise, and I don’t feel about them the way I do about you. I can’t. If I had to put you in cuffs outside of a scene, I would die inside.”

“You won’t have to.” He brought her paw to his lips and kissed her knuckles before reaching down to squeeze the short blanket that had been covering her rear and thighs before. How could he make her feel so warm inside when they were discussing such heavy topics? He grinned, as if he knew where her thoughts had gone. He probably did. “So you’re proof that a mammal can keep kink and profession separate even when said profession basically involves elements of kink. If Snow couldn’t keep from using her as a sub, it’s because he didn’t care, not because it’s impossible.”

“He’s a piece of work,” she agreed. “I know we should be going over case files, but...I’ll be honest, I kinda just want to lie here with you for a bit before we get ready for the munch. Toss around ideas. Relax, like everybody says I should do more often.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. The next thing Snow RSVP’d for is a month out, and you don’t have your meeting with Hirsch and Del Valle until two days from now. This nest is superb work, really, it would be a shame to waste it while it’s here.”

She raised an eyebrow, having expected him to encourage her to get off her butt and get working. He’d always been a hard worker. “It’s not like you to be so lazy.”

“Well…” He leaned forward and snatched her up, falling onto his side with Judy wrapped in his arms (and the blanket he’d been futzing with) like a startled burrito. “It is very much like me to want to spend time with you. You have expressed your desires, dearest, darling, light of my life-”

“Oh, brother,” she interjected with a snort of laughter.

“-and it is my pleasure to oblige. We can keep listening to recordings from here. Besides, someone kept me up half the night.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my aunt not to send any more of her dried fruit snacks, if they’re that distracting. It’s not like they were going anywhere.”

He gave her a stern look, the effect of which was somewhat ruined by the way his mouth kept twitching. It was a bit hard to see from her awkward position wrapped in the blanket. “Judy. I will leave you if you do that. Your aunt may be at least twice my age, but I will leave you and ask her to marry me.”

“I knew it,” she exclaimed dramatically. “You only want me for my family’s farm!”

“You’re damn right. I…” He tipped his muzzle and nosed at her ear. “I can’t even say it. I want you because you’re too wonderful to describe in any known language. That you come with a cool aunt is a bonus.”

She curled a little and hid her face in his chest so he wouldn’t see the embarrassed look on her face. “Say that again.”
“You’re wonderful?”

“No.” She felt as though she were going to explode. “That you want me.”

“Oh. I do. I want you. In my life, in my arms, in my office distracting me, by my side when I visit Mom in the cemetery. I want to be annoyed by the globs of your fur I keep finding in my brush. I want to freak out in the early morning because you’ve burrowed under me and I think I’ve squashed you in my sleep. I want to hear those sweet little sounds when I rub your feet. Shall I go on?”

“No, I’m good,” she managed, and wondered if it was possible for someone to spontaneously combust just from too much sweetness.

“Yes? It’s good? I think that’s what I heard. I want you in our shower because you always pretend like you weren’t singing…”

Yeah, she was probably going to burn to death. But it was nice to know that aside from being loved, she was also wanted.

The coffee shop was a sort of hipster place located in the Canals that catered to mammals of all sizes. To Judy, the ceilings were unnervingly high, just as they were at the station, but she saw the logic in it; instead of having distinct areas for similarly-sized mammals, there was one large area with seats and tables that were movable. There were megafauna-sized couches and armchairs with light switches that would let larger mammals know if smaller mammals had decided to occupy one, and a megafauna-sized table in the center of the room that had platforms of varying sizes attached to the edge for smaller mammals to sit comfortably. It allowed for diverse groups to hang out and talk, an uncommon sight outside of public events like the Gazelle concert Nick and Judy had attended just a few months after her first case.

She’d wanted to get there early to scope out the place, but Nick had convinced Judy to just go into their first munch like anybody else just entering the community. It was a wise decision; when they got to A Shot of Love exactly at 7PM, nobody else was there yet, except for a bunch of adult horses taking up the far left corner who were wearing shirts depicting strangely-colored unicorns she vaguely recognized from some kits’ show. Well, okay, then. She was wearing a cork leather trench coat and had a short leash clipped to Nick’s belt buckle, so who were the weird ones, anyway?

Their leash was new, purchased last-minute from a kitschy sex shop in Tundratown, where their temporary apartment was located. She didn’t think it was appropriate to lead him around on a leash attached to his collar, and she wasn’t sure she was up for that anyway, but she had led him around by his beltloop plenty of times even before they’d started dating. It was much more discreet, looking more like a long keychain than a leash, so although he was wearing a low-necked red shirt that showed off his collar in full, she had let go of the lead on the train and no one had looked twice.

He still looked a little uncomfortable when he first sat down anywhere. With as hard as she had hit him with the tawse, she expected the bruises to linger for a few more days. Still, he was in remarkably good spirits, considering the seriousness of the case. He ordered the Bunny Ears brew, a drink supposedly so caffeinated that it would make the drinker as perky as a bunny – whatever that meant. Judy ordered decaf, because it was evening, and she wanted to be able to sleep later.

As they waited for their coffees, Judy leaned against Nick, playing with the leash. He massaged the bottoms of her ears. They both looked to the right when the bell on the door jingled and two ocelots wandered in; unless Judy missed her guess, they were two of the electric play ocelots from the party. They were probably there for the munch. Was it appropriate to ask, though? What was the etiquette here?
“Bunny Ears and decaf, for...Oliver,” called the smaller barista.

Nick, being the taller of the two, collected their beverages and gave Judy hers with a flourish. “Your gross decaf swill, Ca – ah, cara mia.”

Judy laughed abruptly and tried to hold onto her drink. “Ollie, you’re such a-”

“Charming and handsome rogue?” He busied himself with dropping an obscene amount of sugar into his own gross swill. How could he stomach that? “Am I just absolutely dashing? I am, aren’t I? Completely irresistible. Eh, cara mia?”

“Completely going to give me a secondpaw heart attack, if you keep dumping that crap into your drink,” she said dryly, but she couldn’t help but smile. Nick just being himself made her smile, usually.

“Really, you’re not going to take the opening?”

“...What opening?”

He whirled to face her, looking the way an actor might look on stage if he needed to convey panic. Even his ears were point straight back, the goofball. “You know! Cara mia...mon sauvage? The Padams Family?”

“I don’t have the freakish ability to remember stuff I hear when I watch a movie one time,” she protested. A bit late, she added, “And I am not Morticia.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, now flooding the rest of his cup with some kind of off-white liquid. Maybe almond milk. Her stomach turned at the thought of that unholy concoction actually going in his mouth. A mouth she was probably going to kiss later, ugh. “Form-fitting dress? Light, fluttering, seductive steps? Soothing, hypnotic voice that makes even gory death sound sexual? Obviously, I’m Morticia. Oh! That’s an idea for All Hallows! We’ll have to get you a pinstripe suit.”

Judy closed her eyes and sighed. There went her plans to dress up as Jack Savage for the All Hallows fundraiser. Nick would insist, and he’d use those eyes. She could never resist that pleading face. And anyway, he did look good in a dress…

Not now, Judy.

“C’mon, honey, let’s go – I think it’s that middle table,” she said.

“It is,” said one of the ocelots. The other was ordering at the counter. She held out her paw with a friendly smile. Judy shook it with enthusiasm. “I’m Susan, that over there is my wife Elaine. Sorry if I’m being invasive or blowing your cover or whatever, but you’re not exactly in disguise like that.”

Judy could feel her nose twitching out of control. “In disguise?”

Susan cocked her head curiously. “I know some mammals prefer to keep it lowkey. Oh my God, are you not here for the cork munch? I just assumed, with the leash and everything…”

“Oh!” Judy put a paw over her chest, feeling silly all over again. Obviously Susan hadn’t recognized her as Judy Hopps. Most mammals had a hard time distinguishing between rabbits anyway, and with her fur dyed black, it was almost a guarantee that she wouldn’t be connected to her real identity. “Yeah, back in Arcadia we were out and proud, as it were.”

“I guess you’d have to be,” said Susan, amused, “being kinky and queer. Hey Leeny! Come meet
Oliver and…?”

“Luna,” Judy finished with a smile she hoped was welcoming. Her heart was still racing a bit.

Nick extended his paw and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Susan.”

While they shook paws, Elaine appeared, almost silently, at Susan’s side, looking much sterner than her wife. She looked between Nick and Judy a few times and then asked, “Are you two married?”

“Don’t be a dick, Leeny, these are nice mammals,” Susan chided.

“We are married,” Nick answered anyway, putting his arm around Judy’s shoulders. She leaned into him, as always, taking a sip from her cup. “What, five years now?”

“And a couple of months.” She looked at Elaine, who seemed to be distrusting of one or both of them for some reason. “How long have you two been married?”

“A few years,” she allowed. “How exactly did you two meet?”

Nick started slightly and pitched his voice to the tone he used when he wanted to lead a witness. Interesting. “That’s a hilarious story involving a car crash, a felon, and an insurance scam, but I’m too old to stand here for long. I think we’ll go find a seat at the table. Feel free to sit with us once you get your drinks, if you like.”

And he swept Judy away to the big table, allowing her to scale the ladder to the smaller seats first. Once they were seated on a reasonably-sized platform, with Judy’s coat hanging off the low back of her seat, Judy asked, “What was-”

“Shh.” He held up his phone and mimed texting. Well it was better than nothing.

She didn’t like you.

I know.

Why?

I think she thinks the worst.

??

Prey with a fox on a leash

Your worst fear!!

Most mammals never get to face theirs.

She made a face and set her phone face-down on the table as more guests arrived. Susan and Elaine sat down close to them; Judy hooked her fingers in the loop of the leash and watched the mammals pour in while Nick engaged Elaine with some amusing tale that was probably true, even if she hadn’t heard it before. She had a million stories she hadn’t told him yet, most of which she never remembered until direct reminders came up. He always knew what to say to brighten up a room. She was much more responsive to him.

“Oh my God, Spence, another bunny,” said a voice to Judy’s right, and she looked down to see the lynx and hare who had done the needle scene at the Jungle. Judy waved down at them and the hare smiled brightly. “Hey there, Bunny!”
“Come up and join us,” she replied. Once the two had climbed the ladder and settled in on the platform adjacent to the one Judy and Nick were sharing with the two ocelots and an empty seat, she said, “I’m Luna, by the way.”

“Alice, and this is Spencer. Is that your dom?”

Judy bit her lip, trying not to laugh. It wasn’t funny, but it also kind of was. Nick was capable of topping her, certainly, and he generally did it with the same enthusiasm and curiosity that he did everything else in his life, but he wasn’t cut out to be a dom. “No, I’m his. As you can see, he’s busy making friends with anyone who makes eye contact with him, per usual. It’s nice to meet you, Alice, Spencer.”

“Likewise,” said Spencer. He reached over and played with Alice’s ears. Judy knew how good that felt, so she wasn’t surprised at the blissful expression on Alice’s face. “I haven’t seen you two around before.”

“We’re new to the area. Just came from Arcadia.”

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to go there,” Alice said. Judy looked over at her, and Alice’s expression darkened. “Oh, great. He’s here. Now I have to act polite.”

“Honey, you can’t blame him, he’s grieving,” Spencer soothed, and with a sudden sinking in her stomach, she looked over to the front door to confirm her suspicions.

Nathaniel Snow.

Her eyes widened. He wasn’t supposed to be there! He had been isolating himself, had only RSVP’d to one event a month down the road; he certainly hadn’t RSVP’d to the munch on MuzzleBook or FetLick! She grabbed her phone again and texted Nick, trying to keep a neutral expression.

Stay cool

She cranked up her smile and sat up straight. That was cool, right? A professional always had good posture, right? And if her foot was vibrating, well, it was a coffee shop and she was a bunny, and Nick leaned over and ran the fattest, wettest part of his tongue up the back of her ear, managing to lick every part except the bandaged area. She jolted. “Niyaaaaaaaargh! Oliver, WHY!”

Nick, who was in the middle of sipping his coffee as though he hadn’t just freaked her out in front of the mammals they were trying to appeal to, looked the part of an angel. He swallowed and gave his cardboard cup a skeptical look. “They say this is Bunny Ears coffee, but it tastes nothing like bunny ears. I think we should write a strongly-worded letter.”

“Someone’s just itching for a spanking when we get home,” she muttered, both embarrassed and grateful. She’d certainly made a scene, but at least now she had a reason to be grossed out and on edge.

Nick eyed the rest of the expanding group with over-pronounced distrust. “Whoever it is, I’m sure you don’t have to get involved.”

“I am quite sure,” she said, tugging on the lead, “that I do.”
He grinned at her. She grinned back, hoping that it looked natural. *Nathaniel Snow.* She hadn’t expected this.

“Aww, you guys are so cute,” Alice said.

Judy gave her a smile she hoped didn’t look manic. “Ollie’s the cute factor in our relationship. Who should I be polite to?”

“What?”

“Sorry, I just heard you say you needed to be polite and that *he* was grieving. I don’t want to step on any sore toes at my very first munch.”

“Ah. See that Arctic fox over there ordering?” Judy followed Alice’s finger and nodded. “That’s Nate. He just lost his girlfriend, and he *loses his shit* whenever anybody says her name.”

“That happened once,” Spencer added, giving Alice a hard look, “and that was because they were trash-talking Sarah.”

Judy winced. A guy like Nathaniel Snow would probably take that kind of talk personally, especially if he’d been the one to kill her. Forensic reports showed that Sarah had been bound pre-mortem and tortured to death, which meant that it hadn’t just been a crime of passion.

Alice shrugged. “Well I never liked him anyway.”

“Because you met Jolene first, and she has some weird ideas about him.”

“I know a good dom when I meet him, Spence. You’re a good dom. There’s something off about him, and I don’t think it’s fair that I have to be nice just because the latest version of Jolene is dead. You know he would have ditched her too eventually.”

“You didn’t see the engagement ring,” Spencer said grimly. Judy made a note to write that down when she could get away with it. “In any case, you don’t have to talk to him, just don’t be passive-aggressive and I won’t have to beat you later.”

“Oh, darling, how can I *resist* with that kind of promise looming over my head?”

Judy snorted, but the sound turned into a sigh when Nick, without looking away from his ocelot friends, took her paw out of the loop of the leash and squeezed it. She kept her eyes closed, listening to the chatter of mammals who mostly knew each other. A lion asked a tigress about some sports event her cub had won. Alice asked the elephant seated at the corner of the table if she was done with her current project. It all seemed so mundane; these were mammals that she wouldn’t have been able to pick out of a crowd as “kinky.” Their conversations probably seemed *less* weird than the horses in the corner.

One ear came up as a mammal climbed onto her platform and took the seat next to her. Judy knew without looking who it was, and she put on her best smile to make a good first impression.

“Hi,” she said, making sure to sound appropriately enthusiastic but not as...*forceful* as she often came across. “I’m Luna.”

“Nate Snow,” he replied with a slow nod. He looked over her shoulder at Nick and narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything else.

“This is Oliver, my husband,” she continued, undeterred. She had to make the most of it, didn’t she?
“Say hi, Ollie. This is Nate.”

“Charmed,” Nick said, turning his attention away from Elaine and Susan. “Oh, a fellow fox. Where’s your domme?”

There was a hush around them. If that had been accidental, Judy would eat her badge. Very carefully, Nate said, “I had a sub. She’s not here.”

“Oh. My bad.”

Nick grinned and turned back to Elaine, who said in a hushed whisper, “She died. Be careful around him, he’s really upset about it. We’re all just giving him space.”

“And, now you’ve met my goober of a husband,” Judy commented, just to keep the conversation moving along. She didn’t want to talk to Nate, but he was sitting next to her, so she had to make the most of it.

“Yes,” said Snow with a raised brow. “Such a charming fellow.”

It was not a compliment.

Before Judy could say anything, the lion cleared his throat and called, “Hey, everyone, I’m glad to see some new faces! And you, Nate, so glad you could make it!”

Snow looked uncomfortable with all the attention on him and waved very briefly. The lion continued, “Let me know if you’re low-tech and need a list of CSZ events, but otherwise feel free to chat amongst yourselves. Nate, if you need anything…”

“I’m good,” he said through his teeth.

How obnoxious. It was obvious that Snow didn’t want all of that attention, and although Judy thought he deserved all the discomfort anyone could imagine, if he hadn’t been a serial abuser and possible murderer, that would have been a pretty messed up way to treat him.

“Hey,” said the elephant, leaning over as far as her seat would allow, “you all right, Nate?”

“I’m…” He pulled out his phone, looked at it, and frowned. “Fine, but apparently work never ends. Maybe I’ll manage to get through one of these eventually. It was good to meet you, Luna.”

“Yeah,” she said, glad he was leaving. She doubted he’d gotten called into work, but at least he wouldn’t be next to her.

He stood. His frown deepened and he leaned forward. “Are you all right?”

Judy blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Your husband…” He huffed. “Never mind. Have a good night.”

He climbed down the ladder while Judy tried not to yell something vulgar. How dare he? What was his problem? Who did he think he was, anyway? How did he have the gall to make intimations about Nick when he had several large, dancing skeletons in his closet?

“I have to use the restroom,” she said angrily, and climbed down the ladder after him. Fierce protectiveness was part of Luna’s character anyway, so the sooner she established that, the sooner she could stop worrying about it, right? This was good.
By the time she caught up with him, he was already across the parking lot, about to open his car door. Hoping she didn’t sound too petulant, she called, “Hey!”

Snow stopped, turned, and gave her a warm smile. “Ah, Luna. How can I help you?”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others; I’m not much of a rabble-rouser,” Judy half-lied, “but I want to know what problem you have with my husband.”

He studied her. It felt...awkward, because he wasn’t checking her out, but she didn’t know what he was looking for. Finally, his smile dropped a fraction and he answered quietly, “I just don’t like subs who hurt their masters, that’s all. It’s obvious why you have him on a leash. He won’t forget his place again. And that’s fine; your business is your business, but I can’t force myself to like an abusive piece of trash just because he’s a fellow fox.”

“An abusive... what?” She gazed up at him, completely confused. “You think Ollie...?”

“I’m in cybersecurity, so I look at patterns for a living. You have old scars on your cheek and on your back, and you have recent injuries on your ears, in the exact place you would if someone with sharp claws dragged you by them. I may not be a bunny myself, but I know how much harm that can do. He’s uncomfortable from a recent beating – congratulations on the firm paw, by the way, fox fur is quite difficult to penetrate – and that leash is new. It hardly takes a genius to figure out the turn of events.”

Her eyes narrowed. She didn’t owe Snow an explanation. He didn’t deserve one. But it was galling, to hear an actual abuser speak about Nick like that. “You might look at patterns for a living, but you are way off-base. The scars on my back are from an MMA match in college, and as for the ones on my cheek...yes, they’re from a fox, but not my husband. I’m not going to talk about what happened to my ears, but he made it stop. Oliver saved my life. He’s been a constant supporting presence since I met him. He’s never touched me without my say-so, even going so far as to not touch me when I said he could but he knew I couldn’t handle it, and he’s never damaged me. You are more than welcome to say anything you like about me, but Ollie is the one thing in my life that’s purely good. So just don’t.”

“My apologies,” said Snow, and he seemed sincere. It put her on edge. “I don’t know you very well, obviously, but you don’t seem stupid. I should have known you picked up one of the good ones.”

“...One of the good ones?”

He reached out and touched the scars on her cheek gently with the pad of his index finger, eyes sad and mouth drawn. It was by sheer will alone that she didn’t move. She didn’t feel like she was in danger, but all the same, it was an unpleasant sensation, being touched so compassionately by someone she was investigating for serial mistreatment and possible murder. She wondered if she could manage to include assault and battery of an officer in his list of charges. Probably not. It was tempting, though. “As regrettable as it is, I have to admit that the one who gave you these is your typical fox. It’s cultural. It’s systemic. And, while that’s unfortunate for innocent kits, it’s also a fact we can’t escape. I was lucky; I only spent 3 years in the system, which I can’t remember, and then I got adopted by sweet, loving parents who were well-enough off to buy me private tutors and top-notch education. Not every fox is so lucky, and most of us resort to...well. You’ll never look in a mirror and not have a reminder of what you’re dancing with.”

Judy thought of Nick’s offpaw comments about distrustful public school teachers, the wolf teaching his fifth grade class who had refused to allow him to go on the field trip to the museum as she had assumed his dues were stolen, the vixen a couple of years older than Nick who was bullied into jumping off a bridge the year he quit school. If – and that was a big if, even Gideon had turned out
decent in the end, so she didn’t trust that statement at all – foxes were more prone to violence, it was because of the way society treated them.

Nick was the smartest mammal she knew. If he’d had Snow’s opportunities, she was sure he’d have been running the world by now. But he hadn’t. She still sometimes caught him mispronouncing words or using them slightly wrong, obvious signs of someone self-taught who’d spent more time reading those big words than using them. A lonely kit with a library card, a curious streak, and a head for puzzles made for a good hustler and an ineffective real criminal...but he’d tried that out, too, with Mr. Big. Nick wasn’t a bad mammal, but he could have been, given the right circumstances, and Judy blamed that entirely on the unfair, prejudiced system. It wasn’t right that any kit would have to consider joining organized crime just to protect his own small family.

“I think,” she said carefully, “every species has the capacity to be nasty. And because of the Animalian government’s deep-rooted and unfounded distrust of certain species, there is a higher chance of those mammals getting caught doing the same nasty things that other mammals of other species are doing. They can send out all the colorful little sensitivity pamphlets they want, profiling is inherent to law enforcement.”

It was okay to trash-talk the actual problems within the ZPD if it meant making connections with the suspect, right? She wasn’t blind; she knew there were plenty of ugly things about the mammals she’d chosen to associate with. Part of her personal mission as an officer was to be outspoken about those things, behind closed doors, and try to do some good from within. But it was slow-going, and although Bellwether’s schemes had put fear of looking like a bigot into most cops, the profiling was still there. Little snap judgments based on species or appearance or status. When responding to an altercation between a fox and a koala, 9 times out of 10, the officer would immediately move to put the fox in cuffs without asking questions.

“Then you’re uncommonly compassionate. I suppose I can respect that.” His lips lifted into something that might have been called a smile, if he hadn’t looked so melancholy. “Do you have lots of experience with colorful sensitivity pamphlets?”

At least she had a cover story ready. “I was an insurance investigator up in Arcadia. The amount of pamphlets they gave out...well, let’s just say a clever raccoon made his collection into an interesting conversation piece with mod podge and megafauna-sized paper clips. Our CEO was less than impressed to find it hanging from the ceiling of his office.”

Snow had a nice laugh. Judy wished she didn’t like it. She wanted him to be someone easy to hate, blatantly bad. But if she didn’t already know what he was, she might want to invite him to coffee, try to make a new friend. He pointed at her, thumbs raised, and it was so Nickish that she had to blink a few times. “I knew you were some kind of detective. You talk like one. Did you meet your sub through work?”

“Indirectly. He’s a bounty hunter, so it wasn’t like our paths crossed often. In that particular case, I was investigating an auto accident, and he was pursuing one of the mammals involved. Not exactly a romance for the ages, but it all worked out.”

He put his paws in his pockets and leaned back on his heels. “Do you want to get coffee sometime?”

“Mr. Snow-”

“Nate.”

“Nate,” she said, trying to hide her exasperation, “I’m not poly.”
“No, I…” She got to see the expression that went with his self-deprecating laugh. It looked so real.
“Sorry. I meant just to talk. You can bring Oliver, if that would make you feel better about it. I just...you saw what happened in there. Since they found Sarah, everyone’s been treating me like I might break, but I don’t need to be pampered. You’ve made me smile more in the last few minutes than I have in weeks. I’d like to be your friend, Luna. That’s all.”

“Oh.” She blinked and fiddled with her paws. “Well, I…uh.”

“Think about it,” he said, pulling out his wallet. He gave her a crisp white business card with his contact information printed on it. “If you feel like taking me up on the offer, feel free to give me a call. At the very least I’d like to make up for my less than stellar treatment of your sub, but that’s up to you.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile, feeling like a sleaze. “I think we could use a friend in this city.”

“We.” He shook his head, a fond expression across his face. “He really is yours, isn’t he?”

“He’d certainly jump at the chance to say so,” she acknowledged.

His focus, suddenly, was intense. She tried not to shudder. “You have doubts?”

“I think that when you have a dynamic like ours, there’s an element of inherent reciprocity. He’s mine, yes, in that I’m his domme and he’s my sub. But I’m his, for the exact same reason. Mammals aren’t things; Ollie’s not replaceable. He’s precious. I may keep him on a leash, but he owns so much of my heart that I’d die for him. Or kill for him. Whichever would be safer for him and more expedient.”

“I know what you mean. My Sarah...God, she was incredible. I could hardly deny her anything, unless it was for her own good. And even then I felt bad about it. Me. I was supposed to be her master.” He looked up at the sky, presumably to hide the tears that were obvious in his voice. When he spoke again a moment later, though, there was no trace of that gloom. “If that’s how it is for you and your husband...hold onto him. Protect him. Keep him safe. Even if it means putting strict restrictions on him.”

“Is...is that what you did?”

He grimaced. “It’s what I failed to do. I became inconsistent with her punishments. She took advantage of the freedom I allowed her, and now she’s dead.”

“I read about it in the news. She was found bound, wasn’t she?”

“Which begs the question, what other dom was she seeing, and why didn’t she think she could ask me to learn shibari? I would have done anything for her. Anything. The police think I did it. But why would I kill the perfect mammal?”

Well.

Shit.

He was a better liar than anyone she’d ever met.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she murmured. “I hope they catch the mammal who killed her. Whoever they are, they should be made to suffer.”

“Exactly! You’re the first one who actually gets it. A mammal willing to bind and torture another
without their consent…a mammal like that deserves to be tortured. And then to die. If I have to hear one more well-wisher tell me not to be angry, to just cherish the time I had with her…” He abruptly took a short step back and eyed her. “My apologies. You probably think I’m a little nuts, freaking out on a stranger.”

“I threw a raspberry pie at my teacher when my littermate died,” she said, which was a true story that sounded funnier without context, “so comparatively you’re acting...pretty normal. Hey. Whoever it was, they’ll get theirs. I have to go make sure Ollie isn’t getting into trouble without me, but...I will call you, Nate.”

“Thank you,” he said, and turned to open his car door.

Judy held herself in while she turned her back on him and walked away. Was she unsettled because Snow had been unsettling, or because he hadn’t been? Her fears from before taunted her. She was cheap and gullible. She knew what he was and she found him charming anyway. She didn’t believe that he was innocent. He was an abuser, probably a murderer… (...Right?)

“Stupid,” she muttered, and then pulled on a smile so that she could walk into the coffee house looking like her character would after a quick talk with a fellow dominant. Nick, who was probably telling lame jokes to Susan and Elaine, looked over at her and smiled, a lovely warm expression that eased the knot in her stomach. She could talk to Nick. Whatever happened, she would have a cynic on her side.

She scaled the ladder again. Instead of taking her seat from before, she sat down in Nick’s lap and ran her fingers through his ruff just above his collar. He was here. He was hers. She was his. Snow was a bad guy, and they’d catch him. They would.

“I was thinking,” Nick told her, sliding his paw under the bottom of her racerback tank top to scratch at her belly, “we might go to Elaine’s class next week. Apparently, she’s an expert on needleplay. You have interest in that, Sweetheart?”

“I...that sounds wonderful,” she enthused, and allowed herself to relax against him. Nick was here. She was fine. They had each other’s backs, no matter what.

(And maybe someday soon, if they forged a good relationship with Elaine and Susan, he’d have her back in a more literal way, pierced with needles and laced up with ribbons.)

Chapter End Notes

Normally a spanking doesn't linger too long unless you leave cuts instead of welts...or it's a really long, heavy session that leaves much deeper bruises (see: Unbound). It usually looks worse than it is, and although some spankings leave bruises for a couple of days, there is nothing quite like a tawse in my experience, so long as you do it right. 50 strikes with my favorite two-tail left a sub of mine bruised for almost 2 weeks. At the party, Judy did not by any means "go easy" on Nick, so it'd be weird for him to not still feel it somewhat only 3 days after the party.
Chapter Summary

The day after a brief meeting with Hirsch and Del Valle, Nick and Judy get coffee with their suspect and reminisce. Judy makes a connection or two. Nick does too, albeit in a different way.

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by codeine and spite. There is no fluffy one-off because influenza makes me irritable, but there is a fair bit of desperately-needed worldbuilding and some serious focus on the detrimental effects of internalized -ism. Also I bring to light one of the most under-addressed issues of UC work: downtime. It ain't all dodging bullets and throwing traffickers through windows, or whatever they would have us believe on the wretched stone. Although if anyone deserves defenestration, it's human traffickers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Devil’s Bayou was a small restaurant in the Swamp District, and it sold the best jambalaya in the city. Hirsch and Del Valle had agreed with Judy that it was a good neutral place to meet; the Swamp District was out of their jurisdiction. In a sweet little pink dress and sunhat given to her by Angel as gifts, nobody would connect Judy with Detective Hopps or Luna Evergreen. Out of uniform, Hirsch had a plain, unmemorable appearance. Del Valle was larger and more imposing, but she was also on loan from vice, so it was unlikely that anyone would connect them, either.

Perhaps Judy was being a little paranoid, but as Nick would say, better too cautious than not cautious enough. Caution reduced the risk of major confrontation.

Judy wasn’t supposed to have much contact with her handlers, but there was one more recording to collect, and any sensitive data needed to be either passed physically or sent through hard mail on a flashdrive. Although their tech division had assured them with much eye-rolling and technobabble that Snow didn’t have the access or resources to “hack into” the ZPD (Judy still wasn’t fully sure what that even meant), the higher-ups had decided to take the old-school approach.

While she waited for her jambalaya and stout (a taste cultivated under the unyielding influence of Ruth Wilde, bless her heart and rest her soul), Judy watched the other patrons. It was always interesting to see the brilliant choreography that went into serving a multi-size restaurant. They all seemed to know where each other were and where they were going to step next. Not for the first time, she wondered why they weren’t paid well when their work was halfway to dancing. Before she could follow that thought further, though, she heard the sweet voice of her partner, Penelope Hirsch, from the door. She and Flora Del Valle were dressed in casual clothes, looking like two normal deer out to have lunch with their friend.

“He-ey, it’s Bunny the Vampire Slayer,” said Hirsch with a smile, leading the way. Judy returned the
smile. She and her partner didn’t quite manage the easy banter and sub-vocal communication that Judy and Nick used, but they got along fairly well. Their size difference was the main issue. Well, that and Hirsch’s tendency to laugh along with speciesist jokes, which was irritating, but at least in practice she mostly avoided stereotyping and profiling. Judy was free to ask for better, but whether she would find it was the question of the hour. Probably not. She wasn’t exactly perfect, herself.

“Come on, sit down,” she said cheerily, gesturing to the seats across from her. One of the much-overlooked reasons that mammals tended to stick with their own species was the issue of size; the booster seat felt demeaning, but across from two deer, she couldn’t do without it. And it wasn’t as though they could fit at a table made for mammals of her size. At least there weren’t too many folks who made a big deal of how cute she looked in a booster. Pretending not to be embarrassed about that, or about the way she poured her old, trained-out country accent all over her words, she added, “I put in the orders you texted to me already.”

“You never turn off, do you,” asked Del Valle with a short laugh. Her voice, unlike Hirsch’s voice, was on the lower end, more of a rasp than a sigh. If Hirsch was the kind of mammal you trusted immediately, Del Valle was the kind of mammal who probably smoked behind the school greenhouse as a teenager and never stopped.

With a somewhat bashful smile, Judy admitted, “Not usually, no. But I come bearing information.”

“About our boy?”

“Kinda. We established contact with him at a church function. He’s a little estranged from the rest of the community right now, the poor thing. He gave me his card, though. I’m thinking I might take him up on his offer of a coffee date with me and my husband.”

Nice and ambiguous.

“Well, that’s great to hear,” Hirsch replied. “What about the rest of the congregation? Are they all grieving after what happened?”

Judy shrugged. It was hard to admit the truth, because they were a community that perhaps she could have been a part of, had she and Nick taken a different path, but she had to be objective about their flaws. “I don’t think most of them knew his fiancée very well. The ones who care seem more invested in comforting him. But she was new, and she only joined because she was with him, so it’s not that surprising.”

“Is that normal?”

“I don’t know. Bunnyburrow didn’t really have churches, and most of my college peers were secular, so it wasn’t until recently that I bothered to look into more community-oriented stuff.”

“Bunnyburrow didn’t have churches?”

“It’s true.” This wasn’t even bad sub-speak anymore, and it was a bit of a delight to challenge Del Valle’s preconceptions. “Bunnies get a bad rap for being ultra-traditionalist, and usually that translates to ultra-religious, but that’s not really the case. I know the Loplin family had a Harvest Goddess shrine out back, but from the state of it, the last time anyone bothered to leave an offering was probably the 50’s. Anyhow, this community is a little weird, but I think the members are nice enough, and maybe if we take him up on coffee we can let him know he’s not alone. I know y’all have been itching to talk to him, but we don’t want to press until he’s comfortable. Oh, look, our food’s here.”
As the server set down their plates and Del Valle thanked him, Judy made eye contact with Hirsch, who nodded. Good. It was hard to keep a conversation coded and still make it understandable, but the alternative was for them to meet at the police station, which wouldn’t be good. Without knowing who had killed Sarah, or why, it was dangerous for Judy to be seen talking to cops. It wasn’t really about her safety, so much as it was about integrating with the community: if someone caught sight of “Luna Evergreen” talking to the cops just a week after her official introduction into the community, they might come to the right conclusion through the wrong reasoning, and she and Nick would get shut out. It wasn’t exactly uncommon for kinksters to be profiled in the first place.

It was...kind of sad. Even if the community had members like Shane and Nathaniel Snow, it also had members like Emilia and her partners, Adam and Eric. Had things been different...

“Before we get all caught up in how delicious this food is, you said you had another song for me,” she said pointedly. You never knew when an urgent call would come.

“Right.” Del Valle fished a flashdrive out of her purse. “This might not help you put together your program, though. The last part is strange. We think someone accidentally cut off the end of it, maybe during editing, and we couldn’t fix it. See what you can do. Maybe work it into a medley.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Judy pocketed the flashdrive and gave the two deer her sweetest smile. “All right, prepare yourselves. You are going to fall in love at first bite.”

“The unfortunate truth of stakeouts,” Nick said from his position lounging on their bed, “is that the wait time is not exciting.”

His dramatic sigh was turned into an oof when she dropped onto him, her hips off-center so that the back of her head was on his chest and her legs could cross beside his. He immediately wound an arm around her, working his fingers into the fur on her stomach where her shirt rode up in the front. She held up her phone as an offering. “I just transferred the new recording so we can listen to it.”

“Is that supposed to excite me?”

“I’m excited,” she said, not quite able to make her voice convincing. He wasn’t wrong. Going undercover only sounded exciting to mammals who hadn’t done it. Most of UC work was waiting for something interesting to happen while exhausting long-shot leads. Of course, if Judy had really been an insurance investigator and Nick had really been a bail bonds mammal, they would have had more interesting work to do, but Luna and Oliver were officially taking a leave of absence in preparation for adopting their first child. If anyone asked, Luna was going to go back to work at the Zootopia branch of the same insurance company once they had their affairs in order, but Judy doubted anyone would ask.

All of the pretense and the detail that went into assumed identities reminded Judy of Nick’s mother. She had died a year ago, and Judy missed her, but this was something that almost helped her connect to Ruth. Would she be proud of them for putting together a decent lie? Maybe not, but Judy liked to think that she would be. After all, Ruth was the one who’d taught Nick all the tricks of the trade.

“Well,” said Nick, drawing Judy out of her moment of reminiscing, “I guess we can listen. Not like there’s anything else to do.”

“Oh, poor sad fox,” Judy teased. “Don’t worry, we’ll be dodging bullets soon enough.”

“I’m okay with not doing that,” he told her. She could practically taste him rolling his eyes.

“I’m just saying, be careful what you wish for,” she answered easily, and then pressed play.
“Are you done with your assignment?”

“Yeah,” Sarah said brightly. “You wanted to talk? Is this about the meeting tomorrow?”

“No. To get to the point, I know you’re attracted to me,” he said bluntly. Was that a hint of growl in his voice? Gross.

“I – oh, I’ve not been subtle at all, have I,” Sarah fretted. Her voice rose fractionally in pitch and sped up a little. “I’m sorry, Nate, I know that’s completely inappropriate-”

“I feel the same.”

There was a quiet moment in which only their breathing could be heard. Then, Sarah said in a quavering voice, “That’s not where I thought you were going.”

“I know,” Snow said pleasantly, either unaware of Sarah’s distress or, more likely, trying to get rid of it by lightening the mood. “We’ve only known one another for a few months, but it feels like I’ve known you my whole life. We have a connection. I like it.”

“Me too,” she said softly. “I wanted it to go away, but I want you more.”

“I want you, too. But there are rules for dating me, Sarah.”

“...Rules?” Sarah cleared her throat. “Like boss-employee rules, or...?”

“I practice BDSM in my relationships. Dominance and submission. In broader language, kink. Have you ever heard these terms before?”

“Only in terms of that kink shaming is my kink thing that went around for five minutes, but I’m not an idiot, I can piece together the implications well enough.”

Snow laughed. “No, you’re not an idiot. I’m a dominant, Sarah. In all aspects of my life.”

“So that’s...that’s what you want from me, then? Submission?”

“I want a relationship, and your submission would be part of that. But trust me when I say that I want you. This isn’t a casual thing for me. It was a risk, bringing it up at all.”

“Because I have a little power over you now,” she concluded flatly.

“Yes. Do you know how much this little secret could ruin my career?” Now he sounded distressed, and it was so real that Judy could believe he felt it as strongly as it sounded even in the recording. “Kink is not very well-received outside certain circles. Mammals don’t understand it, and they tend to hate what they don’t understand. I’m already a fox in a powerful position. If this information got out, my name could become toxic. I gave that information to you, and now, you have the power to ruin me. But it’s a risk I had to take, because of how we feel about each other.”

“I’m not gonna ruin you, Nate. I’m not heartless.”

“No, I didn’t think you would. But as good as I am at reading mammals, there are
always secret thoughts. I believe you would be an excellent submissive, Sarah. You’re emotionally strong, you’re smart, and you know when you ask questions and when to do as you’re told. I’d like to give you two weeks off, paid vacation time. During that time, I want you to do research about this. Really get to know what BDSM is.”

“You can’t tell me?”

“I think you would benefit from an outside perspective,” he countered, obviously much more relieved despite the hesitant tone in Sarah’s voice. “Try to find someone to talk to, if you can. It’s probably too much to ask for you to magically find a friend or relative who’s into it, but that could help. The internet is a valuable resource.”

Sarah drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Her voice sounded a bit stronger when she said, “I can do that.”

“Great.” His tone lowered a bit. “You’re right, though. Talking to you as your boss is inappropriate. If, after these two weeks, you still want me, then we’ll need to make arrangements. Money and relationships don’t always work well together.”

“I don’t want to lose my job, Nate,” she said warily. Perhaps even resigned.

“I’ll take care of you,” he assured her, but Judy just felt ill. Really? She had known he’d asked this already, but hearing it with her own ears...that was just asking for trouble, wasn’t it? She already knew Sarah hadn’t taken him up on it, but even just the thought...

Sarah scoffed. “You want me to, what, become your little wifey? Or would you just rather pay me in experience, like all the other jagoffs who offer unpaid internships?”

Go, Sarah, Judy thought with satisfaction. Then she was frustrated with herself for getting a little more attached to a dead mammal.

“No, no! I mean – if that’s what you want, I’m not opposed – but if you believe you won’t be able to handle working for your dom, I’ll help you find a new job. I’ll give you personal references. We won’t start our dynamic until you...look, Sarah.” He sighed heavily. “I’m a complete piece of shit. It’s not in good taste to proposition your employees. I know that my advances put you in a difficult position. I want to make this clear, though: your job isn’t in jeopardy. If you come back and tell me you don’t want a relationship with me, that will be that. I won’t fire you and I won’t pursue you. I will continue to mentor you and I won’t be angry with you for denying me. Our mutual attraction doesn’t need to be addressed ever again. You are the brightest assistant I’ve ever had.”

“I...thank you, Nate,” Sarah replied, sounding a little flustered. Judy wanted to throw something.

“Don’t thank me for the truth. Just...take these next two weeks. Do your research. Figure out if this is what you want.”

“I...”

The recording ended. Judy could see why Hirsch had found it suspect. What had come just after that?

“Is it just me,” she mused, trying to puzzle out what she could with such frustratingly limited information, “or did that sound...weirdly normal? Aside from the obvious problems, which he...kind
of addressed, at least mostly. He does the whole self-deprecation thing really well.”

“It’s not just you,” Nick assured her, dragging his claw-tips through the fur on her stomach. She could feel his gentle breathing against her back and she tried to relax a little more, to allow him to really hold her instead of just breathing underneath her body. She never did that, did she? Even when he curled around her while they slept, or when she sat in his lap, they were always slightly separate. They could be so close that he was literally inside of her, and still she held herself. After scenes, even the ones in which she bottomed, she usually held him and petted him, aftercare for both of them.

No wonder he hadn’t been able to tell how frustrated she had been. Not only had she not been aware of it herself, but the distance between them hadn’t quite been bridged yet. Did he know?

“What’s going on in your head, Carrots? You just got tense.”

Brilliant. She tried to relax, but for some reason, with this knowledge in her head, it was harder. She felt guilty for pushing him away. It wasn’t like she’d known, but she should have. The easy fix would be to stop, but... breathe, Judy.

“I just realized,” she said quietly, turning her head up to try and look at him. It didn’t work due to their positioning, so she just laid her cheek on his chest. “There’s always been a little bit of distance between us. It’s so small as to be unnoticeable, and I thought – I’m so dumb, I thought-”

“Don’t say that,” he said, claw-tips pressing in a little less gently than before.

She rolled her eyes. “Sorry, I’m not dumb, then. Unaware doesn’t really cover it, but okay. I thought it was that I hadn’t proven myself enough for you to trust me completely, but it’s not you. It’s never been you. The one who always hesitates is me. I’m the one who’s scared. You’ve been opening up to me this whole time, and I’ve been...selfishly taking that, but not completely reciprocating.”

“You can’t reciprocate when you’re not open to yourself,” he answered quietly, nuzzling her ear. She wished he’d get angry with her about it. But he probably knew that already. These were echoes, things that he’d been through either with her or before they’d met, and foolishly, she had thought that they were issues she didn’t share, because they had wildly different reasons for feeling the same way. He licked the place he’d been nuzzling before adding, “I’m not mad at you for that. I didn’t know there was distance, Judy. And I know what’s going on in your head right now; you’re feeling guilty for being dishonest, right?”

“I mean, you’re not wrong.”

“It’s not an all-or-nothing thing. You can’t lie if you don’t know the truth, you can only state what you believe to be true. That’s why in legal affidavits they have that line, upon information and belief. You may have been lying to yourself, but you weren’t lying to me. I know enough about you, and about mammals in general, to separate the two.” He breathed deeply for a few counts. She breathed with him. “What prompted that?”

“Just thinking about how I’ve never really let you hold me,” she admitted, bringing her paw up to rest it on his, “and I guess more generally about Snow. Everything he said was factual. BDSM is misunderstood, and it is a potential career-killer. It is a risk to bring it up to someone. He’s a piece of crap, and he shouldn’t have brought it up to her, and research is a good thing. Your mom always used to say that the best way to lie is to tell the truth, but I don’t think I ever got it until now, and I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

He laughed. The sound went through her, as small as she was against his long torso. “It kind of feels
like the tables are turned. You spent years assuring me that I could go at my own pace, that you didn’t resent me for being a bit emotionally unavailable—"

“You had a legitimate reason—”

“And so do you.” He brought his other paw up to cover her chest. Both of his paws together, splayed out like they were, covered her entire torso. It was easy to forget how big he was sometimes, because he was hers. He wore her collar because he wanted to, and it was so incredibly easy to feel – well, dominant – when that was precisely what he wanted from her. But he could harm her, if he so chose. It was nice to know that he never would, at least not purposely. “You can’t compare our situations. We’re not the same, and we react to things differently. Remember what you told me? That not knowing everything about me wasn’t going to hurt you unless it put one or both of us in danger? It was the right thing to say, and now I’m going to say it to you. You’re allowed to go at your own pace. It’s not going to hurt me. I know you trust me, and that’s enough right now.”

“Snow trusted Sarah,” she said darkly, because she couldn’t help it. Even though she knew on a surface level that she wasn’t like him, that their situations weren’t the same, it wasn’t getting through for some reason.

Sounding amused, Nick said, “Sweetheart. Darling. Don’t be a stick in the mud. At the very least, Nathaniel Snow is an abusive dick. At worst, he’s a monster who tortured someone to death. Surprising no one, I have self-preservation instincts. We have been together for the better part of a decade; if you were at all like him, I would have left you by now. Okay? I’ve not been trapped by you. I have no obligation to stay, beyond my promise that I will. But we both know that promise doesn’t extend beyond the borders of a healthy relationship. You’d leave me if I harmed you, right?”

She thought about it. She had never actually considered that before, because she had always known that whatever hurt he might accidentally cause, they would be able to fix it. But what if it couldn’t be fixed? What if he put his silver tongue to good use and manipulated her into crossing her hard limits through guilt trips and bogus incentives? Could she bring herself to leave him? She loved him. She loved him so much she couldn’t imagine a life without him in it. “I’ll have to get back to you on that. Ever since we started dating – before that, even – I’ve trusted you not to hurt me. I know you were mean to me when we met, but it’s not the same; you were being mean to rile me up, and I gave as good as I got, and we became friends anyway. So I don’t know if I would leave or not, because I have to really consider what hurting me would actually look like. But I don’t believe you would, so it’s a moot point.”

“Never moot, but I get it. Regardless, I’m being honest here when I say that you can’t harm me and just get away with it. If you can’t trust yourself, then trust me. I allow you to take care of me, because we both like it, but I can take care of myself. And I will, should it become necessary. I didn’t think that needed to be said, but I’ll say it every day, if it’ll help.”

She took a deep breath, and then vocalized the thing she had been avoiding for the last day or so. “You’re going to have to poke me every once in a while. You know how easy it is for me to focus on anything else. We might be in the most boring position right now, but we have an opportunity here, too.”

“Work on us while we’re trying to catch a killer,” he mused. “We might be the only couple in the city who can say that’s realistic.”

She pulled up his paw so she could kiss it before letting it fall back onto her stomach. She was lucky. She had her dream job, a chance to make the world a better place, a perfect partner who was also her best friend, and – it was overwhelming. “But I just have to say I’m so lucky.”
“Maybe so,” Nick said neutrally. She wanted to know what was behind that, but she didn’t want to start a fight or have a heavy discussion, so she tried as hard as she could to just relax. Nick could take care of himself. It was okay, really, to sometimes be the one who needed care. It didn’t say anything about who she was. It didn’t say anything about her level of competency. The world wouldn’t end if she had a moment of weakness. She wouldn’t be punted back to the farm if she had a couple of stereotypically bunny traits –

Oh.

That was something to unpack later, probably, but she didn’t want to go there when she and Nick were having a moment of quiet. Once they took Snow up on his offer, there would be far less of these, if only because they’d officially be on Snow’s radar, and she wanted to let the moment last.

It was hard to stop tapping, despite Nick’s urging to do so. Earlier, they had gotten the go-ahead to officially establish contact with Snow, and now they were sitting at a table for smaller mammals at the Arctic Brewery, an interesting little place that served coffee all day and craft beers in the late evening. There was a little space for a band, and the middle tables could be pushed aside to make a dance floor. Judy thought she might bring Nick back after their case to see if Ruth had been telling the truth when she’d mentioned teaching Nick various ballroom dances.

(For long cons, she’d admitted cheerfully, without any hint of shame.)

Judy focused on her surroundings, trying to control her breathing, holding Nick’s little belt leash tightly. She wanted to hold his paw, but he was using it to pet her ears, which felt too nice to stop. The soft smell of coffee didn’t manage to cover Nick’s scent, but masked most of the others. The lighting wasn’t too bright, nor was it too dark; it looked similar to the lighting at the Jungle. Strains of some not-quite-pop song were playing through the speakers, although it was difficult to hear which song it was over the din of coffee dates, college study groups, orders, and general kitchen noises.

“This is a neat place,” she said quietly, mostly to ground herself. Another trick she’d been taught, this time by her own father. Just babble till you’re not scared anymore, Jude. Gimme that ratchet extender, would ya? “We should come back here sometime.”

“Just the two of us,” Nick agreed, stuffing his nose into the cradle of her ears. Not that she didn’t enjoy the proximity, but why he was so interested in her scent, she had no idea. Bunnies didn’t smell that great. Judy would know, having grown up in an old-fashioned warren. Maybe there was some part of him that would always want to eat her –

No, she really could not think about sexy stuff, not when they were about to become friends with someone who may very well be a murderer.

“Your nose is cold,” she said, instead of doing the stupid thing and climbing him like a tree.

She felt his breath ruffle her headfur as he laughed and replied, “So your head will warm it up.”

“That’s not how that works, Ollie.”

But she didn’t push him away, because it was still more comforting than not. She could breathe, because whatever happened, she had immediate backup she could trust. Judy had her own useful skillset, but when it came to matters of persuasion, Nick would always have her beat. Twelve-year-old Nick would probably have her beat, too. Thank the stars for Ruth Wilde.

When Snow walked through the door, she could smile more or less genuinely. Although she did take her paw out of the loop, she kept it resting on Nick’s thigh, tapping her fingers gently on his crisp
slacks. They’d both gone for business casual today, the only vaguely noticeable paraphernalia his short belt leash and the collar his white button-up did nothing to hide. Judy was somewhat uncomfortable in her own skirt suit, but it was something Luna would have worn on a daily basis, so by golly, she was going to suck it up.

“Nate,” she said pleasantly, waving her free paw as he approached. She thought her smile looked real enough. She was glad to see him, in a sense; she wanted to get the investigation underway.

“Good to see you again, Luna,” he replied warmly, draping his jacket over the back of the third chair at their table. “I’ll go put in my order and be back in a minute.”

“Yeah, hi,” Nick said at Snow’s retreating back, seemingly trying not to laugh. At least, Judy hoped it was that, and not a cover-up for actual offense. She doubted it. Nick most definitely gave his heart too quickly, but if you weren’t one of the rare few on the receiving end of his affection or respect, he was impossible to offend. If Snow had earned anything from Nick, it was his scorn.

“He’s probably just still being weird about the scars,” she said in an undertone. “But he thought the ones on my back were from you and assumed the ones on my cheek were, too, so he’s not as smart as he thinks he is.”

“He’s disrespecting you,” Nick countered, equally quietly.

“How so?”

“To a guy like that...I’m an extension of you, right? That’s how he sees submissives. I’m your toy, your property. Not greeting me is not acknowledging you as a fellow dominant.”

She rolled her eyes. “I doubt it’s that deep. Something tells me he only uses subtext with his victims.”

Nick shook his head. “Foxes deal in subtext. It’s our culture.”

She squeezed his thigh, a little higher up than was strictly proper in public, and she grinned when he froze for a moment. “Remember, he doesn’t think of himself as a fox. He’s better than the rest. You’re one of the good ones. I’m not as good as you are at reading mammals, but in this case, don’t expect to be talking to a fox.”

Nick had nothing to say to that, but the more Judy thought about it, the more sure she was. It wasn’t just verbiage that Judy had in common with Snow. Nick had grown up resenting the way others had treated his species; he’d resented it so much that he’d essentially become what they expected just to spite them. Judy, on the other paw, had chosen to rise above expectations, which meant leaving behind certain things associated with bunnies. She hadn’t truly thought of herself as a rabbit in a long time, a mentality that Snow shared.

It wasn’t the same kind of wrong as the way he abused his subs, but that didn’t make it right. Being exemplary didn’t mean not being part of your own species. With speciesism against foxes being so overt for so long, it wasn’t surprising that Snow had taken the path of least resistance. The pushback that foxes faced was the kind of thing that settled into your bones. Snow wouldn’t think of himself as a fox, and if Judy understood him as well as she thought she did, he would probably actively avoid culturally vulpine things in general.

When Snow came back to the table, Judy felt much more confident. She didn’t know how to connect with a killer, but she knew how to connect with someone who was disconnected from that deep, ancestral part of himself, someone who probably defined himself by his work and his status. “I’m glad you could make it. I assumed by the way you were called back into work so fast the other night
that work is pretty demanding.”

“Yeah,” the Arctic fox replied, running a paw through the fur on his neck just above the low collar of his light blue sweater. It looked homemade, like something Sharla’s grandmother might have woven when they were still young enough to be similar in height. “I used that as an excuse to get out of there, but you’re right, I’m swamped right now. I need to put out an ad for a new assistant, but…”

That melancholy look really was so genuine. If she didn’t know him, and ran into him on the train, she might have to tamp down the urge to ask him if he needed anything. She gave him a comforting smile. “Good thing you decided to venture out into the sunlight for a bit. I hear too much screen time can cause migraines.”

“Oh, trust me, I’ve got my GP on speed dial,” he said, brightening a tad. Directing his gaze toward Nick, he extended his paw and said, “We haven’t really formally met. I was kind of a dick the other night. Mind if we start over? Nate Snow.”

“Oliver Evergreen,” Nick replied with a bright smile, taking Snow’s paw. Always such a charmer. “Luna’s allowed to call me Ollie, but I wouldn’t try it if I were you.”

“A little possessive, I take it?”

“She’s my best friend. I’m allowed to be a little possessive,” Nick returned, deliberately and spectacularly missing the point. It was adorable.

Snow laughed, so Nick had done something right. What it was, Judy wasn’t sure, but she trusted him to do the right thing. As she sipped her cooling coffee, she examined their suspect. He was shorter than Nick by a few inches, stocky in a way that suggested he either worked out or did some routine physically strenuous activity, with neatly filed claws and professionally groomed fur. He looked exactly like a professional in his late 30’s was supposed to look; clean-cut but not obnoxiously so, casual enough for a coffee date but dressed well enough to go into a casual business meeting at any moment, carelessly handsome, but obviously tired. She could see it in the lines of his forearms below the rolled-up sleeves of his sweater and the quiet red lines in the whites of his eyes. He wasn’t sleeping well, and probably hadn’t been for a while. Worry about being caught, or grief at losing Sarah?

“I’m just glad you two decided to take me up on my offer,” Snow admitted, looking between them.

“Yeah, what prompted that, anyway? Not that we’re not grateful to make friends here in Zootopia,” Nick said, gesturing between himself and Judy, “but why us?”

“To be frank? You’re new here. You’re looking for friends in the community; I’m looking for friends who won’t coddle and smother me. If we don’t like each other, we’ll part ways and maybe have a brief moment of awkwardness if we see each other at a party or a munch, but nothing ever came from sitting back and doing nothing.”

“Now, that’s the truth. I imagine that’s how you got where you are today.”

Snow nodded. He opened his mouth to respond, but a young hare set a large mug of coffee in front of him and he smiled at her in thanks before taking a long sip. His eyes closed as he enjoyed the flavor, and Judy tried not to make connections. Snow set the mug down after a moment and sighed. “Oh, that’s exactly what I need right now. And yes, that’s exactly how I got where I am today. When doors wouldn’t open for me, I used the resources at my disposal to kick them down. If I were to hazard a guess, Luna, you had to do the same to get your position.”
How could she explain it in a way that wouldn’t be an obvious parallel to the way she became a police officer? Judy Hopps’ story wasn’t exactly a secret. The ugly, slimy truth was that even now it was being used as inspiration porn, a story for the younger generation to feel hopeful about a future that probably wouldn’t happen for them. Judy was not within the normal range and distribution. Prejudice would persist regardless of how many inspirational stories could be gathered.

That was it, wasn’t it? Numbers.

“I was never an average bunny,” she said carefully. “My family grew medicinal plants, but I was always more interested in keeping the books than digging in the dirt. While my siblings learned botany, I learned advanced math. While my sisters got married and had kits, I went to college. But after that...I windmilled a little. My family didn’t support me, and, well, a single childless female bunny isn’t employable, because the assumption is that she’ll work for a year and then quit for several more years while she has litter after litter. I almost became an actuary, if you can believe it, but that raccoon I mentioned the other day was my way in. And I just dug my heels in every time someone tried to make me feel like I didn’t belong, because I love my job and I love the work regardless of who thinks I can’t or shouldn’t do it...even if maybe that’s dumb.”

Snow raised an eyebrow, a look of surprise making its way across his face. “You think you’re dumb?”

“What? Oh, no,” she gushed, backtracking, feeling, yes, like an absolute moron. Did she talk like that at work? She couldn’t remember making the same jokes at her own expense around the station, but if she didn’t notice it happening...what if her coworkers were only going along with speciesist jokes that she started to get away from the hurt of speciesist assumptions? No. She couldn’t afford to go down that python burrow, not right now. Ruth would probably tell her to stick as close to the truth as she could, so that was what Judy decided to do. “From everyone else’s perspective it’s dumb. An Arcadian rabbit, doing something other than botany? Preposterous. I, ah...I know I can be somewhat overbearing, so I usually put that out there to mitigate the inevitable stress. I don’t even realize I’m doing it anymore.”

“I’ve always found it repellent, myself.” Nick offered, but when Judy looked up at him, his expression was one so full of affection that she felt herself heat from the inside out. She looked away and took another sip of her coffee as Nick turned and gestured toward Snow. “You and I know how frustrating it is to have to downplay ourselves. Pretend to be less intelligent, less capable, just to keep our heads down. It’s demeaning, but it’s a way of life, for foxes. To watch someone you love have to do the same thing...it makes you question the status quo in a larger way.”

“That’s an interesting take. My world is small; it doesn’t matter what species I am, as long as I get my job done,” Snow replied, repositioning his mug so that the handle was perfectly even with the edge of the table. “Half my clients don’t even know what my voice sounds like, let alone what I look like. College was...an experience, an exercise in self-control, but I don’t think I ever picked up on that particular defense mechanism.”

No, Judy thought acidly, you just became a manipulative piece of crap.

“Luna and I were products of the public education system, so we did what we could to get by.” Nick’s voice was final. He didn’t usually speak that way, but he always could. It was funny; he was naturally good at communicating, but he preferred not to take the lead unless he had to. Was that inherent, or was it learned?

Snow leaned back in his chair with a grin, although the melancholy look in his eyes never changed. He was obviously still sad about Sarah, although whether it was because he’d lost her or because her body had been found was anyone’s guess. Judy tried not to think about that too long, because she
knew it would show on her face. Instead, she listened to him say, “I know it’s a little taboo out in the
open like this, but you’re not exactly *in hiding* with that leash, so...how did all this happen, if you
don’t mind my asking?”

“I was in a rut,” Judy told him, again sticking as close to the truth as she could. “I’d overworked
myself so much that I’d made myself sick. Ollie and I had only been dating for a few months, and
he...well, how *did* you come up with the idea, Sweetheart?”

Nick threw his arm around her shoulders with a happy smile. “I could swear I told you this, but who
knows? The thing is, I used to read a lot as a kit. Lonely little boy with a library card who needed to
hide from bullies – yeah, yeah, I’m a stereotype, I know – anyway, when I was about twelve or so I
wandered into the adult section of the library and picked up *Venus in Skins*. Thought it was going to
be a murder mystery.”

“No,” Snow said, putting his paw to his mouth.

“Yeah. Obviously I was *very wrong*. At that point I didn’t really get it. I was five minutes into
puberty and everything I knew about love came from the rom-coms my neighbor watched when she
babysat me, so I thought Severin got such a raw deal, *not getting the girl*. Nick snorted. “When I
figure out why such simplistic birdshit makes so much money, we’ll be living the high life. Anyway,
I don’t really know why it stayed with me, especially since I hated the ending, but it did. It was kind
of a guilty fantasy all throughout my teens, and – okay, this part’s unbelievable, but I swear to you
it’s true – Luna was futzing with my phone and trying to get up instead of resting, and I joked that if
she didn’t lie back down I’d tie her to the bed, at the same time she was holding down the voice
search button.”

Judy...actually *remembered* that, as hazy as it was. She’d been doped up on medication that made
her loopy at the time, and until now, she had completely forgotten. “That’s right! Oh, I was so stoned
at the time.”

“I got my phone back from her with all the search results on display, and I realized it wasn’t just a
weird fantasy that one writer and a youngish fox happened to share, there were other mammals who
liked the same things. So when Luna was well again, I took her to lunch, we negotiated, we did
some research, and...the rest is history.”

“So *you* instigated it?”

“You sound surprised,” Nick answered, and if Judy didn’t know better she’d believe his clueless
tone.

Snow lifted one shoulder, the shadow of a shrug. “I’m always the one who brings up the topic. A
submissive taking charge seems a little foreign to me.”

Of course it did. Snow wasn’t a dominant, he was an abuser. No matter how amusing a turn this
conversation had taken, she had to remember that. “Neither of us had any experience. We went into
it blind, which in retrospect probably wasn’t the best way to do it, but we worked through all the
kinks. Eh, pardon the pun, that was terrible. I like being his domme, but I think it was good that we
got to know each other and dated each other before considering a dynamic. I also like knowing that
we can take care of ourselves, and that...our relationship, the way we love each other, doesn’t
depend on our dynamic. It doesn’t matter who brought it up. I’d love Oliver the same if we never did
another scene.”

“And you wouldn’t miss it?”
She smiled a little. “Of course I would, Nate. You know how much of a rush it is to – to have someone at your mercy, restrained, all their trust in your paws. To be able to help someone the way they need. Not all affection is gentle, and not all gentleness is good. But I’d rather lose that rush than lose the fox I love.”

“Fascinating.”

“What?”

“Just...you really mean it. I’ve never had a relationship outside of kink, although my first experience was as a sub. That wasn’t...well, I prefer to dom, let’s leave it at that. I don’t know what love looks like outside of that model, and nobody in the community likes to talk about the possibility of giving it up.”


“It does, doesn’t it?” Judy didn’t know what to make of Snow’s statement, but before she could consider further, he knocked on the table. “Well, unfortunately, the work doesn’t stop just because I want to take a longer break. It was nice getting to know you two, though. We should do this again sometime.”

“I’d like that,” Judy said, going for warmth.

“Seconded,” Nick added.

“I’ll text you when I get a moment to breathe,” Snow promised, standing and shrugging on his jacket. Judy watched Nick wave off their coffee companion with ease, and wondered if he felt the same way she did. It was that strangeness again: was she, now that Snow was leaving, unsettled because he’d been unsettling, or because he hadn’t been?

One of the very first things that Nick had done in their real apartment was break in the kitchen. He had gone all out, setting the table with dishes she’d never tried with flavors that made her feel like all the best parts of the earth had come together to play a symphony in her mouth. Cooking, he had explained, was a big part of fox culture, but their place just hadn’t had the room for him to really get her involved. He didn’t always get extravagant, but when he did, Judy appreciated it.

(And it always made her hungry for something other than food, the second part of their private housewarming party.)

Unlike Nick, who hadn’t quite thought through the cultural differences surrounding food, Ruth had taken Judy aside and explained the significance. Tods – a word for male foxes that Ruth had brought with her when she had immigrated, although most of Animalia used the word “dog” instead – often used food as an expression of love, a throwback to ancient times when vixens would spend a couple of weeks in a den nursing newborn kits, and the harder he worked, the more he wanted to show his love. Nowadays, she’d added, the old traditions were dying out. Vixens dated vixens sometimes, and tods dated tods, and some tods were just never taught to cook. But even without that specific quirk of courtship, food was important to foxes; it was a family bonding thing, an expression of love between parents and children, a social event. Judy had taken to it gladly, sharing meals with Ruth, going out to new restaurants with Nick. Their most intimate conversations were usually accompanied by a meal, if they weren’t just cuddling in bed.

For bunnies, food was more of a chore than anything, especially in a colony as large as the one Judy had grown up in. Nick had taught her to love food, and Ruth had taught her to appreciate Nick. So
when he got into a food frenzy like this, she didn’t offer to help. There was a weird cultural implication there, that she didn’t trust him enough to feed her. She didn’t really understand it, coming from a family where help was not only appreciated, but mandatory and scheduled. She could still participate in something Nick liked to do.

Tonight was some kind of soup. She’d let him surprise her. Whatever it was, it smelled delicious.

“You’ve been quiet,” he said, jumping back as the oil popped a bit, before taking the handle with both paws and swirling the pan a bit. “What’s on your mind?”

“Your mom, actually,” she said, feeling weirdly bashful about it.

“Because we’re playing one of her games?” He turned slightly, winked at her over his shoulder, and went back to making dinner while she watched his tail sway. Honestly though, how had he managed not to get proposals from every vixen in Zootopia? “She did always say you were wasted on the brute squad.”

Right, that was why. Sometimes he was slick as oil, and sometimes he was rude as heck. It took a discerning eye, and lots of patience, to realize that one wasn’t all that different from the other.

“Kind of. And I’m not really hearing her voice in my head, but sometimes you’ll say something, or turn your head that same way she used to,” she explained, hanging onto the rush of affection because the topic at paw was sad. The details of their case weren’t just digging into her self-confidence, but bringing up bittersweet memories she didn’t want to have to deal with. It was better to do it now, though, than to wait for it to overwhelm them. “I wish I could ask if she’s proud of what we’re doing, but I can’t. And that’s just part of growing older, losing loved ones and eventually dying of cancer or diabetes or having a stroke or whatever, but I also keep thinking about Sarah, and how they probably died the same way, seeing it coming, knowing everything that was happening and having no control over it. I can’t...we can’t do anything about Ruth’s death. We can’t cure cancer. We can make sure whoever killed Sarah can’t do that again, but only if we solve the case and...what if we don’t? Even if this wouldn’t become a pattern, if it went to cold storage and the killer never did it again, nobody would give her back her voice, and – it’s – she died alone. Ruth was scared and she had us. Sarah had nobody but her killer. It’s really irritating that we don’t know if Snow killed her or not.”

“What makes you doubt him,” Nick asked curiously, but without condemnation. He was probably on the same page, but it wasn’t about agreement, it was about critical thinking; he always knew what questions to ask to get her mind running, and she knew how to respond to get more detailed questions.

“Nothing concrete. Just the concept of justice.” It pained her to admit that, because it sounded stupid – sounded lame, childish, not stupid – but it wasn’t the wrong way to approach the situation. “We don’t have any evidence, only suspicion. We know he’s charming. We know he’s surprisingly funny. And we know he’s a serial abuser, if nothing else. If we had enough evidence to put him away for that, it’d make me happy. Personal bias aside, though, we have to admit that domestic abuse doesn’t always move on to murder.”

“You’re right about that. Hey, c’mere, I want you to try this.”

She hopped up off her chair and edged into the kitchen, trying to get close to Nick while staying away from the hot stove. He offered a little ball of dough and, with a little grin, she licked it out of his palm. He looked too pleased with himself, but that was part of the point, wasn’t it? He got to be affectionate. “It’s delicious.”
“Wait till I put it in the soup.”

“Wait, what?”

“With leeks, carrots, ginger...trust me, you’ll love it.”

“I love you,” she said, deciding to wait and see. She’d never not liked something he made, so it was a safe bet anyway.

“Judy.” She looked at him head-on. He saved her name for special occasions, mostly defaulting to nicknames because that was just a thing he did. It felt good to hear him say her name, though. Intimate. “I know you love me. I hope you know that I love you.”

“I do. If there’s one thing I never doubt, it’s that,” she said honestly.

“And we’re honest with the ones we love, right?”

“I should hope so.”

He turned and kissed her forehead quickly before nudging her away with his hip. “So you know I’m being honest when I say Mom would be proud of you. I have no idea why that’s important to you, but...she would be. Don’t let this case get into your head, okay? Maybe we won’t solve it. You told me yourself that the ZPD only solves about 40% of its zoicide cases. Honestly, I’m more worried about why they want eyes and ears inside the community; it seems silly to send us undercover unless they’re getting ready for a bigger case.”

She went cold. He was right. Why hadn’t she been informed, though? Did Hirsch know? Was that why they’d gotten Del Valle from vice? Had Judy been thrown into a fire as an expendable element?

“Oh.”

“You...didn’t think of that, did you?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said hollowly.

“Good news is, you’re lead on the zoicide, which means we have control over what happens next. Bad news is, until we can figure out what the bigger picture is, we need to be careful.”

She nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. They could do this. They would do this. Whatever happened next, she and Nick would face it like they faced everything else: with sarcasm and gentle violence, most likely, but most importantly, together.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who are holding out for chapter 3 of Justice League of Zootopia, I'm about 3/4 of the way done with it. Between sleeping and hating life (or, you know, after getting over the flu), I shall finish it and post it.
Confirmation

Chapter Summary

In which art is sexy, networking happens, and Judy takes care of some urgent matters.

Chapter Notes

Warning: semi-graphic needleplay in this chapter. If you have a needle phobia, might want to skip the class...although if you've made it this far I'm guessing you'll be all right. As a bonus, y'all finally get an explanation of why this particular dead-girl shibari scene couldn't be done by any schlub with good rope and a MewTube account. Because here's the secret: bondage isn't hard. You need to know 2 knots plus 2 safety hitches to do a really pretty half-suspension scene the first day you pick up a rope, and the only limit is imagination. (Well, that and the pesky laws of physics. Everyone knows that suspension photography is misleading AF.)

...Also, I felt like writing something vaguely pornographic, so there's a masturbation scene in here. True to form, though, it's focused on actual biological mechanics, so it's not the kind of scene you'll find in a shitty romance novel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Luna’s phone had been carefully prepared by the tech team, with real-sounding text exchanges dating back months, pictures of food and Arcadian scenery, and even a few previously-unseen photos of Nick in bondage or bent over something, colors altered to make him into a silver fox and to make Judy into a black bunny. There were even two doctored videos, one of an intense spanking and scolding scene that Nick had requested for purely pornographic reasons, and one of Nick getting himself off with a toy vibrating inside of him. He’d sent that one to her upon request when she’d had to leave town without him for an ash ceremony, and it had cheered her up immensely. The decision to allow the tech team to view and alter private, intimate moments had been an uncomfortable one to make, but she and Nick had decided together that it was for the best.

She was browsing the photos now, examining her own knotwork. Her real phone was in the safe at Wilde Investigations, so she had no photos of herself to compare it to, but she thought her knotwork was a little better than Nick’s. Part of that was surely the way they moved. Nick, in his submissive headspace, was easy to physically manipulate; he could hold positions for a long time if she ordered it, and he was able to almost predict where she needed him to move next. Judy had a hard time submitting like that. She wanted to be pretty, and she wanted to help, and she usually ended up playing along with the scene rather than losing herself in it. She wished she could be like Nick that way. He looked so gorgeous and serene during scenes, and when she bottomed, she never managed to achieve that kind of beauty.

It wasn’t wrong to have preferences. It wasn’t. Nick preferred to bottom: in the same way that she couldn’t really get into the right kind of submissive headspace, he could never really lose himself in the dominant role. Judy didn’t want to feel guilty about her preferences. All relationships were give
and take, and what she gave to Nick was just as valuable as what she accepted from him. It was just...

She loved it. When the mood was right and her head wasn’t shouting louder than her heart, she did lose herself in the dominant role. She loved binding his limbs with her best double column bars and smuggler’s knots, loved the precision and artistry in coils and hitches, got a rush from seeing the finished product. She loved having him over her lap, loved having him bent over or restrained, got a rush from hearing him whine or moan or both. She loved the way he quieted emotionally when she sent him to the corner. She loved the way his whole body would relax when she told him what to do after a long day of worry about his business and clients. She loved seeing him slip into subspace. She loved knowing that her actions helped put him there. More than anything, she loved that he loved it, that she could give him the precious gift of brain silence for a little while. He had long ago claimed her as his domme because he wanted that, and she had accepted him as her sub because she wanted it too. They both got what they wanted out of their D/s dynamic, even when they were playing different roles.

So why did she feel guilty for it?

Why did she have a moment of doubt every time they started a scene?

Why was she still questioning their tawse play from the party two weeks prior, when she had hit him much longer and much harder (and with much less playfulness) other times?

She checked the time on the upper right corner of her phone. She was still early. Nick, who’d gone with Eric and Adam to run some errand or other, had promised to meet her at the Treehouse, another local dungeon where Elaine’s needle class was taking place. Sadly, Judy had overestimated the amount of time it would take for her to get from Tundratown to the Rainforest District. If she left now to walk to the convenience store, she might be late to the class, but she didn’t want to lurk like a creeper for another 20 minutes waiting until she wouldn’t be unacceptably early.

She was Judy Hopps and she feared nothing...unless the thing in question could be offensive, or detrimental to her case, or harmful to someone she cared about. She frowned at the photo of Nick bound with his chest on the ground and his paws behind his knees, his rear high in the air, his eyes glassy and unfocused, a small smile on his face. He had expressed glee at the thought of some stuffy, inexperienced techie having to doctor that photo without blinking. When had she gotten socially awkward? She didn’t remember being this way as a child, and she’d gotten along just fine with her college peers and her classmates at the ZPA. Somewhere along the way, Judy’s world had shrunk down to herself, her career, and Nick, with other mammals occasionally sprinkled in so sparsely they almost didn’t count. She sometimes got coffee with Angel, but usually Nick came along. She was friendly with Ian and Finnick, but they didn’t really hang out. She usually just discussed kink with Madame Moon through text or private messaging on FetLick. She was on much better terms with her parents and siblings now, but they weren’t part of her new life, in the same way that her old schoolmates Sharla and Bobby and Penny weren’t part of her new life.

Other than Nick, she spent the most time with Hirsch and the Captain, and those were strictly professional relationships. Hirsch was friendly, but they were not friends. The only thing she knew about the Captain, a nonbinary tiger named Quinn Fangmeyer, was that they had at one time been a military interrogator but most of their history was classified. Rivers, the wolf from vice who’d once upon a time speculated that Judy had slept her way into her position, kept inviting Judy out for a beer at the Barrel...but then she’d say something horribly speciesist and pass it off as a joke, and Judy couldn’t figure her out, so she kept declining politely. Why, after all, would she spend time with someone who probably hated her when she could just go home and spend time with someone who loved her?
Her phone dinged and she opened the text from Nick: *May I send you a sexy photo?*

She laughed quietly and replied in the affirmative. Although at this point it was practically a given that the answer would be yes, they both always asked first. It was a nice reinforcement that at any time, either of them could say no to anything. When her phone dinged again, she opened the text eagerly and then felt a bit dizzy.

Either Eric or Adam had taken the series of photos. In the first, Nick stood almost perpendicular to the camera angle, but his eyes were on the camera; he had his tongue wrapped around the end of a long, rather lifelike dildo, his head tipped back slightly. In the second, his eyes were closed, and he had it halfway into his mouth. In the third, his eyes were open again, watering slightly, and the whole thing was stuffed into his mouth. It was long enough that even with the length of his muzzle, he had to be choking himself with it, or near enough. Judy bit down on her own fingers to keep from making any noise. That was so hot.

If he had his mouth on it, that meant he’d bought it, or been gifted it. It was his. What did he want it for? It was far too big to fit inside of her, and while it would likely fit inside of him, it wouldn’t be a comfortable fit. It must have been a gag gift, she concluded. Nick liked to joke around and make her laugh; he probably hadn’t known she’d find it surprisingly erotic. Maybe she could say something funny in response?

*I’ll be there in 15.*

Well, never mind, then. She couldn’t think of anything anyway. She was pretty good at matching his banter, except when it took a turn for the sexy, because that was a surefire way to fluster her. Nick wasn’t sexual like she was; he enjoyed it with her, exclusively, because she was Judy Hopps, not because it was sex. When he seriously flirted, or said something overtly sexual, it was to elicit a certain response he fully intended to follow up with action in the near future. She expected him to treat her nicely at this point, even though he could definitely be a bit of a jerk. It still felt like a gift when he did treat her well, and when had *that* happened?

When she’d joined the ZPD. She could trace a lot back to that moment, couldn’t she? Maybe Nick wasn’t wrong when he said she put up with too much. In the past two weeks, she’d had more positive social interaction than she had for *months* prior to this assignment. She had pushed past fears that had imposed limits she didn’t want or need. She had been wretched to Nick in a moment of ridiculous self-loathing, and the world hadn’t ended. It was a cold, ugly shock to realize that even though she had chased her dream and caught it, in some ways, she had *still* become her parents. Settling for less when she had the right to demand more. She had accepted sub-par treatment because she didn’t want it to get worse. She wanted to serve and protect, even if that meant playing nice with mammals who didn’t want to play nice with her. But Zootopia was *worth* serving and protecting. It was worth the frustration and digs at her species and watching her back even with those who were supposed to *have* her back.

...Right?

What was she thinking!? Of course the city was worth it. All of it.

“Luna? Is that you?”

Judy’s ears swiveled toward the sound and her head followed shortly after. It was Star, the lynx Judy and Nick – or, really, Oliver and Luna – had met at the Jungle. She smiled happily, pushing away her dark thoughts from before. She was just being dumb, anyway; it was the case messing with her, nothing more. “Hey, Star!”
Star squinted at her as she came up to the tree Judy was standing under. She realized she probably looked pretty shady, lurking outside the dungeon with her phone in her paw, just out of sight of any windows. She had to strain her neck to look Star in the eye, since rabbits were so much smaller than lynxes; Star was even taller than Nick, though turtled in her light green oversized sweater and sensible skirt, she looked smaller anyway. She returned Judy’s smile and asked, “What are you doing over here?”

“Just waiting until it won’t be rude to show up,” Judy replied, trying not to let her embarrassment show. “I got here earlier than I expected.”

“I think we can just go in,” said Star, brows furrowed.

Judy put her phone into her bag and said, “Then we should go. Care to join me, Miss Star?”

“I’d love to. Um. By the way, my name’s Linnea,” said the lynx. “I use a scene name at events, but I don’t mind if individual mammals know my name. Plus, I know yours, so it’s safer.”

Judy felt a little bad about not telling Linnea her real name, but there wasn’t much she could do about that until the case ended. She made a mental note, as they drifted toward the dungeon’s front door, to make it up to Linnea somehow, after the case was over, if she wasn’t too upset about the deception.

Arriving early, as it turned out, had had its perks. Judy had been required to purchase a membership card and give certain personal details to the zebra at the front desk, which had been a little embarrassing; in the restrictive business casual suit she was wearing for her Luna persona, it was too hard to jump up on top of the stool placed for smaller mammals, so she’d been forced to ask Star for a boost. At least now, she had a firm confirmation of her identity as Luna Evergreen. Her license was real, in that it was government sanctioned, even if the details on it were fake...but the bank card was barely passable.

As she sat in the front row – another perk of early arrival – between Nick and Linnea, she clutched the membership card in her paws, strangely proud of it. Luna and Oliver Evergreen belonged to something bigger. A community. And largely, nobody had been rude, or speciesist. Nobody had looked at them strangely or asked questions about their relationship. Nobody had told them they didn’t belong. Even while wearing a fake identity, Judy felt strangely at home among these like-minded mammals who were all ever so excited to watch an ocelot decorate another mammal with hypodermic needles.

Elaine was still setting up 5 minutes into the class, so Judy leaned over and asked Nick, “Did you actually buy that thing in your photos, or was it a gag gift?”

He snorted. “Good one.”

She blinked, thought about it for a moment, and then leaned her head back, trying not to be too exasperated. “Ollie. No.”

“Luna. Yes,” he countered with a teasing smile. He trailed his claw-tips from one shoulder to the other and settled his paw on the shoulder opposite him. That just wasn’t fair. She couldn’t focus on his terrible wordplay when he was being affectionate. Oh well. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t made equally terrible jokes before, and it was her unintended pun. “To answer your question, Adam got it for me.”

“Why?”
“Because I asked why he liked being throat-fucked,” he said quietly into her ear, so quietly that it was probable, through the din of mammals chatting and greeting each other, she was the only one who could hear. Although Judy usually preferred less crude phrasing, his voice always did things to her; the tone combined with the subject matter and the way one of his fangs “accidentally” caught on the edge of her ear made her sit up straight, her thighs and toes contracting. Neither she nor Nick fit properly on the seats; even Nick’s feet just barely brushed the end of the wooden chair they were sharing. There was no way he wouldn’t see her reaction.

Trying not to let her voice shake, she asked, “Oh?”

“Mammals who like that sort of thing,” he continued, still so quiet that he needed his mouth to rest against her ear, “like the feeling of helplessness. Being used. Adam says that for him, it’s not the dick, so much as it is the force; he can’t stop it, he can only gag and choke and accept it, and that moment of acceptance can be transcendent. Supposedly, it’s a unique experience, because there can’t be a safeword, just a gesture or series of noises. He suggested starting out with an air horn, because there is nothing less sexy than that.”

“Suggested?” Judy knew her eyes were wide. She dug her nails into her thighs and then relaxed her paws so as to avoid ripping holes in her skirt. Business casual clothing was horrendously expensive, and most of Luna’s wardrobe was borrowed. Think about money troubles and other unsexy things. Don’t think about – yeah, she was still thinking about it. “As in...is that something you-”

“All right, everyone,” Elaine called, clapping once to get the attention of the assorted mammals in the Treehouse classroom area. Judy couldn’t tell if the distraction was welcome or not. She wasn’t sure whether or not she wanted to hear Nick’s answer.

Nick took his nose out of her ear space, which made her relax a bit. Cripes, he was distracting, even when he wasn’t saying stuff like...well. She didn’t want to be aroused during a class. That would be weird, and likely uncomfortable for anyone with a keen sense of smell. Ugh, he’d probably done that on purpose! Nick was such a little brat sometimes.

“My name’s Elaine, and this is a class on needleplay. If you’re not here for that, you’re still welcome to stay. If you’re afraid of needles or blood, you should probably get out. Anyone need to leave before we get started?” No one moved, and the ocelot grinned widely and waved her paw up and down Susan’s body. “Good. Now, I have the lovely Susan here to assist me, and we’ve already discussed the scene, but I need to stress some things. Most of you will be bored. Some of you are new.

“Needleplay is definitely more RACK territory, which is great for mammals who know what they like. Not so much for mammals who are just starting out. The most important part of any RACK activity is the C: consensual. For needleplay especially, your consent needs to be an active discussion. None of that no means no birdshit, folks. Obviously no means no. More importantly, though, yes means yes, and that yes needs to be freely given. Coercion is a no. Guilt trips are a no. Using an existing master/slave dynamic as force is a giant hell no. Needles aren’t something you fuck around with. My personal view is that kink in general isn’t something you fuck around with; you all know best what your dynamic can and should be with long-term partners, but don’t be that piece of shit who uses because I said so as justification to do harm. Abusers don’t belong in our community. If it ain’t consensual, it ain’t kink. Anyone who disagrees can see themselves out right the fuck now.”

Judy relaxed against Nick. It was good to hear that her values were mirrored even by the more hardcore dommes. Sometimes she worried that she was too conservative, too careful. There was a real difference between the garbage that popular media claimed was BDSM and the real thing, but
from the sound of it, she and Nick were doing the right things.

“And that goes for subs, too,” added Susan, earning herself an approving smile from Elaine. She pointed at her own chest. “Remember that even though you’re the one making yourself vulnerable, your dominant has a lot to deal with. It’s their job to respect and work within your limits. It’s their job to protect you and keep you safe during a scene. If your top has hard limits, don’t push or try to guilt them into dominating or hurting you more than they’re comfortable with. Leeny and I are both into needleplay. After tonight, if one of you decides you’re not, don’t rush into it anyway. Reluctance on the domme’s part can lead to mistakes that might end up causing lasting damage.”

“Exactly. This is supposed to be fun. And with that, let’s jump right in.” Elaine clicked a button and a projector turned on, surprising Judy. The wall was apparently undecorated for a reason. The picture on the wall was of a naked tigress with buzzed patches all over her body, needles stuck through the skin. Attached to each needle was a strand of bright blue-beaded wire, making the tigress look like she had a skimpy dress on. It was a gorgeous sight. “Needles aren’t just for pain. It’s more like bondage than beating: it can be uncomfortable, or even painful, but most mammals do it for the art. As you can see here, needles are uniquely suited for artistry.”

She clicked the mouse on her laptop, which Judy hadn’t noticed before, and the picture changed to a hare with circular rings running up and down her arms and back. The hare’s arms were crossed in the front and wrapped around her hips, and running through each ring was a length of purple ribbon. Due to the positioning, the model was effectively bound; if she moved, the ribbon would tug on the rings, which would likely be painful. Elaine gestured to the screen. “Needleplay is more than just hypodermics; the term encompasses piercing, surgical stapling, and suturing as well. I got permission to use this artistic shot to show the versatility of piercing; it can be purely cosmetic, or it can be part of a bondage scene, or in some cases it can even be used as the frame for a shirt or dress. I don’t suggest trying that until the top and bottom are experienced, though. You don’t want the piercing to pull out of the skin. Not fun for anybody, not even the top. Trust me: I’m a sadist, I love blood, and I hate that.”

Nick’s claws dug ever so slightly into Judy’s shoulder. She tried not to smile. Whether he was into it or disturbed by it, only time would tell, but it was making him feel something, and that was a good sign.

“Because we don’t have a lot of time tonight,” Elaine continued, switching the screen to the tripod camera attached to the laptop via USB, “I’m going to skip over the beginner spiel. You know why you’re here. I’d rather be able to finish the demonstration than tell you stuff you already know. But before I do, I want to stress the importance of safe disposal. Always have a sharps container. Only put the needles in; wires and ribbon or string don’t belong, and if you’re doing bloodplay as well, neither do butterfly tubes or used vials. Dispose of those responsibly as well, but we don’t want some dumpster diver getting stuck with your used needles. You should already know whether your sub has blood-borne pathogens, but it’s not a for sure thing. Always err on the side of caution. Now, Susan, take off your shirt and lie down on your stomach.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Susan, and Nick’s claws dug in again.

Susan removed her tank top and lay down with her stomach on a large hospital pad across the massage table. Due to the angle of the camera, the large buzzed area on her back was projected on the wall, so that even the mammals in the back row would be able to see the details as Elaine worked. First, she sprayed Susan’s back with brown liquid Judy recognized as iodine and stepped back, pulling some gloves over her paws. Fortunately for her, her claws were retractable, so she didn’t need to tip them like Nick and Judy did during penetrative play. “If you have fur, make sure to shave or buzz it first. We prefer buzzing, just because shaving can pose a safety issue, but that means
being extra careful. Susan washed her back before this, and I’m sterilizing this patch anyway. I like
iodine because it looks pretty under her fur, but there are other things you can use. See me after if
you want more info.

“Needles come in different sizes, called gauges. You can use thicker ones if you want to cause actual
pain, or if you need a firm hold. I like to use the thinner ones for the kind of project we’re doing
tonight. We’re doing a basic cosmetic corset lacing; we don’t need a firm hold. You might have
come across some photos online that show lines of needles straight up and down, but that’s boring.
Most of you have at least passing familiarity with corsets; they’re designed to suck in your belly and
accentuate your hips. That means the lacing lines aren’t straight, they run along the body’s natural
curves. That’s what we’re doing tonight.”

Judy thought about the corset she’d worn to the party. She didn’t usually bother with “sexy”
clothing, because she liked being comfortable and Nick didn’t really care whether she wore a leather
corset or a paper sack, but she remembered it being hard to lace up. Her hips were naturally
pronounced compared to her waist, and the back had been curved dramatically. She could see why a
needle corset would look silly with straight lines. She glanced at Nick, who was entirely focused on
the scene. He didn’t look disgusted, so that was good.

“All right, here comes the fun part,” said Elaine with a wide grin, uncapping her first needle. It had a
light pink hub. Using one paw, she stuck the needle through Susan’s skin, guiding it out with the
sheath held between the fingers of her other paw. Susan sucked in air. “If you noticed, I used the
sheath to make sure the tip of the needle stayed where it needed to be. It’s a good way to avoid
needle sticks, which are scary as hell. Speaking of, if you do accidentally stick yourself, you’ll need
to cut away the hub of the needle and pull the body of it out with forceps. I have medical-grade
needle shears; you can also use dykes, but those are not as easy to use and you need a lot of strength.
It can be a really unpleasant experience for the sub, who’s probably already freaking out a little.
Spend the money on the shears. Needles are an expensive hobby anyway – here we go, second
needle.” She stuck Susan again, about half an inch below the first needle. This one had a blue hub.
Susan’s leg jumped as she breathed in sharply again. “I’m not capping these, since we’re not going
anywhere and I’m taking them out as soon as we’re finished here, but if you want, you can cap your
needles. I use erasers. Just cut them into little squares and push them onto the tips of the needles. It
helps them stay in place, and your sub can actually go places with your little art project. Just be
careful the hubs don’t get caught on anything.”

Susan hummed as Elaine stuck her again, another blue-hubbed needle half an inch below the first
blue one. It was not a musical hum. Elaine paused for a moment and asked, “You getting a little
lightheaded there, Su?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Susan replied breathily, and once again, Judy felt Nick’s claws in her shoulder. She
didn’t want to look away from the scene to check on him, though.

Elaine’s practiced paws sent another pink-hubbed needle through the skin half an inch below the
second blue one. “The nice thing about needles is that it doesn’t take much to give the bottom a
euphoric feeling. I have no masochistic tendencies, at all, but I get the same high. I love being the
bottom in a needle scene, partly because it’s the closest I ever get to subspace, and partly because I
like being pretty. Watch out for warning signs of a bad reaction, though. Lightheadedness is normal,
but if the bottom starts shaking or becomes unresponsive, you need to stop. Nobody wants anybody
going into shock.”

Judy’s heart pounded as she watched Elaine work mostly in silence, with occasional soft, happy little
moans from Susan as the needles punctured her skin. Needles went in, sounds came out. She felt like
a voyeur, intruding on an intimate moment as puncture after puncture seemed to intensify Susan’s
responses. It wasn’t merely erotic, it was downright sexual; Susan’s toes were curling, and it almost seemed like the needles were a type of penetrative play. Judy was going to chew her lip raw if she wasn’t careful. Was she supposed to be turned on, or was she just weird? Needleplay was designed to be arousing, wasn’t it?

Nick’s claws were starting to hurt a little. She snuggled into him, hoping to relieve some of the pressure, but she couldn’t guarantee that her nails wouldn’t be digging into his skin, if her paw were resting somewhere on him. As it was, she imagined that a softer wooden chair would have nail marks in the underside, as hard as she was gripping it.

“Now,” Elaine said briskly, her voice like a slap in the face, “usually I use more needles than this, but in the interest of time, we’re only going to do 16, 8 on each side. See how they’re lined up according to the curve of her back? I’m not a huge fan of the placement on this one, hang on.”

She pulled the needle out, allowing a little blood to seep out of each end of the puncture, and Judy wondered why that seemed sexual too. Quickly, Elaine stuck Susan in a better spot so that the needles were all even. She pulled off her gloves, threw them in the trashcan by her leg, and pulled on a new pair. “Don’t be shy about changing your gloves. It’s better to be safe than sorry, right? You want to sanitize everything, even your ribbons, but I did that before we started so we wouldn’t have to take the time to do so. Make sure your ribbons are made of something that can be rubbed with alcohol and dry without spotting, or you’ll have weird coloring on your lacing. I’m using two lengths of ribbon – purple, because it’s my favorite color – to mimic the look of a real corset. Make sure to match the ends of the ribbon so that they’re even when you tie them; wind each side of the middle around the hubs of your first needles like so.”

Judy watched in fascination as Elaine expertly wound the ribbon so that the top didn’t fold. She could tell it was going to be beautiful at the end. As she crossed the ribbons to wind them on the second needles, she continued, “A real corset should be slightly uneven, so you want to wind your top ribbon around five needles on each side before tying the first bow, like so. Then you want to do the same thing, starting from the bottom and lacing upward for the last three needles.”

The finished product, once Elaine finished tying off the bottom ribbon, looked like the back of a real corset, and Judy had been right: it was beautiful. Elaine helped Susan sit up. Susan was shaking slightly, but her smile was blissful, and her eyes were more or less clear; it was just the endorphins flooding her system. The lacing shifted slightly with her movement, but it held, and it didn’t sag like Judy had thought it might. Elaine snapped off her gloves and threw them away. “This is a reasonable project, but it’s super basic. You can do so much more. A lot of mammals like to do dreamcatchers or other designs. You can actually take forceps and feed some sanitized fishing line through the holes in hypodermic needles and take the needles out, if you want some beaded body art to wear dancing or to parties without worrying about catching the needles on anything. If you’re really looking to keep the line in, you can suture it down. Okay, Su, are you ready for me to take them out?”

“I guess so,” Susan said, theatrically reluctant.

Elaine snorted and pulled on another pair of gloves. “Lie down again so you don’t drip anywhere but on the mat. Listen, when you pull the needles out, no matter how gentle you are, the bottom’s gonna bleed, so if you can’t handle that, needleplay is definitely not for you. Some mammals bandage the holes after, but I never do; it’s not exactly an open wound, and so long as you clean off the blood properly and nobody touches it, it’s fine. You do want to keep bandages on paw for more intense bloodplay, though.”

There was a pause while Elaine carefully unwound the ribbons and set them to the side on the medical pad. As she pulled out the first pink needle, she said, “I guess I should talk to you about that,
too. When you’re using needles for bloodplay, you need training. Nurses and phlebotomists should be fine already, but when you’re going into a vein, there’s a lot more you need to be careful of. I’m not kidding on this. Don’t try it without being trained. Sutures and staples are different: staples are the easiest to use, just because it’s a hard push and then it’s done, but you want to be careful about removing them. Do not use staples without a surgical staple remover on paw. They come together in a ring shape under the skin; if you yank them out, you’ll rip the skin. I guess some masochists might like that, but it’ll be bloody, so you need to prepare for that. Sutures are harder to use and harder to control, but they’re a lot of fun. You don’t need training, per se, but it’s a good idea to get some. I learned suturing from a mortician; medical professionals are concerned with treating wounds, but morticians use sutures largely for cosmetic purposes. They’re more likely to be precise and know small, pretty stitches. You can learn from MewTube if you don’t want to bother learning from a professional, but your art will be better if you have some paws-on training."

Judy looked sideways at Nick. He looked...intense. For as long as she’d known him, he’d been good at absorbing information; he was committing all of this to memory. This was great! He was interested! Her chest felt hot. He was interested. A glance at Linnea showed that the lynx was much less interested in needles, but Judy supposed it wasn’t for everybody.

Once the needles were all out and in the sharps container, Elaine sprayed Susan’s back again and pressed a disposable cloth carefully to her back, soaking up extra blood and helping sterilize the holes. She folded it and put it in a plastic bag along with the used ribbons, and finally, she pulled off her gloves and threw it all away. Susan stretched, humming pleasantly, and Elaine told the group, “Don’t recycle any of this stuff. Don’t be gross. Be safe, do your research, and don’t be afraid to ask for help. I’m PurpleKitty on FetLick; feel free to reach out to me, and if I don’t have time to help you or I don’t have information on a particular aspect of needleplay, I’ll point you in the right direction. The Zootopia Cork Society needs this room in 15 minutes, so we all need to get out quick, but I hope you enjoyed the presentation, and I hope to hear from at least some of you soon.”

There was a sudden loudness as the group stood and spoke among themselves. Speaking to both Nick and Linnea, Judy asked, “What did you two think?”

“I think it’s a little too hardcore for me,” Linnea admitted, stretching her arms above her head. “I watched Spencer do his dreamcatcher, but hearing all the details involved...it seems less cool. I know it’s probably safer than knifeplay, but I dunno, I’m not as into it as I thought I’d be. What about you two?”

“I’m in love,” Judy said frankly, reaching out to hold Nick’s paw. Now that they were standing among the group that was drifting toward the door, she felt tiny.

“That photo of the hare using ribbons as bondage caught my eye,” said Nick, squeezing gently. Linnea raised a brow. “Oh?”

“I’d rather do it with needles instead of piercing, but it would be amazing to be bound like that. It’s half physical, half psychological. I’d have to make a conscious decision to stay still, especially if there were other things going on.” His voice lowered, and so did his muzzle, until it was next to Judy’s ear like it had been earlier. “That thing Adam bought me, for example? To answer your question, I want to see how it feels.”

Judy thought she might burst. Or faint. Linnea looked amused at their exchange, but Judy could hardly focus for a moment. How incredibly unfair. Their friend shrugged her shoulders. “Well, I have some errands to run before bed, but it was good to see you. Are you coming to the party here next week?”
“We probably will,” Nick said, because Judy couldn’t say anything.

“Great. Hopefully I’ll see you then. Have a good night.”

“Bye,” Judy said blankly, her mind still stuck on what Nick had said.

When Linnea slipped away, Madame Moon – Emilia – took her place, and Judy had to stretch her neck. It was a good way to pull her attention back to the present. Emilia took in the sight of Judy and Nick pressed together and smiled fondly. “Tonight there are two different events going on: a gathering for male-presenting submissives and a gathering for female-presenting dominants. Eric and Adam want Oliver to come, and I’d like to invite you, Luna. They’re not really kink parties, but rather social gatherings for like-minded mammals to talk and exchange ideas and drink wine. What do you say?”

Nick looked at Judy with such a soft expression that she felt embarrassed and flattered and just...loved. “Do you mind, Luna?”

“Go have fun,” she told him with a smile. “I’ll try to make friends too.”

He bounded off to find his new wolf buddies and Judy didn’t think it was possible to love him any more than she did in that moment.

Three glasses in, Judy thought she should probably regret accepting the first glass of cabernet sauvignon, but it was delicious, and the world was nicely fuzzy around the edges. She felt warm and wasn’t worried about how she looked or what she might say. Everyone was taller than she, but that was okay; she just sat on the tiger-sized table instead of on a chair and she could see everyone.

The gathering was small. Judy, Elaine, Emilia, another wolf named Iris, and a tigress named Yvonne. Nobody was using scene names, so Judy had surmised that they all knew each other, and by now it had proven to be true.

“If you say so,” Iris said, holding up her much larger wine glass, “switches have the most fun.”

Judy had no idea how the conversation had started. She felt drunk. She’d never had a hangover before, but she knew she wasn’t going to love waking up early. None of that really mattered; she clinked her glass against Iris’ glass and said, “Absolutely.”

“You’re a switch,” Emilia asked, sounding surprised, unless Judy missed her guess.

“More or less. I bottom on occasion.” Why did her voice sound so far away? Reminder: she was Luna, married to Oliver. Luna, Oliver. Luna, Oliver. “Ollie doesn’t love topping and I don’t love bottoming, but it’s – it’s important, right? We can’t really be good dommes unless we know what it feels like. It’s so hard to be vulnerable, and my fox just does it, he just trusts me, and I really want him to know that I trust him too. Also when he puts my arms in our bed cuffs he can make me cum more easily. It’s so freaking hard to get off sometimes but when he can get me to stop squirming it’s easier for both of us! Or. Last week I wanted to run away from a hard conversation so I made him keep me cuffed.”

“Oh my God, that’s adorable,” Elaine said. Some wine sloshed out of her glass and onto her flannel shirt, but she just laughed. “You’re perfect for each other. I was kinda worried when we met, because it’s like – you’re prey, and you never really know with interspecies stuff. No offense, but rabbits have a reputation for being closed off.”

“Leeny,” Emilia scolded.
“No, no, she’s right,” Judy acknowledged, chatty because of the wine and because she felt more comfortable in an all-female group. Apparently that was a thing. The energy was different; even though everyone was much larger than she, Judy felt safe with them in a way that was rare. “It’s because of what happened after the Agreements. We helped broker them and then got dumped there in the areas nobody wanted, and we made it our own – thousands of years ago, you know, everybody says it shouldn’t matter anymore, but a lot of bunnies resent other species who moved back into the country areas because rabbits made that land their own. We made a living and a culture, and it’s still a thing today that parents tell their kits to settle for less. To be grateful we’re alive and not pets. And then the species who wanted to get rid of us came back and took advantage of what we built. This generation is a little different; we’re not our parents. We’re not afraid like our parents are. Probably because of the internet, social media, that kind of thing. Kits these days just roll their eyes when their parents tell them how dangerous other species are, but the closed-off reputation is spot on for our parents, and their parents, and so on.”

“Really? They don’t teach that in school,” Yvonne said, either thoughtfully or doubtfully, Judy wasn’t sure.

Judy snorted, because it was funny and because she felt like making noise. “They wouldn’t, would they? They don’t teach about the mange panic in the ’70s either, even though there are still laws on the books that require foxes to go through lots of invasive tests before they can be treated in the main part of the hospital, and they don’t teach about the gross laws they had prohibiting “pack behavior” in the ‘20s. Everybody wants to look good, even if it means erasing parts of history we should learn from.” She frowned. “Sorry, I swear I’m not usually such a downer. Apparently my brain wants to give a passionate speech about history. I’m just gonna fill my mouth with wine and listen to y’all.”

Oof. She hadn’t meant for that to slip out. She was still a little embarrassed of her old accent, no matter how mild it had been in the first place. Why was that? Eh, who cared, it didn’t matter. These were nice mammals. So nice.

“I’m cutting you off, Luna,” said Emilia, sounding amused.

“Aww.”

“You’ve had three glasses of wine, plus a shot of tequila. I don’t want you to die.”

“I’d never had tequila before! It’s like Gazelle says, try everything.”

This prompted laughter from the rest of the group. That was good. Judy liked laughter and she liked making mammals laugh honestly. They were laughing at something she’d said, not at her. It was different. She hadn’t realized it until just then, but it was different.

“Here, drink some water,” Elaine said with a smile, pouring herself a glass as well. Judy accepted it gratefully. She was thirsty, and Elaine’s voice was pretty, and so was the water glass. Little diamond-shaped indents made the bottom of the glass sparkle even in the dim light of Yvonne’s dining room.

“I agree with Luna. Try everything. Or at least everything that isn’t a hard limit,” said Iris with a smirk. Emilia clinked their glasses together. It was a fun exchange to watch. Judy was pretty sure she’d done the same thing, but it was hard to keep a train of thought running when she wasn’t speaking. Was the world tipping?

Okay, yeah, she was drunk.

“You know what, I think I’m gonna take Luna home,” said Emilia. The room looked different. Oh, wow, she’d actually lost a little time. Her glass was empty, though, so that meant she would probably
sober up a little in the car.

She nodded. “That’s probably best.”

(Her voice sounded like the bottom of a syrup bottle, slow, thick, drip-drip-drip.)

“It was great to meet you, Luna,” said someone from above her head. They were all above her head.

“Goodbye, Elaine-Iris-Yvonne. Thanks for having me.”

“Yeah, feel free to come to our next get-together,” said...Yvonne, definitely Yvonne, because her lips were moving.

“C’mon, Luna, up you go.” Judy grabbed Emilia’s paw for support. Her legs wobbled a little bit and she laughed because it was funny. Then she let out a weird surprised squeaking sound when her feet left the table and the world turned sideways. Emilia’s voice again. “Sorry, honey, but I can’t think of a safe way to lead you out. Don’t worry, Yvonne had to do the same thing for Leeny last time.”

“I am definitely a lightweight,” Elaine said cheerfully. “See you around, Luna.”

“Bye, everyone,” she replied, and watched the house go by. Wow, that wood paneling was pretty.

She would definitely come back. Probably she wouldn’t have any alcohol, though. Could she be the designated driver? No, of course not, she didn’t even own a car! And also she was smaller than everyone else. Elaine could probably fit, but nobody else.

She snuggled into the large seat with a smile and smelled the cork leather. It smelled good. Everything was nice. She wanted to do this again sometime.

As the car rolled to a stop, Judy’s eyes opened. She stretched in her seat, rubbed her eyes, and realized she couldn’t look around, but she assumed they were at a stoplight. Emilia glanced at her and said, “Good morning, Sunshine.”

“I hope it’s not morning,” she mumbled, licking her teeth. They seemed a little too dry.

A quiet pause, and then Emilia asked hesitantly, “Can I ask you a question? Not as Luna Evergreen, but as Officer Hopps.”

“You can ask, but I don’t know if I can answer.”

“Fair enough. What I still don’t understand,” said Emilia, pushing on the gas again, “is the idea that the killer must be one of us because of the shibari. It’s not that uncommon. You and Nick have done some pretty intense bondage scenes without being in the community.”

“Shibari isn’t uncommon, no,” Judy replied, wrinkling her nose. She didn’t think she was drunk anymore, but she wasn’t fully sober, either, and her lips felt weird. At least this was a topic she was familiar with; she knew the details backward and forward, and as her point of contact, Emilia was allowed to know the basics for her own safety. “What’s uncommon is the specifics. The vic was dumped in a sewer in the megafauna part of the Rainforest district. It was a miracle she was found at all. But she was bound post-mortem in imported, untreated hemp.”

Emilia hissed. Judy couldn’t blame her. Hemp rope was fine for binding animals with shaved fur or bare skin, so long as the rope was treated and washed properly, but terrible for animals whose fur covered their bodies. It was why most mammals went with synthetic fibers, even if that meant using
more knots and hitches.

“...and furthermore, it was an asymmetrical binding that incorporated the shattered elbows and knees. Have you ever tried to bind a corpse?”

“Can’t say I have, no,” the wolf answered dryly.

“It’s different. Corpses don’t move like live mammals do; even after rigor mortis fades, they’re hard to manipulate. And they feel heavier because they don’t mold to movement. So not only did the killer need to have the time and supplies – not to mention the strength to deadlift a fox squirrel and carry her into the sewers somehow – but also the experience and expertise to do that kind of ropework without any help at all from the vic, since she was dead. That means a perfect vision and perfect follow-through. You could probably do it, and I’m guessing Master Juniper from River Valley could do it, but otherwise I can’t think of any local riggers who are small enough to work with those particular ropes and experienced enough to see the end before they begin. Even you and Nip are pushing the size limit given the amount of detail that went into the...project.”

“Okay, yeah, that makes a lot more sense.”

Judy sighed and stared at the glove box, ears drooping, mildly frustrated despite the amazing class and gathering she’d just attended. She was tired. Scared, too, and without the alcohol to distract, everything was coming back to her. These mammals were good ones, for the most part, and they didn’t deserve to have cops sniffing around all the time just because the kind of fun they had was nontraditional. Emilia didn’t deserve to be caught up in an investigation that was probably far bigger than a single zoicide. Judy wanted to give Sarah a voice from beyond the grave, but the cost was potentially large enough that she had to wonder if Sarah would want it paid.

No. She couldn’t think of it that way. She had to think like a cop. That was her job.

“What’s wrong, Judy,” Emilia asked. She was more insightful than Judy had expected, though she wasn’t sure why; after all, the wolf was a professional dominatrix. That required a lot of insight.

“I just...this case isn’t...I feel like maybe I’m getting you into something that’ll get you hurt. I know you said you’re willing to accept the risks, but what about your job? Your client base – what if they won’t come to you anymore? Or-”

“You worry too damn much about the mammals you care about.” Emilia’s voice was quiet, but she didn’t sound angry. Judy looked over at her to see a small smile across the wolf’s muzzle. “It’s easy to forget you’re a cop, because you actually care about us, the mammals in the city you’re serving. You know what? This could be bad for my job, but if I’m not willing to risk it, I’m not the kind of good mammal I’d like to think I am. I didn’t know Sarah very well, but she was one of us. My community is too important to me to just sit back when I know I can do something.”

“You’re a good mammal. I’ve always admired that about you: even in your job, you put your clients first. I remember that weekend you didn’t sleep because one of your clients was in crisis.”

“It was awful. Not that I’d ever say that to anyone else, but as a fellow domme, I think you can understand just how terrifying it is to have that kind of power. That whole weekend I worried about saying the wrong thing. Setting him off. I could have called an ambulance, but hospitals can’t really do much without consent, and I gave him the number for a therapist but there was nothing anyone could do over the weekend. Technically he wasn’t my responsibility, but...”

“You couldn’t sit back when you knew you could do something.”
“I bet you and Nick don’t really go through that, do you?”

Judy laughed quietly. “You and I haven’t really spoken candidly until recently, have we? There’s been a little of that from both of us. Every bit of grief is worth it, though. I’m a better mammal for loving him, and I think he feels the same.”

“I know what you mean. Love makes us strong. Do you think you and Nick are going to try needleplay sometime?”

Her toes curled again. She hoped Emilia didn’t notice. “We’re both open to it. He said he wants me to try that ribbon bondage thing, and I’ve been thinking it might be neat to have some pictures of a corset lacing on my back.”

“Start small,” Emilia advised, “but I can see why those would appeal to both of you. Just think: you’d get to shave him, or at least buzz him, which is a more erotic experience than you’d expect. And needleplay is basically fucking without the sex, so there’s that aspect of it. You love each other. Winding the ribbons would take precision in a way that rope bondage doesn’t, and the finished product...you wouldn’t just have his body bound, but his brain, too.”

She bit her lip, embarrassed at how much that affected her. Maybe it was dumb, but she wanted the brain thing especially. Nick had proved to possess a surprising amount of willpower; she hadn’t expected it from someone so hedonistic that his wardrobe consisted of expensive silk shirts and ties even when he was homeless, but he could even sit quietly without moving while she blew him. “That does sound nice.”

They were both quiet as the car moved. Judy felt small against the seat, but she didn’t mind. Emilia wasn’t dangerous. As Emilia pulled the car up next to the apartment building in Tundratown and Judy took off her seatbelt, the wolf said, “Hey, Judy? Don’t worry about me. I chose to help. But...take care of yourself.”

“I will,” she replied, pushing open the door. It took a lot of strength, but she made it without having to try more than once.

Before she had the chance to shut the door, Emilia added teasingly, “And have your fox take care of you too! I can smell you from all the way over here!”

“Oh my God,” Judy moaned, trying not to be self-conscious. So she had noticed. That was all right, it wasn’t like they hadn’t been talking about sexy things, right? Emilia had practically spelled out a fantasy right there in the car. She shut the door and wobbled into the building, trying to gain her bearings. It felt a little like she had sea legs. She was never going to drink again.

Unfortunately, the elevator was made for larger mammals, and Judy’s head didn’t even come up to the grip bar. She had a whole three floors in which she imagined tying Nick to it, reaching into his pants and hoping nobody came in. It was an innocent fantasy because she never would take that risk, but it was sort of – very – arousing to consider. It wasn’t really that she had any exhibitionist tendencies, but the danger was exciting.

By the time she got into the apartment, she was feeling hot, but Nick wasn’t there. She wanted to have sex, but Nick wasn’t there, and she was dizzy and turned on and it was uncomfortable. She wanted to go to sleep and she wanted to shower and she really, really wanted to have sex, or at least some kind of release. They had a few toys here, didn’t they? Yeah, there was a whole box of stuff. In the bedroom, she fell to her knees and pulled the box out from under the bed. She didn’t bother with the light, deciding to choose something by feel. There: a silicone vibrator with a large swoop meant for insertion and two prongs meant for clitoral stimulation. She kicked off her skirt, shucked
her jacket and shirt, and threw them on top of the hamper. Who cared if they looked nice? She had to get them dry cleaned anyway, and she was tired and horny and anyway they were Luna’s clothes, not Judy’s.

She heaved herself onto the bed, bit her lip, and stroked her belly, sort of wishing Nick was there because he was good at getting her off and toys never really measured up, especially when she was using them on herself. She slipped her fingers under the crotch of her undies and spread her labia carefully, touching the tip of the dildo to the fabric stretched over her clitoris with the other paw. Cripes, how long had it been? A week? Why was she so suddenly turned on just by the thought of Nick bound like that? She felt raw and swollen and even the gentlest setting made her hips and thighs clench. Her underwear made a nice barrier between the silicone of the toy and her sensitive clit, a bit of friction that softened the blows of vibration. Her lower back flexed as she softly circled the dildo, trying to find the perfect spot.

It wasn’t hard to see why mammals ignored the female orgasm. It was hard to apply consistent pleasure to her own body, even as sensitive and needy as she was. She couldn’t imagine how much more difficult it would be if she didn’t know the ins and outs of clitoral stimulation. She took a moment to appreciate Nick, whose enthusiasm for pleasing her often played out in dedication to her sexual satiation.

Judy’s whole body – there it is – twitched as she got her paw in the right position, the toy vibrating against her from the bottom left. Or was it the top right? Who cared? She switched the setting to a pulse, short-long, short-long, and turned up the intensity. She didn’t want to prolong her orgasm, she just wanted it over with. To feel better after being turned on and off again too many times that night.

Nick has buzzed lines on his arms and legs and back, something like 60 needles of different gauges running up and down the lines, and a beautiful green ribbon that matches his eyes has been woven around the needle hubs and corked ends. He’s kneeling, the ribbon acting as a bondage rope holding his limbs in place, and his eyes close in pleasure as he opens his mouth –

Judy moaned and pulled aside the crotch of her underwear, placing the end of the dildo directly against her clit with a jerk. Oh, that was good, and the bright light pulsed in time with the toy, and Nick wraps his lips around a the long dildo, strapped to a pair of gray hips, they’re Judy’s hips, and he sucks on it like his life depends on it, and her knees went up as she pulled her labia open further and she jerked again with a gasp and Nick’s eyes fly open to meet hers when she moves closer, one leg between his, and pushes forward into his throat and he might be trying to moan but he’s gagging around the tip of her strap-on and he sucks and sucks her inside his mouth even more and Judy could hardly breathe, pushing her hips into the vibrator as she pushed it against herself and she was there, she was close, she could feel the end creeping toward her and Judy thrusts into his willing mouth and watches his eyes water, listening to him gag and gag, feeling his hard-on grow or pulse against her calf every time she pushes into his throat and she came with a cry that sounded halfway to agonized, but she came, and her heart beat so harshly in her chest.

She tried to catch her breath, but the images played over and over in her mind, making her toes curl. It was an innocent fantasy, really. In her imagination, Nick had wanted it, had wanted to choke on a strap-on, had loved being bound so precariously that staying immobile was more of a mental thing than a physical one. She knew from their earlier conversation that he would be open to it. He’d been thinking about it longer than she had. But now that the fantasy was over and her orgasm was settling, was she open to it? Could she bear to do that to him?

I want to see how it feels, he’d said to her, sending a thrill from her ears to her pelvis. Could she bear to keep that from him?
She would think about it after her shower. She would get clean physically, and then she would consider everything. All she needed to do was get up from the bed, throw her undies in the hamper, and start the water. Any second now, that was what she’d do. After she caught her breath. After her heart calmed down. After she could open her eyes. She would think about

The next time she opened her eyes it was 10 AM and neither her underwear nor the dildo were anywhere in sight. She was curled up in Nick’s arms feeling warm and safe, fully rested for the first time in over a month. She sighed, relaxed further into him, and closed her eyes again.

Nick was watching her, stroking the outside of her thigh gently. Judy didn’t mind. Although it had taken her a couple of years, she was at a place now where it was a nice way to wake up, soft breaths ruffling her fur and light touches easing her out of sleep. Due to conflicting schedules, waking up at the same time was rare for them, and the affectionate contact made her want to stay there longer. She had never been much of a snuggler but Nick was different. Part of why she trusted him so much was that he’d never asked her to. He’d simply been there, had accepted her, flaws and fears and overbearing personality and all, with minimal judgment. He had set the example by putting his well-being in her paws and it had been surprisingly easy to follow suit.

“Morning,” she said softly, trying to decide whether she wanted the pleasure of stretching or the pleasure of his gentle touch. She decided to stretch, but keep as much contact with him as possible.

“Morning,” he replied, propping his head up on one paw and moving his other to rub her side. He looked nice as a silver. It wasn’t exactly a surprise; he was handsome generally. Happiness was a good look on him, and these days, he was happy more often than not. “You slept forever.”

“Sorry.”

He shook his head slightly, cupping his head more firmly. “No, I’m impressed. You always wake up at sad o’clock in the morning. You look better.”

“I feel better,” she affirmed, pleased to know that Nick had noticed. It wasn’t just a psychological trick she was playing on herself, if it was obvious on the outside too. “Did you clean me up last night or did I just have a dream about sex toys?”

“I cleaned up the bed and your toy. Wiped you down a little too, since you wouldn’t wake up. You still need a shower.”

“Ugh.”

He sat up. She didn’t, although she mourned the contact a little. With some curiously adorable expression, Nick said, “There’s no rush. Anyway, I want to try out a massage trick I learned last night. Yes? No?”

“Like I’d say no to that,” she teased. “Do I need to be on my back or my stomach?”

“On your back.”

She turned over and watched him move; he pulled down the covers and settled between her calves, picking up her right leg and lifting it a little. For some reason, even though Nick was recognizably himself as a silver, Judy was taken aback every time she saw her own temporarily black fur. It looked out of place in his paws, as though her fox were handling some other bunny. She didn’t think she’d mind too much if he did, but he never would. They both worked too hard and too long for that to even be a reasonable discussion. Outside of this case, date nights had gone from twice per week, to once per week, and then just whenever they could match their schedules and weren’t exhausted,
and *oh, yes.* He pushed her leg until her knee was bent and the upward pressure on her foot was stretching her tendons, and while he did so, he knuckled her soleus.

“Oh, that’s amazing,” she moaned, aware that it sounded a bit too obscene for the situation but unable to care. His thumb pushed into the middle of her foot where her metatarsals were, and although there was slight pain, it was accompanied by such relief that the pain was worth it.

“Whoever told you to massage both places at once is a lovely mammal who deserves all the nice things.”

“A guy whose name probably isn’t really Slave Red,” he replied, squeezing the leg muscle a few times. She arched her back like she would if she were aroused, even though she wasn’t. It wasn’t really any kind of erotic or sexual contact, but certain parts of her were reacting as though it was. It just felt so *good.* He switched to the other leg and she moaned again, bliss overtaking her.

“Your paws are made of magic,” she said, unable to keep her eyes open.

“My paws are made of meat. That sound you just made was magic,” he countered. She could *hear* his snotty grin, but she didn’t care. She hadn’t noticed how tense her legs and feet were, but now that he was releasing that tension, she couldn’t understand *how* she hadn’t noticed. It built up, she supposed. A little pain at a time, infinitesimal steps up so that she simply adjusted.

In order to keep herself grounded, she asked, “How was last night? Did you make friends?”

He set her leg down on the bed. She opened her eyes to see him looking at his paws. “Last night was great. I want to talk to you about something, but I don’t want to if that made you feel too good.”

It was important, then. “I’m fine. It did feel good, but I’m not drunk or anything.”

“Good. Last night was great,” he repeated, appraising her. She didn’t know what he saw, but she hoped he liked whatever it was. “I had a pretty good talk with the guys, and a pretty common theme was how lucky Oliver was to have a mistress like Luna. Now, I know you don’t like that term, so I’m not going to use it, but that’s how they see us, Carrots. To the mammals who meet us, you look like my Mistress, capital M. And I realized...I’d be happy if you were. I’d be *proud.* I want to make it clear here that I’m not saying this to push you. If you say no, that’s it, the answer’s no. But I want Luna to be Oliver’s mistress. I want her to own him. There’s a part of me that has always wanted that, but when we’re not us, when we’re allowed to explore parts of ourselves that don’t have to carry back over to our real selves, it feels like a real possibility.”

“Why,” she asked, flabbergasted. Her chest felt hot and there were surely invisible eyes on the back of her head, invisible ears invading their space. She could feel her legs trying to curl in tighter. She couldn’t help it. She had always railed against the idea of that kind of dynamic, that kind of long-term power imbalance. “Why would you want me to own you?”

“Because every time you take control, you make me feel *safe,*” he explained, tracing the inside of her knee with a claw. She watched him warily, unable to make the connection. Safe? How was that *safe?* How could that *ever* be safe? He met her eyes and continued, “You make me feel strong. You make me feel loved. You make me see myself as you see me.”

“I don’t see how that’s safe,” she replied meekly.

He sighed. His whole face softened, and she had no idea what to make of that, either. “We’ve had this discussion before, but I don’t think I’ve ever actually said this concretely, so here’s the unpolished truth: I’m braver and smarter and happier when I’m following your orders. You taught me how to love myself and how to forgive my own past. You taught me how to trust others and how
to connect. I’m not an idiot; if you order me to walk off a cliff, I’m not going to do it. But I know you won’t order me to walk off a cliff, and in fact, you’ll order me to stop walking if you see a cliff that I don’t know about. There’s freedom in submission, Judy. My biggest enemy has always been my own brain, and submitting to you helped, and helps, me defeat it. It wouldn’t be the same for you if you were to have a mistress or master or whatever, I get it, and that’s okay. And it’s okay if this is the last time we ever talk about it. You already own me. I’m already yours. What you feel about that information is your business unless you want to share it. But Oliver would like it very much if Luna would consider being his mistress – of course, he’d call her Madame or Milady or Ma’am or something more acceptable to her – even just while they’re out in public. I’m not asking for a forever thing, or even for a full-time thing, if you can’t handle it. Just a trial run. Fantasy fulfillment, while we’re roleplaying anyway.”

She could see echoes in his speech, if she were completely honest with herself. She could recall instances where he’d called her Ma’am when she gave him a direct order, or when he was diving into subspace. He liked to kneel at her feet, to defer to her judgment, even if he could occasionally be bratty. In just a few years, he had transformed from a disconnected, vaguely cowardly con artist into a fierce and brave fox who used his smarts to help mammals instead of cheat them. She didn’t think she could take credit for any of it; she would have continued to love him had he continued as a street hustler, and she had never asked him to change at all, let alone change for her. Still, she knew that using a system of rewards and punishments had given him the courage to make that change for himself.

Realization. Clarity.

Judy was scared of Nick’s submission because being under someone else’s control was terrifying. She didn’t see freedom in it, she saw theft of power. But she was thinking as herself: a small mammal who’d never had power, who wasn’t supposed to have power, who’d had her power stolen from her more than once. Rabbits were supposed to be submissive to other species. According to society, she was supposed to be prey, emotionally and sexually and even physically. Unlike country rabbits, city rabbits had weird male-dominated gender roles that were expected to be followed, as she had found out the hard way in college. And there was certainly a historical aspect to consider. There hadn’t been any real chance of being caged and marked and used as pets or amusements for centuries now, but the cultural stereotypes still existed: bunnies were dumb, bunnies would even breed out in public, bunnies were scared little creatures who were only good for food and entertainment. But Nick…

Nick was a fox. Society expected him to be a lowlife. He was expected to be a predator, emotionally and sexually and even physically. Ancestral predators were pointy and sharp, and for a long time, that had been seen as an inherent inequality. When a species was naturally equipped and naturally inclined to hunt and kill and eat other mammals, it was intrinsically a position of power, and many small prey genuinely feared that one day the social code would be broken and they’d be forced to hide or become dinner. Submitting to Judy, someone who might have been a nice meal once upon a time, would be a subversion in itself, a great big fuck you to a society that marginalized both of them.

It was so easy to forget that even though they were similar, they had fundamental differences. They were not the same. She didn’t have to understand the concept of submission-as-freedom to acknowledge it as a valid view, and she didn’t have to share his approach to submission to respect it. And it didn’t have to be forever. Luna Evergreen wasn’t hampered with the same baggage as Judy Hopps, and Oliver Evergreen didn’t have the same trauma as Nick Wilde. They could do anything they wanted. They could do what Judy had promised herself she’d do a long time ago and then again last night: try everything.

“We’ll have to write everything down,” she warned, trying not to be embarrassed about the shake in
her voice. It was easier when she saw Nick’s warm, excited smile. “I mean we don’t have to do a contract or anything, that’s weird. But if we want each other safe, we…”

“It’s us,” Nick said after a moment of silence, running his left paw along the curve of her hip and leaning forward to settle with his paws on each side of her hips and his chest between her knees. “You’re great, and I’m me, so between the two of us we’ll work it out.”

“We will, won’t we?”

He bent his neck and kissed her inner thigh. “Now, a matter of equal importance: may I have my Queen’s permission to lick her until she tells me to stop?”

“Permission granted, provided she can grant you a boon of equal value,” she replied with a smile of her own.

It didn’t have to be scary, she thought, and then his tongue swept over her vulva and thought was *highly overrated*.

**Chapter End Notes**

I've never actually met someone who can get off on vaginal penetration alone, except in kink scenarios where they've been trained to cum on command, but that's an entirely different situation. I'm sure these magical unicorns exist somewhere, I've just never heard of them. (I have, however, heard about people who fake orgasms during vaginal sex with no other stimulation, because they think they're supposed to be able to get off on it.)

This chapter ended up having not much in it, I know. It probably could have been mashed up against next chapter, but next chapter is pure investigative work, and I wanted to split that apart. This chapter is all play and no work; next chapter is all work and no play. Okay, a little play, because it's Nick and Judy. You know what I mean.
Dynamic

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy split up to manage the investigation. Judy has Big Ideas and channels Ruth Wilde. Nick is cute as always and Judy takes her first steps in her new role.

Chapter Notes

I got the idea for the weather this chapter while I was reading about Hang son Doong. I'm not a climate scientist or meteorologist, but if I'm understanding this correctly, if you build it right (or conditions are randomly naturally perfect, as in the case of Hang son Doong), you can have an element of climate control, plus whatever fancy technology Zootopia has going on. But you still, once again if I'm interpreting this right, can't control the weather. Different regions of the city will experience a storm differently...but they'll all get it if they're in its path.

The chapter title is a layered joke and I am not ashamed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Judy stood smooshed against a boar and twin lambs, feeling the train sway beneath her feet as her favorite singer played through her earbuds. It was an older song from Gazelle’s Dónde Están los Ladrones? and it never failed to make her smile. Gazelle had been Judy’s favorite singer since the late 90’s; as children, she and Sharla had saved up together to buy 2 of her albums and 2 cassettes, so that Sharla could keep the CD’s and Judy could copy the CD’s to the blank cassettes for the portable tape player she’d gotten as a gift from Auntie Alice. Childhood hadn’t been great, exactly, but sometimes Judy missed the fun parts. Learning how to fix things around the warren and in the barn, helping fix up trucks and tractors, being so proud when she fixed her first leaky faucet.

She understood as an adult that she’d been placed on the maintenance team primarily because her parents had wanted to show her that there was more to farm life than digging in the dirt; though she’d been required to study plant theory just like every other Hopps, they’d wanted to give her options that didn’t involve moving hours away and risking her safety for the sake of strangers she’d probably never meet. Judy had enjoyed the precision involved in diagnosing and fixing mechanical problems, the almost mindless routine involved in vehicle maintenance. Jude the Dude had worn overalls and grease like a battle costume, but almost never stopped shaking tail to Gazelle’s pretty voice.

Through the right lens, anything could be seen as good, even a childhood that had been lonely and exhausting. It was why she needed to work so hard to be a good cop, and why she had to question herself, and why she needed to meet Nathaniel Snow on her own. She couldn’t rely on Nick to translate for her, because she was smart. She was capable. The only way she’d ever be able to see herself that way would be to prove it, not to her coworkers, but to herself.

Nick was out chasing a lead of his own, with 30 bucks in his wallet for emergencies and a healthy lunch they’d packed together. He had instructions to check in every 2 hours by text and send her a
photo of his empty lunchbox, but although Judy had initially thought that amount of control over his
day was too excessive, Nick seemed happy with the arrangement. At least she knew he’d feed
himself something more than sweet fruits. She didn’t worry about his calorie intake anymore, but
even now, if he wasn’t cooking for two, he tended to not eat enough. It was a problem that might not
ever go away no matter how they worked on it; he’d spent years in a state of homelessness,
eventually voluntary but not at first, and often that had meant poor nutrition. Changing his approach
to feeding himself had proved to be as difficult as it was for Judy to remember that having emotions
didn’t make her dumb.

She fingered her phone in her bag, resisting the urge to fidget. Her coral pink blazer and skirt were
new, and she didn’t like the way the skirt rested against her body. She’d never loved skirts, aside
from her cheer uniform, and that had only been a question of functionality. Pants were less likely to
tear and more likely to be made of strong material that wasn’t itchy. They also had pockets, which
meant she didn’t need to carry a stupid bag everywhere, but Luna’s skirt suits had none of the
practical utility Judy liked.

Oh well. She was a temporarily unemployed insurance investigator. She wasn’t a farmer or a
mechanic or a cop. She could carry around a purse, and even though it was obnoxious and she
constantly worried about leaving it somewhere or dropping something accidentally, it did fit her
character.

As the train rolled on, Judy quizzed herself on the facts she needed to know. Arcadia was a rural
region up north, only noteworthy because a series of action movies had unexpectedly catapulted it
into the limelight. Rather than districts, like Zootopia, it was divided into professional and cultural
sectors; it was a much more segregated place along the seams, although the city center was a
mishmash of businesses and housing for all sorts of mammals. It was the kind of small-town place
that Judy had never wanted to travel to, although it was the home of the highly-ranked university
where Sharla spent her time studying the mysteries of the universe, now that she wasn’t allowed to
spend any more time in space.

The bunny sector was mostly dedicated to botany, and since that was where Luna had grown up,
Judy needed to know all about it. She’d done her reading and found it mostly similar to
Bunnyburrow, but on a much larger scale and, ridiculously, even more insular. Most rabbits up in
Arcadia still spoke with a lisp, a holdover from the old language almost nobody bothered to speak
anymore. Judy knew enough Lapine to be convincingly Arcadian – although everything she knew
was ripped from the Epic of Hazel, and having an actual conversation was beyond her – but she
doubted it would come up. Dead languages were dead for a reason. Judy’s cover story was that the
lisp was simply unprofessional; it was reasonable enough. A milder Tri-Burrows lilt often made city
folks write off even Sharla, whose second choice of profession was astrophysics sans space travel, as
a simpleton. Bunny lisp had the same effect.

As frustrating as it was to have to let go part of who she was just to be taken seriously, it wasn’t
uncommon to train out an accent. Wolfard hardly sounded like he was from Meadowbrook anymore.
Rivers no longer sounded like she had marbles in her cheeks and wasabi on her tongue. Mostly,
everyone around the station used the same Zootopian idioms and colloquialisms. Sociolinguistic
uniformity was an unfortunate side effect of working with the public, but learning to fit in that way
had prepared Judy to adopt certain Arcadian traits.

UC was bizarre, but also intellectually stimulating. It had been a long time since she’d done
something this involved, and it felt good. It felt like police work. It felt like the kind of thing she had
gone to the academy to learn. She just had to shift the lens: she wasn’t exploiting kinksters to
investigate the sad and hopeless case of a murdered squirrel, she and Nick were serving a quiet,
secretive community to help prevent kinksters from getting murdered in the future.
In the face of all that, how intimidating could Nathaniel Snow realistically be?

Judy gripped the loop tightly as the train ground to a stop. This was her exit, so she smiled politely at the boar as she pushed past him and slipped out of the sliding door, opening her umbrella as she did so. She was scheduled to meet Snow – Nate, she had to call him Nate if they were going to be friends – at a little soup café in Sahara Square, just a few steps away from the station, and although she had been eyeing Nick’s lunch with envy that morning, she figured carrot and ginger soup would be decent compensation for having to spend one-on-one time with their suspect.

The café was in a low building, obviously built for small- to medium-sized mammals, lit by windows and skylights instead of lightbulbs. Because of the rainstorm, the dining area was dim, and it felt like a joke. A perfect setting for a meeting with someone she suspected of being a murderer. The table was reserved under “Evergreen,” so it didn’t take very long for her to get seated.

“Just coffee for now,” she told the server, a perky springhare whose nametag said INGRID. “My friend will be here soon. Actually, two coffees; if he doesn’t want one, I’ll drink it.”

“Okie-dokie, I’ll bring that out to you A-sap,” chirped Ingrid. Judy smiled as she was reminded of her first week at Targoat during college. That had been a demanding, thankless job, but at least it had kept a roof over her head and some form of food in her stomach while her academic scholarship took care of half her tuition and student loans took care of the other half.

Nate would be there any minute. Despite the summer theater she’d participated in (her 16-year-old portrayal of Mercutio especially had been a hit) and her excessive preparation for the role of Luna Evergreen, Judy didn’t trust herself to be able to befriend someone she suspected of murder, so she thought about Nick’s mother, Ruth. They’d gotten close before the old vixen had finally succumbed to the cancer, and Judy had faithfully taken mental notes on classic cons and manipulation techniques. She had never really believed that Ruth’s lessons would be helpful, but Ruth had been right after all.

She didn’t have to befriend him. She only had to befriend an idea of him. She had to make him feel important – make him feel valued – and give away enough information about herself to make him believe she reciprocated whatever trust he had in her. She didn’t have to lie, but rather, present the truth in a way that benefited her cause. She didn’t have to like him. She only had to find common ground and like that piece of him enough to build up a personality she could live with.

She could do this.

By the time Nate pushed through the door, business casual as usual under a long hooded raincoat, she felt confident again. She smiled genuinely at him while he hung his coat on the coat rack by the door, revealing another white corded sweater over a baby blue button-up and some well-fitted tan slacks. Did he have many versions of the same outfit in different colors, like a cartoon character, or was this just happenstance?

“It’s nice to see you,” she said sincerely. Sincere, because she needed to investigate him. It was nice that he’d taken time out of his day to reveal the kind of mammal he was when not many others were looking. She extended her paw and he shook it before sitting across from her and skimming the menu. In a light tone, she added, “I ordered you a coffee, by the way.”

“Presumptuous,” he chided, but she didn’t think he was serious in his tone.

“Selfish,” she corrected, fingering the spoon on her napkin. “It’s super awkward to have a drink when the other party doesn’t, but if you don’t want coffee, I can certainly handle two cups.”
Nate laughed loudly and replied, “I do want it, I’m just teasing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, relaxing. She picked up her menu and searched for something she would be able to eat on an otherwise empty stomach.

Nate was likeable. He’d taken her light teasing about his menu choice (chilled watermelon soup, as though they were in some alternate universe where that wasn’t disgusting) with grace, and he’d teased her about her “boring” mushroom soup, and although he still looked melancholy underneath his smiles and banter, it was hard to hate him as an individual. When she took a step back and looked at even just his provable actions, she found him abhorrent, but it was hard not to enjoy the company of Nate Snow the mammal.

What did it say about her that Nick had immediately made friends with potentially useful contacts, but she’d connected best with their suspect? Maybe it didn’t have to say anything. She was using Ruth’s method of persuasion. Tricking herself so that she could trick him. Still, she knew she needed to be careful, no matter how amusing he could make technological mishaps sound.

He leaned forward a tiny bit. A sharp flash of lightning made his white fur glisten for a moment, something ugly and beautiful at the same time. Quietly, he asked, “Is something troubling you?”

She shrugged, unnerved at how easily he’d seen through her. Out of necessity, she didn’t wear her heart on her sleeve anymore; she was either slipping, or...he saw himself in her. It was a distinct possibility. Her character was designed to appeal to him, inspire a kinship, and she was practically running a game on him, but it wasn’t too far off from her regular personality. “I’m just thinking about Ollie.”

“Where is he, anyway?”

“Out with friends.” She tried to keep her tone light, but it wasn’t happening. “He makes friends easily.”

“And you’re jealous,” he concluded thoughtfully, sitting back in his seat and setting his napkin down next to his mostly-empty bowl. “I don’t blame you. It’s not every day one finds a sub so well-fitted. I imagine it would be devastating to lose him.”

“No, no, I’m not...I’m not jealous, at least not like that,” she protested, shaking her head vehemently.

“How is it, then?”

She winced. The truth was ugly, but calling it jealousy wasn’t wrong, and although Nate Snow was not on her list of trusted mammals, at least she wouldn’t feel guilty for dumping her dumb – not dumb, mundane, if she wanted to be Nick’s mistress she needed to not be a hypocrite – problems on him. “I trust my husband. He could theoretically fall in love with someone else, but he would never leave me without a very thorough discussion, and even then I suppose I wouldn’t mind sharing him, because I love him and I want him to be happy.”

“A happy sub is always important,” he affirmed, and she didn’t give into the urge to make a face. Hearing that from him was bizarre and she hated that it was so believable coming from his lying mouth.

“I’m not jealous of his friends, I’m jealous of him,” she explained. “He knows how to read mammals and get along with them, even if it’s only for a little while, but that’s not my forte and I’m always worried that I’m holding him back. If you hadn’t noticed, I’m not...very much like most of the bunnies I know.”
“I had noticed.” He gave her a somewhat boyish grin across the table. “It might have thrown me off at one point in my life, if I’m honest. Being in the community gives us a different perspective, though.”

“How do you mean?”

He shrugged. “Bunnies are passive. They’re submissive by nature. They’re easily frightened, and it’s not their fault; it’s cultural and historical, but they really just need to be taken in paw when they overstep. That’s what media tells us, and bunny communities aren’t known for being welcoming to outsiders, so most mammals don’t give it much thought.”

Judy thought of Bunnyburrow, with its us-versus-them mentality. By virtue of being Bunnyburrow residents, other species – including the predators – were included in us, but even then, they were thought of as the safe ones. An army of bunnies would undoubtedly defend even Gideon Grey’s late mother from outsiders, even though she had been almost universally despised because of her horrendous child raising tactics and unwillingness to engage with anyone. Yeah, bunnies were definitely insular.

Nate continued, “It doesn’t help that the only bunny actors who make a decent living from it are porn stars, and that cements the idea of rabbits and hares being universally submissive. Outside the community, undoubtedly that’s how others see you. You’re a bunny, so you’re submissive to other species. You’re a female, so you’re submissive to males.”

“Yeah, what’s that about,” she blurted. It wasn’t an issue she’d raised with Nick, because it made him sad and it didn’t apply to them anyway, but she had wondered. “City bunnies are so weird. Arcadia’s a small town, and at least in the bunny sector, it’s just...the best mammal for the job does the job. There’s no gendered hierarchy, although in traditional families there’s definitely a matriarch so that we can always know who belongs to what bloodline and avoid interbreeding. The big city seems completely insane.”

“Most mammals do have a gendered hierarchy here in the city. It’s convention. I believe most species are ancestrally matriarchal, but something changed, and I certainly didn’t learn about it, even with my top-tier education. At any rate, it’s not like that in the community. Female dominants are highly sought-after, and male submissives are a bit like unicorns. There’s a lot of crossover with the queer community and polyamory, and we’re told – rightly – not to judge. The only mammals who’d bat an eye at a female dominant bunny are the newbies or closed-minded bastards.”

She wondered how he could not count himself among closed-minded bastards when he “couldn’t sub” and had (inadvertently or otherwise) coerced several mammals into BDSM relationships, but she supposed nobody thought of themselves as a villain. Nate seemed, on the surface, to be a genial, well-mannered guy. He accepted her as a fellow dominant without question and hadn’t made her feel unsafe, like Kevin from college.

She fought to stay still as she replied, “I see your point.”

“In any case,” he said, “I think what you’re feeling is envy, and it’s perfectly natural.”

“I don’t really enjoy being condescended to,” she told him, more out of principle than anything. “You’re not wrong, mind you, but I’m not the kind of mammal who likes having her own feelings explained by a third party.”

He grimaced. “I don’t really have an excuse for doing what I’d do with a sub. My apologies.” The grimace turned into a sly grin. “You may spank me if you like, Madame.”
“You’re a naughty one, Nate Snow,” she said with a laugh, wagging a finger at his ridiculous comeback. She refused to feel guilty for it. Who said she couldn’t joke around with a suspect? They were supposed to be friends, and frankly, even normal friendship sometimes required a degree of moral flexibility. Once upon a time, Nick had been a shameless con artist, and she had accepted him wholesale.

He laughed along with her and, tapping a claw on the table next to his empty coffee mug, shot back, “And you’re a queen, Luna Evergreen. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“That’s kind of you.”

His look softened into something thoughtful. It sent a flutter of anxiety through her belly, but she ignored it, because this was friendship, right? “I’m not being kind. Joking aside, I think if you had been my first mistress, then maybe…”

This was her in, wasn’t it? A little picture of his mind, a story to feed into the overall picture. She reached out to put her paw on his wrist, gently enough that it could barely be called a touch. He didn’t move away, so she patted his paw, withdrew, and said, “I know it’s none of my business, but I hope we are, or at least can be friends, and friends are there for each other. You can talk about it if you want.”

“I’ve never told anyone,” he admitted, “because I wasn’t sure how to phrase it without looking like a walking red flag, but I think that a fellow dominant might be a little more receptive.”

“I’m at least a quarter ears.”

He snorted in amusement and rolled his eyes. “It’s not as big of a story as it seems, really. I was young. She knew exactly what she wanted, which is a good thing, but I didn’t know what I wanted or how to say no. She was a grad student teaching my Algorithms and Data Structure class – I was just 19, had never had another relationship – and the rest of the guys told me I was lucky to have her attention. I was her slave before I understood what that meant, and for so long I felt so privileged to be with her that I overlooked the red flags. She never talked to me about my limits. Never even gave me the information necessary to consider what my limits might be. That’s why I’m so vigilant about having prospective subs do their own research: I don’t want my opinions and biases to influence their decisions.

“I watched through someone else’s eyes as it got more and more violent, more and more oppressive, until one day she put me in a muzzle and shackles and left me in a dark room for a day. No food, no opportunity to use the restroom. I still have nerve damage in my right leg because of the stress position I held for too long. At 9:38 PM, when she got back from wherever she’d gone, she demanded an apology for ruining her carpet. I hit her and left. There were obvious signs of abuse on my body aside from the nerve damage, so I didn’t get into legal trouble, although she did serve time for domestic violence. Of course, it was my fault. I could have left at any time. I knew she came from an abusive home. I could have said something to defend myself. Hell, I could have overpowered her, if I’d been so inclined; she was a red panda, not an elephant. I didn’t do any of that. I just let her hurt me and use me until I was hardly recognizable, because I loved her, and I thought she loved me. I was a bit stupid. Thought that was what private love was supposed to be. Thought it couldn’t possibly be abusive, because I’m male.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” said Judy, and she meant it. Assuming his story was true – and she was inclined to believe it, because an outrageous lie was more dangerous than a small one, and the facts were easily verifiable – it was a situation nobody should have to go through, and it made her sick just to hear him tell the story. It explained some things, as well. It didn’t excuse his own history of coercion and abuse, but she thought she might understand a little better now why he might not
recognize his own actions as abusive. “But Nate, it wasn’t your fault. You were just 19; just a kit. You were sucked into a situation where you had no power, without warning or backup, and if it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else. Being violated doesn’t make you...stupid…”

She rubbed her cheek, blinking at a splash of rainwater against the window as a rhinoceros tromped by. Forks clinked against plates behind a thick wall of glass. The air itself felt heavy. It wasn’t Nate’s fault that he’d been hurt by someone with an advantage over him, especially at such a young age. It hadn’t been his responsibility to police his mistress’ behavior; that wasn’t how consent worked, let alone relationships. There was no such thing as “asking for it,” and no matter how much trauma the aggressor had in their background, there was no such thing as a pass for abusive behavior.

It wasn’t her fault. She’d just been 17, and she’d reacted as well as a high schooler could react to being overpowered and assaulted and terrorized. Being violated didn’t make her stupid, and neither did residual fears. It wasn’t wrong to admit to being powerless, and it wasn’t wrong to have taken a long time to forgive Gideon Grey. “Victim” wasn’t supposed to be a dirty word, but a simple descriptive one.

“A history of abuse doesn’t excuse abusive behavior,” she finished, something warm settling in her chest. “It is never an excuse. You don’t have to hate her, but blaming yourself absolves her of responsibility.”

If Nathaniel Snow was guilty of murder, he’d go down hard. Judy would make sure of that. But it wasn’t a certainty that they’d get witnesses and victims to testify against him on the matter of his coercive abuse, and on the off-chance that he wasn’t guilty of murder, then maybe...Gideon had changed. Judy had changed. Nick had changed. Even Kevin had changed. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that Nate could change, too, and there wouldn’t be any more victims left in his wake.

“Like I said,” Nate managed after a moment, looking and sounding shaken, “you’re a queen, Luna Evergreen.”

“Please, no tribute except on Thursdays,” she quipped, and they both laughed, albeit less boisterously than before.

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This is Luna from the domme social.

Is this Elaine?

Yes, you have the right number. :)

I know this is irregular, but would you mind meeting up? I have some questions.

Certainly. Do you want to go somewhere?

Or just come over?

I can come over. Address?
Judy knocked on the cutesy red wood door of Elaine’s and Susan’s condo located in the Meadowlands. It was somewhat surprising to find ocelots living in the Meadows; the locals had never been polite to Judy or to Nick, being a community of traditionalists who were mostly smaller prey, but rent wasn’t expensive and the climate was decent enough. Judy could see the aesthetic appeal, at least.

Susan answered the door with a smile and said, “Come on in, Luna! It’s great to see you. Leeny’s in the kitchen making tea, the nerd.”

“I can hear you,” Elaine warned from the other room, but Susan only exchanged a grin with Judy and rolled her eyes theatrically.

They didn’t seem like a stereotypical Mistress/slave couple, but there wasn’t really a right way to do kink, only a few wrong ones. Judy chewed on that while she followed Susan into the kitchen and took a seat. Both ocelots were just a little bigger than Nick, so once again she had a little trouble with the height of the seat, but they’d been nice enough to welcome her into their home on short notice.

“So,” said Elaine pleasantly, bringing over a tray with three mugs on it, “what brings you here, Luna?”

“A question of dynamics, actually,” replied Judy, blowing on her tea. She knew better than to try to drink it while it was still so hot. “Are you okay answering questions like that?”

In order to get inside Nate’s head, she needed to think like him, but although they had similarities, they had fundamental differences. Judy had always been somewhat reluctant in her heavier dominance, where Nate preferred to begin his relationships with something close to a Master/slave dynamic, even though according to the recordings she’d reviewed, he never called it that. She needed an insider’s opinion, and although Emilia might have been helpful in her capacity as a professional dominatrix, her dynamic with Adam and Eric was closer to what Judy had previously settled on with Nick: not a dynamic of ownership, but your run-of-the-mill Domme/sub. Elaine and Susan, however, had the exact kind of dynamic Judy needed to understand if she either wanted to catch Nate or rule him out.

And maybe she might learn some helpful things for her relationship with Nick.

“You’re not the first mammal we’ve helped,” Susan assured her. “What are your questions?”

“What’s the draw? I mean.” Judy tried to collect her thoughts before one of them answered, because she’d already started off wrong. “In an ownership dynamic...what do you both get out of this? I’m especially interested in your answer, Elaine, because I don’t really understand it.”

“But you’ve been thinking about making a change,” Elaine concluded.

“Yes,” Judy told her, not mentioning Nate for obvious reasons. “In general, what is the appeal of owning another mammal?”

She raised a brow. “Is this an ethics question?”

“...Maybe,” Judy acknowledged. She blew out her deep breath. “You make it work, and anyone can tell that you love each other. But I keep getting hung up on the concept of ownership. Logically I can understand that mammals have their own desires and relationship styles, but I have...some baggage, and I’m worried that owning someone might be some kind of...”
“You’re afraid that your so-called baggage might be affecting your judgment?”

“Yeah, that’s a good way to put it.”

“Rewards are unique, but personally, what I get out of the deal is comfort. I give Su commands that benefit us, and she follows my orders because she understands that I love her. If I give her destructive orders, she doesn’t follow them. She’s my slave, but only until she revokes consent, at which point we’d either talk about it or she’d leave me. Ultimately, our agreement follows the standard BDSM guidelines; we started this dynamic with active participation on both sides. We argued a little, especially about established rules and what kinds of situations I was allowed to control outside of our agreements. Sometimes I order her to top me, even. Consent can become a little iffy in dynamics like this, where it’s more no means no than yes means yes, which I know goes against the lecture I gave at the class a few days ago. But we agreed to structure our consent this way after a long period of negotiations and a trial run. We’d been living together for over a year at that point, too.”

“The no means no model works for us,” Susan added, aiming an adoring smile at Elaine, “because we already went through the yes means yes phase and found what works for us. Starting out – you already know this from your own experience, but I’m trying to work it into context here – it’s not enough to just tell a sub to speak up if they don’t like something. If the sub doesn’t actively express that they’re into it, you don’t do it, period. For us, Leeny already knew my likes and dislikes. She’d already memorized my hard limits. We’d been together for two years before moving in together, after all. Having a master in the traditional sense is completely insane for a new relationship, and any dominant who suggests that is sketchy as fuck. But for an established couple who knows each other inside and out? It’s only really an ethics question if you’re either ignoring limits or taking out your frustration on a sub who hasn’t done anything to deserve it.”

Judy’s brow furrowed as she took a sip of her lavender tea. Knowingly, Elaine said, “That’s not really what you’re struggling with, I can tell. That’s your surface question.”

Judy felt small. She wanted to blurt out the truth. She didn’t want to lie to these kind, accepting mammals about who she was and why she was there. She wanted them to trust her because she was trustworthy, not because she was lying well enough to make Nick’s mom proud. But it was her job to lie for now, and if she quit...the damage to the community might be worse. So she didn’t talk about Nate, and instead, she asked, “As a sadist – as a top – how might one stay objective about prior traumas? For example, if there’s a history of abuse or violation of the top, is owning another mammal an invitation for trouble? Mammals tend to view things in relation to one another, so if the top in question has been severely traumatized or violated or just whatever, they’ll be less likely to see their own actions as abusive, right?”

Elaine focused on Judy for several moments while Judy tried not to fidget. Her skin crawled beneath her fur. Finally, the ocelot smiled gently at her. “This is your first time in an actual kink community, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said carefully.

“There’s a support group that meets on Mondays at Whitespire Chapel. It’s kinksters only, led by a kink-friendly therapist, focusing on problems just like this. Personally, I believe that if you’re worried about the ethics of your dynamic, you’re probably safe. It takes self-awareness to even begin to ask these questions, and you have to respect your partner enough to care about the answers. I wouldn’t worry too much, but I do suggest you attend at least one meeting. If you’re struggling with trauma, even if it doesn’t affect your dynamic, it might do you some good to let it out. Not to a submissive, but to random mammals who aren’t emotionally attached to you. It feels really good to confess to
being hurt and have complete strangers validate your experience.”

“I…” She blinked. It wasn’t a bad idea. She obviously wouldn’t get the answers she needed from Elaine tonight, but she could listen to others on Monday, and maybe she’d find her answers there. “I think I will. Thank you.”

“If I might offer you one more suggestion? Go alone,” Susan advised.

“What?”

“Because,” Elaine said with a wistful smile, “it’s easier to tear yourself apart when someone you love isn’t there to scold you for it. Almost uniformly, victims can’t stand themselves, because they were weak or they were stupid or any of a million things that makes the pain superficially easier to bear. Healing is a process, not a single moment in time. And sometimes before someone can get better, they need to just hate themselves loudly enough to realize how problematic that kind of thinking is. It’s too hard to do that when you’re sitting next to a mammal who hurts because you hurt and wants to put bandaids over the wound before it’s fully drained.”

When Judy arrived at the temporary apartment after tea with Susan and Elaine, Nick was already there, sitting on the couch reading something on his phone. She smiled at the sight. She may not have needed him today, but she was glad to see him. She was so lucky that she’d been able to convince the Chief to allow a civilian on the case. Could she have survived this case alone?

Probably. But it was better with someone she trusted implicitly at her back.

He looked up at her quickly, dropped his phone on the coffee table, and smiled at her, obviously glad to see her. As she walked toward him, he walked toward her, and in the middle of the room he threw his arms around her and picked her up a little, murmuring into her headfur, “I missed you. I’m glad Snow didn’t eat you.”

“I missed you too,” she replied, laughing into his shoulder. What a goober. Was she really going to be able to go through with her plan for tonight? He set her down and tugged on her paw, leading her toward the couch again. Instead of sitting next to her, though, he kneeled at her feet, still smiling widely. She scritched between his ears. “Productive day?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, the sudden sharpness of his smile contrasting his soft eyes. “You know, it’s amazing what mammals will say when they trust you. I’m yours; I’m a submissive. I’m safe, because you’ll sort me out if I do something wrong.”

It was BDSM culture, she reminded herself. It didn’t say anything about her, or about Nick, or about their relationship. “What did you find out?”

“I looked into a kind of kink network for mammals who aren’t really sure. Apparently it’s not a widespread thing; it’s a small local experiment they might advertise on FetLick if it goes well. I’m starting to think the ZPD wants eyes in the community because there is a lot of shady stuff going on. You’ve got typical kinksters, sure, but then this wide, quiet subset of mammals who’ve been hurt in BDSM relationships and still identify with the lifestyle but are either too afraid to start another relationship or not sure if they really want to leave. There were something like 20 of us there. I made it very clear that I was only there to support a new friend of mine, Melanie. She’s a switch whose ex-boyfriend kicked the shit out of her because she confessed that she wanted to tie him up and he was a piece of garbage who couldn’t handle the perceived hit to his masculinity, and I am only telling you this because it’s relevant to the case. Guess who she dated before said piece of garbage.”
“Nate,” she said, rather than asked.

“Bingo. And she had nothing but glowing praise for him. She never said his name, but it was obvious who she was talking about. She said it would have been her ideal relationship, had he allowed her to switch it up sometimes and had it not been slightly weird because he was her boss. It’s not like we could ask followup questions, like we might do with a witness, but I think it’s important to note that just because it’s an abuse of power doesn’t mean everybody hates it. We’re going to have a lot of trouble pinning this guy without a murder charge. How’d it go with our suspect?”

“Really well.” She smiled down at him as he rested his muzzle on her thighs. He was so freaking adorable when he looked at her like that; she almost felt bad for what would come soon. “I think we really connected, and he told me a story that I know I’ll screw up if I try to say it with my mouth, so I’ll write it down for you later tonight. Thus far he doesn’t show any signs of realizing who I am – not that I’d expect it, I’m pretty camera shy these days and I’m wearing brown contact lenses on top of the dye. I was nervous, so I just pretended I was your mother and it worked.”

“If you start picking pockets, I will march you down to the station in your own pawcuffs,” he warned, amused. “I’m not kidding, Carrots. Pawcuffs. On your wrists and your ankles. And it won’t be kinky at all.”

“I’ll take that under advisement. Now, onto other matters.” She took a deep breath and let it out, staring at him impassively so that he knew he was in trouble. This would be new, but today had been surprisingly informative, and Judy felt okay to take the next important step. “I didn’t get a picture of your lunchbox.”

He pulled himself upright and his smile dropped. “Ah. Yes.”

Normally, she’d give him an out. She might ask him if he forgot, or if someone had bought him lunch without checking, but it didn’t matter this time; he hadn’t followed her simple instructions, and he hadn’t even asked her for permission to do something else. Whether it was an honest mistake or a deliberate test of boundaries, she didn’t know, but more importantly, it didn’t matter. Nick had chosen this. Nick had asked her to domme for him outside of individual scenes. She was not a pushover, and she would not go back on her word. “Yes what, Nick?”

“I left it in Melanie’s car, and by the time I realized I was late for lunch, she’d already gone to work. I did eat when I got back,” he offered, looking at his thighs with contrition. At least he wasn’t trying to make excuses.

“Good job on that, but you’ve still earned a punishment for that initial disobedience.” She put her paw under his muzzle, raising his head so that she could look him in the eye. “Go to the room, take off your clothes, and put your nose in the corner until I’m ready for you.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said with a tiny nod, and he stood quickly, not wasting a moment. It was weird to do this without his active input; even though he’d had plenty of say in the consequences for specific acts of disobedience when they’d written down his list of rules, and had contributed the lunch thing on his own, she felt a hot nervousness drag through her body.

She swallowed it away. She wasn’t taking advantage of him; she was giving him what he wanted. Judy listened from the couch as Nick pulled off his clothes, obeying her order as promptly as she’d expected. After a few moments of relative silence, she stood and headed for the kitchen. She would need bottled water, maybe some trail mix, and of course, clean paws; she wrapped the goods in a clean dish towel before using the stepstool to wash her paws and carried the whole thing to the bedroom.
Nick was, predictably, standing in the corner, tail a-flick but otherwise as still as he could be while still breathing. She wanted to go and run her fingers through his fur, rub him down and kiss his scapula, but that wasn’t her duty. Still, she thought as she gathered the pillows and arranged the water and snacks on the side table, she could compromise. She didn’t need to cane him to get the message across, especially for this kind of infraction. Nick needed to remember to take care of himself even when he wasn’t taking care of her, but a harsh spanking wasn’t the right kind of reminder.

It was probably the punishment he was expecting. Nick wanted a spanking when he disobeyed safety rules – he deserved one, if only because he’d written down the rule in the first place – but in her new role as his mistress, it was up to her to decide just how that would look and feel, and at its core, spanking was more than a punitive action; it was a form of body worship.

She sat down at the head of the bed, stretched out her legs, and pondered how best to incorporate the basics of spanking into his punishment.

“Okay,” she said after watching his tail flick for several minutes. “Come here.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said. He turned immediately and climbed onto the bed, no questions, no jokes, no signs of discomfort at all. This was what he wanted, and she was allowed to want it too.

There was something highly intimate about a bare-pawed spanking that couldn’t be found in many other activities; like massage, it could hurt or feel wonderful, even erotic, despite lacking any sexual component. As much as she loved giving Nick exactly what he decided he needed, she wanted to indulge. She sat back against the headboard, allowing him to drape over her outstretched legs with his head pillowed on his forearms and his feet propped up on a cushion near the edge of the bed. The cushion served the dual purpose of making him more comfortable and pushing his rear up the slightest bit so that she could spank him more easily. They had started out in this position all those years ago; it seemed right that they would come back to it at the beginning of a new phase in their relationship.

Judy massaged his backside, running her paw through the thick fur near the base of his tail. He hummed happily as she brushed him with her nails and shifted her weight. As his mistress, it was even more important to make this pleasurable for him, because the kind of dynamic he wanted was beyond RACK: he would do what she told him to do, and if he didn’t, he would face punishment. It would not be discussed; he could always safeword, but the communication aspect would decrease significantly. Being a good mistress was just as much about reward as it was about punishment. This spanking, though ostensibly punitive, would be an erotic one. She wanted to ease into it, to show him she still valued him and loved him in their new trial dynamic.

And, yes, she wanted to perform a little body worship. He deserved it. Next to brushing him, this was the best way to do that. If she did it right, she wouldn’t need to cause him lots of pain to put him into subspace, and ultimately, that was the point: reminding him that he had chosen to be her submissive.

She raised her paw, cupped her palm, and swatted at him, more of a tap than anything. It wouldn’t hurt. At most, to someone who wasn’t expecting it, it would be mildly annoying. Judy knew that Nick preferred the grander spankings, and they would get to that eventually, but she wanted to warm him up thoroughly before they did anything else. When she swatted him again, he snorted quietly into the crook of his arm; she swatted a little harder, but not enough to truly call it anything but playful. Nick hummed again and she grinned, enjoying the sound of him enjoying her actions.

With light, cupped paws, she landed little smacks on his thighs and cheeks, taking a few moments in between to massage the area or scratch the base of his tail. He squirmed, making those same happy
little humming noises that warmed her chest. Now that they both understood subspace better and had explored it, he had a much easier time reaching it; she knew that by the end of this session, he would be deep enough to need the items from the kitchen and plenty of petting, and that would be just as enjoyable for her.

She struck him harshly with both paws, but immediately stroked his testicles with the back of her finger. His feet crossed just above the toes and with his quads he pushed his hips into her thigh, moaning very quietly. Sometimes he liked her to spank that area too, but this wasn’t that kind of spanking. It was supposed to hurt, but only enough to cross the pain and pleasure wires in his brain. She wanted him to feel special, to feel loved as much as she loved him. She wanted him to understand that he was important, and that no matter what their dynamic looked like, that would never change. Really, this was hardly about body worship anymore, so much as Nick worship.

Being disobedient didn’t make him any less valuable or wonderful.

“I want you to be good from now on,” she told him as she struck a bit harder, this time with a flat palm. It allowed for more force and less resistance, as minimal a change as it was. She struck him again with her other paw, and then a few more times, trying not to create any kind of pattern, before pausing to run her paw along his tail. His thighs clenched, as did his feet, but otherwise he didn’t react physically. He graced her with another happy noise, though, which sent another shot of heat right to her heart.

She struck again and again, sometimes quick little taps and sometimes harsher slaps that were surely going to make her own paws sore, but Nick didn’t show any signs of distress. His eyes were glassed over and he hid a smile in the crook of his arm, and Judy felt…well, she felt good. She felt more connected to him than she had in a while. She was entirely in control of the scene, but she was confident, and she wasn’t worried about proving to him that she loved him. She struck him harder, but he didn’t come out of his happy haze, only snuggled into it a little more.

This was good. Nick was good. And Judy was good, too.

Chapter End Notes

This may be the last chapter for a while, unless I can manage to write another chapter in the next few days. Not that I don't love y'all, but I'm due for a hysterectomy soon and I have no idea how long it'll take to recover as I've never had invasive surgery before. This is sort of an emergency procedure and I didn't plan for it. So if I'm gone for a month or more I'm not dead, just in recovery...although with my history of writing under the influence, you might get 6 chapters that I won't remember writing. Fun fact, though: THEY DO THIS PROCEDURE WITH ROBOTS. Technology is sexy. I'll be in my bunk.
Proposals

Chapter Summary

A party at the Barn has an unexpected twist. Nick and Judy avoid drinking and talk about the future.

Chapter Notes

I realized that particularly in EA, where Ruth's loss is still pretty raw for both Nick and Judy and they're essentially running a game on Nate Snow, Ruth has a big presence even though she's not in it. For now, you can assume what you like about how close Judy was to Nick's mom and why her opinion is so important to Judy, but pretty soon I'll be posting a little one-shot about their relationship just before Ruth's death.

I've been pretty stoned over the last week or so, for what should be obvious reasons, but I think this chapter's fine and I'm too impatient to hold off on posting it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The feeling was different.

Where the Jungle had been high-energy, lots of mammals engaging in lots of different activities, the party at the Barn was much lower-key, old-school electroswing (Stray Cats changed to Big Bad Voodoo Dormouse as she and Nick arrived) playing at low volume through a system of speakers and a more obvious snack spread displayed in the not-so-crowded living room. This house didn't require newbies to go through an orientation or even have a sponsor, so Judy walked in, holding herself tall, holding Nick's leash with confidence. It was a scam, a show, a hustle, but more importantly, it was something Nick liked, and in Judy's opinion, what Nick wanted, he deserved to get.

She didn’t want to hate herself the way Nick had assumed she did. She never wanted to put him in that position again, having to feel bad about denying an unhealthy request. Tonight was about investigating a different crowd (although there would be quite a bit of overlap, she was sure), but Luna Evergreen was not ashamed of her ownership, and logically, Judy wasn’t supposed to be, either. So she’d practice until she got it right. The nice thing about being with Nick was that he might tease her and mess with her when it didn’t matter, and in fact he had the capacity to get malicious, but he knew when to stop with the mammals he loved.

She felt good. Maybe it was a paradigm shift, maybe it was just renewed confidence, but she was more inclined to believe that it stemmed from the chance to serve someone she cared about so deeply the way he wanted to be served. He was obviously happy with their arrangement. It was strange: she always thought he looked good, a little handsome, a lot adorable, the whole Nick package that didn’t change even while he was silver, but suddenly there was some kind of joyous quality that made him stand out even further. They were both dressed relatively conservatively, a white button-up and khakis for Nick and a light blue circle skirt for Judy, but she couldn’t help eyeing him like he was the first almost-ripe tomato on the vine – not only could she not wait to pluck him, but he looked
particularly edible. Exciting. They weren’t even planning to act differently from how Luna and Oliver had acted at the last party, but it was different anyway. That had been play, and at least for the remainder of their two-week trial run, this was real.

Judy didn’t see anyone she knew inside the social area, so she followed Nick through the sitting room area and down some stairs that would probably be narrow for larger mammals, but were more like platforms for her. She and Nick were lucky; they were on the smaller end of a mid-to-large community. There were a few parties and such in Little Rodentia and some events for megafauna-only, but nothing that either of them would fit into unless they pretended to be “tinies” or “giants” for the size kink folks. The majority of open parties and events catered to the mid-to-large community, and without Nick at her side, Judy might raise a few eyebrows.

Then again, without Nick at her side, would she be into the lifestyle at all? Maybe not. Dominance had always been something she desired in the abstract, but maybe she would have suppressed it or been ashamed of it, capitulated to social pressures because she wouldn’t understand. Without Nick’s curiosity and Judy’s policy of trying everything, this would be a very, very different investigation. And that was important to keep in mind: despite her excitement and the rightness of the community, this was an active investigation. She needed to keep her brain in detective mode.

“Find us a spot in a populated area where we can still talk,” she told him, keeping her voice down so that no one would hear them. Although her words were innocuous, it was better to be safe than sorry.

...If she ended up as paranoid as Wolfard after this, she was going to request a long vacation on a beach somewhere just to get her head on straight. The last thing she wanted to do was become a bitter, cynical, borderline alcoholic like him.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Nick replied. Since their shift in dynamic, Judy had been slowly appreciating the weight of that. He didn’t call her Mistress per her request, and they had rejected Sir because it reminded her too much of work, but Ma’am had a nice ring to it, and it wasn’t necessarily a tell. She had acquaintances who said yes, Ma’am to other female friends, or to strangers out of politeness, and it was an old enough term that it could be played off as Oliver just being old-fashioned. They were, after all, supposed to be from Arcadia, which wasn’t as behind-the-times as Bunnyburrow, but it was still a bit folksy. Just like his collar, context was key, and if there was no context, it was doubtful strangers would draw the right conclusions.

She loved him, and so she said, “Good boy.”

Happy smile. Nick was most attractive when he was happy – not smiling, per se, because those could be faked, but genuinely happy. She wanted him to be happy always, which was why she tried not to be overbearing. She wanted him to feel respected. Loved. She worried about him when he wasn’t with her, but she tried not to show it, as he tried not to show his worry about her. They had dangerous jobs and usually didn’t have each other’s backs. Was he so happy now because they were working together, or because of their shift in dynamic, or a little bit of both? Was he just happy to be in a space where other like-minded mammals felt free to let their freak flags fly?

Or...maybe there was another reason she hadn’t thought of? It was worth following up at a later time, when she didn’t need her attention on her surroundings.

They found a space in the corner of the basement’s largest room. From this area, Judy could see into the private room set up with an empty gurney and medical supplies, and she could also see into a curtained-off alcove where a male kudu was getting his testicles pinned to a chair. His upper arms were flexing as he strained against what must be restraints behind the chair, his thighs clenched but could not move past the restraints on his legs, and he was already erect. Was that something Nick
would be into? She hoped not. She may have had a policy of trying everything, but she didn’t think
she would be able to handle such harsh treatment. CBT, or cock-and-ball torture, seemed like such a
dangerous activity, and for what? Of course Nick sometimes liked to be spanked there, which could
technically be considered a milder form of CBT, but long pins? Blood? How could that be
enjoyable? Needles were one thing, but what if that kudu jerked too hard and ripped? Well, that was
what the restraints were for, but...

She looked away, feeling a little bit nauseated even though she didn’t want to be the kind of mammal
who kink shamed anyone.

As she settled into her chair with Nick kneeling at her feet, she noticed that his focus was on the
suspension rig in the middle of the open area. At the Jungle, nobody had opted to do a suspension
scene while they’d been at the party, but now, a tiger couple was using the one built for megafauna.
Unless she missed her guess, the tigress getting her wrists knotted together – there was Judy’s
favorite safety hitch – was Nisha, one of the presenters from the Jungle. It was probable that her
rigger was her husband, although Judy couldn’t see his face so she wasn’t positive.

Although Judy and Nick had become quite familiar with ropes over their seven-year evolving
dynamic, they hadn’t had the opportunity to do any suspension work, as real equipment was
expensive and the cheap stuff wasn’t very sturdy. She was interested to see how close a real
suspension scene was to the modeling stuff she’d found on Zoogle. She suspected it wasn’t very
similar at all; being familiar with the laws of physics and having visited a few forums, she knew that
there were usually hidden wires and extra hitches and spare riggers keeping the model aloft and in
place. Photos were artfully done, angles and lighting precise, but suspension modeling was mostly
just illusion. A real scene, though...how would that look? She could tell that Nick was just as
interested, albeit probably for more clinical reasons. Where Judy liked to know how things felt before
she understood the mechanics, he liked to know how things worked so he didn’t have to worry about
being unable to enter subspace the first time he felt something.

But she couldn’t afford to watch.

Along the periphery, there were several groups either watching or chatting quietly. If she was going
to get information at a party, these were the ones she needed to eavesdrop on, not the mammals
doing the scenes. Fortunately, she was the perfect mammal to do so. Nick, with his superior eyes,
could be the sight; she, with her superior ears, could be the sound. There were certain keywords she
needed to listen for, even as she slid her eyes over their shadowed faces. Most ancestral gifts were so
watered down now that she was sure their ancestors would laugh; Nick’s pupils were round, so his
night vision was diminished, but still better than hers. In contrast, Judy could see much further than
he could, even if her up-close vision was just a year or two away from a license suspension if she
didn’t get glasses, but she couldn’t see as far as her ancestors could. His nose was far superior, but
bunnies had never lost their keen hearing; things evened out between them in a way that benefited
them both. If things had been different, maybe they could have been partners, either as officers or as
private investigators, and they would have been an unstoppable team, probably. Small enough to go
unnoticed, large enough to protect themselves, with complementary skillsets.

The diverse group to her left mostly wearing fetish gear, corsets and cork and chains and such, was
discussing – okay, Chaucer, not exactly zoicide, although Judy’s high-level literature class had taught
her that even the nicest of mammals might feel a little zoicidal when faced with obnoxious,
unreadable old books. She’d have to keep an ear on them, because the pretentious type was always
suspicious in her mind, but they weren’t exactly priority. The wolf couple to her right was in the
middle of a spirited negotiation for a dual primal regression scene – ooh, that sounded interesting.
She and Nick hadn’t delved very far into that aspect of kink, and their one scene hadn’t been sensual
at all; he had just been reluctant to play top seriously, and she had wanted to prove to both of them
once and for all that she wasn’t afraid of Nick’s teeth and claws, and she wouldn’t become insensible if he was rough with her. It might be worth revisiting after the case; it looked like the wolves’ primal scene would be more of a competition for dominance.

In the opposite corner were a bunch of smaller mammals cuddling on a large beanbag chair. The two raccoons were sharing a pastel yellow blanket, the otter was playing with some kind of puzzle block, and the undersized sheep – Judy thought she might be a babydoll, like Dawn Bellwether, but she wasn’t sure – was sucking on something...oh. Littles. Judy listened closely as best she could, but they were all smiles, discussing some new cartoon about animated whales who’d gained sentience. The concept was...probably sound, considering that whales were technically mammalian, so there were strict laws about hunting them, but nobody had seen any whale try to communicate outside their species or seen any evidence of civilization or even intelligence, so the show was mostly played for laughs. Our society...but underwater! Nothing particularly interesting there, although she made a note to caution her brother Moondancer’s oldest litter, who were about nine. From the sounds of it, today’s scientists thought of whales like early mammals had thought of dumb bunnies, and while the situations were perhaps actually different, the echoes of caricature made her a bit uncomfortable. Angel had already condemned it wholesale, saying that she too felt the echoes of old-style speciesism in the way that the Narwhals were insular and distrusted and generally portrayed to be minor villains – thieves, bullies, jerks, not very intelligent but definitely cunning. It was so brightly-colored and cheerful that despite the large-scale hate for it from some circles, it had good ratings. Oh, well. She couldn’t take on the entire world; she could only help make it a better place.

She swiveled her ears, listening for any hint of any lead, although she didn’t imagine she would actually hear any evidence at a party. Rather, she wanted to get to know mammals who had known Sarah. She wanted to find out where Sarah had gone, what she had done with her free time, who she might have spoken to about her relationship with Nate. Hirsch and Del Valle were already following leads outside of the community; her sister Sian was still out of the country finishing some kind of year-long youth aid mission, which was probably as solid an alibi as one could get without being in police custody at the time of the murder, but Sarah’s parents were still alive, living out their retirement in Mammoth Lakes. In grad school she had mostly dropped her classmates around the time she’d begun her thesis, and her social media pages were sparse; she only followed family members, Nate, and a few celebrities.

By her own choosing, or at Nate’s command? Nobody was sure yet. It was one of the avenues they were checking. Unfortunately, Sarah’s murder wasn’t as important to the rest of the department as it was to Judy. It should have been low on the priority list; there was no evidence to suggest it was part of a pattern, and murders happened every day. The tech department was consistently backlogged and Hirsch had three other unrelated zoicide cases to investigate alongside this one. She knew she should have asked why before this operation had even begun. There was something larger going on here. She needed to keep an eye out for clues about that, too...though without knowing what she was looking for, there wasn’t enough puzzle to solve.

“Hey, Luna,” called a familiar voice from behind Judy, and she grinned, turning to look at Linnea. She seemed a little more comfortable in her own fur this time, and she was dressed down compared to the party at the Jungle. After seeing that there wasn’t a uniform, Judy didn’t expect to ever wear another corset to a party, although she did want to see Nick in those tight pants again…

“Hey, Star, it’s good to see you,” Judy replied, waving her over, careful to use Linnea’s scene name in front of others. Plenty of mammals didn’t want their real names out there for anyone to hear.

“Come and sit with us, if you like.”

Quickly, Linnea whumped down next to Judy with a friendly grin and said, “Hi, Oliver.”
“How have you been,” he asked, eyes mostly still on the suspension scene, although he did look at her to let her know he was paying attention.

“Eh. Aside from teaching Intro to Astronomy to a bunch of snot-nosed Freshers who just want the science credit and don’t care about the subject, I’m collaborating on a paper with Dr. Harker from ZU and Dr. Woolston at U of A – it’s so intimidating, you have no idea, they’re like titans in the field – so things have been a little crazy, for the given value of academia anyway. Tonight’s my night away from all of that.”

Judy carefully did not mention that Sharla was not, in fact, intimidating. Her old friend was as sweet as pie, but she couldn’t say that without thinking up a cover story for how she might know Sharla and hoping Linnea didn’t ask Sharla about Luna Evergreen. Instead, she asked, “Are you going to play tonight, then?”

“Actually, I...had a request. Didn’t expect to jump right into it, but...I was wondering if you’d be open to doing a scene with me,” Linnea suggested shyly. Judy was knocked off-guard by the request; she hadn’t expected it at all. She opened her mouth, closed it, and listened to the rest of the request. “And you don’t – don’t feel obligated, please. I don’t want you to feel pressured at all. I just don’t want to feel pressured either. I’ve played with a few guys before, and they always wanted to take it to a place I don’t want to go. But you won’t make this into something it isn’t, because you’re already in a monogamous relationship, and I think I can trust you both not to be gross about it.”

Judy tried to make eye contact with Nick, but he was focused on Linnea. They hadn’t talked about what they would say if others wanted to scene with them. Judy was inclined to trust Linnea when she said she didn’t want it to be anything other than a scene, and Nick...well, he didn’t get a say, did he? She could certainly use her relationship with him as an excuse to turn down Linnea, but that wouldn’t be honest.

“I’m not really feeling it tonight,” she said instead, going for an answer that was as close to the truth as possible. Linnea’s face fell, and Judy felt compelled to add, “But tell you what, let’s talk about what a scene would look like. We’ll exchange numbers, and if we’re both feeling good about it, we’ll do it at the next party. Does that sound like a good alternative?”

“Yeah.” Linnea’s expression looked relieved and Judy felt a little bad. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever feel good about playing with someone other than Nick; it wasn’t really about fidelity, so much as it was about their familiarity with each other and Judy’s reluctance to hurt others. Then again, maybe it would be a good idea to step outside her comfort zone in a new way. If she proved to herself physically what she already logically knew to be true – that she wasn’t going to randomly fly off the handle just because she was given permission to indulge – then she would probably be a better domme for Nick. And Linnea might benefit from a scene partner who really wasn’t going to attach any strings to it. No hidden fees. A mutually beneficial arrangement, where both sides would leave satisfied, even if Judy would probably get more out of it than Linnea.

Ruth really would be proud.

With a quick smile in Nick’s direction (he still wasn’t looking at her, but he didn’t look upset), Judy asked, “What would the ideal scene look like to you?”

“Just a spanking, with a paddle, maybe,” Linnea suggested hesitantly, looking between Judy and Nick. She twisted her paws together and fidgeted in her seat. She was probably nervous. Judy would never insult her by calling her cute, but – well, the behavior was cute, anyway. Sweet, fluffy...harmless, almost childlike. With the big dark eyes and long ear-tufts, the lynx looked a little bit bunny. “I don’t think I’m ready for anything like that strap you used on Oliver.”
“A tawse,” Judy corrected, and then bit her tongue, but Linnea didn’t seem to mind, judging by her relieved smile.

“Yeah, a tawse. That looked painful. I just want a little impact play?”

“You sound unsure.”

“Maybe I am…”

Judy put a paw on her arm and gave her a reassuring smile. “We’re not saying what we’ll absolutely do, remember? Tell me your fantasy. What does Star, the kinky lynx who lives in your head, envision as the perfect scene? No rules, no limits, you don’t even necessarily have to obey the laws of physics. We’ll take bits and pieces from there.”

“Well I...um, there’s some stuff you and I will never do, so I’ll just skip that. I think for a scene with a friend, I’d want to start out being tied up, with a spreader bar between my feet and my forepaws tied to that so that I can be tipped over,” Linnea told her, so quietly that if Judy hadn’t been a bunny it might have been hard to hear.

“Go on,” she encouraged.

A little louder, Linnea continued, “Okay, so I’d start out on my knees, and the top – or I guess you, but in my ultimate fantasy I don’t really have anyone specific in mind, it’s all about me, which is probably selfish but-”

“Fantasies always are. I know mine are. Ask Ollie.”

“My mistress always has fulfilling fantasies,” Nick said loyally, bless him, but his smile was too dangerous for that to imply anything except that she was reasonably sadistic per his character’s preferences.

Linnea took the joke as intended, thankfully, and laughed, her shoulders un-tensing and her nervousness draining out of her face. “Okay, fair enough. It’s just, this isn’t something I’ve ever really talked about before. I kinda take what I can get, being a non-sexual bottom unless the top is a female I’m romantically attracted to, so...anyway, on my knees, bound like that, with you telling me what I’m being punished for. It could be anything, it doesn’t really matter, it’s the scolding that I want. Like you could be scolding me for wearing the wrong shirt or shoplifting or – hey, that’s a fun fantasy, if we had you interrogating me police style, like the bunny cop, although I’m sure you get that all the time, so I’m sorry if that’s speciesist – is it? Oh my God, am I allowed to…?”

“You’re fine,” Judy assured her, trying not to laugh. She wasn’t nearly as successful as she’d hoped. Perhaps it was a tad speciesist – all bunnies look alike wasn’t exactly the spirit of the sentiment, but it wasn’t far off, either – but it was funny because Judy was the bunny cop, and watching Linnea trip over herself to explain that she totally didn’t think Luna Evergreen looked like Judy Hopps made her wonder if Linnea was questioning her own judgment...or perhaps couldn’t tell bunnies apart after all. Judy’s fur was professionally dyed black and she had brown contacts, and even her grooming style and nail maintenance were different; if she MuzzleTimed with her own parents from an unknown number, she might not be recognized until she spoke. It was funny, but Judy still felt a little bad about having to play along, because it felt a bit like the social gaslighting she still sometimes had to deal with in her real life. She would have to make it up to Linnea after the case, assuming she didn’t feel betrayed by the deception.

“Ha, if you say so...but yeah, scolding, and then you’d tip me over? With your foot, pulling down on my shoulder, so that I’m on my chest and knees with my arms running through my legs. And you’d
spank me for my bad behavior, and really go into detail about how bad I’ve been, like. Try to 
humiliate me? I don’t know, maybe we’d need an audience, get a couple of attendees to laugh at me 
or else it wouldn’t feel like humiliation. I mean in a perfect world this wouldn’t be at a kink party, 
this would be at an event where a spanking isn’t the norm. You’d be doing it for real, without my 
permission, and it would be obvious that you were doing this to punish and humiliate me...at a dinner 
party or maybe a business meeting. So, maybe you’re my boss, and I screwed something up for your 
huge project, so you have to take me to task in front of your partners and my coworkers and it’s not 
just a private thing, this punishment is going to haunt my career. My coworkers will laugh about it 
behind my back and every time I’m called into your office they’ll joke about how I’m probably due 
for another spanking. It’s not realistic...but anyway, when you’re done, you send me to the corner to 
think about what I’ve done wrong, and afterward I have to get up on a chair and make a public 
apology. Like it’s still the 50’s and I’ve been naughty.”

Judy kept her smile on her face through the unpleasant memories and the equally unpleasant 
summary of the punishment style. In a lot of ways, Bunnyburrow was still stuck 20 years behind the 
rest of the world, and they probably always would be. Everyone enjoyed the slow life; they were 
slow to embrace technology, slow to change, slow to acknowledge upgrades. Her dad’s business 
computer still used a CRT monitor and a big, ugly box that whirred like a monster. Hide-and-seek 
was still played with burrowing and ground stomping, with the “it” mammal wearing a blindfold, to 
teach kits how to farm naturally and avoid disasters. And yes, most families (bunny or not) preferred 
to discipline their children with an old-fashioned whuppin’ and a public apology, no matter how 
detrimental that had proven to be. Like it’s still the 50’s might have been a little bit inaccurate, but it 
wasn’t completely wrong.

“Let me guess,” Nick said teasingly, stroking Judy’s thigh. Covering for her. God, he was 
wonderful. “You never got spanked as a child.”

“Are you kidding? My mother once sat me down and told me that if I were ever naughty, I would 
have to spank her, and it freaked me out so much I never even cheated on a take-home test.”

“Hraka, how did you...never mind. I think we can work off that.” Judy squeezed briefly and then 
brought her paws together in her lap. She felt silly about the use of Lapine, especially since she 
wasn’t entirely sure she’d even used it in the right context, but it was part of her character. At least 
most of her character didn’t need to be faked. It wasn’t hard anymore to assume a domme persona; 
she wore it like an old, comfortable sweater, and as Luna, she didn’t even need to consider her own 
daily life. Luna Evergreen owned her husband, and she could own a room, and she could certainly 
own a scene. “I’m sure we could get a couple of spectators to agree to participate, if that’s something 
you want. Someone will probably watch anyway. A spreader bar probably isn’t the best idea, but I 
can do a double column tie that functionally is the same, but more comfortable. We can do a double 
column smuggler’s knot on your wrists and attach it at your ankles, though I’ll need to know if you 
have any nerve damage or joint issues, because even though they’re pretty comfortable knots that’s 
information I need to know anyway.”

“Double column what, now?”

Nick shot up beside her and she threaded her fingers through his headfur, giving him some calming 
pets. Of the two of them, he wasn’t the biggest fan of rope bondage – that was something Judy had 
unexpectedly enjoyed on her own, and he enjoyed the bottoming experience more than the rigging – 
but he did love it when she explained BDSM things. Too bad he wouldn’t be getting a view of that 
thing. “Sometimes I practice on my own feet. I’ll send you a photo sometime this week. The point 
is, I can tie you pretty comfortably, although I’ll need you to do some homework and find out how 
long you can comfortably lie there in that position. We might need to find a cushion or a mat to 
lessen the stress on your body. The paddling won’t be hard, and since I don’t know your body or
your limits, we’ll have to stick to a predetermined number of strikes and you’ll have to triple promise to red out if it gets too intense, even if we’re not to the spanking part, okay? I’ll write a script and send it to you and you can approve it, make changes...that office thing sounds interesting, and it wouldn’t be personal, so you’d get the feeling of being publicly scolded without revealing something that could actually hurt you. That whole thing seems workable, as long as you can imagine we’re in an inappropriate place rather than a dungeon.”

“You can – you’d really do that for me?”

“Of course! Ollie and I haven’t done any office roleplay, since by mutual agreement we don’t bring our work home with us, but it does sound like fun. It doesn’t break any of my hard limits, and you designed the scene yourself, so it by nature doesn’t break any of yours,” she explained, a little worried about Linnea’s surprise. “That’s kind of the point – as a responsible top it’s my job to make sure you’re getting what you want. Yes means yes, remember?”

“I’ve only played with those three guys, and they...weren’t so generous. I mean, they weren’t...they weren’t bad, I didn’t have to safeword out, but it wasn’t really me getting what I want, it was just me letting them know what I didn’t want and getting a scene out of that.” Linnea admitted, looking away and fidgeting again. She jigged her leg up and down and spoke to her knees. “What you’re saying makes sense, and it feels like what negotiated consent should be, it just hasn’t been my experience.”

“Those guys weren’t good tops then,” Nick said bluntly, resting his muzzle on Judy’s thigh. She could feel him clenching his muscles though. It was his way of hiding how much he hated that aspect of social kink. This was something that had kept them from making contact with the community before the investigation; all of the bad stuff on the internet had to come from somewhere, and it came from the bad parts of the kink community, selfish tops taking advantage of bottoms who were worried that they wouldn’t get any experience if they said no too much. “They were self-centered and irresponsible and that’s their fault. My mistress isn’t like that at all.”

Linnea bit her lip. “I’m sure they’re just new…”

“New or not,” Judy said gently, “that was wrong of them. Consent isn’t just safewording out when you can’t handle something, it’s actively going after what you want. Even if that means turning down a play opportunity or telling your intimate partner you don’t ever want the same things. If Ollie didn’t like spankings, we wouldn’t do them, even though I ended up being really good at it. I’m his mistress because we wanted it, not because I made a unilateral decision and he didn’t disagree. You’re allowed to get what you want. This lifestyle is designed to give you what you want. Especially if you’re a bottom.”

Linnea looked like she’d been slapped in the face. Judy wondered if anyone had ever bothered to explain consent in such concrete terms. Probably not. There was a lot of terminology that everyone assumed kinksters just knew, and the few websites that did go over safety and consent were sadly written mostly by tops for tops, framed mostly in terms of no means no because it was assumed that everyone already knew yes means yes. But clearly that wasn’t the case. These tops that Linnea had played with probably weren’t bad mammals. They probably didn’t think they’d taken advantage of her as a bottom, and Judy wasn’t sure she’d even feel comfortable calling their behavior anything close to assault. It was a fundamental misunderstanding of consent. She wished she could fix it – just take everyone’s paws and help them, re-frame the conversation – but she couldn’t. All she could do was watch out for individuals like Linnea and hope that was the worst of it.

Truthfully, though, the kink community was small potatoes compared to so-called “normal” mammals. In kink, at least the concept of consent was important. In kink, if someone said the safeword, it was a hard no, and except in rare cases that were clearly labeled as violations, it was
respected. As an officer, Judy had taken scads of statements from mammals who’d said no and been ignored by their intimate partners, or who hadn’t given clear consent for sexual activities and been overpowered, or who had been afraid to say no because they didn’t want to be attacked physically. As a bunny, Judy was well aware of the risks of saying no to a bigger, stronger mammal. She felt reasonably safe in the kink community, even amongst the large mammals who could kill her accidentally without even knowing it. She wasn’t sure she’d feel so safe were she just dating around in the real world, trying to find someone to love.

If she wasn’t universally hated after this case ended, could she and Nick could maybe teach a joint class on responsible, negotiated consent from a legal and ethical perspective for both tops and bottoms? Were they even qualified for that?

“This isn’t your fault, Star,” Nick said firmly, and Judy kept petting him, because he still felt tense against her leg. This was important to him. After his experience with the Scouts and trying to understand why he was even into bondage after that, trying to understand why he wanted to lose control, negotiations were huge for him on a personal level. “You’re not in charge of their behavior. You’re not supposed to keep them in line. If they’re not listening to you and respecting you the way a top should, that’s on them, and they need to do better.”

Cheese and crackers, why was it so much easier to listen to that lecture when it was directed at someone else? Did being upset on her new friend’s behalf, but making excuses for mammals in her own life, make her a hypocrite?

“I need to think about that for a while,” Linnea admitted. “Can we...talk about something else?”

“Mistress and I sometimes just sit back and watch whatever’s going on,” suggested Nick, looking up at Judy for the first time. She was glad he had chosen to forgo contacts. The familiar green made her feel at home even in such an unexpectedly awkward situation. “Sometimes we make up stories, but not at events like this.”

“Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Maybe the addition of a new friend gave Judy less time to confer with Nick, but in a way, she added to the experience. She might have some insight, no matter how unrelated it might seem on the surface. Sometimes the best way to approach an old problem was from a new, unconsidered angle.

Judy kept up her petting and settled back in her chair to watch Nisha’s suspension scene progress, keeping her ears on their surroundings. She would be ready to focus if she heard any of the buzzwords she was looking for, including Sarah’s name, but being in detective mode didn’t mean she had to turn herself off. She could be a good domme, and good friend, and a good detective, all at the same time. If she was a good mammal, two of the three would come easily anyway. And as usual, Nick was right. She was a good mammal, even if sometimes it didn’t quite seem that way.

By 11:00, nobody new had shown up and nothing interesting had happened, so when Judy got a text from Nate asking if Luna and Oliver would like to meet up for drinks, it seemed like a better use of their time. Linnea was happy to tag along, so at 11:25, the four of them sat down at the end of a table at some nearby bar called “The Scratch.” It was 80’s night, which apparently wasn’t the same kind of kitschy 80’s night that other venues hosted. They played music from that decade, both popular and not, and all of their drinks were priced like they would have been back then. It was a giant sale set to fun music. Judy could see why it was so crowded.

She had to speak loudly to be heard over drunken merriment and Dingo Boingo when she said, “Good to see you again, Nate! Thanks for asking us out!”
“Yeah,” Linnea added cheerily. Her previous anxiety had disappeared with time and a subject change. “The party was dead.”

“Oh, were you at the barn,” he asked. Judy noted a line of cups that indicated he’d been there for much longer than just a few minutes. She decided not to mention it.

Nick replied, “Yeah, but Star’s right, it was dead.”

“I’m not surprised. Nobody openly talks about it, but the mammals who meet at the Barn are usually what’s left of the old crowd and they’re not quite as social. It’s also got less equipment and less space; the Barn is mostly used for exhibitions and classes now.”

“That’s good to know,” Linnea mused, and then she stuck out her paw, sliding her own pale ale to the side. “I’m Star, by the way. And you’re Nate?”

“Well, nobody calls me Nathaniel,” he teased, shaking her paw once before pushing up both of his sleeves. Another cardigan and button-up. Judy was ready to put money on her cartoon-character theory. “Nice to meet you, Star. I haven’t seen you before...are you new to the area? Oh, thank you, Sally.”

Their server, a vixen with a bright smile, set down a blackberry martini for Nick (he wouldn’t drink more than a few sips because he was afraid of turning into an alcoholic, but it was as good a prop as any), a Bloody Mary for Judy (vodka was nasty enough that she wouldn’t be tempted to have much of it, aside from the celery), and a basket of fried potatoes with herbs and spices. It smelled delicious, and – as Sally winked at Nate and sauntered off to the next medium-sized table – Judy soon found out that it tasted delicious, too.

“Oh, wow, these potatoes are great. To answer your question, I’m pretty new to the scene in general,” Linnea said around a bite of their snack. She tapped a single claw on the table in front of her, but it didn’t seem like a nervous fidget this time, just perhaps a normal behavioral habit. “Just about four months in, now. Before I played with a few guys, I mostly read books.”

“Which books,” Judy asked curiously, thinking of the ones she’d read. The Mistress Manual was a pretty good one for an overview of heterosexual female domination, although Judy didn’t put it into practice much. She hadn’t found much of anything on queer dynamics, although she hadn’t exactly looked very hard either, since she and Nick were only considered queer outside of the kink community; in the real world, outside that bubble, interspecies relationships were much less acceptable.

“You’re gonna laugh at me.”

Judy could feel Nick’s grin widen before she even slid her gaze over to confirm it. She pinched his thigh hard enough to make him yelp and told him, “Be good, Ollie.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied unrepentantly.

It was enough to give Linnea courage, though, and Judy had to wonder if it had been a happy accident, or Nick’s design. She knew that she tended to credit mammals with more skills and smarts than they actually had, always trying to see the best in everyone, but she also knew him pretty well, so it could have been either.

“A friend of mine dragged me to see Fifty Shades of Prey when it came out. It was – really gross. I kept thinking, this can’t be right, because I mean...I sometimes would spank myself with a furbrush or use scarves to tie my feet to each side of my bed while I... you know, um, relieved myself, and it
felt really nice. But the movie made it seem like Ana didn’t have a choice. She had to be a sub to be with this guy, and he was stalking her and manipulating her life and he was rich and powerful and bigger than her, so like – what if he’d just decided to spirit her away and keep her locked up? Better to say yes and feel like she had a choice, right? But. I still liked the idea of being tied up and I still wanted to be spanked. So I went looking. Read some blog posts, picked up pretty much anything on BDSM I could find, even if it looked awful. Most of it was. There was bad porn and really fucked up stuff especially on, um, hentai message boards which I regret stumbling across in my quest for knowledge, but also some pretty decent how-to guides and a series of romance novels that had some softcore erotic kink elements. I did a couple of one-night stands without the whole sex thing, looked up local meetups, and here we are now. As weird as this sounds, I don’t think I would have ever found the community were it not for *Fifty Shades.*”

“That’s unfortunate, but not for you, I guess,” Nate said bluntly. Judy thought he might be drunk, because from what she’d observed, he tended to be a little more choosy with his words. Compared to his usual manner of speech, his consonants had softened; he didn’t sound so refined anymore, but it was only noticeable because Judy had to keep her own accent in mind.

“Yeah, I know it’s kinda the worst introduction.”

“So some dumb bitch writes fanfiction, believes she reinvented the kink wheel, and while she laughs all the way to the bank, the rest of us get side-eye when we go to the hardware store,” he continued disdainfully, and although Nick and Judy both flinched at the word *bitch,* she couldn’t really fault Nate for using a harsh slur. Judy had, of course, read the series, albeit with low expectations. It had been full of garbage — it was truly one of the worst interpretations of BDSM available in print, unless you counted the 40-60 page, self-published, unedited erotica with titles like *Kaylie’s Bruised Behind* or *In His Thrall* — but unfortunately, it was popular. It made the lifestyle that Judy and Nick enjoyed (and benefited from) look cheap and disgusting. The protagonist was a vapid, self-involved piece of trash who absolutely embodied the stereotype of *dumb bunny,* her abuser was even *worse,* and the series ultimately portrayed kink as a bad thing, an illness to be cured. Not to mention, it fell into the absolutely appalling trap of using babies to solve everything. Coming from such a large family in a region where teen pregnancy wasn’t just the norm but the expectation, Judy was well aware that babies didn’t solve problems; if anything, they only caused problems.

If Judy, who understood how healthy and fulfilling the lifestyle could be, sometimes felt awkward about her desire to dominate...how many potential kinksters were turned away by the rambling train wreck that made Nate’s coercive behaviors look harmless and sweet? Or worse, how many potentially *healthy* kinksters turned into accidental abusers because they romanticized the wrong dynamic?

“It really is terrible,” Linnea agreed, sharp and sardonic, conveniently keeping the conversation going. Judy was usually pretty good at processing quickly, having spent her whole life as a bunny – the first few years of every bunny’s life were filled with informal, ears-on lessons about filtering out unnecessary noises and prioritizing responses to stimuli — but she hadn’t ever considered that *Nate* would find the series problematic, and she wasn’t sure whether to press for information or let it go. She avoided conversations about the ridiculous series as a rule, as it was unmitigated birdshit and she didn’t usually find trash-talk fun, but she wanted into his head.

She *needed* into his head. She needed to know him. And this was at least common ground with very few variables; if she could find out *why* he hated it, she could maybe understand why he had still abused at least some of his subs. It he hadn’t murdered Sarah, and he didn’t pay for his crimes, she wanted him to be able to change. Become healthier. It wasn’t her job to fix him, but she couldn’t exactly just sit around and do *nothing.*
“And mammals...they believe in it. Their only experience with BDSM before they pick up her books is usually a pawcuff allusion in a movie played for laughs, or something more sinister like a so-called romantic take on historical slavery or indentured servitude, and suddenly we see news stories about a dog who killed a vixen he was dating with a rope around her neck because they wanted to *spice it up like Fifty Shades*, and I’m mildly ashamed to use my spare bedroom to store my equipment because any resemblance at all is too close to the *red room of pathetic posturing* and – well. You all know how bad it is. But it nearly drove my Sarah away, when she first read it. I told her not to, so of course she *did*, and she asked me if I thought of her as an incompetent, stumbling, blushing ignoramus. If that was what I was looking for, if that was how a submissive was supposed to end up.”

After listening to those recordings, Judy could practically hear Sarah’s voice asking that question, sounding accusatory and nearly as disdainful as Nate himself. Of course, the ideal would be a kinder world in which she hadn’t been killed, but the more Judy heard, even from Nate’s biased anecdotes, the more she wished she could have met Sarah at least once before her death.

Was that it, though? Was *that* the only reason he hated it? Or had Sarah’s reaction only heightened his dislike?

“It doesn’t help that everything about Christian’s business was vague and phallic,” she added, refusing to feel bad for talking badly about the author. After all, it was one thing to write bad fanfiction for a body of work that was *already* bad, but profiting off of her bad prose made her a public figure and authority, as undeserved as it was. “Her MO seems to be to make penis allusions to distract us from her complete lack of knowledge about...well, anything.”

“And I imagine being in the community for as long as you have would make that more personal to you.” If Judy hadn’t known Nick as well as she did, she might have missed his amusement. “My mistress and I have been going it alone. We’ve only bothered to come out to mammals we trusted, and we tend not to trust mammals who are so stupid that they might believe E.L. Jackal produced anything more than, as you said, garbage.”

Nate’s voice lowered slightly and he leaned in close enough to share air with Nick, a weirdly intimate gesture that Nick didn’t seem to find offensive even to Judy’s practiced eyes. “It doesn’t bother you that she’s a rabbit and he’s a fox? I’m sure that informs opinions about you, even outside of the kink aspect of your relationship. The author chose the species *based on* stereotypes.”

“Yeah, the predatory fox sneaks around behind the back of his impressionable prey, the ultimate submissive, buys her inappropriate gifts far too soon and expects her to appreciate him instead of being rightfully grossed out – grooms her for abuse after stalking her to make sure she’s too stupid to notice, because he wouldn’t be able to dominate her otherwise.” Linnea nodded firmly. “I would be offended.”

“Well,” Judy interjected, taking the advantage presented to her once the cheers of a nearby merry crowd died down. Maybe the species thing bothered Nate as well; his question implied it, at least. Cheese and crackers, why did he have to seem so normal? “We’ve learned not to care too much about what others think of us. Is it annoying? Sure. Have we gotten some crude jokes? Of course. Is it a bunch of typical speciesist tropes? Absolutely. Is the whole series degrading to all of us who are living this life rather than just dabbling in fuzzy pawcuffs and airplane blindfolds? Yes! At my first party, some jerk saw the way I was holding Ollie’s leash and suggested that I’d like to go off with him and be flogged anyway, and I wouldn’t be surprised if those bad stereotypes are part of the reason he assumed I would be amenable to subbing for a stranger. But I try not to complain too much about being stereotyped. That’s not the worst thing someone’s thought about me. At least with *Fifty Shades of Prey*, we have a whole syllabus for a teaching moment. Imagine trying to prove to your skeptical coworkers that you did not, in fact, sleep with the entire MR department just to get hired.”
Linnea looked nauseated, which was understandable. Nate looked outraged for some reason. Nick only reached up to run his claws through the fur on the back of her neck, because he knew Judy, knew how dedicated she was to working hard. It was an absurd thought that could be discarded ofpaw, even if you decided that her perfectly healthy libido and desire to climb the career ladder were enough to turn her into an unfaithful (and unregistered) prostitute...and assumed that every single mammal involved in the training and hiring process was unethical enough to take advantage of her ambition...and yeah, it was silly, wasn’t it? She laughed, suddenly feeling lighter. Why had she taken that so personally at first when the ones who believed that about her were the stupid ones?

“There will always be mammals who write content that makes certain groups look bad. To the as-of-yet uneducated or the willfully ignorant, *Fifty Shades* is BDSM, cuckolding is cheating, and polyamory is orgies, or at the very least, only about having lots of sex. But there are mammals out there who believe being queer should be illegal, too. Why should we get hung up on their opinions? So long as they don’t try to force their dumb ideas into the law, why should we give them a second thought?”

Nick scritched a little harder. When she looked at him, she felt so shiny; he was looking at her like she’d hung the moon, or like he was proud of her, and this was what he’d been trying to tell her, wasn’t it? He had never wanted her to attach her self-worth to something outside her own purview. Results mattered. Interpersonal relations mattered. But failing to prove herself did not make her a failure as a mammal; often, it only meant that her audience had failed to see her as a mammal, and their prejudice wasn’t her fault. Logically, it couldn’t be her fault. That part was hard to face, because it meant that she didn’t always have control over how she was perceived...

...But she was *not a failure*, and if some mammals still perceived her as stupid or aggressively hypersexual or prone to random emotional breakdowns, that was their own willful ignorance. Judy’s biggest mistake on that front was trying to take control of that in the first place; it had only led to the kind of internalized speciesism she had helped Nick fight against.

“Sarah would have loved you,” Nate blurted, gesturing carelessly in Judy’s and Nick’s direction. He was definitely drunk, she decided; he wasn’t slurring or anything, but the number of cups in front of him was probably not accidental, and she knew the signs well enough. He acted like her Pop-Pop had acted before he died; nothing changed except the way he held himself. Nate was obviously more prone to speaking before he thought, too. Bright-eyed, he continued, “You especially, Luna, but – Oliver too. She liked – the real Sarah – she liked smart mammals who weren’t afraid to express their opinions and went after what they wanted. She liked to argue and win, too, but only if her argument was better. I don’t know you very well, Star, but I think she would have liked you too. She liked everybody who had a brain. Even me!”

Well, she knew how to recognize a free carrot when it bounced in front of her. “You haven’t said much about her, but she sounds great.”

“She was. She was *perfect*,” he answered, sounding as though these words were too important to say slowly. “The only thing I can think of that wasn’t perfect was the weird persona she had in the end, this *fakeness* she would sometimes use. She was cold – demeaning – she never threatened to leave, she just...wasn’t herself. It was her new friend, someone she met on the internet. As soon as they started talking...I was going to propose anyway. I had a ring and new rope. I was going to ask her to tie *me* up.”

This was good information to have. They had been operating under the assumption that Nate had treated her exactly the same way he’d treated his other subs, but something about Sarah was different. He had decided to commit to her, assuming he wasn’t lying – and the ring was probably verifiable, if they could manage to get a warrant for his bank records – and he had changed. He had planned to allow her to top him. It was more important than ever to get an outside view of who she
had been, if they wanted to get justice for her. Was Nate actually innocent of zoicide? Had it, perhaps, been this unknown internet friend? They were still working on getting information off Sarah’s devices…

She couldn’t afford to waver. She had to treat Nate like a suspect until they found the killer. He was an *abusive scumbag*. Whatever else he had the potential to be, at present, that was what he was. Helping him change was and always would be plan B. Plan A was finding enough evidence to take him down for what he’d done to Danielle and the others.

She smiled and thought of justice to make sure it looked real.

Nick’s shirt was somewhere off to the side and all of Judy’s blouse buttons were undone, but at least they weren’t boiling from the weird temperature problems in the apartment buildings in Tundratown.

There was a funny sort of quiet between them, a tense non-communication that Judy didn’t like. After saying goodbye to Nate and Linnea at 1:30 after a few drinks and increasingly silly conversation, Nick and Judy hadn’t been tired enough to go to bed right away, so they were sitting on opposite ends of the couch sanitizing and massaging each other’s feet, as they often did to pass the time. She knew that Nick wasn’t angry with her, but she couldn’t tell if he was angry at something else. He had the annoying ability to remain impassive when he was chewing on something, and she either had to prod him and hope she didn’t make things worse or wait for him to come out with it on his own. At this point in their relationship, she knew that she could trust him to tell her important or urgent things, so she usually just gave him space unless he bratted at her, but for some reason this time it didn’t feel right.

Hesitantly, trying to keep her tone as gentle as possible, she asked, “Is there something wrong, Nick?”

“I’m just…” He sighed and dug his thumbs into the middle of her foot, making her moan. That was one of her weak spots. It never failed to make her melt. He continued kneading as he said, “I’m worried. You really like Nate.”

Her attempt to pull her foot out of Nick’s grasp was as halfhearted as her glare. She probably just looked sleepy. “Nick, it’s not like that. I like who he pretends to be. I like who he had the potential to be, before he became an abuser.”

“Yeah, I know.” He kissed the outer edge of the foot he was kneading, probably just because. He did stuff like that sometimes. “And I’m not saying you’re going to let it affect your judgment. I know you. I know that when the time comes, you’re going to do the right thing and bring him in. But I also know that it’s going to hurt you. Either way, murderer or not, doing the right thing is going to hurt you. I love you and I respect the hell out of you, so I would never interfere or try to get you to quit, but it’s not easy to sit back and just...let it happen. Seeing you in pain is one of the things I like the least.”

“S-sometimes I do think about quitting,” she confessed, surprised at herself even as the words came stuttering out. She worked her paws around Nick’s foot, hoping the rhythmic motions would keep her grounded. She hadn’t ever allowed it thought-space, but it was true. Nick wouldn’t tell anyone. He wouldn’t judge her. It was safe to talk it out here, even if she couldn’t say this to anyone else. “It’s worth it, most of the time. Sure, I deal with speciesism, which I’d have to do anyway, and it burns me up to know that no matter how vigilant we are, there are probably some crooked cops in the department. Police brutality is really low since they increased the ZPA training requirements and revamped the vetting process, but it exists. Lloyd Alma wasn’t unique, even if he was uniquely lame. I’ve made it part of my mission to help keep the ZPD, or at least Precinct 1, accountable to the
public. And that’s part of why my coworkers don’t like me much; I’m their sister in blue, but I’m faithful to the citizens I serve, not to the department. I won’t protect or support bad cops. I will blow a whistle if one needs to be blown. It’s always been my goal to make the world a better place, and I chose police work as my method of doing that. But lately, looking at things from a new perspective...in addition to the interpersonal problems I have with my coworkers, I’m worried about what ulterior motives someone has for sending me undercover, worried you and I and maybe even the whole community might be collateral damage for someone’s stupid agenda, and I’m uncomfortable with how sometimes other officers talk about mammals like they’re objects or numbers rather than citizens to protect and serve. The ZPD’s got Lieutenant Wolfard and Captain Fangmeyer, who are amazing, but then it’s got Rigby and Longtooth, who are probably roughing up the perps they bring in even if nobody can catch them doing it. It’s hard to tell what the right thing is – stay, and hope I’m adding to the drawer of good cops? Or leave, because I don’t want to be complicit in bad behaviors that I can’t even prove? I don’t know who I would be without my job anymore. But that’s a problem, too; it’s not healthy. I can’t afford to have moral dilemmas right now, but there’s never actually a good time to have them when your job is to catch killers.”

“Are you depressed,” he asked, sounding worried. His eyebrows were furrowed and his mouth pressed itself tight after the question, but his paws didn’t stop moving in the ways that usually made her feel good after a long, stressful day.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’m confused, and I hate being confused because it makes me indecisive, and less efficient as a result. I want to do the right thing, Nick. It’s important to me. Doing good is more important than my badge. I’d give it up if I thought it was the right thing to do. I just don’t know. And I haven’t allowed myself to think about it. I guess what I’m trying to say is that you’re maybe not wrong to worry. I’m worried too. Doing the right thing is always easy; it’s just...picking up the pieces afterward that’s hard. I think I should talk to Fangmeyer about it. If anyone would understand my issue, it’s them. They’ve been through a lot, first as a military interrogator and then as a cop. I’m not the first UC to get close to a suspect. I’ll deal with it as it comes. And you’ll be there with me, won’t you?”

“Always.”

“Then that’s half the battle won already. Not every officer has this kind of support system. I know I can trust you to be honest with me, to tell me your opinion of my actions...and stand beside me even if you disagree, as long as I’m not making the world a worse place. I know I can trust you to call me out on bad decisions or disordered thinking. I don’t know how much of this is stress and how much of it is other issues making everything look bleaker than it is, but...now I’ve said it. Now I’ve acknowledged it. I’m not going to make a decision until we’ve gotten justice for Sarah, but it’s a decision I need to make.”

“And it’s a decision you can count on me to support 100% either way. Now, will you please come over here? Rubbing your feet is great, but I want to hold you. Especially now.”

“Fine, but if I fall asleep, you’re in charge of getting us to bed,” she teased, rubbing the top of his foot briefly and crawling up his torso to settle her weight on his chest. Immediately, his paw went up the back of her unbuttoned blouse to settle into the fur of her lower back while he stroked her tail with his other paw. It wasn’t an erogenous zone, but massaging her tail had the same effect on her that massaging her feet or the base of her ears had. She tried to let go. She was safe with Nick. She didn’t need him to protect her body, but he was good at protecting her heart, especially when she wasn’t being kind to herself. He was safe.

Did he know that she was willing to do the same?
“You know I’ll always be there for you, too, right?” She breathed in his comforting, familiar scent and reached up to run her fingers through the fur on his neck underneath his collar, which he loved. He hummed. “It’s been all about me lately. My stu–pet–my worries and problems, my case. I know it’s probably getting hard. But I’ll always be ready to be there for you like you’re here for me. I promise.”

She felt his laugh roll through her body, so she knew it was real. Sometimes his size was a surprise to her, even though she never really forgot how big he was. “Yes, Ma’am, I know. You’re a rockstar. But, uh, if you want to prove it…”

“How,” she said eagerly.

He snorted. “It’s not life and death, Carrots. Melanie asked me to lunch so that she can give me my lunchbox back, and I’d like it if you’d come with me.”

“Oh.”

“Like I said, not life and death.”

She decided not to shrug, because her position was comfortable, and instead kissed his bare chest before replying, “Of course I’ll go with you. It’s just, you know…investigating things is so expensive. We eat out something like six times as much just to get an in with witnesses or suspects whenever we work together.”

“And we don’t even get to use the company card for this one,” he lamented, referring to Luna Evergreen’s bank card that was to be used for strictly-defined expenses. He paused for long enough that she almost lifted her head to look at him, but he patted her lower back and asked hopefully, “Do you think it could still count as a tax write-off?”

“…Probably not?”

“I recant my statement. Not a fan of this job and you should definitely quit,” he grumbled, but he patted her again and he wasn’t really being serious.

She understood the sentiment. Investigating expenses were larger than anyone ever expected them to be, simply because of the housekeeping involved. She grinned into his fur, enjoying his deeper, slower breathing. It was only funny because it was true, but at least it was funny.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, snap, character development and friendship to balance out the paranoia.

The amount of shade I'm throwing at E.L. James makes it more like 150 Shades of Grey, but this book is a really controversial piece of shit in my community. It's brought more curious cuties to our door, true, but also it's super disgusting and not BDSM in any sense. It's had a direct negative effect on the kink community's vague goal of legitimacy, plus kink-curious folks are like "ooh, I can't wait to meet my Christian," which, no thanks, I'd rather eat my own adrenal glands than be like him, or "I just need to find my Ana," which...no, my guy, you just need to not be a dickfaced shitbag before you're ready to top. In-community, it's largely regarded as a joke that doesn't need telling, but the problem isn't kinksters, it's non-kinksters taking it as gospel or those on the periphery...
not understanding that modeling your relationship after Steele-Grey is a gasoline-soaked overflowing dumpster just waiting for a "contract" to strike a match under your brand-spankin-new abusive relationship. I mean, you do you; if you like the book, by all means, set dildo to stun or whatever, as long as you understand that it's the troubled, uneducated ramblings of a deranged woman who legit thinks BDSM is the same thing as abuse. As always, I beg of you, stay safe.
Research
Chapter Summary

In a case like this, where is the line between investigation and exploitation? (Judy does the right thing...hopefully.)

Chapter Notes

Everything sucks and I want to die, but I don't...think I let that affect my chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Monday came quietly after a Sunday full of mind-numbing research on FetLick and other social media pages. Matching faces to possible names using local searches was a long, difficult process, especially when overheard names could be scene names, but Nick had a knack for facial recognition and Judy was pretty good at remembering names, so working together they had made reasonable progress.

Nick wasn’t overjoyed at meeting Melanie for lunch, although he hadn’t said why. Judy hadn’t pressed; if she’d ordered it, he would have told her, but it seemed like a petty order that didn’t have anything to do with the things they had agreed for her to control. Nick was an adult who could take care of himself. If there was no imminent danger, then it was likely a personality conflict, and he was good at pretending those away for long enough to get information. His social skills were part of what made him a good detective.

The little salad joint was highly rated, but it was in the Meadows, so Judy hadn’t ever tried it. The decorators had avoided headache-inducing fluorescents, instead choosing to light the area with fairy lights twisted around pillars; it wasn’t bright, but the lighting was warm, and although it was fairly full, Nick and Judy didn’t have trouble finding Melanie. Whether that was due to the decent lighting, though, or Nick’s keen nose, Judy wasn’t sure.

Melanie Redd was another fox squirrel, bright-eyed, a bit underweight for her species but not to the point of being sickly. Her teeth were on the larger side, her fur was impeccably groomed with old-fashioned braid designs (reminiscent of the 80’s) running along the lines of her head, and her smile seemed to be genuine...until Judy stepped out from behind Nick as he took the lunchbox from Melanie’s paw. Judy hoped that what looked like disdain to her unusually fragile self-esteem was actually just confusion. It wasn’t realistic to believe that she’d be fast friends with everybody on this case, but she didn’t want any sort of contention either.

“Oh,” said Melanie, sounding disconcerted. “I didn’t realize you’d be bringing someone, Oliver. Who’s your friend?”

Nick’s smile was proud and adorable, and Judy bit her lip as he pulled out her seat for her. She sat down feeling silly for feeling flattered by his gesture; of course she wasn’t an invalid, she could pull her own seat out, but the kind of show Nick was putting on made her warm inside. He really took this service thing seriously. “This is my mistress – and less importantly, my wife – Luna Evergreen.
Mistress, this is Melanie, the friend I made last week.”

“You’re married?” With a blank expression, Melanie looked between Judy, who pretended to look at the menu, and Nick, who was busy scooting his chair ever so slightly closer to Judy’s. “You two are married?”

“It’s legal now,” Judy said defensively, even though there wasn’t really anything to be defensive of. She and Nick had never even discussed marriage, as it didn’t seem necessary. They weren’t planning to adopt kits; although Nick did make more than Judy, they were in the same tax bracket; health insurance could only be shared between same-species families, although that issue was still being fought in the courts; they both had living wills and end-of-life provisions. Nick’s collar, to them, was far more important than any piece of paper signed and notarized at City Hall.

“Of course it is, I’m just surprised that a – but that’s nice. The world is changing for the better, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” Judy agreed pleasantly. She felt as though she were missing something. Had she done something to make Melanie angry? Was she overthinking? Maybe Melanie was just a bit brusque with new mammals. When Judy looked at Nick to gauge his reaction, he was focused on the menu in front of him, and she felt another swell of affection, this time for no reason at all.

“Even if it hadn’t,” he said, gesturing vaguely somewhere to the left of Melanie’s head but keeping his head in the food selection, “she’s my mistress. Marriage or no marriage, I’ll be by her side forever, and she’s promised to keep me in line.”

“Not that you need much direction these days,” Judy teased. “You’re a good boy, Ollie.”

He smirked, catching Judy’s eye for a moment and winking. “I’ll be naughty later if you like.”

“I think it’s cute,” said Melanie, her tone somewhat dismissive. Judy tried not to bristle. This was Nick’s contact, and it was important that they keep her happy until they found out whether or not she’d be useful to the case. Working the case was important, not being liked. She could be hurt later, when her feelings were allowed to be important again. “A bunny playing at dominance – and you’re doing a good job, from the look of it. Some mammals might say that’s probably more down to Ollie being a good sub than anything, but what do I know?”

“Oliver,” Nick corrected. Judy sighed internally. He was a professional, and he wouldn’t break character, but she could tell from the suddenly-tight lines of his shoulders that he wanted to defend her. Within the confines of his scripted personality, there was only so much he could do; a big part of his persona was an even keel, his bratting more sass than crass. Shane had been a physical threat. Melanie was just being a little bit rude. “Only my mistress gets to call me Ollie.”

“Oh of course.” Melanie’s smile was beatific. “Then I’ll call you Oliver for now.”

For now…? It came together, suddenly. Melanie didn’t dislike Judy personally; she hadn’t had time to form an opinion. She just wanted Nick for herself. That was hardly a surprise. Nick was desirable as himself and as Oliver Evergreen; as her parents’ generation might have said, he was quite the catch, and in BDSM, a male submissive who was both enthusiastic and creative – not to mention willing to compromise and able to believably top if asked – was practically a mythical creature.

There wasn’t much evidence of Nate’s coercive practices aside from witness testimony, but it seemed that everyone connected with him was toxic to one degree or another. Melanie had pretended, according to Nick anyway, that her relationship with Nate had been nearly perfect...but if that were the case, she wouldn’t be targeting a fox she hardly knew, either as a legitimate play or an attempt to
establish the dominance Nate had withheld from her. It was sad, Judy thought. She may have been slightly dysfunctional, but at least she wasn’t making pathetic passes at committed monogamous mammals.

It wasn’t worth the potential exposure to try and blunt-force her way to information; she’d just have to trust Nick not to let his feelings get in the way of the investigation. With a slightly exaggerated grimace, Judy looked at her phone and said, “Oh, darn it, that meeting with Manuel was on the calendar for tomorrow, but it was scheduled for today. I need to go home and change.”

“I guess that means we won’t be eating here after all,” Nick told Melanie. If Judy hadn’t known him as long and as well, she might have mistaken that reluctant tone for sincere. “Sorry-”

“No, Sweetheart, it’s all right. You stay here with your new friend. It’s pay negotiations with my new boss, not a relay race. Here.” Judy pulled out her wallet, wrapped three twenties around a plain black recorder pen, and gave them to Nick. “You two treat yourselves to whatever you want; make sure you eat some protein, Ollie, or you know what will happen. Anyway, your afternoon shouldn’t be ruined just because my assistant wears her Tuesday undies on Mondays. I’ll see you at home later. Around nine?”

“That late,” Nick asked anxiously. Huh. That was interesting.

Hoping to reassure her fox, she replied, “I have to meet up with Manuel and then MuzzleTime my siblings to help with their algebra, so I thought I’d set up shop in the library and get some reading in. Will you be all right without me?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said with a nod.

She hated speaking in code. It always sounded weird and felt like a bad spy movie. If she never did it again, it would be too soon. She doubted her on-the-fly excuse would let him know that she was planning to do some research at the library. She didn’t know if he remembered she was going to the trauma group later that evening, but she would text him in an hour and hope he wasn’t too mad about her abrupt departure. Nick had been a detective for longer than she, so he would in theory understand her reasoning, but he was surprisingly loyal to his investigation partners; he’d never left someone in a jam like this. The pen was for his protection, mostly. Because of the one-party consent laws in Animalia, if Melanie became aggressive in some way, he would only need to begin recording. He could also use it to record relevant information if she became chatty in Judy’s absence.

It was just...Judy knew that Melanie wouldn’t talk if she wasn’t alone with “Oliver.” Was it slimy to use her like this? Yes, it probably was. But it would be stupid to let a lead slip through their paws because of debatable moral hangups.

Judy frowned down at her tablet, concerned. More than concerned, really. She trusted Nick to handle himself, knew he wasn’t in any real danger, but Melanie Redd was, apparently, a mammal of interest, at least according to the notes on the server.

Per instruction, this tablet was never connected to the internet while Judy was at the apartment. Of course, there were ways to get information off a device without using the internet, and the ordering officer (Commissioner Greg Sporeheel, according to the official order) was being too paranoid – Nate would have no reason to “hack” her devices – but following orders was crucial to being kept on this investigation. Aside from wanting to prove herself capable, Judy was invested in the well-being of the community; an outsider would have no such loyalty, and might do a lot of damage.

The public library, however, provided internet access. With a pretty decent app, she could access the
server from anywhere; this was definitely loophole exploitation, but it was better than going in blind. Someone would be able to tell that she’d used her username and password, but as long as she didn’t add anything, nobody would be looking at her activity, so she was free to look at the new stuff at her leisure. According to one of Hirsch’s most recent additions, Melanie Redd’s name had been found on a list in the victim’s car. Judy hadn’t even been told they’d found it yet, but that wasn’t a surprise; they’d just found it the day prior, abandoned in the tunnelway built under the ocean by the docks in Tundratown. Judy had been down there before; it was creepy and dark and definitely a good place to stash a car, since nobody in their right mind would stay very long. The plate glass above was used in several undersea observatories worldwide and in theory would keep the tunnelway quite safe, but it wasn’t routinely maintained, and a collapse would kill anyone inside. (A collapse wasn’t likely, but accidental drowning wasn’t generally on anyone’s bucket list.)

Notably, Melanie’s name had a check mark by it, Danielle’s name was crossed off, and three other names that Judy didn’t recognize were checked. There were eight names on the list, another of which was crossed off, and the rest were untouched. Detectives weren’t supposed to make guesses or huge leaps of logic, but she felt pretty confident in assuming that these were names of either Nate’s former employees, former subs, or both. Recognizing the opportunity, Judy texted Nick.

Try to get M to talk about SB or NS.

Yes Ma’am.

It was silly, but his response brought a smile to her face. She was beginning to really enjoy being called Ma’am, not necessarily because she wanted a nickname that was more respectful than Carrots or Fluff, but because it was important to Nick. It made him happy. That was enough, wasn’t it? She hadn’t loved the nickname Carrots, either, but she’d grown used to it. She recognized it as an endearment, a legitimate name to be called rather than a jab at her upbringing or a bratty taunt. Ma’am could be the same. It didn’t need to be a title of power, not really.

She trusted Nick to adequately manipulate the conversation, or shift the conversation if it became dangerous or inappropriate. She wouldn’t waste time fretting over him. Instead, she delved back into the information on the server; it was...interesting.

A warning not to tell Judy that the parents were on their way back to Zootopia to talk to investigators and do an ash ceremony for their daughter. That was irritating, but not worrisome on its own; a UC didn’t need distractions, after all, but added to the larger picture, it did make her nervous that she was being set up (or used) for something.

A laptop hidden in the trunk in the compartment where the spare tire would be. The tech department had been ordered to get what they could off the hard drive, but there were at least a dozen cases above this one in terms of priority. They likely wouldn’t get answers for a few weeks.

An addition to the coroner’s report: due to the varied stages of healing, the official determination was that the fractures and lacerations had been inflicted over a period of weeks. Not just torture, but extended torture. Sarah had seen her death coming every day for weeks. Judy’s heart went out to her and her resolve hardened: whoever had done this, whether it really was Nate or it was some unknown mammal, they needed to be brought to justice. She frowned, going over the information she knew. Nate’s story was already slightly off. He had admitted to Hirsch in his interview that he enjoyed rope work, but he had told “Luna” that he didn’t know shibari; considering that shibari was often used as an equivalent for artistic binding (although Judy and Nick never used the word, nor did they adopt the term kinbaku-bi, because it seemed kind of dumb to use words in languages they didn’t know to describe rope bondage), either he was lying or he was incredibly precise. Either was likely.
In strictly-defined BDSM, the word *shibari* was used to describe tight binding as a spiritual experience. Some mammals considered subspace and topspace to be spiritual experiences rather than simply neurochemical, but Nate didn’t strike Judy as the type to be particularly spiritual. His comment about “learning” *shibari* might have meant that he hadn’t learned to make a mental shift into spirituality. It might have meant that he hadn’t learned to effectively *fake* a spiritual experience. It might have meant he’d never experienced top space. It might have meant he hadn’t delved into the historical aspects of tight bondage, from punitive to erotic to spiritual. Or he could have been lying, knowing that Luna had read about Sarah’s murder and wanting to look squeaky clean in front of his new associate. If he enjoyed psychological BDSM as well as physical, he would be well-practiced in verbal loopholes and pedantry. The discrepancy didn’t mean that he was the killer, but it wasn’t exactly a point in his favor either way.

Melanie and Danielle were now on the suspect list. That was...inconvenient. Melanie, they could covertly investigate if Nick kept up their friendship – maybe he’d be willing to play into her desire to “steal” him away, but Judy wouldn’t dream of pushing him into that – but Danielle was out of reach. They would have to rely on Hirsch and Del Valle to follow up on that line of investigation.

And there was something about the method of torture that nagged at Judy. It was important, somehow, and the reason was *right there* on the edge of her brain, but she couldn’t dig it out. The killer hadn’t just broken her bones and cut her with scalpels. She’d obviously been beaten harshly with singletails and expertly-tipped flail whips over and over again. Despite the nearly savage way she had been tortured, all of her injuries were...precise? Clinical? Definitely reminiscent of kink scenes. The binding had been a big enough clue, but the methods of infliction and (Judy hated to think it, but she couldn’t lie to herself) level of *skill* involved pointed to a dedicated kinkster as the culprit. That didn’t necessarily mean that the killer was part of the community, but it excluded mammals who either had no experience or were just starting out. It was much more *likely* that the killer was part of the community than not.

They had finally gotten a subpoena for the sale records of the only shop in Zootopia that sold singletails, but that was almost certainly going to be a waste of time. Most members of the community would have made purchases there, probably, and there were so many online stores and independent sellers who took commissions that it was impossible to tell where the killer had gotten the singletail for the torture scene.

More questions than answers, then. Nick would surely complain about it later, but from Judy’s perspective, this was good. At least now, they *had* questions. Was it challenging? Absolutely. But detective work wasn’t easy, or everyone would do it.

Unsatisfied with her progress but knowing that it was better to bow out when a certain avenue was exhausted, Judy committed the new details to memory, saved them in a document she could access offline, and hard logged off the server. She would go over the details and her observations with Nick later. There were still a couple of hours before the trauma group would start, so she got to work on her new project: writing a scene for Linnea.

She had pages and pages of scenes she and Nick had worked out during their relationship, usually the more intensive ones. A simple spanking only needed verbal negotiation and a safeword, but the scene in which Nick had first achieved subspace, for example, had been *meticulously* planned out. She had even written herself a script for his chastisement. Plenty of mammals planned elaborate scenes verbally, but Judy preferred to have guidelines for this kind of scene; she also wanted to ensure consent for all of the aspects of the scene, and a written model would protect them both.

She was really doing this. She was writing a scene for someone *other* than Nick.
It was scary to think about. Judy didn’t think of being a domme as part of her identity. Rather, it was an aspect of her relationship with the mammal she loved most. But once she really thought about it, at about the four-year mark, Judy had begun to idly fantasize about dominating other mammals. It barely registered, because she had no real interest in doing it, but despite not identifying as A Domme, Judy had desired dominance since her early teens. She had always liked the idea of being in charge, of giving orders, of being a leader. Not a tyrant or an abuser, though; someone respectable who had earned the right to give commands. The scene with Linnea was an opportunity to explore the limits of that desire in a safe place. She wasn’t attracted to the lynx, and Linnea wasn’t looking for a relationship other than friendship. The scene would not be remotely sexual, although it was possible that either one of them might experience some form of arousal purely from the acts; that was not the same as wanting sex. She was slightly uncomfortable about the type of scene Linnea had described, because it was akin to a rape fantasy, albeit a nonsexual one; from a certain perspective, nonconsensual spankings could be just as violating, after all, and neither Judy nor Nick had ever been particularly interested in anything that lacked consent, even if it was just pretend. But Judy thought it might provide some catharsis. During the span of her career, Judy had noticed a trend: the more power a mammal had, the more likely they were to abuse it. She wanted to know what that felt like so she could be sure to avoid it. She never wanted to be that officer, the one getting away with police brutality. In her line of work, there were a lot of “excessive force” behaviors that were excused for one reason or another, but that was wrong. She never, ever wanted to do that. She didn’t want to do unjustifiable harm to any mammal she had sworn to serve and protect, even a criminal. It was why she hadn’t traded her shock pistol for a live firearm when promoted to detective.

Double column spreader bar tie; hitch off, loop on each end, bring together for double column smuggler’s knot on wrists. Leave room for stretch, comfort.

Tools: paddle (let L choose), possibly a gag (probably not), possibly a blindfold? She to wear professional clothing and ugly underwear.

L on knees. She incorrectly scheduled a meeting and did not calendar it appropriately; I am therefore unprepared to meet with my associates and other employees. We are all upset with her for wasting our time, and she must be publicly punished for her screw-up because official (normal) corrective measures have failed before. First I chastise her for her mistake.

(L, write a basic script here. Let me know if you want me to adjust it to make it humiliating without telling you what I’ll say, and what the limits are for that. It’s your decision whether the dialogue should include you repeating your “mistakes” back to me. An idea I’ve had is that you have to choose how many strikes each mistake is worth [this can serve as an in-scene checkpoint to make sure you’re still okay with our plan without breaking the scene] and whatever you choose, I’ll laugh at you and tell you that the numbers in my head are much lower, but I’m glad you are so eager to be punished. It adds to the illusion of humiliation. You don’t have to add that to the scene; it’s just a thought.)

She pursed her lips, thinking. The transition to physical punishment would have to be handled well. If they couldn’t recruit others into their scene, Judy would have to pretend to explain all of this to empty space. Nick would be there, of course. Linnea would probably be able to ask Spencer and Alice, and if Emilia and her subs were there, she was sure they’d take a little time to participate. Was that enough? What were the guidelines for asking for participants ahead of time on the FetLick event?

She’d think on it. They still had a couple of weeks until the next party, so there was no hurry. And either of them could back out at any time; if Judy got cold feet or Nick decided he was no longer okay with watching it in action, that would be that. BDSM was, above all, about mutual satisfaction, and that meant consent from both parties. In Judy’s case, her desire to dominate was less than her
desire to keep Nick happy. It would not be a big sacrifice to forgo the scene, even if she was getting more excited about it.

Mutual satisfaction. Always.

That was why Nate had to be brought to justice as well. Even if he hadn’t had anything to do with Sarah’s death, he was a coercive abuser. Coercion was not consent. Even worse, in all of his “relationships” with his employees, he had put the onus on his victims to make the decision to quit. That was a violation in itself; he had made them choose between their livelihood and their relationship. It was slimy and inappropriate in every circumstance. A responsible mammal would acknowledge how disgusting that was; a responsible top, even in such an inappropriate situation, would do the right thing (in addition to providing a decent severance package and glowing references...and making sure officially they voluntarily left rather than getting fired). No matter how nice he had been to Judy, no matter how funny or likeable, she had to remember that he was a scumbag.

Star,

Attached is a copy of the first part of our script. Let me know what you think.

-Luna

Due to the nature of undercover operations, anything Judy did was technically during work hours. Normally, attending a group therapy session would be reserved for a later time, but this wasn’t only therapy; it was a chance to get to know mammals who were involved in the lifestyle. Who they were. How they thought. What they’d been through. How did real trauma victims, like Nate, justify their lifestyles? It felt kind of gross to be spying on these mammals during their rawest points, but she wasn’t planning to break confidentiality. And...if asked, she was going to give something back. She didn’t have to participate, but it wouldn’t be fair if she listened to everyone else bare their souls and then remembered their names to research them later.

Was that weird? It was probably weird. But at least she was doing her best to minimize the exploitativeness of this whole thing.

If the room in the chapel hadn’t felt so much like a prison, the meeting might have felt more friendly, but as it was, the whitewashed walls and small, sticky windows only served to draw attention to the flickering fluorescent overhead lights. It seemed like a stereotype – the kind of room she’d pictured when she’d read Choke and Fight Club by Woodchuck Palahniuk, although that wasn’t exactly a surprise. From what Judy understood, the group functioned similarly to AA or NA meetings, with a fairly large distinction: instead of the vaguely cult-like chants and religious undertones, this was just a group of mammals with similar issues gathering together to support each other. The leader, Kim Perks, was a badger with sharp eyes and a soft smile. She was likeable, from what she’d shown, and understanding, and didn’t seem to be bored of hearing the same general themes.

Out of eight mammals, excluding Dr. Perks, two had been abused by their parents, one had an ex-girlfriend who had gaslighted him into taking the blame for years of systematic abuse, and two – including the female jaguar sitting next to Judy – had been victims of sexual assault.

“It’s funny,” said the jaguar, whose name was Michelle. Judy didn’t think it was funny at all. “They use this term – rape, and it’s supposed to be something you know about. It’s supposed to be something awful. At the time, it didn’t feel like rape, it just felt like bad sex. I mean, the other stuff was awful. He’d tell me if I left him he’d kill himself, or just die, and Pete wasn’t a liar, so I believed him. He’d prod me. Tell me I should do sexual things with him, that I was obligated to, because he
let me hit him and dominate him, but...I mean, he never physically forced me. He always *phrased* it like I had a choice, but then if I said no he’d pout or nag or tell me I was selfish. That’s a huge thing, for a top. You’re not supposed to be selfish, it’s *dangerous* to be selfish. He would tell me I was taking advantage of him, and I believed him. So I would always...even though I’m on the far end of ace, even though I don’t even have a libido, never mind the desire to have sex, I would always say yes. It hurt, but he didn’t kill himself, so win-win, right?”

It was textbook coercion. Judy’s immediate response was to track down this Pete and cuff him, but that wasn’t her job. She wasn’t a cop right now, she was an insurance investigator married to a bail bondsmammal, and she had a feeling the story wasn’t over. Was he even alive?

Michelle laughed. Swallowed harshly. Clenched a fist. Laughed again. Judy had done that song and dance before, and her heart went out to Michelle. “We broke up over something stupid, and I refused to keep tabs on him, but sometimes I hope he *did* kill himself after I left him. Now I do, anyway. I didn’t think of it as rape or even abuse until I got serious with Micah – my current partner. Zie tugged on my tail when we were cuddling in bed, not even *kissing* yet, and I just...freaked out. There wasn’t any warning or reason, I just did. We talked, and the story came out, and zie told me that rape by coercion was a thing. And, you know, it made sense. I hated sleeping with him. By the end of it, I didn’t even like dommeing him anymore, because there were these hidden fees he had promised weren’t real. There at the end, I was just tired. I was anxious, I felt nauseated *all the time*, I couldn’t even eat...I want to get over it already. I’m not being fair to Micah. And zie’s not being impatient or pushing me at all, but I want to be the kind of partner who can give zir what zie needs, at least emotionally. Zie isn’t him. It’s not zir fault I’m slow to trust. Therapy has been...unhelpful, because all three of the therapists I’ve tried *shut me down* when I mentioned that our relationship involved BDSM and I was the domme. It’s like they think that it’s all consensual if something is, or a sub can’t be abusive. So this is...my newest attempt. Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Thank you for sharing, Michelle,” said Dr. Perks gently. “Micah is right, you know. Rape by coercion is real, and you should be taken seriously no matter what. Would you like to say anything else?”

“No, thanks.”

“Then let’s move on to our next new addition.” Dr. Perks smiled at Judy. “Do you want to give us your name?”

Judy nodded firmly, nervous but unwilling to show it. “I’m Luna.”

“Welcome, Luna. Would you like to share your story today?”

“I think I should,” she replied. Oh, *crackers*, she was really going to speak. This would be a big step, and not just in her integration assignment, or even her own personal growth. Telling her story would only work to get these mammals to trust her if she told her story; names and unimportant details like locations could change, of course, but mammals *knew* when you were lying, and she didn’t want to tell a fake story to vulnerable individuals who were hurting. They didn’t deserve that. So she would have to be completely honest except for where she was from. She would...have to be *completely honest*. Could she do that when she wasn’t completely sure why she was bothered by her past to begin with?

Deep breath in.

Breathe out.

Try everything.
“I’ve been listening to these stories and wondering if I deserve to talk. My parents were never on my side, but they weren’t abusive, they just didn’t understand me. I’ve never been violently raped or coerced or – next to almost anyone else, my life’s great, and it always been. And sure, growing up I was...odd, and a little bit unlikeable, but I didn’t really notice it until I was 17, when a classmate of mine clawed me across the face. I don’t know if that’s where this whole thing started, but I think it is.” She looked at the dingy window, watching the children climb all over the jungle gym, instead of paying attention to who might be looking at her. “Kits fight, right? He’d been bullying me for years, and sometimes I got snippy with him but mostly I just ignored it, because the bullying wasn’t important in the scheme of things. I guess I felt like taking the high road gave me the edge. Maybe it did. Maybe aside from that smug self-satisfaction I got from being better, from not engaging, it kept me safe...because one day I did fight back. I said some really awful things to him, things I knew would hurt him, and I felt good about it. It was so stupid, but I felt justified for a few minutes. I felt bad about it later, but the damage was done. And after school he cornered me, clawed my face, and held me down while he said some things – dumb things, you know, just stuff they say about bunnies. I’d heard it all before, maybe dressed up a little differently, but it’s kind of a given that to other species, rabbits are a joke that doesn’t even need telling. I thought it didn’t affect me. A friend of mine picked me up that day and we talked a little and everything went back to normal. I really, genuinely didn’t think that it left a mark on me until my boyfriend caught me self-harming.

“It’s weird to say that out loud, because I didn’t consider it self-harm, and there’s a big part of me that still doesn’t. Sometimes when I had negative thoughts about someone else, or I made a mistake that could have hurt someone else, I would re-open those old scars. If I hadn’t done that for so long, who knows, maybe these marks would be gone. I thought I was doing myself a favor. I thought I was keeping myself honest, keeping myself polite – making sure to remember to be the kind of mammal I wanted to be instead of the kind of mammal who deserved to be hurt. Because I did deserve to be hurt. He made the choice to leave external scars, but I was wretched to him; I called him stupid and told him he’d never amount to anything. I still...don’t really see the problem with the whole self-harming thing, but I know it is one, because my husband got really upset about it when I went back to it once. Just, you know...I was stressed out and I shouted at him, and I felt so bad about it, and I couldn’t even stop myself from – it had been a while. And it was still the first thing I thought of.”

A young wolf screamed in glee as she went down the slide. Judy tried to hold onto that sound, hoping she could get through her story without crying and making a mess of herself. The mammals here...they had stories that were awful, that hurt to hear. They deserved to cry, even if two of them hadn’t. She was just some dumb bunny with a few avoidable scars on her face; the only reason she was doing this at all was to integrate into a part of the community that would help her understand Nate. Well, that, and to make things easier for Nick. To make herself more bearable.

Because unlike Michelle, who had actually been victimized – no. That was bad thinking.

“I’m married to the most amazing mammal in the world, but sometimes I don’t think I’m the best partner for him. At first glance you can’t tell that he’s a submissive; he’s sarcastic, he’s kind of a brat, and he can be so...so incredibly mean in certain circumstances. Not to me, but he knows exactly what to say to get back at someone who hurts one of us. Life wasn’t kind to him and he had to learn to protect himself. But when you get past all those defenses, he’s a pleaser; he doesn’t just want to please, it’s like something he needs, on a level I don’t really understand. I want to be the kind of domme he wants, but I’ve got all this fear that I’m just...not good enough, that my stupid childhood spat somehow made me a domme, and I know that’s not how it works but...”

She wiped her eyes, angry about the tears that were leaking out and angry that she didn’t have the right words. Angry at everything – at Sarah’s killer, at Elaine, at Kevin, at herself, even a little at Nick for being so good to her when she really didn’t deserve it. She still couldn’t look at anyone,
because next to their stories, what was this? It was nothing. It was a 17-year-old brat provoking someone bigger into, yes, inappropriate violent action, but if she hadn’t said anything, then he wouldn’t have done it! And they were basically friends now! “I hate that I’m still mad at him, because he’s not a bad guy; in fact, I make it a point to say hi to him whenever I’m out his way. I can say all the right things to anyone else to explain that they can be mad at someone who hurt them, but I still feel like I don’t have the right to be mad at him. We were mean to each other, mutually, and I just happened to be the one to come out of it with scars. Maybe if that were the end of it I wouldn’t be mad, but I spent years trying not to stand up for myself, actively, because I wanted to be a better mammal than I was. I needed to be better. It made me a target, that self-consciousness. I’m not a pleaser like Ollie, but I was raised to be – I wanted to be, I wanted to be liked and likeable, and that’s attractive to a certain kind of jerk. There was this guy in college who would not leave me alone, and I ended up recruiting some other guy I barely knew to play the part of the boyfriend and break up with me because I was afraid that telling him to go away would be too cruel. That didn’t end well. He still pursued me, he was still a total sleaze, and in the end, I turned him down very cruelly, and he got in my face – he tried to slap me, and I just reacted and he was in a rear wrist lock before I could even process. MMA club has its perks. A few years later, we made up too, and I forgave him because he changed, but here I am, still stuck in this dumb little slump. Everybody changed but me.

“When my husband asked me to start a dynamic with him, I was petrified by how much I wanted it. I constantly question myself – you know, do I want this because I enjoy dominance, or do I want this because they’re both foxes – it makes no sense, because I loved Ollie before he ever suggested it, but I. I couldn’t take the risk. He’s been there for me for so long. When I moved into my new department in my job, nobody wanted me there, and he stood up for me and kept me clear-headed. He stood up for me because I couldn’t stand up for myself, and sometimes I still can’t, because I don’t want to be the stupid rabbit who deserves scars on her cheek. Even though I know I’m supposed to tell myself I didn’t deserve it, I only know that because I’ve been told by someone smarter. I don’t really feel like it’s true, and no matter how many times I’ve convinced someone else they’re worthwhile, I can’t really get it through my own head. I constantly feel like I never do enough for him, and partly that’s because I – I can’t always give him the things he wants as a bottom. I’m scared. It scares me to go fully into top space because I love it so much, and there was a point where I couldn’t get him to subspace because I was just...too self-involved, I was afraid of letting him in like that, what if I hurt him, what if he got to subspace and I forgot myself or...he’s better than I am, at almost everything, including being responsible. He always pretends otherwise, unless he’s in the mood to be bratty, but I know.

“After what happened with the guy at college, there was a time where I felt like I was...just a spectator in my own life? I still had the same ambitions, the same friends, but it took me months to recognize myself in the mirror again. It doesn’t make sense. He didn’t even get the chance to hit me. Even so, I kept thinking about how I shouldn’t have fought back when he got in my face, because I had been cruel to him. Again. The pattern is, I’m cruel, and they fight back with violence, and next time I’m more cruel. I’m not afraid that Ollie will hurt me. I trust him more than I trust myself, sometimes. But I’m afraid that this will be a case where I’ll hurt him, but he won’t leave me, he won’t even call me on it. He promised me that he would leave me if I became abusive. And he’s not stupid. I’m the one who’s being stupid, thinking like this, and I can’t stop, and I don’t want to blame what happened when I was a freaking teenager but I can’t think of any other reason. Just, that incident created a pattern, that turned into a bigger pattern, and I was so good at hiding it from myself that nobody else really noticed how bad it was. Because I – because what happened to me, in high school and in college – it wasn’t a big deal. It’s not like I got raped, or maimed, or robbed, or...except it does kind of feel that way. That I had something stolen from me. I don’t really deserve to feel that way about something so trivial. But it felt like they stole my power, and my dignity, and my respectability, and in both of those situations, it wasn’t about what happened. I mean it was, but the bigger thing was the what if.”
There it was. The missing piece, the thing that had always eluded her. She could have walked away from Gideon with much less trauma had the what if not been there. She could have dismissed Kevin as a useless idiot had the what if not kept her on her toes. In teen health class, the girls had been told through anecdotes and so-called safety tips that males were inclined to hurt females; the State-mandated curriculum had been weird and incongruous with local attitudes about sex and gender, but some things were the same. Males were shown to be required to seek favor with females, especially amongst nominally matriarchal cultures, but you never knew which ones were going to skip seeking favor and take what they wanted. The girls had been told that it wasn’t fair to deny boys if they were smitten, which seemed wrong, but to a teen, the word of trusted adults was basically law. Females needed to be fair. Females needed to be prepared to fight off aggressors, even of different species, because...well, the curriculum hadn’t covered the why, only the what. She had seen entire scenarios pass through her mind when Gideon clawed her, from rape to murder, because teen girls were taught that was what happened. At seventeen, could she have really been expected to know otherwise?

...A decade later, could she really say that they were wrong? Sure, mammals of all shapes and sizes, all sexes and genders, could violate someone, but how many times had a larger mammal tried to intimidate her, rather than Hirsch? How many times had mammals talked down to Judy, not even meaning to be hurtful, just because that was how you talked to a bunny? Snide comments weren’t warranted. It wasn’t her job to prove her personhood.

(Except, apparently, it was.)

“It...gets inside your head. What if. What if he’s not done with me. What if I’d moved a different way, what if he still has plans to – to hurt me. I’m not worried about it anymore, but I was, for a long time, and I’m pretty sure it changed the way I think. I have the kind of brain that sees multiple possibilities at the same time; it makes me good at MMA, but it’s not so great for looking back. I had some bad dreams for a while, where the rabbit from college had...made a different decision, except he was as big as the fox from high school and I was still the weak little 17-year-old who couldn’t fight him off. I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat, I felt so stupid. Ollie hates it when I say stuff like that. He says it’s not true, that I’m not dumb, that it’s – internalized speciesism, or whatever, and it all sounds so appealing on the surface. Who doesn’t want to be smart? But if I’m letting tiny incidents from my past keep me from being what I want to be, then is it really wrong to say I’m dumb? Because that’s a dumb thing to do, isn’t it? Sometimes I’m too trusting; I don’t listen to my gut because I don’t want to be some bitter cynic, and that gets me into trouble. And I’ve listened to all of your stories, and I can’t help but think that this is nothing. I don’t know if it’s true or it’s just my brain trying to make it out to be less than what it was. But that feeling of – of being inadequate, of being stupid, is something I’ve never been able to shake, and it’s gotten in the way of my marriage, my kink...maybe even my job. Maybe my coworkers don’t like me because it sometimes seems like I don’t like myself. Maybe I’m just imagining the speciesism and the dismissal...but that doesn’t seem right. I don’t know. I hate not knowing. But, um...that’s really it. Thanks for listening. Sorry, if what I said really does just cut into time where someone who deserves it more could be talking.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Luna. Everyone’s story is valid,” said Dr. Perks, and Judy tried to believe her. “Heather? Are you ready to tell your story?”

“Not today, Doctor,” said the coyote on Judy’s left. She felt so small next to everyone and attempted to separate small from inadequate.

“Understood. Maybe next time. Amber? Are you still processing too?”

Another coyote, sitting on Heather’s left, leaned forward, tilted her head to look at Judy and Michelle, and took a deep breath before replying. “I think...today I want to say something.”
Apparently, share-time was only the first part of the meeting. The second part was about socializing, support, and – if needed – getting references from Dr. Perks. Judy snagged an overly large slice of cake and headed toward Michelle, who was the most likely candidate to pump for insight. That Judy could serve as a listening ear was a definite bonus, not just because it would make Judy feel better about the whole thing, but because Michelle deserved to be heard by someone who wouldn’t shut her down or make her nervous, and to most mammals, bunnies were among the most nonthreatening species.

Already, Judy had catalogued all the ways she could take each and every one of these attendees down, if she had to. But nobody had to know that. She wasn’t unduly violent, and preferred to polite her way out of things. Unfortunately, before she could reach Michelle, she was waylaid by the two coyotes who’d been sitting to her left in the circle.

“You’re the first bunny I’ve met,” said Amber, and then she made a face. “Sorry, that’s probably not the right way to start a conversation.”

“She has no filter,” Heather offered with an apologetic grin, “despite all of our collective efforts.”

Judy shrugged and smiled back, thinking of some of the things perps had said to try and knock her off guard. She held her smile even as Michelle shook paws with Dr. Perks and threw back the rest of her cup of coffee. “I’ve heard worse. Are you two together?”

Amber and Heather looked at each other, mildly horrified, and Amber burst into laughter. “Oh my God, no. She’s my big sister. She practically raised me.”

“I have a baby face,” Heather added.

“And I don’t age other mammals well. Sorry.” Judy didn’t try to hide her laughter; it was a silly mistake after all, and nobody was offended. “Even other bunnies. I have a few cousins I hadn’t met until recently, and I thought they were twelve or so. They were adults.”

“You didn’t know your own cousins?”

She rolled her eyes. “You try keeping extended family straight when you already have over a hundred siblings. Most bunnies don’t even have birth certificates. Anyway, what can I do for you, Amber?”

“Just...I came over here to thank you, before I got distracted by how small you are.”

“That’s me, small and cute,” she answered insincerely, although her smile never wavered. Frustratingly, Michelle left the room. Judy would have to try to catch her next time. “Um. I’m not really sure what you wanted to thank me for, but you’re welcome, if that’s...”

“Right, sorry. I’m such a scatterbrain. I’d forget my name if I hadn’t sewed it into my underwear. I’ve been coming here every time for about a year now, and I’d never told my story. I’ve always been too shy. I always felt like I didn’t have the right to share, just like you said.” Judy blinked and focused. Amber’s story had been horrifyingly detailed and bloody. Judy didn’t doubt for a moment that witnessing the event had been traumatizing. “Ooh, my parents died in a crash, big deal, right? But then you told your story, and you said what I was thinking. And I realized it’s not really a dick measuring contest. It’s not about whose story is worse. We all react differently. I think everybody tries to tell themselves their story isn’t worth telling, because if it is, then that...makes it real. It makes it hurt. But it’s your first day, and you didn’t really hold back on what everybody thinks and nobody says. So I told my story too...and it felt good. It felt like letting go of something I didn’t know I was holding onto. I guess I’m trying to say you inspired me.”
She felt her chest and neck heat up. She had, of course, been told before that she was inspiring, but this was only the second time she’d been told that in a context outside of catching Dawn Bellwether or being the first of her species to do something big, and Amber wasn’t her best friend, so it actually counted. To be told that because of something she had chosen to do rather than reacted to — or, in the case of being a bunny cop, something that had happened to her, since without the MII she would never have been allowed to even try — felt good. It was flattering. “I’m...glad to hear it.”

“And for what it’s worth, Luna...it is Luna, right? You do deserve to say your piece,” Heather added, addressing Judy but looking at Amber. “I mean, hell, that story from your college years was a punch to the gut. You spend so much time being nice until someone backs you into a corner, and then you feel like, you know, this is exactly what I wanted to avoid. Makes you wonder if — yeah. Like you said, what if.”

“Like maybe you have to stop trusting, but maybe the one you shouldn’t trust is yourself,” Judy offered. She had known that she wasn’t a special case, but to hear that someone else had a Kevin in her past...

“And I don’t even know where to start,” Amber put in. Was she younger than Judy? “There’s so much to consider. Even if I could find someone who cares what I want and what I think, I’d probably get annoying with these night terrors. I play a little bit, you know, at parties and stuff, but I can’t bring myself to actually date anyone. It’s cool that you can. I haven’t played with many folks who care about how their sub is beyond basic safety stuff, which is fine when you’re just doing softcore scenes with strangers, but it’s not…”

“It’s not intimate, it’s just business.”

“Exactly. Maybe I want someone to care about how I am.”

“I think it’s important to find someone who doesn’t just care about how you are, but who you are,” Judy said, thinking of Nick. Of their uncomfortable, angry, anxiety-inducing (and -quelling) conversation in the bathroom. She shifted from her right foot to her left, trying to bury her impatience in her gratitude. “Someone who doesn’t want to change you and worries about you when you’re not yourself. I mean — change isn’t bad, it’s inevitable unless you’re a psychopath or something — I don’t know what they call that now, probably something that sounds neutral or at least less charged, and feel free to think I’m a jerk for not knowing because you’re probably right — but when you love someone, you know them. Radical changes that come out of nowhere usually mean something’s wrong. And if you’re really in love, what they look like is nothing compared to who they are, because you love them, and...this is harder to put into words than I thought it would be.”

“No, I get it,” said Heather, nodding in the same exact way as her sister, “and I think that’s nice. You kinda just reminded me of our mother, you know. Old-fashioned ideas about love, that it should be a mental and emotional connection. Bit idealistic, but then, I’ve never been excited to just go out and fuck some random mammal. Nothing wrong with taking your time.”

“No,” she mused, smiling slightly, refusing to be bored by the conversation. She and Nick hadn’t exactly taken their time, but if she hadn’t fallen for him, there was a high chance she would still be single. She was ambitious and driven, dedicated to a dangerous line of work, perfectly willing to eschew social obligations. She liked sex and she liked having such a deep romantic connection, but neither of those were necessary for a good life. Her smile fell. That was...somewhat of a revelation, and a guilty one, at that. She was deeply in love with him, but life would be easier and more manageable if she were single. She would never trade Nick for a chance at an easier life, but it was a fact she had to acknowledge. “In fact, I suggest it. You never know what kinds of opportunities
might come up, and when they do...you want someone by your side who will embrace the future with you no matter what. Or else it’s better to have no one at all.”

*Embrace the future side by side.* Like she had loved him unconditionally during his hustling days, and stood by him when he decided to go legit. Like he had supported her through the academy and cheered her on when work was hard. Like they both provided a safe quiet place for each other away from the pressures of work and other mammals. She took another bite of cake and felt so incredibly *lucky,* even though she’d been cornered by these two before she could speak to Michelle.

They had other leads they could follow up this week, and she could try again next Monday, and if she got close enough with Amber, maybe she could be introduced to more mammals in the community that moved outside Emilia’s social circle.

Nick was pacing when she arrived home, his shoulders tense and his jaw clenched. Judy’s whole day had been tiring, but the moment she saw him, the only thing she wanted to do was rub the stress out of his shoulders and soothe him. He deserved to never have to worry about anything. She dropped her bag and keys on the table and reached for his paw, grateful that he allowed her to take it. With his other paw, he wrapped her in a half-hug. She almost felt like they were about to swing dance like this.

The familiar press of his damp nose between her ears made her relax against him as he asked, “Did you have a good time?”

“Not really. It was draining and I didn’t get the information I wanted,” she told him truthfully. “It would have been a great step toward self-improvement if I hadn’t felt like a fraud. Did you have a good time?”

“I hate Melanie,” he said flatly.

Judy stepped back very slightly so that she could look up at him. They were at a dead stop in the middle of the living room, and she had half a thought to lead him to the couch or to the bedroom, but he was upset. She’d let him take the lead. Carefully, she asked, “Did she hurt you?”

Nick snorted. “Do you really think she could?”

“Well, no, but it’s not good to underestimate anyone.”

“Fair.” He took a deep breath in, held it, and breathed out, but his expression did not change from anger. She squeezed his paw, offering support if he needed it. “I figured she would stop hitting on me once she met you, but she just doubled down. I managed to get her to admit that she knew Sarah, in between these *vile* little jabs at *weak females.* Weak, meaning Sarah and you, I guess. She even said you would never have to know. You would never guess, because you’re just a…”

“A dumb bunny?”

“I might have burned that bridge. You can punish me for that. I probably deserve it. I’m a *professional.* I’m supposed to be better than this.”

Judy shook her head and decided that *she* needed to sit down for this. She tugged on his paw to lead him to the couch and he followed her willingly. Sat down so close to her it felt like he was trying to meld them together. Seemed reluctant to let go of her paw. She smiled up at him, showing him she wasn’t angry at him. “I would never punish you for setting boundaries, Nick. We can have Hirsch and Del Valle go after her now; I’ll let them know she admitted to knowing Sarah. Today at the library I found out her name’s on a list they found in Sarah’s car, so they have a legitimate reason for
“I don’t get why she’d be so nasty about you,” he said, which really showed his lack of objectivity, because usually he was the first to understand. He had probably been in and out of this anger all evening, and she felt a little bad for leaving him to stew, but she hadn’t known it would bother him this much.

“Nick, she’s messed up. She’s one of Nate’s former subs, remember? I’m sure it’s not personal; she doesn’t hate me, she just hates that I’m in the way...and I doubt she wants you. You’re amazing, but she can’t know that. I’m guessing she just sees you as a fox she can dominate. If she can’t beat Nate, maybe she can beat you.”

“If that’s not a blow to the ego, I’m not sure what is,” he commented, and it was supposed to be a joke, but he still sounded upset. “Coming in second to an abuser.”

“I love you.”

“And everyone will come in second.” He sighed and lightly rubbed the side of his muzzle against her ear. “He just drips poison wherever he goes.”

“It kinda feels like the whole community is poisonous,” she admitted quietly, putting words to something that had been nagging her for a while. For every Emilia, there was a Melanie. At first, everything had seemed so shiny, but as their investigation took them further in, things just got more and more unpleasant. Maybe they wouldn’t need to mend bridges after the investigation after all; she wasn’t sure she wanted to stick around.

“The community’s just a microcosm. We’re deliberately seeking out the worst of them. We’re chasing leads, and that’s going to color our perception. Far be it from me to have faith in strangers, but logically they can’t be all bad.”

When she looked up at him, she could tell that his smile was fake. He was trying to make her feel better, because of course he was, but he was still upset. Taking care to keep her voice strong and clear, she asked, “How can I help you feel better, Nick?”

“Can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

“It’s not like you try very hard,” she said with a laugh. “You actually respect me.”

His smile shifted into something a little less tense. “I do. Just...let me dote on you? Let me forget myself for a second. I’ve been thinking about myself all day.”

“If that’s what you need,” she agreed, “but are you sure you don’t want to talk?”

“Maybe later. I’m tired of feeling bad, Ma’am,” he answered, almost visibly transitioning to submissive. It was fascinating – and a little erotic, if she was honest – to watch. “Please.”

“Then I’m yours to dote upon,” she teased, allowing him to flip her paw over. He laced their fingers together, spreading hers wide and pushing them down to stretch the flexors in her forearm. He used his thumb pads to rub small circles into her palm, making her melt in her seat.

If this start was any indication, it was going to be a good night.

Chapter End Notes
I cut out quite a bit of this chapter and it's still too long. Starting in chapter 11, there will be a significant shift in the pacing, because I've decided to skip over quite a bit of stuff I originally had planned. Although this is not and was never meant to be a story about an investigation, the case drives the plot, so. This should be the last chapter that only covers one day.
Intimacy

Chapter Summary

Judy breaks a few rules, learns a few things, and makes some commitments.

Chapter Notes

Not a ton of casework this chapter, because next chapter will be almost all casework and (fair warning) Nick won’t even show up in chapter 12.

Caution: headcanons, a bit of animal politics, and lots of fun ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Forest Temple had probably had another name, at one point, but everyone called it that. Once an opulent building, it had degraded over time, solid stone walls and the few gems that hadn’t been scavenged mingling with mosses, passion fruit vines, and Mycena luxaeterna, amongst other flora. It was the oldest building in Zootopia – though “building” was a kind word for it, since most of its ceiling had been replaced by dense tree cover – and the surrounding area was home to a community of nature worshipers or other untethered souls who had mostly forgone traditional housing in favor of tents, completely-solar-powered mobile houses, and the like. This was Fangmeyer’s given address; even if they lived somewhere else, if they weren’t at work, they were usually at the Temple.

Dressed in a dark gray loose cotton tunic and black calf-length bottoms in the same quick-dry material, Judy looked like she belonged with the bunny crew who tended to the plants and gently maintained what was left of the place; this was a calculated risk. She wouldn’t be noticed, and even if she were, it was Friday evening – there were plenty of bunny families she could be there to see. It was easy to slip inside and look for Fangmeyer, but Judy already knew where they would be: the darkest area in the Temple. It was full of bioluminescent fungi and Fangmeyer liked to meditate there. To Judy, it was like stepping into a beautiful alien world. It was obvious why Fangmeyer found serenity there.

“I always feel like I’m underdressed when I come here,” Judy said quietly, carefully making her way toward her coworker from what had, at one point, probably been a doorway. The vines were large enough; she couldn’t trust herself not to slip or trip herself on a large mossy tree-root.

“And you never are,” Fangmeyer returned from their usual spot. The crumbling stone walls came together in one corner, interrupted by a giant tree. Fangmeyer liked to sit in the large dip in the stone that someone had made some time ago, their back to the tree and their head somewhat sheltered by the massive roots. Judy lowered herself carefully inside the paw-made cave and sat next to Fangmeyer, allowing them to finish their reply. At work, they shot off orders with terse, precise language. In the Temple, they allowed themselves time to organize their thoughts before speaking. “I can’t say I’m surprised to see you here. How have you been, Judy?”

_Captain Fangmeyer_ had asked Judy to call them Quinn outside of work hours, but she still had a hard time thinking of her hard-nosed, no-nonsense superior officer as anything other than Fangmeyer.
or Captain. Mostly she tried to avoid using their name at all, which was frustrating, because she liked using mammals’ names in conversation; it was something she’d grown up doing. Deciding to be honest, she said, “Mostly worried.”

“About the case?”

“Partially, yes.” Judy took a breath in, feeling the rainforest in her lungs. She couldn’t see much of Fangmeyer, but she could picture the expression on their face. They didn’t love partial anything. “I’m also worried about my future on the force, but...that’s secondary.”

Fangmeyer huffed and shifted their weight to the paw opposite Judy. It opened them up a little and made conversation easier. “What part of the case has you so worried that you’re risking your cover just to talk to me?”

“The part where it feels like a setup.”

There was quiet for a while, but Judy didn’t push. Fangmeyer was perhaps the most trustworthy mammal on the force; if they needed time to reflect, it wouldn’t be about covering anything up. Finally, they answered, “I can see that. Idris didn’t want to approve the investigation, you know. He said it was a waste of resources to go undercover just for one murder, but the Commissioner’s on the committee and has the ear of the Mayor. When it comes time to review and reallocate resources, we might get sub-par equipment. Or we might find our funding cut, and you know the first thing to go would be the community outreach program you and I helped set up. Part of the Chief’s job is politicking, so he usually jumps when Sporeheel says jump and we jump when Idris says jump. I don’t know what Sporeheel’s agenda is, but you’re right. It looks like a setup with you as acceptable collateral damage. I will be unbelievably pissed off if something happens to you, so I’ve been looking into it, and I’ll let you know when I find something.”

“Thank you,” Judy said, squinting into the darkness and seeing almost nothing but the mushrooms. The stone felt cool under her forepaws and feet. This really was a beautiful, tranquil place. If she didn’t have Nick, she could see herself living there, although she still thought it was odd for Fangmeyer to do so. They were a former military interrogator, retired now, and they never spoke about what they had seen or done – half their record was classified, the locations redacted, and the rest read like a vacation itinerary, so it was likely that “interrogator” was but one of many duties – but Judy had assumed that four sturdy walls and reliable utilities would be more desirable than a tent and solar strips for charging their phone.

“Now, what’s actually troubling you? What has the unbreakable Judy Hopps in a knot?”

To Fangmeyer, any exchange that wasn’t brief and brusque was a sign of trust, so Judy took the sarcastic jab as the compliment it was and said, “I just…” Her shoulders slumped. She picked at the stone next to her thigh. “Do you ever feel like quitting?”

“The ZPD?”

“Yeah.”

Fangmeyer laughed quietly. “All the time. I speak six languages and have a degree in psychology. Surely I’m employable elsewhere. A place where physical force is never a requirement. A place where I can relax around the mammals I serve.”

Judy frowned in confusion. The bit about the languages wasn’t new, and the psychology degree made sense, but… “Why do you stay, then?”
“Oh, cowardice, I suppose,” Fangmeyer told her bluntly, without any trace of self-deprecation. It almost sounded cheerful, or as cheerful as Fangmeyer ever got. “Enforcement is what I know. My whole adult life I’ve been taking or giving orders. I’ve been getting information from little pricks who will squeal eventually if I push the right buttons. I’ve – there are other things I’ve done, but I’ve never done anything else. Even my schooling was all long-distance, finished under the always-watchful eyes of the Animalian government. I don’t know what the real world is like, outside of... solving civilian problems, but my own mother misgenders me when you all don’t, and if the criminals we put away are anything to go by, the real world is just more garbage. At least I’m useful at the ZPD.”

“The world isn’t garbage,” Judy said firmly. “There’s a lot of bad out there, but there’s so much love, and beauty, and diverse cultures-”

“Yes, we all know you’re an idealist,” Fangmeyer said dryly. “That can be admirable, but you can’t save the whole world, and it’s going to kill you to try. Maybe I should be telling you not to lose that fire, but I don’t want to see you burn out. I want to see you take my job someday.”

Judy felt the tips of her ears and her chest burn as she asked, “Me?”

“Who else deserves it,” Fangmeyer returned. It almost sounded rhetorical because it was so bland and lazy. “Cops who think they’re incorruptible can’t be trusted with power. You get it. You get that there’s no such thing as incorruptible, and you push yourself so hard in the opposite direction that half the force hates you. Maybe more than half. They think you’re going to tattle on them for uniform violations instead of their real violations – yes, they happen, no, you’re not crazy, and IA is worth less than a ripped-up condom. There’s noise in the ranks about the thin blue line, but that’s birdshit; we need officers who do the right thing even when it hurts.”

“...Oh.”

It was a trap. Fangmeyer had real faith in her, which was so flattering that it left her spinning. At the same time, it was a call to action, wasn’t it? She’d be letting down the city if she walked away from the festering toxicity–

“Don’t feel pressured to stay, though,” Fangmeyer added, seeming to read her mind. “You’re not me. Don’t let the job define who you are. You don’t owe a debt.”

“Neither do you.”

“How would you know? After the things I’ve done...” Judy heard the susurration of fabric behind her and felt a gentle paw on her shoulder as Fangmeyer continued, “I’m not even allowed to tell you why I was discharged. Listen to your burnout. If you turn out like me, I’ll shoot you.”

“I...can’t tell if you’re joking or not,” Judy said uncertainly.

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.”

Maybe it was a threat, but Judy didn’t feel threatened. She sat in silence next to her Captain and thought about her own struggles, and Nick’s, about the natural guilt that plagued decent folks after mistakes or harmful behaviors. It was nearly universal to worry, wasn’t it? It was decent to worry about decency, right?

“You’re a good mammal, Quinn,” she said into the quiet dark. “I hope one day you can see that too.”

“Good enough to tell you not to contact me again until your case is finished, but not good enough to report this little indiscretion,” Fangmeyer shot back, and Judy took that as her cue to leave.
Yvonne’s house was the only one big enough to house the five of them, so on Saturday evening, Judy found herself once again on the outskirts of the Savanna, sipping iced lemonade with Emilia, Elaine, and Iris while Yvonne worked the tiger-sized grill. She and Elaine were sharing an overstuffed cushion set atop a small table, so they could be tall enough to participate in the conversation, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. With the spring evening sun caressing her fur and the delightful scent of grilled rutabaga, plantains, salmon, and squash wafting through the air, she almost felt at home.

“It smells amazing,” she complimented, closing her eyes to better enjoy the evening.

Yvonne made a pleased noise before answering, “Thanks, Luna. I’m surprised you’re okay with the salmon, to be honest.”

That wasn’t the first time and probably wouldn’t be the last. Unfortunately, Judy didn’t think she could explain the rigors of farming and the evolution of the rabbit digestive system when Arcadian farms weren’t nearly as... physical as those in Bunnyburrow, so she just shrugged and said, “I have an active lifestyle. As long as I eat mostly plants, it’s actually healthy to indulge a bit. Otherwise I’d have to eat a lot of nuts and complex carbohydrates, which would get boring and expensive.”

She knew this because Nick had been a full vegetarian until he’d started exercising and training with her, and the amount of money spent on nuts had been part of why he had slept under a bridge. He would still choose a fruit smoothie made with almond milk over a tuna sushi roll, but they’d compromised with goose eggs for their apartment; Nick had been attacked by geese when he was four, and he liked them about as much as he liked eating soap. She wondered if he would eat salmon if she ordered him to. He probably would. Not that she would do that, as he had his principles, and she’d never dream of ordering him to compromise them. Still, the mental image of Nick blocking his nostrils and making faces at the foreign flavor on his tongue made her grin.

“Just wait until you try Yvonne’s rutabaga,” Emilia said, leaning over the arm of her chair. Judy opened her eyes for a moment to see why Emilia’s voice had suddenly gotten so close. The chair was too large even for wolves like Iris and Emilia, but comparatively it wasn’t so bad. “It’s to die for.”

“Can confirm. It’s pure Yvonne magic,” Elaine said. Judy closed her eyes again and slid forward to rest her cheek on the cushion, stretching her body flat. It felt good to be outside, spending time with friends – or, well, she wasn’t sure if they were friends, but she wanted them to be. It had been so long since she’d had friends; she was friendly with lots of mammals, but she lacked that intimate spark with all of them. Maybe if this case went well, these mammals could – maybe they wouldn’t hate her for lying to them, if she could protect them. Elaine, unaware of Judy’s duplicity, continued, “I think they grow it right here in Zootopia, in one of those special mega-greenhouses.”

Judy smiled vaguely, but didn’t respond. As much as she was glad that animals were branching out and away from tradition...her family’s farm couldn’t keep up with the giant growing operations. Most folks didn’t care if the product was grown in natural soil with non-artificial weather, nurtured by caring paws, so long as it tasted good, and next to the convenience of “mega-greenhouses” right there in big cities with funding that didn’t depend on the crop yield, what did Hopps Family Farm have to offer? They were small; even carrots, Bunnyburrow’s major export, were produced by four different farms, and they barely made a dent in Zootopia’s market. Most mammals wouldn’t know of Hopps produce unless they visited local markets in the surrounding area. Most of the fruit was grown for home and neighbor use only; her family just couldn’t compete. She opened her eyes, almost expecting the sun to be darker with the realization, but it was as bright as ever. Her grandfather would have laughed bitterly and pointed out that it was the way of the world for bunnies to get
shunted to the side, but her father – a better, kinder bunny than his father, if somewhat simpler – was probably still scratching his head trying to make the numbers work. His worst nightmare, aside from losing his family, was having to sell out to some big corporation and welcome trouble into their community. After all, to Burrowers, community was everything; even Pop-Pop, who had often likened predators to hurricanes, would have welcomed the entire ten-strong Catmull family into the warren if they’d lost their house. Especially if they’d lost their house to outsiders.

“You shouldn’t waste a single cent on the big-shot growers,” Iris said cheerfully from her spot on a sun chair, interrupting Judy’s darker thoughts. Iris was already on her second screwdriver, and it showed in her voice.

“Why not,” asked Elaine.

“Well, think about it. When they subsidize farms, who does that money go to? Not the co-op in Meadowbrook, that’s for damn sure. The mammals at the local farmers’ market don’t see a dime of it either. It goes to these big operations that are slowly elbowing out the smaller competition, or buying them out, and the majority of the money that should go to paying wages...doesn’t. The books have too few employees and a suspicious amount of cash expenses.” She gave them all a look that said just how much she approved of that. “Half the laborers are getting paid under the table. Probably homeless mammals or seasonal migrants who just don’t want any trouble, so nobody’s gonna ask if they’re getting paid minimum wage; it’s easy to take advantage of them. To these big ops, their laborers aren’t mammals, they’re tools, and the less expensive the better. But what can we do? I’m just an accountant. I report what I see and it does nothing.”

“Just an accountant, she says,” Emilia said, throwing a pebble at – well, near, it was obviously not meant to connect – Iris. She turned to Judy and stage-whispered, “She’s a corporate sellout. She’s got cubs at home.”

“There is nothing wrong with children,” Iris retorted stiffly, but she couldn’t keep the grin off her face.

“Right, they only take away your time, your money, your energy—”

“No, don’t listen to her, Luna, she loves my cubs.”

“Yours are freakishly well-behaved and intelligent. They’re not cubs, they’re small adults.”

“Anyway,” Yvonne said loudly, “I had no idea I was inviting two children to my very adult party. Do I need to put you both in time-out?”

“But Mom, she started it,” Iris teased unrepentantly, winking at Emilia.

Emilia winked back. “Nuh-uh, you started it!”

Judy blinked and looked over at Elaine to ask, “Is this normal?”

“Yvonne’s a big. They’re just giving her shit. Still makes me glad I was an only child,” Elaine snorted, obviously amused. “Imagine if this were real.”

Judy shook her head. “I don’t have to imagine. I have dozens of siblings. Sometimes it ended in an all-out brawl. Kinda makes me miss home.”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re from a traditional family.” Yvonne began scraping the grilled veggies onto a serving tray. “How did they react to your lifestyle?”
Judy grinned at the image of a very confused Bonnie Hopps running into Judy’s room at the Grand Pangolin Arms, brandishing a sack of peaches, ready to defend Nick against his “attacker.” That had been uncomfortable at the time, but in retrospect it was hilarious. “I think they were so used to me doing my own thing that it didn’t really register as weird to them. But I guess it helps to be only one of many. Usually nobody really cares what you do as long as you’re not harming yourself or breaking the law.”

*Or trying to be more than they think you should be,* she didn’t add, because she was an adult. Whatever hurt she’d felt in her younger years over that, it was in the past, and her new goal was to leave the past where it was.

“You *are* breaking the law,” Yvonne pointed out. She didn’t sound very invested, but that was probably because she was carefully spreading out the small strips of salmon now that the vegetables were out of the way.

“Only technically, and it’s unenforceable under the new personal privacy laws. Bunnies know the difference between good laws, like murder being illegal, and stupid laws, like the ordinance in the Meadows that says you’re not allowed to swear on Saturdays. Some stuff is still on the books because it’s too expensive to make the change, but if someone tried to take one of us in for spanking a partner the case wouldn’t even be considered. Doesn’t make it any less *taboo,* but it’s something.”

“They just don’t frame it that way,” Iris said grimly, seemingly over her prior playful mood. “BDSM itself isn’t an enforceable crime, but anyone with a grudge can call it domestic abuse and have a pretty compelling case. Even an accusation can ruin your life if you can’t afford a good attorney. I mean, it’s important to always take claims seriously, but *actual* domestic abuse is completely ignored most of the time. It’s only when someone has an agenda – or money, or status – that it gets investigated.”

That sounded accurate. Precinct 1 had high standards, in part because Chief Bogo was the kind of dangerous idealist who thought that enough sterling investigations and honest convictions would decrease crime, and in part because they served as the main hub of Zootopia’s police department, so only the best and brightest were placed there. Precinct 1’s policy was to take every claim seriously. But there was a degree of mammal error to consider – the officer taking someone’s statement might have bias – and other precincts were not held to the same standards. It was frustrating, but Judy didn’t have any more social or political status than any other random citizen, so she was powerless to change it. Rachel Furris, her press contact, had run a few articles on the deficiencies of police procedure with Judy’s “anonymous” input, but other than pissing off the progressivists who already knew of the problems, it had done nothing.

It looked like she and Iris had more than just domme tendencies in common, after all.

“It’s true.” Elaine made an adorable noise that sounded like it belonged in an Impalasahn song. Judy wanted to pet her for some reason. “I had another slave before Su, and...it was bad. Her parents tried to convince the Court that she was *non compos mentis,* that she wasn’t mentally capable of consent, so I was abusing her. It ruined our relationship. Not that I’m complaining about being able to be with Su, and this old slave and I weren’t a great match anyway, but who hates their child *that much?* It’s almost worse than forced conversion therapy, since she was an adult. I was lucky to get it all ironed out, but that kind of thing happens more than you might think and it’s always ugly.”

“That’s awful,” Judy murmured. She’d known about the community secrecy, and Judy herself had always been reluctant to *go public,* as it were, but seeing it laid out concretely like that was still a shock. She was tempted to ask which precinct had done the investigation, but refrained.

“It’s *why we find good friends and stick with them,*” Yvonne corrected, bringing over a large plate of
vegetables for Judy and Elaine to share. “Welcome to the family. Eat up, Luna, you look like Arcadia’s going through a famine.”

Judy reflexively put a paw to her butt, which was looking a little less than lean these days since she didn’t have much chance to work out, but didn’t comment; to a tiger, all bunnies probably looked too small. She took a bite of some yellow squash and made a little yummy noise, because it was delicious. “Oh, wow. It’s just like-” She cut herself off.

“Just like home” wouldn’t work if Luna’s family grew medicinal plants. “—My aunt’s cooking.”

Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she drew it out to check the message: a photo of Nick, holding up a beet salad and somehow managing to convey disdain without saying a word. She grinned, texted Good boy, and put her phone away again. They were still doing their experiment, so when they weren’t together, he was supposed to text her pictures to prove that he was eating what she’d told him to eat. She wasn’t surprised that he had obeyed her, but she made a note to do something nice for him, as he despised beets.

She took another bite of squash, smiling at the flavor. She hadn’t expected an ancestrally obligate carnivore to be so good at grilling vegetables; most of them still required more meat than anything, so vegetables were more of a filler than a meal. Then again, most of the larger mammals she spent any time with were fellow officers. It was possible that they simply kept up with the demands of the job, as she did. And...wow. Once again, she came face to face with the fact that she really needed to get out more. Judy spoke with Angel so rarely that it didn’t really count as friendship, and Finnick and Ian were Nick’s employees. At least Luna had her fellow dommes...

Welcome to the family, Yvonne had said. Just like that. Maybe she was using a fake name, and maybe they’d be mad at her after, but as Detective Hopps, she would work hard to preserve this family. Luna could be their friend, and Judy would protect them from whoever was using her to push their agenda. And after that, after the case was finished and she revealed her identity and purpose, maybe friendships could be salvaged.

Being sober and comfortable, Judy was able to admire the details of the house that she’d missed last time. The wood paneling in the hallway had geometric designs on it; the lights were soft; the floors were hardwood under long rugs that matched the other decorations. It was a tasteful collection of dark colors, deep green and gray and shiny oak. It also had an impressive bar and a small private dungeon area.

“I don’t host parties here,” Yvonne explained as they filed into the space, “but I do host dominatrix night, where we have dedicated subs come and serve us.”

Judy thought that was weird, but she didn’t say that aloud. Everyone was allowed to have different likes and dislikes. She assumed it was similar to a party, but instead of a mix of mammals, it was much narrower. Her assumption was proven correct, at least in theory, by the assortment of different-sized tools organized in a sort of cubby system. While the others stopped by the bar to get drinks, Judy wandered over to the cubbies and pulled out a flogger.

Such a simple-looking thing. It had about 30 cork leather tails as long as her ears, a thick handle criss-crossed with more cork leather, and a loop at the end to keep it attached to someone’s wrist. Although it was made for mammals bigger than Judy, she could hold it just fine, but she couldn’t use it. She’d never been able to make floggers work no matter how she and Nick had experimented. Even MewTube, which had been a blessed source of information for rope bondage and cork maintenance, hadn’t been much help.

“Ooh, good choice,” said Iris. Judy looked over her shoulder to see that the wolf had taken a seat on
She shrugged and put the tool back. “I actually can’t use them.”

“What?” Yvonne laughed, but it wasn’t a mean laugh. “Every domme needs to know how to use a flogger! That’s like…impact 101.”

“I always hit myself with it. Even got a couple of tails in my own eye once,” she replied. She decided to take a seat near Iris, as that seemed to be the place that everyone was congregating; Emilia, too, was sitting on a low stool next to Iris’ beanbag chair, and Elaine was leaning against the bar looking very small next to a taller stool.

“How are you using it,” Elaine asked curiously over the rim of her glass. It was something clear, with mint and what smelled like citrus in it.

“Just…grabbing the tails and trying to flick them, like they do on MewTube.”

“Oh, honey. Em, you’re her sponsor, why didn’t you fix that?”

Emilia’s laugh was short, more of a snort than anything. “Luna’s good at whatever she tries. It didn’t occur to me to ask if she knew the basics. You want to learn?”

“You guys would teach me?”

“That’s what these nights are for! Chatting, drinking, playing around. Sometimes it’s good to have a minute where we’re all the same,” Yvonne explained. Instead of taking a seat on something, she opted to sit on the floor with her back against the wall. “Not that it’s not fun to play around with subs, but it’s nice to have time to exchange ideas away from prying ears. Here, go back and get that and we’ll help you through it.”

“I…thanks,” Judy said, grateful. She stopped looking for a spot where she could sit and still talk to the others, and instead, went back for the flogger. With the implement in her paw and the others in a sort of semicircle around her, Judy thought that she probably should feel awkward, or on the spot, but she didn’t. She only felt excited. She loved trying and learning new things, especially useful things.

“Okay, put one foot in front of you, so that you can brace yourself,” said Emilia. Judy did so, taking a stance that wouldn’t look out of place in an MMA ring. “Okay, good, you want to be able to shift your weight depending on how the sub moves. Now, start circling it to the side, like you’re trying to make an O shape with it.”

Frowning in concentration, Judy followed Emilia’s directions. She swept her arm wide as she made large circles with the flogger, but Elaine said, “No, no, don’t use your shoulder that much, you’ll get tired. You’re not swimming. This is a little shoulder, but you want to use your wrist, too. It’s like…did you ever have a ribbon dancer as a cub?”

“My friend had one,” she replied, coming to a stop. She could see how using her shoulder would leave her sore. “I tried it out a few times.”

“Well, it’s that motion – you’ll eventually want to make figure-eights with the flogger, so pretend it’s a ribbon dancer. Swing it to your right, then to your left, making sure it’s not arcing too far away from your body.”

Judy closed her eyes and remembered the two weeks when Emma had brought her ribbon dancer to school and allowed Judy to play with it. The motion had been easy enough, and it was true: it was
more of a wrist flick than a full-body motion, although she did need to use her elbow a little bit. She copied what she remembered, making figure-eights with the tails, and…

“Oh. This isn’t hard,” she said, feeling a little foolish.

“Yeah, I’m not a huge fan of the flick thing you were trying to do. Su doesn’t like it either; it’s inconsistent and there’s less bite.” Elaine hopped up, set her wine to the side, and pulled off her shirt. Judy averted her eyes, letting her circles stop, and the ocelot snickered. “Hey, don’t be shy. You need target practice, and a little X on the wall won’t tell you if you’re throwing it wrong. Don’t worry, flogging is just a spicy massage. Your arm would probably get tired before I’d have to red out.”

“But…”

“You don’t have to, but the alternative is trying it on a sub, and who knows if that sub knows what it’s supposed to feel like?”

“I...okay. I’ll do it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Iris cheered as Elaine turned around. Judy caught Emilia’s eye; she nodded approvingly. That, more than anything else, helped Judy feel more comfortable about this. As her sponsor and point of contact, Emilia had promised to help Judy navigate the community safely.

Judy began making circles again and Emilia said, “Okay, now turn your body a little so she’s to your right – there you go. When you come up from the left, you’re going to want to throw the flogger with a backpaw strike at her upper back and then circle down to your right. Come up, go to the left, come up, and throw the flogger again.”

When she came up from the left, she snapped her wrist – and made contact! Following Emilia’s instructions carefully, she went down to the left, came back up, threw the strike, and made contact again. Elaine hissed, and Judy immediately dropped her arm to her side. “Are you okay?”

“Luna. I’m fine. Just pretend I’m the last mammal who called you cute.”

Judy didn’t take the collective laughter of the group personally, because the joke wasn’t really at her expense; the butt of the joke was, thankfully, prejudice. Everyone was having a good time. It was a marked difference from the way that the ZPD, by necessity exclusive, made fun of each other.

Because Elaine was about Nick’s height, Judy knew that this would be good practice. As she made her figure-eights, she eyed Elaine’s upper back, concentrating on landing her strikes in the same place with the same force. After five hits, Emilia said, “Okay, now I want you to go over to the other side and practice throwing a forward strike. It’s the exact same movement leading up to it; you just want to throw it at a different time and a different angle.”

Judy nodded and did as instructed, but before she began her figure-eights again, she asked, “Still okay, Elaine?”

“Yep, just keep practicing,” Elaine assured her, so she began again.

It was a different sensation the second time; she felt like she had much more control over the placement of the forward strike, but it was harder to keep her hits light. Elaine wasn’t very responsive – until Judy threw a strike a little too hard, making Elaine’s back arch – but it was just patterns. Arcs, strikes, and timing. It was a new motion, but all the elements were the same.

“Okay, now you want to go to the middle and face her. Every time you go down, you want to strike
her back, so it’s double the throws this time. There will be a little bit of a drag; that’s normal, just keep doing your figure-eights,” said Emilia.

“And before you ask, I’m fine to continue,” said Elaine, turning her head to wink at Judy while she moved positions.

“Har, har,” Judy replied, centering herself with her left foot slightly in front of her. Taking care not to hit Elaine yet, she did a few practice swings to get a feel for her new position. She adjusted her grip, swung down, arced back up, and –

Nope, that wasn’t happening.

“I’m too short,” she said through a laugh. “I can’t reach your upper back from this angle.”

“And if this were a real teaching moment, we’d either get you a stool or I’d get down on my knees, but I’m not signing up to get my ears flogged if you miss. I hate that. But that’s something you can practice on a little X, now that you know what it feels like to throw.” Elaine stretched her back with her paws on her hips, and Judy tried not to stare. She couldn’t move like that. As flexible as she was, for a bunny, there were just some movements that didn’t work with her build. Ocelots were naturally as flexible as foxes, and maybe even moreso.

...Well, everyone had a few things they wished they could change about their bodies, right?

“Thanks for the help,” Judy said genuinely. She made a note to get out their old, unused flogger and practice for a while. Maybe if Nick liked it and she got really good at it, they could invest in something nicer than something basic online. “How do you want me to sanitize this before I put it back?”

“You don’t actually need to. I have a maintenance routine that I do every so often, but you didn’t hit her enough to even get any sweat on it, let alone worrisome fluids. Clean leather too many times and you’ll start to get bad results,” said Yvonne. “I’m glad you had fun, though. Do you think you’ll want to do it again?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she replied, looking down at the flogger. There hadn’t been much of a connection with Elaine, and she had mostly been too concerned with form to enjoy it, but thinking about getting Nick on his knees, coaxing out his excited noises with a spicy massage…

Oh, yeah, she’d be doing this again.

Sunday saw Judy sitting in Nick’s lap with a large paper towel over her thighs, carefully attending his claws. In the same way that rabbits needed to keep their teeth ground down to avoid health problems related to overgrown teeth, foxes needed to keep their claws filed to avoid arthritis in their paws. Later she would brush him until he was glossy and tangle-free, but he’d probably fall asleep after that, so they were doing his claws first.

She massaged his left paw, paying attention to the pads and the creases between his fingers. Over time, most mammals had lost the natural webbing between their fingers, most likely for the purpose of dexterity, but there was still a bit of webbing at the very bottom; it felt really nice to get it rubbed. Nick, predictably, rested his muzzle on her shoulder and breathed deeply as she pressed a little harder. He typed so much for his job that it was already having an effect on his paws; she could feel the tension in them.

“Judy, you’re a magical being,” he said, the wet tip of his nose touching her chin.
She grinned and gently bumped him aside. “Wait till I get the brush.”

“For a spanking?”

“For a brushing,” she replied, rolling her eyes. She gripped his paw firmly and put the file to his index claw. “Today I’m treating you to the whole relaxing spa treatment! I love you, but sometimes…”

“Oh. Oh, that’s good,” he said. His torso seemed to melt behind her and she sat back a little further, leaning him into the corner where the back of the couch met the armrest. His deep breath ruffled her fur on the way in and on the way out. “I’m just saying, spankings are relaxing too, but you’re the boss.”

She tried to sound stern, but the smile was obvious in her voice when she answered, “Yes, I am the boss, and I say you get groomed today.”

“Keep-” He groaned as she flipped the file around and used a little tool to dig some grit out of the base of his claw. “Keep doing that and you’ll hear no complaints from me.”

She didn’t bother to answer him. Instead, she simply flipped over the file again and moved onto the next claw. Although in modern society, it probably made more sense to clip their claws to avoid arthritis and other joint problems, most predators with non-retractable claws used files. In red fox culture specifically, it was not okay to even consider cutting your claws; Judy wasn’t sure why, mostly because Nick wasn’t sure why, and she’d never asked Ruth before her death. It was just one of those things, like bunnies chinning everything they owned (including their favorite mammals, when appropriate).

For a few minutes, there was nothing except the sound of the file and Nick’s deep breathing. While she held his paw captive, he used the other one to scritch the back of her neck or rub her side. He was so tactile. After all this time together, it didn’t surprise her anymore, but contrary to popular belief, rabbits weren’t especially physically affectionate unless they were already intimately close to the mammal in question; it had been a surprise to be nudged or elbowed (or used as a leaning post) by him just days after she’d first contacted him. At first, she had allowed it because she felt guilty about being afraid of him. Now, she liked it, and she especially liked the calming effect that petting her seemed to have on him.

When his paw seemed to settle on rubbing her hip, she remembered Yvonne’s offpaw comment about her weight and asked, “Am I too skinny?”

“That,” he replied, squeezing firmly, “is a loaded question, and it’s hard to answer. You’re thinner than you used to be, but I don’t know how much of that is natural to aging and how much of it is lifestyle. We’re not the same species. Honestly I only noticed because your hips look bigger.”

She frowned thoughtfully and blew on the claw was working on. Bunnies got thicker as they aged, at least until they were really old, but she wasn’t even 30 yet. “I didn’t notice. Maybe we should get a scale.”

“Oh, you know I’d be the tastiest snack,” she retorted, not above playing dirty. Despite the fact that she wasn’t as in shape as she should be, she was still feeling good from the night before.
“Any wise fox would take a look at you and turn the other way. Either because you’re not plump enough or because they’d sense your skill with Bunny-Fu and run away from the danger.” He moved his tongue to the back of her head and she sucked in a shaky breath. It seemed that his talented tongue could get to her no matter where he used it. His fangs scraped the skin under her fur when he added, “Not me, though. I’m not a very wise fox. You’d kick my tail and I’d be yours forever.”

“Y-you’re the wisest mammal I know,” she stuttered, trying to give the compliment without sounding silly. It didn’t work, mostly because her paws were shaking. She thought back to the mammals at the party who had been negotiating a primal scene, and the sudden visual darted straight from her brain to her pelvis. She had grown up on tales of Bunny Scouts, not the little kits who sold cookies but the ancient ones who defended bunny colonies and wore their scars with pride. Would she have been a Bunny Scout? In a primal scene, she was fairly certain that she would be a warrior – that she and Nick would both be hunters, and that he would submit when she caught him. But neither of them had ever regressed before. Even during their pseudo-primal scene a few years ago, Nick had been completely in control of himself.

She wasn’t afraid of getting eaten. Mammals still instinctively knew what wasn’t good for them, and modern predators couldn’t digest raw meat properly. Nick cleaned himself almost obsessively anyway; he didn’t like grime or slime or anything else that might ruin his fur, and that part of him was so ingrained that immediate cleanup after sex had become a part of their usual routine. He would not delight in bunny viscera. They would just... be animals.

...Maybe her coworkers were onto something when they joked that she got off on the thrill of danger, because Nick’s nibbling at her neck was not at all frightening, not even with thoughts of ancient predators running through her mind.

She cleared her throat, dropped Nick’s paw, and moved to the other one. He was only teasing her.

“I’m not as wise as you think I am,” he said softly, resting his muzzle on her shoulder again. He’d gotten the unspoken message, at least. “I knew you were dangerous the second I laid eyes on you, and here we are anyway.”

Pretending there wasn’t any unspoken tension – because this was supposed to be a day of relaxation, and because she wanted to finish his dang manicure – she only said, “Please, Nick, you told me yourself you liked me as soon as you met me.”

“I did,” he acknowledged. “That’s why you were dangerous. You could hurt me, physically and emotionally. I liked you, and I wanted you to like me, and...well, you remember our first fight. We opened your parents’ care package together and they’d sent you a can of Fox-Away. I didn’t want to believe you when you said you hadn’t asked for it. I didn’t want to trust you because it didn’t seem like you could ever trust me. If the scars on your face weren’t so obvious, I might have blamed that first fight on bigotry – I might have abandoned you without listening to your side of the story.”

“Ruth always said you were sensitive,” she replied, abandoning his paw massage in favor of bringing it to her lips. Assurance. She wasn’t mocking him. “You’re the strongest and smartest mammal I know, but-”

“Don’t put me on a pedestal,” he warned.

“I’m not.”

“All joking aside, you’re forgetting, or ignoring, how much fear motivates me, how closed off I can be.”
She smiled and kissed his paw once more before going back to the massage, not certain what that had to do with anything but perfectly happy to reassure him anyway. “I know who you are, Nick. I know you. What makes you strong is that you don’t let any of that control you.”

“What if…I did? What if I refused to open up to you? What if I was cruel to you whenever I felt vulnerable and teased you or even tried to make you think you were overreacting so you wouldn’t call me on my shit? I’ve done it before. What if I went back to that?”

“Then I wouldn’t love you,” Judy said bluntly, “because you wouldn’t be you. You’ve spent a lot of time reassuring me during this case, but Nick, you’re not Nate Snow either. Two days into our little thing, you told me what happened to you just because you saw how I – how that professor – you opened up to me because you wanted me, more or less a stranger, to feel better after getting hurt. I know what you’re capable of. I know how cruel you can be. But more importantly, I know how good you are. I won’t pretend you’ve never hurt me, and I hope you won’t pretend I’ve never hurt you. But to me, you’re the mammal who told me never let them see that they get to you, just because you recognize speciesism when you see it and you’re too empathetic to let that hurt worse when you can do something about it. What’s brought this on, anyway?”

“Just thinking about who I would be if I hadn’t met you. I’m 32. I could have gone 32 years getting lonelier and lonelier and maybe I would have been a dick to you if we did meet. Maybe I would have done something to really hurt you. I was so happy to have to text you every two hours yesterday. I was happy to eat what you told me to eat even though I don’t even like beets. But on the other paw, I know this is hard for you – you’re spoiling me even though I know you have more dominant fantasies than you’re willing to act out with me – and I don’t want to be the one taking advantage of your optimism.”

And...clarity. The unexpected paradigm shift, brought on by Nick’s concern for her, his love for her, made her former worries seem so inconsequential. They took care of each other. They loved each other. As had become their unofficial mission statement, they had tamed one another. They communicated. They knew each other. Most importantly, they were both informed, consenting adults. Suddenly, she knew exactly what to say, for the benefit of them both.

“You’re not taking advantage of my optimism, just like I’m not taking advantage of your cynicism. You know me so well; you know what I want. And I know you; I know what you want. It’s been hard for me because you trust me, and I never want to betray your trust. You’ve been betrayed before; I never want you to be hurt like that again. But...I won’t. I love you, and you love me, and we got here because we communicate. If I ever hurt you, you’ll tell me. Dommeing you is an expression of love, and loving you makes me a better mammal. If subbing for me does the same for you, then there’s nothing to be guilty about. For either of us. We should still be cautious for safety reasons, but I trust you, and you trust me, and we should trust ourselves, too. We shouldn’t hold back anymore.”

“God, I love you,” he breathed, squeezing her tightly. “I’m going to cook tonight, all of your favorites, even beets, and I’ll feed it to you, and you’ll never have to worry about how skinny you are again, because-”

“You’re not doing anything until you let me finish this manicure,” she said gruffly, but her cheeks hurt from smiling and her chest felt like it might burst.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied. She really could get used to hearing that. After a few moments of quiet in which she began filing his claws again, he said, “I’m really glad we planned this downtime. The case has been getting to us both, and neither of us are used to work invading our personal lives. But I just realized: if we get targeted, the worst that can happen is we die horribly. Imagine if Bellwether had
actually shot me – or worse, you. You’d have cracked me like an egg in either case, but if she’d shot me it would have been self-defense.”

She pinched the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, eliciting a yelp that she knew was more presentation than pain. He was such an overactor sometimes, and she always fell for it, because he was always adorable doing it. “Nick! Don’t joke like that!”

Judy felt him shrug behind her, and his quick lick to her ear was comforting in conjunction with his next words. “If you don’t want me to, then I won’t, but I think it needs to be said. We are different mammals now after experience and time. We think differently. We’re more mature, both of us. And this situation is comparatively low-risk. We don’t even have a deadline.”

“And Fangmeyer said they’re looking into who might be using us to push an agenda,” she added, moving to his next claw. She had to force herself not to rush it, because she was excited to get to the brushing; it was not-so-secretly one of her favorite activities. It calmed her, like petting her calmed him.

“We can do this, Judy. We’re going to be okay.”

“I know we are,” she told him, and somehow, it was true. Maybe because she had made progress integrating, maybe because she’d had a good time socializing with mammals other than Nick, maybe because she had a new outlook for tomorrow’s trauma support group at Whitespire Chapel, maybe because she knew exactly what to ask Nate during their next lunch on Wednesday, or maybe because Nick always managed to say the exact right thing to make her feel stronger. Whatever the cause, the result was that the case didn’t look so bleak.

She would solve the case, and she would protect the mammals who had accepted her so willingly. Whatever happened after that, she would deal with it. This was going to be a success – a triumph – and she would not allow it to drag her down.

Chapter End Notes

To hear the noise Elaine makes at the grill night, look up ocelot growls on YouTube. It really is like the growl that Ihsahn uses and it makes me so happy inside. Ocelots are the cutest animals ever. I want to hug them all.
Chapter Summary

Judy goes from investigator to full-fledged hustler and learns some unsettling things about mammals -- and organizations -- she thought she understood.

Chapter Notes

I forgot to mention this before: because I actually dislike real-life cops, I write the ZPD as better, in every way possible. I might deal with concepts like police corruption, but not because the institution is inherently corrupt; rather, because any system of power is corruptible. In my Zootopia, the vice department is structured somewhat differently from real-world vice. Because sex work is legal and there are entire agencies dedicated to the safety of sex workers, there's no reason to go after them; because most drugs are legal and there are purity regulations for substances, there's no need to go after dealers or users. My animal society is too advanced for morality crimes to be a thing. Instead, the vice department is in charge of things like small-time animal trafficking, local child porn makers/distributors, forced prostitution/porn, large-scale sex crimes, drugs being sold without being tested or being sold to minors without their parents' permission, the source of date rape drugs...vice is a bit of a misnomer. It's a holdover term from before progressive reform helped transform Animalia into a better place. These particular officers are highly trained not in just detective work, but how to deal with the realities of living trauma, and are required to be cleared for duty by a psychologist once every three months. I believe that Judy could handle the job part of the job, but with her canon-established tendency to stuff her feelings, I don't believe she could clear the psych part, hence her position in zoicide where she's giving a voice to the dead instead of vice where she could be saving the living, or major crimes where she'd have to go up against the guy who thinks of her as family, or missing mammals where she'd be over-utilized to the point of unnecessary risk. (While this just gives some background info for this installment, it's important overall to Ruff Stuff.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Here she was, once again trying to get information through alternative means. Daria Worcester’s name had been a regular on Sarah’s laptop’s search history, but because she was a part-time cam girl, that wasn’t enough of a reason to bring her in; she was one of many that had been searched on the laptop. It almost seemed like Sarah had tried to cover her tracks; interpreting her motives through hard data was impossible, though. All Judy knew was that seven years prior, Daria Worcester had worked for Nate for exactly three months, had been given a generous severance package, and hadn’t been able to find work in her field since then. Her name hadn’t been noteworthy to Hirsch because she wasn’t a fox squirrel and seemed to lead her life entirely separate from Nate's toxic reach or anything even tangentially involved with the kink community, but Judy had a gut feeling...and as a private citizen, more or less, Luna Evergreen was allowed to do whatever she liked with her gut feelings.
When she wasn't working as a cam girl, Daria brought coffee to a bunch of overgrown frat boys who wouldn't let her help them develop cPhone games, which was the actual job she'd been hired to do. It was as close as she'd come to doing what she loved in years, and Judy thought it was garbage that they'd shut her out just for being a female. Considering their current series had a female protagonist, Daria's input would have been valuable, but not to these douchebags, apparently.

At least today, Daria was on her own.

As a rule, Judy would never be the kind of jerk who sat down with someone who obviously wanted to be alone, but this wasn't exactly a normal situation. So she swallowed her reservations and sat down across from Daria, a small cup of coffee in her paw. She had the fleeting, absurd thought that she was going to die of caffeine overdose one of these days, considering how much coffee she'd had just to meet with witnesses for this case.

The red panda looked up, raised an eyebrow, pulled out an earbud, and asked, “Uh, can I help you?”

“I think so. You’re Daria Worcester, right?”

“Depends on who’s asking.”

“Luna Evergreen,” Judy answered with a smile she hoped look real. “I just need a minute of your time.”

Daria snorted. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying, Bunny Scout.”

“I’m not selling anything,” Judy said firmly, refusing to take the bait, “but I am looking for information about a girl we both know. I promise I’ll get out of your fur shortly, just hear me out.”

She couldn’t imagine living life this way. She didn’t mind playing harmless tricks, and she certainly had the stomach to do what it took, even something unpleasant, if it meant doing overall good. But she found large-scale lying and trickery to be...tiring. She could understand why Nick had preferred the short con and had eventually gotten out of the business. She could also, finally, understand how Ruth had turned out the way she had. It was becoming tiresome to think of herself as two different mammals. Keeping Luna and Judy separate was a good thing, but the more she thought of herself as Judy, the more accessible her own hangups were.

Whatever opinion mammals had about Luna Evergreen did not have to reflect on Judy Hopps. She would not flinch.

Daria’s big brown eyes dragged up and down Judy’s face and upper torso, but she kept up her smile. Daria wasn’t checking her out so much as sizing her up, which was something she could deal with. Finally, the red panda said, “I doubt we run in the same social circles, Bunny. That jacket alone’s probably half my rent.”

“I could keep up with the coy pleasantries, but I’ll just be honest with you, Ms. Worcester-”

“Daria.”

“—Daria. I’m worried about a friend of mine, Nate Snow, so I’m getting information about his girlfriend, who just died — Sarah Browncoat.”

“Oh, shit, she’s dead?”

Judy nodded, noting the dismay in Daria’s voice but not commenting on it. “Yeah, she — they found her body in the Rainforest District. Nate’s really broken up about it, and the cops are blaming him, or
at least trying to. It’s like nothing’s changed; better to blame a fox than to do some actual investigative work. So I...I’m not an attorney or anything, but I have a little background in investigative work, and I’m trying to help piece together the last few weeks of Sarah’s life because nobody else will. I know you and Sarah talked, so...was it work-related, or were you friends?”

“Neither. And both, I guess,” Daria said with a careful shrug. She sipped her tea, looking unconcerned but for the wrinkle in her brow. “She paid me for the performance, but mostly she wanted to talk; she was asking me a bunch of questions about my relationship with Nathaniel — I guess he’s going by Nate now — but I didn’t really have one. I did tell her to leave him, though.”

Judy made sure her face looked appropriately confused. “Why?”

“Because Nathaniel Snow is a user.” Daria rolled her eyes. “That’s what he does. He promises the world, and then he tells you the price tag. He promises he’ll make you the best goddamn specialist who ever existed, but if you don’t submit to his little rules, he stops working with you. Oh, he doesn’t make it sound that way. You can “stay on” if you want, but could anyone actually handle that? Working for someone who gets off on ordering you around? It made my skin crawl and he fucking knew it. Look, I know you think he’s your friend, and that’s fine, but if you don’t mind, I’m gonna be candid with you.”

“...Go for it?”

“He’s the best. He’s good at what he does and he knows it. And he can get away with being demanding and weird because mammals have an idea about that kind of thing — nerds, or artists, or whatever, we’re all weird, we all have quirks, right? But being demanding wasn’t just a quirk for him. He promised it was. He said he didn’t expect me to say yes when he came onto me, as a kinky thing, like that movie with James Hayder taking advantage of Maggie Gyllenham and pretending she’s in a position to consent to a relationship after forcing punishment on her? But he was already doing that with me. Telling me to do things without telling me why, making me run around pointlessly and calling it “training” — it was gross. I mean if you’re into that, whatever, but don’t do that unless you’ve talked about it, right? It’s a quirk if you don’t get off on it, but it’s a violation if you do. So I told him to go fuck himself, and I said if he didn’t give me enough salary to last until the end of my eight-month contract, I’d put his name out. I know my rights. An NDA isn’t enforceable when the thing being disclosed is a legal violation.”

“A...legal violation,” Judy asked, just to keep her talking. This was exactly the kind of frank conversation she needed. She wouldn’t even mention that legally, Daria had blackmailed Nate. The statute of limitations was long over, it wasn’t proveable, and neither would admit it in an official setting, as they’d both done bad things to each other. “What do you mean?”

“It’s sexual harassment. Propositioning an employee is sexual harassment. If I’d been a more naive or more desperate mammal I might have said yes to save my job, which would make him a straight-up rapist. I didn’t want an investigation, I just wanted enough money to live while I looked for a new job...although I should have reported him. I should have skipped the negotiations and just put his name out there anyway. I never got hired on in my dream career, and I can’t say for sure that he’s the one who made that happen, but I wouldn’t put it past him to be petty enough to start some stupid rumor.”

Pushing the boundary a little, Judy said quietly, “But he seems so...nice.”

“Sure he does. Because he is. But nice and good aren’t the same thing. Look, honey. I know you say he’s your friend, but he’s not. If I were you, I’d drop him like he’s the sickest bass. If Sarah’s dead, the cops are probably right: he’s probably the one who killed her. I don’t say that because he’s a fox, I say that because he’s a piece of shit.”
“But…”

“She was furious at the end of our last conversation. Seemed to think she should be special or something — she had all these names of girls who’d come before, that kind of thing — honestly, fox squirrels in computer science are a dime a dozen. How she could think she was special, I’ll never know, but anyway, I didn’t know who she was more angry with, me or him. Me, for saying no, and him, for...I guess not being a virgin when he’s pushing 40? Who even knows.” Daria suddenly looked stricken. “Oh my God. When did they find her body?”

“A couple of months ago. I’ve been-”

“Oh my God. Fuck. I...was I...was I the last…? I’m gonna be sick, I...should I tell the cops? Fuck!”

Judy reached over and patted Daria’s paw, feeling a bit sorry for her. It was clear that it had just struck her what might have happened. Judy couldn’t exactly blame her for how she was feeling, but the cop part of her was annoyed that she probably wouldn’t get any more information out of her witness. Carefully, she said, “Nate’s been a good friend to me, but...if what you say is true...then maybe you should talk to the police. I won’t say anything to Nate. He doesn’t even know I’m doing this for him...or...maybe to him...dang it, I thought he was a good guy. He was so nice to me and my husband when we moved here.”

“Yeah, beware the nice ones.” Daria spat. “They always have ulterior motives.”

And if that didn’t hit home, Judy tried not to think, nothing else would.

Despite having been promised that the ZPD would look into Melanie’s conversation with Sarah, it hadn’t been done — and that would have been fine, but it wasn’t even on the to-do list. She’d checked everywhere. Her first request disappearing might have been explainable...but not her second one. Someone was actively messing with her investigation. She didn’t know who to trust, and it was frustrating; logic said it wouldn’t be Hirsch, as they’d been partnered for ages, but that didn’t mean it was a sure thing. Fangmeyer wouldn’t be doing it, but they already knew there were problems and they were looking into it. Del Valle? Unlikely, she was on loan from vice…

Well, maybe, if vice was looking at the kink community as a large-scale sex crime now. But Del Valle had made a reputation for herself as a professional, objective to the end, unwilling to even commit to an opinion, let alone a conviction. It wasn’t impossible to hide that, but for the sole purpose of hindering an investigation years after she’d joined the force? Again, unlikely. She would have to have precognitive abilities, and that wasn’t a thing. Besides, keeping that information from Judy would make no sense; she had made a name for herself, too, as someone who would do what needed to be done so long as it was in service to the city. A convincing case against the kink community would be hard to hear, but if it really were turning into some kind of crime ring, she’d be willing to be part of a team to take them down.

It wasn’t, and nobody had made that case. This was most likely personal somehow to whoever was messing with things, and Judy hoped she’d get to give them a firm tongue-lashing once this case was over.

Melanie was looking somewhat meek on the park bench next to Judy. She’d chosen this place as neutral ground; there were lots of kits on the playground, so neither of them would be able to make much of a scene, but if it got heated, they both could walk out. Judy had asked Nick to make a meeting with Melanie, but he hadn’t shown up. This was an opportunity for Judy to pump a witness for information, but she couldn’t do it with Nick at her side.
“You made my husband very uncomfortable last week,” she began bluntly, making eye contact and keeping it. “I don’t care if you find him attractive. I don’t care if you want him. He’s an attractive mammal, and he’s sweet and funny and everything one might want in a partner. I even find it a little flattering, if I’m honest, that he has other options and still comes home to me. What I’m not okay with is that when he told you he was uncomfortable, you kept pushing. That’s not appropriate to do to anybody, married or not.”

Melanie looked away with a scoff. “And he sent you to me to warn me off him? Or is that just you, going all big bad domme because you don’t trust him?”

“Neither. I’m here to ask you to apologize. Do you have any idea how hard it is to make a friend, only to realize that they had ulterior motives? I do. It’s a betrayal. They pretend to want to be your buddy, but they really just want in your pants. It sucks. And Ollie...he talks a good game, but he likes to be liked. He likes to have friends. He was excited to have you as a friend. If you can’t handle being platonic, the least you could do is apologize for leading him on. You hurt him.”

Although she felt like a hypocrite after spending all this time lying about who she was, her wording was deliberately structured to evoke memories of Nate (and what seemed to be his usual spiel about not being able to handle a specific type of relationship). The excitement of getting something she’d wanted, the letdown of — as Daria had put it — the price tag. It was a price that Melanie had been willing to pay, but it didn’t really matter; Nate had betrayed her the way she had betrayed Nick, but worse by orders of magnitude.

“That...wasn’t my intent,” Melanie said, looking troubled.

“I didn’t think it was. Ollie’s a good judge of character. If he didn’t expect that kind of thing from you, then I doubt it was premeditated.” She looked out toward the playground where the kits were. Most of them were prey, and all of them were small mammals. The unfortunate fact of species was that kits would sometimes never get a chance to play with each other. Elephant children were significantly larger than mouse ones, and for the safety of both children, they couldn’t play together while they were young. There was too much danger of the mouse getting squashed by accident and the elephant living with that guilt forever. Megafauna with certain conditions often weren’t allowed to be around small mammals, whether they were predator or prey, because they could accidentally hurt someone. She wished things could be different, but what could anybody do? These kits would grow up knowing they were different from one another; no matter how tolerant or fair-minded they were, they would always be small and therefore vulnerable.

That...was something she could use. “It’s not like I’ve never hurt anybody. When I met my husband, I was awful to him. He’d say otherwise, but I used his resources to help me in an investigation and then gave him a fake number. I’d been hurt by a fox before, and I didn’t trust him.”

Close enough. In truth, Judy hadn’t given Nick a fake number all those years ago, but she hadn’t trusted him from the get-go, either. It would have been stupid to trust someone who had actively dealt with the mob in a business setting, a known con artist whose partner liked to joke about biting mammals’ faces off. She had planned to use him and then never talk to him again, until he’d proven to be an excellent friend. She still felt guilty for it sometimes, even though she had been clear with her intentions from the very beginning.

Before her death, Ruth had told her it was silly to feel guilty about a business transaction, but Judy liked to be kind when it was possible. She liked to think the best of mammals, and she was more guilty about the lack of trust on her part, even though it had been logical. It only seemed rude after the fact, because she knew who he was. She knew how he was. But if he’d had turned out to be untrustworthy and she had trusted him, then the majority of mammals would have told her she
brought it on herself, trusting a stranger who was proud of his ability to hustle anybody he pleased. Trust was only considered brave if you didn’t end up hurt.

So maybe she was a little stupid sometimes, not for bunny-related reasons, but because she didn’t mind taking that risk. Things were different now. If she got hurt, she wasn’t alone anymore.

That was as much a part of her identity as Luna Evergreen, so she added, “To be clear, I don’t dislike you. I don’t know you. I’m just not a fan of how you treated my husband, and I haven’t seen him that angry in...a long time.”

“Yeah, he did go out of his way to tell me what a rancid bitch I am,” Melanie acknowledged, which surprised Judy. Nick had never exactly shied away from offensive behavior, even that which crossed the line between merely offensive and straight-up speciesist, but that was a very specific insult that canids used on other canids, with the implication that the only thing the “bitch” in question was good for was breeding. He’d never used that word, to Judy’s knowledge; Ruth had taught him better than that. He must have been furious. He’d certainly downplayed his reaction.

She wasn’t going to apologize for his behavior, because she was only in charge of him in the way he wanted her to be, but she didn’t have to be heartless. “That must have hurt.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been called that by a fox. I’ll be fine.”

Oh. Had that been a deliberate move on Nick’s part, or just a lucky accident? A prediction based on a gut feeling? Judy wanted to think the best of him, but it seemed a little farfetched to think that Nick’s ability to read a situation would be nearly omniscient. They would definitely be discussing that sometime in the future. Instead of saying that, though, she asked, “Really? It’s my understanding that it’s kind of the worst thing a fox could call a female.”

“I think I deserved it this time. The other time...maybe not so much, I don’t know.”

“I don’t think anyone deserves to be called degrading names,” Judy soothed, trying and failing to make eye contact. Hopefully this would get her a little more information, even though the fox squirrel was avoiding looking at her directly.

Melanie shrugged and shifted, obviously uncomfortable. “It wasn’t exactly an amicable breakup. I discovered my dominant side, and my dom wasn’t happy about it. I’m sure you know how it is; there’s an overwhelming stereotype of submissive females and dominant males, and most of the pred-prey couples have dominant predators, and there’s resistance to any so-called role reversal. He just took it for granted that I’d be a forever sub, and when I pushed back, he got mad. It kinda came out of nowhere, too. I’d thought our relationship was perfect. We never even disagreed on anything until that came up.”

Judy nodded and put her paw on Melanie’s, patting it once. Strangely, it was a tactic that worked pretty well on most mammals; not all, as some weren’t inclined to seek out physical comfort. Judy herself tended to only be comforted by physical contact with those she already had an emotionally intimate connection to, like her littermates, her parents, Nick, and Ruth. But little pats on the paw or shoulder usually put witnesses at ease, so she often used it as an encouragement tactic. “Sometimes you have no idea who someone is until you disagree for the first time. And hey, now you know that someone who won’t switch isn’t worth the trouble.”

“You do that? Switch?”

“Sure, sometimes I bottom. I don’t have submissive tendencies, per se, but I do have thrill-seeking ones, and I like to encourage Oliver to be dominant every once in a while. It’s important for both
parties in any BDSM relationship. I take it you haven’t really found someone since this guy you were seeing before?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Ollie’s married, and you don’t seem like the kind of jerk who would plan to break up someone’s marriage...not that it ever works, unless the relationship’s already broken...I know what it’s like to be lonely and worry that you’ll never have someone in your life who gets you. And the thing is, I know what it looks like. I’m a bunny and I have obvious scarring from predator claws. You’re not the first to think I might be taking advantage of him, or using him in some way,” Judy said kindly. More kindly, she thought, than Melanie deserved, but it was like Nick always said: the best way to get what you want out of someone was to give them something they wanted. In this case, validation. It was painfully obvious that Melanie had more damage than she was willing to admit, and maybe it wasn’t all from Nate, but some of it was. Judy was trying to swing this so that Melanie would talk to her about her experience, and...well. As much as she hated it, Judy was cute. Immediately perceived as nonthreatening and even a bit naive. That counted for a lot during interviews. Her looks and seemingly forgiving nature made her easy to trust. “The sad fact of the matter is that BDSM by nature is something that anyone can use to hurt mammals who just plain don’t deserve to be hurt. Like you were hurt. It’s not wrong to not trust someone who hasn’t proven themselves.”

“I can’t tell if you’re trying to guilt trip me or you’re just that nice, but it’s kind of freaking me out. You’re giving me way too much credit.” Melanie looked at her directly, finally, and raised her left eyebrow. “I didn’t come onto Oliver to save him. I mean, okay, not completely. It’s just, he had this clever way of talking — and he’s funny, and sweet, just like you said, at least until he gets mad at you for insulting his mistress — he just. He reminded me of my ex, except better. The thing is, my ex was really eager to please. He was really good at playing dominant, but whenever I enjoyed what we did or asked him to do something new, he’d get this expression, like I was — like my pleasure was more important than his. I could tell he was overdoing the dom shit, almost like it was on purpose, or like he was trying to commit to a role; he acted like a submissive who just hadn’t noticed he was subby yet, you know? Which made it even stranger that he threw me away like old garbage just because I wanted to switch. So then I met Oliver, and I just...he seemed perfect. So you should stop being nice to me. I was awful to you specifically, and I’m sorry.”

“No apologies necessary, your ex sounds like a piece of work. I’m sorry you had to go through that. We all make mistakes, Melanie. I don’t think I can really even be mad at you anymore, knowing the context. Do you think your ex is sorry about what he did to you?”

“Not even a little. He just moved onto the next sweet young piece of tail,” Melanie replied bitterly. She didn’t cry, but Judy could hear it in her chest.

“What, really?”

“Yeah. And you know, she actually had the guts to message me on Chitter under a disposable handle? At first I didn’t know what she wanted to meet about, but she was a nutjob — and not even in the fun way squirrels usually mean that. She would not believe me when I said I hadn’t talked to him since we broke up, and when I finally told her how we broke up, she went off. She told me she was going to kill him! Obviously she was just being crazy, but I hear they found her body in the sewers, so I guess she killed herself instead. Good riddance, if you ask me. I’m not one of those types who scares easy, but I was lowkey worried she was going to kill me just for getting there first.”

Judy’s stomach twisted unpleasantly. This was the information she had set out to get, but it wasn’t the story she’d been hoping for. Had Sarah planned to kill Nate? Had he struck back in self-defense and then tortured her for some unknown reason...or had one of Nate’s ex-subs done the deed out of
some kind of misplaced loyalty? What had pushed Sarah that far, anyway? Or...had she always been unstable, and just very good at hiding it?

Judy didn’t bring up Nate. Melanie hadn’t said his name, which meant Judy wasn’t supposed to know it. Instead, she asked, “Did you report that to the police? I think I would have, if someone was being threatening toward me.”

“No, I didn’t get the chance. Some cops came and took a statement from me before I could. Or, well, not really a statement. It was weird; supposedly they were investigating her suicide as a murder, but they asked me a lot of questions about what I do in the bedroom and almost no questions about what the crazy girl said to me. I guess it wasn’t relevant. I figure they don’t really care what happened, though. Isn’t that what cops do? They decide it’s murder and then they pick a suspect and build a case around them. Whoever they decide killed her is going to prison, regardless of whether or not this even was a murder. I’m just glad I’m not the one they picked as their pet killer.”

“Yeah, cops are kind of the worst,” Judy said, feeling very, very hollow.

“You got that right.” Melanie smiled a small, but seemingly genuine, smile. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re really easy to talk to?”

“I do get that a lot. Mostly from mammals who don’t know what I do behind closed doors,” she answered, trying to keep up the positive energy, but she was spinning out. Not only was someone messing with her investigation, but they were hiding information. They were conducting interviews and not reporting them. This was so unsafe; she was undercover, with a civilian partner, ostensibly investigating a zoicide but also keeping an eye out for...what? Criminal behavior, certainly, but what else? Was she supposed to be a point of contact in the community after her case was finished? Nick had been right; the kink community was a microcosm. There were awful mammals in the community, and there were great ones. There were healthy mammals, and there were ones who’d let their damage rule their lives.

Something was rotten in the state of Dholemark, and Judy didn’t want any part of it. That she was involved anyway did not make her happy. Someone was using her to further an agenda without any regard for her safety, Nick’s safety, or the safety of anyone else who might be involved.

“That, and you’re...really nice,” Melanie added. “You’ve been nicer than I deserve.”

Judy didn’t feel nice. She felt immensely, monstrously angry. The venom in her gut was scaring her. But if Ruth Wilde could keep charming mammals while feeling zoicidal about the attack on Nick at his first and only scout meeting...Judy could do the same. If it meant protecting and serving, especially mammals who were important to her, she could do anything. So she smiled back and replied, “Everyone deserves kindness. You don’t know someone’s story until they tell it.”

Everyone deserved kindness, except for whoever was putting Judy’s civilian consultants in danger. Once she found out who it was, she would do everything in her power to make them feel the extent of her wrath. If Internal Affairs didn’t do their job this time, Judy would have to make the hard decision.

Judy Hopps did not believe in the “thin blue line.” Her mission was to serve and protect, even if it meant protecting the city from her fellow officers.

The tech team was being slow per usual, but the known contents of Sarah’s laptop had initially sold Judy on Nate being the killer. After hearing Melanie’s story, however, Judy was no longer sure that Nate had done the deed, although he was still the most likely candidate. Unfortunately, there was no
No matter who had done it, they needed a confession. Before Melanie’s little revelation, Nick and Judy had hatched a last-ditch, plan-Z idea — for her to play on Nate’s throwaway what-if comment about Luna being his first mistress, court him as a domme, and coax it out of him — but it was a bad plan even if they narrowed it down to him because even if it worked, the definition of “forced confession” was only barely open to interpretation for UC operations like this. Technically, it was well within the scope of possibility because confessions were a staple in humiliation play and punishment play, but whether it would be admissible in court was a whole different question. Even if she recorded it, all he’d need to say was that he was trying to sort through his guilt at not being able to keep her safe.

But there was another, softer plan available, at least for now. Judy was finally getting a sense of what had happened, for better or for worse; if Nate had killed her, Sarah had probably been the initial aggressor. If he hadn’t killed her, it was a pretty safe bet that someone from his past had. After all, Sarah was essentially unremarkable. She might have seemed like a fun, interesting mammal on the tapes, and from Nate’s perspective, but who else really knew her? She hadn’t had many friends, and she hadn’t been close with any of them. According to the latest notes on the server, she hadn’t talked to her parents in over two years, except to ask for some money once, and her sister hadn’t had much good to say about her either. She hadn’t had any enemies, but most mammals didn’t have any, so that wasn’t remarkable either. The only reasons for her to be on anyone’s radar were work, and her relationship with Nate. The viciousness of the murder and the obvious skill made it clear which one was the issue.

It was weird to have a friend she didn’t trust at all, but it was necessary in this case. Nate was wrapped up in this case whether or not he had killed Sarah, and he was an abuser, and if he hadn’t killed her, he might also have been in danger from the real culprit. They had texted quite a bit, as friends often did, but...it was still weird to have lunch with a friend when they weren’t friends and never would be. The lies were eating at her, but what could she do?

“I’ve never been to this part of town,” she said casually, gesturing at the window. Outside, she could see the artificial landscape meant to mimic the South Disney area, all palm trees and warmth and synthetic turf. Nate lived in the Avenues, which was somewhat surprising for someone who did as well as he seemed to, but maybe he had gone light on his stories of speciesism. Or maybe he was more about looks than truth. The restaurant was a quiet little place that sold small meals for low prices, something Judy appreciated after spending so much money on food and beverages for this case. She still felt full from the fruit salad and fried goose egg Nick had made for breakfast anyway.

“You wouldn’t have had a reason, being such a new transplant. The Avenues aren’t exactly ritzy,” he replied. “I wouldn’t even live here, except I bought my place when I was younger and put a lot of effort into it.” He gave her a sweet, charming little smile that threw her off balance. “My security system is amazing. Built it myself. There’s a signal jammer — I turn it on during sessions or when I’m focusing on a project — and cameras that will show me who’s outside on a monitor in my kitchen. The only way to get through my locks is to break down the door. The windows are barred from the inside using a button, so they’re not a safety risk to the mammals in the house but they are a deterrent to anyone who wants to break in. And I’ve got other tricks up my sleeve, of course, but I’ve never felt safer anywhere else.”

“That...seems excessive,” Judy told him, trying not to sound judgmental. “Impressive, but excessive.”

“I had a very different idea of where my life was going back when I built it...plus I was bored. Now
it’s just a project of mine. A safe house.”

Thinking of the hustle that Nick had introduced to her before they’d started dating, Judy teased, “Safe, house, with a space in the middle?”

“A house that is safe, yes,” Nate replied without missing a beat. “Not that I feel particularly unsafe anymore, but eventually I’ll get around to selling my ideas, when I get them fine-tuned. Maybe get out of the nine-to-five slog that somehow never starts after eight and never finishes before seven.”

She smiled sympathetically. “Salary is practically State-sanctioned BDSM.”

“Ain’t it the truth. There’s no pleasing the corporate mistress,” he agreed, prompting startled laughter from her. That was something Nick might have said. She thought back to Melanie’s story, and when she looked at Nate — smiling, obviously pleased with himself for making her laugh — she could see it. The same eagerness. The same desire. For the first time, Judy wondered if the reason she got along with Nate so well wasn’t that he reminded her of herself, but instead he reminded her of Nick. It was a dangerous thought; Nate wasn’t Nick, and Nick could never become Nate. He didn’t have it in him to coerce and abuse the mammals who trusted him, because to Nick, trust was precious, and also he might have been a bit of a dick but he wasn’t a monster.

But they shared undeniable similarities.

“I’ve always made my own path,” she found herself saying. “I tend to get my way at work, even though I’m not exactly in charge.”

It was true, although she’d never thought about it concretely like that. From the very beginning, she had been so aggressive about her career that it all seemed natural, but an outsider would say otherwise. She had not been driven to quit by speciesism, by steadily-compiling microaggressions, by temporary partners turning a blind eye to poor treatment. No one could make her do anything she didn’t want to do; even the orders she followed were followed because she thought it was right, not because they were orders. It didn’t make her popular amongst her coworkers, but it did make her consistent.

“Ah, but you’ve never been submissive in your life, I’d be willing to bet,” he returned, shaking a finger at nothing. His teeth were sharp and so was his smile, but somehow, he still looked melancholy, like it was a constant state of mind for him. Maybe it was. Maybe he really did miss Sarah as much as he said he did.

(Maybe he hadn’t killed her after all.)

With an exaggerated shrug and a careful smile, she said, “I can’t say I have, no. Even when I bottom it’s more about having an experience than actually submitting. To be honest with you, I wish I could feel that — I wish I were a little more submissive.”

“It’s not bad that you aren’t,” he told her. She tried not to find that comforting, because maybe he hadn’t killed Sarah, but even if that were so, he was still a nasty piece of work. She didn’t want any personal advice from an abuser. But she was hoping to lead the conversation in a specific direction, so she smiled gratefully, making his own smile widen. Yeah, she could definitely see it, even if Nate himself could not. Or would not. “We’re small mammals, Luna. It’s expected of us to submit to larger ones. But it’s important that we don’t, or else nobody will ever allow us to thrive, at least professionally.”

“I…”
She paused as their server brought them their respective meals. Judy had gone for a tuna salad, light on the tuna, heavy on the spinach and nuts and berries, tossed with olive oil and lemon juice, something Nick would not appreciate on her breath later. She hoped to make it up to him by bringing him a fruit tart or something. In contrast, Nate had ordered some kind of veggie pizza with almond cheese and olives. Ugh. Olives were awful.

“...else for now,” Nate was saying to the server, who nodded and scurried to the next table. Nate looked at her, seeming concerned. “You all right, Luna?”

She blinked and gave him a weak smile. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine, it’s just...every time I look at an olive, I remember this mean prank my older brother played on my litter. He switched out a few olives for these fat black beetles. I can still feel the unwanted crunch between my teeth.”

“That was rude of him,” he said, and then took a big bite of his pizza, olives and all.

“We got him back. He had nettles in his underwear drawer for weeks.”

“Ooh, lopsided retribution. I approve.” He set his pizza down again and looked her over thoughtfully. “Why do you wish you were more submissive?”

“There are just some things I can’t share with my husband, and I wish I could. He’s so secure in his submission, it’s like...a transcendent experience. The closest I’ve ever gotten to that is the feeling of closing a difficult investigation. Or winning a match, although I haven’t boxed in ages.”

“Because you get off on domination. That’s not actually a bad thing. That part took effort for me — the actions are easy enough, but getting into top space is a real challenge.”

She tried not to show that she was surprised he would tell her that. She wanted him to trust her, but they’d barely known each other for a little over a month, and sure, they’d texted quite a bit, but never about more than surface things, and half the time she’d asked Nick to help her with replies. Unsure of where to go with that, she simply asked him, “Why do you do it, then?”

“BDSM?”

“Sure, generally, but I meant why do you top if it’s not natural?”

He didn’t answer right away. For over a minute, he sat watching her, and although she didn’t feel uncomfortable with his gaze on her — he wasn’t checking her out or trying to psych her out, which was a nice change from what she was used to from suspects — she didn’t really know what to do with it, either. She was about to apologize for the invasive question when he replied, slowly and quietly, “It’s the only way I know how to do relationships. I don’t want to be alone for the rest of my life, but I can’t let what happened with Patrice happen to me ever again. It takes a lot of trust to even admit my proclivities to anyone; I couldn’t imagine putting my body in someone’s paws, at least until Sarah. Kink is safe. It’s beautiful. And when they’re bound, I can touch them, but they can’t touch me.”

“I get that,” she told him, equally quiet. Because she did. It had taken her a long time to accept the realization that she liked it when Nick couldn’t touch her, whether he was bound physically or psychologically. She liked to hear him beg her to touch him, and she liked touching him. But she didn’t think it came from the same place. Nate liked the distance; he liked that it made him feel safe. Judy liked rewarding Nick. She liked that being unable to move heightened Nick’s experience. She enjoyed his enjoyment as much as she enjoyed the act on its own.

In this case, she could understand why Nate’s preferences ran toward fox squirrels who worked for
him. They were prey, largely seen as less dangerous. His field was oversaturated with them, so the
trend was convenient. They were smaller, not smaller than Judy, but not big enough to overpower
him unless they were athletic. And they were already submissive to him by virtue of being employed
by him. There was a grooming process already in place, inherently. That was why it was so unethical
to come onto someone who worked for you. It genuinely didn’t matter if he got off on ordering them
around in a professional context or not; it was tainted. It was wrong. It was disgusting, even. But it
made a twisted kind of sense, and against her will, she felt sorry for him. His first experience with
both love and BDSM had been horrific, and if that was his entire model for relationships…

Well, he probably thought he was doing it right, because it was miles better than what Patrice had
done to him.

It brought a question to her mind, and because they were being candid, she asked, “How did you get
into topping?”

She dug into her salad, figuring he would again take a while to answer. He seemed to like to talk a
lot, another thing he had in common with Nick. Something he didn’t have in common with her. She
didn’t know whether to be glad to see the glaring differences, or weirded out that he had more things
in common with the fox she loved.

He frowned, but not angrily, and said, “I couldn’t sleep. I had nightmares; I’d wake up and my life
away from Patrice was fake. I’d still be bound, unable to escape from that position and that room.
And then I’d really wake up and I’d be terrified that I was still dreaming. So I bought some rope and
started learning to tie knots, mostly to keep my paws busy, but also to learn how to escape. The idea
was to never be powerless again. But I enjoyed the tying. Knotwork is methodical and undeniably
beautiful, and I realized I could move on from tying myself up to tying someone else. I move on from
there to other types of dominance, and it was easy to do. I look at patterns for a living, remember?
Pretty soon it was like I’d been a dominant my whole life. It seems true enough. Whatever I had with
Patrice...it was an aberration.”

“Did you enjoy being a submissive at all, though? Not the bad parts, not the abuse, but…”

He raised an eyebrow, took another bite of his pizza, chewed, and swallowed before asking in
return, “Why do you want to know?”

“I just worry sometimes,” she admitted. She could tell him part of her reason; emotional vulnerability
would help her seem like a good friend. “I worry that maybe I'm being too mean. Ollie loves it when
I scold him and he does get off on pain somewhat, but it’s like we were talking about: I don't really
understand the submissive mentality. I get that masochism is a thing, but I don't know how to tell
when someone is enjoying being controlled. Or why. I just have to trust that I’m not being lied to,
but the last thing I want to do is take advantage of someone who’s too afraid to advocate for
themselves. It’s why I’ve not been very adventurous until recently. Oliver is the smartest mammal I
know, and probably the strongest too, but neither of us escaped childhood without some scarring,
even if mine’s more literal than his.”

“That makes you a good domme then. Patrice never worried.” He shrugged and tapped a single claw
on the table, something that seemed to be a subconscious tic. “I did enjoy the enjoyable bits. I had to
work for her approval, but when I got it, the whole world seemed brighter. I liked following her rules
too, because it made things simpler. I won't waste time pretending humility; I'm very smart. Brilliant.
I don’t believe in genius as a concept, but I’ve heard it used about me plenty of times. Everything I
do comes naturally to me, and I’m curious as hell, so I’m constantly acquiring new information. As a
result, I'm also constantly thinking. Over thinking, actually. It was enjoyable to be able to let go and
only worry about what she allowed me to worry about. Get good grades, make the mistress happy,
rinse and repeat. I suppose I should thank her for curing me of the need to please. That would not have served me well in my adult life.”

She tried to fit this new information into the picture. She didn't like it at all, and not just because the implications about the need to please reflected poorly on mammals like Nick. “You don't feel any drive to submit anymore?”

“Honestly, half the time I don't feel *anything* anymore,” he said, inappropriate humor in his voice. “You spend enough time trying not to let anything get past your armor, that armor becomes who you are. My Sarah helped me see that. It’s part of why I loved her so much.”

*Never let them see that they get to you.*

*Judy, I love that you know how to get to me.*

Yeah, he *was* a lot like Nick. A weird, warped, twisted version of Nick who didn’t realize his own MO was to employ someone, force them to psychologically sub for him, and then come onto them.

“She sounds like an amazing mammal,” she said insincerely, but warmly.

“She *was* amazing. Even when she was acting strange, I couldn’t help but admire her. I trusted her completely. I...I think I told you that I was going to ask her to top me when I proposed?” At Judy’s nod, he continued, “I’d wanted that for a while. I believed, for the first time in eighteen years, that the mammal I was with would only hurt me as much as I allowed. I regret not having the chance to find out what could have happened had she not been...twisted, or whatever, by the boy she met online. Daniel, I think his name was. I’m fairly certain he’s the one responsible for her death, but I don’t know who he is, only that she mentioned him a couple of times and it didn’t register until just recently.”

Judy made a mental note to cross-reference the name Daniel with contacts on Sarah’s laptop. It was maybe a long-shot. Maybe it was even a lie. But it was worth a try, at least. Keeping the conversation alive, she said, “It sounds like maybe you didn’t lose all of your submissive tendencies after all.”

“Maybe not,” he acknowledged. “I do still think about it — what might have been. Sometimes it’s all I can think about, but I assumed it was more about Sarah than any desire to submit.”

“And it sounds like you maybe have some psychological stuff to work out too,” she added, just to see if he could be pushed that far. “You know, if you ever need someone to listen...”

“I had something a bit different in mind,” he told her with a tiny laugh.

“Right. I guess it makes more sense to see a therapist or something. Not that I think you’re crazy! And not that there’s anything wrong with being mentally ill...wow, Luna, way to be sensitive,” she babbled, wishing she’d never said anything at all.

“I actually meant that I’ve been considering asking you if you’d be willing to scene with me.” His face was the picture of confusion, and she felt weird about it. Wasn’t this the trust level she had hoped for? And ahead of schedule, too! So why was she so uneasy all of a sudden? “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone as passionate about BDSM ethics as you are, outside of professionals, and it might be a cathartic experience. Just to say I’ve faced that demon and put it behind me.”

“Is that why you’ve been so open with me,” she asked hesitantly.

“Partly. I usually despise doing emotional labor, but you need to know where I’m coming from if
you decide to say yes. But it’s also because I promised Sarah I would stop pushing mammals away. We were lonely. Until the end, we were really only emotionally intimate with each other, and that’s not healthy at all, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Judy said guiltily. Until recently, she hadn’t had many friends either. She knew that Nick had a small circle, but somehow, she hadn’t been able to cultivate her own. She had been so focused on the nebulous concept of making the world a better place that she had neglected a lot of her own emotional needs, and Nick had been stuck with the aftermath of that. It wasn’t fair to him. “I’m doing a scene at the Jungle on Saturday with a friend of mine, and I’m sure I’ll be wrung out afterward, but I’m not saying no to sometime in the future.”

“That’s not a yes,” he pointed out.

“Right. It’s a we’ll see. How can we be sure I’m even a good fit for you? How do we know I could help at all?”

He smiled at her again. “That, right there. Your first thought was about whether or not it would serve both parties. You didn’t even ask what I would give you in return. I’ll watch your scene on Saturday and we’ll talk again sometime after that.”

She hummed noncommittally and enjoyed her salad. Nate didn’t seem upset by her silence, so she didn’t break it; instead, she looked out the window again. Nate had said the Avenues weren’t a great place to live, but they were hardly as rundown as the Grand Pangolin Arms, where she had lived for years.

She had an opportunity here. Whether it was a ploy for sympathy or a real desire, Nate was offering her an intimate piece of himself. She had set herself up to be someone he could trust, and she had taken the information from Melanie and used it against him. Deliberately. It felt slimy, like she was taking advantage of him, even though it was a perfect way to get close to him. She knew from anecdotes online and from her own work with Nick that the endorphins from a scene could loosen tongues, or at least make mammals more susceptible to suggestion. Even if he hadn’t killed Sarah, he might be vulnerable enough to see that he’d hurt enough mammals for it to become one of the patterns he was so proud of seeing. And that thought felt terrible too, even though she knew that it was what a UC did. Using every available advantage was part of the skill set of a good detective. She believed that mammals could change. Nate was an abuser, and he couldn’t be trusted, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be better in the future, if he chose to make that change.

So why was she…

Ruth’s face popped into her head, and her stomach dropped. That was why.

“Oh, I’m supposed to meet up with the social worker today,” she told him as her phone chimed, thankfully giving her a way out. “I’m going to go get a fruit pastry for Ollie. Sorry I have to leave so quickly; we’ll talk again soon, Nate. I had fun today.”

“Me, too,” he said with a genuine smile. “I look forward to seeing you on Saturday. And hearing your answer.”

She felt like a jerk. There was no reason to feel bad about misleading someone who could very well have murdered his own girlfriend, but she did anyway. After all, if he hadn’t…almost nobody was irredeemable, and now she wasn’t just investigating him. This felt dangerously close to toying with his heart, something Ruth had made her promise she would never, ever do.

Would she be able to keep that promise?
Judy uses a fun little two-tongued implement in all three scenes here: she's nice, and she volunteers personal information. Anyone who's done a little creative socializing knows how effective that is. People just tell you things if you act like someone worth talking to. You could be the shittiest human alive, but you look trustworthy because you're "opening up" to them. You're "trusting" them. (Incidentally, this is why I have a problem with people who say that Judy should have trusted Nick in canon. Who the fuck trusts a proud con artist? Stupid people, that's who. Nick didn't prove himself when he opened up to her; his Scouts story was unverifiable and he could have been using a sad lie to get her on his side for bad reasons. Also, blackmailing 101: never trust your target not to stab you in the back as soon as humanly possible. The fact that she trusted him at all would, IRL, speak volumes about how little positive social interaction she must have had prior to coming to Zootopia. I'd be interested to learn if that was something the creators had in mind when they wrote the script, or if it was a happy accident that Nick and Judy matched up so well.)
Submission

Chapter Summary

Judy and Linnea have their scene, aftercare is important for all parties, and Judy's not sure whether or not she's done detective work, but she does experience something new.

Chapter Notes

See the chapter contents for a breakdown of the differences between a dominant and a submissive, in terms of why people enjoy what they enjoy. Remember, doing top stuff doesn't necessarily make you a dominant, and doing bottom stuff doesn't necessarily make you a submissive. And enjoying both can, but does not always, make you a switch. This is more the psychology of BDSM we're talking about here, but at any rate, I hope you enjoy the scene part of it, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Judy was feeling the pressure, not just from Linnea, but from Nate, too. She wanted — strangely — to impress them both, to show that she was versatile and capable. She felt like she was about to tip over the edge of something, and it was thrilling and terrifying. The feeling of fighting a much larger opponent. The feeling of facing impossible odds. The pressure wasn't bad; she could feel it running through her, energizing her, making her warm. She felt…

She felt powerful.

The interesting element here was that this was an unrealistic fantasy for Linnea (or, as she would be called tonight, Star), but a reality for Nate. Would he find it boring? Or would he find it enticing? Would it serve to ensnare her target, or—

No. This was not about her case. This was for Linnea.

Nate, Emilia, Emilia’s partners Adam and Eric, Nick, and a couple of other mammals Judy didn’t know were gathered around with the understanding that their participation in the scene was to be limited to laughter, and perhaps a couple of derogatory remarks about Star, but a gesture from Judy would be enough to cut off even that.

Although the best way to begin a tie was to have the bight in the middle of the rope, Judy moved one of the ends a reasonable distance away from the other and placed the new bight against Linnea’s ankle. Because the scene wasn’t fully in play yet — Judy made sure to run her fingers through Linnea’s fur and take her time settling her into the proper mindset, and neither were sure exactly how long that would take — Linnea only needed to tell her to stop in order to halt the preparations. Even so, as Judy wrapped the ends of the rope around both of Linnea’s ankles a few times, keeping them shoulder-width apart, she asked in-character, “Do you understand what’s happening here, Star?”

“I’m being punished, Miss Luna,” said Linnea, her voice completely clear. That was a good sign. Even though rope was one of the easiest forms of BDSM to master in terms of actions, it was the
hardest to perform with a partner. There was a lot of trust involved, and it was a far more intimate type of bondage than, say, throwing on a pair of padded cuffs. A lot of mammals got nervous their first time with a new partner, but Linnea didn’t seem to be nervous. In fact, she looked like she was relaxing into the rope like Nick tended to do.

With a murmured, “Good girl,” Judy put the uneven ends of the rope through the bight and began wrapping the long end around the strands of rope between Linnea’s legs, making sure to keep her wraps neat and even. It took a while, but when she finally reached the other ankle, she brought the end through the triangular space between the rope and the ankle and did a basic munter hitch for safety. She did the same with the other end on Linnea’s other ankle and left that alone for a moment.

Linnea had brought a smaller rope as well, and Judy took that in paw, making sure the bight was at the center as usual. “Put your wrists out, Star.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Judy again put the bight against Linnea’s limb, her wrist this time, and wrapped the ends around both wrists twice, keeping them closer together than her ankles had been. She pulled the ends and the bight together in the middle, pulled them around to make a plus-shape, and wrapped the bight around the rope between Linnea’s wrists, coming around to make a basic knot before wrapping the bight around the ends and pulling it through itself to make a smuggler’s hitch. Judy then gave Linnea a few calming pets, pulled the ends of the double column spreader tie from Linnea’s ankles through the loop, and made an extension tie to connect Linnea’s wrists and ankles with enough room to maneuver her limbs.

As soon as Judy helped Linnea onto her knees, so that she was kneeling on the soft athletic mat with her forepaws pulled down to the floor, the scene began for real, and Judy stood partway behind Linnea, so that she would have to twist her head uncomfortably to see Judy. In a much more commanding tone, Judy said, “I can’t believe you’ve let it come down to this, Star. Never in my whole career have I needed to use such drastic measures.”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Linnea said meekly, looking down.

“Is that all you have to say for yourself? I’m sorry?” Judy scoffed and walked around to Linnea’s other side, pretending to be too annoyed to stand still but really inspecting her setup one last time for any weak points. “That’s something, I suppose.”

There wasn’t much of a script. Linnea had requested something organic to maximize the effect of the humiliation, so Judy had simply considered what might embarrass someone like Star. The only thing that was off-limits was species, which was understandable; that was never something to be ashamed of. Judy also didn’t care to use Linnea’s body, either, because that was the cheapest form of humiliation. Best case scenario, it didn’t work well. Worst case scenario, it added to existing body issues, and Judy didn’t want to take that risk.

Linnea was an academic. She was intimidated by the idea of collaborating with the brightest minds of her field, even though she was clearly bright enough to do the collaboration. As evidenced by her throwaway comment about teaching gen-ed students, she didn’t much like being assigned tasks that were below her skill level. Like most academics, she didn’t seem to care much about how she was perceived; rather, she cared about whether or not she did well when she did something. Judy had noticed the same trend in smart mammals, academic or not; they often knew they were smart, so they didn’t really put much value on the opinions of others, but they’d be embarrassed by making stupid mistakes or messing up something simple.

This would be easy.
She felt her soft red skirt swish against her thighs as she circled around Linnea with a sway in her hips, and it felt good. She could feel everyone’s eyes on her and it excited her, even as her short little stalk narrowed the world to just Judy, Linnea, and the scene. They weren’t at the Jungle anymore; they were in the boardroom of Evergreen Legal, and Judy was very disappointed in Star, her scatterbrained assistant.

“Tell me something,” she said, loud enough to be heard but not loud enough to be shouting, her voice rolling through her chest. Another lynx might be able to call it a purr, but it was simply the closest approximation Judy could manage as a bunny. “When I hired you, did you or did you not tell me that you could handle these simple duties?”

“I did, Miss,” Star breathed, her eyes following Judy as she paced back and forth.

“Then why,” Judy continued, coming to rest directly in front of Star, “is this a recurring problem? Are you lazy, or just stupid?”

Star’s shoulders scrunched and she looked down. “Neither?”

Judy clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and said, “So you can’t admit your faults, either. I’m disappointed. I was hoping to avoid this next bit; you’ve already taken up so much of my time by refusing to stay put. I should have fired you instead of tying you up. However…” She lifted her right foot under Star’s chin, forcing her to look up and make eye contact. She made sure to keep her left knee a bit bent, so that she wouldn’t wobble or fall. Star couldn’t hold her gaze for very long and dropped her eyes, which was perfect for the situation and made Judy’s chest burn. She should feel bad for being such a disappointment. “My associates demand compensation for the time you wasted. We’ve discussed it, and since you’re just as bad at managing money as you are at managing time, we know you can’t possibly afford to pay them. So we’re willing to give you a chance to earn their forgiveness.”

Surprising Judy a bit, Star asked quietly, “Will I earn your forgiveness too?”

“Maybe if you’re a good girl and take your punishment like a grown-up,” she replied, setting her foot down. She didn’t show it, but her left leg was getting a bit tired. “Can you do that for me, Star?”

“Yes, Miss. I promise to be good.”

“She promises to be good,” she told her associates, making eye contact with Nick Wilde, the private investigator she sometimes hired on a case that needed more evidence than what her clients came in with...or when a defendant in a civil case she was handling proved to be particularly difficult to serve. He smirked at her, clearly still on board with their plan. Two of her associates snickered at Star’s plight. Focusing on her assistant again, she said, “We’ll see, won’t we?”

She pushed gently on Star’s head while she pulled on her shoulders, folding her over to rest on her chest and knees, her paws too close to the rope spreader between her ankles to be used as braces. Judy walked around to the back again and pulled up Star’s flowy black skirt to reveal a blue silk thong, which would come in handy; she wouldn’t need to move the undergarments out of the way. Star was on the slim side, but she was even taller than Nick; her rear was at the perfect height for Judy to run her paws along the top of it, soothing Star and prepping her for what was to come next. Making sure to ruffle the fur on Star’s thighs, Judy said, “Now, I’m not unfair. We’ve got two offenses here: the miscalendaring, and the insult to my associates. Would you agree with that?”

“No, Miss.”

Judy blinked and almost paused in her prep work. “No?”
“I-I should be punished for my irresponsible attitude, too.”

Judy hummed and tapped Star’s rump gently with both paws, beginning her warm-up. “That’s a good point, Star. Three offenses, then. And because I’m being so generous,” she said, tapping harder once for each word, “I’ll give you a chance to be a little more responsible. How many strikes with the paddle do you believe each offense is worth? We’ll start with the lesser offense of miscalendaring.”

“I...twenty?”

“Are you asking,” Judy said, moving from taps to something a little closer to smacks, “or affirmatively stating?”

“Twenty,” Star replied.

“Interesting. I had a different number in mind, but we have plenty of time to make up for it,” Judy teased. She hadn’t had a number in mind at all; rather, it was a game. No matter what numbers Star came up with, they would be wrong. Her assistant needed to learn, after all, how to accept being wrong before she could get things right. She rubbed Star’s thighs again one last time and hopped off the six-incher to give herself more leverage with the paddle, which she’d placed near Star’s feet during the tying process.

This wasn’t a paddle that Judy had used before. It was nice, though; it was about half as long as Judy’s favorite crop, made of flexible plastic, and had ten round holes, making it lightweight and easy to swing. It was perfect for a quick-and-dirty punishment: it would hurt like the dickens while it was being used, but it wouldn’t cause any bruises and unless Judy used it incorrectly, Star probably wouldn’t feel much of it after a good night’s sleep. Considering how long Judy had been using paddles, she’d have to actively try to use this incorrectly.

Judy swung the paddle hard through the air, grinning at the way Star tensed up at the sound. This was another good use for the holes. The longer she kept Star waiting, the more punishing the actual spanking would be, even if she went soft and light. She swung again, but did not make contact; instead, she winked at Nick when Star whimpered.

Topping was as much about presentation as it was about action. A good top thought about more than just the activity itself; it was misdirection, street magic, setting the sub up to receive the desired effect. A good top could get the sub so involved in the scene, psychologically, that they believed they were being cut by a knife when they were simply feeling the blunt end of an icing spatula. It required using the surroundings to your advantage. Judy, in one way or another, had trained for this since college.

She drew her paw back, making sure the action could be seen in Star’s peripheral vision, and threw forward quickly, drawing back at the very end to tap her rump. It was barely hard enough to consider it a strike, but it had the desired effect: Star jumped, and then relaxed. Judy swung again, three times in quick succession. Even though it wasn’t very hard, Star jumped anyway, clearly surprised by the speed. Judy shifted and pretended she was going to hit hard, but then swatted empty air again. Sure enough, Star gasped and breathed out heavily.

Another quick series of swats to Star’s upper thighs made her squeak and Judy couldn’t help but smile. It was actually a bit darling. She’d forgotten how thrilling the first steps were, used to her usual sub as she was; her mind began to race even as a bubble of cool fire settled around her. She owned
this area, she owned this scene, and she was taking a naughty lynx to task, as was proper. One firm hit followed by several light but rhythmic strokes made Star shift on her knees, but Judy had her bound well enough that she couldn’t do more than that.

She stopped and assessed Star. The lynx was a little tense, but otherwise not showing any signs of distress, so Judy swatted her another six times, three on each side, and tapped the paddle against her own thigh while she waited. Once Star was settled again — it only took less than a minute — Judy circled around to the front and said, “Well, Star, you’ve been a good girl so far. What do you have to say to me?”

“Thank you for punishing me, Miss,” Star said, once again surprising Judy. She had assumed the girl would apologize. This was better, though.

“There’s a good girl,” Judy murmured, and ran the tips of her paws through the fur on the back of Star’s head. Gentle touch was as important to this kind of punishment as impact was; it was a small check-in. Judy would be able to feel minute shakes that might not be visually obvious. She wanted to preserve her assistant, after all, not break the girl. Thankfully, nothing was particularly worrisome, although Judy did need to keep an ear on Star's breathing. The position was less than ideal. Raising her voice a little, she asked, “Now, what do we say for wasting everyone's time?”

“I'm sorry.” Star shivered as Judy dragged the edge of the paddle along her ear. “I deserve this.”

Judy frowned. That was some specific language to use without prompting. She'd have to do extra check-ins. Still, for now, she would carry on the scene, so she said, “The girl is sorry. For wasting our time and throwing off your days, she's sorry. Well, Star, here’s your chance to show us how sorry you are. How many strikes is your apology worth?”

“Fifty, please, Miss.”

“Please, Miss,” she mocked, prompting a little bit of laughter from her associates.

“Little bit too hungry for the paddle,” Nathaniel Snow said snidely to some intern or other. Judy couldn't be bothered to learn the names of the assistants in her cyber security department, since they came and went so often.

“Maybe just hungry for who's holding it,” replied the intern cruelly. Star whimpered, and Judy bared her teeth at him, jerking her fingers from one side of her face to the other. He fell silent. As much as Star deserved to be shamed, she would not tolerate that kind of disrespect in her domain.

Judy circled around again, this time the other way, and stopped at the side so that she could ruffle the fur on Star's thighs again. Star shivered and went still. Her first swing was a bit harder than her first 20, just to test star’s current threshold. She made a low whoo noise, but otherwise didn’t move. Judy suspected that she had done a bit more than just spank herself with a furbrush; it was likely the clever thing had found a way to give herself a proper beating. Why couldn’t she apply the same cleverness to her job?

She continued her “warmup” with a string of sharper swats, the paddle swishing with a nice sound through the air. They weren’t quite where Star needed to be, but there was a lovely slap now, and it wouldn’t take more than fifteen more strikes to get Star ready for the bigger, better paddling she so needed. Judy took care with them, less perfunctory smacking and more cautious strokes, keeping an eye on Star’s body. She was shifting a little, making adorable small squeaking sounds with every hit, but she was breathing well and beginning to relax into the rhythm. Her shifts brought her hips back to meet Judy’s strikes — yes, she was ready for the last 25 of this round.
Internally, Judy started a Gazelle song, one that was easy to remember and of the right pace to establish a good rhythm. Star couldn’t hear it, but after six rhythmic strikes Gazelle’s voice sang *lo vi solito* and Judy struck with much more intensity, drawing Star out of her relaxation and prompting a full-blown yelp. She struck once more at a lesser strength and then let Star breathe, bringing the count to eight. She swished the paddle again just to see Star jump and gave her another eight count of medium-strength strikes. She swished to her side and then struck hard and fast; her reward was something between a cry and a moan.

*Interesting.*

She decided to finish strong and in a good rhythm to get Star into an expectant state for their finish. The last eight strikes weren’t anywhere near full-swing, but they were hard enough to set an edge of pain in Star’s thighs, and when Judy was done, Star was breathing heavily, but not straining to do so.

Judy circled forward again and knelt down to be able to look Star in the eye. In a voice that was low and steady but somewhat mocking, she said, “You’ve been *such* a good girl, Star, but your irresponsible attitude is worth a much harsher punishment, isn’t it? You know better than that. I taught you better than that, even though you shouldn’t have needed as much training as I gave you. You came highly recommended, but you’ve been nothing but a disappointment thus far.”

Star looked truly stricken at that, her face drawn and her eyes nearly tearful. Judy took note of that for their post-scene discussion and reached forward to stroke Star’s cheek. She leaned into the touch, so Judy could tell that it wasn’t a bad kind of emotional reaction, just an unexpected one. She didn’t seem to be overly hot to the touch, and she wasn’t shaking — shifting, yes, but not shaking — so she wasn’t cold, either. Judy was safe to continue, “It would be one thing if you were just terrible at your job. That can easily be corrected. Your arrogance isn’t so easily forgiven. You believe your systems are superior to the ones we have in place here.”

Closing her eyes, Star *whined*. This was the kind of humiliation she’d been seeking, wasn’t it? Judy grinned. She could work with this. Raising her voice a little, Judy asked, “Out of curiosity, who here believes that arrogance and irresponsibility are linked?”

“Absolutely,” Nick said gruffly. Emilia assented, as did Eric, but most of the rest of her associates stayed quiet.

“You just can’t help it, can you? That high recommendation gets you through the day, doesn’t it? You feast on it.” Judy cooed, petting Star’s ears as she did so. Star whimpered and leaned into Judy’s paw again. When she opened her eyes, they were still glassy, but not with unshed tears — oh, yeah, she was in the zone now. “You know you’re worse than bad, you’re mediocre. All that unused potential, and for what? Your own useless little ego?”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Star slurred.

“Not yet, you’re not. But we’ll break your habit, or we’ll break you trying. How many strikes is *this* worth to you?”

“One hundred.”

“I will *not* be striking you a hundred times, that’s ridiculous,” Judy told the girl, making sure disdain was obvious in her voice even as the fire spread from her chest to her stomach and her head went a little fuzzy. The fact that Star *thought* she needed — that she *wanted* — but it wouldn’t do to waste any more of her associates’ time. “You get another thirty, and you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

Next to what she’d done with her usual sub, this was child’s play, really, but the dynamic was
entirely different. For all she knew, Star was lying about having done this before. It was unlikely, but Judy wasn’t willing to be a monster, even to such a bad assistant. So she patted Star’s head once more, stood, and added, “I’m not even sure you’re listening to me. Repeat what I just said.”

“Thirty strikes. Not good for me,” said Star, in that same tone that was almost lazy.

“If you’re really listening, you’ll tell me what your favorite color is,” Judy challenged. One final check-in before she gave Star her real paddling.

“Green.”

This next bit had been non-negotiable on Star’s part. She had been adamant about the final set being hard and fast, like an actual punishment rather than an erotic fantasy scene. Judy remembered being vaguely uncomfortable during their negotiations, but now, it was nothing but exciting. The thrill, which had built up over time, was spreading even through Judy’s fingers wrapped firmly around the paddle, which she dragged down the length of Star’s body and even down to the tip of her tail. When she reached the best place available, she turned on her heel to maximize her range and swatted sharply. The plastic smacked against Star’s thighs, the whistle of displaced air and the snap of impact different from what had come before. It was gorgeous, and so was the little shriek Star made.

And she pressed her hips back, eager for another strike despite being in pain from the first one. The warmup had done its job. This finale would be fine.

Judy’s heart pounded in her throat and mouth as she struck again, just as sharply, waited ten beats, and struck a third time. It felt as though the entire world was fading away, disappearing, just Attorney Luna Evergreen and Assistant Star left awake and alive. The song of the paddle, Star’s cries — not for help, not for relief, just cries, on their own without any need for context — she could taste a sharpness in the air, smell the sweat from Star’s pawpads— this was a connection, it was a conversation, or a dance, in which Judy was the lead and Star was a willing follow, and as Judy struck and struck fire moved through her until

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I screwed up, I always screw up, I’m such a failure,” Star babbled, and Judy halted in her strikes, concerned. Even after she reached out to pet Star, the lynx continued, “I let my fear of failure get in the way and I still failed, I always fail, I’m a disappointment and I’m going to ruin everything and I’m sorry!”

— hard shutdown.

Star — Linnea — was bringing real-life issues into their scene, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, and it was time to bring the scene to a close, even if it wasn’t supposed to be over yet. As Judy tried to quell the ecstatic fire racing through her body, tried to escape top space, she said, “Red. This scene is over.”

“Please, no, please keep going—”

“It’s over, Star,” Judy commanded, and Linnea went quiet. Judy knelt down and decided to simply snip the ropes instead of undoing the knots. Linnea was shaking and breathing hard, and her eyes were glassy, and she didn’t look like she was having a panic attack, but Judy couldn’t know for sure. She slid the blunt-tip shears under the loop around Linnea’s wrist and said, “Come on, lean on me. Relax. Lean forward, I’ve got you.”

Linnea did so, resting her face on Judy’s shoulder while she cut through the strands of rope and moved onto the other side. Once she was finished with the second wrist, she set the scissors aside
and rubbed Linnea’s wrists gently. Just as gently, she asked, “Ni — Ollie, will you please come and get the rope around Star’s feet?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Nick said, and immediately knelt down to attend to the spreader tie. Hopefully they could at least preserve the longer length of rope; it wasn’t cheap, but Judy had needed to at least get two of Star’s limbs free immediately.

“You’re all right, Star,” she said quietly, wrapping her arms around the lynx as best she could. She moved back and forth a little, a soothing motion she’d learned from Ruth and Nick. “I’ve got you. You’re okay, I’ve got you.” Over Linnea’s shoulder, she told the assembled spectators, “Everyone else, get out of here, your part is over.”

Etiquette demanded they obey, as aftercare was an individual thing and nobody had the right to force themselves into any part of a scene, so nobody seemed put off by Judy’s terse order. If any of the spectators needed support, they could talk to each other. Not that she would have cared; Linnea was the important party here, the one who had put her safety and security on the line. She scritched the back of Linnea’s neck while she held her, watching as Nick carefully unwrapped her ankles. Thank goodness for safety hitches, or the amount of squirming Linnea had done at the end would have pulled the ropes tight enough to cut off circulation. As soon as Nick had the rope unwrapped, Linnea pulled her legs in, almost balling herself up but either unable or unwilling to let Judy out of the hug.

“Can you talk yet, Star,” Judy asked quietly.

“I don’t want to,” Linnea replied.

“We can wait, then. Do you want to go somewhere else or do you want to stay on the mat?”

“Stay.”

“And do you want Ollie to go away too?”

“...He can stay.”

“You were really great,” Judy told Linnea, even though she wasn’t sure if it was true. “You were a superstar.”

“Ha,” Linnea replied flatly, and Judy winced at the accidental and terrible joke.

Judy held Linnea for a while longer while Nick knelt at their feet, watching in silent support. She was grateful to him for being helpful, and for orbiting instead of participating. It was like he always knew exactly what she needed, and maybe he did; after all, more often than not, she knew exactly what he needed. They’d been communicating for so long that some things just didn’t need to be said anymore, although they could be said, if either of them chose.

And speaking of communication…

“You got a little distressed there at the end,” she said softly. Linnea was getting heavy, but she tried not to shift in discomfort.

“I didn’t realize,” was the response. Judy paused in her petting, but didn’t say anything, and began again shortly after. “It all felt really good, even the parts that normally would feel bad.”

“What would normally feel bad?”

“Facing my mistakes. It...I thought this scene would be pure fantasy, but it wasn’t. You’re not a
lawyer and I’m not an assistant, but I’ve made some mistakes recently, and I — I think subconsciously I was looking for a way to process it. It’s not that I’ve done anything that I can’t rectify, but it feels like I have. Every mistake I make weighs on me. I switch a number in an equation and I feel like I’m going to die, or the world will explode. Maybe I include the wrong data in an attachment. Maybe I put the wrong question on an exam. Nobody else cares about little mistakes like that...part of the reason we collaborate in our research is to check each other’s work. Part of the peer review process is making sure the data is falsifiable, the tests are repeatable...I know all of this. And every single time, it feels like a career killer. It felt so good to be punished for that instead of just agonizing over it. I got to cry. I got to apologize for stuff that everyone else says is no big deal.”

“I’m glad,” Judy managed. She had recognized the distress, but she had misread it anyway. Not her finest moment as a top, but she knew she had done the right thing. In the event that Linnea had been in a bad place, if Judy had continued, she could have done harm.

“I know why you had to stop,” the lynx said, sitting up on her own. She looked down at her paws. “I was still kinda sad about it, though. It felt so good, I just wanted you to keep going until I babbled myself out, and I...sort of feel like we’re still in it. I’m your assistant and I’m waiting for your forgiveness. Did I do good? If it were real, would I have earned it?”

Judy melted a little. That was so sweet. “I wasn’t lying; you did great. If it were real, I’d deserve jail time, but yes, you would definitely have earned my forgiveness.”

Linnea’s laugh was somewhere between amused and relieved, a sound Judy had heard plenty of times from witnesses who hadn’t seen what they thought they’d seen. Watching Judy carefully, she said, “You’re shaking.”

“...I guess I am,” Judy acknowledged, looking at her own paws, which were indeed shaking. “I cut that scene off pretty unexpectedly when I was deep in top space. It’ll pass.”

Linnea frowned. “I’m sorry. That must have been hard; you could have finished. It’s not fair I get what I want and you don’t.”

She shook her head and took Linnea’s paws in her own, stating firmly, “I could not have. Of course the ideal is equal satisfaction, but you trusted me. You put your safety in my paws. I did what was right. And for the record, knowing you got something good out of it is important to me, so I did get what I wanted. A good top’s primary concern is the safety of the sub anyway. Anything less than that doesn’t deserve to be called BDSM.”

“That hasn’t been my experience so far,” Linnea admitted, squeezing Judy’s paws lightly, “but I guess a lot of things were different tonight. Like the humiliation. The others I’ve played with...they tried, but all they could come up with was dumb stuff about my body. I know I’m attractive, so it’s not humiliating. One of them even tried to humiliate me by commenting on how wet I was for him.

Like he didn’t know females have natural discharge.”

“He probably didn’t. Zootopian sex ed is awful.” Judy squeezed and withdrew, putting her legs out in front of her to shake them before they fell asleep. “If I had a buck for every time I’ve heard a female complain about some guy trying to stick it in too soon...”

“Yikes. It’s a wonder straight females are even a thing.”

She smiled, unable to relate — she was happy with Nick, and she’d always taken charge of sexual encounters (regardless of sex or gender) well enough to not have ever had that problem — but understanding the sentiment. Someone like Linnea, who seemed to be a lesbian and was most likely sexually submissive, would have a very different experience. “Feeling better?”
“Yeah.” She stretched, stood, and offered a paw to Judy, who took it gratefully. “I feel pretty floaty. I’m gonna go home and sleep.”

Judy nodded. “Do you need a ride? Or a monitor?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m actually an adult.”

“I know, I know, I just...also know how rough it can be,” Judy soothed.

“Yeah, it was rough, but it was good.” Linnea smiled, and although it was small, it was genuine. “Thanks. It was a really good experience. I’m glad we did this.”

“Me too.” Judy wasn’t even surprised to realize it was the truth. “But...do you mind if I talk to Ollie about this scene later? I need to process.”

“Yeah, totally, go for it.”

“And text me when you get home so I know you’re okay.”

Linnea snorted. “Okay, Mom.” When Judy ducked her head, she added, “Hey. Thanks for looking out for me.”

“You’re welcome,” Judy replied warmly. She wasn’t sure how to reciprocate the sentiment, so she just smiled, and relaxed into Nick when he put his arms around her from behind.

“C’mon, let’s sit down,” he suggested, leading her to a row of chairs. He sat in the corner and she attached herself to his side, feeling much safer tucked under his arm. It was weird, though; it wasn’t like she had felt unsafe before. More like...it just felt righter.

After they relaxed quietly together for a few minutes, the party was still in full swing, even though it felt like it should be over. Judy had her eyes on a small needles scene and her ears on Nate, who was having a spirited discussion about different kinds of rope. Most mammals knew that hemp rope was a no-go when you had fur, but Nate defended the use of it, saying it could be treated. Of course it could be; it had to be, in order to keep it from fraying or causing rope splinters; but that still didn’t make it a good choice. It was a terrible choice, especially for foxes, who had so much fur they could probably wear their own spring blow as a sweater.

On the other side…

She didn’t know the mammals doing the needles scene, and it was simple, but pretty. The coyote bottom had strips buzzed off of his arms, and the top had threaded five needles into each arm. She was now weaving a thin ribbon around each of the hubs, forcing the bottom to sit pretty.

“I have a surprise for you,” Nick said into her ear before dragging a fang along the edge.

“Oh?”

“I bought us a needles kit, complete with gloves you can safely put your claws through and a biohazard box.”

She tensed up, unable to help herself. They’d talked about it, but somehow, with the case, she hadn’t allowed herself to get too invested. Nick had taken initiative anyway. She was still coming down from the scene with Linnea, so she knew she’d be a lot more excited later; she could only hope that Nick wasn’t too disappointed in her lackluster reaction when she nuzzled him and said, “Thank you.”
“Nothing but the best for my favorite bunny,” he replied, wrapping his arm firmly around her and pulling her close. “You’ve been so stressed out. This will give us both something to look forward to. Once we’re done here…”

“Done with what,” asked Nate cheerfully from off to their left. Judy sat up straight as he took the seat next to Nick; she didn’t want to take her eyes off the needles scene, but she didn’t really want to have her back to Nathaniel Snow, either.

Nick saved the day by saying, “The adoption’s been a nightmare. Cross-species adoption is hard anyway, and a cross-species couple trying to adopt? First they said they had a little ocelot for us, and now they’re saying they found her a better home but they’ve got a little koala for us — we’re trying to give a home to a kit who doesn’t have one.”

“It took my parents three years to get approved, and by that time I was already six. It’s logical to keep adoptees within the same basic size category; bears couldn’t raise a little shrew, and bunnies couldn’t raise a buffalo, that kind of thing. But the unofficial ban on cross-species adoption is...well, it’s nonsense. I actually came over to ask how you’re doing, Luna,” said Nate, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his thighs. He was only looking at her peripherally, but Judy felt his attention on her.

“I’m wrecked,” she admitted, leaning back into Nick’s side. It was true. She was exhausted, emotionally and physically. Now that Linnea was gone, she was crashing hard. She didn’t even have it in her to be annoyed at Nate for interrupting her sweet talk with Nick.

“Do you…” Nate looked directly at Nick. “Does she need anything? Water? Why did that affect her so much?”

“I’m not her keeper, jeez,” Nick replied. Judy could hear the roll of his eyes. “Ma’am, please tell him the policy.”

She laughed lightly. “Relying on someone else to do your emotional labor is lazy and disingenuous. If you can’t tell your own story after a scene, it’s not the right time to tell it. But there’s no story here; the exhaustion is just the aftermath of top space. Epinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, that kind of thing. I’ll be fine.”

“That sounds like subspace,” he said thoughtfully. “Same chemical reaction, same crash, or at least crash potential.”

“It is the same,” she acknowledged. “Or at least, I think it is. I’ve never experienced subspace, but it sounds like the same feeling. It would make sense from a neurochemical standpoint. It’s basically the same experience, just coming at it from two different angles.”

“You talk like a professional,” he teased.

She shrugged. Blinked. Through a yawn, she told him, “Everything we know is self-taught. I spent a lot of time on prodomme forums and Madame Moon coached me through some of the more difficult stuff. If I sound like a pro, it’s because I sought out pro advice.”

“Have you ever thought about going pro,” he asked with a funny little smile that might, on Nick, have been a smirk.

“No, I have not,” she answered with a shake of her head. “I know I couldn’t handle the training. Besides, I have a good job already.”

“But you don’t love your job,” he stated, which was presumptuous of him. That it was temporarily
true was just happenstance. She was about to tell him so when he added, “You talk about it like it’s a thing separate from you, like it’s just a string of facts. Or perhaps...it’s as though it’s not real for you.”

He let it hang, and through her sleepy haze, Judy became nervous.

“Anyway, I had a question for you, too, Oliver,” he said, breaking the tension. “I think I’m ready to get back into the swing of things, at least in terms of kink, and I’d like your opinion on three-tongued versus two-tongued tawses. The vixen I have in mind likes it hard and rough, and it’d be great to get your assessment of the tool overall, plus any insight you might have.”

Judy listened to Nick dive into his explanation and didn’t feel comforted at all.

Four hours later, Judy was exhausted, but she couldn’t bear to sleep. There was nervous energy buzzing through her, making her brain go wild even as the rest of her felt fatigued. Even aside from the lingering excitement from the party, she had a nagging thought—

There wasn’t a reason to believe Nate was onto them, but it wasn’t a secret that the bunny cop had some kind of relationship with a fox. Most mammals didn’t care; having Officer Hopps and her civilian consultant in the tabloids all those years ago, during the missing mammals case, had been a cheap cash grab to exploit the mammals who’d been darted. Mostly, Judy and Nick had stayed out of the public eye. After all, who really cared about the actions of a random cop or a random private investigator? And yet...

It was the way he’d looked at her, she decided. She’d still been in a state of heightened awareness, and something had been off. She knew it. The question was, had it been off because he was onto them? Why was she so worried about this?

“You don’t want to come to bed yet,” Nick asked from the doorway of the bedroom, watching her tap her foot on the floor by the front entrance.

Right. She had forgotten to actually leave the living room when he had invited her to bed the first time.

“I’m...processing, I guess,” she said mechanically, even though she’d meant to say something about her suspicions. She frowned. “Something’s wrong.”

He moved swiftly toward her and she held herself still, because it was ridiculous that her body would immediately go into fight mode. If there was one thing she knew for certain, it was that Nick wasn’t a threat. At least, he wasn’t a threat to her. His face went narrow as he knelt down in front of her, watching her carefully, and took her paw. “Judy, you’re shaking.”

“I am?” She looked down. She was. “Oh.”

“Aw, shit,” he muttered. Louder, he said, “Please sit down, Ma’am, I’ll be right back.”

“Nick, just go to bed,” she said awkwardly. He didn’t have to stay out there and watch her be weird.

“Nope, no can do. Here.” He lifted her up, carried her two steps, and deposited her on the couch, seeming not to notice her annoyed glare. “Not happening, even if you order it, so don’t even bother. We’re going to talk in a few minutes, but I need to get you — here you go, a cold water bottle.”

She blinked. When had he gone to the fridge at all? Okay, yeah, something was more wrong than she’d thought. It wasn’t about Nate at all, was it? That was just something her brain had seized on.
"Um."

He grabbed the bottle, twisted it open, pressed it into her paws again, and kissed the top of her head. "Just drink that. It will help, I promise."

"Yeah," she said, but by the time it came out, he was already out of the room. She put the bottle to her lips and took a sip, but it felt too loud going down her throat, so she didn’t want to take another sip. She also wasn’t sure she was coordinated enough to set it down on the coffee table, because she was shaking, more than she had been at the party. What was wrong with her?

Nick came out of the bedroom with the down comforter they never used and a pair of her pajamas. He had taken his own shirt off, leaving him in only his striped shorts, and she wished they weren’t still dyed. She missed his orange fur. Her contacts hurt, too. She just hadn’t noticed because everything felt over-sensitive. With a sigh, he set everything down next to her and knelt down again. "C’mon, Ma’am, you need to finish your water."

"My eyes hurt."

"Okay." He held up her contacts case, which he’d apparently thought to grab out of the bathroom. "You drink half of that bottle, and I’ll help you get them out."

That was an objective she could meet. Cause and effect, action and consequence. If she drank the water she could make her eyes feel better, so she took one sip and then another, watching Nick as he watched her. He looked concerned, probably more concerned than was necessary, but he was a worrier. He liked to take care of her, and she usually let him, because it made him happy as both a submissive and her partner.

She wanted to take care of him, too. She tried to think of something she could do, but her brain just kind of buzzed at her.

"Okay, good, thank you for drinking that," he said, taking the half-full bottle from her and setting it on the coffee table. He snapped on his finger guards and squirted them with some eye drops before stroking her cheek with the opposite paw. "Okay, eyes wide, I’m going to put some tears in your eyes and then get your contacts. Deep breath."

She breathed and tried not to move as a giant paw got too close to her eye — right in her eye — pinched her left contact lens out — done. Nick had helped her before; at the beginning, she hadn’t been very good at getting her contacts out, even though she’d been able to get them in just fine. He repeated the process on the other one and she blinked hard, trying to keep the artificial tears in.

"I want you to finish this bottle while I help you get your pajamas on, okay, Ma’am?"

She took it from him and took another sip. It was easier, especially when he got behind her to unhook the weird snaps that had given her an artificial, moveable corset-like shirt. The whole thing either snapped or buckled into itself, so he could remove it without having to worry about her possibly dropping the bottle, and there were enough little fasteners that by the time he did get it off, she was done drinking. He kissed her shoulder and said, "Okay, arms up, I’m going to help you into your nightshirt."

"I’m not a child, Nick," she pointed out.

"No, you’re just in top drop," he replied, "so if you don’t like it, take it up with your endocrine system."

Oh, she thought, feeling very stupid for not considering that. Having an explanation helped; she let
him help her into the shirt and stood shakily while he pulled off her skirt and helped her into her bottoms. She liked these pajamas for their warm and fluffy quality, but they weren’t very sexy, so she didn’t wear them unless she needed the extra comfort. When Nick sat down on the couch with the blanket spread across his torso and his arms out, she sat against him willingly, hoping the cuddling would help. Tactile comfort was more Nick’s thing than hers, but she loved cuddling with him specifically, because he always made her feel safe. This, she was relieved to find as he folded her in the blanket from behind, was no different.

“I didn’t mean to drop,” she said quietly.

He snorted. “It’s not a moral failing. I’ve done it before. It happens.”

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t have.”

She sighed and tucked his muzzle between her ears, the pressure on her skull helping soothe the pain inside it that she hadn’t even noticed until that moment. “You can punish me for this later, Ma’am, but I have to tell you, this is a big enough issue that you’ve got to drop your ego for a second.”

“That’s not it,” she snapped, and then breathed out, angry with herself. “It’s just that I’ve never gone through this before, and I don’t know what to think about the fact that it was with Linnea and not you.”

“Oh. Well that’s easy to explain. We know each other,” he noted, wrapping the blanket around her more tightly and pulling her closer. “We built up our intensity over time. That scene was intense for a lot of reasons that really had nothing to do with the physical pain you were inflicting, and you’ve not been in a great place these past couple of months. I’m not surprised you dropped, but I didn’t consider that you might. I’m sorry I didn’t notice that was where you were headed.”

“I think I ruined tonight,” she sort of whispered after a moment of silence. She wanted to hide her face, but there wasn’t a way to do so, not as she was situated in Nick’s arms. “I messed it up.”

She hated that his voice lacked judgment when he asked, “Why do you say that?”

“I stopped it early. I misread her cues.” The anger returned, and her voice rose in pitch with each sentence. “I cut off Nate’s friend when he was doing exactly what she wanted. I asked you to help me untie her without asking if it was okay with her. We didn’t cover aftercare in our negotiations because I’m an idiot and forgot. I shouldn’t have let her go home alone. Once again I’m the one who redded out—”

“You did the right thing.”

“I sucked.”

“That’s the drop talking,” he told her. He leaned into the corner of the couch and pulled her with him so that she was halfway lying back on his chest. After being hunched over, it helped her breathe. “Take it from someone who’s been through it twice now, this is a hormone miscommunication. Your body’s telling your brain there’s something wrong, and your brain’s trying to come up with a reason for it, and you already have a habit of blaming yourself for things that aren’t your fault, so why would you not follow your pattern? You did the right thing, and you didn’t misread her cues. You were amazing tonight.”

She squirmed until he loosened his grip. Immediately, she turned over, so she could listen to his heart. It helped, hearing that her fox was still alive, even though she could see him and feel him and she could still hear his heartbeat when she wasn’t so close. It was silly, but it was a comfort she
“Is it dumb to say I don’t feel like I was amazing?”

“No, but I doubt my saying that will convince you at all.” He massaged the base of her left ear and rested his other paw on her upper back. “What we all saw tonight was a responsible mistress who took charge of the scene. You did a great binding, even Emilia was impressed. You were able to adapt in real time. You got to her in the way she needed to be got to, your warm-up looked like a natural part of the roleplay. It was even more impressive to me because you and I don’t roleplay; to everyone else it looked like you’d been doing it for a long time.”

“You could have done better, I’m sure,” she said, wishing she could take the words back. Even if they were true in her mind, she didn’t want to come across as fishing for compliments.

He settled his paw between her ears and scritched lightly with his claw-tips, which she loved, and said, “Actually, I couldn’t have.”

“You’re way better than I am at reading mammals, though.”

Shut up, Hopps, honestly, you’re so stupid, some part of her brain went, and she tried to ignore it, but she couldn’t.

“Sure,” he acknowledged, unaware of her internal frustration at herself, “although I do think you sell yourself short there. The thing is, you domme well. Being in charge comes as naturally to you as breathing, because it’s something you want and you live your whole life that way. It’s who you are. But more importantly, you live that way because you care. You want to make the world a better place, whether it’s catching a killer or helping an old lady cross the street or paddling the shit out of a lynx who has some internal issues going on. I read mammals, and I’m good at it, but I don’t see what you see. When I see the negatives in someone, I see a way to take advantage of them. When you see the same negatives, you see a way to help them.”

“That’s not true,” she protested quietly. “Nick, you’re one of the most empathetic mammals I know.”

“That’s like saying I’m one of the reddest foxes you know,” he countered. He pressed a kiss to her ear. “Empathy is near-universal, and it isn’t enough. Some of the most internally empathetic mammals out there are mean as hell because it just hurts too much to get burned over and over. I think you and I saw at about the same time what was going on in Linnea’s head — what her issue was — but immediately, you knew how to address it. You went beyond using it to your advantage, you used it to her advantage, and that’s what being a top is all about. Not to mention, you’re really getting good at exploiting the OODA loop even when the scene isn’t long. She was in the scene even after you ended it early. Her distress was part of her subspace and she loved it.”

“You could do all that too,” Judy told him, unsure of why his praise was making her uncomfortable. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t just be happy with the scene. She’d had fun, and so had Linnea, even when she’d had her breakthrough. Why…?

“Yes. I could. It’s not about can and can’t. Anyone can top and anyone can bottom, as long as they’re actually willing to put in the time and effort. But it doesn’t come natural to me, Carrots. Every time you and I switch it up, it’s like wading through molasses, and I’m tired at the end. Not in the roller-coaster kind of way, just...exhausted. I couldn’t even imagine trying to top for anyone else. I’m a submissive by nature.”

Subdrop didn’t really have a rhyme or reason to it. If subspace and top space had the same neurochemical makeup, then maybe top drop was the same. Maybe she could help herself with it the same way she’d helped Nick with subdrop. Maybe if she could just keep listening to him talk, even if the conversation wasn’t lighthearted, she would feel better. After all, hearing him talk was one of her
favorite things.

“Could you…” She stopped. Wrenched her arm out of the blanket wrap and pulled on his paw until she could hold it. “Could you bottom for anyone else?”

“Probably,” he admitted, seeming to understand that she needed honesty, not pretty lies. He didn’t seem to mind the awkward position she’d put him in, with his arm sort of trapped at his collarbone. “I don’t think I could ever give myself to anyone the way I’ve given myself to you, but after years of doing this with you, I think if you and I weren’t together anymore, if you died or something and I had it in me to move on, I’d probably still want to be a submissive. I like it. When you — someone I love and trust — tell me what to do, it’s not just an order. It’s permission to be good.”

She moved her head to look at his face when she asked, “Permission?”

“Yeah, permission. I spent so much of my life trying not to be exploitable. Trying not to be nice, trying to be someone tough who never felt a thing, because life kicked me around and I was myopic enough to think foxes were the only ones who had it rough.” He rolled his eyes, upper lip curled. “They deserved what I did to them for having what I saw as better lives. No one can hurt you if you hurt them first. Prejudice doesn’t matter if you live down to all their expectations. And I hurt a lot of mammals doing that, including you, as much as I hate to admit it. I mean, the first day we met, I said some really awful things to you and then felt unduly hurt when you walked out on me. But you let me be good. You reward me for it. You keep me safe, not from the rest of the world, but from myself. Submitting to you has made me stronger. Judy...in a world that rewards bad behavior, you keep me on the path I want to take. So stop second-guessing yourself. You’re a good domme and a good mammal.”

“I think I’m at a place where I’m starting to see that,” she said honestly, feeling weird about it. The statement felt like bragging, but maybe that wasn’t a bad thing. She could take credit for her growth. She always encouraged Nick to take credit for his. “I mean, not right now. Right now I feel like crap. But I think tomorrow when I wake up, I’ll be able to believe I learned a lot from that scene tonight. My brain says it showed me that I’m not just loving with you, my kink comes from a place of love, like it’s supposed to. Linnea’s not even really a friend, and still, I treated her with the love she was due from a responsible top. So...yeah. I’m used to second-guessing myself. But I came out of top space when I had to and I read the situation correctly even though that was the first time we’d played. Maybe the only time we will play. Thank you for agreeing, Nick. I needed that, and so did she, and my emotions aren’t really agreeing with anything I just said, but I know that objectively you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right, I’m amazing. I have to be, to keep up with you,” he teased.

She smiled and moved her face down again to save her neck from strain. They had more things to talk about, but it could wait until she wasn’t actively in a drop. “Then, Mr. Amazing, remind me in the morning to ask you about another observation I made tonight.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said, and — she felt awful, but intellectually, she knew it would pass, and she would recover. She might have been in a drop, but Nick was there, able and willing to catch her.

Chapter End Notes

Top drop is something that kinksters don't really talk about very much, but it's a very real thing that needs to be treated as seriously as subdrop. Once again, Nick is kind of a
superstar. Surprising no one, I'm sure.

See tutorials for the double column spreader HERE (I modified it for this scene, but it basically looks like this) and most of the double column tie HERE. I couldn't find a tutorial on the inside smuggler's hitch (maybe it has a different name? Or it's a custom thing my trainer just passed on to me?), but see a munter hitch tutorial HERE. It bothers me that so many people swear by hemp rope; I know there are plenty of purists out there, and I'll admit to using it on occasion when I want a certain aesthetic, but hemp fucks with my skin and always catches in my hair (even when it's short and managed with a flat-iron, but especially when it's long and my curls are everyfuckingwhere). Just don't waste the money. Use synthetic fibers, like nylon. Purists will hate me but they can take that opinion and deep throat it. Jute is fine, for really intricate stuff, but seriously hemp makes me rage. (Stay away from cotton though, it's unworkable. The knots don't hold and it just kinda flops around uselessly. Only use cotton if you're tying yourself up, or if you just want to stage an escape artist scene or something.)

People. Readers. There are 3 chapters left.
Honesty

Chapter Summary

The schedule moves up. Judy learns who she can and can't trust, and words prove to be the greatest weapon once again.

Chapter Notes

Yesterday was International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, and I wanted to get this out because I wanted to remind everyone on that day that if it weren't for Emilia, a sex worker, deciding to risk her safety and security for Judy's case, integration would have been ridiculously hard. But I spent the day at my volunteer thing and then doing my actual job. Heyo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I keep thinking about that scene.

It was incredible.

You helped HR.

I want yo to help me.

Please.

I have so muck in my head.

I miss my Sarah.

Its my fault she’s gone.

I should have been more caramel.

I should have protected her.

Expedient from herself.

I want to be furnished for it.

Please just think about it.

Ill be god, I promise.
I want even tell your secret.

Judy frowned down at her screen. She’d awoken to this string of texts from Nate, and she wasn’t sure how to react to it. The texts almost seemed like a joke; there were too many errors for it to have been written by Nate, unless he’d had eye damage and was relying on spellcheck. Nick had distracted her with breakfast in bed — he’d knelt at her feet, kissing her legs playfully and accepting more bites than she fed herself from her paws, because he was the best boyfriend in the world, and knew exactly what she needed to recover from her drop the night prior — but the dishes were washed now, and they couldn’t put this off anymore.

“You shouldn’t do it,” Nick said immediately upon viewing.

She nodded. “I agree.”

“It sets off all the alarm bells I have.”

“Even the ones I didn’t know I had.”

He sighed. “You’re going to say yes anyway, aren’t you?”

She looked down at the screen, and then up at him. He had a resigned expression on his face, and she understood why: ultimately, this was her call. He had no say in the investigative choices she made. At most, he could quit; he wasn’t exactly contractually or financially obligated to stay. But he had no power over her, especially when it came to her job. All he could do was state his opinion.

“Nick,” she said softly, scooting on the couch to close the few inches between them and lean against him, “I’m not doing anything if you’re not 100% on board. You’re my backup. I trust you and I trust your opinion, and right now I don’t trust the ZPD to have my back. So I’m going to explain what I’m thinking, and if you don’t agree, I’ll think of something else.”

He put his arms tightly around her, and she allowed it, because Nick needed the comfort...and so did she. Thankfully, she wasn’t in an active drop anymore, and hadn’t been since she had awoken, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t still a little raw from the realization that she and Linnea might not ever be friends. It was possible that Linnea might look back on their scene with disgust, because Luna had never existed. Judy planned to break the news to her first, once this case was all finished, and explain that Luna was basically a stage name; Luna was Judy in all the ways that mattered.

And maybe set her up with Angel, if the actress was amenable. Even if Judy couldn't be friends with Linnea, at least she could do something nice for her.

“Tell me,” Nick said, drawing her out of her thoughts with a light nip to the back of her neck. Aww.

Judy held up the phone and explained, “I’ve been thinking about how to catch Nate. I don’t know if he’s the killer, but I do know that he’s an abuser, and in any case he needs to be stopped. Ideally, I’d have a team behind me or wear a wire or something, but Nate told me about his security system. It was possible that Linnea might look back on their scene with disgust, because Luna had never existed. Judy planned to break the news to her first, once this case was all finished, and explain that Luna was basically a stage name; Luna was Judy in all the ways that mattered.

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“That was something I never managed to do well,” he admitted.

“You did; you just...did it differently.” She nudged him with her elbow and thought about how he managed to insert himself into any social circle. “You just do that thing where you speak like you’re in a position of authority, even if it’s all just guessing or even lies, and mammals believe you because why wouldn’t they? It only gets you into trouble when you’re talking to someone who’s an actual expert. And even then you manage to make them question themselves.”

“That is not the same,” he said flatly. “My mother was a menace, Carrots, and so are you.”

She grinned and teased, “You’re just mad that you have so much in common with her, despite your best efforts. Too bad; your mother was amazing, Slick, and so are you.”

“That,” he told her through another open-mouthed kiss, “was below the belt. Anyway, let’s get back to Nate. At worst, he knows who you are. At best, he’s just throwing shit to see what sticks. I see the logic in courting him and taking him through a confession scene, or I wouldn’t have suggested it, but how do we get him to confess the truth? What if he confesses to murder, but he didn’t actually do it? Or what if he did do it, but he confesses to just...not being controlling enough?”

“This is where the plan gets dangerous. I didn’t even want him to trust me so fast, because Fangmeyer hasn’t even caught the mammal who’s covering up evidence...or if they have, I don’t know about it yet. But when we have, and that threat is gone...or at least, there aren’t as many unknowns in this case...well, there’s a reason I’ve been thinking about your mother so much lately. She told me how she met your dad.”

“Carrots, you can’t,” he said, appalled. Of course he would be. He had always been far more cautious in his cons than Judy could afford to be, and that had kept him alive long enough to be appalled in the first place.

She shrugged her shoulders and brought up the text thread again. “I have to, Nick. It’s the only way I can see at this point. What would Ruth Wilde do?”

“She’d get her heart broken,” he said snidely, pressing his muzzle to her head. She felt his lips move against her when he added, “I hate that you’re right.”

“But you’ll be with me the whole way,” she said, and hit send with her thumb.

_Ollie’s not sure about it. I’ll convince him._

Everything that Judy did seemed to have an extra, crispy layer of anxiety. The world seemed oversaturated when she stepped outside; voices took on a tinny quality. She knew it was just nerves, and that it would pass, but it wasn’t ideal for investigating. Still, she was a professional, so she dressed in her Luna Evergreen costume and went out to do her professional duty.

Today, she and Nick were actually meeting with a case worker. It would have been pointless; neither of them wanted kits, and as soon as the case was over, Luna and Oliver would disappear. But the case worker was a contact from the ZPD, set in place by Captain Fangmeyer. Hopefully, this case worker had news for them about the problem element.

She was surprised to walk into the facility and see Erin Rivers, a fellow zoicide detective who was often loaned out to vice when they needed an extra sniffer. Nick and Judy had first met her on Nick’s first case, when she was a recent transfer from South Bean, before Judy had even graduated; her accent had been mellowed by time and space, but she wasn’t exactly inconspicuous, with her bright pink tail-tip and her ragged ear.
Was anyone really supposed to believe that she was a case worker for an adoption program?

“You must be Mr. and Mrs. Evergreen,” Rivers said warmly, putting her paw out for Nick to shake. Judy tried to look slightly annoyed, but mostly she was just glad that Nick was the one who had to deal with trying to shake a paw at least twice the size of his, for a change.

“Thanks for meeting with us on such short notice,” replied Nick with a smile. “I hope you have good news for us.”

“I’m afraid not. Would you both follow me, please?”

Rivers turned and left, expecting them to follow. Judy gripped the short lead on Nick’s belt, thankful for how unobtrusive it was. She might as well be walking with her paw through his beltloop, or simply keeping hold of a decoration on his belt for the purpose of not losing each other in the throng.

Judy frowned at the brown walls of the facility. It looked just like every other underfunded government project, but it seemed unreasonable for a kit shelter to be underfunded at all. The official budget, which she’d skimmed last election season, noted enough money per year to keep two shelters like this running in each district — one for megafauna, one for small-to-medium mammals — and sure, two per district wasn’t ideal, but this seemed bad even for one that had significant overflow. What were they doing with their money?

“Are these kinds of conditions standard,” she asked aloud. She wasn’t sure if she’d get an answer, but it was better than not asking.

“Yeah. Across the board,” Rivers replied with an edge in her voice. “’S what happens when you let some hotshot daddy’s money CEO from fuckin Disney Central swoop in and manage something paid for by taxes. When’s the last time you bought yourself a yacht, cub? Buncha fuckin...anyway, c’mon, I got us the use of an office. In here.”

Despite her suspicions that Rivers hated her, Judy felt for the wolf. She had a passion for kits and couldn’t have any of her own, so as much as Judy was angry about the poor conditions, it was probably ten times worse for Rivers. The kits probably didn’t know any better, but that didn’t make it okay.

A thought almost stopped in her tracks. She’d been agonizing over the vague desire to quit her job, but she wasn’t defined by her career. Catching killers was a noble aspiration, sure, and she felt good every time she helped put a truly bad mammal behind bars. But if she were fired, or lost a limb, or just decided to quit, she didn’t have to let go of her dream to help make the world a better place. There were more options than just “police officer” or “nothing.”

Her renewed conviction made her warm when she shut the door behind them. Whatever happened next, she would have Nick at her back, and they’d deal with it together, like they dealt with everything. And they’d do the right thing, because that was what they did.

“Sit down, or don’t,” Rivers said carelessly, taking a seat on the corner of the desk. The old CRT monitor wobbled and she stood again hastily. “You’ve got to be kiddin’ me — okay. Look, Hopps, you’re gonna hate my message, but don’t shoot the messenger. Fangmeyer’s had me goin’ over discrepancies in the data, tryin’ to find whoever’s fuckin’ with your case. I majored in statistics, so it’s not ideal...but anyway, I didn’t find the officer involved in covering up important data, but I did find a bunch of unauthorized sign-ins on the server. I know most of them were you, and whatever, you’re not the first cop to be cautious. In this situation, going against protocol was the right thing to do. But I found a login with your credentials Saturday afternoon, when I know for a fact you were at the grocery store because we have receipts. There any reason your murder suspect would be
authorized to access your most recent case files?’

Judy’s heart stumbled over itself. She had assumed that if Nate knew her identity, it was because he’d made a guess based on her appearance or speech patterns. But he didn’t just have an idea; he knew. He had accessed her profile. He probably knew as much about the case as she did, and somehow he had managed to get this information without giving off the slightest clue. It must have been during their lunch the previous Friday. But she hadn’t...

The tablet hadn’t been connected to anything! It didn’t make any sense! Commissioner Spottson himself had said it was safe to carry around so long as she kept it on airplane mode!

*I don’t believe in genius as a concept, but I’ve heard it used about me plenty of times,* Nate had said, and Judy had brushed it off as a poor attempt at humility. But maybe Nate was exactly as smart as he gave himself credit for, or maybe the Commissioner had been wrong, but either way, what was done, was done. “So is the Chief pulling us, then?”

“...No,” Rivers replied with a growl. “This case is above his head. Sam Dogwood got involved. Hopps, I don’t know what you did to piss off a senator, but I suggest you go after Snow and get the fuck out. We don’t have enough to charge him with murder, but there’s only one reason he’d sneak in and look at the case.”

“Two reasons,” she corrected quietly. She’d heard real pain in his voice. “He really was in love with Sarah. It’s almost certain that he killed her, especially in light of recent events — and this text thread he sent when he’d gotten plastered, as he said later — but I can see someone as smart as him losing it due to grief. I’ll get him. I already have a plan. I just need your help, Rivers.”

“What do you need me for? You’ve got Hirsch.”

“Hirsch can’t fit into Snow’s house, and Nick can’t make an arrest, and I’ll need backup,” she explained. She bared her teeth in impotent anger. “We can’t plan this on the books, if Snow has access to everything. I’ll write it down, and you’ll have to verbally deliver it to relevant parties. But I think we can wrap this up by next week, if everything goes according to plan.”

In line with her usual cynicism, Rivers shrugged and answered, “It likely won’t, but I guess here’s hoping.”

Judy pulled out the “planner” that she usually carried around as a prop for Luna Evergreen and bent over the desk to begin writing down what she and Nick had come up with on a fresh sheet of paper. The little carrot top on the end of her pen bobbed with the movement, and she didn’t care that it made her look juvenile; Nick had given it to her, so it was special. Besides, Rivers dyed her tail, so she had no room to talk.

“Hopps,” Rivers said quietly, making Judy pause.

“Yes?”

She was surprised to see a genuine smile on the wolf’s muzzle. “After you bring down this murdering fuckstick, let’s get a drink.”

One week after her scene with Linnea, Judy was sitting in a van three streets away from Nathaniel Snow’s house in Happytown, and she wasn’t panicking. She wasn’t. She was just...maybe a little worried. The plan had seemed great on paper, but now that it was real, she could only think of all the ways it was definitely going to go wrong.
“This is a stupid plan,” she said, and if there was a note of panic in her voice, well, it was normal for mammals to misread stuff like that.

“Yeah, that’s what I said, but it’s better than my plan, which was run away to Bunnyburrow,” Nick put in unhelpfully.

“I can’t...I can’t lie to him!”

“That’s true.” He took her paw and knelt down on the floor of the van, bringing them eye-to-eye. “You are good at...an incredible amount of things. Too many things. But you’re a shitty liar, Carrots, so you can’t lie to him. If he is what we think he is, then he’ll know, and we can’t take the chance on hopes that he isn’t. The good news is that real cons, the successful ones, aren’t based on lies. They’re based on truth. Emotion. Desire. Those, you have in abundance.” He put his paws on her cheeks, eyes bright, and pressed their foreheads together. Judy’s paws came up to rest on his wrists and she ignored the twisting in her gut to listen to him. In this, he was the expert. “You’re going to have to tell the truth. Lay it all out there. Bare your soul to him. Don’t flinch.”

She felt tears forming in her eyes and tried to blink them back, but she couldn’t help it, not now. “Nick, I’m scared.”

“Me too. God, I wish it were different. But I have faith in you, and so does the ZPD. You’re going to do this, and you’re going to be magnificent. Okay? Just remember to be honest.”

“I will.” She pulled Nick by his tie and kissed him, heedless of the awkwardness. She rubbed her chin across the bridge of his muzzle, released him, and smoothed his shirt. He thought she was strong. He had faith in her. That was enough to get her through this. “I’ll be so genuine your mother will applaud me from beyond the grave.”

He sat back on his heels with a soft grin. “That’s my girl.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ve got this,” she breathed, wiping her eyes. It was time to go.

_Breathe._

_Breathe._

_Baby steps._

_Breathe._

By the time she reached the corner of Maple Street and Orange Avenue, Judy was Luna Evergreen, tight little suit skirt and green silk blouse with pearl buttons clinging to her fur. Judy Hopps was fearless, and Luna Evergreen had nothing to fear. She was going to crack this case. She was going to crack Nathaniel Snow like an egg. It would be so great to hear him squawk like the little chicken he was. Her ears perked up and her shoulders squared. Who was Snow, anyway? He was smart, sure. And he was definitely an abuser, most likely a killer. But she had a few tricks up her sleeve that even his fancy-schmancy signal jammer wouldn’t stop.

She slipped her paw into her purse, pressing the body of the carrot toy between her fingers. Nick’s special lucky charm. She could do this. Smiling brightly, she knocked on Nate’s door and waited in the bright afternoon for him to open it.

“Luna,” he greeted, extending a paw. He was obviously freshly groomed, with gleaming black claws and a sleek, brushed coat below his usual button-up. “I’m glad you decided to come after all. I know you were undecided.”
“Ollie didn’t want me to come at first,” she admitted. *Stick to the truth.* “He saw things my way eventually.”

“At the end of a belt, I imagine.”

She smiled coyly and didn’t reply. That, Ruth had hammered into Judy’s head before her death. *Don’t agree or disagree, my girl, just give them your best mysterious smile and let them draw their own conclusions.* “He’s going to be unavailable for a while at any rate.”

“I’ve got a space cleared for us in the living room,” he continued smoothly, shutting and locking the door behind her. This was it. She had only a little while before things potentially went sideways and the ZPD walked away with less than they’d started with. “Do you want a drink? Water, juice? I have a strict no-alcohol policy for scenes, but otherwise I’m stocked.”

“I’d like some water, if you don’t mind,” she said, not because she wanted water, but because she wanted to see the setup of his kitchen. He’d mentioned that he could see the front door from a monitor in there; where would she need to stand to make sure he didn’t look at it?

She followed him through the living room, which was an open space with a couch on one side and a half-bar on the other. The kitchen was spacious — it was a kitchen that Nick would like — and there was, indeed, a monitor on the counter near the fridge. Unfortunately, its placement meant that Judy would need to be standing directly opposite of the kitchen, which meant limited access to the front door. The back door, she could get to, but without knowing what his backyard looked like, she only know what Zooble Earth told her, which was that the fences were inordinately high and most of the backyard was taken up by something that looked like a shed. It had been searched by the initial investigators, or so the notes on the server said, but Judy didn’t think she could trust anything that hadn’t been said to her directly by mammals she knew she could trust. But that could be dealt with later. Nate needed to be dealt with *now*. She didn’t want to provoke him — not unless she had to — so she smiled and accepted a glass of water. “Thanks, Nate. I love your place. It’s cozy.”

“I’ve put effort into it,” he acknowledged. “Come on, let’s go sit down and talk for a minute. Make sure we’re on the same page.”

She nodded and followed him to his off-beige couch. It was so light it reminded her of his fur, but he didn’t quite match when he sat down…

…or rather, *kneled* down, just to the left of the place she'd she'd decided to sit. So that was how it was going to be. She hated that she still wasn't sure whether he was seriously looking for some catharsis or he was deliberately leading the bunny cop into a trap. Maybe both. He was screwed up in ways that she wasn't sure she would ever understand. His earliest memories would have been of being in the system, waiting while mammals who wanted him kept getting denied. He talked a good game about his unique opportunities, but reading between the lines, she knew he'd been nearly as affected as Nick by fox prejudice, having been born during the mange crisis that had been (wrongly or rightly, nobody was sure) attributed to foxes. His first relationship had been coercive, abusive, eventually horribly violent, bad enough to leave him with nerve damage. His last relationship had ended violently, too, either because Sarah had attacked him and he'd retaliated or because she'd been killed before she got the chance. It hurt to think about everything he had gone through, and it hurt even more to know that it all *didn’t matter*. His past did not justify his actions. He was not due leniency just because he’d had it rough. He was 38, not 13; he'd been alive long enough for his bad behaviors to be adult choices with adult consequences.

She wished she could go back in time and rescue him from Patrice. She wished she had never taken this case. Nick had called it weeks ago: no matter what, this case was going to break her heart.
The show, however, was not over yet, so Judy did not say what she was thinking. Instead, she put a blunt edge in her voice and said, “Tell me what you want, Nate.”

“I want to stop feeling like garbage,” he said steadily, locking eyes with her, and she didn’t look away only because she had better self-control than that. It was a powerful urge, though. “I want you to take me to task for what I’ve done.”

“And...what have you done,” she asked, refusing to change her tone to something softer or more understanding. She was acting in her role as a domme, here, and more importantly, in her role as Luna. Luna had no reason to suspect Nate of anything except being sad and lonely and a bit too controlling. She leaned forward and said, expressionless and dispassionate, “Convince me.”

“I think you already know what I’ve done, Mistress,” he replied, and when he leaned forward into her still-petting paw to put pressure on his own cheek, they shared air. It felt intimate and awful and it was only Ruth’s voice whispering in her ear, calling her my girl, telling her that the best outcomes occasionally required a personal sacrifice, that kept her still. “You’re smart. Resourceful. Observant.”

“You’ve hurt mammals,” she returned, digging in her nails somewhat. Not enough to hurt, but enough to keep him from leaning forward further. It felt obscene. She was hardly touching him, but it was already too much. “I haven’t said anything, because I wanted to get close to you. I like you, Nathaniel Snow. But any thinking mammal knows that you’ve caused harm.”

“Exactly,” he breathed.

“So?”

He blinked, obviously not having expected that response. “So?”

“I know lots of harmful mammals, Nate, some of whom would kill to be on your end of my tawse. What makes you so special? Why should I spend effort on you? What makes you worthy?”

His eyes narrowed. Was she getting to him yet? “I know who you really are, Luna Evergreen. And I know that you want desperately to be the bunny you pretend to be.”

Forcing her voice into the pseudo-purr she’d used on Linnea at the party, she said, “Please, do tell me all about myself.”

He placed his paw on her knee — a subtle act of submission, or a move a creep might pull? It was hard to tell whether he was acting like a canid or not, considering how he’d developed disdain for his own species — and observed, “When I met you, you were miserable. I mistakenly attributed it to your relationship with your fox, because the signs were all there: the injuries, the bratting, the way you look at him like he hung the moon and stars. But the more I got to know you, the happier you became. How long have you been away from your former life now? Two months, give or take? You don’t hate yourself anymore. It’s in the way you move. You used to hold onto his leash like a lifeline. Now you hold onto it like he’s yours.”

She didn’t think he was talking about her grip. And he wasn’t wrong, either. Whether he was right, though, remained to be seen. It was time to feed his ego. “Go on.”

“You care about everyone you meet. Even me. And it’s funny, because you’re a sadist, but it kills you to see others in pain that they didn’t ask for.”

“I’m not a sadist—”

“Don’t be offended, it’s a nonissue. That feeling of bliss that you couldn’t hold back during your
scene with Star? The way you get off — at least emotionally, perhaps sexually as well — on the pain you inflict on your submissive partner? It’s not a shameful thing. It gives you that last bit of edge that I never had with anyone until Sarah. You love it, and so, you’re careful. I never knew how to love anything — until I was so in love with Sarah that I could drown in her and die happy. You get off on the domination. I just couldn’t get off unless I knew my partner couldn’t hurt me.”

She cocked her head to the side and drew back her paw to trace her lip, something copied directly from Ruth. She’d always hated feeling like an insect under a microscope, so she channeled that. Either he would dislike being uncomfortable, or he would enjoy it, but either way he would feel something. The crux of a good con was emotion. So was the essence of D/s. A good scene was about psychological, not physical, impact.

Trust. Bravery. Integrity.

Honesty.

“You’re perceptive,” she said, “but it doesn’t matter. We’re both stuck. You are what you are — and for better or for worse, I am what I am.”

Her institution was corrupt. Someone in the ZPD had tried to use her as a wrecking ball without care for the aftermath. She was an honest cop who might have to blow the whistle. She was a bunny domme with a fox sub undercover on a bogus case.

But she was someone worth respecting. She was someone worth loving. She was good, and she’d never forget it again.

He shifted on his knees and pricked his claws into her skirt. “You aren’t anything except what you want to be. You know you could do anything, right? You don’t have to do what you do for a living. You don’t have to kill your soul again. I could help you get out, if you needed it.”

She almost laughed at the absurdity. Here was an abusive jerk, kneeling at her feet, giving her practically the same spiel she’d heard in bad romantic dramas made before the Reforms. Some part of her wondered if he really wanted to save her from whatever terrible situation he thought she was in, or if he was playing up the drama for other purposes. She reached out once again to pet his muzzle — he closed his eyes and leaned into her touch — and thought about John Wilde, the prize fighter who made his living selling books and teaching sewing classes.

Had Ruth known how dangerous he was when she’d made the choice to tell the truth and stop conning him? Had she thought about the potential consequences of being honest with someone who might either love her or kill her?

“I do think about quitting,” she told him, moving her thumb back and forth below his eye. It went wide at her honest admission, and she added, “There’s so much infighting and backstabbing, it’s ridiculous. And even the mammals who respect me mostly do so because I proved my worth as an investigator, not because I’m a fellow mammal who deserves respect. But, Nate...if you really knew me, you’d know why what you’re saying is impossible.”

“I’m not stupid, you know. I don’t think you and your fox are going to come and live here with me and play house.” He bared his teeth. “Don’t misunderstand me, freedom isn’t free. I’m sure you know what I want in return for giving you a chance to be this version of you forever.”

She hated this double-speak, the code she could only hope she understood. Was he offering to make new identities for Judy and Nick? She was certain that he didn’t know she knew he had accessed the server, because Rivers had showed good judgment and not flagged it. As far as he was aware, she
was unaware, and that gave him — in his mind — a significant edge. But neither of them had admitted to anything yet. He hadn’t admitted to murder. She hadn’t admitted to being a cop. He hadn’t even used her real name.

She wanted to slap him. She was annoyed that part of him would probably enjoy it.

A car alarm went off and she jumped as she was drawn out of the moment. She was already on her feet clutching her chest when the alarm went silent, and Nate looked annoyed. “I want Richard to drive that car off a cliff.”

She laughed, because it was funny, if you were into that kind of humor, and it gave her the courage to say, “Why don’t we talk more about this after our scene? That’s what I came over for, not a heart-to-heart. I brought some odds and ends; you can look through my bag if you want.”

An offering. All he would find was a tawse, some rope, a paddle, her work planner and pen, some blunt-tip shears, and a comb for her fur. She did not have her phone or a tablet for recordings. It was obvious through her tight clothing that she wasn’t wearing a wire. Not that it would have mattered anyway, as he had a jammer. If he would not agree to be at her mercy, then she would probably be at his.

He took her bag and dumped it out on the couch, looking over each item carefully while she drifted toward the guest room door. She heard him coming behind her, but she pretended to jump when he grabbed her wrist and said, “That’s the old den where I kept my tools. I don’t go in there anymore, not after…”

She turned, reached out, and put her right paw atop his. “Where you killed Sarah.”

She stiffened in anticipation of the blow as he slammed her against the wall, the paw he’d been holding crushed painfully above her head, his other paw curled against her throat, claws pressing into the soft tissue above her carotid and jugular. A wrong move would get her neck punctured. It probably wouldn’t be lethal, but it would slow her, and how long would she have before he slashed her for real or worse? Even her breathing was shaky; she was at a severe disadvantage. None of her training had prepared her for claws at her throat and no place to run. She wouldn’t show him fear, though. She wouldn’t. He didn’t deserve that from her.

Nate leaned forward, growling in her face, the downward angle of his muzzle and the pooling of shadows under his muzzle making him seem even taller than he already was. His breath smelled of mint and his eyes were so narrow, like she’d never seen them. With a surprising note of actual distress, he said, “Every time. Every time I think I’ve found someone who might want to keep me.”

“Let me go, Nate, I didn’t say I held it against you,” she suggested, knowing it wouldn’t do any good but trying it out anyway.

“Don’t play games with me, Detective,” he said smoothly. His face was at odds with his voice though. Can Nathaniel Snow come out to play? “Remember what I said when we met? I look at patterns for a living. I’ll admit, it took me far too long to put the pieces together, but at this point, let’s not pretend you’re anything but the oh so upright Judy Hopps.”

“Fine, let’s establish this. It’s true,” she replied, meeting his gaze. She was terrified, but the best way to lie to someone was to look them in the eye. They always expected shifty, darting eyes, not a ploy for dominance. “I am Judy Hopps.”

“At least you’re not denying it.”
“What’s the point? You’re not going to let me go either way. I’m being honest when I say I don’t want to arrest you, but it looks like you’ve made up your mind.”

He laughed lightly, tapping his claws against her laryngeal prominence. Bunnies may have lacked a gag reflex, but he could still choke her by pushing on that lump of cartilage. “You’re not afraid of the big bad fox?”

She returned his laugh, a sound much shorter than his due to the sharp edges at her neck. It served to catch his attention, at any rate, which was good. “You know they train us to die. At the ZPA. There’s a whole section on it. They don’t call it that, because...bad publicity, I think. But that’s what it is. A whole six weeks on how to look death in the face when there’s no way out. I can’t fight you, because you have an advantage I can’t counter. I can’t de-escalate, because you’ve made up your mind. I’m alone with you, unable to call for backup, and I’m not wearing a wire, not that it’d do me any good in here. There’s no way out, and you’re too clever to make the same mistakes you made with Sarah; they’re not going to find my body, or evidence that I even made it here. So even if I ask you — beg you — for the chance you offered...”

He blinked heavily. She felt the pressure lessen as his face closed off, but the ferocity and the pressure returned before she could move. “It was a stupid offer. You can’t leave your life behind, I know that. It’s my fantasy, not yours.”

The truth hurt, but she told it anyway. “It is my fantasy. I’m tired of being spat on, Nate. I’m tired of being the station joke. I’m tired of the speciesism and the sizeism and having to defend my existence to mammals who ought to know by now that I’m every bit as capable as they are. You think I don’t want to run away? You were right when you said these past two months have given me more freedom than I’ve had in years.”

“You ruined it,” he told her. “You had to go and ruin it.”

“What did I ruin?”

“You said her name.”

She tried to nod against his claws, but he dug them in further, so she stopped all movement. “I want to know what happened that night. Tell me how it went down.”

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. “You think I’m that stupid?”

“No, I think you’re that smart.”

“Explain yourself.”

She didn’t have to fight. She just had to stall long enough for her team to come in, dart guns at the ready. She could do this. Nick had prepped her for this. She was Judy Hopps, and she was magnificent.

“Lying is a skill anyone can cultivate. That’s what the instructors teach you from the beginning. The ZPA teaches you what to look for, what to say to provoke the suspect. I’ve seen Quinn Fangmeyer at work. They are an ex-military interrogator. Of course, they can’t use physical force, but they don’t need to. Everybody breaks, largely because there’s a lie involved. But the best cons are actually careful tellings of the truth.” She gave him a look that was deliberately bad at conveying sympathy. “That said, I know that she attacked you. It was self-defense, Nate. I know you haven’t even been honest with yourself about what happened, and you’ve been in this...self-destructive spiral ever since. If you work it out with me now, you can tell the truth in the interrogation room and walk out a
free fox.”

His face screwed up. She couldn’t tell if he was angry or confused. Perhaps both. His paw squeezed around her wrist and without her own permission, she cried out in pain. He snarled again, “What do you get out of this?”

The best lies were true.

The best lies were true.

She wished Ruth were still alive.

“You think it’s an accident I’m the only bunny cop, even after all this time?” She smiled at him, sweetly, and winked. She was Judy Hopps, and she wasn’t afraid of this pathetic little worm. “I was willing to be ruthless in the academy. I used my cohort as literal stepping stones to win a race over an obstacle I was unable to overcome myself. I cheated and found loopholes wherever I could. I’ve done that my whole life, sometimes to the point of unforgivable cruelty.” (Gideon Grey. Emma Loplin. Whoever would have won her scholarship had the MII not gone into effect far ahead of schedule.) “I have my own skeletons in several closets, ranging from Bunnyburrow to Happytown. Things I can never take back.” (Years of self-harm kept secret even from herself. Passive-aggressive expressions of anger at her family so potent she still hadn’t been able to work through it all. Gideon Grey, again.) “I have lied to and mistreated the most important mammal in my life so thoroughly that the wounds might not ever heal.” (She was the most important mammal in her life. She loved him to the ends of the earth, but Nick came second.) “I’ve done things so disturbing the ZPD would lock me up if they knew.” (If Nick hadn’t been an enthusiastically consenting partner, their dynamic would be horrific. And she’d sucked him off in a public tea room, which was technically a crime she just hadn’t gotten caught for.)

Nate’s eyes were narrow, and one side of his mouth was smiling. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Did it matter? At least he wasn’t killing her. “So?”

She bit her lip, thinking of spanking Nick with a tawse, thinking of how beautiful he was when he was in subspace, thinking of the stash of hypodermics waiting for them to try when this was all over. Thinking of his wonderful loving growl as he licked into her and encouraged her to continue. Her toes curled and she dug her nails into her free paw, knowing Nate would pick up on the mild scent of budding arousal. “So I’m not incapable of planting evidence. I knew you were guilty before I met you. Why, exactly, do you think I went undercover, if I was willing and able to bring you in immediately?”

“I…” Although he drew back slightly, he increased pressure on her throat. She thought of Nick and smiled at his somewhat confused response. “That is a question.”

“As cliché was this is going to sound, you and I aren’t so different. Maybe I want to help you, Nate. This world is full of muck and grime and hatred and idiots, so many idiots.” (Dawn Bellwether. Lloyd Alma. Lila Switchfoot.) “But then along comes someone like you and me. Brilliant. Made hard by circumstance. Willing to do what needs to be done to protect our interests because nobody else gives a damn. Maybe I see myself in you. If I’m going to die anyway, the least I can do is help you get justice for what happened. What she did to you.”

“Birdshit.”

“Or not,” she said casually, thinking of Nick again, his sly smiles, his utter, unshakeable faith in her. She wasn’t going to die here. “It’s no fur off my tail either way, obviously. Don’t blame me if you crash and burn in front of the Captain, though.”
Tick. Tick. Tick. Nate’s type liked to pontificate. They liked to hear themselves talk. They also didn’t like to get caught. But Nate was different, in that he had very real grief, very real — and somewhat justified — anger toward Sarah that he did need to resolve. He needed to face what had happened, and he was smart enough to know that. She could see him considering her, head cocked, eyes focused. She raised an eyebrow, defiant, perhaps a little cheeky. That was what Morticia Padams would do. It was what Jack Savage would do.

“She tied me up,” he said finally. Yes. Judy could have jumped for joy, if only Nate weren’t there. Instead, she kept her eyebrow up in challenge. “Drugged me and tied me up, left me there for hours, like Patrice — I’d told her, and she did that — it was the best way to hurt me and she knew it. I was going to propose to her. She was my fucking goddess, my muse. She ranted and raved about trust and abuse and whoever the fuck her cool new boyfriend Danny was, and betrayal, as though I hadn’t bared my entire fucking soul to her, and she took my own tools and beat me with them. I would have let her if she’d asked! I wanted her to! And because she was fucking crazy, I couldn’t even leave the house for two weeks after that, looking and feeling like I did. But that meant a chance to take my time with her. Remember what I said, Detective? A mammal like that deserves to be tortured, and then to die. It was self-defense. Half the images in my head feel like fever dreams. I can’t tell what I did and what I only wish I’d done.”

“Good for you,” she enthused, pushing aside her nausea like she’d pushed aside her self-loathing. Nick. Nick was exciting. He made her feel warm and alive and he never failed to turn her on with his gentle touch and sharp edges and obvious desire for her. “That’s a fitting punishment, isn’t it? Death to the abuser.”

(By his own logic, Nathaniel Snow deserved to die. She didn’t want to admit it, but in a way, so had Sarah.)

“...You really do get it, don’t you? You get what it’s like to be abused and maltreated and establish yourself, establish dominance, in spite of it all. You understand.”

“Ready,” came Wolfard’s shout from just outside the door, thankfully. He’d given her exactly six minutes from the car alarm until breach, as they’d planned.

“You little bitch,” Nate growled, and necessarily backed away from her as Wolfard and Rivers came barreling through the door. It was a tight squeeze for Wolfard, but inside they could stand tall, towering over Nate and Judy like giants, dart guns pointing at him.

He put his paws up and affected a genial smile. “No need to break down the door. I would have answered if you’d knocked, Officers.”

“Right.” Rivers nodded and jerked her head toward Judy. “Hopps, yalright?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, allowing herself to breathe and steady herself. That could have gone very, very wrong. No. She needed to compartmentalize. She could freak out later. “Just finishing up. I got a confession.”

Snow laughed loudly. “A confession? Detective, what exactly did I confess to? Having an attraction to you? Hardly a crime. And you are quite attractive.”

“The torture and murder of Sarah Browncoat,” Judy corrected, putting on her smuggest tone of voice and walking over to his couch, holding up the carrot-topped pen. “But thanks, I’m super flattered.”

He clicked his tongue, but kept his eyes on Wolfard and Rivers, who had not lowered their weapons. While Judy saved the recording and took her former position against the wall, he countered, “There
is no confession. How many times do I have to say it? I didn’t kill my Sarah.”

Judy rewound the recording about two minutes or so and pressed play. “...*my entire fucking soul to her, and she took my own tools and beat me with them. I would have let her if she’d asked! I wanted her to! And because she was fucking crazy, I couldn’t even leave the house for two weeks after that, looking and feeling like I did. But that meant a chance to take my time with her. Remember what I said, Detective? A mammal like that deserves to be tortured, and then to die. It was self-defense. Half the images in my head feel like fever dreams. I can’t tell what I did and what I only wish I’d done.”

At this, Nate did look over at her, aghast. She held up the pen and stopped the playback. The carrot-shaped amplifying topper, which made the recorder pen look like a novelty toy, had made his words almost crystal-clear, even from behind. “Low tech. No internet connection, no Bluetooth, no obnoxious recording sounds.” She thought of Nick again. What would he say here? She had to make it count. “It’s called a *hustle*, Sweetheart.”

“Nathaniel Snow, you are under arrest for the murder of Sarah Browncoat,” said Wolfard, gesturing for Rivers to put the cuffs on him. “You have the right to remain silent; anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one-”

“You’ll go down with me, Hopps,” Nate hissed as Rivers jerked his paws behind his back. “You’re as good as gone.”

“*do you understand the rights I’ve just read to you?*”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh,” Judy exclaimed, pretending to finally get Nate’s meaning. “You mean because I confessed to being a monster? To doing things no mammal should do? Skeletons in the closet, all of that?”

Wolfard snorted. “You little cheat, you stole that from Fangmeyer.”

“You don’t mess with the classics,” she retorted. She leaned against the wall, hoping nobody noticed that her knees were shaking. “Do you think you could send Nick in here? I, uh...he has my camera.”

“We can’t-”

“We will,” Rivers said, glaring daggers at Wolfard. “He’s still on our payroll, yeah.”

“Thanks, Rivers.”

“Hey, ya made the job easy. Good goin, Hopps.”

She felt dizzy. She smiled and smiled, fraying, watching the three mammals walk outside. When she was sure they couldn’t see her anymore, she dropped to the ground, burying her head in her thighs, shaking. It was over. Nathaniel Snow had been caught. Sarah Browncoat could be put to rest. It was over. It was over. It was over.

“Hey,” Nick said, dropping to his knees beside her. He drew her into a hug, disregarding her body’s weak attempts to fight him off. After years of dealing with her, he knew what she needed. *She* knew what she needed. She didn’t need to fight him. He was safe. Nick was safe. She was safe. Nick was here, and he was hers, and he was safe. He stroked the fur between her ears gently. “Hey. You’re okay. I told you that you could do it.”
“I almost died,” she said through big, fat tears that seemed to be connected to the gnawing in her chest. “Nick I almost died, he almost killed me, I should be dead right now, I would be if it weren’t for you whispering in my ear. I almost died. I almost died. I…”

“You’re okay,” he repeated, kissing her head. His arms tightened around her. “You survived. You’re alive, you’re safe, it’s okay.”

She shook in his arms and listened to the echoes, you’re alive, you’re safe, it’s okay.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe this pushes the boundaries of believability, but Nate was never meant to be a sociopath. He was a self-destructive victim of abuse who continued the cycle and thought he wasn't like "them" because he was incredibly smart and relatively privileged.

To give some perspective on this story, this scene with Nate was one of the first I wrote, although I did make a few edits as the story solidified. The story was always going to end up here. We're allowed to feel sorry for abuse victims and condemn their actions at the same time. Past trauma does not excuse current misdeeds. Stay tuned for case wrap-up and a look at the function of friendship.
Amends

Chapter Summary

The zoicide team wraps up the case, more or less. Judy Hopps makes some friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The station was busy, as usual, but Judy was fortunate enough to not have to wind her way through the crowd of mammals much larger than she and Nick were. Physical copies of the case files were spread out over Fangmeyer’s desk, and Judy could finally see the value of bureaucracy, as painfully tedious as it was. When everything was filed out in triplicate and filed in three different locations, tampering with a case got much more difficult.

They had to pull from each system, but a picture was coming together. Instead of trying to mess with all of the systems at once, which would have been suspicious, the mammal tampering with the case had instead erased things off the server and taken a little from each system, relying on the heavy flow of zoicide traffic and the busyness of Precinct 1 to cover their activities, probably hoping to get it all removed eventually before anyone noticed. Thankfully, Melanie’s unknowing testimony had ensured that they knew there was something sketchy going on. It was only a matter of time before they found out who was behind it, and after that…

Well. Fangmeyer was a bit of a troll with a strange sense of humor, and Judy wasn’t ever sure what was a joke and what wasn’t, but their skill set was most definitely real. Everybody talked eventually, it was just a matter of when.

Whether Nate had gone through processing or not, Judy was trying hard not to care. Picking through case files was helping keep her mind off of it. He had been...not a friend, but the idea of a friend. Someone who could have been a friend, had he not been an abusive killer, and she didn’t want to think about it until she had to write her report. The illusion of loss already hurt. She didn’t want to exacerbate it.

“I’m not a cop or anything,” Nick said from her left. He was sitting on the desk next to her, leaning over papers that were almost too big for both of them, trying to put two ill-fitting pieces of the puzzle together. They would likely be working on this for weeks or even months. He tapped a claw on one of his own paw-written pages of notes. “But this looks weird to me. I’ve been looking over Snow’s victims again, just to be thorough now that we know some might have gone missing, and I just realized I know where I’ve heard the name Tailor before. Ten years ago, Senator Dogwood caused a mild scandal when he divorced Amanda Tailor — one of the first interspecies marriages, do you remember?”

“We learned about the Reforms in school, but I wasn’t really interested in marriage laws,” Judy admitted. “I already knew I didn’t want to get married. Who was divorcing whom meant nothing to me.”

“And I did a...eh, a fun little six-month vacation in the Crimson Isles ten years ago, so I had to recertify for detective work,” Fangmeyer said, and although Judy didn’t comment, she did once again question her Captain’s sense of humor. If that had even been a joke. She had read Fangmeyer’s
halfway-declassified records when she'd transferred to zoicide, but maybe they did think of sketchy
government assignments as vacations. Who really knew?

“Well, they might have divorced, but if I remember the headlines correctly, it ended up being
amicable because of some family stuff. I think it’s worth looking into possible family ties between
our illustrious representative and our first-known victim, Danielle Tailor—”

“I am so dumb,” Judy blurted, resting her forehead on her paw. Her ears fell down her back. She
wasn’t really supposed to say stuff like that — she’d made a rule for herself — but in this case it was
completely warranted. “Nick, Danielle Tailor.”

“I don’t follow.”

She alternated looking at Fangmeyer and Nick, hoping they wouldn’t judge her too harshly. “What if
the cool new boyfriend Danny wasn’t a boyfriend at all? What if it was a girlfriend — or just a
sinister little voice in her ear? What if it wasn’t Daniel, Danny with a y, but Danielle, Dani with an
i?”

“That the insistence on this case would make a lot more sense, and also serve to piss off the Chief
even more,” Fangmeyer stated flatly. “It would say a lot of very questionable things about the initial
murder, too.”

That was right, and it was an unpleasant thought. Had Nathaniel Snow’s first victim encouraged his
final victim to murder him?

They would have to question her, of course. But first...paperwork.

Even if it felt bad, it sort of felt right to come back to the beginning. She still looked like Luna
Evergreen, and interview room B wasn’t exactly familiar, but it felt like an ending. Closure probably
wouldn’t come for a long time yet, but that wasn’t important. What was important here was the truth.

To Judy’s eyes, under the harsh fluorescents that were only used to make suspects uncomfortable,
Danielle still looked a little scruffy — not scruffy, exactly, but worn. Tired. Her loose shirt was
pilling and her pants had seen better days, probably 15 years prior. Normally Judy wouldn't have
noticed these things. Growing up farmer usually meant clothing was about function, not fashion, and
thrice-mended hand-me-downs were a way of life. But knowing what she now knew about the fox
squirrel, her ragged clothing looked...like a statement, maybe even a deliberate one.

Well. No, her outfit didn’t look ragged. She did. Unless that was Judy’s anger talking — was it
justified to dislike someone’s appearance based on how much damage they had caused? Was that
even a thing? Maybe it was just that oft-unspoken wish for mean mammals to be as gross on the
outside as they were on the inside.

“Look,” said Danielle, completely ignoring Rivers and focusing on Judy, “I don’t expect you to
understand. It’s not like I told her to do anything.”

“I have an entire conversation thread that says otherwise,” she replied, holding up a paper copy of
pdf printouts of deleted emails between Sarah Brownpaw’s junk address and curlgirlsquirrel@zmail,
along with one email from Danielle’s legitimate address bring the Nate problem to Sarah’s attention.
The paper file was pointless — a prop, just for show — but it was a little entertaining to recreate a
scene from a low-budget crime show, and nothing else about this situation was very amusing. She
pointed at a random spot on the first page. “Look, you contacted her telling her that Nathaniel Snow
was cheating on her with you and several others. You spelled out his abusive tendencies, which in
another kinder universe would be a nice gesture, and you offered to help hide his body.”

“Okay, first? That’s not me. I’d never pick something so juvenile for my email address. It was probably one of his other victims; he has enough of them.” She gave Judy a flat stare. “Second? Even if it were, there’s nothing illegal about saying something in anger when you’ve both been hurt by the same douchebag. Third? Again, I didn’t tell her to do anything. If that were me, it still wouldn’t be my fault that she—”

“I know a great place to get rid of garbage,” Judy recited from memory, keeping eye contact with Danielle. “I’ll meet you at his house in 16 days at 11PM. Delete these emails and ditch your computer for your own safety.”

“I only emailed her the one time, to tell her he was bad for her. I lied to her about the cheating, sure. I just saw him buying a — a fucking engagement ring, and I knew whoever he’d charmed into his bed was only going to end up miserable,” Danielle protested.

Judy hummed a little and Rivers asked, “Right, well, why didn’t you mention that you knew who she was when Hopps interviewed you the first time?”

“I did. I even told her the date I emailed Miss Browncoat. It’s not my fault you sent a bunny to do a cop’s job,” said the squirrel rudely, gesturing at Judy. “Probably overwhelmed her with the BDSM thing.”

Judy blinked. Had she just...seriously tried to make Rivers think Judy had simply forgotten a piece of testimony because of emotional distress?

“I dunno, Hopps, did the BDSM overwhelm you when you were undercover,” Rivers asked idly, grinning at Danielle with all of her shiny teeth. Danielle immediately looked a lot less comfortable. Rivers and Judy both pretended not to notice as Rivers added, “I thought the reports were intense, but you were actually there...and the detail! Your mind’s a fuckin’ steel trap. It’s so hard to decide who to believe...a reliable cop I’ve worked with for years who has a history of bein’ accountable, or the stepdaughter of a politician who has a vested interest in not lookin’ guilty.”

“It would be difficult,” Judy prodded with a nod. “Bunnies are so dumb. We’ve all got one thing on our minds. I made it through the academy on sheer stupidity, it’s common knowledge. And I am just so overwhelmed by the idea of BDSM. That’s why it was a good idea to send me undercover when that’s not even my job.”

“Please,” Danielle scoffed. “As if someone like you could understand the kind of damage it does! Mammals think it’s all blindfolds and bathtubs — we just talked a couple of months ago, there’s no way you found a sponsor fast enough to do much. You probably just watched 50 Shades of Prey and thought it was romantic — nothing about it is even close to okay! That entire community is full of liars and abusers and I would be surprised if this were the first murder to come out of there. If you didn’t see it, that’s because you weren’t looking. Everyone in that lifestyle is trash.”

Judy thought about the mammals Linnea had played with who only thought of consent in a no means no kind of way. She thought about the deer Emilia had scrubbed from her client list for inappropriate behavior. She thought about Patrice and Nate and Melanie, about Michelle. Yeah, there were problems. But she was sure that the unicorn group from the munch had in-house problems too. No group would ever be problem-free, because every group was made up of mammals. A microcosm, like Nick had said.

“You’re not the first mammal to call me trash, and you won’t be the last,” Judy acknowledged with a smile. It wasn’t even a lie. She usually felt sorry for mammals who had to be hurtful just to make
themselves feel better, because it was such an easy behavior to leave behind, so it was only logical that the folks who lived their lives that way must have some kind of internal baggage. Self-hate that they could only deal with by smearing it on others.

Or they were just jerks. She supposed it depended on whether or not you had any faith in mammal nature. She was a little too old for blind faith by now, but she still liked to think the best of animals until they gave her a reason not to.

Danielle’s eyes narrowed. “You know what, I don’t know what you want from me. I already told you I never emailed her.”

“Except the once,” Judy corrected.

“Yeah. Just that one time.”

“So you’d be willing to say that under oath, then?” Judy exchanged a look with Rivers, who stayed silent. “Maybe sign an affidavit in lieu of testimony? I can get a notary down here within 15 minutes.”

“...want a lawyer,” Danielle said, shifting in her seat.

Rivers raised an eyebrow. “For what? I thought you hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“My uncle says-”

“Your uncle is under investigation for misappropriating resources and mammalpower for a risky undercover op that resulted in no arrests,” Judy said sharply. “None. Not even Sarah’s murderer. You clam up, and in the search for truth, maybe they’ll find a few more skeletons in his closet than they’re looking for. Who knows, with our complete lack of political vetting these days. If I were you, I’d think very hard about how much mud you want to drag his name through in your little revenge scheme.”

“But... no,” she said, looking stricken. “No, that’s not — he — he never…”

“I get it. Your mom was a loser,” Rivers began, leaning over the table that was slightly too small for her. Danielle drew back. “You hung around your aunt all the time. Practically part of the family. Never officially, but Sam Dogwood treated you like family anyway. Basically his daughter, even if you kept it private, right? Wasn’t your fault your aunt fell in love with someone else. Didn’t help pay for college, but he probably helped you get out of your abusive relationship. Made a fuss about it, threatened to help you sue Snow unless he paid you. Am I lyin?”

Danielle said nothing.

“So then,” Judy continued, picking up on Rivers’ train of thought, “when you mentioned that a friend of yours had been killed and the community you hate so much helped cover it up...what decent father wouldn’t do what he could to help his daughter seek justice? Only, that investigation was based on a misrepresentation of facts, wasn’t it?”

Not to mention, he had either paid at least two officers inside the ZPD to hide evidence, or inspired them to do it on their own. But that was for the other investigation that Judy, thankfully, would not be part of. As Wolfard often said, politics was best left to mammals who were already dead inside, which was why the Chief had to live forever: so none of them had to do it.

“It doesn’t matter, Hopps,” Rivers said with an exaggerated shrug, leaning back again. “We got nothin. Sure, we could probably get her for inciting violence and maybe conspiracy to commit
murder, but the evidence is thin, and a good lawyer’ll get her a plea deal she can live with. This is a
dead end. We’re better off going after Dogwood. I can’t wait to see what dirt he’s been hiding.
Maybe he’s the one who killed Sarah Browncoat.”

“But Nathaniel killed her,” Danielle said angrily, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. “I waited
for hours — what kind of cops are you that you can’t even catch a killer you know is guilty?”

“She waited for hours,” Judy commented at Rivers. Of Danielle, she asked, “Waited for what,
exactly?”

“I’m not saying anything else without an attorney present,” Danielle replied, and that was all they’d
get out of her until some hotshot raccoon showed up and chased them out.

Later, in the locker room, Judy said, “Thanks for having my back. When she was saying things
about — well, when she called me dumb.”

Rivers, who’d just pulled on a clean shirt and was sitting on the bench unwinding her heel wraps,
winced. “Least I could do, after the way I treated you.”

It probably was. Rivers hadn’t said anything to Judy directly, but she’d made that horrible crass
comment about Judy sleeping her way through the academy, and she’d been snide about Judy's
species within hearing distance, and she'd been so hot and cold for the past year or so, making social
offers that were suspiciously revoked, being furtive…

“Do, uh...do you hate me, Rivers?”

“I hated you when you first got here,” the wolf replied, leaning back to lie down on the bench and
looking pretty thrashed. Judy felt the same; she shifted uncomfortably against the lockers that were
too big for her, but did not sit. Her height was already a disadvantage. Rivers didn’t seem to notice.
“Police training is hard. No matter what province, we spend at least a year — usually two, for
detectives like us — going through brutal physical training and cramming so much law, history,
tactical shit...real heavy academics into our heads, after most of us have spent four years in fuckin’
college. I almost scrubbed out. When we got a look at the list of new recruits...I couldn’t imagine a
bunny could get the kind of review you did. And I was bitter that you had succeeded so well when I
nearly failed.”

She frowned. The treatment had been rude, but it didn’t call for doubting her own abilities. “Rivers,
you're a good cop-”

“I know. And I was...it's not a competition, but I felt like a cute little bunny gettin’ through just
invalidated what I worked for, but that was my shit. And I'm not good at apologies, so I kept. Ah.
You probably don’t know how hard it is to talk to you anyway. You're too goddamn cheerful, but
you have a fox who'd probably eat his own eyes if you told him to — a fox, whose species is famous
for bein’ insular — and on a given day you might help an old man carry groceries up the stairs or
find 14 missing mammals in two days, or apologize for knockin’ out a grizzly bear who thought it'd
be fun to screw with you in the ring. You solved a case before you were even on the force. You
laugh when someone's mean to you and get embarrassed if they're nice, but you also hate it when
someone disrespects you. I spent so long thinkin' you were intimidating to talk to because I didn't
know how to navigate a conversation, but the Partridge case last year kinda cleared it up.”

“How so,” Judy asked faintly. There was a lot to unpack there. She wasn't sure she was up for it yet.

Rivers shrugged. “I stopped thinkin’ of you as the bunny cop. Stopped thinkin’ of you as the
exception to a rule somebody else set, yeah? You're still a bunny and I'm still a wolf. But I realized, I
got pissed off when this idiot sheep held me up as her token wolf friend so she wouldn't look speciesist. And I was doin’ the same fuckin’ thing to you. It's just...hard to apologize when I don't even know if you're upset.”

“I was very carefully not upset,” she admitted, and her nose was twitching, but that was fine. She couldn’t exactly stop it from doing its thing. “It's hard to be upset when it keeps coming in from more than one mammal. I got to a place where I started to think maybe all the things you said — and it wasn’t just you, I’m not blaming you — they were maybe true. Maybe I was stupid. Maybe I was volatile. Maybe the fact that I don't smile all the time...”

“Nah, we're the dicks in this situation.” Rivers rolled her eyes, one lip curled. “Nobody felt like we were punching down because nothin’ ever got to you. This job can get pretty toxic, Hopps. It feels so good to be part of the pack that you stop bein’ concerned about the mammals who aren’t. I, personally, should have known better. That was why I had to transfer to a completely new province, I blew the whistle on some shit up there. I shoulda been better.”

It wasn’t an apology, but Judy didn’t really expect one. Rivers had explained the problem exactly: it was the mini-culture at the ZPD, a sort of pack mentality. And Chief Bogo led them, and he’d started out hating her, and he cared so little about anything not directly involved with crime that he’d never bothered to address his own mistakes, let alone give some kind of signal that Judy was one of the pack. With an example like that, why would anyone question the ethics of badmouthing the token bunny, the station joke? Who would waste that kind of processing power on someone who was so relentlessly optimistic it bordered on creepy? It wasn’t Judy’s fault that in trying to be a team player and not exacerbate in-house tensions she’d necessarily been left open, and she was done taking on problems that weren’t hers. She wouldn’t take responsibility for this; sure, she could have “fought back,” whatever that would have looked like, but she shouldn’t have needed to fight anything at all. She should have been afforded the same respect any other officer got automatically, but the only ones who actually knew what she was capable of were the ones who worked directly with her, so it had been “okay” to behave that way. To most mammals, she hadn’t earned her shield, she’d simply been affirmative actioned to the top.

It hurt to finally accept that she hadn’t just been imagining it, because that made it real. Still, it didn’t mean she had to hold a grudge against someone who wanted to change.

“It means a lot to me that you’re telling me this,” she said. Her foot thumped a few times with nervous energy, and she forced it to still. “If you still want to get that drink...”

“Yeah, I do.” Rivers sat up again and watched Judy for a moment, looking her over, and then nodded. “This whole case was ridiculous, and I’m glad you got out okay. This could have blown up on us if you and your fox hadn’t gotten us a fuckton of testimony.”

“His name is Nick,” she reminded.

“Yeah, but he’s still yours, isn’t he? Or are you just that good of an actress? If so, you’re wasted on zoicide.”

She followed Ruth’s advice again and just let her smile hang for a moment before she changed the subject. “We both have a day off next week. Let’s plan to meet up the night before and see how much we can drink before they kick us out.”

Rivers laughed. “You sure know how to party.”

Judy thought of talking Nick into orgasm in those tight pants of his and beamed, but said nothing.
She hadn’t been back at ZU in a while, but it was a nice neutral place to meet. It wasn’t that Judy thought Linnea would get angry, but she wanted the lynx to have an easy escape that would look natural, so they were sitting across from each other in a dining area next to the food court. Judy had a cup of pickled carrots in front of her that she knew she wouldn’t be able to stomach, which was a shame, because she hadn’t had pickled carrots in *ages*.

“I solved a murder three days ago,” she said, and stopped herself short. Linnea only looked curious, but Judy needed to act with more integrity than that. “I’m sorry, that’s not a good place to start. I don’t want you to think...okay. I’ve been lying to you, and now I need to own up to it.”

Linnea raised an eyebrow. “What lie could you have told me that would be big enough to make you nervous to talk to me? Also, *murder*?”

She laughed lightly, trying not to show just how nervous she was. She just hoped Linnea didn’t feel betrayed here. “Uh, I’m...I went undercover to investigate a zoicide in the community. I’m not Luna Evergreen; that’s just my cover story. I’m actually Judy Hopps, the bunny cop you heard about.”

“Oh.” Linnea blinked a few times. “Okay, paradigm shift, hang on.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t.” Judy watched Linnea shake for a moment, and then she realized that the lynx wasn’t shaking out of anger, she was trying not to laugh. Nonplussed, she waited it out until Linnea could say — through little quiet giggles — “You actually think that’s something to apologize for?”

“I mean, you trusted me for our scene,” she said helplessly, wondering if she’d misjudged her ability to stay undercover. Had Linnea guessed? Why wasn’t she mad? “You and I talked. What I told you was true, except the names and dates and my occupation, but. Um.”

Linnea was still laughing when she replied, “The community is full of fake names. Personas. Someone might keep their real identity secret from *everyone*, someone might make some friends they trust enough...I can act mad if you want, but I trusted you because you proved to be a good domme, not because I had a certain amount of intimate data. What you have with Oliver can’t be faked. The way you treated me is...well, it’s really hard to fake. If you’d courted me or something, I’d probably be pissed. But I’ve literally had one-night scenes with strangers. You’re actually in the perfect community to have a persona. Nobody gives a flying fuck who you are as long as you don’t break confidentiality. You didn’t, right?”

She sighed in relief and smiled at Linnea. “No, I didn’t. Well, sort of? Everything the killer told me about the murder was passed to the right parties, but everything at the parties and group events, and what you and I talked about, is staying in my head.”

“Then you’re fine.” Linnea cocked her head and looked Judy *over thoroughly* with an amused half-smile, but at least she wasn’t laughing anymore. “I guess I get why you thought you needed to make amends. And I’m actually grateful you came and met with me muzzle-to-muzzle. If our last scene was the last time anyone ever saw Luna and Oliver, I’d probably worry that it was something I did. The question is, do you want to stay in touch, or do you want this to be goodbye?”

“I want to be your friend,” Judy blurted, perhaps a bit louder than was necessary. She wanted to stuff her mouth with carrots and slide under the table, but she didn’t. “I really like you. And I...sort of want to set you up with a friend of mine. If you want. She’s really cool, if you don’t mind big flirting, and she’s *gorgeous*, and she said she’d be okay with meeting you even though I didn’t tell her much about you — just kind of talked up how smart you are, really.”
“I forgive you,” Linnea said warmly, “so stop tripping over yourself, okay? I’ll meet your friend if you’ll do me a favor.”

Judy nodded vigorously. “Anything!”

“Get your carrots and wave at my mother over my shoulder when I video call her from my office. She doesn’t believe that I’ve made friends, and she’s making plans to come visit me because she thinks I must be lonely. I cannot handle that kind of stress.”

“Yeah, I can do that. I’m good at waving,” she said lamely, but Linnea laughed and wasn’t mad, and considering that Linnea still used Star as her scene name, Judy wondered why she’d been so worried in the first place.

The apartment smelled stale and a bit musty, but it was a relief to push in the door to the apartment she and Nick had chosen, not the one they’d been assigned. Judy wasn’t due at the stylist until next week, but there was no reason for them to linger now that Nate had been taken into custody and things had been mostly wrapped up — surprising no one, he’d lawyered up pretty fast, and refused to talk to anyone but Judy, not understanding that those tactics only worked in bad television — and there was no reason to continue the investigation. Chief Bogo had been pretty clear about that, and short of outright admitting that there was some kind of aggressive agenda, nobody could force her to stay.

They still didn’t know who had tampered with the investigation, or who had put the idea into Spottson’s head to waste time, resources, and safety on trying to classify the community as a crime ring. Maybe he’d cooked it up together with Dogson; maybe he’d just followed orders. Judy trusted Fangmeyer to use the resources at their disposal to root out the truth, but her part in it was done.

“I missed you, couch,” she said cheerfully as she marched through the place, although she didn’t exactly feel cheerful. She was still a bit raw from the case and the night prior she’d had a nightmare that Nate had killed Nick and taken his place, but sometimes, acting a certain way made her feel that way, and she hoped it would work this time too. “I missed you, better-sized refrigerator. And I missed you, bed. I missed you so much.”

“We missed you too,” Nick said in a high-pitched voice, and Judy watched in mild jealousy as he made his way into their bathroom, carrying his bag. He was no longer silver. She intended to spend a good two hours, maybe longer, running her paws through his fur and re-familiarizing herself with his natural colors. He looked good no matter what, but she’d missed the orange and brown and off-white.

She dropped her bag at the foot of the bed and leapt off her dominant foot, landing in the middle of the pillow crease and rubbing her cheek on their fluffy comforter. It didn’t matter that it smelled weird. It didn’t matter that it probably needed to be washed. It was good to be home. Judy Hopps, Nick Wilde, and their things in their space with no more zoicide hanging over their heads.

She heard Nick come out of the bathroom behind her, having put their toiletries on the counter, and he quickly joined her, curling around her with his wonderful brown tail brushing her nose and his lovely brown paws holding her tight. Bliss. Maybe she did enjoy causing pain to willing participants, and maybe she did enjoy telling Nick what to do, but this was her favorite part of being with him: just being together. Things would probably be a little difficult going forward. Their dynamic had changed, radically so, and they still needed to talk about what they wanted to keep and what they wanted to discard. But Judy was in a place now where that was viable. She didn’t need to worry about her own desires anymore.
Nick loved her because she was someone worth loving, and she loved that she could be sure of it.

“I can’t wait till you’re gray again,” he confessed into the crook of her neck. His words were muffled like that, but she didn’t mind, because she liked the way his teeth felt against her skin. “And I miss your real clothes, but at least you’re not wearing the contacts anymore. No offense, Ma’am, but Luna Evergreen just isn’t as pretty as you.”

In another life, she might be annoyed at him for being shallow, but this was another instance of Nick remembering what she liked. Maybe she’d always be a little self-conscious about her body, but ever since he’d become aware of that, he’d made a conscious effort to remind her that whatever she thought about herself, whatever ugliness she saw in the mirror, it wasn’t what he saw, and his was the only opinion other than her own that she paid any mind to. She had visible scar tissue, and her ears were a little too long, and she wasn’t nearly as plump as the pretty rabbits in fashion magazines. And that was okay. She was good enough as herself.

She squirmed and shifted until she had twisted around fully and reached up to rub Nick’s pretty orange cheek. “You still want to call me Ma’am?”

He nodded and answered, “If it’s okay with you. I like it. To be honest, it’s kind of like my collar: it’s a reminder that I made a promise, I gave myself to you, and you accepted me. I don’t know if you have an idea of how that makes me feel — I never thought I was worth anything, until you. But you accepted me. Every time I get to call you that, it just...makes me happy. Because I remember that you love me. I do understand if it’s too much, though—”

“I like it too,” she assured him with a soft smile. “You chose me. You could have chosen anyone; you’re brilliant and funny and just...just generally amazing, all of you is amazing, but you chose me. Out of all the mammals in all the world, you chose me, and you keep choosing me.”

“And I’ll keep choosing you, every day, until we die. I tamed you, and you tamed me. But don’t worry, I’m not going to call you Ma’am all the time.” He kissed her forehead, drew back, and gave her a mischievous look. “I might actually explode if I have to go the rest of my life without calling you Carrots.”

Chapter End Notes

I want to say two things:

1) I write a lot about words, and how they’re (usually) more effective than fists. I’m not sure that anyone is particularly upset that this didn’t end with some epic showdown between Judy and the Big Bad, but that was never going to happen. Words and integrity are very powerful weapons. So are relationships, whether it's romantic or platonic or whatever. I wasn't very subtle about that message here, but I want to sort of restate it: forming relationships was what solved this case. It was their most effective investigative tool. Judy pulled an outright seduction scam on Nate, Nick’s deliberate sociability helped them integrate, and of course, their friend Madame Moon sponsored them when it could have backfired badly.

2) I had the next chapter written, but I think I'm going to scrap it and do a different scene to cap off this story. Initially, I wrote a thing where Judy visits Nate in jail, but for now I think I want to leave his complete mental breakdown a mystery for a bit. I had thought it was really obvious what was going through his head, but since I have been told it
wasn't, I'll probably flesh that out a *ton* and make it a two-chapter story later on.
Kindling

Chapter Summary

Life begins anew.

After two weeks solid of paid vacation, a rejuvenated bunny cop went back to work. Judy felt like a new mammal, and not only because she and Nick had spent 14 days pampering each other and not thinking about work at all; she was changed, maybe on a deeper level than even she knew, by the case. She didn't just feel like a different kind of cop; she was. Many of her doubts were gone. Her mind was clear. She had new friends, and she wasn't going to internalize the problems at work any longer. She deserved better.

It was great to not feel so bad anymore. Suffering wasn't noble, pain didn't make anyone interesting, and neither pain nor suffering were enough to excuse abhorrent behavior, so she was glad to be able to leave a lot of her hurts behind with Luna Evergreen. And unlike the other times she had “moved on” from things, this felt real: she wasn't minimizing or deflecting, she was healing. There were other things she needed to deal with, but with her new mindset, she felt like she had the strength to do it. And Nick would be by her side, if she asked.

“You look different,” said Fangmeyer from across the desk. They weren't smiling, but that wasn't their default, like it was Judy's. The size difference was as stark as always, but Judy wasn't as self-conscious about it; she had the respect of dommes the same size as her Captain, and the group was going to have another grill night soon. Her species was nothing to be ashamed of, and she wouldn't go back to accepting that even if it would be easier.

She grinned. “I am different.”

“You look healthier. I was going to order a fitness cert,” the Captain corrected, “but your psych eval was standard, your physical says you're fine, and you actually took your vacation, so I don't see a need for it now.”

Judy's stomach flipped, even though the threat was no longer there. “You were…”

“Technically UC's are on active duty, but it's not uncommon for an op to fuck with someone's head. You were posing as a normal citizen for about two months, and three or more would have required a physical recert after your assignment regardless. You expressed a desire to quit to a senior officer — in confidence, yes, but I'd be remiss in my duties not to consider what I know in determining your post-op treatment.”

That was all reasonable and logical and she tried to focus on the fact that Fangmeyer hadn't ordered a recertification. She was fit for her detective duties, but she wasn't in academy shape, and a full recert would likely have required a month at the academy. It usually did for any mammal who had to recertify. She nodded, made a note to hit the gym more often, and said, “Thank you, Captain.”

“I'm not doing it for you, Hopps, I'm doing it for the department. We're losing Hirsch.” Fangmeyer snorted, managing to convey irritation in a single sound. “Went and got herself pregnant. You know how that's gonna go.”
There was a chance that Penelope might recertify after her maternity leave, but she probably wouldn’t. At most, she’d return for desk duty to keep her benefits. That would eventually leave the department down a body (and Judy without a partner). “Are you scouting a replacement?”

“Not exactly,” they said with a thoughtful frown, leaning forward on their elbows, “although I do have my eye on Del Valle if I can sweet-talk her away from Wolfard. When the time comes, you’ll be working with Rivers as a small mammals team. It's not ideal, but it's not like we have another bunny, and your fox isn't a cop. You and Rivers are the smallest detectives at Precinct 1, and this case opened certain eyes: we need small officers. Snow was small enough that he might have chosen a smaller house. You'd have been alone with him, with no backup. How many cold cases could have been closed by mammals who can fit into small spaces? Chief Bogo's long thought the bigger the better, and I don't want to badmouth him or his policies, so I'm going to shut up and let that hang.”

Oh. Oh, wow. If that wasn't an admission of bad blood, nothing was.

“I'll do my best,” she promised, feeling somehow lighter even though she knew how important her new duties would be. Focusing solely on small mammal zoicides instead of leaving it to the Tundratown station, which was the only station who employed small mammals (as constables, not trained officers) and whose employees were all likely on Big's payroll, meant she would be working a lot of the city. It would mean a complete shift in thinking.

Fangmeyer nodded shortly. “I know. I wouldn't consider it otherwise. How do you feel about quitting now?”

Judy paused, understanding that the question was necessary and deserved a truthful answer. Hirsch and Rivers deserved a truthful answer, too. Finally, she answered, “I'm committed to doing my job to the best of my ability while I'm an officer, Captain. I won't say I don't have doubts. Give me a chance to fall in love with the job again and I promise I won't let you down.”

“Then we'll revisit this in a year,” Fangmeyer decided. Their stern expression relaxed into a smile. “You're killing it, Hopps. Whenever someone questions our department's integrity, we hold you up as exhibit A. Other officers could stand to be more like you. I suspect that's why you're not exactly popular around here.”

“I...thank you,” Judy said, stunned. That hadn't been what she expected to hear at all.

“Don't thank me. Just don't fuck up. Now get out, I have paperwork,” the Captain said sharply, and she grinned as she scampered out.

Things were looking up, and Judy was going to make the most of it.

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