A downtrodden, underpaid sound designer finds himself the only witness of a very peculiar crime - and the experience that comes after is bound to change the way he sees the world, forever.
Chapter Summary

Here, we meet the hapless protagonist of our tale in his day-to-day squabbles with his own fears. His roommate and friend tries to cheer him up, but to no avail.

Stagart Studios, 16 Lionheart Avenue, Downtown Zootopia

June 26th, 2018, 10:44 AM

When it came to producing live-action television spectacles, ZBS was one of the most sought-after broadcasting companies in all of Zootopia. Stagart Studios was the company's largest and busiest sound studio complex. Alongside television material, it was also a place where film sound was created. Therefore, among the numerous awards were several Pawscars, Lemming Awards, Golden Globes and many others.

The inside of the building was not particularly busy. If anyone was within the perimeter, they would usually be inside one of the many facilities that the studio complex had to offer, each serving a unique purpose. If someone did a re-recording mix, he'd be working at the massive 5.1 theater that boasted the grandest speaker system in the building, situated to the north. To the east were the foley studios, where artists created sound in sync with the moving picture of a TV series. To the west stood a complex of ADR studios, where dialogue would be re-recorded for better overall quality. To the south, one would be led to a rather inconspicuous complex that consisted of several editing suites, where the brunt of the work was done - production sound editing, sound effects editing, ambience editing and sound effects design, to name a few. Each of them were conveniently adjusted for animals of all size ranges.

The door of one of the smaller suites opened, and out came a rabbit. A broad-shouldered, fit male rabbit in his late 20s, to be precise. He wore what was typical of the youth – a plain blue t-shirt with a matching pair of jeans. However, his somewhat slumped shoulders, drooping ears and overall dour expression made him look as though he was going through a midlife crisis. No vibrance, no vigor, and not even a small dose of cheerfulness could be read from his face. He slowly pitter-pattered out of the studio and locked the door behind him. Clearly, he was done for the day, and was about to head his own way.

So young, yet so gloomy. One had to wonder why.

"Hey, Rabbits! What are you sore about?" a voice called from behind.

The rabbit stopped dead in his tracks, and bent his head over ever so slightly. "It's Rabberts," he responded, not even bothering to face whomever was addressing him. Strangely, his voice was deeper than the other mammal's.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the other mammal, who turned out to be an Iberian lynx, was quick to appear by the rabbit's side, "Rabberts. Milo Rabberts. Noted. A cute name fit for a cute employee..." The feline smirked down upon him.

"Xander, don't you have anything better to do?" Milo still averted his gaze, continuing down the
hallway towards the stairs, on his way out. Unfortunately, his sensitive ears could pick up some slightly heavier footsteps beside his own – that feline was following him.

"Hey. Hey, I'll only give you a few seconds, because I do have something to do," Xander continued, gesturing vividly with his hands "I have this zombie project to wrap up - you know, The Walking Carrion, season 3? I just can't wait for it to air." At this notion, the lynx took a deep breath through clenched teeth and feigned a shudder. "You know that feeling when you're thinking it's prize-worthy? I have it all over right now. Don't think that'd be the case if someone else did it."

"That's because your reputation precedes you…" Milo quipped, not even bothering to look at the lynx.

"I also heard that you wanted to apply for it. No offense, but let's face it: they'd never let someone like you onto this kind of project. The committee's got their wallets in high priority…" Xander softened his tone, with a concerned look on his face. Even so, Milo was apparently in no mood to converse, seeing as he was climbing down the stairs without a second look, leaving the feline standing next to a coffee machine. When the rabbit was all but gone, he brandished a smug, maligned smirk of victory, "What a loser… Whatever. More dough for me."

In the midst of it all, Milo didn't want to say much. He could have bitten back and told Xander that his position in the studio was too low for him to listen to his boasting, yet he didn't. In his mind, doing nothing at all was far superior to doing something stupid. He did not want to waste any time in trying to correct something that he deemed inherently wrong.

His descent to the main floor finally ended. However, before he could move any further, a massive foot stomped right by his side, prompting him to jolt and binky to the right. "Watch your step, pal!" a male voice nagged, even though the rhinoceros was the one devoid of attention. With a brief scowl, Milo headed off to a locker to get his leather jacket. In the midst of the action, he was distracted by a rather endearing alto.

"Heading home early?" Milo's ears nudged only slightly, before he shut the locked door, and looked up, while he put the jacket on.

"Hey, Melanie," the rabbit greeted, with a smile that was trying hard to be genuine, "The work I have to do now is outside the studio."

"How so?" Melanie raised her eyebrow curiously, arching her long, thin neck over to the rabbit.

"Well, same old jazz as usual…" Milo sighed, wiping his eyebrow with his index finger nervously, "I have a ton of power generator noise in this one park scene. Figured I'd go to several parks and have some ambience ready for the editors, if they want something true to the set."

"Okay, then," Melanie nodded in agreement, "I'll see you some other time, I guess. Stay safe on the road!"

"Thanks," Milo nodded, "See you 'round," and headed off his own way. He was somewhat warmed by the fact that there was at least one mammal in the studio that wasn't treating him like a speck on the floor. Though he certainly wasn't leaning towards picking out curtains with a giraffe, he certainly appreciated Melanie's genial disposition. However, not even that was enough to lift his spirits, or his ears, in the long run.

As Milo sat atop a blue cruiser motorcycle, donning a helmet of the matching color and black sunglasses, he started driving towards home, buzzing down the streets. Home was further in the
middle region of Savanna Central, which was about fifteen minutes away by drive.

Earlier today, he was working on the first episode of Doctor Howl, one of ZBS' longest-standing science fiction series, with over 40 years of history. This particular series marked the twelfth in the canon, and was strongly dependent on the sound design, as it was from its very beginning. As a production sound editor, his job was to edit the dialogue recorded on set for it to be prepared for mixing. If a scene wasn't suitable, then it would be relegated for ADR (additional dialogue recording), an ambience was required that matched the character of the sound recorded on set.

Milo hated doing this. It was a purely technical procedure with little to no artistic engagement – a far cry from what he was hoping for when he first enrolled. He expected a promotion to a higher-profile position to arise after some time of proving himself in the field of production sound editing, but given that the staff kept him in place for two years already, it seemed that Stagart wanted nothing more from him. He was also informed countless times by Xander, as recently, that the staff committee was biased against younger workers, for fear of them jeopardizing their positions. Ergo, to avoid any kind of trouble with his boss, he avoided bringing it up at any time. Having any kind of job was far better than having no job at all. No matter how much he wanted more out of it, he couldn't help feeling that it wasn't worth the risk to pursue something that was out of reach.

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*Thomson's Apartment Complex, third floor, apartment number 15*

*18 Elephant-grass Boulevard, Savanna Central*

*11:15 AM*

At first glance, Milo's apartment seemed to be an unreasonable choice for someone of his stature. The whole place was much higher and wider than anything that would be considered rabbit-sized in the catalog. It was laid out with three rooms centered around a large living room, which also housed the kitchen space to the furthest left.

As Milo unlocked and opened the rabbit-sized door that was built into a larger door, he could see that the living room was stuffy and vacant. He sighed drearily and walked inside, removing his jacket and placing it into an appropriate wardrobe that matched his size of clothing, which was inside his studio, opposite of the kitchen space. Before he could go anywhere else, a familiar face emerged from the first room adjacent to the hall. It would soon be revealed that Milo wasn't the only mammal living in this apartment. The other one was a portly male wildebeest that was, like Milo, in his late twenties, but different in almost every way. He brandished a devil-may-care smile on his face, with his unkempt, spiky mane falling clumsily over his squinting brown eyes. Soon enough, he covered them up with glasses, which implied that he was nearsighted. He was the one mammal Milo called his best friend, and his roommate, no less.

"Morning…" the wildebeest mumbled under his breath, as he smacked his lips, still drowsy from sleep.

Milo couldn't help but stifle a chuckle, "Steve, it's past eleven…"

Not that Steve cared anyway, because he walked right past him and headed for the bathroom to get himself washed up and ready for the day. If there was anything that the bovid wasn't willing to listen to at this given time, it was idiosyncratic smalltalk like this.

With Steve out of the way, Milo moved into a room of his own. Other than a bedroom, it was also a studio – acoustically tailored to be an environment where he could work on projects if the need was dire. To the front stood a work desk with a pair of monitors (speakers) and his work
computer – a MarkhMini. To the back, a shelf lined with field and studio recording equipment on one end, as well as a collection of vinyl records sitting next to a turntable phonograph, on the other. Milo immediately prepared what he needed: a multitrack field recorder and a 5.0 microphone. This would enable him to record his ambient sound in surround, as required by the standard format of the series itself. He also took the appropriate cable and stand for the aforementioned microphone – this done, he placed all the gear into a bag.

As he was in no rush to get to his desired recording location, Milo decided to hang around for a while. After setting his gear next to the couch in the middle of the living room, he moved to his wardrobe to get a track jacket. Meanwhile, Steve furrowed through the refrigerator, looking for something to eat for breakfast.

"You've got some fresh GG down below. Savanna flavor," Milo referred to the can of Uncle Badger's Green Grass, a mixed grass salad, occasionally with other plants mixed in.

"Sweet! My fave…" Steve was more than grateful, seeing as the notion of his favorite food quickly snapped him out of his post-sleep dizziness. He reached for the can, opened it and poured its contents into a ready plate. Then, he approached the coffee machine, and prepared two espressos with matching cups for both himself and Milo. After it was done, the wildebeest took it all to the dining table.

There, Milo sat pensively, wondering where he should start his work day. He didn't know any parks by name and address, except for the set location, and that was not enough. He needed an alternative in case the set park didn't provide a good sound.

At the very moment, the only thing his roommate cared about was gnawing down his breakfast, and by God, he was a loud eater… It was beyond Milo why it was so difficult for Steve to just not smack his lips so hard, or close his mouth fully while eating. It was just the nature of hoofed mammals, it seems. After he was done ruminating, Steve let out a content sigh, "No better way to start the morning than a balanced breakfast."

Milo merely nodded half-heartedly, because all that was on his mind was figuring out how to get his job done. The sudden appearance and strong smell of a coffee cup in front of his eyes wasn't helping.

"Decaf?" Steve asked, as he was the one offering the coffee.

"I'll pass…" Milo waved aside.

"Your loss," Steve shrugged at the rabbit's utterly lifeless mood. He slowly sipped from the rabbit-sized cup, which was about a single gulp to the wildebeest. Wiping his lips, he hummed with satisfaction, "Good coffee. So, what's on today's agenda?"

"Ugh. Same old situation as usual," Milo began to explain, nervously wiping his left eyebrow with his index finger, "Lengthy scene in a park with great acting and beautiful scenery, but oops! The power generator's throbbing all over the boom mic, and the wireless ones aren't enough for a good overall sound." He flailed his arms into the air in exasperation, "One more candidate for ADR. And you know what that means?"

"Yeah…" Steve tried to put on a façade of understanding, but eventually showed all his cards, "No. No." Even though they went to the same faculty and shared some subjects, the wildebeest didn't know all the finesses of working on sound.

Milo let out a growling sigh, not only because he had to recite it for the thousandth time, but also
because he really hated what he was about to do, "Means I gotta go find the set location, and some other parks, and squat at each for an hour straight…"

Steve felt a little foolish for not remembering this, because it was the case on most of his editing assignments. He nodded considerately: "Mm-hmm…"

"The bottom line? Nobody cares about the trouble I have to go through..." With that said, Milo scowled and folded his arms, sitting far back into his chair. Another symptom of his hapless existence. Nevertheless, his own hardships weren't the only thing on his mind, "And what about you?"

Steve mumbled questioningly at first, before his whole face lit up, "Oh, yeah! I'm designing the texture for the Doctor Howl T. rex. Coming along nicely if I say so myself…"

"Very nice…" Milo smiled sourly, feeling that Steve was very fortunate to get such a serious assignment. Something the rabbit was sure he'd never get to work on in his expertise. Nevertheless, he wanted to indulge at least a small amount of amusement, "Mind if I check it out before I head outside?"

"Sure," the friendly artist replied, cracking a wide grin as he began to head to the bedroom, which was also the location of Steve's studio.

The Tyrannosaurus was set to appear in a later part of the episode, which Milo was not working on in his roll of production footage. The model that Steve received was that of an adult animal, which was very anatomically accurate, and met the standards of modern paleontology. It did not look shrink-wrapped, unlike earlier restorations, and showed a very rotund build. A challenge, but one that Steve took with excitement. His work desk also had a Markhortosh, with a powerful video interface, and double screens. A cluttered shelf stood to the left, with a painting easel to the right. Once his go-to texturing software, TailBrush, was fully open, Steve took the work into his own hoofs and started with some fine textures, seeing as he had already applied a layer of rough textures.

"So, you're telling me that this kind of skin texture was the one the actual animal may have had?" Milo asked, while perched on the wildebeest's desk. While he was no expert on extinct animals, listening to Steve's rambling about them made him remember a lot about their physiology.

"Based upon the latest scientific research," Steve confidently assured, as he began to create very delicate skin hardening and scars on the dinosaur's muzzle, "He was definitely no overgrown chicken…" This remark lampshaded the belief that Tyrannosaurus and kin may have had a thick coat of feathers, which was put to scrutiny by recent scientific discoveries that showed scales to be primary. In the wildebeest's belief, if there were any feathers, they would have been as sparse as elephant hair.

Milo, like most mainstream viewers, was impressed by the business end of the animal - its jaws. They were filled with enormous, almost blunt-looking teeth that resembled railroad spikes, "Wow, look at those jaws and teeth… It looks more refined than Jurassic Park, for sure."

Steve was quick to provide a scientific explanation, "Yup, fifty teeth in total. All designed to crunch through meat and bones like hard candy."

Even though he was sour about almost everything and everyone, seeing Steve make progress and impressive work on a daunting task made Milo genuinely happy. Throughout the years of school and University, the wildebeest was the only one who gave him a reason, no matter how small, to believe in other mammals. He smiled fondly, and patted his friend on the right upper arm, "You're
really showing your work, Steve."

"Thanks, little buddy." With this kind of compliment, Steve believed that Milo's mood was starting to improve, so he decided to bring forward something considering his own work, "So, when do you think you're gonna get that raise?"

Milo frowned before Steve even finished the question. He wasted no effort, "Short, or long answer? Short: never…"

"Oh, c'mon!" Steve tried to spur his roommate to life with a light punch on the left shoulder, "I think you're just overreacting!"

"Payments are fixed for a given job, and my forty-eight-hundred a month just happens to be the lowest. Them's the rules, so…” Milo finished, shrugging. He honestly did not believe anything he'd do would make a difference.

"Well, if you ask me," Steve began to counter, "I think you're ready to take it to the next level…"

"Sound effects design? You've gotta be joking!" Milo almost jumped in fear of the notion of trying to aim for promotion - he dreaded the thought of being perceived as an impudent upstart, "What do they need me for, when they have Gary Roestrom? Everybody wants to keep their share of the trough, and they're not going to let it go that easy… If they're materialistic and have a high position, it doesn't matter what I say, or do."

Steve was becoming bored and annoyed with Milo's constant search for excuses for his own shortcomings. Still, he stayed patient, because he'd already gotten accustomed to these kinds of talks. Nevertheless, he gave the same response as ever, because in his experience, he was sure that it was true, "Well, if you don't try, you'll never know."

"Hmph. Yeah, right. Might as well quit on my own will…” With these words, Milo already started turning to leave. He still took another longing look at the Tyrannosaurus. He knew he wanted to take on a sound design task of that nature. He always knew. But no matter what he wanted, he was always certain that the odds were stacked against him. He sighed, and trailed off.

There were times when Steve genuinely cared about his Milo's troubles, but every time his friendly, and, ultimately, true advice had been rejected without a seconds deliberation, he wondered why the little rascal hadn't killed himself already. Milo contradicted himself on every claim, and was crazily unaware of it. He whimpered incessantly about a troubled past, instead of moving on with his life, and living in the moment. The only hope he had was winning the battle against himself.

Before opening the door, Milo stopped and turned around again, "Do you… happen to know any big parks around Savanna Central? Something like Baobab Canopy?"

After laying a hand on his chin, and twirling his beard, Steve finally came up with an answer, "Dude, you're asking the right wildebeest. I know of this one place…"

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Well, at long last, I have given this a shot!

Zootopia was something I'd never expect to be taken in by, but when I saw it, my expectations flew away like a flock of mockingbirds that figured out they were bullying a dragon.

I know it's all OC so far, but it will not stay that way! ;) I've created both Milo and Steve, for the record, with some help from Stegosaurus1412 on proofreading the latter character.
Hope you enjoy the ride.

LionKingAlex!

P.S. - This chapter has been thoroughly revised in the latest edit. Alongside a new and better name for our protagonist, it also touches up on his situation more carefully. A shout-out to Ubermunchkin for beta-reading the new version – thanks a bunch!
Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde had attuned to their careers as partners excellently over the course of the past year. However, one bullpen briefing went much differently than others, and now the two need to tend to a rookie officer, and an agent from another crime-fighting organization.

Oak Grove Park, Zootopia Center

11:45 AM

Oak Grove Park was chosen as a last minute solution to complete the heart of Zootopia, its primary purpose being to assure the populace that the city center wasn't all about business. Every day, mammals on breaks would take detours here to breathe in some fresh air, and take a break from the indoors. The extravagant fountain also helped create the image of a place where troubles would go away. If the humdrum of traffic was an issue, one could simply move to its more quiet center.

Towards the street crossing that led to the aforementioned park moved a figure of fairly short stature, by Zootopian standards. A red fox. He was tall among his kind, and to them would be considered good-looking. Strutting through the streets with a half-lidded smile beaming across his maw, he brandished something that was most certainly not common for foxes. In fact, no other fox wore what this tod did. He wore a blue uniform and an ornate badge that could only belong to an officer of the Zootopia Police Department.

He was Nicholas P. Wilde, the first, and thus far, only fox to manage to complete the academy training and graduate.

Up until two years earlier, he was a specialized con artist who lived up to what most mammals would think of foxes – cunning, insincere and treacherous. Ranging from Pawpicle hustles to smuggling household items, there was nothing he wouldn't do to snatch a dollar. Trickster, liar, conniver, wretch... these were the labels the city gave him, and he wore them proudly.

How did it all turn upside down?

About then, the fox met a rabbit officer named Judy Hopps, who discovered that, alongside his petty thievery, he squeaked by taxes. Thus, he was prompted to cooperate with her to find a missing mammal, because he was her only lead. Throughout this unfamiliar experience, Nick not only grew fond of the rabbit's upbeat demeanor, but also re-examined the way he saw the world, and how he could affect the way it saw him. He learned that whether or not his old dreams of bravery, fealty and honor were dead or not was up to him. Despite the change in thinking going through ups and downs, he learned that he could become special only if he believed he could.

And here he was now. Accomplished, dignified and accepted.

His train of thought was derailed by the chiming of a marimba melody in one of his pockets. His expression changed to one of mild alert as he reached for his ringing cell phone. The caller was named Cleo 3 3 3. At seeing this, the fox stifled a chuckle and shook his head in amusement.
He pressed the answer button and laid the phone onto his right ear.

"Hello, darlin'?" Nick spoke, listening with a smitten, but attentive smile. It soon turned into a rather quizzical expression, "What about lunch?" It became evident what the topic at hand was. He grinned reassuringly, "Oh, come on, honey, you know what I eat..." with the same warm smile he previously had. Suddenly, his hackles slightly rose, his ears folded back and an alarmed expression completed the impression, "Chicken? Vixen, my nutritionist told me to stay off chicken ten years ago!" he explained. Before he was nearly stepped on by a passing hippopotamus, Nick hopped off to the right, "Every time I ate it, I saw it twice over..." he pouted. However, in a matter of seconds, he was smiling once again - whatever conflict there may have been seemed to have been resolved. "Great, thank you! I'm almost at the station, so I'll call it an end here," he announced, even though he still had a decent way to go to get there. "I love you too, my little apple dumpling. Toodle-loo. Ba-bye. Ciao!" And so, he ended the conversation by hanging up first.

Suddenly, Nick could feel a smaller mammal grappling him from behind. "Gotcha, Slick!" A mezzo-soprano was heard, as the female held Nick in a strong embrace. He could feel the mammal's velvety fur brush off against his cheek, and soon, her hand giving him a noogie. This prompted the fox to give a hearty chuckle.

"Hey there, Carrots." Nick immediately deduced who she was. It was none other than the rabbit that changed his life – it was Officer Judy Hopps herself. She eventually jumped off his back and skipped childishly to his right.

"Ready to make the world a better place?" she inquired, smiling gleefully, all the while failing to notice that Nick was starting to squint from the strong sunlight.

"Yes, and I'm starting by putting these on," Nick declared, as he brandished the mirrored aviator sunglasses that he wore ever since he joined the force. It felt much better.

"You're just wearing those to look cool, aren't you?" Judy didn't see the point.


"For real, now?" Judy asked incredulously.

"Hey, I'm a natural-born nocturnal animal. I need them when it's this bright." Nick stated. He may have been evolved, but deep down he was still an animal. Thus, every animal had its own natural strengths and weaknesses, and foxes didn't fully adjust to walking out during the day.

Nodding in understanding, Judy couldn't help bringing up something new. While she was creeping up on Nick, she discovered that he was having a phone call with his girlfriend, so she was eager to ask him what it was all about. "So, what have you and Cleo been talking about?"

Nick's ears perked up in surprise, and he feigned offense, "Have you been tracing my phone calls?"

"No, of course not," Judy rebuffed. However, she was no fan of the pet names she exchanged with him, "I know it can't be anybody else when I hear all those foody pet names..." She shot him with a half-lidded, almost flirtatious look.

"Aw, what's wrong with that?" Nick inquired. Being himself, he had to tease her in some way that was related to the topic at hand. "You're sore because you don't have anyone to pet-name?" Nick topped it off with his typical half-lidded smirk. At this moment, that was the most irksome facial expression that Judy could think of.
"What's that got to do with anything?" The rabbit officer defended herself, "I mean, I wouldn't mind having a boyfriend, but I sure wouldn't call him..." She fell into a brief pause before snapping back on, "What was it? Oh, right, puddin'. Ugh..." she shook her head incredulously.

Nick's expression remained unchanged as he listened to Judy, but his gaze strayed from her to a very peculiar sight. "Whoa, look at that," he pointed to a rabbit in the grassy field at the center of the park, standing motionlessly next to an oddly shaped black object that was mounted on a stand. Neither he, nor Judy, were familiar with what this citizen was doing. However, they weren't about to leave without taking a peek, and whether or not it presented some sort of threat, or broke a law.

"You think he's doing something questionable?" Judy asked.

Nick shrugged in approval. "You got me. Let's go question him."

The rabbit in question was none other than Milo Rabberts, who had found the park that Steve mentioned to him last morning. The strange object was in fact a microphone - even though it had a pentagonal shape and was covered in a black fabric. The location was very analogous to the park that was used as the set location, fountain and all. For the time being, the crowding and traffic didn't present a problem to him, which was certainly a plus in his line of work. Even though he was standing there for about twenty minutes, it was not without reason. At times, only one or two of those twenty minutes would prove useful in ambient sound editing. Fortunately, that was not the case here. Suddenly, the continuity of his ambient sound was disrupted by a female voice that addressed him from behind.

"Excuse me? Sir? Officer Hopps, ZPD." Judy said, as she approached the stranger.

Even though he was wearing headphones and carrying a recorder in a bag hung about his shoulder, Milo could hear her, thanks to his microphone being connected to the input of his recorder at the time. Upon hearing that Judy was a police officer, he turned around immediately. As it turned out, a doe rabbit and a male red fox stood about two arm lengths away from him, facing him.

Nick began to feel very awkward in this grassy field. Something in the air began to tickle away at his nostrils incessantly and irritatingly. When he took a look down and saw that there were flowers all over, he immediately connected the dots, "Uh-oh. Pollen..." He wiped at his nose, and tried to get the smell as far as possible from him, but to no avail.

"We just want to ask you some-" Just as Judy began to inquire Milo, Nick sneezed vigorously, and, unfortunately for the buck rabbit, in the direction of his microphone. As Milo was still wearing headphones and recording at high gain, he could hear this well.

Too well.

He bent over and grabbed his headphones, pulling them off of his ears all the while screaming and groaning in agony from the sudden rush of pain in his ears, with his eyes tightly shut and his teeth clenched. On the other hand, being unaware of this as they could be, Judy and Nick were understandably perplexed. What was wrong with this guy? Was it something they were saying? For a moment, they were starting to get memories of predators going savage right in front of their eyes.

"Oh dear," Judy gasped, her arms reflexively reaching for her muzzle, as she inched a few inches closer, "Are you all right, sir?"

"Buddy?" Nick inquired, also trying to approach the rabbit.
"You just blew out my eardrums!" Milo responded, finally getting a grip on his consciousness, and showing that he was not going savage. This response, however, didn't clear anything up, as both of the officers just stared at him quizzically. He spoke once more. "Officer, I implore you - don't sneeze into a microphone ever again..."

Finally getting a grasp of the situation, both Judy and Nick straightened up. Nick was still confused, "That thing is a microphone?"

"We're both really sorry about that, but may I have your ID?" Judy implored, wasting no time in furthering their original intention. Milo was quick to comply, as he reached for his wallet, pulling out the ID and handing it to the officer. Judy took the time to examine Milo's personal information.

However, the sound designer began to feel that these two officers were doing a shakedown, and was compelled to assure them that he wasn't a delinquent, "Before you ask: no, I have not consumed alcohol, or narcotics within the last hour, and no, I do not possess any weapons, let alone those without permits, and-

"That's not important, Mr. Rabberts," Judy quickly interjected, becoming distracted by the buck's incessant rambling. That said, she addressed the matter that interested her and Nick, "What exactly were you doing when we approached you?"

"I was recording ambient sound." Milo responded nervously, wiping his right eyebrow with his finger, wallet still in hand.

"You do realize that any sort of commercial photography, filming or sound recording in a public park requires a permit?" Judy's question held weight, but Milo quickly pulled out a sheet of paper from his wallet and unfolded it in a fidgety manner. He would have dropped it into the breeze if it weren't for his nimble reflexes.

"Right here.", Milo stated, handing the permit to Judy, who took some time to look over it. Looking at the release and expiration dates, she was aware that Milo was breaking no laws, and concluded that he was harmless.

"Very well. Everything seems to be in order," She returned the permit and the ID to Milo, and smiled pleasantly. "Have a nice day." And so, she moved on towards the police station, and Nick was quick to follow along, nodding his head towards Milo, who remained in his place, musing over the interaction he just had… and the buzzing in his ears that still hadn't stopped. Taking a glance after the departing officers, he noticed that they were oddly cheerful for their line of work. This was beyond his comprehension, but he didn't pay too much attention to it. As he pressed the Stop Record button on his recorder, he prepared to leave for another park. He was done here for the day.

All that Nick had to say about this encounter was his genuine surprise that microphones can come in more shapes and sizes than a stick with a ball on top. "Well, who knew that a bicycle seat could record..."

"He was kinda... jumpy, wasn't he?" Judy mused.

"Yeah," Nick nodded in agreement. Given that he was Judy's kind, he couldn't help but make a joke of it at his partner. "For a rabbit..."

Smirking, Judy hopped up and gave Nick a forehand slap on his right ear, before they continued walking towards the ZPD headquarters. At this point, the two were even. It was beyond her that someone she was so fond of was also the sharpest thorn in her side.
Upon entering the headquarters of the ZPD, the first thing that one would see past its revolving front door was a massive hall that served as the lobby. In the center stood the front desk, helmed by everyone's favorite chubby cheetah: Dispatch Officer Benjamin Clawhauser. From what Judy and Nick could see, he was talking to someone unfamiliar. From afar, he only seemed to be a small white furball in a police uniform.

"Hi, there! New recruit, eh?" Clawhauser's campy tenor was easy to recognize, even from afar.

"Correct!" The voice of the furball chimed, similar in register to Clawhauser, but notably not as effeminate in pronunciation. "First day, actually. So, where do I go to roll call?"

"Bullpen's to the left," the corpulent cat flicked his tail to his left, then pointed in the same direction for good measure.

"Oh, there?" The fuzzy Zootopian inquired. Clawhauser nodded, with a mumble of affirmation. "Thanks!" said the unfamiliar officer, before heading towards the bullpen, in order to attend the briefing.

That said and done, Clawhauser was just about to reach for another donut, when he was interrupted by a greeting from Nick, "Benjo! Buddy, it's nice to see ya. How are we doin' today?"

"Oh! Hey, guys." Clawhauser waved, a cheerful smile beaming across his maw. He then proceeded to inform the duo of something new that he was notified of. "Between the three of us, the chief's got a really big surprise for you."

"Really?" Judy's ears perked curiously. As usual, she wanted to know everything, "What is it?"

Given that this information was classified, Clawhauser was not authorized to reveal it. In any case, if he told them, it wouldn't be a surprise. "Can't tell you. If you wanna know, you'd better hurry up to the bullpen," he noted, pointing towards the flock of officers that worked in Judy and Nick's shift making their way there. Judy and Nick could not afford to be late, because not only would they be excluded from the meeting, but they would also miss out on the aforementioned surprise. No matter how vague it was, it was enticing nevertheless.

Inside the bullpen, it turned out that the fluffy white Zootopian was a male Arctic fox, fresh out of the Police Academy. He walked through the room with a gait full of confidence, and a smile that radiated positive energy, searching for an available seat. The largely megafauna fellow officers couldn't help taking notice.

"Check it out, guys. Fresh meat…" A tiger officer quipped, watching the tiny bundle of poofy white fur walk past. The white fox approached a chair in the row of desks to the left of the room, and scurried up to take a seat. He noticed that a female African elephant officer was seated next to him. He flashed a happy grin and waved at her.

"Hi. Officer James Frost." He finally spoke. "But you can call me Jimmy." The elephant cow merely smiled and turned her gaze towards the podium, where a hippopotamus officer, namely
Higgins, was taking note of who was present for the briefing.

Jimmy took a look to the opposite side of the room, and noticed that Judy and Nick were sitting beside a rhinoceros officer. He grinned once again, trying to capture their attention, presumably Nick's more so. Seeing as it didn't elicit any reactions, he averted his gaze and kept to himself, hoping that later he'd be able to talk to them. In the back end of his row, he could see four officers dressed in parking enforcement uniforms: a snowshoe hare, a striped skunk, a Virginia opossum and a crested porcupine. He was curious as to why they were here, but his train of thought had suddenly been derailed by the blaring voice of Officer Higgins. "Attention!"

Suddenly, every police officer rose from their seat and started chanting and slamming their fists into the desktops. Almost immediately, from a door to the right, entered a familiar figure. A powerfully built, top-heavy Cape buffalo with several small scars lining his face, and a gaze as grim and intimidating as his outward appearance first seemed to be. He was a seasoned officer and, if one looked at the insignia on his uniform, the current leader of the ZPD, Chief Bogo.

He moved to the podium, and finally let out his commanding voice to silence the police. "Alright. Alright! Shush! Down, everyone." The method proved effective, as everyone in the room fell silent and sat down. Jimmy's hair stood up with excitement, because he could hardly wait for his introduction, and, most importantly, his first assignment.

"This noon, I have three items on the docket, as usual..." Bogo began to declare, slamming his index hoof onto the podium top. "First: I shall introduce to us the official, dedicated Parking Enforcement Brigade of the Zootopia Police Department." He pointed towards the aforementioned parking enforcement officers. This elicited a round of applause and cheering, because if there was anything that police officers hated being saddled with, it was parking duty.

Bogo was fully aware of this. He couldn't help but smirk, seeing that they took the matter a little too frivolously. He blared once more, "Of course! I could always revoke that decision..."

At this sentence, everyone froze in place, mortified. The chief's tactic of silencing once again proved effective.

"Very well," Bogo wasted no time in continuing with the briefing. "Number two: we have some new recruits with us, among others, our second fox," upon finishing, he pointed towards Jimmy, who was still smiling with pride. Everyone's gaze turned towards him. Judy saw something very endearing in his overall demeanor, and it was strangely familiar to how she behaved during her first day. After a short silence, Bogo quipped. "Lost its novelty the first time..."

Nick couldn't resist returning the favor. "But he can't beat the original, sir."

"Correct!" Nick was taken aback by Jimmy's sudden intrusion into the exchange.

While Bogo never loved Officer Wilde much, he had grown accustomed to his snarky behavior, and decided not to speak, but rather to assert his dominance by clearing his throat loudly enough for everyone to hear him, "Assignments, starting with parking duty! Officer Harrelson: Tundratown. O'Possum: Rainforest District. And finally, Officer Quilloughby: Savanna Central. Dismissed." At each of their names, the respective meter attendants left the bullpen and proceeded to do their job.

After seeing the meter attendants through, Bogo continued regularly, "Police! Officers Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, Delgado: highway patrol." At this call, a white wolf, a tiger and a lion rose from their chairs and exited the bullpen. "McHorn, Trunkaby, Higgins: open business inspection," the elephant cow, Higgins and a black rhinoceros responded to this call. The chief continued,
"Snarlov, Wolfard, Rhinowitz: we have reports of a jailbreak from Zootopia Central Prison. Here is the case file of the prisoner. Hunt her down, and deliver her here." Of the three officers that were a polar bear, a timber wolf and a white rhinoceros, the bear was the one to grab the file, as the three departed. This left only Judy, Nick and Jimmy in the room. The Arctic fox couldn't help wagging his poofy tail at the impending command, as his patience was already wearing thin to begin with. At long last, Bogo proceeded to finish, "And that leaves us with Hopps, Wilde… and Frost." After a drawn-out pause, the buffalo made a rather sudden announcement, "My office, in five minutes." Having said this, he turned to leave the bullpen, closing the door.

This left all three mammals surprised. Being invited to Chief Bogo's office usually meant that he had something to criticize you for, wanted to suspend you, or at worst, fire you. They were all wondering what this could possibly be for. Especially Jimmy, who was afraid he already made a mistake after a mere dozen minutes in the force, and was already fidgeting with his fingers.

"Was it something I said?" Nick asked Judy, who could only shrug in response, not seeing any negative reason for Bogo to call them up. Seeing as the chief gave them five minutes, she wanted to make something unique of them. The bullpen was too hot and stuffy at the moment, as someone forgot to turn the air condition on.

"Let's go get a breather. I'm gonna choke in here…" Judy said, jumping off her seat and heading to the bullpen door. Nick followed immediately afterwards. Jimmy hesitated for a while, but eventually hopped off his chair and ran up to the duo.

"Officer Wilde!" He called out his name, joining the duo as they exited back into the lobby.

"Yeah?" Nick asked.

Jimmy couldn't help biting his lip at the chance of a conversation, "You have no idea how long I've waited for this!"

"I dunno…" Nick deadpanned, assuming Jimmy was referring to the briefing, "Roll calls are pretty drab, if you ask me."

"No, I mean finally meeting you, the first fox in the ZPD, in person!" Jimmy rebutted, causing Nick's expression to become confused. He wasn't shocked, but he certainly was at least mildly surprised that his feats weren't unheard of.

"And why'd that be?" Nick asked. Judy couldn't help but smile endearingly at how proud the younger officer looked.

"Well, you're a role model to me," Jimmy began to explain, while keeping that same elated grin on his face. "At first, I never thought they'd let me in, but when I heard it on the news that a fox joined the force, I didn't want to waste any time!"

"Thanks, I suppose?" Nick responded somewhat sheepishly, even though his face was anything but sheepish. Of all things, he least expected someone to join the police because of the adulation he had for him.

"Officer Hopps." Being the more sociable of the two, Judy interjected to dispense some of the awkwardness that had arisen, "Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, too," Jimmy said, greeting the rabbit just as warmly. Seeing that they were approaching the door, he let Judy go out first, "After you."

Moved by this display of chivalry, Judy giggled pleasantly, "Thanks…"
Front of the ZPD headquarters

12:03 PM

As the three made their way out of the building, they were treated with a peculiar sight. A male leopard stood in front of the building, leaning against a black car. He looked like a film character, to put it very simply. He wore a black leather trench coat that revealed a grey sweater underneath, dark grey jeans and black sunglasses with slightly oval lenses. He held a cigarillo in his left hand, while keeping his other hand in his pocket. He blew out a cloud of smoke from his mouth, and revealed an ever so low and soft-spoken voice, "So… this is where Zootopia's finest convene."

Judy was definitely surprised by this cat's demeanor. He seemed as though he didn't really belong in this world. Nevertheless, the doe had to address him, "Can we help you?"

At this notion, the leopard moved away from his car and approached the officers, almost gliding as he walked towards them. He folded the right hand side of his jacket to reveal a badge on the inside. Not just any badge – this was the badge of the Mammalian Bureau of Investigation. "Special Agent Leopold Pardrick, MBI," To say that all three police officers were awestruck was an understatement: as this fellow already looked like a cool cat to begin with, his line of work was icing on the cake. The agent concealed his badge, "I'm here for a meeting with Chief Bogo in a few minutes. Happened to see him around?"

At first, the fact that the agent was due to meet their chief in a similar time as they were seemed like a coincidence in Nick's eyes, "Well, we were about to have a meeting with him in a few minutes, as well…"

"Really?" Pardrick was pleasantly surprised, "I guess we should wait and see if we're going together." He then looked towards the ZPD door. His gaze shifted to the three officers, and he wanted to get on their good side, now that he'd already introduced himself. So, he extended his cigarillo box to them, to see if they wanted to light one before heading upstairs.

Judy was quick to refuse on both her own, and Nick's behalf, knowing well that neither of them were smokers, "No, thank you. We don't smoke." However, she didn't know about Jimmy. She nudged her eyebrows at him questioningly, but the Arctic fox shook his head – he was no smoker either.

"Oh, good for you…" Pardrick remarked, as he took another drag from his own, almost fully smoked cigarillo. In a matter of seconds, he was blowing the smoke out his nostrils. For an MBI agent, a smoking addiction was not something to expect, "It's kind of a guilty pleasure. I guess I'll finish this just in time for us to go upstairs, then."

Regardless of his smoking addiction, Agent Pardrick came across as very impressive. To affirm one of their earlier assumptions, he looked and felt straight out of an action movie. Even Nick, the cornerstone for smug and snarky behavior, acknowledged it. He moved over to Judy and whispered into her ear. "He's got style…"

"So, how long have you three been in the force?" Pardrick interjected, curious about the officers, now that he was talking to them.

"Officer Judy Hopps," Judy was the first to introduce herself. "Almost two years for me, sir."

"Officer Wilde," Nick grinned smugly. "First anniversary incoming for me…"

"Still green…" Pardrick commented dryly, noticing that all of these were apprentice officers when
it came to time spent on the force. Hopefully adept, if they were skilled and dedicated. At the same
time, he realized the Arctic fox still hadn't replied, "What about you?"

"I…" Jimmy stuttered, feeling a sudden lack of confidence, fully aware of Pardrick's indignant
reaction at the responses from Judy and Nick. Eventually, he summoned up his courage, "I'm fresh
out of the academy, but I was top of my class." He topped it off with a proud, if somewhat nervous
smile, looking towards the leopard.

Pardrick took his last drag as he listened to the white fox talk. Just after he blew out the smoke, he
made a remark that was easy to take the wrong way, "It's gonna be a fun ride, baby…"

Jimmy's smile melted into an expression of aversion, as he missed the point of Pardrick's remark
and assumed some perverted intentions. Taking a few glances to either of his sides, he whispered
into Judy's ear, "I need an adult…"

Judy rolled her eyes, and gave him an elbow nudge to the ribs, "We're all adults."

"Oh," Jimmy assumed a normal posture once more, awkwardly staring about.

In a matter of seconds, Pardrick doused his cigarillo and threw it into the nearest garbage bin. The
throw was a direct hit. That done, the leopard started walking towards the door more briskly than
before, ready to meet Chief Bogo. "Done and done… Let's get a move on."

Without further ado, the three officers followed the leopard. What Chief Bogo had in store for
them, they did not know, but given that the appearance of a federal agent for the same purpose
occurred simultaneously, one could think that it was more than a coincidence.

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Chief Bogo's office

12:05 PM

Bogo stood watch at the front door of his office, waiting patiently for the MBI agent and the three
officers to arrive. Scanning the surrounding hallway, he heaved a sigh – his position at work was
the most demanding, and there were times that he wished he could sit back and relax. In due time,
he saw all four of the mammals making their way towards the office. Pardrick was the first in cue,
due to his gait being the longest. The buffalo greeted the feline just as he was about to close the
gap between the two of them, "Good afternoon, Agent Pardrick."

"Nice to meet ya, Chief," That said and done, they shook each other's hand, and Bogo courteously
motioned the MBI agent to make his way inside his office and take a seat.

By the time he expected the three officers to do the same, he saw them awkwardly standing three
feet away from the door, as if they were waiting for something – they seemed to be convinced that
they were not allowed in with Pardrick. Bogo sighed, then called them over, "What are you three
waiting for?" He waved his hand to motion them to come inside. After exchanging glances, the
three tiny police officers entered the office. They felt a dose of relief, as they saw that the buffalo
wouldn't scold them in front of a stranger, let alone a federal agent. On the other hand, Judy was
excited at the thought that the three of them could be assigned to work with the MBI, but
considered it a bit of a stretch. Jimmy was even more anxious to know what was in store, while
Nick couldn't care less either way.

Bogo was seated at his desk, while Pardrick sat to his right. The three officers took their seats in
front of Bogo's desk, so that they could face their superior officer. Without further ado, the chief
addressed the three first, in order to explain the assignment.
"Officers Hopps, Wilde, Frost: this is the reason you are here today. Agent Leopold Pardrick of the MBI is working on a case of serious criminal activity regarding the unauthorized smuggling of reptile eggs into the city limits. As this is sensitive material, I believed it would only be fitting that the two mammals that solved the Night Howler Scandal were assigned to work with Agent Pardrick. This also proves a great chance for our new recruit to learn, as the City Hall demanded that it would be an excellent chance for a Valedictorian to shine through."

Nick was not pleased at this realization. His smug smile turned into a frown, and his ears folded back and drooped downward at the very notion of looking after a cop who had next to no field experience. He immediately protested, albeit subtly, "Are you trying to say the rookie's going with us?"

"Yes, I am." Bogo rebutted, and hardened his gaze upon the red fox, "And I shall remind you to address your colleagues with respect." The Arctic fox's initial excitement briefly dropped, seeing that Nick seemed so dismissive of him.

Seeing how he wasn't getting anywhere, Nick merely rolled his eyes, sat back and folded his arms, which made Bogo's glare even more menacing. He didn't even bother trying to dissuade the chief from his intentions. Judy interjected to prevent an argument from breaking out, "Sir? With all due respect, I believe on-the-job training for novices should be handled by more experienced officers, if I'm not mistaken."

"You are not mistaken, indeed." Bogo assured his agreement with her, but quickly took his turn to rationalize and explain his decision, "However, you forget that you have an experienced MBI agent by your side. He has all the skills, and more, than the average police officer of the ZPD."

For all the awkward implications that teaming Jimmy with the duo had, Bogo raised an important point. Judy felt dumb for glossing over it, "I suppose so…"

"Which is not to say you and Wilde are average." Bogo continued, in order to solidify the trust he had in the two officers, "I wouldn't entrust Officer Frost to you two, if I didn't trust you as well. Hopps more so, but still."

Nick couldn't fight the urge to make another whimsical quip, "Oh, that is high praise, sir." Naturally, this elicited an angry glare from the Cape buffalo.

"If the chief believes that you're qualified, I won't question his judgment," Pardrick condoned Bogo's decision to assign the three officers he had just met to work with him. He was also bent on providing a more elaborate explanation of the aforementioned case, so he continued, "Without further ado, I'd like to stress that this case is not only a violation of the Wildlife Conservation & Protection Policy, but whoever's behind it may have some ulterior motives. A string of smugglings in a day and night is more than a coincidence. That's why I want to be certain whether or not they present a threat to national security. Since Hopps and Wilde alone have managed to solve one conspiracy of such nature without backup, or the assistance of the law, I think we're going to get along swimmingly." The smile that Pardrick beamed was most certainly encouraging to both Judy and Nick, and not even Jimmy could restrain his excitement.

"Indeed," Bogo nodded in agreement to Pardrick's words. Seeing as everyone in the room had gone silent, Bogo wanted to know if anyone had anything more to say, "Any other questions?"

This inquiry was met with silence yet again. Pardrick shook his head, followed by Judy and Nick doing the same. As the last one to give a reaction, Jimmy shrugged in conformity.

"Very well. It is settled." Bogo announced, which meant that everyone inside the office had the
right to take their leave.

"Pleasure talking to you, chief." Pardrick said, rising from his chair to shake Bogo's hand as a farewell gesture. He then looked to his new colleagues, "Well, what are y'all waiting for? Let's get busy..." The cat glided off, turning to leave the office. Soon, Nick, Jimmy and Judy alike jumped off their seats to go on their mission. However, Judy was stopped by the deep, husky voice of the chief, "Hopps!"

"Yes, sir?" The rabbit swiftly turned back around, wondering what her superior wanted to say.

"Keep an eye on them," Bogo instructed, with a benign overtone ringing in his usual strictness, that showed he laid his utmost trust in Judy, "Wilde, and Frost alike." It would sound odd for him to say it out loud, but Bogo had indeed grown proud of the rabbit officer, despite their rugged history.

"Don't worry, sir. I won't let you down," Judy replied, saluting Bogo, who gave a single nod in response, with an ever so slight smile forming on the left of his mouth.

"Good. Now, move," the buffalo ended the exchange, prompting Judy to leave the office in order to catch up with the rest of her team, now numbering four, herself included. Working with an MBI agent was certainly something that didn't cross her mind. However, now that she was actually in it, she was willing to take every chance possible to make the best impression on him. How the others felt about this, she didn't know. What she knew is that she was probably having the case of her lifetime.

A new chapter just rolled into town! As well as some new OCs, one of which isn't mine: Jimmy Frost of "Born To Be Wilde" (my favorite Zootopia fanfic) has come to town, and he's just as eager to get into action as on the day he was created!

Jimmy Frost is property of Berserker88, and is used solely and exclusively with his permission.

I hope you enjoyed this new entry. Can't wait to get the ball rolling for the next one!
The Egg Hunt Begins

Chapter Summary

Not too long after Pardrick had explained the situation to the three officers, they've started making progress on uncovering who was behind the mysterious robberies. All that they see implies a familiar face.

12:10 PM

It wasn't long before the MBI agent, followed by three police officers, exited the ZPD headquarters. Even without taking a look, Pardrick could tell that some of them were more than delighted to be part of such a high-profile mission. The one that was clearly ecstatic was the novice Arctic fox officer. On the other hand, Nick walked along smoothly with no indication of his emotions on the matter.

"Isn't this exciting?!" Jimmy wasn't willing to quit on stirring up Nick's seemingly unfazed attention.

"Yup," Nick quipped dryly, "Just wait til we actually get started. That's when the real fun begins." He didn't expect the young fox to understand his sarcasm with this last remark. It seemed that the little bundle of white fur couldn't care less.

"We're going into action with the MBI!" Jimmy didn't bother to even think about what could go wrong, "I mean, what more could you want?"

"At this temperature, an umbrella and a fridge full of Pawpsicles," Nick rebuked. What was it with Jimmy and this chipperness he had in him? It almost reminded Nick of the day he met Judy, when she was still a blind optimist who naively disregarded risk, and took life's hardships for granted. Maybe the prospect of a negative outcome was more than Jimmy could handle. If that was the case, he had much to learn.

"I'll take care of the shade soon enough." Pardrick jumped into the conversation, as the group returned to his car. The feline MBI agent first opened the front right door of the car to allow Judy to take the co-driver seat, "Officer Hopps…"

"Thank you," Judy smiled affably, jumping onto the seat and strapping herself with a small-sized safety belt that she discovered – very convenient. Nick and Jimmy took the back seats, without such requirements. The cooled faux leather was much more comforting than the outside heat, and both foxes were starting to feel more at ease.

"This looks like a really cool car, Agent Pardrick," Jimmy couldn't help but express his admiration for the car, both its interior and exterior.

"It's a government car. It's got nothing on my personal Purrscche Panthera," Pardrick once again donned his sunglasses and started the engine, "Top speed of 164 miles per hour, zero to sixty in six seconds, a detailed GPS and comfy seats – all I need, for a modest price of one-hundred thousand dollars. And I don't regret a single buck I put into it..." the explanation was ended by Pardrick's paw pressing the gas pedal and beginning their ride to their next destination, which would
presumably be Pardrick's office. As he took off, the officers felt a brief rush of excitement, which went down as soon as they reached the highway.

"Wow, you sure don't have to worry about your monthly income," Nick assumed that judging by the quality of his clothing, and the description of his automobile's perks, this cat was very rich.

"No," Pardrick replied, "What we do have to worry about is what those egg thieves are up to. I'll explain everything when we get to the MBI headquarters, which should be in approximately…" At that moment, Pardrick took a look at his car watch, then out the window. He could see that the traffic has thickened up, which would slightly slow them down on the way. "20 minutes, if we're lucky. It usually gets really tight on the streets at this time."

"The headquarters are in west Savanna Central, right?" Judy entered the exchange curiously.

"That's right," Pardrick affirmed. However, after taking a side glance at her, his face lit up in sudden realization, "Oh, wait… I remember a certain Officer Hopps blackmailing a lead into cooperation two years ago. Threatened him arrest for felony tax evasion."

Judy's whole body immediately stiffened when Pardrick began talking about this. She had almost forgotten about the implications of the whole ordeal, and surely didn't expect the consequences to start haunting her after so much time. Her nose twitched anxiously. Nick was also taken into this, because he was on the receiving end of Judy's methods.

"Yeah, arresting someone for federal offenses isn't in the authority of a police officer. Technically, you broke the law in your struggle to uphold it." Pardrick made his otherwise light-hearted baritone sound much lower and more serious with that last remark. Judy's ears drooped downward in utter shame and fear, because it was at this moment that she knew, she messed up… Or did she?

Pardrick let out a chuckle of utter amusement. The charges initially set against her had been utterly dropped in light of what she had done for Zootopia, and no one spoke of it anymore. It turned out that the MBI agent was just joking with her.

"Don't worry. We let it all slide," Pardrick immediately prompted her to ease up on the matter, but not without raising his index finger "However, I will give you a fair warning to refrain from doing that in the future." He then turned his gaze towards the rear-view mirror and addressed Nick's side of the matter. As the one evading the taxes, Nick was guilty as charged, "By the way, Wilde, your criminal records have been expunged as soon as little ol' ex-mayor Dawn Bellwether was sent to jail." Nick heaved a sigh of relief, and sat back relaxedly.

Jimmy was quick enough to interject, in order to lighten the mood, "I bet that's when Chief Bogo said: Mayor Bellwether, ewe are under arrest!" The young fox topped off his best possible impression of Bogo's gravelly voice with hysterical laughter. This only elicited a suppressed, smug chuckle from Nick, and a giggling facepaw from Judy. Jimmy continued to laugh, until he noticed that Pardrick had taken off his glasses, staring at the rear-view mirror with a complete deadpan adorning his maw. Thinking that he was behaving inappropriately, Jimmy stopped and crossed his hands, looking shyly at Pardrick's reflection.

Soon, the leopard let out a manic chuckle of his own, more profound than anyone else's reaction to the pun, "Good one, Frost! Good one…" And thus, their sluggish ride through the cramp streets of Savanna Central continued…
After 30 painful minutes, and cramped rear ends, the quartet finally reached their destination. The leopard agent wasted no time leading his three police partners through the coldly lit hallways of the Mammalian Bureau of Investigation. It looked just as everyone described it before: uptight, secretive and unwelcoming. No one inside took the time to say hello to Pardrick, or take notice that three police officers had just entered the building. After a brief elevator ride, Pardrick led them inside his office. The room was much better lit than the rest of the building, and it looked more like a male cave than Chief Bogo's office. His two work computers were on opposite ends of his work desk. To the right was a small refrigerator, and to the left, a pool table built to be of a smaller size. Opposite of the pool table was a black couch. One peculiar detail was a stuffed iguana with pirate clothing that was positioned on the top shelf of his work desk.

"Alright, everyone," Pardrick announced, as he took off both his sunglasses and his impressive coat, and hung them on a rack that was adjacent to the window. "Make yourselves comfortable, because things are gonna get uncomfortable and really dirty really soon." As the three tiny officers seated themselves at the couch, the leopard approached the opposite side of the pool table, and leaned on it. "To make one thing crystal clear: if you need the help of professionals, just let me know. I'll secure their payment right away."

"What do you mean by that, Agent Pardrick?" Jimmy, being clueless on the matter, addressed the MBI agent inquisitively, his ears raising up with attention.

"It's a good thing that you're so eager to learn, Frost," Pardrick was relieved to know that the youngest of the three was the most inquisitive, "I'm talking about mammals who do things that fall outside of your MO. You know, full-body disguise artists, camera operators, trappers, whatever. They are certainly not going to work for free. Whom you're going to call depends on their specialty."

"Right…" Jimmy nodded.

"Now…" Pardrick proceeded to explain the first and foremost reason that the crew was gathered here today: their case. He paced around his office with his arms behind his back, "The first report we received was that of 20 crocodile eggs stolen from a farm on Outback Island, eighteen days ago. The thieves tried to smuggle them into the Rainforest District, but were intercepted by police officers from Precinct 3 around the Canals. Unfortunately, only one of the perpetrators was apprehended, and she escaped Central Prison recently. The other case happened merely five days ago, where seven Jackson's chameleons mysteriously disappeared from the Vine Reptile Sanctuary, also in the Rainforest District. All of the aforementioned species are listed as threatened with extinction, and I, for one, will not stand for this kind of irresponsible treatment of birds, reptiles or any other wild animal. We need to figure out who's behind all of these operations and we need to do it quickly." He made his point all the more clear by clicking his index claw against the wooden surface of the pool table.

Listening to Pardrick's explanation, Judy could see that he passionately cared about the matter at hand. She found it noble when a mammal would go out of his way to save wild creatures and the environment that all mammals lived off of. By the end, she was willing to show him that she was genuinely interested in participating. Therefore, she continued in his stead, "So, I guess we should try and figure out where the aforementioned prisoner went, seeing as she's our only lead."

Pardrick rapidly shifted his gaze towards Judy, his train of thought brought to an awkward halt. Despite his dislike for being interrupted, he did not protest. The rabbit officer read his mind in a
way that was helping their investigation, "That's a reasonable first step, Hopps. Fortunately for
your idea, your chief has given me access to all the inmate files in Zootopia's prisons. This one's
called Victoria Vixman, Arctic fox. Used to live in Lemming Avenue, Tundratown."

The leopard wasted no time in handing out the photographs of the aforementioned Arctic fox.
Jimmy was a little let down that she was one of his kind, but also paid attention to her every trait,
"Last known sighting was in south Savanna Central. What I need you to do is to track her down,
and see what she's up to. If she meets up with anyone for any reason whatsoever, keep an eye on
them as well. You have complete access to the traffic camera database, to see both older and
current recordings. You wanna trace any vehicles, use the other computer. If there are any officers
on lookout for her, alert them as well – you want them to give you a hand wherever. Buzz me, or
send me a message when you find something – my phone number's on the sticker over there. I have
another boring court hearing to deal with in a few minutes..." At this, moment, Pardrick was
donning a suit jacket, to have a more formal appearance for the aforementioned trial.

"Yes, sir!" Judy nodded, with a stern expression on her face. Her insistence on formalities made
Pardrick more embarrassed than anything.

"Sir? Oh, come on, now. We're partners... Just Pardrick will do." the leopard deadpanned, as he
adjusted the sleeves on his jacket.

"We've gotcha covered, Leopardrick," Nick assured the agent, giving him a thumbs up and a wink.

Pardrick chuckled upon noticing that a sense of humor was something he had in common with the
fox, "Good one, babe. Now, you want something to cool down with? You got some popsicles right
in that fridge over there," The agent pointed towards the small fridge to the right of the office. "If
you need to get your brain cogs to spin, you can play a game or two. I gotta get going now. Don't
screw this up."

With this notion, Pardrick placed the keys to the office onto the pool table, and left with a walk
more brisk than usual. Now, the three officers couldn't count on any direct help from anyone –
they were on their own.

"Babe? How dare he?" Nick quipped, embarrassed that he, like Jimmy, was on the receiving end of
a 'baby'-derived word that held no deep context. Judy, who relished in poking fun at Nick, got up
on her feet and pinched his right cheek teasingly.

"It kinda works," Judy commented, as she jumped off the couch. Nick merely heaved an
exasperated sigh in response. Before he could refocus his thoughts, the rabbit officer was already at
the work desk, "Well, let's get going!"

She jumped eagerly onto the seat, immediately logging into the traffic camera database. She found
the password written on a small paper sheet that Pardrick left by the desk. Nick and Jimmy sat to
her left, as they all focused their attention on cameras around Savanna Central. Judy wasn't known
for her patience – she merely spent five seconds at a given camera, spying around the locations
they were filming, before moving to the next one. Time after time, she'd look back at the photos of
the escaped prisoner to see if she was hanging around. It was a task that was so simple one would
grow tired of it in a matter of minutes.

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*Baobab Canopy Park, 37 Dollowbush Street, Savanna Central*

*1:30 PM*
Meanwhile, Milo was out in the field yet again, having visited two other parks for the same purpose as before. One of them proved to be inadequate, while the other one was just right. Even though he had quite a lot of different kinds of ambiences with decent crowding, he chose a third park, because this park had no traffic at all, and was fairly vacant when it came to attendance. It didn't hurt in case the ambient sound editors wanted some leverage with the volume relation between the main ambience and crowd noise. With a smile of confidence, he set down his peculiar microphone and hit the record button again. Only, this time, he found a small tree stump to sit on, to rest his back from standing all day long – he sat in a way to look at both the street and the cobblestone path next to him, if someone suspicious were to pass by. He was certain that he found a very convenient place to finish his day, thanks to the aforementioned technical perks.

Yet it made him feel very uneasy – it was eerily quiet here. Only once every five minutes would a car pass by, and not a single bicycle. People didn't walk through the area at all, for some reason. After a good while, the buck started to wonder if the place was some kind of criminal hub, where dangerous mammals hid in the streets, lurking for their next victim. He was short enough to hide behind the hedge that surrounded the park, and had several bushes concealing both him and his microphone, so he believed he didn't need to worry about being spotted for now.

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_Pardrick's office_

2:40 PM

After two hours of searching and taking turns with Nick and Jimmy, occasionally to snack on some of the popsicles that Pardrick had in his fridge, Judy had no luck. Her eyes were turning sore and bloodshot, and her ears drooped from the exhaustion of searching and the lack of results. She furrowed through all of Savanna Central, and even beyond, but the Arctic vixen was proving to be all but elusive. To the eye of the beholder, Judy seemed as though she was aimlessly staring at the computer screen, waiting for something – anything – to happen. Her fingers were fidgeting all over the table's surface, and if she could, she would thump her foot so much that it would drill a hole in the floor. As she turned her head to her left, she noticed something that definitely didn't lift her spirit.

Jimmy was not even beside her, let alone paying attention to what was going on.

The young Arctic fox was assembling pool balls on the table. Her nose started twitching ever more erratically, and her eyebrows began furrowing with anger. If there was anything that got to her, it was when someone was dilly-dallying about when attention was crucial. At first glance, Nick seemed to share her sentiments, rolling his eyes and shaking his head with an exasperated sigh.

"Frost, what are you doing?" Judy asked, her voice already shaking nervously.

"Oh, just passing time," Jimmy replied innocently. Once he assembled all the balls on the far end of the table, Nick was quick to prompt him to move aside.

"Step aside, snowball. Wait 'til you see a seasoned player score with the first hit…" that said, the red fox placed the cue ball, and took the first shot. With only one strong move, Nick managed to scatter the balls all over the table, and score three in that single hit. Nick's first move lived up to his bluster, and Jimmy had to match it in order to win.

"Like one fox was bad enough…" Judy's anguished groaning was heard from behind, as her head slumped onto the desktop.

"Your turn," Nick sported his smug, half-lidded grin, holding no expectations whatsoever from the
Arctic fox. Jimmy was eager to make a move anyway, and promptly struck a striped ball. This, as in any eight-ball pool game, marked his decision.

"That makes me solids." Nick remarked, observing the rookie officer making his progress through the game. He struck ball, after ball, after ball. It was only when he failed to score the eight-ball that Nick was on the move. Even though he eventually tied the score with Jimmy, he didn't manage to win the game either. They haggled for several turns, until it was Jimmy who ended up making the decisive strike that assured his victory. He could only top it off with a proud smile, looking back at Nick. The red fox seemed to acknowledge his defeat without hesitation or shame, but he couldn't help blustering even then. "Beginner's Luck…"

"Can you two please at least try to be of any help?" This was as long as Judy could last without losing her cool. She was so incensed by their frivolous behavior that she had to let it out as loudly as possible. It was selfish and unfair that she was the only one paying attention. Nick, however, didn't see it that way.

"Hey, Carrots, I've been sweating my tail off on that chair for more than two hours," Nick remarked, citing lack of progress as an excuse to have some downtime. "When something actually happens, let me know." This only made Judy growl, as she turned her head back towards the screen, shifting to the next camera.

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**Baobab Canopy Park**

Milo was still recording, but this time, his ears twitched at a sudden commotion from across the street. Thanks to his microphone's sensitivity, he could easily hear that someone there was being roughed up, judging by the fearful pleas of a female, and two distinctly male voices. He immediately crouched with fear, and listened onwards, with the record button still pressed. There was some odd commotion going on out there, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was, due to being unable to see what was happening. However, the sound of the thugs' voices gave him a clue into what happened.

"Careful with those!" A husky tenor demanded.

"I am being careful!" A more guttural growling voice bayed, with a whispering tone. "Keep your voice down, dammit…"

"Well, it's about time you showed up!" a soprano suddenly interjected.

"Vicky, get in the van!" The growler snapped again. "We gotta get these to Frankie Melone!" After this, all that the rabbit could hear was the opening and closing of the van's doors, an engine start, and a roar, as it quickly drove off, to the left. After Milo took a look at the aftermath, he realized that he had just recorded a pet store robbery. He was completely taken aback by this realization. He didn't know how to go about it, because it was out of his hands. He assumed that the shop owner had it covered, and called the police herself. Whatever the case was, he felt that he was lingering here for too long. Without further ado, he hit the 'stop record' button and began packing his things. He checked once more to see if his motorcycle, his means of transportation, was intact. Luckily, the criminals passed by it without a second thought, which meant that he was safe for the time being. With enough work done, our sound designer was headed home.

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**Pardrick's office**

Luckily, Judy observed this robbery through the lens of the traffic camera. She easily noticed her
suspect clinging to the van, as she waited for someone to show up. Almost immediately afterwards, she was treated with the sight of a spotted hyena and a giant armadillo hauling two sizeable crates inside the van's trunk, before all three figures drove away. All that their departure uncovered was a small cruiser motorcycle that was parked in front of the shop. She quickly zoomed in, in hopes of examining the license plate, and she could clearly read the number. The knowledge of having a possible lead was more than enough to feed her default vigor. Her ears flung up and she immediately bayed a command to her colleague, "Nick! I need you to run a plate for me!"

Both foxes jolted at her sudden call to duty, leaving their cue sticks aside. As requested, only Nick moved towards the other computer, "Oh, you got 'em?"

"Maybe," Judy said, hoping that whomever was driving this vehicle had something to do with this. "You running?"

"What's the number?" Nick inquired, already preparing to type the number in for checking.

"90SPDDMN," Judy recited carefully, looking not to misspell anything.

"90SPDDMN. Got it. Let's see whom you belong to..." Nick meticulously typed the plate number in. and entered the required commands to commence a search. The loading merely lasted a little more than 30 seconds, and all the data required showed up on the screen soon enough. It read as follows:

**LICENSE PLATE:** 90SPDDMN

**OWNER:** Miles Rabberts

**ADDRESS:** 18 Elephant-grass Boulevard, Savanna Central, Zootopia

"Miles Rabberts, 18 Elephant-grass Boulevard, Savanna Central." Nick recited the last two pieces of information, and took a careful look at his photograph. He was certainly more than familiar, "I think that's the bunny we met on the way to the station."

Judy's face shined with confidence. For the first time in over two hours, it became apparent that they were getting somewhere. The tension had been broken, and seeing as they already met this potential suspect, the doe officer was sure that they were on the right track. She also hoped that he might have some audible evidence to back up the visual evidence they saw: she remembered very well that he was acquainted with sound design and recording. She furrowed her brows and grinned triumphantly, "Bingo... We have a lead."

"Carrots, aren't you forgetting something?" Nick interjected, pointing at the van that was making its way down the street – he was right. They needed to do something about the escaping thieves.

"Chief Bogo gave a case file for an escaped prisoner to Snarlov, Wolfard and..." It was in this moment that Judy snapped her fingers, "Radio Clawhauser and tell him to have someone on that van's tail. We need to see if Milo knows something we don't."

Before Jimmy could do anything, Nick immediately reached for his radio, and clicked the transmission button "Officer Wilde to dispatch!"

Fortunately, the response from the headquarters was swift and sure, "Officer Clawhauser to Officer Wilde. Over."
"We've got a BOLO – pet store robbers on the run," Nick declaimed, "They're in a white van, heading down Dollowbush Street, Savanna Central. Put all nearby officers on alert. Over."

"Roger that. I'll send out the info. White van, right? Over," Clawhauser's tenor once again chimed in.

"That's right – a white van," Nick nodded his head, "I gotta go, now. Over and out." That being said, the fox ended the exchange. He and his two colleagues, on the other hand, had some less exciting work to do, while someone else would have the fun of chasing down crooks. Thanks to Pardrick leaving the keys to his office in their possession, they didn't have to worry about anyone sneaking inside. As the agent said, all they had to do was contact him in case something had changed for the better in their investigation.

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**Thomson's Apartments, Apartment 15**

3:00 PM

Milo spent his entire drive home pondering on his decision regarding the crime he had just witnessed. Surely the police would do something about it – with so many security cameras, their workflow had to be failsafe. Still, there was that one bit of conscience that told him to come forward and let them know, anyway. Therefore, as his train of thought always drove, he chose to say or do nothing at all, before doing anything wrong. He wasn't even going to let Steve know about it. He wanted to let it rest.

When he entered his apartment, not much had changed. Steve was probably still working, or doing whatever he was supposed to do – he certainly wasn't in the living room. Just as he locked his own door, Milo could feel one of his pockets vibrating evenly, accompanied by the sound of a familiar ringtone. It was the Viper app that he used to keep in touch with everyone. When he reached to pick up, he saw that the caller was none other than his mother Veronica. For all he could assume, she was probably calling about his progress at work. He sighed, and answered, all the while making his way to his room.

"Hi, honey! How are you doing?" The mid-aged rabbit greeted Milo heartily. By rabbit standards, she was not too attractive, but she had an endearing smile that made up for all her physical shortcomings, and as such, made Milo feel a little more at ease. It had been days since the sound designer had heard from his parents, and he was actually quite eager to talk to them.

"Hey, mom," Milo smiled, removing the recorder bag from his shoulders and gently setting it onto the floor. "I just got home after a hard day's work." Upon taking a better look at his mother's surroundings, Milo immediately noticed that something was amiss. It was not their family home. It was a cramped room with a double bed, and a tiny window, "Whom are you visiting?"

"We actually live here," Much to the younger rabbit's dismay, Veronica's face hardened upon uttering these words.

"What? What do you mean?" Milo began to feel increasingly distressed.

"Is that Milo?" The gravelly voice of Gerard, Milo's father, was heard. Soon enough, the mid-aged rabbit peeped into the phone camera's view – portly, but still sturdily built, he passed many of his traits onto his son, one of them being his red fur.

"Oh, yes, it is," Veronica replied, as the father soon began to approach the phone.

"We've just settled in this dirty hostel room, after we got evicted from home," That last clause
made Milo's throat contract. His eyes started to open wider, and he gulped with shame. His parents, kicked out of their own home? Not a chance! This wasn't happening.

"What? Evic-," The son's voice broke. He had to take a deep breath to articulate his thoughts, "What do you mean evicted?"

"We've been kicked out of home because we're unable to pay up taxes for the house," Gerard replied, folding his arms, and aiming at his son with an ice-cold gaze that made his hair stand up. Milo was appropriately speechless. Flabbergasted, even. They were telling the sad, painful truth. It became all too apparent that their jobs were failing to bring enough income, "The way things have been going, it was a matter of time before it happened."

"It's really that bad?" Milo inquired, as if he was still unable to process the information he received. This only prompted his father to shake his head, to show how disheartened he was by the way Milo was taking this. He was clearly scared for himself, rather than his parents.

"It's gonna get a whole lot worse if you stay that stupid course of yours…" Gerard wasted no time with these accusing words, because he thought for a long time that it was time for Milo to wake up. Unfortunately, his son was still yearning to sleep in his illusion.

"Oh, so now it's my fault again?" When adversity struck, Milo was quick to lay blame on others.

"There's a difference between not wanting to pay the bills and not being able to," Gerard countered steadily, his ears beginning to point backwards, as an indication that he was growing ever angrier. He topped it off with raising his voice, "We. Are not. Able to do it anymore!"

"What's this got to do with me? They're your jobs." Milo tried to strike the ball back into Gerard's side of the court.

"All that just to avoid any basic responsibility… I can't believe you ended up being such a selfish jerk." It was at that idiotic response that Gerard could no longer contain neither his disappointment, nor his anger. While a short temper was something that could be called a trademark of his, this time it lit up much faster than usual.

"Oh, Gerry…" Feeling that things were starting to go out of hand, Veronica tried to calm it back down.

"What?" Gerard didn't think it was worth trying to dissuade him from his opinion, "Look at him! It's hard for him to open up and show some backbone? I don't want to believe I've been raising a coward for 28 years!"

"Steve's not going to want to lend me anything more!" Instead of suggesting an actual solution to the problem, Milo tried in vain to appeal to his parents' pity. Fortunately, Steve couldn't hear any of this because of the acoustic isolation, "I'll figure something out…"

"The day you figure something out will be the death of us all, Milo!" Everything that the younger buck was saying was only twisting the knife harder. "Take a chance, God damn it! Do something yourself!"

"There's nothing more I can do for ZBS!" Milo started shouting, all of a sudden, trying to aggressively tell his father off. He still insisted that a promotion was impossible. Gerard, being someone who had been to many different venues in his lifetime, and experienced varying levels of success, wasn't buying it at all.

"Oh, is that you talking, or that schmuck, Xander?" Gerard knew about the lynx from many
previous conversations, and knew him as a rather pretentious individual who advised Milo to stay on the same position, because he wasn't bound to get anywhere higher, "Have you ever thought that the guy might be playing you for a sap and scraping up the work you deserve behind your back? Have you thought that maybe it would be good to actually talk to your boss, instead of letting some employee determine what you're gonna do? Have you ever once thought that you might be wrong about anything, Milo?!"

"What do you want from me, dad?!" Milo pouted, "To change the world?! They abused me before, they abuse me now, and they'll abuse me for as long as I live, no matter where I work! I was always different from everyone else in whatever I did! I can't shake off fate…"

"You're not different," Gerard shook his head, his voice having lowered already – he was just about to give up. He had had enough of Milo's unfettered wailing. "You're a disgrace. It's the same story every single time. Someday, you're going to end up all alone, and you'll have nobody to blame, but yourself… I'm going for a walk. I'm done talking to you for good…" With these words, the mid-aged Buck walked out of view, all the while holding his brow with his hand.

"Fine! Go on! Who needs you, anyway?" Milo pouted defiantly, hoping for some understanding from his mother. Understandably, she wasn't buying this futile appeal to sympathy either. Moreover, she completely agreed with Gerard.

"This has gone far enough, young mammal." The female rabbit hardened her gaze once more, "If you don't do something, we'll starve over here!"

"For crying out loud, I already said I can't get promoted!" Milo stayed determined, in the worst way imaginable.

"You don't know that, Milo!" Veronica snapped back, "Why is it so hard for you to-"

Milo's simmering desire to press the hang-up button was stronger than any conscience he may have had at that moment. He swiftly turned his phone into airplane mode, lest they would call again, to tell him the same story all over.

Nevertheless, Milo could feel a change in his mood. For his defense mechanisms, this was rock bottom. He slumped into his computer chair, slamming both of his front paws on his forehead, and then digging his fingernails into the skin, trembling with whiny angst that would be fitting only of a petulant child that refused to see reason. He knew that everything that his parents were saying held weight, and that alone made him eat his heart out. He couldn't come up with any sort of reaction that seemed even vaguely normal. He had completely run out of excuses. As the pain in his brain grew, he slowly came to see how askew his thoughts were. He couldn't blame his mother: her business as a hair stylist wasn't going as well as it used to when he last heard, and Gerard struggled to find any sort of job. Steve wasn't to blame either, because he couldn't afford to cover up for Milo's expenses due to upcoming upgrades to his own studio. He had no one to blame, but himself.

He had to accept that he was self-centered and narrow-minded. All he needed to do was sit still, and figure out what his destiny would be. What was he going to do with his work? What was he going to do to help the ones he loved? Deep down, he loved his parents more than life, and was willing to do anything for them, if he could. Unfortunately, he never believed he could thus far. His mind and soul were in turmoil, because something was going on, deep inside. A spark began to simmer in his heart that he hadn't felt for a long time. It told Milo that the bounties of the world were outside, and that only those with audacity enough could reach them. This spark held the power to make real change, and thus far it had terrified him. For the first time, he was wondering if his current mindset was a normal way to act.
It all fell on his nod.

Well, I hope you folks enjoyed a little more of both OC and canon characters interacting and being shown in parallel! Needless to say, writing arguments is a really tense task, might I add. All that I can promise is that Milo has a lot to learn...

Cheerio!
Caught In The Game

Chapter Summary

Milo is interrogated on the pet shop robbery that he bore witness to previously.

Thomson's Apartments, Apartment 15

3:15 PM

For more than a dozen minutes, Milo was sitting still. He was still at a loss for ideas for what he was supposed to do in order to take care of the situation that unfolded at his former home. There was nothing he could do right off the bat, and time was running low. If his parents were in as bad a situation as they said they were with their work, he needed to think of something in as little time as possible. In the meantime, he would tend to today's work – he turned his computer on, in order to transfer his recordings to his company's cloud storage on Zoogle Drive.

Before he could refocus his attention, a concerned Steve opened the studio door, peeping inside to see if there was anything wrong with his friend, "So, how did you do?"

"I did just fine..." Milo didn't face the wildebeest, lest he'd see that he was troubled from the past conversation. Feeling a slight rumble in his stomach, he realized that he spent his whole work day having had nothing but breakfast. Promptly, he turned around, "Is there anything to eat?"

"Oh, yeah," Steve nodded his head, raising a comic book that was in his right hand, "Pizza dude should be here in twenty minutes."

How typical...

"Alright. I guess I can wait that long," Milo replied, nodding in understanding. "I just need to make backup copies of these recordings. I'll talk to you when I'm done."

"Got it..." Steve muttered lazily, then returned to the living room to continue reading.

Without further ado, Milo hopped off his chair, and reached for his recorder. Setting it down, he connected it to his computer via USB. On the one hand, he was copying the files to his computer's integrated hard drive. On the other hand, he was uploading the files on the Stagart Studios Zoogle Drive, in order for the ambient sounds to be used later during post-production. In the meantime, he removed the track top he was wearing, and placed it back inside his wardrobe. Had he not have been riled up by the recent argument with his parents, he would have done it sooner.

After about 18 minutes, both of the aforementioned tasks were done successfully. Milo could finally afford some time to rest, and talking to Steve was the best way to make use of that time. As he opened the door, he could see that his wildebeest roommate was sitting on the couch. By the looks and sound of it, he clearly wasn't watching television, which made the rabbit's nose twitch curiously. He walked over to the back of the couch, and performed a high leap to the top, sitting beside Steve's head. It turned out that he was reading a tie-in comic to the iconic Jurassic Park. Being one of the most successful pieces of dinosaur-related media in popular culture, it still influenced modern depictions of extinct animals 25 years later, leaving aside the fact that they...
were generally outdated in terms of accuracy.

"Jurassic Park? Again?" Milo puzzled, failing to see how Steve could read the same thing more than ten times over and not grow tired.

"Never gets old..." Steve smiled sheepishly, obviously mesmerized by the art style. Milo couldn't say the same about the comic's portrayal of a particular theropod dinosaur that was shown on the current pages.

"Eek," the rabbit pointed to the aforementioned dinosaur. Even though he was no paleontologist, he knew as much as Steve taught him, "Can't say the same about Dilophos..." he stuttered, before giving up on the awkward name altogether, "-whatever spitting venom..."

"Can't blame 'em for using artistic license, bro," Steve suggested a counter-argument that had nothing to do with science, but considerably more so with style. "Good thing that mammalkind is a long shot away from being able to recreate these guys. But at the same time, it'd be really cool to see a living, breathing dinosaur."

Listening to more of his friend's almost calf-like fantasies, Milo couldn't help but chuckle. However, as his memory started passively jogging itself, it brought back what happened earlier that day. He neglected to tell his parents, because that would not have made their already awful conversation any better. He promised himself that he wouldn't have told anyone until he had a precise idea of what he should say. However, the compulsion of his conscience was stronger than anything his overthinking mind could throw at him, "Steve, I happened upon something really suspicious today."

Quizzically mumbling at first, Steve was more than willing to hear his friend out, "Do tell."

"I think I managed to record a-" No sooner had Milo begun to explain, than the doorbell had rung.

"Pizza's here!" The portly wildebeest's reflexes were suddenly tantamount to those of an athlete, as he jolted vigorously from the couch and tramped towards the door with glee. However, when he lifted the lid of the peephole, he saw no one. Not even the top of the pizza delivery mammal's cap. Ergo, he presumed that it was someone more fit for Milo's size, "Milo, it's for you."

With a twitch of both his ears and his nose, Milo hopped off of the couch, finding it odd at best that someone so small was delivering a large-sized pizza, which he knew was Steve's preferred size. However, when he peeped through his own door's hole, he could feel a surge of numbness course everywhere from the tips of his ears to the ends of his toes. They were police officers. Not just any police officers, for that matter. They were the same two that he ran into earlier today, plus another strange cop he hadn't seen at their side before. He hastily lowered the lid of the peephole and put on the chain door guard. Only then would he unlock the door and open up.

"Oh, it's you again," Milo tried his best to look at ease, spying at the officers standing in the poorly lit corridor.

"You know these guys?" Steve's sudden intrusion into the exchange didn't help at all. If anything, it made Milo feel uncomfortable.

"Shush!" The rabbit whispered, prompting the wildebeest to figuratively zip it.

"Mr. Rabberts," Judy was very quick to divert the other rabbit's attention to the matter at hand. She took out a notebook, along with a pen shaped like a carrot, "We have some questions about the robbery of a pet store."
"Robbery?" She was definitely on Milo's trail. The buck rabbit, unsure of his next step, strived to look as clueless as possible, "Where?"

"37 Dollowbush Street, in south Savanna Central," Nick took the word on, in order to elaborate why he was being questioned. "Your motorcyle was parked in front of Komodo's Pets, when two mammals, namely an armadillo and a hyena, took two boxes from said store and loaded them into a white van before driving off. Do you happen to be aware of any of this?"

Milo's nose twitched in shock – all he heard were the voices. He was afraid that they saw him as a potential suspect – if there was anything that he knew, it was that they were hard to dissuade when they made an assumption they wanted to have verified. Yet again, he felt relatively safe, because there was nothing he had to lie about, "I didn't see what they did. I was in the park across the street, recording ambient sound. The only reason my ride was there was because there were no free spaces available closer. However, I managed to record the whole thing. When they started roughing up the owner, I hid from view, because I didn't want to get involved, or have them see me. Maybe the recordings can be of help to you?"

For all the initial suspicion, Judy was convinced was Milo was telling the truth. He seemed to be very meek, if insecure in his explanation, and didn't give away signs that he was trying to protect the perpetrators. With a positive rapport established, Judy wanted to press on with interrogating their witness, "Okay. So, you just open the door, let us hear the evidence, and we'll be on our way. Is that alright?"

Milo looked down for a split second, hesitantly puzzling. Eventually, he saw the greater good in it, "Alright. Give me a second." Seeing as the two foxes that accompanied Judy were too tall to fit through Milo's door, the rabbit closed and locked the smaller door, "Steve, why don't you open the whole door? There are two foxes, and they're on the tall side."

With short work, the wildebeest unlocked and opened the door graciously. Unlike Milo, he looked upon the officers for the first time, seeing a doe rabbit, and two foxes – one red and one Arctic.

"Wassup?" Steve greeted them with a sheepish grin.

"This is Steve, my roommate," Milo noted, moving to the door of his studio, and observing the cops. They seemed to be examining the living area of the apartment out of curiosity, still not given any indications where they could listen to the evidence. Judy, being the only one that was his kind, caught Milo's attention. Compared to his relatively brawny physique, she was rather slim and lithe, with the exception of her wide hips. Purple eyes broke the dullness of her grey coat, and both of her ears were tipped with black patches of fur. Did she look pretty? Most certainly.

However, he stopped himself from musing about it any more, and reset himself back to his manners, and the matter at hand. He opened his bedroom studio and motioned, "Right this way, Officer…?"

"Judy Hopps," the doe smiled affably at Milo, who only sported a one-second smile that was clearly faked, in response. Not before long, the red fox also introduced himself. "Nick Wilde…" sporting the same suave grin that never seemed to go away, even when he was asleep. Last, but not least, the Arctic fox chimed in joyfully, "And Jimmy Frost!" Milo was taken aback not only by the volume of his introduction, but also by the exuberant optimism he displayed saying so. His head was raised high, with a starry-eyed grin. This was something that did not resonate with Milo in the slightest. The last time the buck was optimistic about anything, he ended up getting hurt. Therefore, he expected a lot of this to happen to the fox cop in the long run. One by one, the officers walked inside the office.
In due time, the officers made themselves at home in Milo's studio. It was a far cry from the outside temperature, thanks to the ventilation installed. Milo seated himself at his computer, and launched his go-to digital audio workstation, Pro Drools, in order to play back the audio of the robbery; since it was a multitrack file, it was more convenient to open it in a software that could process that much information. Judy leaned on the desktop, to Milo's right. A well-defined, although not jutting chin, a finely shaped nose and bright blue eyes – both literally and figuratively – is what she saw of his face. She would've said he was downright sweet if it wasn't for a stance that seemed overall embittered and nervous. He was hunching over, his furrow-browed gaze fixed at the screen.

"Okay. This is gonna take some time, because I have to find the right file." Here, Milo began to scroll through his file database. Wheeling through the files, he tried to find the group that was recorded during the time of the robbery. Some planning in advance would save him the trouble – he regularly set his recorder up to name files in a manner that gave away the time during which a recording was made. His archive was cluttered, however, and the search wasn't going to be over any time soon, "It's gotta be around here, somewhere…"

In the meantime, Nick and Jimmy were scanning the back of Milo's studio for anything he would find to be suspicious. All that they could notice was an array of equipment they were utterly unfamiliar with. Bits, baubles, and almost nothing they could identify, other than a few microphones, and the infamous 'bike mic' that Nick remembered effortlessly. Nothing of interest, and nothing even remotely suspicious.

However, the interest part changed, as far as Nick was concerned. He noticed a turntable phonograph resting comfortably on the right-hand side of the shelf. Taking a careful look, the sly fox saw that it had both 33 and 45 RPM operation, which was something he remembered from his childhood. What interested him now was where the records were.

Fortunately, they were situated close to the phonograph. The first stack was the entire discography of the late King of Pop, Michael Jackal. His particular favorites were Off The Wool, Thriller and Bad, and their presence here made him grin with pleasure. He folded his ears back, and dug onwards, finding various other 1980s artists – Sade, Kenny Doggins, Michael McBunald, Aretha Franklin and countless others.

"There we go," Milo sighed in relief, having finally managed to discover the right file, "Sorry it took so long to find it, if you're in a hurry." That said, the buck rubbed the back of his head shyly.

"Oh, it's okay." Judy brushed it aside.

"No way!" Nick's sudden gasp of shock took everyone aback.

"What? What is it?" Jimmy was the first to address the fox after this sudden alarm.

"He's got Kalimba De Luna!" It turned out that Nick was fumbling again. He pulled out one of the singles among Milo's collection of vinyl. It was one of the better known songs of Tony Espossumito, a rather obscure artist from the Rainforest District. It turned out to be one of Nick's favorite songs of the '80s. "I haven't heard it in ages…"

Judy sighed with exasperation, while Milo winced neurotically: if there was anything that grated him, it was someone touching his collection without asking. He possessively implored, "Put that back, please. It's original."

Nick immediately complied, albeit with a frowning sigh of boredom. Seeing that this rabbit wasn't the most relaxed of mammals, he decided to prod him with something to stir up his nerves, "Who
Milo found this dry quip to be a challenge of his knowledge on the matter, so he immediately engaged, "Beg your pardon, Officer Wilde, but in recent years, vinyl has sold better than CDs."

Raising his eyebrow in confusion as to why such trivial information would be relevant, Nick was only slightly fazed that the compact disc was that out of fashion. He merely shrugged it off with a half-lidded deadpan, "Why am I not surprised?"

"Well, can we hear the evidence?" Judy quickly interjected, feeling that everyone's focus was drifting away.

"Yeah, sure…" Milo complied, nervously wiping his eyebrow with his index finger. He soon hit the playback button, and the recording started to play. There was some stifled indoor commotion that could not be understood, not even to Milo. Thankfully, it was evident that the shop owner was being violently prompted into cooperation for the theft to be performed successfully. After a few dozen seconds worth of ruckus, some voices could finally be understood.

"Careful with those!"

"I am being careful! Keep your voice down, dammit!"

"Well, it's about time you guys showed up!"

"Vicky, get in the van! We gotta get these to Franky Melone!"

After this commotion, all that was heard was the sound of the engine starting. All the while, Judy was taking notes of all the spoken words. While she was successful for the first few lines, she lost track at the mention of an actual name, "Can you just roll that last bit back again?"

Milo agreed, returning the playback to the spoken lines. This time, Judy listened more attentively.

"-van! We gotta get these to Franky Melone!"

An utterly unfamiliar name, by every standard. As Judy wrote down the last letter of it, she sighed and puzzled. "Franky Melone?"

Suddenly, Jimmy hummed thoughtfully, "I think he's that blind old badger I've been seeing in Tundratown. One of the local…" at this point, the Arctic fox stuttered awkwardly, resorting to a nervous chuckle, "Procurers. I don't know what he could have to do with any of this, tho."

"Right…" Nick jumped in, rubbing his chin, thinking of a possible plan of action. It didn't last very long – he snapped his fingers in revelation, directing a witty smirk at Judy, "But Carrots and I have someone underground who might."

Almost instantly, Nick would hear a high-frequency beep, and a familiar voice chiming in from elsewhere, "Officer Wolfard to Officer Wilde. Do you copy? Over." The fox instantly reached for his radio, "Officer Wilde here. Over."

"We caught the mooks that robbed the pet store. Over," Wolfard notified.

"We're on the trail of a potential lead for those guys. I'll hook you up with Special Agent Pardrick, for further questioning of those guys – don't mook it up!" Rolling her eyes, Judy followed her urge and nudged the fox in the ribs with her elbow. Not eliciting any vocal reaction, the fox chuckled, "Over," Nick asserted.
After the whole ordeal was done, Milo couldn't help feeling relieved that it went smoothly, and that he was finally going to be left alone. Overall, he found all of the police officers to be much too cheerful for their line of work. "Well, it wasn't much, but I hope it helped..." he said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head with his hand, all the while hesitating to make eye contact with her.

"Oh, it helped enough," Judy smiled cordially, while both Nick and Jimmy waited for her outside. Looking back at the apparently shy and reclusive buck rabbit, she took a deep breath and said, "Thank you for your time, Mr. Rabberts," before turning her back and leaving for the door.

"Have a nice day..." Milo mumbled dryly, hiding how foolish he found her disposition to be, in spite of her physical attractiveness. For a few seconds, his gaze was fixed at her rump. Maybe it was that skin-tight suit rounding it up almost perfectly that made him look more than he should have. However, he was quick to snap himself out of it, and shifted towards Steve closing the door.

"And good riddance..." the red-haired rabbit scowled, finally letting his relief show that these cheeky, happy-go-lucky cops had been dealt with. He then turned his gaze up towards Steve, to whom he still owed an explanation for the situation that just took place, "I was gonna tell you about the robbery, but I guess you got the hint."

"At a pet shop?" Steve tried to jog his memory on the exchange that his friend had with the officers.

"Yeah. Some punks stole something and drove away. It's a good thing I managed to be helpful." He rubbed the back of his head, "It's beyond me how they, of all mammals, can be so chipper about their job..."

"Free coffee and donuts?" Steve deadpanned, prompting a snorting snicker from Milo. Suddenly, the rabbit could hear a massive-sounding gurgle coming from the wildebeest's belly, then felt a little rumble in his own. It was then that they realized that their scheduled pizza delivery was a bit over a dozen minutes overdue. Steve was growing impatient, and adjusting his glasses. "Pizza dude's got fifteen seconds..."

"Right. I'm starving..." Milo rubbed his belly, having already been drained by the waiting himself.

Steve's keen ears have been drawn to the vibration of a telephone. When he went to inspect, he saw that it wasn't his own, "Milo, you got a message!"

Milo immediately ran up to it, and swiped it unlocked. Apparently, it was an email sent via Zoole.

After several minutes of staring at it in utter shock, he began to read it aloud:

To all fellow staff at Stagart Studios,

We hereby announce that Gary Roestrom, chief sound effects designer, has had a family loss and is in mourning. A meeting will be held on June 28th, at 10:00 AM at the sound department office. All staff from the sound department are required to be present at the meeting.

Jeremy Stagart, Supervising Sound Editor, Stagart Studios

Milo was taken aback by this sudden revelation. The death of a loved one was a predicament he'd never wish for anyone, let alone an esteemed colleague. Nevertheless, something deep down in his
gut told him that if he wanted to improve things, he shouldn't wait – this looked to be it. He rubbed his chin in deep thought, "I assume they want to figure out who's going to fill in for him." When Steve went silent for a few seconds, the crimson rabbit had to look up at him. The bovid was staring back at him with a proud grin, as he patted Milo on the head. "You still think I have a shot at it, don't you?"

"You better believe it!" Steve beamed affirmatively.

"I don't know…" the rabbit wavered, placing his hands behind his back, "As much as I doubt they're gonna let me into it, I could really use it, if it's paid."

"What? Of course they will!" Steve's spirit wasn't moved at all, "You just need an opportunity to prove yourself, and that just might be it, my friend!"

"You know why I could use the money?" Milo hoped that the wildebeest would be understanding of what he was about to tell him, "My mom and dad got evicted."

"Say what?!" Steve's reaction to what Milo just said was more distressed than shocked, seeing as they weren't doing too well last year, and needed help from Steve in paying their bills.

"They got evicted from our house in Podonk, and are now stuck in a hostel," Milo conceded, crestfallen. "They can't afford to pay their bills. I'm not gonna ask you to pay up more, not with all you're getting ready for your studio and all – you've already done enough for me. I need to figure something out myself…"

"Like I was saying, buddy, this might just be the answer to your problem! Now get on out there and grab it by the horns!" The wildebeest topped it off by pointing towards Milo's face with his index hoof, which made his nose twitch. As if things couldn't get any more awkward for him at that moment, the doorbell rang once again.

"Lemme get that!" Suddenly, Milo wanted to open up for the pizza delivery mammal. Once he looked into the peephole - whoopsie. It was Judy Hopps again. He frowned, and opened the door. "What now?"

The doe rabbit stifled a slight giggle, as she began to explain her intentions. "I was wondering if the police could request your services in case of a mission?" Upon hearing this, Steve rolled his eyes and threw his arms into the air in exasperation.

Milo thought he hadn't washed his ears properly this morning. Was she about to give him a job proposal? "What do you mean?"

"Well, since we don't have any wires at our disposal at the moment, I wanted to ask if you could come up with something that'll help us record the admissions of suspects." Yes, she was giving him a job proposal.

Milo's nose began to twitch ever so slightly – he was promptly surprised by this. Being the kind of mammal he is, various ideas and what-ifs came pouring into his mind. He anticipated potential danger to his safety. He anticipated violence. Whatever this would entail, he was certain that this was far from his usual line of work. It made him uncomfortable to think about, but on the other hand he also thought that it was better off than leaving his parents on the line. For the first time in a while, he showed some assertiveness. "Not for free," the buck rabbit deadpanned.

This only caused Judy to stifle a giggle, because she found it rather silly that he'd think she'd be using him in such a manner. She quickly brushed aside this needless concern. "I didn't assume you
work for free. We'll negotiate the price, and the mission details, in case it's required... What do you think?" As she finished, she laid her hands on her waist, awaiting an answer from the buck rabbit, who had fallen silent.

Milo was in a stressful position from the very beginning. Stick with a low-paying job and starve his parents, but keep himself out of harm's way, or try a risky, cautious job for a potentially greater payment that could save his parents from the emotional and literal squalor they've landed into. As hard as it was, the red-haired rabbit could no longer allow himself to give in to fear for his own security. He was currently more willing than not to accept the officer's offer. He looked into her eyes and nodded his head affirmatively. "Deal."

Judy, like always, brandished a cheerful smile of gratitude, "Alright, thanks. Bye!" And thus, she was on her way, hopefully for good. Again, he couldn't help staring at her figure from behind. His deprivation of the opposite gender's presence made him feel a little needy, and he was quenching it in any sort of way, even if it was a meaningless stare. He slowly closed the door, and heaved a sigh.

"It was the doe cop again..." Milo addressed his companion, ready to reveal his exchange with Judy. This only prompted Steve to mumble quizzically, leaning in to hear what Milo was up to. "She offered me a job, and I said yes," Milo said, then explaining his viewpoint on the whole situation. "Just gotta wait and see if she's serious. It's gonna come in handy in case the board meeting doesn't go as planned."

"At least it's a start..." Steve mumbled, half to himself. Nevertheless, he was curious about what the job was about, "So, what's this job?"

Milo knew as much as Steve, and could only assume what was to come. "I've yet to find out. For all I can guess, it's either wiring or recording interrogations... I'll have to see what she tells me. I mean, she's been cordial so far, so I don't think she's looking to scam me, or anything like that." In the back of his mind, he chose not to reveal this to his parents until the errand was done, as a positive surprise.

The doorbell chimed yet again, and this time, Steve leaped straight to the door knob. "Finally!" The wildebeest clumsily unlocked the door and eyed the pizza delivery mammal, who turned out to be a spotted hyena.

"Howdy do, sir?" The predator tipped his cap, brandishing a wide grin of pleasantry, all the while holding two pizzas in his left arm. He then proceeded with a professional inquiry. "One large-size spinach & grass, and one small five-cheese pizza. Was this your order?"

"Yup!" Steve smiled pleasantly, reaching out his arms, while the hyena handed the pizzas over.

"That'll be 17 dollars," the hyena spoke.

"Here you go," Steve gave the hyena 25 dollars, which turned out to be a generous tip. "Keep the change."

"Aw, shucks," the hyena chuckled, moved by this kind-hearted gesture on his customer's behalf. "Have a nice day, and bon appetit!" That said, the hyena tipped his cap and headed off, with his job done, and some appetites about to be sated.

"Ba-bye!" Steve bid farewell, closing the door, and finally acquiring much-needed lunch. Milo was also satisfied to see that they were about to eat. The wildebeest carried the pizzas over to the dining table. "Let's get our grub on!"
For Milo, this felt like a day that was slowly peeling back a very filthy page in the book of his life. In all his years, no one had managed to convince him of an alternative solution for his situation, and now, for the first time, such a situation had arisen to which he needed to adapt. Not only for his own good, but also the good of those he held dear. He had to play his cards carefully, because the decisions he made in the hours, days and weeks to come were bound to make or break his future…

Well, this turned out to be my birthday gift to me...

I hope you folks enjoyed yourselves! Catch ya later down the trail. ;)


Frankie Caught A Cold

Chapter Summary

With some new information gathered, our three police officers head out to search for Frankie Melone. Unfortunately, someone else has his sights set on the badger as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

18 Elephant-grass Boulevard, Savanna Central

4:00 PM

Outside, on the streets of Savanna Central, the two foxes stood idly, waiting for Judy to return from the apartment. They had no idea what she went back for, even though she said she forgot to do something. Jimmy was itching for action as always, impatiently spying around and playing with his tail to pass time. Nick seized the chance to contact their superior, Agent Pardrick. Thanks to a special encryption, he could keep whatever he was about to send him absolutely secret to telephone networks.

The robbers of a pet store in south Savanna Central have been apprehended. Visit ZPD Precinct 1 for further details and interrogation of the perpetrators. We're investigating a potential connection for them.

So far, the only thing Nick found to be impressive about Milo was his collection of music. Otherwise, he seemed like someone who was allergic to parties, avoided any kind of social contact, and probably never had an external relationship. A universal killjoy that could take the smile off of anyone's face. However, he couldn't care less what happened to the red rabbit, and forgot him as quickly as he remembered him. He then thought about the case. Then of Cleo. Then of his rising thirst. Nothing specific, until a familiar tenor chimed in.

"Can I ask you a question?" Jimmy implored, focusing his attention at the rangy red fox.

"Shoot." The only part of Nick's body that moved were his pupils, as he looked down on his younger colleague.

"Who exactly is this underground lead you were talking about?" Jimmy got the impression that neither he, nor Judy were awfully specific about whom they were going to contact for further investigation.

"Oh, he's just a little buddy of mine," Nick beat around the bush, "We've been well-acquainted even before I was a cop."

"Cool!", Jimmy grinned with surprising gladness. However, he was not going to stop there, "What does he do?"

"Kid," Nick chuckled at the younger fox's tenacity, "He's too diversified to be labeled that easily."
"OK…" Jimmy's expression somewhat fell and his enthusiasm was dented, as he began to notice that his older colleague wasn't putting nearly as much interest into talking as he was. He was still no quitter, "I'm still trying to figure out what Melone has to do with all of this. Why would a pimp want to steal reptiles?"

"For all we know," Nick began to fix his tie, finally content with the subject matter at hand, "he could have something to do with these smuggling rings, or he was just in a big hurry to save some cash. Though, I don't think he likes his geckos that much…"

"We're gonna book him, right?" These words were enough to make Nick's entire face twitch in surprise. Arresting someone with little to no direct proof? That was the thinking of someone who was still in kindergarten, and he couldn't take it seriously for a king's ransom.

"No." Nick shot away, as monotonous as he was up to this point.

"What?" Jimmy looked surprised.

"I'm sorry," Nick laid his arms on his waist, this time fully facing Jimmy, "what I said was no… we're not arresting anyone until we're positive about their role in the crime, if they had any whatsoever."

"Right, right," Jimmy tried to bounce back, suddenly remembering this fact from his time in the academy, "I remember that lesson from the academy. I think. It was right after taser demonstrations, so my brain might've been a bit rattled…"

'A bit' sounds like a compliment on your behalf…

"So," Nick began to assert what he believed to be a much more reasonable course of action, "we should keep low, interrogate him, and if he tries to talk his way out of it, we'll know if he's hiding something important." For good measure, Nick quipped once more, "Is that also what they told you?"

Jimmy paused for a second, tapping his head, before finally chiming in, "Yes!"

"Right…” Nick was anything but convinced. He started wondering how this little coot managed to pass through all of the training without consciously being aware of the lessons in his every waking moment. It seemed as though he was treating the job like a joke, which made even Nick, of all foxes, appear disciplined and serious. He suddenly remembered that they were lingering in front of Milo's building for far too long. He turned towards the stairway that led to the front door, folding his arms quizzically, "What's taking Carrots so long?"

"Think she forgot her gun somewhere?" Jimmy suggested, "I did that once. Major Friedkin was not happy, no siree." Much to his discomfort, Nick was staring at him with a complete deadpan. Forgetting to take your headphones with you was irrelevant. Forgetting your weapon of all things made the difference between life and death. Nick learned very early that being scatterbrained about things that mattered was never going to be helpful. This fox was well in his 20s and he still hadn't gotten a hold of himself, "Yeah, that's the same face she made! How did you know?"

"Top of your class, huh?" Nick's latest quip made Jimmy feel slightly embarrassed about this, so he couldn't help but look away. He rubbed the back of his head, with a sheepish smile adorning his muzzle.

Their awkward conversation was brought to a halt when a familiar mezzo-soprano rang out, "Well, we may a sound guy!" It was none other than Judy, skipping down the stairs.
"Oh, so *that's* what you forgot," Nick eyed her carefully, before he realized that she was talking about a 'sound guy' of sorts, "Wait, what?"

"We can hire him to help us record conversations with suspects," Judy reasoned, "He sounds professional enough."

"Are you talking about that rabbit I almost deafened?" No matter how much he saw the glass more half-full after the Night Howler scandal, Nick had reservations here, "Not sure how 'professional' he really is."

"I think a lot of mammals would say the same about you, Wilde." For his poor impression as an officer, Jimmy was right for once.

"Touché." Nick conceded.

"We'll never know unless we give him a shot. Right?" Judy couldn't care less what Milo was like as a person. All she expected from him was getting the job done, and listening to her, Nick and Jimmy in regards to safety.

"If he's as spazzy as he was before, he'll get shot," Nick reaffirmed his dubious attitude. However, his half-lidded deadpan indicated that he didn't care much about it, either way, "But no skin off my teeth, I guess."

That left Judy with the option of asking how their new partner was feeling about the decision, "Frost?"

"I…” Jimmy stuttered, caught between two differing opinions. He was never comfortable in situations where his vote would make the majority. However, with the rabbit's encouraging gaze, he was ready to go, "Can't really doubt the new guy without looking like a hypocrite, so I say go for it!"

Judy smiled proudly at seeing that Jimmy was positive about the inclusion of Milo for professional purposes. All that Nick could do is shrug it off. She moved on to more pressing matters, "So, what's the plan?"

"Well," Nick smiled confidently, "I was thinking we should contact one of our best chauffeurs… I don't really feel like using the bus to get to Tundratown."

Judy hummed quizzically, "Snarlbucks in the meantime?"

Jimmy's ears flung up in alarm at her first choice of beverages, "I've… never had coffee before."

"What kind of world do you live in?" Nick had no doubts that this was an adult-sized pup he was talking to.

"One without coffee in it." Jimmy replied almost instantly, finding nothing odd about his preferences.

"Let's get a move on, then!" Judy didn't care where they'd go, and saw that there was no specific preference from either side, other than Jimmy not being a coffee drinker.

"Sounds good to me," At this point, Nick preferred any kind of walk to standing in place.

Jimmy, however, still stayed in place, muttering to himself in a bereft tone of voice, "I would've taken a juice box…" However, his awareness returned and he noticed that Judy and Nick were
already on their way. To catch up, he had to jog a little…

Fishtown Plaza, Tundratown

4:24 PM

Several dozen kilometers away from our police officers, and several dozen degrees cooler stood the district of Tundratown. The frigid climate was acquired and maintained thanks to the monumental walls that separated it from the searing heat of Sahara Square and the humid tropics of the Rainforest District. The most visited part was arguably Fishtown Market, and the square that surrounded it. Needless to mention that there were many restaurants about, that imported its products. This is where Frankie Melone spent his time…

He was a European badger, with his grey fur gaining a lighter shade from his advanced age, and his eyes were concealed by large black glasses. He wore a beige trench-coat over a plaid olive-colored shirt, and carried a metal cane in his right hand. His left hand was held firmly by a thin grey squirrel with a fedora on his head, and a simple jacket worn over a white shirt with a bowtie. There was no doubt that this elderly badger was blind, and that the squirrel was his guide.

"Another day, another girl, another two-and-a-half thousand bucks down the drain…" The badger's voice was reduced to an atonal, growling rasp, a result of having his vocal cords crushed in a physical assault from over thirty years ago. As anyone who was well-acquainted with the underground of the city knew what he was doing for a living, they gave him a wide berth, avoiding him at all costs, lest he'd smell them walking by. His guide, John McAcorns, would've been much more pleasant to look at, had he not affiliated himself with the aforementioned badger.

"Hate to ruin your mood, b-b-b-b-b-" suddenly, the squirrel began to speak, and apparently not without difficulties. If there was anything that grated Frankie, it was when he began to stammer like this – it came of no surprise that John came to be known as "Shaky".

"Beh-beh-beh-beh!" Frankie snarled intolerantly, grimacing in mockery, "What are you stutterin' at, ya nimrod?! What is it?"

"It's k-k-k-kind of a c-c-c-c-curse, sir," Shaky attempted to justify his condition.

"Well, curse you for comin' out that way," Frankie scoffed, unfazed by his young comrade's disability, "You're better off with your pie hole shut. At least that way the animals around here won't assume that you're a retard."

"When are the eggs d-d-due t-t-t-to arrive?" Shaky said, inching closer to his master's ears and lowering his voice, lest he'd be heard by someone in the vicinity.

"Tonight at nine, around Walrus Cove Drive. I'm supposed to have them hauled over to the buyer tomorrow night at 9, in Clark Halibuts." When it came to doing business, Frankie was as cold as his surroundings.

"B-b-b-but what are you gonna do about Mr. B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-Big?" Shaky had very good reason to stutter more at the mention of one of Zootopia's most feared crime lords. Unfortunately, Frankie had iffy dealings with him in the past, and the squirrel's only concern was that it would not end well.

"Oh, what? Now, you're thinkin' about my problems, Shaky?" Frankie effectively brushed off his concerns, "Well, that's just totally upright of you! If I manage to re-sell those eggs at a good price, I'll manage to pay that debt and more. I'll only ask him for a little more dough this once. Now shut
"I'm trying to b-b-b-be sensible, sir," Shaky was still not convinced that Mr. Big was going to be so lenient about the matter. Not that it made his elderly chief any happier. What he would feel next was a strong pain in his ribs, thanks to a wallop by Melone's metal cane.

"Shut up…" Franky snarled with barely-contained anger.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Melone," the elderly badger was surprised by the sudden sound of a bass-register voice booming in, distracting him from his current mood. As his hearing was the only thing he could rely on to distinguish between different mammals, he knew who it was: Raymond, one of Mr. Big's polar bear henchmen. Shaky, on the other hand, could see not only him, but his colleague Kevin as well. Both wore sport tracksuits, and were standing in front of the stairway that led to Fishtown Market.

"Well, if it ain't Raymond?" Frankie made his best attempt at sounding cordial, "Is Kevin with you, too?"

"Yes, I am," Kevin confirmed, his voice being of slightly higher register than Raymond's. He then proceeded to lead the two newcomers towards the nearest driveway. "Right this way, sir."

"Well, it's a good thing you showed up in time," Frankie growled, as Shaky led him the way that the bears were walking, "Because your boss doesn't have any, I reckon." They were led towards a black sedan, and Raymond opened one of the backseat doors to let the two smaller mammals inside. Shaky was the one to enter first, before lending his hand to his boss, who hobbled inside with minor difficulty.

Without further ado, the two polar bears sat to each of their sides, and the driver wasted no time in starting the engine. Whereas Shaky sat as still as a statue, Frankie gently tapped the tip of his cane with his fingernails, much more relaxed. As far as the eggs were concerned, he was certain that they'd save him from his debt to Mr. Big, and later on, ensure that he had enough money to keep his business going strong. Being a reputable procurer was a lot of dirty work, and he was not going to let it suffer for any reason whatsoever.

MEANWILDE...

Jumbeaux's Café, 22 Nile Drive, Savanna Central

4:25 PM

After over twenty minutes of sniffing around Savanna Central and coping with Jimmy's stigma against coffee-only shops, the three police officers eventually settled with Jumbeaux's Café. Had one visited it before, it would be a place suited only for mammals who could eat all of the enormous dishes that were prepared by elephants. Now, not only were the orders more diverse in size, but they also improved in terms of quality. It seemed that Jerry Jumbeaux Jr, the owner of the restaurant, finally realized that he needed to expand his business in order to attract more guests.

"This is so much better!" Jimmy was treating himself to an appropriately-sized ice-cream sundae: chocolate, strawberry and banana. On the other hand, all that Judy ordered was a glass of carrot juice with ice. Given that most of the waiters were large animals, the tables were elevated for the likes of Jimmy and Judy. However, Nick was nowhere to be seen...

...unless one was meticulous enough to take a look outside the café. The red fox only had a glass of
water, not willing to treat himself with anything. This time, he was the one doing the work, for a
change. Shuffling through his lengthy contact list, the red fox finally found whom he was looking
for: the contact's name was Renato Manchas. Without hesitation, he pressed the call button and
waited as it rang.

Fortunately, the waiting was shorter than a rabbit's tail.

"Hey, Manchito! How's it hangin'?" Nick smiled suavely, greeting the contact as cordially as ever.
With a positive mood established, he wasted no time in going straight to the point, "I was
wondering if you could give us a ride to your boss' place? We're looking for a certain Frankie
Melone from Tundratown, and I reckon that maybe he knows a little more about him."

"Whoa…" Jimmy took the time to simply marvel at the ice cream by looking at it. From the
flavors, down to the texture, he was enthralled, "This ice cream has historic value..." before he
continued to eat.

"Good to see that the owner's opened his mind a bit..." Judy commented on the aforementioned fact
while glancing at the menu, knowing that she and Nick were partially responsible for it. This café
was where they first met, while Judy was still in parking enforcement. Back then, Jumbeaux made
no secret of his distaste and contempt for foxes, and adamantly refused to serve a fox and his
toddler son, based solely on that. Judy couldn't ignore this, and pointed out not only the owner's
bigotry, but also how unsanitary his means of service were.

"Yeah, I'm amazed at all the options they've got here," Jimmy stopped eating only to briefly sneak
a peek at the menu himself, "I never knew I needed a cricket-flavored jumbo pop until I had one."
Change started with oneself, indeed...

"We're at Jumbeaux's Café right now," Nick was still pulling strings to get themselves a ride. The
silence that ensued, as well as Nick's intent expression, indicated that the answer was affirmative,
"In two minutes? Got it. We'll be there. Don't bleach your fur!" Judy took notice of Nick hanging
up his phone, and afterwards he gazed at her and motioned her to come over in two minutes,
because the car was due to arrive at that time. Thankfully, Judy understood his intricate sign
language this time.

"Sounds like we need to get moving," Judy was quick to inform, "Finish up there, Frost."

"Kay," Jimmy dropped his spoon, took the cup in his hands, and buried his muzzle in it. His idea of
hurrying with whatever ice cream he had left was lapping it up like a savage. Did this make Judy
feel pleasant? No, it did not. Much to her embarrassment, this earned them both gazes of shock and
discomfort from the other guests. All she could do was haplessly stare at the manchild in front of
her, at an utter loss for words. By the time he finished, his whole muzzle was drenched in ice
cream remains, from below his eyes to his nose. He had a hard time pulling the cup off, but it didn't
take too long, "Done!"

Judy could only let out a nervous, quiet giggle, much more quiet than seeing Clawhauser eat a
donut that's been stuck under his chin. The only sensible thing she could do right now was giving
Jimmy a handful of paper towels. He certainly needed them.

In a few minutes, it was very clear that a white, silver-trim limousine was headed towards the front
of the café, as it came to a gradual stop adjacent to the parking lot.

"Another fancy ride?" Jimmy gawked at the supreme quality and elegance of the vehicle, having
just finished wiping his muzzle clean, "This guy's gotta be rich..."
The graceful descent of the driver seat window revealed that Renato Manchas was a melanistic jaguar. The right one of his green eyes was adorned by several barely visible scars, a testimony to the Night Howler Scandal, which he was victim to. He gazed towards the group, and immediately called them hither, "You need to come inside. Vamos! I have a small errand to run, and I don't want the boss to wait!"

The three officers wasted no time in making way inside the car. Entering the back seat, as usual, they saw that they weren't alone. Much to Judy's gladness, she saw a familiar face: a river otter that wore a blue sweater, complete with an ultramarine tie and his eyes adorned by round glasses. An otter that Judy instantly recognized as the reason her police career kickstarted, and also a victim of the Night Howler Scandal...

"Oh my God," Judy's face glimmered with endearing joy, as the other mammal drew his attention to her, "Mr. Otterton!" That said, the female rabbit shook his hand eagerly. At the same time, Manchas wasted no time in starting driving.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Emmitt Otterton was equally pleased to see Judy. It's been a long time, indeed, "How are you, Judy?"

"We've got quite the case on our hands, so it's a bit hectic," There was no lying in what Judy was saying. Nevertheless, she was not one to back out on a conversation, "And yourself?"

"I'm on my way to yoga class," hearing what Otterton was saying, Judy and Nick both deduced that Manchas was taking a detour towards Sahara Square, as the yoga class more than likely took place at Mystic Spring Oasis, a local naturist resort, "Hopefully Nangi will remember me this time…"

Nick chuckled lightly at the memory of their previous encounter with her.

Jimmy hadn't a single clue about who this otter was, or how he knew Judy and Nick. All that he knew was that it was a little hot in the car, "Mind if I open the window? It's a little hot in here…"

"Please, officer, I wish that you wouldn't…" Otterton suddenly pleaded, showing signs of paranoia with the tone of his voice and his fidgeting fingers. It was as if the fox asked him to sacrifice himself to a vampire bat.

"Why not?" Jimmy was utterly confused.

"I'm sorry," Otterton realized that he came across as rather forceful in his demands, and that his fear was rather palpable. He immediately regretted the outburst of emotion, sitting back and clasping his hands together worriedly, "I just… don't feel safe."

"Oh…" the Arctic fox pretended to understand, not long before suggesting an alternative, "What about air-conditioning?"

"Air-conditioning is fine," notably calmer, Otterton nodded. Nick switched it on, and it was enough to keep them cool, particularly as they were due to enter the sizzling desert of Sahara Square.

Jimmy was curious as to why the otter was so jumpy about ventilating through windows. His reaction was rather alarmed, and not the sort that happened without a good reason. He nudged his eyebrows quizzically at Judy, as if to ask 'What's wrong with him?', but Judy gestured him to keep quiet. She knew what the otter's history was, but she didn't want to talk about it out loud, for fear of causing him discomfort.

"I'm heading to Pawaii in a few days," it seemed as though Otterton had finally relaxed, and was starting to talk in a more leisurely manner about things related to life, "And my two little boys can't
get off of my head… Dad, are we gonna see volcanoes? Dad, why don't the males wear shirts there? Are there any whales in the sea at Pawai?" After this impression, he couldn't help letting out a soft, loving chuckle, "It never ceases to amaze me…"

"What's that?" Judy inquired curiously, as she was listening to the otter with a warm smile. If there was anything that easily garnered the rabbit's attention, it was the notion of children.

"The curiosity of kids these days…" Otterton remarked, adjusting his tie a little bit, "They want to know everything there is to know about everything, but they've got no idea what's waiting for them when they grow up," his expression fell, as he started rubbing his nose. He heaved a concerned sigh, "God forbid that they go through what I have…"

"Don't worry…" Judy gently placed a hand on the otter's left shoulder, speaking words of assurance, "I don't think something that bad will ever happen again." If anyone else would have said this, the otter would continue worrying.

"Hearing it from you really lifts the spirit…" Otterton smiled fondly, showing great trust, "My wife mentions you at least once every month. Ever since they found a cure for the serum, everyone knows a little something about you two."

"Do they, now?" Nick rubbed the bottom of his lower jaw with his hand. He was never one to yearn for public attention, and given his life as a con artist, it came as no surprise. Fortunately, hearing Emmitt talk about it was slightly more relieving.

"Yup," Otterton smiled affably, "Always buzzing around about how you used to be a con mammal before you became an officer. I can't blame them, because that alone holds a lot of weight. It's inspiring young mammals to stay clean."

No matter how much more relaxed he was, Nick still had his old penchant for self-deprecation, "Oh? Wow, it still feels odd to think that I'd trigger that kind of reaction…"

"Don't beat yourself up," Emmitt reassured him, before recalling one of the more odd stories that were circling around the city. Therefore, he took a deep breath and began to speak, "Anyway…" Every word was pronounced slowly and carefully, without the slightest intention of offense, "I know it's going to sound a little awkward, but rumor is that you two are dating on the job."

Both Judy and Nick froze like Pawpsicles at the notion. The two of them, in a relationship? They took no issue with mammals that consummated romantic relationships with those of a different species, but they both knew this was not something they were interested in. The fact of the matter was that they shared a very strong friendship. Nothing more.

Judy was most certainly taken aback, which was easy to conclude by her upper lip rising up to reveal her buck teeth, and her twitching nose. Nick couldn't help but snicker hysterically, wheezing like a screeching car tire as he bent over, grabbing his belly to hold back the pain that arose in it. He was one second away from tears rolling out of his eyes.

"Eh, no…" Judy finally gathered up the courage to speak up. In due time, Nick stopped laughing and gasped for breath.

"Nope," the red fox confirmed laconically.

"I don't do that kind of thing," Judy made no secret of her preferences.

"I'm taken, anyway," Nick said, finally managing to regain composure. He still couldn't help stifling a chuckle and rolling his eyes. It was much too amusing to be forgotten easily.
"Figures..." Otterton chuckled. It came as no surprise to him that the rumors were false. Without further ado, they were entering the tunnel that separated Savanna Central from Sahara Square...

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**Mr. Big's mansion, 76 Yeti Avenue, Tundratown**

**4:30 PM**

Frankie and Shaky finally arrived at Mr. Big's front door, ready for a meeting. In due time, thudding footsteps could be heard from the inside of the room, drawing closer, and closer, until they opened...

A snow-furred bruin that dwarfed both Raymond and Kevin was the first face to greet the badger and squirrel, wearing a fine blue suit over a black sweater, with a golden necklace. He lowered his head, fixing his baggy eyes upon the guests with almost no emotion.

"Koslov would ask squirrel to follow him," the giant boomed ominously, with a voice that chilled the air around Shaky. Shuddering slightly at first, the squirrel let go of Frankie's arm, and walked after the bear, his hands clenched together, as he looked around the various wall paintings that adorned the hall. Where Koslov was about to lead him, he could only wonder.

"Mr. Melone, we'll take it from here," Raymond placed a hand behind Frankie's back, in order to guide him to the meeting.

Shaky found himself inside the living room, and was motioned by Koslov to take a seat in the couch, "Koslov asks that you do not move. Wait for your chief here." With these words, the enormous bruin took his leave. The room was rather dimly lit, with only a table lamp for a source of light. With only a slight second glance to the door, Shaky sighed and slumped into the couch, fidgeting with his hands. Taking into account all that he said before, he was a little worried that his boss had become too arrogant for his own good...

Frankie was led inside the basement, with Raymond and Kevin staying behind to ensure that he didn't try to pull any sudden moves. Fortunately, the badger was compliant and obedient. Soon enough, they stopped in front of a massive desk, which was, for the time being, unoccupied. Behind it stood a doused hearth, adorned by a portrait of an ailing shrew, who was arguably one of the denizens of the house. Below stood a mantel clock, covered in snow. For a few seconds, nothing but the humdrum of the ventilation system, and the howling of the wind outside was audible. That is, until thudding came from the door to the right. First, they were weak thumps, but they increased in both loudness and intensity with each new sound. Soon, the door opened, and inside stepped Koslov once again, his hands clasped together, with nothing but an ill-tempered scowl adorning his face. He made his way to sit at the desk, setting his mighty arms onto the desktop. Splitting them apart, he revealed the lord of the house, and the mammal that Frankie was due to see: an arctic shrew, seated upon a chair fit for his size, with his eyes concealed by thick eyebrows. He eyed Frankie with much reservation, his right hand placed near his cheek, scratching the shaggier fur. Anyone who knew anything about Mr. Big knew that he was not very happy when he did this.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Big," Frankie tried his best to be soft-spoken. The sound of the badger's voice didn't only grate the crime lord's ears with its utter lack of tonality; it didn't fool him into being in a good mood, either.

"You don't say?" The elderly shrew finally responded, as cold as the outside weather, with a bitterly sarcastic overtone to his high-pitched voice.
"It sounds good, and smells good," Frankie still tried to lift the mood in the room, albeit in a very unconventional way, "Like a girl ready for her first time..." He topped this perverted joke with a dirty cackle. There was something very wrong with this badger...

"Drop it," Mr. Big instantly silenced the larger mammal, unabused and even disgusted by his sense of humor. Without much hesitation, the crime lord went straight to what he suspected to be the matter at hand, as usual, "And don't bother tellin' me why you showed up here in the first place. You want the money, don't ya? When I welcomed you, I opened my doors in friendship, because I thought you were honest with me, regardless of what you do for a livin'. But every time you came, you wanted something. Things. Not company. Not friendship. You never came to me in friendship, Frankie."

Frankie wasn't moved by this criticism at all, "Big, I don't mean to get personal now, but I seriously need another-"

"Another ten thousand dollars?" Mr. Big was not one to be deterred from his train of thought by petty sycophancy, "Another twenty thousand dollars? You owe me ninety thousand and four-hundred dollars, Frankie. How did it come to you treating me so disrespectfully?" he made this point all the stronger by pinching his left fingers together. Unlike most criminals that dug through Zootopia's underground, Mr. Big strived to be cordial with both his associates and the world above ground, and be hospitable, friendly and generous. Materialism was not the only thing he abided by, nor strived to teach his family. With Melone, he had long feared that this was not the case, and now, those fears were made certain. Frankie only wanted money. After all these years, he didn't even bother to call him a friend. The size of his debt also made clear what the shrew wanted to do with mammals like this...

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*Mystic Spring Oasis, 46 Aloa Drive, Sahara Square*

4:36 PM

"Señor Otterton, we are here," Manchas informed the otter that he had finally reached his destination. Nick made haste to open the door, while Emmitt took his briefcase and got off the seat.

"Well, this is my stop," Otterton was not about to leave without bidding a proper, and very fond farewell to the police officers, "It was very nice talking to you again. Have a nice day!"

"Bye!" Judy called out, waving as the otter left the car. Nick also waved at him, with a single swipe of his hand, smiling cordially.

"Goodbye, sir." Jimmy awkwardly wiggled his fingers, to elicit a wave. Soon after, Nick closed the door, and Manchas was fast on the way to the tunnel that led through the climate wall into Tundratown. Now that the otter left, the novice officer finally found the opportunity to ask more about him, "Okay... what's his deal?"

"He's a night howler victim," Nick deadpanned, not bothering to go too deep into the matter. He wanted the fox to connect the dots himself.

Jimmy did take a quick look around, towards both of the windows. An expression of awe and horror adorned his face, because he had just realized that Otterton was shot through an open car window, "Talk about a crack shot..." he quipped, placing his hand on his forehead.

Judy scurried over to the partition of the car, because now that Emmitt had left, she had the chance to ask the chauffeur some question about their suspect. Some foreknowledge most certainly
couldn't hurt, and the female rabbit officer wanted to figure out whether or not Frankie Melone had ever associated himself with Mr. Big in any way, "Excuse me, Mr. Manchas?" She implored. The jaguar didn't move his head an inch, but adjusted the rear view window so that he could see Judy better, without having to turn his attention away from the road.

"What is it?" The jaguar's gravelly voice beckoned.

"How much do you know about Frankie Melone?" Judy wasted no time in getting straight to the point.

Manchas had notably become more pensive. From his face, Judy could easily see hints of hesitation. It seemed as though he didn't deem himself to be authorized to talk about his chief’s associations. After a few seconds of silence, the jaguar finally answered the question, "Not very much. All that I know is that he's a procurer."

No new information at all – she learned this much from Jimmy already. Nevertheless, Judy wasn't ready to call it quits just yet, "Has Mr. Melone ever associated himself with your chief, in any way?"

Manchas was silent for a while yet again, but less so than previously, "I am not sure how often." The conversation started flowing more fluently, "But I know that they had dealings before. Whenever he was mentioned, it was about debts."

A crucial piece of information. It would help the discussion, because this meant that the two had history. The only part that was alarming was the part regarding a debt. Without wasting any time, she proceeded to verify if her most logical assumption was true, "So, Mr. Melone owes him money?"

Manchas was still giving vague suggestions, rather than specific answers, "I think so." She couldn't blame the chauffeur for not knowing the details of Mr. Big's every waking move. However, the part regarding the debt did concern her, because it meant that Mr. Big was most likely not content about it.

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*Mr. Big's office*

4:38 PM

"I'll make it up for you!" Frankie croaked desperately, which went to show that Mr. Big was not convinced by any of his ramblings so far. All of them were empty promises made for the sake of saving the skin, under the guise of friendship. Frankie was not a friendly character, and anyone who knew anything about him also knew that he would never go out of his way to give someone a pleasant surprise. Nevertheless, he was unfettered in coming up with false promises, "I'll get to those ninety grand and even more! I have a very serious reptile purchase on the way! A reptile protection agency is looking to buy these things! It'll be more than just my debt covered!"

"You know what the problem with gadflies is?" Mr. Big wasn't about to let anyone walk over his honor, so he made sure that the grizzled old badger knew what he thought of him: "Gadflies always keep buzzing around in circles, munching away wherever they can manage, and they take only what they want. They never fly straight. And neither do you, Frankie," he was utterly unfazed by Frankie's eyebrows furrowing neurotically, and his lips curling around without aim. The grizzled badger had finally been seen through for what he was, but he obviously couldn't accept it in any way. Nevertheless, the cordial shrew was willing to appeal to his conscience, if he had any, "Besides, I can't help feeling very guilty for lending you any money. I keep hearing about young
broads being sent to the hospital for rape. Word on the street is that you're forcin' them to get it on with much larger guys. You're ruining young lives, Frankie! You're makin' money off of their suffering! That could've been my Fru Fru, or any little schoolgirl I never heard of. Innocent blood is on your paws! Even I wouldn't let that happen!" He finished it by pinching the fingers of his left hand together and shaking his whole hand, as a gesture of distress and abhorrence.

It was no secret to him that Frankie Melone was a notorious sex trafficker. His higher-paid prostitutes – in fact poor high school or college students – were put through unspeakable torture. They satisfied the needs of much larger clients than they, most often those with a criminal record, a troubled upbringing or some sort of mental disorder. Frankie's relationship with his co-workers was no less grisly: he eavesdropped on the deed being done, and always succeeded in bribing his workers into permanent cooperation, which would eventually render them infertile after several sessions. Not even Mr. Big could be indifferent to these heinous practices, even though he was far from a man of the law.

"They come to me for money! I'm being generous!" the grizzled badger started snarling, clenching his first and waving it low in the air. The most heinous mammals were those who adamantly refused to see the error of their ways. Frankie seemed more and more to be that sort of mammal.

"That means you're both insincere and dishonorable," Mr. Big was unfazed by this display of aggression.

"Who are you to talk about what I do, you little bigshot?! You don't know nothin' about it!" Once a sensitive button had been pushed, the crime lord could see that Frankie finally showed his true colors. His unbridled hatred finally came to light.

"I can see that our partnership's starting to get very cold, Frankie," At this point, Mr. Big has finally had enough of Frankie's unfettered disrespect to not only him, but everyone he associated himself with, "There's only one way to seal it off. You're out of my family."

"What?!" Frankie's face jolted upwards with shock. If he had eyes to see, they would have opened very widely, "What do you mean out?"

"I welcomed you warmly, but I'll let you go off cool," Without further ado, this rather obscure phrase was about to materialize itself in the most grisly way imaginable, as Mr. Big uttered the one order that everyone dreaded, "Koslov! Ice this deadbeat."

Koslov suddenly rose from his seat and began to approach the insane badger, who had gone utterly berserk, "What?! How dare you?! You dirty little rat!" He snarled with rage, starting to flail his metal cane around the room, hitting all over the table, and narrowly missing Mr. Big himself, who ducked to the side, narrowly falling from his chair, "You can't do this to me! I'm Frankie Melo-"

Soon, all that was heard from Frankie was a throaty cackle, and the sound of the cane dropping onto the hard wooden floor. Koslov squeezed his giant paw about the badger's neck, hoisting him almost to the level of his eyes, in order to show the badger that this would be the least of his troubles. In the meantime, Kevin lifted the rug, while Raymond opened the lid of Frankie's cold, watery coffin. In but a few seconds, Frankie was uttering a snarling scream of horror mixed with rage, when Koslov hurled him down. Then the splash came…

...and he was heard no more.

Mr. Big's mansion - The living room
Shaky had been sitting still for a hair over fifteen minutes. From wondering what was going on downstairs, to looking at the artwork that was decorating the room, as well as fighting the urge to eat some chocolate-topped hazelnuts that were served on the table adjacent to the couch, he passed his time. He was beginning to wonder if his boss was taking for granted the prospect of dealing with a crime lord of Mr. Big's caliber, and was now paying the price. Sometimes, one's own hubris clouded their judgment so much that they think themselves untouchable kings and mammals who were above all in terms of power. More often than not, it would prove to be their downfall.

Suddenly, the door of the living room opened, and inside stepped Kevin, "Hey, squirrel, come on. Mr. Big wants to see you."

Alarmed at first, the squirrel hesitantly placed his hands on the couch and pushed himself off. The bear stepped aside, motioning him to go ahead. And so, Shaky was lead down the same crooked stairway that, unbeknownst to him, lead to his boss' final resting place.

When Shaky entered, he couldn't hear anything other than the piercing howling of the wind outside, whipping up snow as it went along. Much to his astonishment and horror, Frankie wasn't there. His eyes flew open in a surge of fight-or-flight fear, as he started erratically searching for signs that everything was alright with the badger. Seeing that everything was clean and that there wasn't even a single sign of the badger, he assumed the worst had already happened.

For a moment, it would seem as though Shaky was about to soil himself, his entire body quivering as he looked up at the enormous bruin called Koslov, who stared down at him, seated behind Mr. Big. They didn't hold gazes for long, as the bodyguard was quick to defer to his chief, "What about… broken squirrel?"

With this being said, it was even worse – Mr. Big was now looking straight into Shaky's eyes. The insufferable waiting made the squirrel feel almost nauseous, and he was living up to his nickname in a literal sense, unable to control his reflexes. He prayed for himself to either be spared, or if he was bound to die, that it happened quickly. It would seem that the crime lord was becoming very pensive, rubbing his chin with his usual frown. Much to the squirrel's shock, the shrew was smiling.

"I need someone to serve drinks to larger guests," Mr. Big suddenly seemed much more gracious and approachable. The rumor that he was affable when you were on good terms with him – which his boss was not – turned out to be completely true, "You want the job, Shaky?"

Shaky stopped trembling altogether. His hands lowered completely, and a stunned expression befell his face, as he heard these words. With Franky gone, there was nowhere else he could turn. It also didn't look as though Mr. Big would've been harmed any time soon. He hesitated, but it was only his speech impediment preventing him to speak out, "Of c-c-c-c-c-course, Mr. B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-B-"

suddenly, he felt something large squeezing the tip of his tail, which made him yelp, "Big! Of course, of course..." He topped it off by smiling as humbly as possible, but not without a nervous chuckle.

It was soon revealed that Kevin was the one who squeezed Shaky's tail, "Well, now we know how to get around that stutter, eh?"

This only elicited a chuckle from Raymond, who gave Shaky a friendly pat on the head. In the meantime, Koslov carefully grasped Mr. Big into his arms, and went back out the right door, while Raymond and Kevin followed suit. He was now all alone, and utterly flabbergasted by what he witnessed. To come face-to-face with the most feared crime boss in Tundratown and come out
alive was a serious feat, and he just gained the experience.

However, his nerves were still on high alert, as he was frantically gazing around the room, only to see that the coast was clear. What he did see was a shelf to his left. On it stood a bottle of Jack Hazel's, one of the finest rodent whiskeys: perfect. Without much hesitation, Shaky crept towards the counter, uncapped the bottle, and took a swig just to calm down. After taking it in, he sighed in relief, then gently closed the bottle and left it where he found it, exactly as he found it. He then looked around paranoidly, and headed to the door to the right, that led into the living room…

38 Caribou Migration Road, Tundratown

4:42 PM

Unfortunately for the three young officers, Manchas had reached a small traffic jam, and pulling through became all the more difficult. Due to strict laws, smaller mammals were not allowed to drive under or between larger vehicles – accidents, while usually intended to be avoided, happened nevertheless in circumstances like these. Therefore, the cars were moving slowly enough for the surrounding cityscape to be visible, and they were very close to the massive lake that filled up the center of the ice-cold district – an enormous expanse of dark-blue water, with icebergs and sheets dotting the surface. These served as either tourist attractions, or harbors with inns for small-bodied sailors who would brave the waters in vessels scaled appropriately for their size.

Once Judy preened herself up to take a better look, she could notice a small area surrounded by fellow officers, enclosed by a yellow ribbon – unmistakably a police line. She wasted no time in tuning her radio to hear what the officers there were talking about. If there was anything she learned, it was that leaving matters unchecked resulted in chaos.

"This is Officer Rainier. We've got a 10-39 – dead citizen on the shore, next to Caribou Migration Road. European badger, seems to be in his sixties…"

This was her cue – even Jimmy and Nick couldn't ignore it, as they'd been listening intently from the very beginning. They had to know if this was the mammal they were after.

"Mr. Manchas," Judy skittered over to the open partition, "I'll need you to pull over at once."

"Que? What is it?" the melanistic jaguar inquired, still preferring to look into the rear-view mirror.

"We have something very important to look into. Can you please wait for a while?" the rabbit flatfoot beckoned, "And let Mr. Big know we're on our way soon!"

"Okay, okay…" Manchas wasn't all that happy about this, but he was more than willing to comply. After the last time he confronted the police (albeit without sensible judgment), he didn't want to bother with any more trouble. He stopped the limo in an empty parking spot, and turned on all of his blinkers, so that nobody would try to bother him.

The three officers rushed out of the car, across the street and straight down the slight snowy descent that led into the closed-off area. The police line was guarded by a female cougar, who stepped directly in the way when she saw the three figures making their way down.

"Officer Wilde. We're all from Precinct One," Nick pointed straight at his badge. Without a second's notice, the cougar let them inside with a nod. The rest of the officers were all standing next to the shore, facing the water's edge. While Judy and Nick hesitated to push past them, Jimmy immediately went towards the first gap he saw to pull his head through. What he was about to be treated with was not bound to be pleasant, or beneficial…
Frankie was dead. He was lying there, still as a statue, with his nose gone blue from the cold, frost latching onto his fur, his tongue sticking out of his mouth and his blinded eyes visible, as his sunglasses were lost at some point in the water.

Had it not been for his extensive training at the academy, Jimmy would've seen his ice cream sundae twice over - he could feel his hands going numb, as a surge of shock went through every nerve in his body. Not only was he aghast at the fact that he saw a dead mammal on his first day, but also that his death wasn't going to bode well for the three officers in the long run.

At last, Jimmy pulled himself backwards, facing Judy and Nick with his ears folded back. He bit his lip, "Uh, guys… I think we have a little, uh… big problem here."

If you folks thought that this was gonna be sweet cheese and crackers, I'm here to remind you that you are sorely mistaken! I hope you folks enjoyed the grit shown here, and I guarantee that this isn't going to be the last time you witness a gruesome death.

I would also take the time to announce that the fanfic now has its own page on TV Tropes! So, head out there, and trope the heck out of it!

Once again, I will take a moment to shout-out to my buddy Berserker88 for giving me a hand with some elements of this chapter. If you haven't already, tune into Born To Be Wilde, authored by his good self and Mind Jack! It's one of the most thrilling Zootopia fanfics out there.

Also, a shout-out to LordKraus for coming up with Shaky's name and nickname!

Stay tuned - there's gonna be a lot more on the way!

Chapter End Notes

TV Tropes Page Link:
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/TheSoundDesigner
Big Ideas

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Frankie Melone’s death, Judy, Nick and Jimmy consult Mr. Big and Shaky about possible methods on catching the reptile traffickers.

38 Caribou Migration Road, Tundratown
4:46 PM

Having been treated with an event they most certainly didn't want to take place, the three rookie officers stepped back from the crowd to regain their composure and think of a backup plan. With Frankie gone, the chain of investigation had been broken – he was their link to whomever was next on the payroll. No matter what the case was, they certainly didn't look relaxed or calm. According to the tangible evidence, it seemed that the culprit was Mr. Big. Jimmy was pensively pacing around by himself, while Judy and Nick were standing together.

"Well, isn't this great? Just peachy…" Nick hissed, nervously rubbing his chin.

"Will you stop panicking?" Judy tried to ease the tension, much to the fox's dismay. She tried to approach him from behind.

"Carrots, did you see what happened?" Nick pivoted about himself very quickly, "He's dead! Somebody picked him off, and now we have no way of figuring out how he fits into the smuggling string…"

"Well, we won't be getting anywhere any time soon if we continue walking around in circles!" Judy snapped back, raising her hands.

"Well, what would you have us do?" Nick flailed his hands into the air, at a loss for thought and words alike, turning away once again, "Disguise ourselves and think they're gonna buy it? I really don't know…"

Judy's brows furrowed, and she started thumping her foot all the more quickly into the powdery snow, resuming her train of thought. However, even she had to admit to herself that it wasn't as easy as she made it out to be. Nick's attitude, while negative, was within reason – they were in deep, deep trouble, and it would take a really good plan to get them out of it. At times, it was hard for her to accept the possibility that there was a problem.

As the crimson fox stood still, with his arms crossed, he gazed upon the snowy landscape around him. Lost in thought, he began to mull over what he had just said, and gradually started taking it all the more seriously. When he connected the dots, it didn't seem as so foolish of an idea.

"Disguises…" Nick muttered from under his breath.

Judy's left ear instantly twitched in his direction, and a look of confusion was soon directed towards the fox, "What?"

"Hmm?" Jimmy turned around, wagging his tail with hope that a solution had been found. There
was no luck at all on his part.

"Maybe I can ask Cleo to come up with some disguises!" Much to their advantage, Nick definitely had a specific idea in mind, "If we dress up as Frankie and his co-workers, we could get to the eggs and catch our scalie dealers on the spot." Any previous doubt the officers had about moving on melted away like snow going out of Tundratown - excellent idea.

Clever fox...

"Not bad, Junior Detective…" Judy smirked, giving Nick a friendly jab to the shoulder with her fist. If anything, she was glad that her skeptical friend was on the right track once more.

"Yeah, that's genius!" Jimmy said, waving his fist victoriously, with a silly grin of joy on his face. Then his expression turned into a very quizzical, puzzled one. "Who's Cleo?"

"A professional costume artist..." Nick faced Jimmy first, then turned towards Judy with a snide, half-lidded grin. "...and my little plum cake. Let's get back to Manchito."

Nick wasted no time in heading back towards the group of officers next to Frankie's body. He was followed by a wincing Judy, who could only shake her head in embarrassment. "Plum cake? Really?"

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*Mr. Big's mansion*

4:56 PM

Much to the fortune of the three officers, an agreement had been made between them and the officers of Precinct 4 to keep the death of Francis G. Melone a secret for at least three days, to give them more than enough time to plan out their disguise-related operation that was conceived with the intent of apprehending whomever was bound to receive these stolen assets from the deceased procurer. The same information had also been transferred to their high-echelon colleague, Agent Pardrick.

Having finally been driven all the way to the mansion, Judy, Nick and Jimmy made their way to the front door. The rabbit flatfoot reflexively reached for the shortest of the doorbells, but was quick enough to stop herself and look at Jimmy.

"Jimmy, listen carefully," Judy whispered, "Mr. Big may or may not have something to do with Melone's death. No matter the case may be, don't bring it up to him. We don't want him to know that we know. You got that?"

"Got it," Jimmy nodded awkwardly, already aghast at the notion of the mammal they were about to see.

Nick rang the doorbell to alert the denizens of their arrival. The only thing they heard afterwards was the slow beating of thumping footsteps, hitting more clearly with each sound. Of all three officers, Jimmy was the most anxious: this was the last place in Tundratown he'd ever visit willingly, and now, he had to go there because his job demanded so. Speak of an exciting first day…

The first thing that the opening front door revealed was the towering figure of Koslov. The bruin looked upon the three officers, Jimmy most studiously, having never seen the Arctic fox before. To him, he looked scared – no surprise. The elite servant was accustomed to receiving this kind of reaction to his imposing form, and didn't even bother to remark on it.
"This way," The polar bear droned ominously, "Mr. Big waiting for you."

With nothing seeming a more reasonable option than this, the three officers followed Koslov. They were led through a long, thoroughly lit hall towards the second room to the right. It was a spacious living room, serving to accommodate guests of greater size than any shrew. Naturally, a small table was positioned in front of every couch and armchair in the house, so that any shrew denizens could have a foothold when talking to larger animals. Fortunately, Mr. Big was right where the officers hoped he'd be. The crime lord eyed them as they made their way to the couch, opposite of him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Big," even when on the job, Judy was above basic decency, and smiled warmly as she greeted the master of the house.

"Good afternoon, my child," Mr. Big also smiled, albeit for a very brief while, as he could tell by her attire that there were serious matters to be discussed, "I take it that you mean business."

"That's correct." Judy responded laconically, trying not to affect the shrew's mood in an unpleasant way, before moving to the matter at hand, "Are you familiar with Francis G. Melone, European Badger, about your age?"

"I am. I have just one question of my own," Mr. Big began, with a very cold and somewhat mistrustful tone adorning his high-pitched voice. "Why is Frankie important to you?"

It became very clear that Mr. Big was a little suspicious of their intentions at first. In order to dispel this, Judy proceeded to explain, "Well, he is involved in a case my colleagues and I have been looking into earlier today. Mr. Melone is bound to sell several stolen assets from a pet store in Savanna Central, according to what I gathered from the traffic cameras."

Mr. Big listened intently, twirling his whiskers all the while. Fortunately, the police officers didn't seem to know that he ordered the badger's murder, which mellowed him down once more. It was clear that they wanted to consult someone who was familiar with the locals of Tundratown, and for the most prominent mob boss, this was an absolute given. Letting out a short grunt of understanding, he took his turn, "I see. I don't know what his idea is with all that, but I do know that he's a procurer, and he is part of my family."

Being on the receiving end of Judy's gaze, Nick took over, "So, all we want to know is if there's anyone in town who could help us get acquainted with him."

Mr. Big wasn't a mammal who'd be miserly with anything, be it information, money, food or shelter. "If you want to know more about Frankie and this… reptile business he's in, you should talk to his assistant, John McAcorns. No one else can help you better." That said, the shrew mused for a short while. Even though he was usually very serious about business, he wasn't entirely stone-hearted. He most certainly enjoyed it when his associates felt at home when they're visiting, and Judy was the subject of his attention, "Besides, if I were a godfather, I wouldn't forget about my godchild."

Suddenly, Judy gasped in a shocking realization. She cupped her face in shame and immediately lifted herself from the couch – she forgot to greet Fru Fru, "I'm so sorry! Just give me a moment!" That said, the chipper doe rabbit scurried over to the hall, taking peeks into as many rooms as she could, searching for her friend.

Mr. Big couldn't help but let out a hearty chuckle at her reaction, "Can't blame her for not remembering everything on such a tense job..."

"Yeah..." Nick looked back, stifling a chuckle while picking out particles of dust from the tip of
his tail. "So where is this fella you were talking about?"

"Shaky?" Mr. Big began to explain, "He'll be here soon. My advice? Just be patient with him. He's got a... speech impediment."

"Understood." Nick nodded, slumping back into the couch, feeling more comfortable than anything. So long as this 'speech impediment' wasn't buccal speech, he could handle it.

"Koslov, take me to the office." Mr. Big demanded. The white bruin wasted no time in scooping up the shrew and carrying him off, thudding away as he did.

There was nothing more that the two fox officers could do, other than sit back and wait. Nick could notice that Jimmy was very stiff – he didn't even bother to loosen up in his more than comfortable seat. It seems that he was single-mindedly focused on his dread of being forbidden from incriminating a major figure in Zootopia's underground. Already on his first day, he was failing the book word for word.

"What's up with you?" Nick wasn't buying any of it.

"I'm defending myself with silence," Jimmy whispered, with his arms pressed almost firmly against his body. All the while, he bore a very awkward frown upon his maw.

"You're looking like a nincompoop," Nick quipped dryly. There was nothing for it – Jimmy had to adapt, "Relax."

After a while, Shaky was soon to be seen – the squirrel now took on a different kind of apparel. He wore a black suit fit for a waiter and carried a silver platter in hand. It, along with a confident gait, made his frail physique look all the more dignified. He approached the fox officers, and cleared his throat to speak...

...or so it seemed.

"W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-..."

*He stutters? Great! Carrots is gonna love this...*

Nick kept a poker face, watching the squirrel grimace with strain as the letter W was insistent on sticking around. Jimmy was a little dumbfounded by this kind of behavior, as he has never known anyone with a stammer this severe. He resisted the urge to start laughing, for fear of coming across as inconsiderate and rude.

"...w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-what would you like to drink?" The squirrel finally squeezed the words out of his mouth.

"I'll have some blueberry juice, if there is any. If not, just a glass of water," Nick ordered as he clasped his hands together, then folded his arms with serious intent, "For the record, you have a few things to tell us about your ex-boss, so you can stick around a bit afterwards."

Shaky became notably more worried at the mention of Frankie's name, but it was merely short-lived. These were police officers, and he could trust them. With a single nod to Nick, he turned to face his poofy white-furred colleague, "And you?"

"I'll have the same," Jimmy replied laconically.

Shaky immediately went to the kitchen, with a brisk gait. Most stutterers Nick had known were
slow to react, and slow to stop reacting, but Shaky didn't give off that impression. He was
definitely much more nimble in action than anyone else with similar difficulties. The only part that
lagged was his speech. Probably for the best...

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**The dining room**

5:00 PM

"O.M. Goodness," a squeak of joy filled the exquisite dining room of Mr. Big's house. "Judy!" It
was Fru Fru, Mr. Big's most noteworthy daughter. Needless to say, she was all too eager to run
over to greet her beloved godmother.

"Hi! How are you doing?" The doe rabbit leaned over, and they kissed each other's cheeks twice,
as a formal greeting. This done, the tiny shrew then lovingly embraced Judy's hand, prompting the
flatfoot to take the nearest seat so that they could talk more relaxedly.

"I'm doing just great!" This said, the 'crime princess' took a few steps backward, "I thought I'd fix
up some lunch. It's a little late, because I went shopping earlier today…"

"Little Rodentia, huh?" Judy inquired.

"Yeah…" Fru Fru sighed, clasping her hands together, "Took me all day to find all the stuff I
needed for some really sweet cake I saw earlier on TV. If you could stick around for a while, I'd let
you be the first to try it."

Judy was pleasantly surprised that her friend was already finding her way in the waters of
marriage, and wasn't afraid to do something on her own. On the other hand, her cooking also
benefited the doe rabbit, "Oh? Well, I am a little hungry…"

Fru Fru's tone of voice suddenly changed from chipper to somewhat reprimanding, as she laid her
arms on her waist and pouted in the manner that only befitted a mafia princess, "What's taking you
so long to stop by?" It has been quite a while, indeed.

"Work, as usual… I can't seem to catch a break these days," Judy sighed regretfully. As much as
she wanted to socialize with others, her schedule was tight, and most of her friends and family
knew this. Then, she noticed a little something that the shrew didn't wear very often, and
immediately complimented, "I love that necklace…"

"Aw, thank you," Fru Fru was humbled, as always, "Donnie bought it for our wedding
anniversary."

"Two years, already?" Indeed. No matter how little time had passed from their meeting, "Time
sure flies…"

"What about you?" Fru Fru inquired, gazing curiously at her rabbit friend.

"Me?" There wasn't much that Judy could tell her, "Well, I've got quite the case on my paws right
now, but I don't wanna worry you with that."

"Girl, I wasn't asking about that," Fru Fru giggled with amusement as her friend missed the point,
"I was asking about guys…"

The way the shrew stressed that last word was definitely pressing. While Judy was no stranger to
romance, it had been as long as she'd left Bunnyburrow that she was single. She giggled in
I'm married to the job, so I don't get to hang out. Besides, none of the bucks I meet here wanna get serious."

"Oh, well," Fru Fru most certainly understood this. It took her a decent time to find someone like Donnie, even though she was the popular girl in all periods of her life. All she had to say was nothing short of benign, "All things in time, and everyone's got their own. I'm sure he's gonna be a great guy."

Judy heaved a sigh, wholeheartedly believing that it would most likely turn out this way – Judy knew what she respected in a buck, and she didn't want to settle for a lack thereof. She smiled endearingly, "So, where's my little namesake?"

"Oh, Judy?" Fru Fru's expression melted into an apologetic one, realizing that Judy will not manage to see her goddaughter this time, "I had to put her to bed. She caught a little fever yesterday..."

Judy was mildly alarmed by these news. "Have you wrapped her up in a blanket?"

Fru Fru mumbled affirmatively, twirling her exquisite hair with her index finger, "Two. I'll give her some syrup every night to bring it down, and I won't give her any strong food. Mamma taught me that much, so I'm just doing what I know works for me. I'll see how it goes." With this, the young mother heaved a concerned sigh.

Definitely not a spoiled mob princess...

"She'll be fine..." Judy winked, smiling caringly.

"Oh, did you meet Shaky, our new waiter?" Fru Fru was quick to divert the officer's attention to a finely dressed, lean grey squirrel. He was pouring some drinks, and preparing to carry them off.

"Believe it or not, I didn't..." As she memorized each of Shaky's outward traits, she was served a cream soup made of zucchini by one of the polar bear servants.

"Oh, here's my new soup," Fru Fru chimed, "Hope you like it."

Judy reached for her spoon and began slowly scooping up the soup – needless to say that it was excellently prepared. It was still a little odd to think that Fru Fru made it, given her background and lifestyle, but it wasn't worth any overthought.

"I love it!" Judy couldn't help licking her lips after the first spoonful.

"Really?" Fru Fru asked shyly.

Judy winked assuringly, "Really."

"Well, bon appetit," Fru Fru clasped her hands together, before making a small announcement, "I have to go check on little Judy now. I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Okay," Judy waved her left hand at her, bidding her a sweet goodbye.

Suddenly, she could hear the whispering voice of Raymond. "Grab the squirrel's tail if it gets annoying."

"If what gets annoying?" Judy was confused, as she was still staring at her meal. When she turned her head left, then right, Raymond was nowhere to be seen. Her nose twitched a few times, before
shy shrugged it off and continued to eat.

**MEANWILDE…**

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*The living room*

5:03 PM

Shaky had already brought Nick and Jimmy their respective drinks – both blueberry juice. He was sitting to Jimmy's left.

"Officer Nick Wilde. Pleased to meet you," Nick was the first to greet the squirrel, already taking his blueberry juice glass in his right hand, and taking a small sip to evaluate its flavor. It was of shopping quality, but decent nevertheless.

"John McAcorns," after a small pause, the squirrel finally opened up, "B-b-b-but everybody calls me Shaky."

"Officer Jimmy Frost," Jimmy had finally resumed some of his usually chipper demeanor, "How are you?"

"I'm doing just f-f-f-f-f-f-f-f-fine, thank you," Shaky sputtered with each F, causing both foxes to flinch a little, in fear of some of the squirrel's saliva ending up on their clothes.

"Good to know," Nick elegantly set down his glass, lest it got warm in his hand. He assumed a more serious stance, and the tone of his voice matched every bit of it, "Now, you do know that your boss was going to do business with someone selling reptiles. Correct?" Seeing that the squirrel shyly nodded in response, he proceeded with a more pressing question, "Okay. What was he supposed to buy, where and when?"

Shaky took a very deep breath, all the while fidgeting about with his small hands and curling his lips, before he answered the question, with the same unsure tone that he's had as long as he was in the room, "I d-d-d-d-d-d-don't know what he was supposed to buy, but I know that it's supposed to be sold t-t-t-t-t-t-tomorrow night in Clark Halibuts, at nine P-P-P-P-P-PM."

Suddenly, the conversation wasn't getting tiresome in the mind of the newbie police officer. As scatterbrained as he usually was, Jimmy knew that this was the perfect time to memorize information. He immediately reached for his notebook, and wrote down the squirrel's words, highlighting key points that would be of relevance later on. The fact that his stammer was so long made it all the easier. With that said, the Arctic fox asked a simple question, "Clark Halibuts as in the restaurant at Fishtown plaza?" In response, Shaky nodded.

"Okay," Nick, meanwhile, took another sip of his juice, before moving on to matters that were more dramatic by nature, "What does his voice sound like?"

"V-v-v-v-very raspy," Shaky explained, while both foxes listened intently, "Just a growl."

Nick was compelled to try the act himself, "Like this?"

Shaky didn't find this impression to be very convincing. It sounded too much like Prustell Crowe in Gladiator to resemble the shredded voice of Frankie Melone, "Even raspier. Th-th-th-th-th-th-think someone with b-b-b-b-b-broken vocal cords."

Nick's face jerked back at the sudden influx of information. His brows furrowed in confusion and
his ears folded back – how did the waiter expect him to know this? Nevertheless, the officer wasn't about to let his insecurity curb his desire to prove that he was a genius actor, so he practically just snarled, "Something like this?" Jimmy couldn't help but snicker nasally at the sound of Nick's voice at the time.

This time, Shaky was both satisfied and impressed: the second attempt sounded exactly spot-on, "That'll w-w-w-w-w-work." In the meantime, Jimmy took notes of this, even though it wasn't that important.

"Ugh," Nick grimaced, stroking his throat to relieve the pain that the impersonation was causing, "A few more rounds, and I'll sound like him all the time…"

"It helps that you're tall enough to f-f-f-f-f-f-f-f-fit the size of his clothes," Shaky noted, deducing that Nick was asking these questions in order to disguise himself as the badger.

"Did his cellphone survive?" Jimmy interjected, earning a surprised stare from Nick.

"I have the ph-ph-ph-ph-ph-ph-ph-ph-phone in my old jacket pocket," Shaky stammered away, then raised his finger in suggestion, "I need to go get it."

"Okay. Go ahead," Jimmy smiled affably, as the squirrel headed off. When he looked back at Nick, he could see that his older colleague brandished a suave smile on his face. It was a smile that admired the rookie's thinking, and the positive advancement that he was showing. He could only respond with a sheepish grin of his own, until the red fox turned his gaze back to the hallway, wondering where Shaky was off to.

"He seems to be quite shaken up…" Nick quipped, somewhat pleased that he got a few seconds break from all that incessant stuttering. He was of the thought that Judy was very fortunate for having the luxury of not hearing out all of this – she just wouldn't have the patience.

"Yikes," Jimmy's reaction was a mixture of shock, sympathy and slight aggravation. While he was nowhere near as impatient as others were known to be, he wasn't enjoying Shaky glitching out at every fifth word one bit.

If one listened more attentively, he could hear the soft pitter-patter of small feet making their way toward the living room with a rapid gait. Alas, it wasn't Shaky yet – it was Judy. With a full stomach and a burning desire for more knowledge, she popped inside, "So, what'd I miss?"

"Well, we've gotten acquainted with our new lead," Nick began to explain, following the rabbit flatfoot with her gaze, as she made her way to the couch, taking a seat to his right. Naturally, he wasn't going to be utterly sincere about Shaky, "I think you'll love the way he addresses others."

"So, he's nice?" Judy did not suspect anything.

Jimmy only mumbled in affirmation, before explaining more thoroughly, "We figured some things out. I'll show you the notes when we're done."

Before Judy could ask anything more, her ears swiveled around at the sound of Shaky's approach, as the squirrel returned with Frankie's cellphone intact. The doe rabbit was quick to announce her presence, "Hi! Officer Judy Hopps, ZPD. How are you?"

"Oh?" Shaky was definitely surprised by the sight of a young, endearing doe rabbit being another one of the two foxes' colleagues, as he took a different seat, right next to her, "W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-when did you come?"
"So, that's what Raymond was on about…"

With every repetition of the letter W making Judy's initial smile vanish, Nick was successfully fighting back the urge to laugh out loud. Granted, the way she reacted to their one escapade back at the DMV was more humorous to watch; this was a good enough reminder of that.

"Well, I was here all the while. I reckon you didn't notice me," Judy explained, recalling that she may have been out of the waiter's line of sight, "Now, where were you?"

"Right," Nick snapped his fingers, and then reached his right arm towards Shaky, "Without further ado, I will take that phone, and wait for the crooks to call." At that moment, Shaky glanced at the phone, then at Judy, then at Nick, then at the phone again. After this, Shaky gently revealed it from his thin hand, handing it to the fox.

Judy was quick to ask about Nick's ideas, "So, are you gonna be the badger?"

"Figures, since I seem to be tall enough to fit the bill," at this moment, Nick was adjusting his badge, seeing that it had gone slightly out of place. That done, he turned his attention back to Shaky, "Now, what does he wear most of the time?"

Shaky clasped his hands and pressed his arms against his sides, and took another deep breath, because he wasn't exactly sure what he could tell him regarding his late master's taste in fashion, "He always wears b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b...b-b-b-" Judy was quick to remember what Raymond told her about the stutter, because she couldn't stand it anymore. Seeing how the squirrel was struggling, she quickly grabbed the base of his tail, causing the squirrel to jerk his whole body in shock, "Black! Black sunglasses. You don't really see his eyes from under them. He also wore a p-p-p-plaid olive shirt, and b-b-b-b-b-beige pants. I'd also recommend a coat made of f-f-f-f-f-f-f-faux fur, to cover up that tail."

"Does Frankie have a…" Jimmy puzzled, placing a hand on his chin. Then something that may have been of relevance popped into mind, "...favorite drink?"

"W-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-..." Shaky started stammering away, in order to reveal the answer. Both Judy and Nick frowned – out of all the things that were important, beverages were not high on the list. Jimmy could only shrug in response, not seeing how this was sidetracking by any means.

"Wine?" Judy attempted to rush the waiter into revealing the answer more quickly.

"...w-w-w-w-white wine. With ice." That finally finished, Jimmy took notes.

"Okay," Judy asked, "Does he join his clients and workers?"

"M-m-m-most of the time. He always takes them to f-f-f-f-fancy places where they talk a little before… you know." Shaky responded, much more briefly than before.

This opened question after question. Nick had already decided that he was going to play the part of Frankie Melone. Given the late badger's profession, this could lead to some rather risque roles to play. She was hoping that the whole thing wasn't going to have to involve any of what Shaky was saying. She had to consult Nick privately on the matter.

"Nick, can I talk to you alone for a while?" Judy asked, wanting to resolve the roles before moving on.

"Yeah?" The fox replied dumbfoundedly, as Judy began to climb down from the couch.
"Excuse us," Judy addressed Shaky and Jimmy, to prevent anything from coming across as awkward, as the two moved away...

Broom closet

5:07 PM

Even though it looked as though the two were sneaking away to enjoy a moment together, this was most certainly not the case. As the most seasoned team members, they had to decide what was going to happen in tomorrow's mission. The only place where they could whisper undisturbed was a broom closet that was not too far away from the living room. They crept inside, and Nick gently closed the door.

"So, what do you really have? Where and when?" Even though she was whispering, Judy was all too eager to hear some actual news.

"Clark Halibuts, tomorrow night at nine," Nick responded, then reached for Frankie's phone, showing it to Judy, "If the thieves call, I'll get any other info I need from them."

Judy wasn't convinced that having Frankie's look would suffice, "What about your voice?"

"Got it covered," Nick was quick to reassure, raising his paws towards Judy, the palms facing the rabbit, "Shaky said my impression was good."

"Where does that put Jimmy and me?" Judy asked nervously.

"Where do you think? In disguise, with me." Nick reasoned, "I need you two to be around, because you don't really have anywhere to hide."

Judy was convinced, until she noticed that he was brandishing the same devious smirk he had two years ago at Mystic Spring Oasis and the DMV. As her nose twitched, she was quick to connect the dots, and deduce what Nick imagined her as – a sex worker. It was obvious that he was still all too eager to see her go through something exceptionally embarrassing just for the sake of his own amusement.

"Don't even think about it…" the doe rabbit furrowed her eyebrows, glaring straight into Nick's eyes. Her ears were folded backwards, but still lifted, which only showed one thing – she was far from happy with this idea.

"Carrots, the only way this is gonna work is if you play the escort girl," Nick was taking it far more seriously than it seemed, however. It was the only way she could keep a low profile, with someone like Frankie around.

"No way!" Judy was still panicking over it, her ears completely drooping with concern, "What if someone recognizes me?"

"Trust me – when Cleo's through with you, nobody's going to see a thing." Nick had complete confidence in Cleo's line of work, so he saw no reason for Judy to worry, even if she was the public face of the ZPD.

"Plenty of girl cops got sued for doing this!" It was true that, in several cases, would-be arrestees would sue the city officials or the federal government for entrapment over such things, but this was only meant to be a façade of Frankie Melone being alive.
"It's not like you're doing a john bust… It'll be fine. Nobody's gonna lay a paw on you." Nick reassured her, seeing that Judy wasn't really thinking logically, but driven by fear of dressing up as something that didn't resonate with her by any means.

Judy sighed, apparently pacified by Nick's arguments. Her line of work was all about setting fear and prejudice aside for the greater good, so she had to be flexible in order for the plan to work. Then she recalled a probable new team member to notify about the job, "Should I phone Milo?"

Nick's whole face puzzled at the notion, "What for?"

"To record those goons," Judy reminded the fox, who was quick to nod in response, "We've got a better shot at investigating this if we do that."

"Right, right…" Nick said, "Means we've got someone to play the client for you."

"Right…" Judy sighed, "We also need to bring Shaky along. And Frost?"

"As far as I'm concerned, he should be a mime," Given his impressions of the rookie officer, he would much prefer to keep him at the bottom-most of profiles, "He's better off not talking."

Judy wasn't exactly sure why Nick thought this way, "Why's that?"

"What kind of top-class cop wants to arrest someone without proof and forgets his gun?" Judy's eyes slightly widened, and her nose began to twitch, as she was indeed baffled by this information, "He's a pushover!"

"Wait, seriously?" Judy inquired.

"I'm dead serious," Nick deadpanned.

Judy furrowed her eyebrows and sighed with exasperation, "I guess that's as good as we can prepare for this…"

"So, we've got a deal?" Nick decided to make sure.

"Do we have a deal?" Judy employed the old technique she learned from him, albeit not as enthusiastically, "Yes, yes we do…"

When all was said and done, the two officers gently walked outside of the broom closet. As uncomfortable as the implications of tomorrow's sting operation may have seemed, it was the only way the three ZPD officers could advance anywhere with their case, as the details behind the thefts were still hazy. Shaky could only offer some minor details regarding the aforementioned meeting. This meant that apprehending the traffickers was the shortcut to clearing matters up. As the hour was growing later, the next step was to inform their superior, Agent Pardrick, of all their progress today.

Darn, it took me long enough to post this baby...

With faculty duties on the horizon, my schedule will be getting tighter by the day. Nevertheless, I'll do my utmost to stay true to this fanfic!

Writing girl talk was definitely something I'm not accustomed to, but I'm stunned that it came across fairly decently at the end of it all. It was also refreshing to cut Judy some slack and have Nick handle the brunt of the work. Naughty fox... x)
Anyway, I hope you folks enjoyed yourselves. Catch ya later!
Faux Badger

Chapter Summary

With a solid heading, the team reunite with Pardrick to begin setting up their plan of action. This will require some outside assistance by artistic professionals who take their work very seriously - if not too much so.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE READ THE STORY BEFORE: The protagonist's name has been changed, and some scenes in existing chapters altered and rewritten for aesthetic reasons. Do not be alarmed.

Pardrick's office

6:30 PM

After their time at Mr. Big's residence had ended, the officers now had a strong, precise heading backed up by tangible evidence – namely Frankie's telephone and Jimmy's written notes (even though his paw-writing was rather sloppy). They could have sworn that the badger's death would most certainly do them in – fortunately, with good faith and methodical thinking, they managed to consolidate themselves and press onward.

Immediately after leaving the mansion, the three officers contacted Pardrick – the MBI agent picked them up and drove them back to his office in the HQ, for the sake of comparing evidence. While the officers were looking into Melone's tracks, Pardrick headed to the ZPD to interrogate the robbers of Komodo's Pets, and was able to catch up on certain details of where his three colleagues would be led. All they needed now was a mutual course of action.

"Thanks to your colleagues, officers Snarlov, Wolfard, and Rhinowitz, I managed to catch on that Francis Melone, a procurer from Tundratown, was bound to receive a leopard gecko, a leopard tortoise and a leopard snake, stolen from Komodo's Pets in south Savanna Central – I'd find it relatable if it weren't theft," the cat chuckled, scratching the area about his left whiskers before moving on, "All that I didn't find out was who's next in the trade chain." Immediately after finishing, Pardrick spun about his axis, leaned on the pool table and flicked his tail as if to point at the officers, "Did you find anything useful?"

"Only that he's dead, unfortunately," on behalf of all three, Judy delivered the news with a worried look in her eyes, as she faced the leopard.

"And…" the agent dragged along, with a surprised face, "What was the cause of his death?"

The bunny bowed her head down, and her nose began to twitch. She didn't have a specific answer, but she did have the presumed conclusion gathered from the officers at Precinct 4, "All the evidence we have gathered on the matter points to suicide due to drowning. I know this is making things harder, but-"

"Yes," Pardrick interjected, once again beginning to pace around the office, "Having someone who had a role to play in this trafficking string sent to the here after does create a problem..." The feline
faced the window, scratching his chin and twirling his tail about ever so slightly, lost in thought. For someone who had just received news of a setback, he reacted quite relaxedly. Perhaps it was due to years of experience having taken their toll on the psyche, where he had grown to be less and less shocked by certain events.

"That being said," feeling the need to help Judy regain her confidence, Nick interjected, "We've managed to find a workaround for it. We've gotten in touch with one of Melone's associates, and he provided Melone's telephone, as well as a meeting place where the assets are supposed to be delivered on our part. We believe that by disguising ourselves as Melone and his associates, we'll be able to arrest the trafficker who wants the scalies. The police from Precinct 4 are keeping Melone's death under wraps until this sting is complete." The fox smiled, looking up at the federal agent with content, and then directing a subtle wink at Judy and Jimmy, who had been listening intently all the time.

Pardrick was most definitely pleased to know that there was already an alternative. However, he still wasn't entirely convinced, "And where would you get a disguise that makes you look like..."

"A badger," Jimmy butted in, "He was a badger."

Pardrick slowly nodded, "Right. Well?"

Nick paused with hesitation at first, but eventually regained his cool, "My girlfriend is a professional costume designer that works at ZBS. Trust me; she is way too perfectionistic to let anything slip," the fox ended his declaration with strong conviction and stress upon the point.

"Yeah, but you need to cover up that tail. It sticks out like a seal under ice," Pardrick was incredibly quick to find a hole in the plan, keenly observing the fox while walking up behind him, "Tape it up and tuck it under a coat for it to not slip through."

The remark made Nick awkwardly take a glance at the aforementioned extremity: it was large, and covered in thick fur. The fox was fully aware that this was not going to be comfortable, but police work never was about comfort, to begin with – it was about sacrifice for the greater good; more precisely, pulling off a good impression of a mammal who was a far cry from his kind.

Having relaxed, Judy addressed the federal agent once more, "Are there any wiring technicians available at the moment?"

Pardrick turned towards Judy immediately, having taken her question rather seriously, "Now that you're at it, no. Our wire guy is working on another case. Darn shame..."

"Hmm..." Judy lightly tapped her foot along the floor, before speaking up once more, "I've found a sound engineer who could help us record any verbal exchanges of importance for further investigation instead."

"Really?" Pardrick was taken aback by these sudden news, "That's unexpectedly good news, indeed. I'll address him in person whenever possible," the leopard nodded slowly at the suggestion, before resuming his train of thought, "Since Melone was a pimp, what does that make you two?"

The very question almost made Judy's fur stand up – the matter at hand was grating enough as is. Rolling her eyes, the sole female in the trio sighed, "Prostitute... That makes the sound engineer fit the bill of a client, since he's a rabbit."

Seeing how aggravating it was for a seemingly decent doe rabbit to take on the role of a female with low morals, Pardrick nodded in understanding, letting his usually stern expression ease a little.
He shifted his gaze to the only member of the police team who hadn't yet voiced an idea – Jimmy. The arctic fox was rubbing his chin pensively with quizzical hums, seemingly taking the task rather seriously.

Nick didn't really have the patience for the younger colleague to mull things over while precious time was slipping away. "I think he should be something really conspicuous, that fools the masses."

"I got it!" It was in just about that moment that Jimmy snapped his fingers in absolution, "I'll be a mime!"

"Huh?" Both Nick and Judy jolted their heads in surprise.

"Mimes are really flashy, but who's gonna expect one to pull an arrest?" Jimmy was actually making sense of the whole matter, before elaborating even further, "Besides, my mom and dad worked at vaudeville and taught me a lot of tricks."

As Nick listened, a smile began to form on his maw. He would have liked nothing better than to have the rookie keep his mouth shut after his display of inexperience in his retellings of his days at the academy, "You actually read my mind there…"

Jimmy was taken aback by his role-model finally giving him the attention he'd been passively striving to attain, "Really?"

"You betcha," Nick winked suavely.

"Yes!" Jimmy cocked his arms back, clenching his fists with an audacious grin, "This is gonna be awesome!"

"You cannot speak if you're a mime!" Judy's remark made Nick stifle a laugh in remembrance. Pardrick also chuckled, but called the attention of the cops back, because it was much needed, "All joking aside, we now have a solid plan." That being said, Pardrick once again started to pace around his office, making fine gestures with his hands wherever he stressed things, "The game is deception. The scene is that of Mr. Melone doing business as usual, while a mime happens to stop by and eat after a hard day's work. Then, our blubbery badger is called upon by a businessman for the sake of work that no one has a clue about. They sit and talk, while the escort leads her client upstairs for a wild night." This last remark made Judy face the floor with mild disgust – she did not want to take it that far by any means. Her attention was called back by Pardrick tapping his index finger against the surface of his pool table, "Until I make my move, that is precisely what I want everyone inside that restaurant to think. You don't blow your cover, or your partner's cover for any reason. Understood?"

The only response that Pardrick received from all three officers was an affirmative nod, "Good. As far as our professionals are concerned, the payment is seven thousand Zootopian dollars per errand for each, from the funds of the MBI, one day after the job is done."

Judy wasted no time in writing it down, "Seven thousand dollars. Got it."

"Alright, then," With all said and done, Pardrick lifted his hands off of the pool table and raised his hands slightly, "Let's get this show on the road…"
Milo and Steve weren't known for arranging free-time activities together often. Most of the time, they'd be preoccupied with work that couldn't be postponed. Today was an exception – Steve successfully persuaded Milo to take part in a gaming session, as they had already set up their PawStation and controllers. Milo wasn't one to open himself easily to time off, but after all that has transpired today, he decided to ease up a little.

"Yo, Miles," Steve called out from the couch, already winding up to begin, "How about another round of WWF? Loser does the dishes!"

Was that a wrestling game that Steve was challenging Milo to? It would seem so. From the kitchen, the buck rabbit brought a bowl full of diced watermelon, and set it on the table, before jumping onto the couch again.

"Unless you're a teensy bit worried I'll beat you again!" Steve grinned, poking Milo in the ribs with his index hoof. This made the rabbit grin with a spoonful of smugness, as he reached for the controller.

"I hate to jog your memory, Steve, but the last time we crossed clotheslines in the ring, you lost," Milo made the point clearer by pointing his thumb down, then seated himself.

Steve was a little taken by surprise, but otherwise unfazed. He immediately went to the match selection and went onto "3 VS 3 TAG TEAM MATCH", before disabling count-outs and disqualifications and selecting three professional wrestlers: a horse, a domestic bull and a lion.

"El Orgullo, The Brahma Bull and Bronco? Sweet! It's gonna be fun pinning your tail to the mat. At least one of those three..." Milo quipped, before making his own choices: a Macabre-dressed polar bear, a female spotted hyena, and, after some hesitation, a female rat.

"La Mala Perra, La Niñita and Iceberg? Radical... but I'd hate to let you use the third of those," Steve approved of the choices, before the first entrance sequence started to play. Knowing that there was bound to be several of them, the wildebeest immediately skipped through all of them, so that they could start with the match.

The cacophony of the roaring crowd was eventually disrupted by the chime of the ring bell, and both Milo and Steve began controlling away. To start things off, Bronco took down La Mala Perra with a ferocious clothesline. When the stallion loomed over the hyena, she elegantly dodged out of the way of his elbow drop. She then moved to the bull's behind and dished out punches to his back. Eventually, she grappled, and as soon as she did, she dealt a painful punch to the groin, which sent the horse falling to the mat like a domino.

"Low blow? That's not fair!" Steve pouted, while tapping rapidly to get Bronco back up.

"No DQ, buddy," Milo smirked, as he made Perra climb onto the turnbuckle for a leaping move, "Anything goes, including this-" but his pride turned into aggravation as Steve made Bronco slide out of the way, and kip back up onto his hooves; Perra's frog splash sent her falling hard onto the mat, "Ouch... not today."

Before wasting too much time, La Mala Perra was back on her feet, and running toward the ropes, away from Bronco. Bouncing off, she ducked out of the way of a chop by the horse by sliding down on the mat, then picked herself up, and hit the stallion square in the nose with a spinning wheel kick, sending him falling down once again.
"Man, I'm really digging this hyena," Milo grinned, as he guided her back to the top turnbuckle, and prompting her to perform yet another frog splash – this time with a better result, "Nice frog splash. I'll play her all the time from now on."

Steve snickered at his friend, "Did I tell you that she's dating Niñita in real life?"

For a moment, Milo was outright aghast, but was quick to laugh it off. Doing so, he made the hyena hit a running hurricanrana on Bronco, "Okay. Disgusting, but okay." Steve returned the laughter and kept on playing.

It was at that very moment that the doorbell rang for the fourth time that day, disrupting the thrill of the game.

"Oy vey..." Steve's expression fell, as he reluctantly hit the pause button and set his controller down.

"Want me to get that?" Milo asked, reaching for a piece of watermelon as he prepared to get up.

"Sure," Steve shrugged, watching the rabbit pitter-patter off to the door. A flat face soon turned into a teasing smirk, as he slowly reached for the controller while his friend wasn't looking. But as soon as his fingers clicked against the contraption, Milo's ears shot up.

"Don't even think about it..." Milo deadpanned, prompting the wildebeest to set his controller down again. Stifling a chuckle and shaking his head incredulously, he headed back to the door. He kept the chain guard on, but unlocked it. He could see a strange new leopard, but only from the waist down. Milo's ears fell not only because of his unwelcoming black trenchcoat, but also because of his calculating facial expression, "Can I help you?"

"Special Agent Leopold Pardrick, MBI," a deep voice replied, with a completely flat tone, as he showed his badge for proof, "I would kindly ask you to open the door and let us in."

Milo quickly motioned a somewhat shocked Steve over, so that they could comply to the agent's demands. When they did, they realized that he hadn't come alone – Officer Hopps was with him, so both roommates were slightly more at ease.

"Mr. Rabberts, you've been recommended for a mission," Pardrick spoke, as he walked inside the apartment, and turned to face Milo, "Due to the absence of a wiring technician on our part, we were wondering if you could help us."

"Alright," Milo finally relaxed, putting both hands in his pockets while gazing up at the big cat, "What am I required to do?"

"You are required to record the verbal exchanges of potential suspects by any means necessary, throughout the full duration of an undercover sting operation," Pardrick stated, then raised his index claw, "The only auditive quality that needs to be fulfilled is intelligibility. As someone with a degree in sound design at Zootopia's Academy of Dramatic Arts, you seem to be more than capable of doing so. As far as personal safety is concerned, you will pay heed to every instruction given to you by police officers or federal agents. You will receive seven thousand dollars the day after your assignment is completed. Do you accept our offer?"

This question made Milo lower his gaze, as he once again found himself in a compromising spot – stay in the safety of low-risk work, or reach out the extra mile to help his family. On the one hand, the images of potential danger were adamant in staying on his mind. On the other hand, he felt a strange force luring him out of what he'd grown accustomed to; it was a force he usually ignored.
back in the day, because of the aforementioned fear. Too concerned with what had already transpired, and too wary of things that hadn't come to pass. He was not going to allow a chance to pass him by, even if it wasn't as golden as he would have wished. He couldn't afford the luxury of choice; it was now, or never.

With a newfound assertiveness, the buck rabbit looked up at the federal agent, "I'll do it."

All of a sudden, Pardrick, who had kept a flat face for the whole duration of his stay, smiled pleasantly, "Very well. We'll wait downstairs for a few minutes, so you can get ready. I'd recommend as light as possible, for ergonomics' sake. Our first stop will be the costume department."

Without further ado, Milo immediately went to gather all of his required recording gear, dressed up more accordingly for a public meeting, and bolted out the door. Since Pardrick mentioned a 'costume department', he knew that all he needed was a number of concealable wireless microphones, and a four-track handheld recorder – he could not afford to overencumber himself where quality wasn't a game-breaker.

The automobile ride made the buck rabbit feel uncomfortable; for one thing, he was surrounded by strangers, and wasn't really itching to start a conversation with either of them. For another, he never fancied cars very much. He saw them as caustic, enclosed boxes that take all of the fun out of the ride and turn it into a necessity. By comparison, he felt that the motorcycle gave him much more freedom, letting him breathe in the air outside and feel the weather for what it was.

Not before long, they stopped at yet another apartment building...

Denizen's Sanctuary Apartments, second floor, apartment number 7
33 Hill Street, Savanna Central
7:15 PM

Inside a short-roofed apartment, adorned by paintings and decorations of all sorts, upon a couch for three, lounged a red vixen; slim and lithe like what most of her kind would consider appealing, with brown eyes and a tail adorned by white fur. However, she had a rather odd choice of apparel – she wore rather large silver earrings, a Pandonesian necklace, a red flannel shirt and a bordeaux skirt. The sound of heavy metal drummed in her headphones, as she shuffled through the latest edition of *Velvety Fur*. Whatever her line of work was, she was very interested in fashion. She was deeply taken in by the latest fashion ideas that started circulating. So deeply that she didn't bother looking around elsewhere...

"Boo!" Her train of thought was thrown off by a blaring voice and a sharp squeeze of her tail, that made her yelp in shock and drop the magazine on the floor. As she sat there, hackles raised and eyes gawking, she turned around and saw that it was only Nick.

"Oh, come on! Are you crazy?" Her voice was adorned by an accent most similar to Fru Fru's; as she removed her headphones, the vixen turned her gaze away from him, and towards her fallen magazine. Sighing, she reached down to pick it off the floor.

"Don't be scared of me, Cleo..." Nick's usually smug grin turned into an almost pleading look, as he rested his arms on the side of the couch, still squatting down. Cleo rolled her eyes after a brief aside glance at him, still shaking her head at the previous stunt. Nick decided to invade her space a
little bit, and jumped on the couch, "Come on, cheesecake… No kiss to welcome me back?"

Eventually, Nick's unwavering sass got the better of Cleo, and she eventually fully faced him, kissed him and tightly embraced him. She even wrapped her tail around him, which her boyfriend returned as eagerly, "Welcome back, blueberry puddin' pie!"

In his girlfriend's tight embrace, Nick could have sworn he heard the sound of a facepaw and a very quiet groan coming from Judy, and stifled a chuckle. Oddly enough, it was Cleo that broke up the hug.

"How come you're home so soon?" The vixen inquired curiously, adjusting her shirt ever so slightly, "I thought you worked until ten."

"Well, I brought some friends over," Nick would immediately reach to snap his fingers, and Cleo would soon be treated to the sight of someone she didn't wager would come inside their home at this time.

"Hi, Cleo!" The only mammal that Cleo recognized and knew among these mammals was Judy.

"Special Agent Pardrick, MBI," The leopard's introduction made her slightly alarmed; part of it naturally owed to his imposing figure and sense of fashion. She was also somewhat sympathetic towards him, since he was barely standing up in their apartment, and was struggling to avoid the chandelier that was hanging above the couch.

"Have a seat, sir," Cleo replied meekly, then motioned Nick to get off the couch, to make room for the agent. With a sympathetic smile, Pardrick nodded his head in gratitude before sitting down. That said and done, he wrapped his tail about him.

"Officer Frost. I'm Nick's new partner!" The vixen was taken aback by the chipper voice of an Arctic fox who looked significantly younger than Nick. Beside him stood a rabbit that was keeping to himself, and only waved shyly at Cleo.

"We need some help," Nick's tone of voice suddenly became all the more serious.

"With what?" Cleo implored laconically.

"We're setting up an undercover sting, and I need to disguise myself as an old badger," the notion itself made Cleo look utterly confused, as she listened to Nick explain, "You're the only one I know who can pull it off. And before you ask – yes, you'll get paid."

"How soon do you need it done?" Cleo asked.

"For tomorrow night," Nick's quick response clearly ruffled his girlfriend.

"Tomorrow night?!" Cleo raised her voice, shocked by the apparent lack of consideration, "How do you expect me to make a badger costume in twenty-four hours?"

"I just need something that's gonna hold together and look convincing," Nick tried to calm her down, seeing how her perfectionism was already getting the better of her. "It doesn't have to be three-hundred percent perfect."

"Nick, I have to change your species, for cryin' out loud!" Whatever it was that Cleo wanted to do, she'd do her absolute best, "What's the point if they see through it? Folks aren't that stupid, you know?"
Nick didn't think that this attitude was helpful at this time, "I'm fully aware of that, but time is really of the essence here. So, can you do it, or not?"

At the moment, Cleo still wasn't absolutely sure if this was going to work out. As she stood there, rubbing her nose, she ruminated. On the one hand, she knew it would require more attention; on the other hand, she did things like this before, and it was Nick of all mammals who needed it. She sighed, "Alright... I might have a badger-shaped latex mask ready. Otherwise, it's gonna take me four days to make a new one. I have some fat suits and pads ready for you, but it's gonna take a while, so you have to be patient. I'm also gonna need some fur dye and scent mask, but I can only manage it tomorrow." Her gaze turned from tender to analytical, as she took a meticulous look at both the upper and lower end of her boyfriend, "The ears are gonna be pretty easy to mask up, but what about the tail?"

"I suggested sticking the tail to the end of a very long coat so that it falls out of visibility," Pardrick interjected, adjusting the sleeves on his trenchcoat a little bit, "That being said, none of the fur should stick out either, or else his cover will be blown before he says 'hi'."

"Right... I think I can pull that off," Cleo observed, nodding her head. She then turned her attention to the others, "But before I start, I have to get measurements for the rest of you. I hope your disguises won't be as complex as Nick's."

The other four merely exchanged glances and shrugged at each other, not having any ideas to pose as anything but their own kind. On behalf of the rest, Judy replied to Cleo's inquiry, "No, we're good."

Milo recalled that he wasn't even slightly informed on the meat and potatoes of the sting, "Speaking of which... What am I supposed to be?"

"Well," Nick addressed the buck rabbit, "The badger that I'm playing is a pimp, so that makes Carrots my worker and you..."

The red fox's half-lidded grin said it all. Milo was frowning to begin with, but now the frown became a little bit wider. As a lump formed in his throat, he took an aside glance at Judy, before turning away and rubbing the back of his head, "Right..."

"You know what I'm gonna be - a mime!" Jimmy's eagerness to join the conversation eventually boiled over, "My dad used to be in vaudeville and he showed me a ton of awesome stuff! I can't wait to pull the tricks, but I'll have to jog my memory a little..."

"But rule number one - you can't speak if you're a mime," Nick interjected, to prevent Jimmy from straying too far from the central topic.

"Correct!" Jimmy flashed a grin in response.

"My disguise should really be paper-thin, but inconspicuous," Pardrick began to explain, adjusting his bottom on the seat to make himself a little more comfortable, "Once we make the arrest, I want it to be clear that I am what I am. Until then, an illusion has to be maintained." After this, the agent grinned whimsically, "Besides, us cats are a nightmare to tailor for."

Cleo successfully stifled a chuckle; since the felid denizens of Zootopia were rather top-heavy in terms of physique and picking out matching elements made difficult, Pardrick definitely had a point. Without further distractions, Cleo wanted to begin, "Alright, then. What are we waiting for?"

The next twenty-four hours were spent in an upbeat, focused and almost tireless workaholism on
Cleo's part. Firstly, she finished the easiest task possible and measured everyone in the crew. Thanks to having turned the largest room in the apartment into a small costuming studio, she was able to quickly find a matching attire for Nick's disguise, based on photos of Frankie Melone provided by Pardrick. The whole suit construction took her until 2 AM to finish. Because of the differences between the head structure of foxes and badgers, she had to use a latex mask to make for a convincing impression that would be bought easily by onlookers. Fortunately, she did have a furless badger-shaped mask, even though it was originally modelled after an American badger, rather than a European badger. Adjusting the details to match Frankie's look and the addition of fur took her several hours to complete, because she was either going to do her job as finely as she could, or not do it at all. The next day she spent scouring for clothes for the other mammals, and in due time, exactly one day after her help was enlisted, everything – from basic suit details to fine elements like scars, jewelry, scent masking, make-up and even contact lenses – was finished.

Nick portrayed Frankie in an elaborate coat made of faux mink fur, and his cane and sunglasses were replicated with utmost precision. The most difficult detail to match was the effect of blind eyes as Nick squinted. He would have to act as though he was blind for this to be convincing. All in all, the disguise itself looked more than satisfying.

Judy's prostitute masque also ended up looking fairly convincing. She was completely outlined by a skin-tight scarlet dress, a bordeaux coat made of faux fur and violet faux leather gloves. She also wore an ornate gold necklace to complete the kitschy impression she was supposed to leave. Her face wasn't left unattended, either – she was given rather dark eyeshadow, a rather thick mascara and green contact lenses to mask her eyes.

Jimmy donned the apparel one would expect from a professional mime artist – it consisted of a shirt riddled with white and black stripes, suspenders and a derby hat. As most mimes, his face was elaborately decorated with eye paint, as well as some black lipstick to the tip of his lips. Needless to say, his speech of experience with mime artistry was completely true – he was very skilled at it.

Milo was the one who received the second most drastic makeover. Cleo had successfully transformed him into an obese rabbit with an oversized lower lip (albeit at his own insistence) that wore a leopard-print suit and a silver-colored wristwatch. He also insisted to wear brown contact lenses, simply to be even less conspicuous than he already was. To Cleo, it seemed as though the rabbit was much too paranoid about avoiding detection. All in all, his disguise represented the cheap elite of Tundratown's streets that congregated around places like the restaurant the team were about to visit.

Pardrick's disguise, while not convoluted to set up, was rather peculiar in its own right. It consistent of a fine turquoise suit with a dark blue wool scarf, a silver wristwatch complete with reading glasses – he insisted on resembling a character from one of his favorite films, who was himself a culinary critic.

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_Den-izen's Sanctuary Apartments, apartment number 7_

_June 27th, 2018, 7:10 PM_

"Well, there we go. I think this should hold up," Cleo shrugged, with a proud, although somewhat sleepy gaze adorning her face, as she looked upon the ensemble that now also included Shaky.

"Now, you should remember that we don't appear at the restaurant at the same time, or together," Pardrick raised his finger, while addressing his subordinates, "First Frankie's gang, then the mime, then me."
No sooner had Pardrick finished, than a strange ringtone was heard. It came from an older model of Roekia that was in Nick's pocket. When Nick removed the telephone from his pocket, he saw that the caller was an unknown number. Before saying, or doing anything, Nick cleared his throat, and finally pressed the answer button. He now put his impression of Frankie to its fullest use, "Hello?"

"Hey, Melone? You there?" It was an unrecognizable, somewhat husky male voice that was on the other end of the line.

"Frankie Melone here. What's up?" Nick continued the act.

"Is our deal still intact?" The correspondent implored.

"You better believe it. I got the stuff," Nick impressed onwards, "Just so you'd know, I've got a client to deal with. Once that's taken care of, I'll get to you. I'll be there from 8:30 PM, on the main floor."

"Good, good," The correspondent conceded, "We'll be there at exactly 9. The stuff better be good."

"No doubt there," Nick assured, "You'll see me then."

Without further ado, the correspondent hung up, leaving only one thing to be done. Nick coughed a little bit, rubbing his slightly itching throat – imitating the voice of someone like Francis Melone was something he would easily erase from his bucket list. Before long, he turned his attention to the rest of the team. "Well, let's get busy."

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I'm baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack!

Well, it's been more than three months, but I assure you, it was worth the wait.

If you notice some changes, it's mostly because of the fact that I took the time off to devote myself to creating a more convincing and more powerful story than before. Hence I've been thoroughly rewriting what was already posted. If you're interested, take the time to read it, because it's really worth it: Milo is the protagonist's name now, for aesthetic reasons. I also made his story much more relatable and up-close, even if it meant introducing a few new characters in the start. That won't be the last you'll see of either of them.

The rewrite of the fanfic has been beta-read by Ubermunchkin. I give my heartfelt thanks to her constructive advice and general quality as a writer!

Buckle up, because the adventure continues here!

P.S. A holler out to Berserker88 and JackOfMinds for La Mala Perra, La Niñita and El Orgullo's cameos in the video-game!
Covert As Perverts

Chapter Summary

Judy, Nick, Jimmy and Pardrick embark on a sting operation in Clark Halibuts, under the guise of Frankie Melone and his associates, in order to track down some reptile traffickers.

Clark Halibuts, Fishtown Plaza, Tundratown

8:32 PM

Clark Halibuts stood proud within Fishtown Plaza as one of the oldest restaurants in the snow-covered district. Over the course of sixty years, their staff had consistently attracted carnivorous customers, but thanks to the Wellness Policy of 1983, they were prompted to broaden their menu for herbivores. As of late, however, they were under the eye of suspicion, due to several accounts of prostitution taking place in a nightclub above the restaurant. Therefore, only adults who still fancied their specialties would come to the restaurant during the evening, seeing how it had become unsafe for children.

At around this time, the interior still wasn't too crowded. Only a handful of mammals were sitting around the main hall of the restaurant, and from what could be seen, they weren't consuming any meals. Nick maintained his facade of a blind badger by sitting as still as a statue, only twitching his ears at any sudden sounds that really alarmed him. No matter what, he would not open his eyes. Shaky was the one doing the spying in Nick's stead, while growing wary and paranoid due to the insufferable waiting.

Milo and Judy sat at the same table, as idle as they could be. They either peeked into their respective menus, or played games on their cellphones, because they were ordered to be in airplane mode by Pardrick, who was seated a few tables away. They showed the classic image of modern society, too self-centered to converse and too caught-up in the routine to find something new. However, Milo wanted to take a look under the table...

Before he could, the group was approached by a waiter – a plump Baikal seal with finely brushed whiskers and a rather campy voice, "Good evening and welcome to Clark Halibuts, Mr. Melone. What can we sate your appetite with?"

"Well, what's on the menu?" Nick asked, not turning his head.

"This week's predator special is stewed squid with Seasar salad," the waiter flashed his pen and notebook, ready to write the orders down.

"No chicken?" Nick squeezed in some of his own angst.

"No chicken, indeed," the waiter smiled affably, writing down the meal order, "Would you like a drink with that?"

"Ah, you know me: white wine with ice," Nick grumbled back. He was more than relieved that his impression of Frankie was working without a hitch.
It wasn't long before the portly pinniped addressed the stammering squirrel, "You, sir?"

"W-w-w-w-w-well, I would-" Before Shaky could finish that sentence, his ribs were rapidly introduced to Nick's elbow.

"Shut up! You ain't gettin' jack…" Nick snarled angrily, which was enough to make both Milo and Judy wince, let alone the waiter, who stared on awkwardly. Nick chuckled, "He's on a diet, ya know…"

With his shock dying down, but his slight discomfort remaining, the seal faced the rabbits, "And… you, miss?"

Judy leaned on the table with her elbows and crossed her legs, humming quizzically while pouting her lips ever so slightly, "Well, I'll have a double cabbage salad mix," She managed to put on a breathier overtone to her voice. The seal was confused by the order, until the apparently lustful doe started caressing Milo's shoulder, "To split… And a carrot vodka for me."

"And your drink, sir?" The waiter implored, having written down all but that.

Milo produced a rather nasal, somewhat lispy voice, perking his ears, "Beg your pardon?"

"Sweetie, he's asking you about the drink," Judy inched her head ever so closely to Milo – to a layman, the buck rabbit appeared to be all but deaf.

"Oh, well… I'll…" Milo stuttered a little bit, struggling to make a choice. This grated the waiter's nerves ever so slightly, as he already felt he was overstaying his time at this table, "I'll have a cappuccino, thank you."

"Okay…" The waiter conceded, albeit perplexed by Milo's choice of beverage, "Do have a bit of patience." Having written everything down, the waiter left to take the order to the chef.

"Who even drinks cappuccino with salad?" Needless to say, Judy shared the waiter's opinion.

"Someone with poor taste," Milo's justification was rather outre to her, "Since I look the part, I might as well…" That being said, Milo waited until the waiter was out of sight. He ducked his head underneath, then took out his handheld recorder and wireless receiver, and adjusted them – he stuck the wireless receiver to the table's leg, pressed the record button and stuck the recorder against the bottom of the tabletop. The recording format was MP3, being written slowly into an empty SD card. After he finished, the buck rabbit immediately straightened himself out before anyone could notice.

Pardrick was rather leisurely about his role-play. He was reading the menu, until the aforementioned seal also greeted him, "Good evening, sir. How can we help your appetite?"

"What I would like, good sir, is some perspective. Well-seasoned perspective," Pardrick put on a very convincing Avaleonian accent, motioning his paws in a very posh way as he placed his order, "I want to know the amount of attention you give to your cuisine, so I will choose my favorite – an octopus cutlet with potato salad, and a glass of your finest white wine."

"Ice?" the seal asked.

"No, thank you," Pardrick shook his head, gently waving his left paw aside, before raising the index finger again, "And if you may, your dessert special."

"Very well, sir," the waiter finished writing down, before heading off to transfer the order to the
kitchen. Pardrick sank back into his chair, gently tapping his fingers onto the table top. It didn't hurt him to admit that he was growing bored of waiting. Looking at his watch didn't help, either. It was only 8:37 PM, and the dealers were due to arrive only twenty-three minutes later.

Outside...

8:54 PM

About five minutes away from the restaurant, Jimmy was already in his element. Since his father had worked in several circuses and on the streets as a mime artist, the young Arctic fox learned enough from him that all it took to jog his memory was a compilation of videos on ZooTube. At the very least, he was able to perform the most common tricks; this was enough to elicit at least some attention from passer-bys. Even though a tin can for pledges stood beside him, not everyone was generous enough to spare a dollar or two. However, if there's anything that Jimmy learned, it's that practice makes perfect, and that one has no right to complain about bad luck if they did nothing to improve. With due diligence and a few laughs, the citizens of Tundratown eventually warmed up to the mime artist and paid him some more attention. There were still mammals who would scoff negatively as if they knew better, but that didn't discourage Jimmy at all. While his colleagues all expressed some form of discomfort, or even outright dislike of their respective roles, the rookie Arctic fox had no shame in admitting that he legitimately enjoyed playing his part.

Suddenly, he had the attention of a rather unexpected kind of gentleman – an enormous, burly male Pacific walrus, dressed in a naval trenchcoat riddled with brass buttons and some sewn-in stripes, with his robust neck sticking out prominently, for lack of a scarf. At first distant, the pinniped hobbled over slowly, curiously inspecting the Arctic fox's rather odd antics. All those elaborate acts and mimicry, performed without a single word, or care of the populace's opinion.

"What is little white fox doing?", the walrus asked, with a thick, albeit distinguishable accent that was common to many denizens of Tundratown, including Koslov. Strangely, it seemed as though the fox wasn't listening to him at all. The fox squatted down, wrapping his tail around himself and squinching his head against his shoulders, then started pushing upward with what would be described as a fake strain. Then he adjusted himself, and started "pushing" to the sides, also clenching his teeth as though he was about to soil himself.

"White fox! Can you hear what Ivar is saying?" The walrus was growing impatient, and suspecting the tiny canine to be either deaf, impaired or downright rude. Eventually, Jimmy had finally erected himself with a sudden jolt upwards, which slightly surprised Ivar. At long last, the fox looked at the walrus, smiled genially and tipped his hat in greeting to this inquisitive stranger.

"Can you not speak?" Ivar was somewhat placated, but still didn't see clearly what was going on here; part of it was thanks to nature not blessing him with eyes keen enough. However, once he saw that the fox started to act as though he was being swept away by a very rapid wind, and was holding onto a rope, along with a closer look at his attire, Ivar felt silly for not realizing earlier – this was a mime.

His initial furrow-browed scowl was replaced by a whimsical smile, and as Jimmy mimed on, he imitated the motion of a large pair of scissors, "snapping" them twice. Soon, he repeated the same motion right in front of Jimmy, who, after a look of utter shock, jumped backwards with great vigor, and fell onto his rump; the slippery sidewalk ensured that he skidded all the way to a small lamp post, and had snow end up all over him as the result of the impact.

Ivar let out the most hearty of laughs, holding his enormous belly, before hobbabling over to the dazed fox, who seemed to have legitimately hit himself in the head. He hoisted him back onto his
feet, and dusted off the snow that fell onto him, "Come now, poofy tovarisch! Ivar would like to show you very good restaurant."

At this notion, Jimmy made a perplexed expression, and scratched his head.

"Restaurant is called Clark Halibuts," Ivar proceeded to explain further, motioning Jimmy to move with him, eager for more tricks and games, "There is shady business going on there from time to time, but Ivar adores their clam chowder." And so, Jimmy was lead towards the place where their desired suspect would also arrive in due time, and though it wasn't exactly the time Jimmy intended, he wouldn't protest much.

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Inside…

8:59 PM

Come about a half-hour since the team's arrival, the restaurant had become moderately crowded. It came of no surprise that most of these were adults looking to sate their appetite before heading out into a wild night, or were saving the wild night for upstairs… Taking a good few looks around while eating her meal (which was admittedly quite delicious), Judy could see all kinds of delinquent young ladies. Some of them seemed wearied and drained; others were haughty and proud. The few doe rabbits that noticed her cast envious looks upon the officer in disguise. Nevertheless, she minded her own business. As if being dressed as a sex worker wasn't grating enough, she also had to drink the vodka she ordered in order to keep her act. She did it in small amounts, because her conscious mind mattered much more to her than maintaining a facade as though it were the most important thing on the case.

Suddenly, two new mammals made their way into the restaurant, and paced in the direction where the group was sitting. A coyote who seemed to have some mange under his neck, and an American black bear with a visible snaggletooth for a lower right fang, both wearing haggard coats and winter caps.

"Hey, Melone!" The coyote uttered, eyeing the apparent badger.

"Who's there?" Nick turned his head about himself, before he heard the tapping of canine claws to his right.

"I was on the phone with you, about the deal," He then eyed the two rabbits that were sitting with him, "You'd better get done with those two. Time is money."

"Huh?" Milo squinted, pointing his left ear awkwardly at the canine.

Judy could have sworn that there was a sizeable bulge in the coyote's pants – a knife, judging by the shape. Still, she rose from her seat rather quickly, feigning concern and shyness, as she moved over to Milo's left, slowly caressing Milo's shoulders, "Oh, don't worry, fellas. We were just about to head upstairs anyway…" Then she started gently scratching the back of his head.

Milo was taken aback by Judy's sudden invasion of his personal space, but played along with a strong jerk of his head, and his left ear lifting up, "What were you saying?"

"Let's go upstairs…" Judy practically whispered into the buck's ear, which made him gawk a little in realization, but also due to the slight goosebumps he got.

"Oh, upstairs…" Milo slowly nodded, and insecurely rose from his chair, taking aside glances to the table cloth, knowing full well that his recorder was hidden underneath there. The realization
that he was giving up all knowledge about what could happen to his recorder had given him a rather slow pace, so Judy had to drag him by the arm to get him to move faster – but not without a flirtatious giggle on her part. They moved up the stairs that lead into the brothel rooms that were a floor above the restaurant, slipping out of sight in due time.

"Like I always say – if you love your job, never do it for free…” Nick chuckled, before setting his paws onto the table, "Shaky, move it. We've got work to do…"

"Whoa, whoa, where are you going?" the bear implored, showing signs of subtle aggression. The coyote also stepped forth.

"Oh?" Nick barely even moved his head, as he took a deep sniff, "Is my nose playin' games, or are you some kind of bear?"

"We reckoned it'd be b-b-b-b-b-b-better for you if you sat at a table more f-f-f-f-f-fit for your size, sir," Shaky was incredibly quick to prevent any kind of oddities, even though he could hear suppressed laughter coming from both of the mammals. He jolted himself immediately and nervously flopped from the chair down onto the floor, "Let me get the ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-chair, Mr. Melone."

The coyote narrowly stifled a snicker, as the squirrel pulled back the chair and began to guide his master to the two mammals, "What are you spazzin' at?"

"Don't mind Shaky," Nick waved aside, then nudged the squirrel in the ribs with his cane, "He was born a little askew. Ain't it right?"

Turning his head away from both Nick and the strangers, Shaky snorted to himself in remembrance of the cruel days he spent with Frankie. On the other hand, he was impressed by Nick, because that's exactly the kind of condescending, low-witted remark that Frankie would make on him, simply for having a stutter.

Placated and understanding, the two mooks followed Shaky and Nick to a table more suitable for the bear's size. Before the smaller majority could take their seats, Nick called out to the nearest waiter, "Hey, you! Give us three elevated chairs, and offer these gents something to eat, on me."

The waiter, an Arctic wolf by species, nodded and immediately went to accommodate the gentlemammals. He and one other waiter were rather swift to replace the existing chairs with elevated ones that would be fitting for a badger, squirrel and coyote.

"What'll it be, gents?" the wolf waiter implored, seeing how the four mammals were all seated.

"How about a 10-meat platter?" The bear implored.

"Okay," The wolf wrote down quickly, "Would you like a salad with that?"

"Sure, I suppose," the coyote shrugged.

"Noted," without pause, the wolf trailed off to the kitchen.

Soon, two more guests made their appearance in the restaurant – Ivar the walrus and Jimmy the miming Arctic fox chose a table on the left side of the restaurant. Before taking a seat, Jimmy quenched the urge to scan the restaurant to see where his colleagues were; due to his proximity to the door, he couldn't really see Pardrick, but he could see that Nick was sitting with a mammal that he couldn't quite recognize, and a large bear. Before he could pay any more attention, he was pulled away by Ivar's webbed front flipper, "Come this way, little fox. Ivar will find good seat."
"Hey, there, Ivar!" a rather chipper elephant seal of a waiter was eager to greet the walrus, "Back from another match?"

"Not today," Ivar conceded, having revealed that he occasionally partook in some kind of sport activity, "Ivar has met new friend who cannot speak. What was word?"

A single look at Jimmy was more than enough to the waiter, "Is he a mime?"

A nod from Jimmy, and Ivar snapped his fingers in remembrance, "Ah, yes, yes! He is mime."

"Clam chowder as usual?" The waiter shot away very quickly.

"Da," Ivar chuckled with delight, "Warm, and glass of vodka."

"And you?" The waiter shifted his attention to Jimmy – he began to mimic the pricking of his fingers onto several barbs, then the motion of spearing something. "I'm afraid we're out of octopus at the moment, sir. My apologies," the elephant seal conceded.

Before long, Jimmy imitated the motion of smaller, shorter tentacles moving rapidly through water. "Squid? Would you be interested in our calamari special?" To this question, Jimmy could only nod in approval. The waiter proceeded with the next question, "Would you like a drink with that?"

Jimmy began to mime the cutting and squeezing of a lemon into a glass. "Lemonade? Got it," Having written everything down, the elephant seal hobbled off to deliver the order to the kitchen.

"Ivar enjoys pouring lemon on fish, but he doesn't know of drinking lemonade with seafood," the walrus conceded, having comfortably seated himself, and laying his hands onto the table, "It's new thing for Ivar to try, I suppose."

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Clark Bad Girl Burrows; Room Number 7

9:00 PM

The brothel that was situated above Clark Halibuts looked as much as it could be expected from an escort house; its walls were lined with red velvet, and decorated with bulbs with a rather candle-like design. A muskox security guard stood in front of the entrance, granting access to anyone who was sixteen, or older. Milo and Judy easily bypassed any roughing up, and rented a vacant room for a period of one hour.

It looked as similar to the hallway as could be: the wall behind a double bed was also lined with velvet, while the rest of the room was painted pink. With no windows, the only source of light were somewhat dim scented candles, presumably to make the ambience all the more erotic for anyone paying for the services of a prostitute. It was a relic from a bygone period where prostitution in Tundratown was outlawed, and those who wished to procure had to find ways of avoiding detection.

Fortunately, neither Milo nor Judy were very keen on maintaining the act to that level of faithfulness. All they did was sit on the bed, and heave a sigh of relief for being outside of any physical danger. It was quiet in the room. Awkwardly quiet. The only audible sound was the subtle hum of the ventilation system that was installed to keep the rooms fresh and free of germs, as well as suitable for breathing.

"That was a close shave..." Strangely, it was Milo who spoke first, with the prosthetic lower lip giving him a rather irksome lisp. After a small pause, he resumed, "When do you think the arrest is
"Well, it's gonna take a while," Judy conceded, "Nick's probably going to order them a meal to keep them busy. Pardrick's going to radio me when it happens."

Satisfied by the answer, Milo nodded slightly, and lowered his gaze to the floor. So long as he had something to occupy himself with, he could manage a long time without moving around. In this case, it was his phone – a relatively recent Levovo. He looked into his Muzzlebook, and after a few seconds of shuffling through it, he found absolutely nothing of interest. Next stop: Instagrunt. Pictures of mammals enjoying the full happiness of their lives with their significant others, or in exotic locations abroad, comprised most of his news feed – didn't comfort him at all. Then came his ZMail: the most recent message was still Stagart's email about the board meeting, and that didn't help him relax, either.

With nothing on his phone to capture his attention, the only possible activity that remained was the one he found to be the hardest – speak with Judy. He hardly knew her, and his first impression of her was of a doe who was extremely likely to land herself into trouble through her sunny disposition and eagerness to take action; all judging by the hours he spent with her during the costuming. Unsurprisingly, she didn't seem all that entertained herself, as she was killing time by adjusting the skirt of her dress for more comfort.

"So..." Milo drew out, all the while rubbing the back of his head again, "Is this what you always wanted to do?"

Judy was a little confused, "Dressing up as an escort? Nope."

Milo stifled a laugh, "No, I mean, working as a cop, and all."

Finally catching the meaning, Judy couldn't help but lightly laugh as well, "You have no idea. It's been my dream ever since I was a little girl."

"Did your family give you any... weird looks for it?" Milo asked.

"Oh, they did," Judy nodded, her smile fading. It wasn't too long before it returned, albeit with a satyrical note, "When you're the first ever rabbit cop, everyone's gonna give you weird looks."

"Oh, right..." Milo nodded in swift realization, "Did that have anything to do with Lionheart's inclusion initiative?"

As pleased as Judy was to know that she was familiar, the memory of the former mayor of Zootopia, whom she had lukewarm feelings of, was awkward, "Well, it's... nice to see that there's at least one detail you remember me by. Even if it is our ex-mayor," After a brief pause, and picking out a sizable clump of mascara from her left eye's lashes, the doe continued, "Anyway, my family all thought I was totally crazy for even thinking about a career in the ZPD. 'Bunnies don't do this, bunnies can't do that, yadda yadda yadda'... But, since I wasn't about to give up trying to prove that I'm capable of doing the job, it had to come to fruition at one point."

This doe was definitely looking on the 'bright side'. Milo wasn't buying it, "Yeah, right..."

"Huh?" Judy jerked her head towards the buck almost defensively.

"Oh? Nothing..." Milo alleviated the tension, "I just find it hard to believe that there isn't anything more to it than that."

Judy still wasn't sure what he was aiming for, "Well, there isn't."
"I guess my line of work is even more closed-minded than yours…" Milo stated, staring at the floor with a gloomy frown.

"What are you talking about?" Judy implored.

"I can't have the job of my dreams, for all I want," Milo conceded, completely crestfallen.

"Why's that?" Judy's gut was telling her she'd have a difficult time comprehending the buck's mindset, "You seem pretty professional about it."

"I'm not talking about that," Milo redirected Judy's attention to the actual matter at hand, "I'm talking about sound effects design, the art of it. Making something from scratch and hearing it put on screen is one of the most wonderful things you can do. But…" At that moment, the awe and reverence with which the buck spoke of what he clearly enjoyed the most faded back into glum despair, "Since Stagart has Gary Roestrom, who is a genius, why would they want me to do it? What else is a rabbit going to be other than a production sound editor? A techie? Nothing. I'm stuck at a trite job that barely covers my bills because other mammals never have and never will be willing to sacrifice their share of the trough and let newbies into the higher positions."

During this desperate eulogy, Judy read Milo like a book. He seemed to be entirely caught up in the belief that the opportunity for their dream job was going to fall out of the sky if he did nothing but complain about it. It seemed as though he was appealing to her sympathy, but it was not going to work, "Really? Have you tried bringing it up, and seeing how your boss responds to it?"

"Alright, look," Milo tensed up as though he was being belittled, raising his paws ever so slightly and speeding up his speech, "Sometimes circumstances are pitted in a way that doesn't let you get what you want."

"Circumstances aren't a game-breaker..." Judy tried to counter positively, but the buck's rising tone cut her off, knocked her ears down and wiped her encouraging smile clean off her maw.

"And there's nothing you can do about that!" Milo closed off, lowering his voice once more as he looked at an increasingly annoyed Judy, "So why push a boulder up a steep hill when you know it's gonna fall back down?"

"How can you know if it's going to fall down if you quit trying?" Judy shook her head in bedazzlement that someone could be so adamant on a resigned outlook, "You keep pushing, each time with a different strategy, until you make it to the top. It's the only way it can work."

"You're one to talk," Milo scoffed, his initial adamance devolving into arrogance, "With the mayor by your side, it must've been easy...

At this moment, the change on Judy's face was all too noticeable. Her ears had raised up halfway, her eyes widening, nose twitching and brows furrowing, as she gasped quietly – there was no mistaking her apparent anger for anything else. If there was anything she couldn't stand, it was this kind of behavior, "I clawed my way up to get to my badge! I've gone nights without sleep building myself up for what I wanted to do, and I would have done it without anybody's help! When I came to the station on my first day, the chief turned me into a meter maid!" As she told her story, Milo was all but aghast at her unbridled sincerity, "But that didn't stop me. I was going to be a proper cop, or get fired trying. I never gave up. Not while looking for the missing mammals, or when it came to putting Dawn Bellwether in her place. And you're telling me how you can't get a better job..."

Milo was growing increasingly nervous. Her words, though honest, sounded like others – they
spoke as though what they were saying would simply make all his troubles go away in an instant. He began to retort again, "Who do you think you are? You meet me for the first time, and try to lecture me about how I should do my job? You don't know me, okay? You don't even know what I've been through! Every time I wanted to do something new, everyone else laughed it off! I was made fun of for being different!"

"So was I! They even beat me, to boot, in case you were wondering. Bunnyburrow isn't exactly uptown Zootopia, so you can make the connection," Judy once again had the high ground over the buck, who was stunned to learn this, "It's only hopeless if you let others determine what you can, or can't do. You'll never be happy if you expect everyone to be good to you."

Milo was completely silent after this.

As the doe averted her gaze, and began to fiddle around with her radio while waiting for the call, he could only stare blankly at the red carpet that lay on the ebony floor. It was at this moment that he finally asked himself: *Is what I've always been doing, and the way I went about this wrong?*

He never entertained the possibility. How could he possibly do something wrong when so much wrong was wrought upon him? He had begun to act as though he was the only mammal who had problems, and it came of no surprise that his appeals to sympathy came across as selfish. However, once he thought about it again, he saw that if Judy's words were to be taken at face value, the two had more than a few things in common. She seemed to be close to his age, had an incredibly uncommon interest for her kind and social setting, but she powered through all the obstacles and scored her goal. What she strove for was a **much** more daunting and heroic task than any of his work. All his claims that he couldn't improve his standing were drowned this night; if she could overcome all the odds to do the job she loved, so could he.

*Back on the main floor...*

*9:25 PM*

As far as his meal was concerned, Jimmy most definitely wasted no time in dispatching it. As a local of Tundratown, he knew the food of Clark Halibuts by heart, because his parents usually ordered food from there after their vaudeville tours would end. It was unfortunate that there was no octopus tonight – their octopus cutlets were to die for. Given the rumors surrounding the upper floor of the restaurant, it came as no surprise that the Arctic fox's father wouldn't take Jimmy straight there, let alone allow him to go there on his own. Among other things, he listened to Ivar's broken English, as he narrated his many trips around the world, and the mammals he'd come to know.

As amusing as it all was, the novice officer had to take a look every now and then to see what was going on at Nick's table – as of yet, the only thing they were doing is eating and occasionally dropping a funny joke or two, judging by the laughter they emitted.

Suddenly, that all changed. All four mammals rose from their seats and started heading out the door. Jimmy took a sip of his lemonade, as he observed each of them approaching the door, one at a time. However, he gagged when he clearly saw a sizable bulge in the coyote's pants that was too large to pertain to his privates - it was obviously a weapon. Whether it was a knife, or a gun, it was alarming, and the rookie knew that he needed to prevent the crooks from using it in any way.

From under his reading glasses, Pardrick noticed that the suspects were slipping towards the van that stood parked to the right of the restaurant – a van that he himself had rented for the sting, hand-picked to resemble the van of the Komodo's Pets robbers. The three stolen reptiles have been
stashed there as a means to keep the facade going strong.

Without as much as a second thought, Jimmy came down from his seat.

"Tovarisch, where are you going?" Ivar inquired with surprise. The Arctic fox mimed the motion of money falling into his tin can, and how he had very little time before he would head home. Ivar was placated, although somewhat let down that he lost his sole company. Jimmy walked towards the door as casually as possible, before he made his exit, pretending he knew nothing of what was going on outside.

Pardrick couldn't ignore this – Jimmy was leaving the restaurant before the appointed time. He tried to get the Arctic fox's attention by paw signals, but alas… he did not see a single one. Rolling his eyes and placing his paw upon his forehead, he shook his head in exasperation and twitched both his ears at the novice's apparent lack of foresight. Whatever was bound to happen, he was sure of two things: for one, he knew he had to act quickly to prevent him from getting killed; for two, Chief Bogo was not going to be pleased...

Outside...

"So, how did you manage to drive a van this big?" The coyote implored, sensing that something could be amuck with these two.

"Right this way, sir," Shaky motioned the canid, who followed. The squirrel climbed to the driver's door and opened it to reveal an elevated seat and brake system – clearly, the carnivore was placated.

"So, where's our stuff?" the bear suddenly chimed in.

The coyote shot him a glare, displeased by his butting in, before turning to Nick and Shaky, "What my friend wanted to ask is to show us the crawlies."

"They're in the back of the van, as promised," Nick growled, coughing after spending so much time imitating Melone, "Ain't that right, Shaky?"

Shaky and Nick led them to the back of the van, and it was the squirrel who opened the doors. The reptiles inside the cages were placed adjacent to a heater, so that the bitter cold of Tundratown wouldn't harm their health in any way.

"Mind if I sneak a peek?" the coyote implored. Shaky clasped his hands together, rubbing the palms together while looking around nervously. This was merely a pretense of cold – the squirrel was beginning to worry that the other officers won't arrive in time.

"Well," Nick grumbled once again, "Unlike me, you can, so go ahead. They told me everything was fine when they sold them to me."

The coyote climbed into the van to inspect the reptiles; switching on the flash light of his telephone, he examined all three pens. He did not say anything until he faced the others again, "Leopard tortoise, leopard gecko and leopard snake? Was that it?"

The bear suddenly took a small paper sheet out of his pocket and started reading, "Uh, leopard tortoise, leopard gecko and European ratsnake; they ain't got 'em all!"

"That's because a European ratsnake is a leopard snake, nimrod," the coyote face-pawed in annoyance. He then hopped outside, dousing his flashlight, "Have you always been keeping them
"Yeah, yeah," Nick grumbled, "Kept 'em on room temperature, next to windows so they can sunbathe, fed the snake poultry, the lizard ate fresh bugs and the turtle had lettuce. Ain't that right, Shaky? Help a blind man out."

"That's right, sir," Shaky said, with his hands still clasped together, as he looked the coyote in the eyes, "I took them to the b-b-b-b-balcony, f-f-f-f-f-first thing in the morning... And I gave the gecko li-li-li-live f-f-f-f-food."

The coyote once again barely managed to stifle a laugh, unable to control the reflexive reaction at his speech impediment, "How about f-f-f-fifty-six grand?"

"Good evening, sir," A youthful tenor interrupted the conversation.

"The Hell do you want?" The coyote was displeased, eyeing the Arctic fox mime who had just appeared before him, "I don't want none of your mime crap. Now, beat it!" On the other hand, Nick was fighting the urge not to groan in anguish – it was painfully obvious that their cover was about to be blown before he could say 'knife'.

"I'm Officer Frost," Jimmy identified himself, much to the mixture of shock and hostility that adorned the coyote's face, "I'd kindly ask you to stop what you're doing and follow me."

Seeing how Jimmy was the sole police officer in the perimeter, the coyote wasted no time in drawing his weapon – a Ka-Bear military knife. As soon as he made the first thrust, Jimmy tackled the larger canine's arm in an effort to make the weapon fall down. With a strong press against the assailant's wrist, the disarming was successful... or was it?

As he moved in for the cuffing, the Arctic fox felt a horrible pain in his groin, and tumbled down onto the snowy sidewalk into a squealing bundle of congealed, thick white fur. The coyote had managed to sneak a strong kick.

_Dang it! They never taught us about this back at the Academy!_

Shaky cowered behind the front of the van, praying that he wasn't going to get involved in any way. Soon after, he remembered that he isn't exactly an in-law himself, and decided that he lingered around the police long enough – now was the time to run, and he was going to take the chance.

The coyote retrieved the knife, but before he could do anything more, he was grappled from behind by the badger he'd been dealing with prior. He was trying to put him in a hammerlock, but the coyote struggled free, whirled about his axis and landed a precise cut across the corpulent carnivore's gut...

...but he did not bleed.

All that came from that wound was thin air hissing out, and what seemed to be a badger had completely thinned out into a wiry frame that looked like anything but. Without further ado, Nick removed his blindman's glasses and tackled the larger canine while he was still agast in surprise, knocking him to the ground, and the knife with him. It clattered off to the side.

In the meantime, the bear hoisted a downed Jimmy into his right paw, holding him about the neck while chuckling haughtily, "It's time for you and me to-" Before he knew it, he felt a surge of agony coarse through his whole arm – the novice officer thought ahead just in time to use his taser on the bear. What he overlooked was that the electric current would also shoot through him. The
bear's screaming maw was the last thing Jimmy saw before his consciousness was flipped off like an old analog TV, and he fell back onto the snowy concrete.

Nick forced the sprightly coyote face-first against the sidewalk and eventually gathered enough control and power to hit him in the back of the head with his elbow, before he would cuff him; alas, this time he was driven away by the charging bear, who was swiping his good paw straight towards him. Before anything could happen, the red fox scampered away, and looked toward his downed colleague, then at the bear, then back at Jimmy, then back at the bear, as he leaned against the restaurant's wall.

As the coyote once again reached for his knife, and both he and the bear surrounded Nick and Jimmy, there was hardly anything the foxes could do. To their surprise, the two mooks exchanged glances and nodded, starting to run away...

...until a sleek form leaped from the shadows with a snarl, landing directly on the coyote, who slammed hard onto the concrete. The canid could only lie down helplessly as his knife was swatted out of his reach, and his paws effortlessly restrained with a pair of cable tie handcuffs.

"No wonder you couldn't catch the Roadrunner..." Pardrick's smooth baritone quipped. It wasn't long before the leopard did about the only thing he could do – engage the bear head on. The bear charged in again, hurling his left paw straight towards the leopard. He dodged these sluggish attacks and placed swift jabs under his ribs to irk him and throw off his focus. However, the bruin didn't even budge. While Nick was trying to reanimate Jimmy, Pardrick and the bear stared each other down face-to-face, having reached what seemed like a stalemate.

"Aren't we a teensy little bit worried now, kittycat?" The bear laughed smugly, in between pants, all the while massaging his right arm, for it was numb from the taser attack just a few seconds prior. Little did he know that he was the one who should worry.

"Not one bit," No sooner did Pardrick speak than the bear felt his left arm being grabbed and jammed behind his back, and a clammy breath hitting his nostrils while a menacing grunt sounded off – it was Ivar. The pinniped left the restaurant soon after Jimmy and headed to the same street where the van was – discovering the fight and the Arctic fox there came as no surprise. To solidify his grip, he pinned the bruin against the wall of the restaurant to avoid having him move anywhere.

"You are under arrest for wildlife theft and trafficking!" That being said, Pardrick wasted no time in reaching for his radio, "Special Agent Pardrick to Precinct 4 Dispatch, over."

"This is ZPD Precinct 4, Officer Curtis, over," Much to the federal agent's gladness, the response was timely and swift.

"We need a large-bodied officer to help with escorting two wildlife traffickers to the MBI headquarters – one is an American black bear. The location is the Clark Halibuts restaurant, over," Pardrick placed the demand.

"Roger that," Officer Curtis conceded, "Expect backup in approximately five minutes. Over."

"Roger that," Pardrick nodded solemnly, "Over and out." Pardrick then started to radio Judy: "Agent Pardrick to Officer Hopps. We got 'em. About to ship them over to the MBI headquarters, over."

"Officer Hopps to Agent Pardrick," the familiar mezzo-soprano sounded off. "I'm coming down. Over and out."
When all was said and done, he placed the radio back into his pocket.

Mission accomplished.

Well, here we go with another entry!

This chapter concludes the first act of my story, and I can assure you that whatever comes next will not disappoint!

I've also established that I'll ask my loyal bookworms some interesting questions about the story, and this is the first.

**Which actors do you believe suit these original characters: Milo, Steve, Jimmy, Pardrick, Shaky?**

I'll take this chance to shout-out to Upplet, author of "When Instinct Falls" and a good friend of mine, for allowing me to give his character Ivar the Russian-accented walrus a cameo in this fanfic. Pinnipeds are notably absent from the film, and seeing them brought to light through fan fiction is always cool!

Also, a shout-out to my awesome beta-readers: Ubermunchkin, ubernoner and Berserker88! I don't think my story would have gone very far without you!

Looking forward to your answers, and can't wait to start the next act! Catch you later on, down the trail. ;)
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the Clark Halibuts sting, Jimmy is faced with the consequences of his actions. Meanwhile, another mammal is taking a different crossroad on his life path.

*Three minutes later…*

At last, Jimmy was beginning to feel the shaking and light slaps to the face that Judy was administering to help him regain consciousness, "Frost? Frost? Jimmy!"

Groaning drowsily, Jimmy slowly raised his head, and then the rest of himself and dusted off his nape. When his consciousness returned and he fully opened his eyes, he almost jumped in shock when he noticed that the entire climax of the sting passed him by, "Holy albatross eggs! Did we get 'em?!"

"Did we get them?" Nick folded his arms, staring flatly at Jimmy, "Yes. Yes, we did." A glance towards the former scene of the fight told the novice officer everything: both the coyote and the bear were being led away from the restaurant and into an appropriately sized police car. Presumably to be lead to the ZPD or MBI for the sake of interrogation. With an inquisitive tone, Nick spoke again, "So, all things considered, what do you think went wrong?"

Jimmy was rather puzzled by the onset of this question – they succeeded in all of their main objectives, so nothing really went wrong at the end. Scratching his head, he began to explain anyway, "Well, I saw that one of those guys was armed even back in the restaurant. As is procedure, I went after him-"

"Alone," Nick cut him off, with a somewhat comforting smile beaming on his maw, "Right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Jimmy nodded sheepishly, feeling slightly more at ease; then the red fox's gaze hardened into a complete deadpan.

"Wrong," Nick droned, before taking a deep breath – from what Jimmy could see, he was clearly somewhat exasperated, "When you go take on someone with a knife who has a buddy who's big enough to eat you for breakfast, how well do you think it's gonna go?" Jimmy was starting to raise his finger, but he didn't get a chance to utter even a single syllable, for Nick went on, "The plan was to wait for Pardrick's lead, and you missed out on just that."

Nick noticed, for the first time, that his chipper young colleague was a little crestfallen – Jimmy's gaze went from his eyes to the snow-covered sidewalk, and took on a glum note as his ears fell backwards. He could tell that the youngling felt awkward and foolish because of his all too apparent mistake. Knowing how it used to affect him, Nick laid his hand on the rookie's shoulder, his usually smug face softening, "That's what partners are for – when we're on the field, we're one. That includes helping each other, as I'm trying to help you now. So, next time, just follow the orders and it'll be fine. Is that all right?"

Jimmy, being a fox of sunny disposition, quickly beamed the proud smile that Nick was most
accustomed to seeing – with Nick pledging his most honest loyalty to him, the annoyance at his lack of foresight waned ever so slightly, "All right." However, he still wanted to talk more, "It's just that… I always try to do what I've been taught, and sometimes, it just doesn't work. I'm 22 years old, and I'm still so… reckless."

"We'll work on that," Nick winked, letting the poofy Arctic fox know that he had a friend in him. "It's not like Carrots and I were so scot-free when we started off."

"He's right. Just between us, I nearly got fired on my first day," Judy interjected, having a fair share of the story on the subject herself.

"Carrots, that was on your second day," Nick corrected, raising his hand, "On your first day, you were vastly exceeding expectations with ticketing cars, among other things."

"Oh…" Judy's face lit up, before she resumed her train of thought, "Case in point – don't worry. You'll be fine eventually."

"Gee, thanks, guys," Jimmy said, grinning like a child that had just received a birthday gift. Then he lifted his gaze – he saw a familiar figure, towering over all the mammals in the perimeter, gazing towards him curiously. Compelled to finally speak to the tusked pinniped, Jimmy walked straight towards him.

"Is tovarisch doing well now?" Ivar asked, with an ever affable smile upon his maw.

"I suppose…" Jimmy nodded, rubbing his nape to relieve the pain he sustained from the fall, "I… guess I should introduce myself for real, finally. I'm Officer Jimmy Frost, ZPD, Precinct 1."

"You'd be good mime, I must say," Ivar added, chuckling heartily at his acts.

"Well, my dad used to be one, so I guess I learned a thing or two from him growing up…" Jimmy giggled amicably, then cleared his throat in remembrance, "Thank you for helping out." He topped it off with a sheepish grin.

"We really appreciate it, sir," Judy chimed in, smiling with genuine gratitude. She was moved by any civilian with a noble soul who would have the courage to aid the law, so the walrus was no exception.

"Ah, never mind…" Ivar waved his webbed paw aside, "It was least Ivar could do for police." Soon, the portly pinniped took out his pocket watch, and made a somewhat alarmed expression, "Oh, look at time! I have to go now. Have good night!" He waved, before turning away and quietly leaving.

"Bye!" Jimmy waved, grinning. Heaving a short sigh, Jimmy reflected for a while on what had been said, and was bound to happen. And then it struck him – sooner or later, a report would be filed to the chief at his precinct, and he would know every single detail of what happened.

"I hope Chief Bogo won't be too upset about this…"

Outside Chief Bogo's office

June 28th, 2018, 9:16 AM

As he fiddled around with the thick fur of his tail, seated in a waiting chair, Jimmy never recalled a more boring time in his life. Precinct 1 was unusually quiet and scantily crowded when he arrived
here for the debrief on last night's sting. His colleagues told him to wait outside until they were
done – he evidently wasn't particularly good at that. For all he knew, they were probably looking
over every single detail with pinpoint scrutiny. In all his lifetime, he wasn't one to worry. Now, for
the first time, he was very nervous about one particular detail – last night's fumble. He didn't need
anyone to repeat to him that he had made a mistake – he was aware of that already. He just needed
to know if he was still worthy of carrying his badge.

Then the door opened, "Well, that could've gone worse…" quipped Pardrick, slinking out of the
office, followed soon after by Judy and Nick.

"We've got you covered," the doe rabbit said, grabbing the Polar fox reassuringly by the arm. She
then stressed, "Just don't do anything wild in there, alright?"

"Where are you off to?" Jimmy could read the intent from the speed at which they walked that
they weren't going to stick around.

"Carrots and I got a call from some company called Stagart Studios," Nick clued, "God knows
what they want. Now, hang in there." With an approving pair of thumbs up for Jimmy, he followed
Judy away from the scene.

"Okay. See ya later…" Jimmy waved, smiling. However, it wasn't long before it melted like
Tundratown without a climate wall, "...I hope."

And so finally came his turn. The novice officer wasted no time in entering the office. The blinds
were half-closed, and thus the whole room had a dark air that only helped Jimmy feel even more
nervous than he already was. At the center desk sat none other than the towering Cape buffalo. His
gaze was stern and fixed on Jimmy, waiting for him to be fully seated. And when the fox did sit
down, he was torn between hanging his head in shame and looking at his superior. The Chief's
gruff voice convinced him to do the latter.

"Failure to obey orders, reckless endangerment of oneself and of fellow officers." Yes – that's what
happened. It just sounded less grating in layman's terms. The bull continued, "Nevertheless, all of
you have executed a successful mission. Officer Frost, are you aware of the gravity of your
errors?"

Jimmy wasn't going to let any criticism go by without saying something on his own behalf, "In my
defense, sir, I was following the protocol-

"And in doing so, you defied explicit orders to wait for Agent Pardrick's command to arrest the
suspects," Bogo pressed, making a point by stabbing the desktop with his index hoof. "In police
work, these are grounds for unequivocal and immediate suspension, if not termination."

The way Bogo lowered his voice upon finishing made his claims sound all the more serious.
Jimmy was stunned, "...Termination?"

"But," the chief raised his index hoof now, in order to silence the officer, "Since your colleagues
have vouched for the procedural correctness of your actions, in spite of the risk they carried, I will
not do anything of the sort this time." Just when Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief and started smiling
once again, the punishment had been uttered, "That's why I'm placing you on Admin Probation
until the IA is done reviewing your conduct. You're not the only officer with training scars, and
don't act as though you'll be given exceptions any further. Every officer on the field has made
mistakes, myself included, but we did not stay at that point; we changed and learned. Moreover,
this is a good reason to address Academy cadre about reviewing training protocols so that things
like this don't happen on the field as they have in your case. Are we clear?"
Pardrick was right - this could have been a whole lot worse. It eventually turned out that the chief was bent on righting wrongs instead of taking out his ill-reputed temper. At the end of it all, it didn't matter if Jimmy liked his impending sanction. He made a mistake, and was ready to take the consequences for them like a mammal of integrity. So he beamed a chipper smile, "Yes, sir! We're clear. Crystal clear."

Bogo didn't expect the novice to take it so well, "Good. You'll be relegated to office work for forty-eight hours before you can join your team again."

"Oh…" Rotten sanction, indeed. But Jimmy was in no position to protest, "Roger that, sir."

"Very well. Clawhauser will point you to your objective," Bogo nodded solemnly, before motioning Jimmy out the door, "Dismissed."

As Jimmy stiffly walked away, the first place he thought of inspecting was Clawhauser's desk. He was going to have his paws full of files and folders for the next two days – and not the kind he was most used to, either. He was hoping that the workload wouldn't take away most of his day, otherwise he'd have to consider drinking coffee, which he admittedly didn't fancy. Then again, he didn't get to ask for much when he worked part-time cleaning snow in his neighborhood in Tundratown before he applied for the police academy. They simply expected him to do it and return all the equipment where he took it from. No taking offense, no complaints. He knew deep down that doing that would be disrespectful if all the boss expected from you is to do better. All in all, he knew that the light at the end of this tunnel was two days away, starting now.

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40 minutes earlier…

Break room, Stagart Studios

Dully colored, spacious enough to accommodate mammals of all shapes and sizes and with food and beverages actually better than one would expect a cafeteria to offer, the break room was everyone's go-to place to rest their ears after a hard terms work. No smoking was allowed, of course, but the fun part was that there were enough amenities to keep visitors entertained. There were even a few vintage arcade games lined up in the left area of the room for anyone bored enough to slot in some coins. Today, that wasn't the case. Everyone was seated inside, waiting for the long-expected board meeting.

As a dutiful employee, Melanie Rothschild was already there. She wore a purple bretelle top and a darker skirt to match so that she could stick to the dress code while compensating for the warm weather outside. She was curiously shuffling through her news feed on LinkedIn, to see if there was anything even remotely interesting crawling around the Interwebs, all the while calmly sipping away at her espresso. Comforting so far. Until she heard the sound of a very "grandiose" entrance...

"And the star of the show is back!" Xander's voice, coupled with his grating accent, was very easy to distinguish. "Thank you very much."

The female tapir, whom the lynx had hit with the door while entering, had coffee splattered all over her shirt and was colored anything but grateful. Even when she glared angrily at Xander, all he did was shrug incredulously. In his mind, it was her fault that she was standing there, and hence, he didn't have anything to apologize for. With a stride that radiated utter surety and a silver ring to complete that image, he approached a table where two workers were seated already. They were male, the both of them, a muskrat and a Dall ram.

"Howdy do, Xanderoni?" The male muskrat beckoned.
"Well, Bevis," Xander said, as he climbed over to sit with him, alongside the ram, "I believe the email spelled it out already. Stagart said 'all paws on deck', and here I am!" To make an exclamation point, the lynx spread his arms to make his presence all the more noticeable.

"So, what do you think is on the agenda today?" the ram inquired, before taking a crunch out of the cookie in his right hand.

"You know, Dallgren, my gut tells me one of us will have to step in for our good ol' boy Roestrom," Xander boasted, all the while slouching into his chair with pride and tapping his belly with his paws, "It also says that it just might be me."

"Hooves cloven that you make it!" Dallgren extended a shake to the smaller feline, which the former accepted without apprehension.

"You know, I forgot to tell you that you really did a good job with that one season of The Walking Carrion!" Bevis chimed, clasping his hands in friendly adulation.

One could almost hear Xander's ego purring at the sound of said compliments. He leaned over, "Mmm, was that fun to work on, or what? Needless to say, I found all the source material on some free sound website. You can't believe how much stuff you can just dig up online, without spending a dollar. And you know how long it took me to finish all the zombie groans the first time I got into it?"

"How long?" Bevis inquired curiously.

"Three hours!" Xander laughed, gesturing vigorously with both hands, while the other two mammals were stunned with the revelation.

"Sweet!" Bevis squeaked.

"Rad…" Dallgren nodded.

Xander cleared his throat lightly, concluding his long, self-aggrandizing ramble with the following: "You know what that means? I've got the chops for the trade… Someday, I'll be off to A-grade Woollywood, and you'll wish I was still here!"

"Just one thing, though," Dallgren raised an index hoof.

"And what's that?" Xander tilted his head with curiosity.

"Don't you think they're just a tad harsh?" When Dallgren said this, he could see the lynx's confident grin convolve into an insulted scowl, as he jerked his head backwards. How dare this lowly production sound editor speak of his work in this manner?

"Do I look like Rabberts to you, Dallgren?" Xander fumed, pointing at his own chest. He leaned in again, looking the ram straight in the eyes, "Look, when you're an actual sound designer and when you get to do even nearly as much work as I do, then you'll be able to talk about harsh, muddy or whatever. That okay with you, dialoguer?" For someone who wanted to seem as untouchable as ever, the cat looked and sounded rather touchy.

Dallgren was a little taken aback by such a needlessly ill-spirited and aggressive response, "Uh, yeah…"

"Alright," Xander backed away, seemingly placated. Adjusting his wristwatch, he leaped down to the floor, "I'm off to the toilet. Call me up when the meeting starts."
As Xander left, both Bevis and Dallgren sat awkwardly still. The lynx was snapping back as though someone threatened him with slavery rather than offering legitimate critique. What they couldn't see was Melanie rolling her eyes and shaking her head in appalment.

"You just had to say something to make him mad?" Bevis chided his colleague.

"Oh, come off it, Billy Bob…" Dallgren waved it off.

"No, the guy comes here all chipper, and you have to put him down talking like that?" Apparently, Bevis cared more about keeping a peaceful atmosphere.

"Well, it's not my fault he can't handle it!" Dallgren didn't see the fault in blunt honesty.

"You just can't keep your mouth shut, butthead!" Bevis flung his arms into the air, as he looked the ungulate straight in the eyes.

"Bucktooth!" Dallgren rebuffed, almost slamming his hoofed fist into the tabletop.

"Cud-chewer!" Bevis retaliated.

"Stinker!" Dallgren snapped back, scowling into the rodent's face. Before long, he saw that he struck a particular cord of his feelings that made his aggression recoil into offense, and the muskrat withdrew his gaze.

"You crossed the line there, Hank…" When the ram tried to give Bevis a pat on the shoulder, the muskrat shoved the hand away.

The epilogue of this altercation was exactly what Milo saw first upon arriving to the break room. Even though his trip by motorcycle wasn't very long, it felt like it lasted all morning – he was lost in thought for its whole duration.

He ruminated on his past attitude and how many real opportunities for betterment he let whiz by him like speeding bullets. He recalled the number of times his loved ones and friends had called him out on it, and he stubbornly refused to listen. He remembered a certain arrogant narcissist whom he formerly saw as a potential companion betraying his trust when it became apparent that the lynx was only interested in bettering himself. Many times, Xander had told Milo that he'd arrange something to help him become a sound effects editor in return for his help, but nothing came of it.

This wasn't the case any more. Today, Milo was stepping up on his own merits. He didn't need to depend on anyone else. He didn't need to blame his misfortunes on others. He believed that he deserved the chance for a better life, and he was all out on taking it today. This was new water – and he was having a lot of trouble adjusting himself to its temperature.

As he moved through the cantina, the only voice he heard as friendly called to him from above, "Milo?"

"Hey, Mel," Milo masked his angst with a smile.

"Hey, come here!" Melanie called. It wasn't long before the buck rabbit complied, and made several high jumps to reach the female giraffe's table. He was facing her, even though they were both breaking their necks to maintain eye contact.

"Well, I…" Melanie wanted to say something, but was struggling to find the words. "Not gonna lie, but I-"
"Didn't think I'd show up?" Milo didn't need to hear it out wholly to assume that nobody, even the only mammal in the studio complex whom he considered anywhere close to a friend, would have thought he'd be willing to engage in staff meetings.

"...yeah." Melanie didn't feel particularly good about having to put it that way. "No offense, of course. But I'm glad you did."

"Where's Stagart?" Milo inquired.

"I don't know, haven't seen him. Could still be on his way, for all I know," Melanie shrugged in oblivion, before looking out the window. There was something about Milo's nervousness that told her that there was more to the buck showing up than a mere change in routine, "So, what made you join the meeting?"

"Well, I've been thinking I should…" Milo rubbed his nape, while looking to his side. He was clearly taking his time, before he put a full stop, "…branch out."

"What do you mean?" Melanie didn't quite follow that.

"What I mean is that I want to see if they're asking for a stand-in for Roestrom." Milo made himself clearer, and opened his arms just a little.

"You wanna volunteer?" There was no faking Melanie's gladness. When the buck rabbit only ever slowly nodded, it was obvious that his intentions were genuine. The giraffe suddenly sported a sassy smirk, "Well, I guess he-who-revels-in-his-own-reflection should brace himself, hmm?"

"I couldn't care less what Xander thinks," Milo almost cringed at the notion of the lynx as he rebuked him. "It's Stagart I'm worried about…"

"Why?" Melanie didn't seem to think that this concern was warranted.

"What if he turns me down?" As he spoke, it was very clear that Milo was still afraid of failure, and this wasn't something that was going to help him in any case.

"What if this, what if that…" Melanie motioned her hands before focusing her attention fully onto Milo, "Those two words – 'what if' – are all in your head, and will only keep you on the starting line. What I really want to know is this: do you know if you can create sounds for those dinosaurs?"

"I can. I know I can…" Milo responded somewhat reflexively, but the innocence in his voice was enough to clue Melanie that he was telling the truth – he was just too darn sweet to lie, and too intelligent to make a short-sighted decision, "I did monster sounds quite a bit back in college, and I still do them in spare time, so why not here?"

Seeing that her friend was finally beginning to ease up, Melanie smiled, "Relax. Take it easy. I'm sure you'll do just fine. Even if you don't… you're not beaten."

She was trying to encourage him with that last remark. He knew she was. Yet still, it wasn't making him feel any more at ease. Milo didn't entertain the possibility of failing just yet, and he feared he'd relapse into the bad old days if that happened. Building trust in oneself certainly didn't come over night, but he wasn't going to throw in his towel now. Judy Hopps' words from last night were still more meaningful to him than any of his dark mind chatter that remained from his past life. It was time to put his new approach to the test.

"Good morning, all!" A soprano called out through the break room, and a small shapely female
The sandcat dressed in a black jacket and skirt entered, "Dr. Stagart is waiting in the conference room. He's asked to see everyone in five minutes."

Heaving a sigh, Milo knew that there was no turning back after this. Not even the sight of Xander emerging from the men's bathroom, adjusting the collar on his shirt and beaming his usual peacock smirk was enough to deter him from what he'd sworn to do. He was going to follow through, no matter the outcome.

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*Conference room, Stagart Studios*

*9:01 AM*

One by one, ladies and gentle mammals of Stagart Studios took their seats, all facing the far end of the table, where Dr. Stagart himself sat. Being a red deer past forty, he sported a broad crown of antlers that bifurcated elaborately, but not as profoundly as in the oldest of his kind. His eyes were adorned by reading glasses, and the rest of his figure was outlined finely by a Prussian blue suit worn over a white shirt. The sandcat sat to his left, with a notebook close by – she was his secretary.

Milo himself was only two seats away from him, to his right side. For lack of foresight, he couldn't have chosen a further spot than what he had to settle for. This was close. Too close. As if speaking his opinion out loud wasn't hard enough, now he had to deal with both his superior being very close by, and Xander being just across the desk. "Get out of your head, Milo. Don't be fazed..." his brain cogs clattered, as the aforementioned deer reached for a paper sheet.

"Alright, everyone," Stagart commenced, calmly gazing across the room as he watched the staff assemble. "Take your seats so we can start. And no jokes today, because, if you read my email, this is the most inopportune time for it." That being said, the executive adjusted his glasses and began to read from the paper sheet, "Now, the matter at hand is that the team at ZBS working on the pilot episode of Doctor Howl, Season 12, are in dire need of fresh, original sound effects for several dinosaurs and prehistoric creatures that appear in one of the later segments of the episode. Without Mr. Roestrom by our side, and with me as re-recording mixer, those duties will have to be transferred to someone in the group that's here today." He set the sheet down casually and shifted his gaze towards the crowd that was sitting opposite of him, "I'll ask this question only once: are there any volunteers?"

As expected, the workers were conflicted. They were each minding themselves, ruminating and taking their time. A few quick glances said as much. To boot, some of them seemed to be spying around the conference room as well – as though they were gauging the time they had to make up their minds on whether or not they wanted to volunteer. With the corner of his left eye, he saw Xander twirling his beard, while slouching into his chair as though he owned the whole building. He'd be inclined to reprimand, but he knew that it would be in vain with the likes of him. And so, for over a dozen seconds, the staff ruminated, contemplated and obfuscated. He was about to state that the company would need external hiring, before the most unexpected of mammals in the room spoke.

"I'll do it." It was Milo. Quite a few faces were surprised that it was he of all mammals that spoke up first. As soon as his right ear twitched, Stagart turned his focus towards the buck rabbit. The instant that happened, Milo lowered his arm, and immediately clasped both his hands together. He was looking away for a second, but then returned his gaze towards him, before winding up to speak again, "I would like to fill in... for Roestrom."

"Yes, I understand the intention, but do you have a precise idea of how to go about it?" Stagart
could sense that the rabbit wasn't having the easiest of times expressing himself, but he wasn't going to simply reject him a priori for it. Someone else, on the other hand…

"Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I really think a more-" As soon as Xander interjected, the hart heaved a sigh, removed his glasses and faced him.

"Sorry, or not, you are interrupting." Stagart was quick to assert his authority over the feline, as he sat back into his chair. That being said, the stag returned his attention to the rabbit, "Now, mister…?"

"Rabberts." Milo replied sheepishly.

Stagart set down his glasses and motioned his hand towards him, "By all means, continue."

"Well, I..." It was immediately as Milo started when his throat dried up from sheer nervousness, and led him to gag a little – he felt as though the walls of the room were closing in about him. He had to take a gulp just to continue talking. "I'd first consult the director for his vision of the character in question, and see what I can gather from that." He was talking without inconvenient pause and maintaining eye contact with Stagart - excellent. "And, optionally, take a look at the character's design to see what it invokes. I'd look into as many different sound sources as possible, and record any that I lack, so I can have a solid database to work with. Since I've done some work with birds and reptiles during my master studies, I'm confident that they won't pose an issue if they are well-trained..." A quick glance from his fidgeting fingers back at Stagart showed that the hart was not only listening carefully, but seemed to be genuinely interested in hearing him out. He couldn't make out if his boss was beginning to show some semblance of a smile, but he wasn't about to stop and look now – he had an elaboration to finish. "When designing, I'd organize listening sessions with the director, to make sure that the design doesn't stray from their vision."

And thus, he ran out of things to say, because he practically covered every step of the process.

Milo couldn't believe how much he managed to captivate Stagart's attention, and how much the deer actually listened to him. He was probably assessing whether or not the rabbit knew what he was talking about, and how thorough he was about understanding serious sound design. Now, it all fell on his superior's nod. Milo was fighting back the urge to smile, because he knew that this was no time to celebrate – the victory had not been claimed, and he didn't know if it was going to be.

"So, you're gonna let the schoolboy do A-grade sound design? This is ridiculous..." And with this remark came a nasal snicker from none other than Xander, who was shaking his head with his palm over his face. For the first time during the meeting, he sat up straight, looking straight at Stagart, "You're looking at someone with college-level knowledge who wants to take on something that requires years, if not decades of experience in the field!" To drive it home, he practically flung his hand in Milo's direction, "And especially coming from a production sound editor, whose qualifications for this kind of thing are problematic to begin with. I think hiring someone based solely on some theoretical talk about artistic vision is playing with fire."

"And who are you to determine who's competent?" Melanie was fed up with this unchecked display of arrogance.

"Somebody with a portfolio big enough to list on your neck, toots," Xander crossed his arms.

"He's got a point, boss," Hank Dallgren was, unsurprisingly, aboard the sycophancy train, butting in before Melanie even had a chance to retaliate at the aforementioned insult, "It's the work done that counts, and I don't see Rabberts having any."

"That's right; if anything counts, it's the mileage." It wasn't long before Xander's influence was
present in Billy Bob Bevis' wording.

Even though they were talking, it was unauthorized, so Stagart had to intervene once again, "Please, don't interject any more… We'll resolve this more easily once we gain a proper consensus."

Milo was beginning to feel that his golden opportunity was slipping away, and that Stagart was being pressured into changing his mind. What Xander had said was pointing out his current state as an excuse for him not to advance with his desires. Yet it wasn't criticism. It was much too deliberate, and a hair too personal to be nothing less than an attempt to burn the hat Milo had thrown in the ring. His voice dripped with vitriol and sarcasm, and his gaze crept about the room to find any imaginable way to serve only and exclusively himself. He felt threatened that someone was going to jeopardize his hegemony over the editing department. Milo knew that Xander was going to betray Bevis and Dallgren just like he betrayed him. For much too long, he allowed the likes of him to determine what he can, or can't do, and make decisions that would affect his life in the long run, and none for the better. For too long, he pulled the victim card and shirked responsibility for his own inaction.

No more. Not this time.

"My qualifications didn't matter very much to you when you asked for my help with the Breaking Buffaloes reboot, now did they, Xander?" Milo was no longer meek nor withdrawn, but leaned slightly across the table, shooting his gaze straight into the lynx's eyes.

"Gentlemammals…" Stagart tried to calm the situation down, but to no avail.

"Wait, what?" Xander placed his hand on his chest, Are you trying to say that-

"I'm trying to be of help to my company," Milo's ears shot halfway up and his formerly fearful look turned into a visibly angry glare, but his voice remained tranquil. He was taking deep breaths, but the words were unstoppable, "I'm trying to build my experience in the arena in which I want to work and live from the sweat of my own brow. If you have a problem with that, I've got three words for you: I. Don't. Care."

"Mr. Rabberts!" Stagart was feeling that this meeting was severely getting out of hand.

As soon as he heard it, Milo jerked himself backwards and into his chair, startled by this alarming order. He froze in place, lest he'd be sanctioned for misdemeanor.

Xander, on the other hand, slouched back into his chair, smirking triumphantly at the rabbit as though he was sure to seize the opportunity to create these sound effects, "You are such a boy scout…"

Milo wanted to crawl out of his own skin at the thought of even Stagart snubbing him. He was trembling with dread, taking deep, shuddery breaths and was severely overheating. Being as powerless as he felt, he remained still and silent, only looking around the office for anything to sate his disheveled nerves.

"And Mr. Xander," Stagart would not leave the lynx unspared, either, "I'd ask both of you to leave your personal grievances aside, so that we can continue this meeting properly."

Xander was, as always, defensive, "Hey, I didn't do any-

"Enough..." Stagart finally lowered his voice, before shifting his focus to his front. In doing so, the
hart saw that a large, aged white rhinoceros was raising his hand in a desire to speak. After the disorderly conduct of several employees beforehand, he was more than willing to allow it, "Yes, Mr. Reinhardt?"

"Sir, I apologize for interrupting the meeting, but I have a need to bring to light reasons against hiring Terrence Xander in this, or any other Stagart Studios projects," Mr. Reinhardt then donned a pair of glasses and pulled out a file, before continuing, "Earlier this week, ZBS received a lawsuit about plagiarized intellectual property, namely sound effects, being used in several episodes of The Walking Carrion where Mr. Xander is credited as sound effects editor. I do not know what Mr. Xander's motivations were for doing this, but I'll only remind that they represent a direct breach of the employment contract, and should be sanctioned immediately."

Milo was still in shock over what had just transpired, but he wasn't going to ignore the fact that Terrence Xander, who supposedly excelled at his job and held the title of employee of the month on more than a few occasions thanks to his diligence, only ever amounted to being an overblown sensation, a thief and a liar of the filthiest kind – even worse than what he pictured. A simple look towards his seat showed that the usually outspoken and proud lynx had lost all of his bravado and shrunk to the size of a poppy grain, as his hands began to tremble and he nervously smiled at Bevis and Dallgren – not even they could stand him now.

What stood out above all else was Stagart. The way he raised his voice at Milo a minute ago paled in comparison to what the deer looked like now – a simple glance showed that he was nothing short of incensed. With a glare fixed upon the cat, and an eerily motionless stance, one would think he was about to fling Xander out of the room with his antlers. Nevertheless, being an ungulate of etiquette and fine manners, the chief quietly ordered, "I want everyone other than Mr. Reinhardt and Mr. Xander to leave this room and wait outside for a short time..." With this, everyone began to rise and leave for the door. Stagart himself rose up as well, only to see that Milo was still sitting. He heaved a sigh, and his gaze softened, "You too, Rabberts."

Feeling crestfallen, Milo descended awkwardly from his seat, and followed the crowd...

...but as soon as he got away from the crowd, he made a dash for the nearest bathroom. The tension of the whole meeting had come crashing down on his poor little nerves, and he couldn't bear anyone staring at him in a state like this. He had to get away from all of it – the conference room, the mammals around him – it was too much. He barely managed to grab hold of the sink's faucet lever, and wash his face to cool down at least a degree, because his hands were trembling like grass in the wind. He leaned on the sink just so that he wouldn't fall over, because he could feel his legs betraying him from shaking. He stared blankly at the mirror for a little while, before closing his eyes and hanging his aching head in anguish, as his heart pounded with unexpected power.

He was overwhelmed. He wasn't accustomed to doing this – he couldn't remember the last time he pleaded for his wishes to be fulfilled, or stood up to someone who was bullying him out of malice. He prayed that only the first time was this grueling, and that everything was going to be fine. He just had to adjust and clear his thoughts, because they were all over the place now, and gnawing at his mind.

If anything was for certain, it was that he would never look at life the same way again.

Four months... Sheesh!

I'll have you know that I spent all that time finishing my last year in basic studies at the faculty, and I'm proud to say that I finally earned my Bachelor's degree after four years of studying. It was a hectic period, and not one that allowed me to keep the pace I had set up until March.
What is fortunate is that the hiatus gave me time to iron the story out and give it a cohesive flow from last chapter onward. No better way to start the next act than to completely turn some established things around, am i right?

All I'll say is that Milo is going to have one heck of a ride. And Jimmy? Stuck doing the boring stuff.

The voice actor suggestions that I asked for last chapter were scant, but nevertheless interesting. They are, as follows:

**Milo:** Milo Gibson (definitely not a coincidence… I myself also dig Chris Evans)

**Jimmy:** Greg Cipes, Elijah Wood (Tom Holland wouldn't be too shabby either)

**Pardrick:** Benedict Cumberbatch (*are you reading my mind?*!), Tony Jay

**Steve:** Jon Heder, Tom Kenny (along the lines of Valhallen)

**Shaky:** Rob Paulsen, John Leguizamo

The bottom line is: I'm back! Catch you later on, down the trail!
Make-up Gain

Chapter Summary

Milo and Xander face the consequences of their actions at the end of the meeting. One of them is doomed to fall.

Judy's police car

9:19 AM

The aforementioned cruiser rode through and out of Downtown Zootopia on the way to their designated location – Stagart Studios. Even though Nick enjoyed the ride with his usual cavalier grin, he could tell that Judy wasn't really herself now. With a pouting scowl, she seemed to be nothing short of irritated. Even though the tod usually avoided offering comfort to others, he trusted Judy enough to know she wouldn't take it the wrong way.

"Let me guess: you're upset about staying put last night?" If there was anything the doe was passionate about, it was the action.

Judy sighed, ever so slightly shaking her head, "I'll take that guess and make my own guess: it was either because I'm a bunny, or because I'm a girl…"

"What? Nah…" Nick reassured, waving his hand to the side, "Things just went down pretty quickly. Nothing to do with you. Just don't… thump your foot on the gas pedal over it."

Judy was, nevertheless, no more at ease, "I mean, sitting in a brothel room with that ugly dress on and doing nothing was boring enough. But that Milo! Ugh…"

In a fingersnap, Nick's demeanor changed from partial indifference to complete concern, "Was he bothering you?"

"No, but I had to listen to a sob story about how it's everybody else's fault that he can't get a better job, or whatever…" Turns out it was a philosophical clash that got the better of Judy.

"Oh…" Nick nodded in realization. In his case, Milo's 'sob story' hit closer to home, "For all you know, he's got his own sad little backstory he doesn't talk very much about. I had a similar enough time of my life back when you first ran into me."

Even though Judy was more understanding of Nick, she didn't feel even remotely similar when it came to Milo, "I understand, but the point is: you moved past that like a grown-up would. You let it go. I get the impression that it never occurred to that guy that if he doesn't take a risk, nobody's gonna hand him the opportunity! That kind of attitude is just, just…" As the words failed to escape, she grit her teeth and focused her gaze back on the road. What she said was only the tip of the iceberg – her colleague and friend knew not that Milo accused her of nepotism.

For all the excess nerves the doe put into this rant, she was absolutely right. Letting go seemed to have worked miracles for Nick, and he couldn't argue it, "Well, I've been on both sides. All I can tell you is that regardless of how hard it is to change, it all comes down to knowing what you want, and whether or not you want to go the extra mile to get it. Those that don't, well… they fade away.
Unless they run into some really good mammals…" Nick smiled. It wasn't his overconfident smirk that he ever so often wore around everyone – it was a heartfelt smile with beaming eyes wide open. He knew how much the doe rabbit's glimmering optimism meant to him, and he had no shame in showing how glad he was to have her at his side.

All it took for Judy's frustration to go away were a few kind words. She felt a lot better with the reminder that the tod was her truest companion in the city, and the only one in whom she could confide. She returned the smile, all the while keeping an eye on the road, "Well, I was there to help. I've done a lot of bad things, too, and you were there to help me."

"That's what friends…" Nick's attempt to impersonate famous bass singer Thurl Ravensclaw came to a cracking halt when he gagged on the last word – he was a tenor after all. Judy couldn't help but laugh. Rubbing his throat and chuckling as well, Nick covered it up, "Well, you get the idea."

"Oh, look," Judy beamed attentively. Her change of tone was completely justified – they were on location, "Stagart Studios…"

Mixing stage, Stagart Studios

9:25 AM

It took Judy and Nick some time to adjust to this massive, unfamiliar structure known as Stagart Studios. Nevertheless, they received the numbering address to the room they were required to enter, and after some brief directions from the local janitor, they found it.

It was the grand mixing stage of the studio. It looked like a film theater in that it was large, spacious, had several rows of seats and a huge Doeby Atmos speaker system, considered state-of-the-art. The only real difference was that at around the center of the room there was an enormous mixing console, and three mammals seated there – a red deer stag, a white rhinoceros, a small cat and some species of lynx they couldn't make out. To avoid anything awkward, the fox & rabbit duo took some of the smaller seats in the mixing stage while they waited for them to finish, because they were apparently still busy.

Suddenly, the stag rose from his chair and slammed a folder on the hard part of the console surface, glaring straight at the lynx with a low, yet angry tone, "Take whatever belongings you may have left, and get out of the building."

The lynx's reaction was nothing short of flabbergasted, "…Excuse me? What's the meaning of-"

"You're fired." the stag stressed, cutting the cat off like a scimitar as he raised his voice. From all that Judy and Nick could hear, this was about to get ugly.

The lynx gasped, shaking his head in utter disbelief. He then spread raised his hands in a begging manner, "It's just a tiny little setback, sir. I could have pulled those files out by mistake! Doesn't all the work I've done so far testify for my capabilities?! The blood, sweat and tears I gave for this company?! For you?!” By this point, his voice was reduced to melodramatic screaming that was in no way fit for an employee. It sounded downright pathetic, if the rhino's face-palm was of any indication.

"Yes, it does," the stag remained ever so cold, and his glare was no less welcoming. His decision was still unambiguous, "It testifies that you're a liar and a thief, and I don't need anyone of the sort in my company. You should have known better than following through with this. We're done. Leave."
Suddenly, the lynx hissed through his gritting teeth and pointed his hand at himself, "You know, this is only starting with me." He then pointed his hand threateningly towards the stag, who flinched insultedly, "As soon as I'm out of here, your goody-two-shoes mask is going to fall apart like a stack of dominoes."

"Leave. Now!" The stag almost shouted.

"Catch ya later, Jerry," The lynx grinned, before turning around and heading for the door. This was the cue Nick and Judy were waiting for – as soon as the cat came near, they followed close by to make sure he did nothing that was contrary to his superior's final orders.

When the ordeal was over, and the result satisfying, Stagart couldn't help letting off a little steam, "Bastard…"

"You know we're gonna have to make a re-edited version of all those episodes, right?" Reinhardt pointed out.

"Yeah…" Stagart slumped back into his chair, "ZBS will be sure to put all the fines on us." He shook his head and threw his arms up almost despondently, "Well, he sure fooled us, Neil. Never saw it coming." Given that he was just cheated by an employee he once greatly trusted, one couldn't blame the executive for feeling slightly betrayed.

"So, what about the Roestrom stand-in, Doc?" In Reinhardt's mind, any court ordeal with Xander would have to wait.

Even though it was a pressing matter, Stagart wasn't going to make the call on a whim. Laying his hand on his jaw, he puzzled. Even though Milo Rabberts was hardly his best choice, he saw in him potential for doing exceptionally well. He needed something fresh. Therefore, his decision was clear, "Rabberts."

"Rabberts?" Reinhardt jerked his head back in surprise, "The production sound guy?"

"So, what if he is?" Stagart shrugged, "The bunny probably wouldn't have stepped up if he thought he wasn't capable. Let's give him a chance to see exactly what he's made of. Nothing to lose." That being said, he turned his attention to his secretary, "Isabella, bring him over, will you?"

"Yes, sir." In an instant, the sandcat set down her pen and jumped off her seat to find Milo.

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**Break room**

**9:25 AM**

"Uh-oh…" A male bison noticed that Xander was being led down the hall, outside the studio building. By a pair of police officers, no less.

Melanie couldn't feel any sympathy, so she deadpanned, "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"All things considered, he was practically asking for it," a fellow male cougar chuckled, shaking his head.

"You know, I still can't believe Rabberts finally manned up and told him to zip it," The bison quipped.

With the far edge of her right ear, Judy caught the name 'Rabberts' – was that the same rabbit who
said he was a victim of fate? Who didn't believe he could change with audacity and effort? Normally, she'd move on without a second thought, but for some reason, she hoped that it was, indeed, him. Not before long, she turned back to the lynx and ordered him to leave the vicinity of the building once they made their exit.

"Dr. Stagart has asked to see Milo Rabberts," Isabella arrived among the crowd.

"Milo?" Melanie inquired, before scanning the grounds. Her height gave her a distinct advantage, but didn't help much, "Wait a minute, where is Milo?" The additional staring and clueless shrugging by the other mammals wasn't helpful, "Has anybody seen him?"

Dallgren thought for a little while, before scoffing indifferently, "Don't know, don't care."

"Hank!" Melanie didn't find this cordial, let alone helpful.

"I think I saw him slip away into the bathroom when the break started," said Bevis, of all mammals.

"Well, go look!" Melanie's request was more of a knee-jerk reaction than a plea, and the muskrat jerked his head back a little, before heading off.

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_Males' bathroom_

9:26 AM

Bevis started his search on the main hall. Not a sight, not a sound. It seemed as though he escaped the building, or something. And then, he finally heard a male voice in the bathroom… retching in the toilet.

The muskrat cringed at the vomiting and decided to wait for it to pass before coming in. Much like almost everyone else, he was nauseated by nausea, but distracted himself by any means necessary.

"Hey, Rabberts!" Bevis hollered, "Boss wants to see ya." However, when the buck rabbit stumbled out of the toilet, he almost fell before he leaned on the sink. He was trembling, and hung his head low. While Bevis never thought highly of him, he couldn't help feeling concerned, "You alright?"

"I don't feel so good…" Milo replied through a breath, shaking his head.

"Jeez Louise…" Bevis rushed to the rabbit's aid, "All right, take it easy. Just wash that gunk out of your mouth, cool yourself off and I'll take you back to have a drink of water, okay?"

"Okay…" Milo finally stopped squinting and looked at the muskrat – it seems he was genuinely trying to help him.

"Stagart's gonna give you a job, man. It's all right," As Bevis patted him on the shoulder and left, Milo clumsily let the sink water flow and rinsed his mouth from having thrown up not too long ago.

In a few moments, Bevis headed back to the break room, with his quarry walking beside him clunkily, "Got 'im!"

"Milo!" While everyone else was rather indifferent, Melanie was relieved. She bent right over to him, "What happened? Where did you disappear?"

"I don't know. Everything just came down on me, I got sick and…" Milo was practically tripping
on his own tongue as he tried to explain. Then he saw Isabella – the first thing that crossed his mind was that Stagart got tired of waiting, "I'm sorry, I..."

"It's all right, sir," the round-cheeked sandcat brushed off any concerns, "I'll let Dr. Stagart know that you felt ill. He's asked to see you at the mixing stage."

"I'll be there in a sprint. I just need to have a drink of water," Milo finally fully came to his senses.

"Very well," Isabella nodded, before walking away, swishing her skirt as she left.

Milo's actions followed his body's natural impulses, as he immediately downed a plastic cup that he found on the nearest water dispenser. For something so mundane, it was incredibly soothing.

"Feeling any better?" Melanie asked, still hovering above the rabbit.

"Yeah..." Milo looked back at the giraffe with a genuine smile – he couldn't hide his gratitude for what she said earlier, for all he tried. He was just too stumped to word it, "So... let's see where this is going." That being said, Milo fixed the lapel of his t-shirt before heading off.

Mixing stage

9:27 AM

Milo was still rather nervous. Before he took a step towards the door, he paused – that small moment of hesitation before something remarkable was due to occur. His hand once again flew over to his nape, but he immediately stopped himself before taking a deep breath and pressing on. There was no looking back now.

As he peeped through the door and looked around the stage, he was greeted and caught off-guard by the deep, melodious voice of Reinhardt, "Come on in, Rabberts."

And so he entered. Since the stage was built to accommodate mammals of all shapes and sizes, Milo felt appropriately miniscule. He rarely visited this place, so he couldn't help but gawk at the speaker setup for a little while, before finally standing before Isabella, Reinhardt and most importantly, Stagart, who motioned him over, "Have a seat."

Seeing that the only way to reach said seat was to jump, Milo summoned whatever strength he had to do so onto the nearest chair.

"Just one thing, though," Stagart leaned slightly forward so as to look the rabbit in the eye, "Isabella told me you were a little sick. Are you all right now?"

The old Milo would have ascertained the executive for a selfish bureaucrat, but he was actually asking the buck rabbit if he was okay. Moved, Milo clasped his hands together and replied, "Yes, I'm fine... Thank you for asking."

"No problem," Stagart nodded solemnly and cleared his throat before commencing, "I occasionally look over employee applications in pastime, and yours happened to be the last one I rewatched. I'll repeat what I said before: you have shown exceptional talent when it comes to editing and creating sound effects, and the mix wasn't too shabby, either." All of a sudden, the chief's tone was entirely different to what the rabbit heard when his first job interview was over. Back then, he sounded almost bored. This time, he saw something new in Milo that was worth evaluation, "You only ended up in the production sound department because you hadn't struck me as confident. Since that obviously changed today, I'm putting the fate of that pilot episode into your paws."
As Milo listened to this declaration, he hung his head – he wanted to jump back in time and beat himself for being so clueless about his demeanor, and how much that cost him. He only sprung back up when the hart said something electrifying: Milo was going to fill in. His face was starting to light up like a sky at dawn, "Sir?"

"Here's the deal: you have seven days, starting today, to create a complete set of sound effects for a plethora of dinosaurs that appear in the episode, in sync to picture, from scratch," Stagart declared, eyeing the gradually more attentive Milo. "Ed, the director, insisted on making them sound more… scientifically accurate, but don't let it get in the way of good drama. We'll be listening to the material you bring with him, so he'll be able to give input on them anyhow."

For the time being, Milo succeeded in looking stoic, even though his mood was going into the positive end of the spectrum, "Got it."

"Now, the terms," Stagart made a point by knocking his index hoof against the desk, for this was very important. "If you miss the deadline, which is next Wednesday afternoon, you'll be forced to resign from the company. If you finish the job in time, you'll be promptly transferred to the sound effects editing department and receive a raise. You won't be paid for the dinos, because Mr. Roestrom took a paid leave. On the other hand, you'll receive your last production sound editing pay as is normative. Understood?"

The terms – those very simple norms that needed following. The bad side was a little worrisome, but to his surprise he didn't feel discouraged. The plus side was what was worth fighting for. For once, he envisioned that positive outcome, and it made him feel… more alive. With resolution, Milo nodded to the question, "Understood."

Stagart still wasn't finished, as he raised his index hoof, "Before I forget: if there's anything at all that you need to finish your work, and the studio building can offer it, you've but to ask. Don't hesitate to call me, or send me an email. I'll respond to you as soon as I'm informed on whether or not you can use a certain studio space at a given time, et cetera. You'll also have full access to our sound effects library. Is that fine?"

At this point, Milo couldn't contain the smile that was overtaking his maw. How could having all of Stagart Studios at his disposal not be fine? It may not have been something that occurred to him, but his ears were gently propping themselves up, as he clumsily let the words flow, "Of course. Yeah, I mean… Yes. Nothing wrong with that, whatsoever." As he finally felt that his ears were upright, he giggled nervously and looked to his hands – it was time for his first idea, and it had to be good. It had to lead to an original sound set. After a second-long stammer, he directed his first demand to Stagart, "Could I schedule a vocalization session with mammal performers for tomorrow?"

The stag raised his left eyebrow and grinned at the apparent eagerness to work, "Just give me the time." Reinhardt couldn't help smiling either, as he raised his bushy eyebrows in gladness. At this rate, they felt, they'd definitely be on-track.

Milo stammered a little, before replying with an almost kit-like enthusiasm that he hid under a soft-spoken tone, "Preferably in the morning, from 10 to 12 o'clock." The first thing he heard afterwards was Isabella's pen scribbling away.

"Okay, then," Stagart shifted in his seat, leaning backwards before having the final word. "I'll have the video material sent over to you later today, as well as Ed's email, so you can get in touch with him today. Until then, brew up some ideas. You're good to go." And so, he waved his hand aside.

"Thank you, sir… you won't be disappointed," Milo beamed before jumping down from his seat.
The giddiness that was starting to overtake him almost made him forget his manners – he almost forgot to bid a good day to the mammals, "Have a nice day, everyone." As he left, he heaved a big sigh, still overwhelmed by everything that has transpired.

"You too, Rabberts," Neil Reinhardt smiled, moved by the innocence, humility and mild manners of the rabbit. Unlike Xander, who turned out to be nothing short of a disingenuous coward, he seemed innocuous, yet he had a certain forthright and brave disposition to his decision-making. Both he and Stagart saw that he was going to be a breeze to cooperate with, and looked forward to hearing his work.

Thomson's Apartments, Apartment 15
10:03 AM

It was a miracle to see Steve Gnuman up this early; it could have only been for a specific reason. Said reason was a paleontological documentary airing on Netflix that the artist thought may be a good reference for his own dinosaur model. With his notebook in the left, his pencil in the right hand and the remote controller close by, he took freeze frames and studied them carefully before sketching after them. It was quiet, which he liked. Until…

Suddenly, the frantic unlocking of a small door came, and a blaring yell sounded off, "Steve!"

"Whoa!" The wildebeest's sketch went to oblivion – startled, he shredded the paper with his pencil, just as Milo jumped on the couch side. Steve had to give him a glare.

"Whoops…" Milo's initially manic smile turned into a frown, and he put his hands behind his back shamefully, "Sorry."

"Eh," Steve stuck out his tongue, tore the paper sheet from his notebook and hurled it into the trash, "Didn't like that sketch, anyway… So, how-"

"I did it," Milo gave the answer before the question was finished, which clearly surprised the wildebeest.

Regardless, Steve's surprised expression turned into a victorious smirk, "And here comes the part where I say…" He then lightly jabbed Milo's snout, "I told you so!"

As little as Milo liked the poke, he completely deserved it. He rubbed his nose, and then raised his hands in an apologetic gesture, "Okay, okay, alright. You were right, I was wrong." Then he practically spoke into his chin, "And stupid."

Even though he wasn't a sound designer, Steve heard him clearly enough, "I'm sorry, dude. I couldn't quite catch that. Say it again…" He grinned, perking his ear towards Milo.

"I was stupid…" Milo spoke a little more clearly.

"Still can't hear ya!" This time, Steve was grinning with devious pleasure.

"I was stupid!" Milo raised his voice, then breaking into laughter, "You happy now?"

"Finally!" Steve victoriously raised his fists, before snatching the rabbit into his arms, giving him a noogie and lifting him in the air like a certain shaman in another story, "He admits the error of his ways! Praise the Lord!"
Milo groaned in irritation and slight pain, before going completely deadpan, "Can you put me down, now?"

"Oh, sorry." Steve set him back onto the couch side, then regained his composure from teasing, "Jokes aside, that's totally bodacious…"

"Tell me about it," Milo once again found joy, as he fixed his crumpled t-shirt, "I can't believe how easy it was!"

"See? I told ya that you were just overthinking it." Steve smiled.

"Hopps was right," Milo conceded. "Throwing in the towel is the worst kind of failure."

"You mean the bunny cop from the other day?" Steve asked.

"Oh, yeah."

"Which reminds me: how'd Mission Impawsible go?" As an avid fan, Steve couldn't resist the allusion.

"They should be sending the cash to me today," Milo puzzled for a little while, "I'm glad it was over with quickly."

"So no thrashing bad guys?" Steve tilted his head, "What was it? Some mail fraud scheme? Hijacking?"

"No, they were thrashing the bad guys," Milo stressed, "I was out of sight." He felt more than comfortable with not telling his flatmate that he was with Judy all the time, lest he'd insinuate that there was something between them.

"Oh." That being said, something else occurred to Steve. He smirked, "How'd that mangy ol' pussycat take the news of you filling in for Roestrom?"

Milo returned the sassy smirk and folded his arms, "Well, let's just say that his life will be taking a different course since Reinhardt found out he's been stealing sounds from other games and movies."

Even though Steve knew Xander to be a mean one, his jaw slacked and his eyes widened, "No… Seriously?"

"What are the odds?" Milo shrugged, shaking his head with a mixture of disbelief and pity, "No wonder he was so insecure about the work he got…"

"Cheetahs never prosper…" Steve deadpanned.

Milo couldn't help cracking a chuckle at this pun, but that didn't deter him from taking out his phone, "I'd better call my family." As soon as he flicked the unlock button, something dawned. It crawled back into his memory that he didn't acquit himself well the last time he spoke to them. It was enough to lower his mood, if slightly, and Steve could see it.

"Something wrong, buddy?" The wildebeest inquired with concern.

"I argued with them the other day. Said some things I shouldn't have…" He was at fault. He was disrespectful. Of course, them demanding financial support was jarring, but on the other hand, they were trying to pull him out of the emotional pit he was in. Like Steve before and Officer Hopps
after. No matter who was right, he had to make amends for his mistakes, "They were trying to help me, and I just kept doing my thing. Navel-gazing. Not looking after myself. I thought that was right, and I defended it."

"I'm sure we both know what you gotta do now," Steve said, nodding in understanding. Just by looking at his longtime friend he could tell that he was wearing a different pair of glasses now (Even though he was the one wearing glasses).

With a glance of resolve, and a deep breath, Milo concurred, "Yeah." That being said, he headed into his room to call his father privately.

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**Milo's studio space**

10:06 AM

Suddenly, Milo's little studio/bedroom hybrid didn't feel as cold and drab as it used to. From this one time he entered, it suddenly felt more… awake. It was as if he could tell that whatever time he was going to spend here was going to be more productive than usual. In any case, he had other matters to focus on at this moment – matters of the heart.

He sat on his bed, opened up Viper, found his father and dialed for a video call. Easy enough. Now he had to sit and wait if he was going to respond.

It was taking time. Time that Milo used to take a look around the little photo gallery in the back of his room – each of them a family memory. The first one was when they went parasailing for the first time during a summer vacation in Alpacapulco, just before Gerard and Milo took off. He was merely seven years old at the time. Another picture showed him at a similar time, sitting at a desk with Veronica and doing math – at the time, Veronica was his homeschooling teacher, and not yet married to his father. A worry occurred to him that such splendid times were a thing of the past when it came to this family, as he listened to the calling tone on his phone. He sighed nostalgically, until he heard a most pleasant sound.

"Is this thing on?" Gerard could be heard mumbling on the other end of the call, before speaking more loudly, "Hello?"

"Oh!" Milo jolted towards the phone. Once Gerard could see him, he let out a nervous giggle, "Sorry, dad. I was… distracted."

"What made you call so early?" Gerard was wearing a fine jean shirt and didn't look to be too pleased, or upset. This is what made the son worry a little.

Milo anxiously bit his lip, utterly unsure about how he was going to handle this, "Dad, I just want to say I'm so, so sorry about-"

"The deal with the house?" Gerard suddenly began to look more saddened and remorseful.

"Yeah," Milo sighed, "I was such a-"

"No. That's not your fault, Milo. That one's on me," It was Gerard as well who was remorseful, much to his son's surprise. "With the number of auditions I've been going to, I thought I was gonna be back." He then clenched his fist and scowled, "I was so hungry to get back on screen that I didn't give anything else half a chance…" Then he sighed, shaking his head, before taking another crestfallen look towards the younger buck, "I'm sorry I let it come to you having to pay anything for us. You've grown up, you have your own life. Who am I to intrude on that?"
He listened to his father talk. For all the peace that it brought him to hear Gerard say this, Milo felt that he needed to respond in kind – he, too, was at fault. Besides, blood is thicker than water, after all, "If it's help you really need, you shouldn't hesitate to ask. I have something else to apologize for."

"And what's that?" Gerard tilted his head ever so slightly.

"Not working on myself, not facing my weaknesses and blaming everybody else for my failings," Milo conceded, while his father didn't look all too amused. "I know you heard it all before, but I swear it's different now! I went to a board meeting at work this morning." The initial suspicion that Milo was trying to justify his behavior, as he usually did, was all but gone. Now, Gerard was all in, as Milo suddenly sounded a way that he hadn't heard before – excited, "They needed a replacement for one of the senior sound designers for a TV show we've been working on. I volunteered!"

"No kidding?!" Gerard chuckled.

"Yeah!" Milo beamed with a downright adorable smile, "Then Stagart asked me a few questions about it, I answered, and then…"

"What? What?!" Gerard failed disastrously to withhold his own giddiness.

Suddenly, Milo rolled his eyes in a rather exasperated manner, "Xander wanted to throw me off just so he could get a bite at it…"

Gerard snapped his fingers and gritted his teeth, "Entitled son of a…"

Before Gerard went on the blue streak, Milo proudly interjected, "Anyway, it didn't work, because as it turns out, he's been stealing sound effects and putting them into our shows and movies. As expected, Stagart fired him, and called me over."

"Ha!" There was nothing sweeter than the song of karma. Gerard's gut told him that this was going the right way. He'd pat his son on the back through the phone screen if he could, "So, you got the job?"

"Yes!" Milo grinned with utter gladness, his voice squeaked and his eyes glimmered with vigor, "He told me I'd get promoted afterwards and get a raise! Can you imagine that?"

"Ooh, yeah!" Gerard pumped his fist and called out to Veronica, who was on the balcony overlooking the Podunk streets, "Ronnie! He did it!"

Veronica jolted at the call, and rushed through the open door, "What happened? Who did what?"

"Our boy did it! He's getting promoted!" Gerard was, at this point, more excited than even Milo. Veronica's shock soon changed into what matched her husband's manic smile, "Oh, my God! Is it true, honey?"

"It's true, mom," His foster mother's flabbergasted tone of voice made Milo chuckle a little, but he remained tender.

Veronica's eyes gleamed – to see how far he came from homeschooling with her to now was an absolute joy to witness, "Well, what do you know? How do you feel?"

"I lost a load off my mind…” Milo sighed in relief.
"How hard was it, really?" Gerard folded his arms, looking pointedly at his son.

Milo shook his head incredulously, "It's actually pretty easy!"

Gerard shook his head and rolled his eyes in a sardonic manner. Milo wasn't upset, because he knew he deserved it, "If you weren't so darn stubborn, it would've been even easier." Just then, the father shrugged, "But who am I to judge?"

"Gerry, look at the time!" Veronica tugged on her husband's left arm, "We'll be late for the fair…"

Gerard rolled his eyes again, then shrugged at Milo, "When she's gotta go, she's gotta go." This elicited a small nudge in the ribs from the doe's index finger.

Milo wished he could talk a little more, yet he knew that there was any time at all for that, "Okay, I guess I'll call you back later. I'm gonna have my hands chock-full for the next week," When he next looked at them, they were embracing each other and looking at him with an endeared gaze. He couldn't help but give a yearning smile, "I love you both, and I miss you so much."

Gerard and Veronica gazed into each others eyes, before they returned the smile. "We love you too, son…" Gerard replied.

"We always knew that you could shine through," Veronica took her turn, gently addressing her adoptive son, "I just never thought you'd be willing, until now. You've started to change your life, and in doing so, the world around you as well. Just promise me one thing – never change who you always were."

Milo thought this was counterintuitive – of course he had to change, otherwise he'd stay the negative Ned he always was. He had a somewhat doubtful look in his eye, "And what's that?"

"A good buck, Milo," Gerard filled in, "You were always a good buck." After all this time, they believed in him as much as they always did – wholeheartedly. That alone made the bellows under his heart work, warming it and reassuring him that he was loved and cared for, and never stopped being so. He could ask for nothing better.

"Okay, we gotta go now," Gerard concurred with Veronica's somewhat nervous gaze, urging him out of the hostel, "Now, you kick some tail at work!"

"Bye, Milo!" Veronica winked.

"Bye!" Milo smiled fondly, before Gerard hung up. And then, he just set the phone away. He shut his eyes and took it all in – in the meantime, his relaxing torso flopped back-first onto the bed. With the approval of his chief, the encouragement of his friends and reconciling with his family, Milo felt at ease for the first time in years. In this moment, nothing could swerve him back into his self-destructive ways of old. He started anew, knowing fully that only by living in the present, he could understand the mistakes of the past and charter a course towards a better future. All that had to be done now was to follow through with it.

And then, an email came…

In case anybody is wondering, make-up gain represents the output gain of a compressor – an audio processor that is used to adjust the dynamic level of an audio signal. You use it to make up for the loss in audio level. In the same respect, a compressor also has a threshold (last chapter's title) – a certain level above which compression begins.
Now that I've gotten the trivia out of the way, I proudly present one of my favorite chapters to write so far. That tingling feeling of joy at something going the right way after a while can be nothing short of satisfying.

In any case, I whipped up a hypothetical casting for the members of Stagart Studios.

Stagart – Robert Downey Jr.

Melanie – Karen Gillan

Xander – Zac Efron

Reinhardt – John Goodman

Bevis – Paul Christie (Skinny ram from Brother Bear)

Dallgren – Danny Mastrogiorgio (Bulky ram from Brother Bear)

In any case, I hope you folks enjoyed yourselves. Catch you later on, down the trail. ;)}
Questions To Scale

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the Clark Halibuts sting, Judy, Nick and Pardrick try to dissect the defenses of their interviewees in hopes of discovering more information about the reptile theft ring.

ZPD Headquarters – Lobby

10:16 AM

The daily grind for Nick and Judy hadn't even started yet, and they knew they'd be having their paws full of work, even this early. The aftermath of last night's sting saw both traffickers arrested, Jimmy getting knocked out by electricity and Nick having a close shave with a deadly knife. The cut he received severed the cable of the wireless mic Milo provided the team with, so they made sure to compensate for that however they could. Now, they were supposed to squeeze out whatever information the coyote and bear had to offer.

Upon entering the lobby, they saw that Pardrick was still there – more precisely, at the front desk with Clawhauser.

"Thanks for the advice, Agent Pardrick," the corpulent cat's voice was heard, with an overtone of gratitude, "I'll definitely consider doing something about it."

"You're welcome," Pardrick nodded, with a cavalier smile to top it off. As he turned, he saw whom he hoped to see, and spoke immediately, "So, are we ready to get this talk show on the air, or what?"

Nick was quick to concur as he strode along, "Yeah, I'd rather not sweat in the lobby. Who's with us?"

Pardrick wasted no time heading to Interview Room 1, or answering the fox's question, "Snarlov, as the officer who has the Komodo's Pets report, and Detective Oates, as someone who's investigated both our crime scenes. You got those recordings edited out, right?" This last question was directed at the tod.

"Yup!" Nick exclaimed proudly, before flashing a USB flash drive in his left hand, "The hotspots of last night's sting are all here, though I did lose the bit after that guy cut the cable, as well as a few hours sleep."

"That's all right," Pardrick gave the fox a literal thumbs up, "So long as you've captured everything before the fighting broke loose, it should do."

"Have you found anything useful while we were gone?" Judy inquired.

"Not really," Pardrick shook his head, then scratched and itch that dug its way into the underside of his chin, "Just idle chit-chat with the dispatch. Between you and me, I seriously don't know why he hasn't been fired yet." It wasn't unusual for Pardrick to have a biting comment for just about anything, but Judy couldn't help but feel sorry when the recipient of such quips was a wholesome,
gentle soul like Benjamin.

"Clawhauser?" The doe asked, appealing to the leopard's conscience. "He's a good police officer."

"It's not his positivity that worries me, but his body-positivity," Pardrick's brutal honesty, coupled with the truth, made things more understandable for her. "I only gave him a few pointers, perfectly politely. Back to topic: the bear's already inside, waiting for Snarlov and me."

"So, we'll be taking care of the coyote," Nick stated the obvious.

"Yes," Pardrick sighed, adjusting the collar of his coat, "With Trunkaby at the door and our team up front, I don't think they're gonna be getting any ideas of doing something stupid. After we're done, you two will be next immediately. Now..." They had already arrived in front of the room's door. Pardrick just needed to call his teammates over, "Oates?"

Detective Horace Oates was a middle-aged chestnut stallion with a white mane, dressed in a white coat and grey overalls, complete with a pink tie. He was sitting calmly, with a wheat stalk nestled comfortably between his lips, until he heard the leopard's voice, "Well? Agent Pardrick, are you ready to roll? Get that mangy ol' crook to fall apart like a card tower on a jet wind?" He asked cheerfully, a Texan twang permeating his nasally voice.

"Yes, I'm ready..." Pardrick quipped, not sharing this kind of upbeat disposition when it came to it. He turned his attention to the third party, "Snarlov?"

"Right here," the ice bear nodded, ready and willing.

"Alrighty! Let's go," Oates led the way into the interview room. With someone like the black bear of last night being questioned, the seasoned detective was quite optimistic when it came to it. Interviewees who were... less wise were more prone to erratic behavior and more likely to spout out crucial information with the right amount of prodding on the detective's behalf.

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**Interview Room 1**

*10:18 AM*

The black bear was sitting stiffly at a grey table, unenthusiastically eyeing the room about him. It was a dull black square lined with acoustic isolation and a dark-grey carpet lying on the floor, and with naught but a small window for ventilation. To the left stood a water cooler, in case an interviewee needed to ease their nerves, or sate their thirst. All in all, the bruin wasn't accustomed to squalid confinement like this, and the overbearing presence of a large-bodied police officer in his vicinity wasn't helping matters much either. Soon enough, the tall, corpulent Officer Trunkaby wasn't the only one who'd be keeping the bear company.

"Good morning, Mr. Nero," Pardrick slid across the carpet, taking the chair to the bear's left. He flicked the back of his trenchcoat to sit down and eyed the bear stoically.

"Uh, hey, Pah, uh..." the bear stammered rather erratically, as if he mispronounced something, before slowly regaining composure. "Hello."

Oates took the middle of the three chairs, sitting before the ursine with a small smile, "Is there anything you need? Water, coffee, or something like that?"

"Nah, I'm good," the bear literally waved the demand aside with a hint of a smile on his maw. To the seasoned detective, this smelled like bravado.
"Very well," Oates shrugged, then motioned towards the rest of his colleagues, "Now, this here's Officer Snarlov, this is Agent Pardrick. My name is Detective Horace Oates, and today, I'll try to help you out with your little situation, here. How've you been so far?" The stallion laid his arms on the table, clasping his hands together with his gaze fixed on the interviewee.

"Alright, I guess?" The bear sounded rather nonchalant, keeping his own paws to himself, and looking awkwardly at the desktop before returning to the horse.

"So, this ain't the first time you've been in this sort of predicament?" Oates raised his eyebrow.

"Nah, but uh…" The bear scratched the back of his neck as he delayed, "I wouldn't really talk about the past times."

"Good. We don't want to hear about them." Pardrick quipped. This made the interviewee slightly sigh in relief.

Oates took it upon himself to break the situation down, "What we do want to talk about, though, is why you're here today. On the one hand, you were brought here under the allegations that you were about to procure some stolen reptiles with the help of a Mister Francis Melone alongside your accomplice, Michael Perro de Monte. On the other hand, the assault of ZPD Officers Frost and Wilde and MBI Agent Pardrick."

"Stolen reptiles?" The bear's expression of shock was rather extreme and pronounced, like a very hammy actor, "I don't know nothin' about no stolen reptiles. What are you talking about?"

A very common form of deflection. In situations like these, Oates liked to employ hard evidence to comprehensively dismantle any form of opposition. With the lack of an attorney at the bear's side, it was almost kindergarten, "Officer Snarlov?"

Snarlov opened a file, beginning the explication, "The animals in question are a female European ratsnake, a male leopard tortoise, and a male leopard gecko, originally owned by Komodo's Pets, a retail store in 37 Dollowbush Street, Savanna Central. They were stolen from the store by Armand Dillon and Kerry Cackleford. Carried out in plastic containers into the back of a white Renault van. They were intercepted on the intersection of Dollowbush Street and Migration Drive by Officers Wolfard, Rhinowitz and myself."

Snarlov also took the time to show some stills from the traffic cameras at the moment of the robbery, "Upon arresting the aforementioned offenders, we questioned them and confiscated the stolen assets. These are the reptiles that you and your accomplice were bound to procure from Francis Melone."

The traffic cam stills from last night were the final piece of evidence laid before Nero. While the black bear squinted at the photographs carefully, he still denied anything to do with the whole train of events, "Nope. Never seen 'em in my life."

Snarlov wasn't convinced, but remained calm, "No?"

"Nuh-uh," Nero shook his head, shrugging for good measure.

Pardrick's booming baritone sounded off, pointedly striking a nerve, "This is despite the fact that you've mentioned those exact three reptiles by species on the location of your arrest?"

The bear was flustered, shaking his head with a dumbfounded expression, "What? Me? I'm just a caretaker at a zoo. I have no idea what this is."
Oates chewed his wheat stalk with a deadpan stare, before taking another glance at the leopard, "Agent Pardrick?"

Via a small digital recorder, Pardrick played back an audio file. But not just any audio file. It was taken last night, outside of Clark Halibuts in Tundratown.

"Mind if I sneak a peek?" One voice beckoned.

"Well, unlike me, you can, so go ahead. They told me everything was fine when they sold them to me." A very raspy voice beckoned, being closer in perspective.

"Leopard tortoise, leopard gecko and leopard snake? Was that it?" The first voice rang in one more time.

"Uh, leopard tortoise, leopard gecko and European ratsnake; they ain't got 'em all!" A gruff, dull-witted voice added.

And this dull-witted voice made Nero freeze up and avert his gaze. A far cry from his relaxed demeanor early on. It was as if he was a cub, caught stealing cookies from the pantry in the middle of the night by his mother.

"This ain't just some wire bug used by the police force – this is professional audio gear and a crystal clear microphone," Oates pressed, inching a little closer to the bear, to drive the point home. "There's no mistake that the voice in the end is yours, Mr. Nero. This ain't lookin' pretty good for ya, but we still wanna help you out." The bear was leaning back in his chair, while Oates was approaching even closer, "You were complicit in a scheme involving the reptiles, and you had to get them to someone in Tundratown. There's no point in denying anything. Tell us what you know, and we'll make this as painless for you as possible."

The bear's gaze was starting to dart around the interview room like a bee trapped in a jar. He couldn't do anything about the elephant at the door, or the mammals that were in front of him. It's as if the walls of the interview room were closing in around him, in order to squeeze the truth out of his mouth. He thought he might as well do it himself, "All right, all right… I confess. Me and Mike were gonna smuggle the reptiles."

At least now, he was beginning to open up. Oates backed away, but still retained the pressing tone of voice, "To whom?"

"Well…" At this point, the bear sighed hesitantly, once again trying to avoid anything uncomfortable, "They're all over the city. In just about every district, and you're gonna have a hard time tracking them down."

The attempt to change the conversation in order to dissuade the interrogation could be smelled a mile away. Unfortunately for Nero, Oates wasn't having any of it, "Mr. Nero, as servants of the law, we are obligated to ask you where exactly your organization is seated, or whatever we need to know in order to bring them to the law. Please, don't bother deflecting."

"I can't say I know anything," the bear's voice began to quiver, as he backed away into his chair. It appeared as though the pressure was becoming too much for him to handle.

Oates kept his voice low, but propped up the intensity of his speech, "As a worker, you must know every detail about the company. Tell us what you know."

The bear was starting to break, as he raised his voice and nervously gestured with his hands, "What part of 'I don't know' do you not get? They keep these things classified. I just do what I'm told,
that's all."

"The tone of your voice says otherwise, Mr. Nero. It says you're saying that in order to withhold information. Please, tell us what you know," This time, Oates punctuated every word when he finished his demand.

"I said I don't know. Stop asking, already!" The bear raised his voice in a rather petulant manner, as if trying in vain to receive some form of pity. This prompted Trunkaby to grasp the hilt of her taser just in case worst came to worst, even though it didn't look like things were about to get that violent.

"Your deflection won't take you very far," This time, Oates slightly raised his voice – like a parent trying to calm a spoiled child, but not shouting. He was not going to stop until he breached the interviewee's defenses. "Tell us what you know."

"It's hopeless! You'll never catch up with Basilisk!" Hearing this last word made Oates curiously raise his eyebrow and withdraw more comfortably into his seat, with a curious, smug smile adorning his muzzle. The bear, however, froze in place, and his expression morphed from defense to horror, as he clasped his face in both hands and shook his head in utter disbelief. Pardrick was utterly unamused, while Snarlov entertained how relatively quickly this whole ordeal has gone by.

"So, this organization has a mighty fancy name?" Oates chuckled as he folded his arms and once again leaned onto the table top, "Thank you. What else can you tell me?"

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**ZPD Headquarters – Outside the interview room**

**12:05 PM**

After less than two hours of idle sitting (at least on Nick's part, anyway), Judy and Nick suddenly saw the door of the interview room open wide. The black bear was being led away, his hands cuffed and his snout muzzled. It looked like he wasn't going back into the outside world any time soon. He was accompanied by Pardrick, Trunkaby and Snarlov, with the former walking to the staircase more briskly. It was actually quite surprising to the dynamic duo that the interview went by this quickly.

"So, how'd it go?" Judy sprung up from her seat, directing the question at the MBI agent, who seemed to be more curt than usual.

"It went well enough," Pardrick didn't even stop to talk about it proper and continued down the stairs. "I have to go take care of something right now. Don't have time to talk."

This was most unusual, indeed. Cooperative cases were important deals for all parties involved, and Nick couldn't help having a gut feeling that there was something odd at work with the agent, what with this kind of sudden departure. The fox raised his right eyebrow in surprise, taking a little more time to jump down from his seat, "That looked a little rushed, don't you think?"

Judy lowered her gaze awkwardly, feeling much the same as Nick. It wasn't going to deter her for long, however. If Pardrick wasn't going to talk, there was someone else who would. Judy addressed the ice bruin, "Snarlov? Did you get anything new?"

"Well, for starters, he didn't deny his involvement," Snarlov was more than willing to converse with the smaller officer, calmly explaining the situation. And then he chuckled, "And for two, he actually dropped the name of his organization. It was..." here, the bruin was stuck. "Some kind of
"mythical snake-like critter, thing."
"Hydra?" Judy guessed.
"No." Snarlov hastily shook his head, knowing very well why it would be a bad idea.
"Basilisk?" Nick joined the guessing game.
"That's the one!" Snarlov snapped his fingers in affirmation.

Judy was already on the thought train. This discovery could either prove to be an instrumental puzzle piece that would help them find the masterminds behind these thefts, or a distracting buzzword meant to throw them off the trail. Whatever it was, it was worth looking into when all was done, "Interesting…"

"Guy slipped on his own tongue when he told us that," Snarlov stated in slight bewilderment, then laughed heartily. "Can't remember the last time an interview went by so quickly."

"Indeed…" Nick puzzled, his index finger gently tickling his chin in pondering. He thought he'd heard the name "Basilisk" before in environmental circles, but never in the context of reptile theft and smuggling. Therefore, a name alone was hardly any clue at all. Nick pressed on, "Did he tell you where they were stationed?"

"No, he did not," Snarlov stated. "I think it's gonna take his buddy for you to find that out, or else you won't be getting very far with this." Even though the polar bear's words were hardly encouraging, they were true – the canine seemed to be the more lucid one of the two, and getting him to speak would prove most useful for them.

"Hey, gunslingers?" Oates poked his head through the interview room door, "You better buckle up! This coyote ain't gonna interrogate himself."

This was indeed Judy and Nick's cue; they had little time to applaud Snarlov for his and Pardrick's accomplishment or to hypothesize about potential outcomes, because further answers were just about to be found.

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Interview Room 1

12:16 PM

Interviews and interrogations were a rarity for Nick and Judy to participate in, since they spent the brunt of their time patrolling the city and looking out for criminals on the field. Nick was fairly calm and composed, since his rule of thumb was to never get carried away by anything. Judy, on the other hand, relished the opportunity to take on criminals in verbal exchanges. Though she was a little overzealous on her few tries, it would take a while for her to temper her abilities and skills.

Judy, Nick and Oates were greeted once again by Trunkaby at the entrance to the interview room, while the coyote sat firmly in the chair once occupied by his larger accomplice. He seemed to be fairly quiet and reserved, not showing any signs of emotional distress.

Oates took the center seat once again, being the first to address the interviewee, "Mister… Perro de Monte, is that right?"

"It's Michael Perro del Monte, yeah," the coyote stressed in correction.
"Right," Oates nodded in understanding. "My name is Detective Horace Oates, and I'm here to help you out with your situation. Now, is there anything you need? Water, tea, coffee, soda, you name it?"

The easy-going nature of the detective's talking seemed to be very disingenuous to the coyote. But with quite a bit of talking to go through, he thought he could use something to keep his throat moist, "Just water, thanks…"

Oates nodded, and saw that nobody was going to do this. He urged, "Well, you heard the man. Pour him a cup from that cooler, will you, Wilde?"

Nick lazily sighed, "At your service, good sir…" He jumped to the cooler and filled a cup with cool water to serve to the canine who almost tore him a new one last night.

After a second's worth of awkward silence, Oates took it upon himself to resume the interview, "So, howdy do? How's it been so far?"

The coyote was taking a sip of water when he received this question, but quickly replied, "Not bad." He flashed a grin that showed his yellowed, dirty teeth, which made Judy's nose twitch a little in disgust.

"Now, I imagine this ain't a predicament you often find yourself in, is it?" Oates asked politely, with a slight smile on his maw to make the interviewee feel more welcome.

"Nope. I'm usually on the fast lane," This coyote sounded like he had a better track record than the bear, and his line of work suggested that he had to be efficient and steadfast.

"The fast lane, as in your line of work?" Judy wanted to push the interviewee to ease up a little and be more upfront, "Can you tell me a little more about that?"

"Yeah, I'd rather not," the coyote shook his head.

"Very well," Oates shrugged in understanding, before opening the interrogation, "As to the reason why you're here, today… First, you were brought here under the allegations that you were about to procure some stolen reptiles with the help of a Mister Francis Melone, alongside your accomplice, Frederick Nero. Second, the assault of Officer Wilde and Officer Frost and the attempted second-degree murder of Officer Wilde. Are you aware of this?"

The coyote didn't look as fidgety or nervous as his comrade was upon receiving this question, but he did give off the impression that he was thinking about something. After a brief silence, he turned his gaze from his hands back to the detective, "I'd like to have my attorney over. I do have the right to have an attorney, don't I?"

"That's right, sir," Oates conceded to the power of the law, and handed the canine a telephone. "We'll take our leave until you finish your phone call. I'd advise you to keep it short and to-the-point – this room is being filmed, you know?" At this sign, Oates led Judy and Nick outside of the room.

The coyote took a few seconds to dial the number he wanted to call. Only 10 seconds later, he seemed to have received an answer, "Hello? Attorney Cuoco?" There was a slight pause, "I urgently need you at Precinct 1. I'm being questioned over last night." There was another slight pause "I'm in Interview Room 1, on the second floor. Yeah." With one more short pause, Perro del Monte finished the conversation. "All right. See you then," he said, as he hung up and set the phone down. His interviewers wasted no time in returning inside.
"Who is your attorney? What is their name?" Oates asked.

The coyote curled his lips a little, before answering definitively, "Jennifer Cuoco. She'll be here in like… forty minutes."

"Ah. Good to know." Oates nodded, even though the notion of Jennifer Cuoco didn't bring his hopes up very high. On the one hand, he knew Cuoco was a staunch environmentalist; on the other hand, he knew that she had close ties with Outback Island's Precinct 5, who were under suspicion of Precinct 1 for quite some time when it came to their conduct regarding sanctions of wildlife-related crime. Nevertheless, it was under his power to broker some kind of evidence out of this interrogation, even though it looked to be considerably more difficult than the last one.

Judy had no choice but to tone down her initial dose of excitement, because she knew that if she let her fiery nature get the better of her in front of a seasoned lawyer, she could cost the team their case. If there was anything she learned in the past two years, it was that taking action first and asking questions later wasn't going to lead her anywhere but in trouble.

Nick, on the other hand, was somewhat curious about this change of plans. He thought getting to know new mammals and studying their train of thought would prove to be incredibly useful for future dealings. His mileage on the other side of the law showed him that attorneys could come in all shapes and sizes, and most of them weren't completely clean. He anticipated that Cuoco could try and subvert their reports about what happened last night, but he was more than prepared to counter. He was a hustler back in the day, so he knew other scam artists when they so much as opened their mouths.

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Police office

2:21 PM

Away from the verbal games and psychological tricks that took place in the interview rooms, there were regular police offices, and there, enforcers of the law did away with whatever work they had to deal with.

Sooner rather than later, young officer James Capen Frost was chiselling away at his self-imposed duty of paperwork at a quite quick pace, fully confined to his very own little cubicle. His natural spunkiness helped his cause, and over the course of the past four hours, he went through at least 20 folders worth of police reports and criminal files, with much attention to detail. In part, this was because he consciously prodded himself to be more vigilant after last night's fiasco. He wanted to adjust. He wanted to prove that he can learn from his mistakes, and doing what the Chief requested was the best way to get there.

However, there was one report out of many that happened to strike a chord with him. As he read carefully, it became clear to him that this was the report of a case of wild animal theft, some five months ago. More specifically, this took place in a reptile house in southern Sahara Square. Very interesting, indeed. The next report he found was the one detailing the theft from the Canals that Pardrick mentioned the other day. Another one was the robbery of Komodo's Pets. The following sheets were also written about similar cases, and when Jimmy made a comparison between their place and time of occurrence each, something became crystal-clear to him – all of the aforementioned robberies took place within the time span of a week or two each, and never in places that are in relatively close proximity. But the one common denominator for all of these was that the crime scenes all formed a hemisphere around one locale – the Outback Island ferry dock.

This was enough to put a smirk full of bravery on the young tod's maw – for him, there was
nothing better than finding something meaningful through serendipity and happy accidents. This meant a lot – not to him, but to the colleagues he was still very loyal to. And thus, he felt that it was his obligation, and nobody else's, to have these news delivered to them.

Before long, he jumped off his chair.

"Where do you think you're going?" A fellow beaver officer inquired.

"I'll be back soon; I gotta go to the toilet!" Jimmy lied, then darted out of his cubicle, and finally his office, carrying the folders he found in his hand.

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ZPD Headquarters – Cafeteria

3:15 PM

The second and final interrogation for today was, to say the least, quite a painful experience for the team. Not only had it already been made more difficult by the arrival of Perro del Monte's attorney, but said attorney also went out of her way to make things extremely difficult.

Cuoco wanted to make the situation appear as though her client was working for "the greater good of the wildlife". In addition, she claimed self-defense on the coyote's behalf due to the alleged lack of a warning and the inability to discern that the two mammals that approached him last night were part of the ZPD, before he assaulted them. The ensuing discussion led to the exchange of every possible ounce of evidence at the disposal of the ZPD (including Nero's confession), and every counterargument that Cuoco had. In the end, Michael Perro de Monte didn't reveal where the name "Basilisk" came from, nor did he give any clues about where they were stationed. He was quiet for the majority of the interrogation.

These several hours drained both Nick and Judy, who wanted nothing more than to relax. While Oates immediately returned to work on something unrelated, the two smaller officers took the chance to get some drinks and lunch before they continued with their investigation. They stood in line, waiting for whatever counter suited their size to be available.

Nick was thirsting for something fruity and sweet to drink, because the sudden, inexplicable memory of the strawberry flavor of Pawpsicles made way into his mind and compelled his stomach. His train of thought was derailed by the ever quickening thumping of Judy's foot.

"I can't help but feel that if it weren't for that smarmy lawyer girl, we would've found out a whole lot more," Judy pouted, feeling bereft of clarity and as though Cuoco was a spanner in the works.

"Yeah, she pretty much wanted to make the coyote look like a victim." As much as it was out of their hands at this point, Nick couldn't agree more. He found the quokka's train of thought to be unusually appealing towards feelings more so than facts, which he found particularly eye-rolling. He then stretched his back, feeling a little too stiff from all the sitting, "It might not have been productive, but I'm sure glad it's over."

Judy couldn't help but muse about it nevertheless, "It's pretty funny how the coyote just clamped shut like a mussel, even though his buddy pretty much spilled the beans."

This stream of epithets was a little too much for Nick. He rolled his eyes with a short chuckle, shaking his head afterwards, "You know, you sound just like Oates…"

"Isn't that the truth?" Judy chuckled, bemused herself. Nevertheless, she was glad that at least the other half of their team made good progress, "Well, at least Snarlov gave us something useful."
"Speaking of which…" This notion immediately reminded Nick of something that couldn't escape his mind ever since the bear was dealt with, "Didn't you think Pardrick acted a bit strange? He just… skidded off when we asked him about the bear."

Nick was right. For all the good will he had to help, his departure was rather brisk and abrupt. He elicited no more than a slight turn of his head towards them when he said he had urgent matters to tend to. It was vague and cryptic, but still, it could have turned out to be true. For the time being, Judy wasn't going to make calls on a whim, "I don't know. Maybe he's got his paws full back at the MBI. It can get stressful. Then again, I've been wrong before…"

In due time, their two-party conversation was soon joined by a third party. A youthful, high-pitched voice calling from across the cafeteria, "Guys!"

"Frost?" Nick threw his ears up in shock.

"Guys, you've gotta see this!" Jimmy squeezed himself between two giant mammals before he reached the doe and tod, panting and with a folder in his hand.

Judy didn't mind Jimmy's company, but she surely didn't believe he should be here right now. Bogo's wrath was not something anyone should incur. She asked with concern, "Aren't you supposed to be doing paperwork?"

"Well, I found this during paperwork. I think it's really important, so please check it out," he handed the folder to Nick before turning back around, "I gotta go back now! See you in two days!" He then scurried away as fast as his legs could carry him.

After a few seconds of confusion, Nick took a careful look at the folder Jimmy gave him. As he opened it, he noticed that all the files inside were documentations of various crimes against wildlife, mostly acts of theft. On the inside of the folder cover there was a sketch. The sketch seemed to be a very rough map of the southern shore of Zootopia showing several… sites, presumably the crime scenes described in the files, and the Outback Island ferry dock as the point at which all of these crime scenes connected. The suggestion here was more than worth a look, and Nick couldn't help but flash a smug smirk. Judy looked at him questioningly.

"Carrots," Nick declared, as he shut the folder, "I think you and I have more than enough to look through while we have lunch."

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Did I really take my sweet time with this chapter?

...kind of. I had my reasons, but I'm not going to bother you folks with that. The bottom line is that I'm back, and I have more than enough stuff to share!

This represents a serious turning point for our heroes and how the case unfolds. Is there more to this vague name than the affiliation with a mythical beast of old? That is for you to discover.

A special thanks to Ugg Ugg the Great for helping me out with organizing and staging the interrogation scenes to help them feel more realistic.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this, and I'll see you next time, much sooner. Catch ya later on, down the trail!
Proper Motorvation

Chapter Summary

After facing a setback at work, Milo finds time to be at ease with his old friends before continuing.

Stagart Studios – Mixing stage

June 30th, 2018, 3:34 PM

In the past two days, Milo has tangoed around the clock in order to make the right kind of prehistoric creature sounds to seal his end of the deal with Stagart. Furrowing through various libraries of animal recordings, both sapient and non-sapient, the buck rabbit assembled his database. The studio recording session helped him with acquiring proper, unique mammalian vocalizations that would help distinguish his own sound design from what was already familiar on the market. The wild animal sounds at his disposal were more formulaic, but nevertheless helpful.

Right up until the afternoon of the second day, there came compression, equalization, pitch-shifting, morphing and all the tidbits of a sound designer's work that were naught but a mystery to a layman. Yet, at the end of it all, the layman was to feel and perceive all that work as a cohesive whole, immersive and otherworldly.

On the afternoon of the second day, everything Milo had done would have been put to the ultimate form of scrutiny – the director's intuition and tastes.

"Hmm…" Ed Horner, the director, a takin, twirled his beard, having listened to this first take wholly. His eyes played about in a show of slight disappointment, "I'm not getting the right vibe from the T. rex and the raptors. They're neither unique nor too scientifically accurate at first bite. I don't know. The T. rex shouldn't be roaring, and I get a lot of that, you know… generic roar from this. I don't want a roar. I want a bellow, grumble or hiss kind of thing, you know what I'm saying?"

Regardless of how little Milo liked the feedback, he reserved his negative sentiment for himself, "I'll see to it."

"And these raptors…" Ed pinched his left hooves together, as if he was searching for an elusive word, "If you could just take something that's less… screechy for those attacking sounds, that'd be great. Everybody knows screaming raptors are so over."

It looked as though this wasn't going to be finished as quickly as Milo had hoped. Alas, it turned out that this was the nature of the beast as it were. The promotion would have to wait.

"The herbivores all sound pretty cool, though! Wouldn't change a thing." This remark brought Milo's attention back up, and slightly his mood. Then the takin said, "Just work on these meat-eaters while you've got time, and you've got plenty, so…"

Stagart interjected to prevent any kind of nagging, "I'm sure it'll turn out fine. At least now we've got a clearer heading."
"Right," Ed concurred, then rose from his seat, "So, I'll see you next time at the end of the deadline. Until then, send me snippets, if it's easier for you to get feedback that way. We can keep in touch."

"Yeah, that'd be great," Milo nodded, in hopes of it actually coming true.

"All right, gents," Ed waved to the duo, smiling courteously, "I gotta get going now. I'll see you next time. Ba-bye!"

As he closed the door, Stagart mulled over the situation. While hiccups were something that he believed to come naturally with a new employee taking up a higher-ranked position, he noticed that Milo didn't seem to take it all that well. He appeared lost in thought as he was slumped in his seat.

"What's the matter?" Stagart asked.

"I've scoured through all my libraries for birds and reptiles," Milo replied with an overtone of doubt and ponderance, scratching his chin. "I don't know how to get to any more sounds without taking a field recording trip."

"You sure about that, Rabberts?" Stagart raised his eyebrow.

"Pretty sure. There was nothing that-" Before Milo could even word his thoughts, he was cut off by his chief immediately.

"Then you take a field recording trip," Stagart spoke steadfastly, rising from this seat, "Record something that's wholly you and isn't a stock sound, then put it into the mix and see how it works."

Milo's ears jumped up in utter shock, raising his hands apprehensively, "Wait. Sir, I don't have time to record that many-"

In response, Stagart simply flashed a business card from one of his jacket pockets and showed it to Milo, "The Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center on Outback Island has been our partner for over twenty years for recording wildlife. They're cut off from the traffic and teeming with wildlife, so you couldn't ask for a better location with regards to noise. Two days will do. Your equipment will be given to you by us, and optionally, hire a partner to help you out with boom operation. You said you're capable of recording wild animals, so I fully take your word for it. You'll have paid ferry tickets, hotel stay and any liability issues, but I expect you to take care of the equipment you're given. Is that okay?"

Hearing all this out was a stark reminder to Milo that he was all in when it comes to this assignment, and that he had to do whatever it takes to make it work. If it was a two-day recording session that was necessary, then he'd see it done, even if he thought it was a short amount of time. Milo nodded, "Yes, sir. That's okay."

"Good," Stagart curled the edge of his mouth into an ever-so-slight smile, "Call him up to schedule a session for tomorrow and the day after."

"Wallace Beanie?" Milo read from the card.

"Yup," Stagart nodded, before closing in on Milo and lowering his voice a little, "Oh, and just between us, he's quite a wild card, so don't get too comfortable around him. By the way, let me know whom you've hired as a boom operator."

This cautionary warning was kind of outre for Milo, but he had to take his boss' word for it, "Yes, sir. I'd best be off, now. Those sounds won't be designing themselves."
"All right," Stagart nodded, thereby approving his departure, "Good luck."

"Thank you," Milo hopped down from his seat and scurried out the door with the intent to finish his venture as soon as possible.

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Lionheart Avenue

3:44 PM

Even though he had enough logical arguments in his favor and a slight tinge of motivation to go on this field recording session, Milo knew it would take more than his good will and resolve to make the trip to Steve Ermine's worthwhile. There were animals of all shapes and sizes at that sanctuary; some of them were really small, and some of them rather large. Some species were docile, while others were groomed by nature to be carnivores and, as such, quite dangerous. They could destroy his microphones and boom, if they so choose. He knew he couldn't count on his own strength to wield a boom for close-miking water-dwelling animals like crocodiles, or large snakes. He needed someone larger, stronger and with far more reach than him, while he manned the recorder.

As he left the studio complex, he saw Melanie making her way to a street crossing. Before she could get away, the buck darted towards the giraffe, "Hey, Mel! Wait up."

"Hi, Milo!" Fortunately, she was one of the few mammals his age who knew better than to wear headphones on the street, "How's your sound effects deal going?"

"Well, I've kind of hit a speed bump," Milo explained himself, "I have to go into the field to record wildlife, and I need help. You know, someone with reach, a long boom, that kind of stuff."

Melanie listened intently, with a slow nod, "Right. So, where are we going?"

"Well, it's on..." It occurred to Milo that his question may have already been answered, "Wait. We?"

"Yeah, we!" Melanie chuckled, "I know it sounds kind of out of the blue, but I just took a week off."

"It's on Outback Island. Two days, starting tomorrow, with a hotel stay," Milo explained to the giraffe, "If you could make it, that'd be great."

"You're on," Melanie winked, then extended her index hoof in the rabbit's direction, "Just call me when you get home, so we can talk about setting everything up, okay?"

"Of course, of course," Milo nodded, then graciously clasped his hands together with a smile that emanated pure gladness, "Thank you so much..."

"Aw, you're cracking me up..." Melanie laughed in endearment, before hearing a bus horn behind her, "I gotta trot off, now. I'll miss my bus."

"Right; see you!" Milo waved away, even though the giraffe was cantering rather than trotting.

With the matter of team work out of the way, Milo had no qualms about anything relating to the recording trip. Fortune was on his side, indeed. All he had to do was make sure it stayed that way.

Just when the buck took out his phone with the intention of informing Stagart about the newly assembled duo, it rang. Seeing that the caller was Steve, it piqued his curiosity. He answered,
"Hello?" Whatever Steve had to say made Milo a bit apprehensive, "Well, I don't know. I'm gonna have to get ready for-" Here, the buck cut himself off, and his initial look of concern faded into an excited grin, "The Pink Elephant Pub? Otis holding a meeting? Don't move a muscle; I'm coming right over!" With that, the buck rabbit stashed away his phone and darted towards the parking lot. Whatever Milo was rushing to, it was clearly an event worth noting.

The Pink Elephant Pub, Bayou Trail 78, Southern Savanna Central

4:13 PM

This bar, in contrast with its name, wasn't a place where revelry and alcoholism were common practices. Here, one had the opportunity to do a multitude of things: either meet and greet the Motorvators (a motorcycle club that owned the bar and used it as a gathering area), or occupy one of the many attractions that were laden across the bar, be it the bowling alley, arm-wrestling stand or pool tables. The bar itself was situated on the west wing. In front of each chair, one could see a small seat protruding from slightly under the bar, to accommodate for smaller mammals that wished to reach the bartop.

Although the Motorvators were, by in large, a peaceful, law-abiding club and no ruckuses took place here, today was an exception. Today, the bar interior was ringing with the disaffected screaming of young adults, whom the club officials were trying to placate.

"Look, I don't know where you're pulling this from, but we're not posting alligator hides anywhere on the web," the bartender, a portly grizzly bear wearing a jean vest and a beret explained desperately to some very angry small mammals.

"Then stop wearing reptile leather, specists!" One of them, a male dik-dik, dressed in a plaid shirt with thick glasses adorning his eyes, croaked petulantly.

"That isn't helping the conservation of endangered species, you know?" Added a female wolverine dressed in a suit jacket, with some dyed fur implants for hair, with an overtone of moral superiority permeating her voice, "For all we know, we shouldn't even be wearing animal products!"

A lioness who was sitting to the bear's right rolled her eyes in annoyance, and unapologetically called the wolverine out, "Says the girl with a wool hat…"

"Hey!" The small predator shrieked defensively.

"Dude, like, chill," Steve was also in the midst of this, and trying to ease the ongoing tensions, "You're not doing-"

"You called her 'dude' without a trigger warning? That's a sexist microaggression!" The dik-dik was throwing what most resembled an apoplectic seizure at this point, "I'm like, so Tweeting this!"

The bear face-palmed in exasperation, seeing that there was nothing he and his friends could do right in the eyes of these mammals, "It's no use. Bulwark, get them out of here."

Bulwark, a large American wood bison with a chiseled physique, picked the two diminutive, but clearly overly aggressive, mammals and carried them away from the bar and out of the building.

"Hey! Let me go, you redneck!" The dik-dik cried shrilly, flailing his arms about, "You're gonna lose-" whatever other pearls they wanted to clutch were muffled by the closing door of the Pink Elephant Pub. The fourth mammal that was seated at the bar, an auburn wolf who had a pin with the name "Dave" written on it and held an acoustic bass in his hands, played the bassline of Yes'
"Roundabout" as this situation ended.

Such was the behavior of mammals who were so blinded by their desire for validation and moral superiority that they couldn't see the wood for the trees.

"Rotten little attention hogs, if I ever knew 'em, these college kids..." scowled the fifth mammal in a nasally, raspy, Southern-accented voice – an elderly, portly wild boar with a muscle tee and a bandana over his head.

"Holy shizzle, Kenny, they're at it again?" Steve asked with concern, as the aforementioned bear returned to tending the bar.

"This is, like, the fifth time this month," Kenny said, frustrated by this predictably unreasonable, petulant behavior. He gestured at his brow, "Do they even ask themselves if some random dead gator photo on the internet is worth freaking out over?"

"Gotta get those victim points somehow," deadpanned the lioness.

"Ain't that the truth, Sam?" Kenny replied.

"They're just loungin' around, poking at their 'smart' phones and goin' to..." The grouchy old boar paused to snort contemptuously, before finishing his statement, "Twitter."

"Aw, come on, Si, old dude," Steve patted the old boar on the back, in a joking mode, "Everybody uses Twitter!"

Silas was no more jolly after hearing these remarks, regarding the magic of the world wide web as utterly superfluous, "Hmph. What kind of name is that, anyway? A bird don't moo, and a cow don't tweet."

"I think these twerps are giving Otis some right headaches at this point..." Samantha shared the group sentiment, still leaning on the bar. She stood out from the rest of the gang in that she wore a midriff-baring jacket over a pink t-shirt.

"So, I missed the show?" A male voice could be heard coming from the front door's direction.

"Oh, you bet you have, Spike..." Sam nodded snidely, before her face completely changed. A giddy smile crossed her fangs, as she turned around towards the newcomer, who happened to be Milo, "Spike! You're here!"

"Oh, Spike?" Kenny smiled joyously, echoing the unusual nickname. Dave, on the other hand, played the bass line of Michael Jackal's "Speed Demon" via the slapping technique and flashed a dopey grin of his own.

"Hey, guys!" Before Milo could even approach his friends, he was crushed in an affectionate smother by Sam, who started to play with his cheeks.

"It's been so long since I hugged you and pinched your squishy little cheeks!" The overjoyed Samantha soon felt the rabbit's small hand patting her on the arm, which was a message she understood all too quickly. She set him down on an elevated seat, and apologetically fixed his jacket while he caught his breath.

"Dude! You're ahead of time." Steve chimed in a congratulating manner.

"Well, I can't say I was fixing to miss another roll call," Milo fixed his jacket a little more.
Nevertheless, he was happy to be in the company of his fellow bikers. By in large, the Motorvators weren't concerned with matters of species, gender or any kind of identity politics, valuing equal opportunities for all its members and applicants.

"So, let's hear some more about that promotion thing!" Kenny beamed joyously, leaning against his own end of the bar, "Steve told us you hit a deal."

Promptly, all eyes were fixed on a flustered Milo, who giggled nervously, "Well, I…"

"Well, well, well… Are you skipping work, or something, Spike?" A deep, husky male voice emanated from behind everyone, and drew everyone's gazes towards him. Walking inside, alongside Bulwark, was a tiger – a ten-foot-tall, middle-aged yet still muscular pantherine dressed in a black jacket adorned with spikes on the rims, with a Motorvator emblem on the left. He wore sunglasses, which he promptly removed as he approached the bar. His muzzle riddled with slight bald spots from healed scars, his eyes a dark brown. Dave slapped again, this time playing "Run For Cover". Anyone who was standing around Kenny respectfully got out of his way.

"Yo, Rick! How goes it?" Steve greeted, patting the tiger on the back. Suddenly, the cat's ear twitched and his tail stiffened, and a stringent glare came across his face.

"Hooves off. Now." Rick deadpanned, and the wildebeest complied quickly. As unlikely as it was for a feline to be averse to physical affection, it was clearly possible. The imposing tiger was conveniently standing to Milo's left, and took the time to address him, out of all Motorvators, "I'll take a wild guess here; you're feeling miserable because you can't make the connection that taking any kind of action is more likely to get you a sound designer's position than doing nothing." Afterwards, the tiger turned to Kenny, "Pour me a Corona."

Milo knew where this was coming from. He could see himself, exactly as he used to be only a few short months ago, behaving exactly the way his senior clubmate put it. This gave him all the more reason to break the good news, "Rick, I…"

"Just don't tell me you're going to do something about it. Every time you did, you went back to doing the same thing over again. To the surprise of absolutely nobody, it didn't make you feel better," Rick's sardonic edge wasn't dulled by anything he thought Milo had to say. He knew how insecure Milo was, and that he wasn't keen on change any time soon, "I'm sorry, but I'm tired of listening to you digging yourself deeper and not answering your wake-up call. I trained you long enough to know that you always fumbled at the sight of an obstacle." Feeling that he was done with the matter, the tiger turned to take a sip of the beer that Kenny poured.

The training Rick was talking about was in defensive martial arts. Everything said was true, no matter how grating, crudely put or discomforting it was. Still, Milo's conscience was at ease, because he knew what he was going to say in response was going to change his old mentor's mood, "I already answered my wake-up call."

Rick barely stopped himself from choking on his drink before turning back to Milo with an intent gaze, "Dazzle me."

"I struck a promotion deal with my boss," Milo explained, surprisingly fearlessly for everyone that was around him. Especially Rick, who was already rubbing his chin with curiosity about how everything came to be in the first place, "I have to create some sound effects for a TV show that's piloting soon, and now my career depends on it. It happened after a board meeting."

Rick sat like a gym teacher watching intently at his student going through an exam, slightly adjusting his whiskers, "Tell me what the meeting was like."
"Stagart asked if there was someone who wanted to help with some dinosaur sound design, and I volunteered. I asked to do it." The ease with which Milo talked about this was enough to put smiles on everyone's faces, even though Rick reserved his own ever so slightly.

"Yes!" Sam victoriously clenched her forepaw into a fist.

"All right!" Kenny cheered as well.

"On your own?" Rick was, if slightly, excited to hear about this.

"Yeah, all alone," Milo giggled innocently.

Si clapped his hands and chuckled in utter disbelief, "Criminently! Little ol' Spike showing some backbone? This I gotta hear…"

"It's true," Steve interjected, "I didn't have to talk it into him any more than you guys did, and I totally didn't think he'd follow through with it anyway."

Rick's gaze was no longer discriminating and scrutinous, but filled with happiness and pride. He asked, "How did it feel to finally be open about yourself?"

"It…" In this moment of honesty, Milo chuckled and smiled, "It felt great. Really. It was quite cathartic. I mean, I couldn't believe how easy it actually was. Of course, Xander wanted to louse it up." The buck shrugged, no longer annoyed by the matter.

"Spoiled little brat…" Sam concurred, cringing in disgust.

"What did that good-for-nothin' dirtbag want?" Silas scowled, albeit in a protective manner this time. Overall, no one was very happy to hear that name. It was almost as if they knew him well enough to dislike him.

Milo hesitated for a brief moment, before delivering his final words on him, "Whatever it was, I remember telling him that I don't care if he's got a problem with me and that he has no right to rob me of anything. I wasn't looking for a seal of approval from anyone; I just wanted to help, because I can." The buck rabbit then put on a cheeky half-smile, "And do the job I love, at the same time."

"See what I mean? He's been doin' totally radical, bros!" Steve raised his fist triumphantly, glad to know that he didn't need to speak for him. However, he noticed that Sam was looking at him, "And sis." Sam only chuckled and shook her head.

At this point, Rick could no longer contain a very wide smile. In his eyes, Milo passed the exam. At the very least, the first one in a line of exams. He extended his hand for a shake and nodded with unequivocal approval, "Now, you're talking…"

"What happened then, other than you getting the job?" Kenny pried curiously.

"Well…" Before Milo could say any more, he was cut off by the fluttering of small wings as a minuscule fruit bat landed on the bartop, slightly catching her breath, "Guys! Otis is coming down soon. You'd better get ready."

The Roll Call Cave

4:20 PM

The Motorvators descended into the basement of the Pink Elephant Pub, inside a large auditorium
lit with LED lights. There was a long, horseshoe-shaped table that stretched almost all of the room's length and faced an enormous podium. This bar was built on the foundations of a 1940s radio station, and these parts of the architecture are all that remained of those bygone years.

Just as everyone sat down in quietude, thudding came from a staircase from right behind the podium, behind a beaded curtain very wide and high. The first thing that came through that curtain was a sharp point – a tusk.

As the tusk, very long and curving forward, moved the curtain aside, Otis Ivorson at last came into view. He was an African bush elephant, but even by his own species' standard, he was a giant. Standing at 15 feet high and with a surprisingly strong build, he dwarfed every other mammal in his current vicinity. Even though he was nearly sixty-eight years old, his left tusk greatly severed, his fan-like ears riddled with holes and rips and his face criss-crossed with wrinkles, he maintained an upright posture and a confident gait. He wore a black alligator hide vest over a blue jean shirt, while his head was adorned by a cowboy hat with the Motorvators emblem on the hat's face.

The old leader's arrival was met with adulation from the Motorvators, who clapped and whistled. However, all that the old elephant gave in response was a humble, wholesome smile and a wave with his trunk. As he approached the podium, his deep, resonant baritone, riddled with a Texan drawl, heralded the beginning of what seemed to be a meeting, "Afternoon, everyone."

The entirety of the club quieted down, only to perk their ears with the utmost attention, now that the meeting was in session. Otis donned his glasses and began to read from a sheet, "Okay, the first item we've got today is from the Blues. Our brother-in-law, Rodrigo Delgado, sent me a report this morning. Says something about reptiles being stolen from pet shops around the south of the city. Keep your noses clean, and try not to buy leather accessories until this thing is cleared up."

Even though this order was met with annoyed groans and eyerolls from fellow bikers, the elephant wasn't going to let his thoughts be oversimplified, "Don't get me wrong; I can't stand them self-righteous college kids next door any more than you. I just don't want us to end up in trouble over it. And, come Hell or High Water, keep politics out of the Motorvators. We ain't senators, we build bikes." He made his point all the more clear by patting his trunk on the podium surface. Then, he cleared his throat with a slight cough, before resuming his list, "Second item: LaFleur Children's Hospital in Bunnyburrow. Joey, where are we standing with the cruiser we planned for them?"

Joey, a grey wolf with a black stripe running along his fur, responded diligently, "The metalwork is done, and ready to be painted."

Otis addressed another wolf on the charity event, "June? The funding campaign to help 'em get started?"

June, a brown she-wolf sitting between Joey and Dave, clasped her hands together somewhat shyly, "Well, we've managed to get to 52% of our milestone this week since May. We're going to need a little more effort to get it done by July 25th."

Otis nodded in understanding, "Right. Have you done anything about it?"

"We did open up a donation box next to the bar, and a few posters outside. There's also the cross-country tour right before their grand opening. It might give us some attention," June conceded. The situation may have indeed looked slim, but she wasn't bent on leaving it to chance.

Even though this wasn't the result the club head was hoping for, he knew that this took time and effort and that things could turn around during the set time, "All right, then. Somethin' to ask, anyone?" This question was met with shrugs, aside glances and overall, silence, "All right. That's it
for the day, and I hope you enjoy the rest of yours! Let's hit it." With that said, Otis went away from the podium and let out a blaring trumpet, which was followed by whatever vocalization the animals that could vocalize could offer.

_The Pink Elephant Pub_

_4:30 PM_

With the meeting over and nothing else to cover, the Motorvators resumed their regular activities. Milo and Steve themselves wanted to kick back a little before heading home. At present, there was no more interesting way to do so than watching Rick and Bulwark, two powerhouses in the club, squaring off in an arm-wrestling match.

With the corner of his ears, Milo could hear Otis' voice from behind, "Say, Kenny, you don't happen to have any more of that good old marula brew, do you?"

"You're in luck, Big O," Kenny agreed and provided, even opening the bottle and pouring a glass for the elephant's convenience, "Here it is."

Otis smiled courteously, raising the mug with his hand politely, "God bless. Cheers." Then, in the only way nature could permit him, he sucked the beer in with his trunk before pouring it into his mouth ever so gently, so as to not spill.

Milo met Otis a long time ago, when he was a child. The Motorvators were first friends to his late biological mother, and by extension, his father Gerard afterwards. Since then, he's looked upon the old elephant as someone who would always listen patiently to whatever anyone had to say, then unfailingly give them the most sound advice. For all his size, he had his feet on the ground and never saw himself as superior to any mammal. Milo felt like he had to tell him the news regarding his sound design, as well as share his gripes about it, "Hi, Otis."

Otis' right ear twitched ever so slightly as he turned over to the rabbit. A caring, welcoming smile crossed his face, "Howdy do, kit?"

"I'd be lying if I said I've seen better days lately," Milo fiddled with his thumbs before he turned his gaze up at the old pachyderm, "Work's really starting to pick up. For the better, too."

"Oh, yeah," Otis nodded solemnly, with a daredevil grin, "Some two months ago, you wouldn't even bite a biscuit, and here you are, already fixin' up to turn that career of yours around. Rick already told me about that." Suddenly, they both heard a loud thud coming from the arm wrestling table – it appeared that the bison won the match.

"Well, you got me there, Bulwark," Rick twisted his shoulders and massaged his weary right arm. "Wanna go again after we take a break?" Bulwark asked playfully.

"You've done it," Rick pointed at him quasi-threateningly, laughing, "There's no way I'm gonna quit now."

Otis chuckled and shook his head, before he noticed that Milo was rather somber. It was as though things picking up at work weren't quite enough to solve all of his problems. It's not that Otis expected it to be that easy, but he needed to know about it nevertheless. He leaned in ever so slightly, "What's eatin' ya?"

Milo hesitated ever so slightly, but reminded himself that he couldn't afford doing this anymore. He
sighed, "My first take on those dinosaurs wasn't exactly what the director was hoping for, and tomorrow, I have to go to Outback Island to record some wildlife."

"Little bump along the way?" Otis puzzled.

"I guess," Milo replied half-heartedly, "I know how to do all those things, but I guess I got too excited when I first got the assignment."

It seemed that Milo still needed to understand that if he wanted to do something he thought was worth doing, he had to do it a bit worse than he hoped the first few times. He needed to understand this was par for the course. Otis mused, "Let ol' Otis tell you something. In times like these, I just sat down and remembered what I set out to do in the first place. When you do that, that big wall you call a setback drops down a hundred feet. You get your bearings back together. And when you do, you get up, shake off the excess, try again and, this time, just beat the devil out of it. That's what ol' Bob Moss used to say, anyway."

Another thud rang from the arm wrestling table; but this time, Rick's tone suggested a different outcome, "Ooh, yeah! Who's the tiger in this outfit?!" He shouted, and high-fived the bison respectfully. Both were joyous, both were jovial and no hard feelings to be had.

"Awesomely super-sensationalistic, bro!" Steve clapped, and the clattering of his hoofs was enough to make the tiger's ears ring.

"All right, all right. Now, you're spoiling me…" Rick prompted him to stop.

This prompted a hearty laugh from both Milo and Otis alike. But Otis wasn't finished yet. He reassuringly laid the tip of his trunk over the rabbit's shoulders, "Listen, kit: don't worry if it ain't right the first time. It ought to be like that, no matter what job you're doin'. What matters is what you get it in the end. If there's anything I know about you, it's that you don't give up on anything when you set your mind to it."

Milo couldn't help feeling a fair amount of drive knowing his new trajectory was received so well by all of his loved ones. It was a drive that he silenced at all costs for a large part of his career. A drive that told him he can do better. For once, his aspirations were in tune with his logical mind, and he looked at the world with much more clarity than before. What Otis said meant that success was never permanent, and that he'll have to titillate up and down the hill for as long as he lives.

"Thanks, Otis," Milo smiled.

"That ought to prove to Gerry that you can do it," Otis patted Milo on the back.

Milo shook his head in disagreement, "Well, I don't think it's that." The elephant was a little concerned that Milo would say something against his father, like he usually has, but listened anyway, "I never saw it as proving anything to him. I just… I want him to be proud of me. That's all."

Otis eventually backpedaled and nodded in concurrence, but not without a clause of his own, "I don't know how proud my pa was of me when I set out to build bikes instead of workin' on the railroad, but I know Gerry was always rooting for you. He was just worried you wouldn't follow with it, and I bet he's really glad you did now. Kim would be, too."

Kim – his mother. Minus the 'step'. The very mention of her name sent a pang of nostalgia and memory in Milo's heart, filled with a bittersweet collection of moment. In order to avoid wasting words on the matter, he simply nodded and smiled.
"Yo, Miles?" Steve approached the bar, standing between the two mammals of drastically disparate proportions, "Shouldn't we be heading out? I've got to put my grubby hooves onto some work, 'cause I have a deadline tonight."

This was a timely and well-asked-for call, because Milo wasn't exactly free-scheduled either, "I'd love to hang out more, but we gotta go. I have to get ready for tomorrow, too."

"Alrighty, then. Take it easy, you two," Otis nodded solemnly, as he followed the departing mammals with his gaze. At the last moment, Milo turned back around and waved, smiling with joy. Otis called out, "I know that you will." With that said and done, Otis turned back to his drink, then recounted everything that came to pass. Hearing this made his day all the better, because he truly did see Milo as a sort of grandson. A smile, showing both joy and benign surprise, molded the wrinkles on his face. What he read from the young buck today was proper motivation.

Well, here we are. I hope you all had a terrific Christmas and a splendid New Year so far! For you, I have a new chapter & new characters.

The Motorvators are a long-standing Motorcycle club in Zootopia that I had great fun coming up with. I wanted to make them as wholesome and approachable as I could, for a biker club.

That being said, I want to pose the old voice actor question again; which actors do you think will fit these Motorvators:

Otis
Rick
Kenny
Silas
Samantha

In any case, that was it for this chapter. Catch ya later on, down the trail!
Birds On A Fishpole

Chapter Summary

Milo heads to Outback Island with Melanie in order to record some wild animal sound effects for his assignment at Stagart Studios.

Port Wombat, Outback Island

July 1st, 2018, 8:14 AM

Come the first day of the year's seventh month, Milo Rabberts was all but ready for his trip to Outback Island. He had all the equipment signed onto his name early in the morning, and met up with Melanie, who had the automobile. The two mammals were given two nights to stay at the local motel, as well as the obligatory insurance for their equipment, in case it was damaged somehow.

The only way to get to Outback Island was via a ferry docked at the very southeast of Savanna Central. The trip to Port Wombat lasted for two hours – with a serene view of the open bay, and some of Zootopia's architecture visible beautifully from afar, it was a pleasant experience overall. From the port, it was only a short while before Milo would take his first steps in recording these wild animals.

Melanie's automobile, unlike in most of her kind, didn't have a giraffe-like paint job: it was a plain metallic grey, but distinct in shape by its bizarre height-to-length ratio. It gently rolled out of the ferry and onto the road to the research center.

Melanie's car

"Tell me again, why you took 10 different hard drives with you for a two-day trip." Melanie asked.

Milo responded, comfortably snuggled into the corner of the passenger seat, "They're all the right format, and it never hurts to back up in case you lose one. Can't be too careful."

Melanie wasn't having any of it, as evidenced by her confused expression, "I get that you care about doing this right, but maybe you should… take it easy. Relax a bit."

"Relax?" Milo twitched almost reflexively, before thinking of a more ingenious response than simply continuing to complain, "Some music might help."

Melanie chuckled, "Fair enough." That being said, her right hand immediately floated over to the car radio. Switching on, the first station that came into audibility was a rap station. The two mammals needed only to exchange awkward glances for one to assume what they thought of it. The next station caused Melanie a great deal of discomfort, "Country? Nope!" Then she flicked the button again.

"Oh, God!" Milo cried out in frustration, because if there was anything he couldn't get behind, it was mainstream pop music on the third station. Namely Gazelle, "Please! No!"
"I'm on it, I'm on it," Melanie responded with a placating tone, only to find a station that suited her ears, as well as Milo's – the R&B of old. Rhythmic, soulful, with a life of its own, unlike the derivative assembly line tracks they've only come across as of yet. A sigh of relief and the light bobbing of their heads cemented their comfort.

"So, what do you think Outback Island will be like?" Melanie broke the silence.

"You got me," Milo shrugged, "I never traveled here before, but I heard they don't really like rabbits. Probably because of our, eh… prodigious fecundity."

"Yikes," Melanie winced a little, before sending a more playful question his way, "You wanna hide in my purse in case something goes south?"

Milo waved away dismissively, with a chuckle, "Nah, I'm not scared of them. How long until we get to the sanctuary?"

"Not for a while," Melanie took a peek at her GPS, showing her the way, "We still have a few miles to go."

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**Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center**

8:32 AM

Even though the aforementioned wildlife expert and television legend usually spent his life in Australia, he always wanted to spread his influence wherever he could manage. Given the following he had in the United States, he became interested in making Outback Island, the most recently finished district in Zootopia, a place where his mark would be left. His wife Terri, born in the US, helped the most with setting up this animal rehabilitation and research center, and the vast majority of the wildlife to be found was, by in large, not native to North America. Most of the rehabilitated animals were former exotic pets that escaped their confinement, and were being nursed back to a healthy life.

Today, the sanctuary wasn't being visited by anyone else. The gusts of hot air coming from Sahara Square's climate wall could be felt to an ever so slight extent on this insular district and, consequently, made it slightly warmer than the regular temperature of the continent. Nevertheless, work needed to be done.

As Melanie wheeled the car over to her parking spot, she was treated with the sight of a rather irate-looking male red-necked wallaby who hopped over vigorously, his arms folded and his gaze discriminating. As both mammals got out of their cars, he began to shout as he approached ever more closely, "Aw, mates! You're two minutes late, ya bloody seppos!"

Melanie and Milo were quite dumbfounded by such an uncouth welcome. Looking upon the wallaby closer, they could see that he was wearing a khaki shirt and shorts, with a fedora adorning his head. Soon, his initially demeaning appearance gave way to hooting laughter, "Oh, I'm just bloody faffin' about, eh. How's it goin'? I'm Wallace."

The wallaby warden's handshake greeting was offered to Milo first. As per the norm, the rabbit obliged, "Milo Rabberts. Pleased to meet you."

"And your friend over there - with her scuffed height?" Wallace lifted the brim of his hat ever so slightly to have a better look at the female giraffe.

"Melanie," she waved politely.
"Now, let's show you around, shall we?" Wallace patted Milo on the back and led the duo on, "Gotta get you acquainted with the space, I reckon."

**Harpy eagle aviary**

9:02 AM

Before Milo and Melanie began their work shift, they settled into their respective rooms at the Eucalyptus Motel, with Melanie's being a slightly loose fit due to the rarity of giraffe visitors.

The sky was clear and the sun shone all the brighter, as temperatures soared. Even Milo donned a cap to shield his eyes and help him concentrate. Regardless of the intense heat, he had to keep his cool in order to do his work well. The first animal Wallace led Milo towards was an enormous species of eagle from South America.

"All right, then, mate," Wallace propped the aviary door open, "Just go and hop in when you're ready. The eagle will probably come over."

Milo was unconvinced by the implied simplicity, "Just like that?"

"Exactly like that, mate," Wallace winked with a smug grin adorning his face, "Won't even get a nick on ya."

For all the doubts Milo had, he had always been taught to abide by whomever was the main caretaker of the object, or in this case, creature, that he had to record. Nevertheless, he wasn't going to compromise his equipment on the first entrance, because he needed Melanie's help for miking. He walked inside, treading lightly and observing the environment around him. Tall, tropical vegetation was the main sort to be found, with kapok trees being the tallest of the vegetation dispersed here. Due to the greenhouse-like construction of the aviary, it was humid here. Unbearable for the rabbit, but for the animals contained here, it was just like home.

Before he could marvel at the vegetation any more, he saw a slice of flesh being thrown into the pen. Not just a few short seconds later, the harpy eagle swooped down from the heights towards it. However, its gaze turned with a rapid twitch not to the meat, but to Milo. An enormous female, the curious bird ogled the rabbit that had just walked into her space and began to approach him slowly. Suddenly, Milo felt more than slightly threatened, as a nervousness awoke within him. It wasn't just a fear of the unknown; it was almost as if a primordial fight-or-flight instinct was kickstarted deep within his psyche – back before the days of sapience, eagles used to eat rabbits.

Soon enough, the raptor lunged at Milo with her sharp beak, but the buck was quick enough to binky, screaming in fright, as he dashed away on all fours, panting faster than ever before. Much to his dismay, the bird took flight after him. He raced on, his heart throbbing and the leaves of the underbrush slapping him in the face. Then, when he turned back for a slight second, he could see the raptor's talons reaching for him. With a yell of horror, Milo made one last jump for the door from which he entered and avoided the bird, then frantically scurried to close the door.

"Oi!" Wallace suddenly shouted, "Bloody hell you think you're doing?!!"

A frazzled and dazed Milo couldn't let this kind of frivolity go, "You told me it was safe to go inside!"

"Nah, mate - bloody hell ya talkin' about, eh?" Wallace sounded quite offended, "Not during bloody feedin' time! Little drongo bastard…"
"Why… Didn't you tell me about that?" Milo pressed, ever more unnerved.

"Yeah, well… ya didn't think to ask, now did you?" Wallace turned back to the rabbit with a half-lidded smirk, before looking to his meat can again, "Anyway, now that I've had my fun, we'll leave em' for a while. When they're all filled up, it should be bloody right-o' for ya."

Milo couldn't believe what he was just a part of. The park warden seemed to be an unhinged wallaby who took amusement in potentially dangerous pranks. Whether this was a test of Milo's will, or simply a quirk, he couldn't tell. All that became clear to him at that moment was what Stagart told him earlier – this marsupial was quite the wild card. Milo's palm slid all over his face, in hopes of wiping off the frustration and shock that was going through him now.

Thirty minutes later…

"Right, mate…” With feeding time finally over and the birds well-fed, Wallace wanted to help start Milo's recording session proper, "First thing you should know: never talk to the animals. They don't understand ya, so don't bloody bother."

"Right," Milo nodded with the utmost attention.

"Yep, I'll be hanging around the back - givin' the Eagle something to squawk at," Wallace turned to leave, before waving at the rabbit, "Good luck, eh?"

"Thanks," Milo acknowledged half-heartedly, now joined by Melanie as his boom operator, "All right, take two…"

Going back inside, Milo didn't notice anything different to the last time he was in. The same female harpy eagle that had lunged defensively at him before was perched high on a kapok tree branch, observing her environment. So far as Milo remained out of her sight, he had the opportunity to record. However, getting the sound out of the eagle was easier said than done.

With Milo sitting on a small rock and gain-staging his recorder for the session, Melanie slowly moved the fishpole boom towards the giant raptor. The fluffy textile windshield immediately sparked the bird's attention. She ogled the device with curiosity, tilting her head every few seconds, each time a little closer. Fortunately, she wasn't in a defensive, or aggressive stance. This was a purely inquisitive examination. Little was the animal aware that this was where the microphone was housed.

Suddenly, what sounded like an amateur recording was heard from outside the pen. It was Wallace, playing back the sound of the raptor's kind via a small speaker. Not remarkably loud, but loudly enough to be heard within the confines of the aviary. The bird's gaze and attention were drawn away from the windshield to the direction from which the sound came. It inspected, tilted its head around, and then, it finally happened.

The harpy eagle let out a melodic call in the direction of the amateur playback – a very flute-like sound, sweet in texture and nothing like the hawk screeches mainstream viewers were accustomed to hearing whenever a bird of prey was on screen. Melanie used this opportunity to adjust her miking position to make the absolute best of this event, because if there was anything that was paramount to field recording, it was speed. Milo adjusted the gain level to a satisfactory amount; one where he'd be sure the signal would be rich enough to be processed properly. The eagle gave fourteen takes of that call at this moment.

It was wonderful to Milo's ears. Not only as a job well done, but as something that would make an
excellent ingredient in Milo's sound design soup – unrecognizable to most mammals and striking in sonic character.

Goose pen

2:51 PM

With the eagle off the checklist, it was time to continue, and it took quite a fair share of time. The second animal that was to be recorded was the Cape vulture – or, more precisely, a group of them. Unlike the eagle beforehand, these birds didn't have a proclivity for attacking anyone that came near their kill without the intent to eat it. With that in mind, Milo had an easier time setting up a close miking position, even though the occasional cacophony of multiple vultures at once was somewhat of a hindrance. The vulture's raspy squawks and screeches lent themselves well to any kind of dinosaur.

The next place Wallace took Milo was probably the least exotic, or enticing location he'd seen in the sanctuary so far. It was a small pen walled off by a short chain link fence and featuring a small house-like shelter. At first glance, Milo was worried that these might be ducks, and yet another tasteless prank at the hands of the warden. However, when they approached more closely, it was revealed that these weren't ducks, but geese.

"Here-we-bloody-are! Welcome your sorry self to Jurassic Park!" Wallace dramatically introduced the pen, raising his arms in its direction with a proud grin.

Milo couldn't help a chuckle, "Jurassic Park?"

"Well, it ain't gonna be much fun in tellin' ya why, now, is it?" Wallace beamed, urging the rabbit on.

"What? Are you setting me up for another attack?" Milo retorted.

"The hell ya' goin' on about? Bloody, no!" Wallace waved aside, "Mate, if something does happen anyway, it'll be your own bloody fault. Like gettin' too close to the big bastard over there."

Milo, taking a good look at the large male goose in question, seemed to be understanding enough, "Too close? Got it."

That being said, he entered the pen. This time, he was alone – given the size of these birds and the short fence, he could hold the windshield himself. There were several females to the left of the shelter, with their respective goslings next to them. For about a good minute, the geese honked and squawked communicatively. A very bizarre sound and one that could lend itself to more unusual animals, like the duck-billed herbivorous dinosaurs.

However, these honks were cut off by something else – a quiet, but ever so discernible and frightening hiss. At first, the buck rabbit thought he came too close to a snake, so his eyes darted down. Then to the sides, and finally behind. The male that Wallace was talking about was already throwing a literal hissy fit, angrily sizing up the rabbit. The spine-chilling hisses continued, but this time Milo wasn't going to give in to fear: he adjusted his miking position as much as he could to record precisely these sounds. Slowly, but surely, Milo walked towards the exit of the pen. The goose followed, hissing as he went along. This raspy sound was precisely what the warden was talking about – these hisses were indeed edited in for the Velociraptors seen in Jurassic Park. With himself outside the pen, Milo rushed to close the gate. He hung around for as many more hisses the male goose was angry enough to give, before he had a total of over 20 individual takes.
"Wow…" Milo removed his cap to scratch his head.

"You see what I mean now, eh?" Wallace beamed from behind, his hands on his waist, "That's the "Clever girl" sound, am I bloody spot on or what?"

"Yup," For all the annoyance the wallaby rent on him earlier, Milo had to give credit where credit was due, "That's pretty much it."

It turned out that Wallace wasn't as antagonistic as early impressions would let on – he only seemed to have an incredibly roundabout method when it came to helping sound effects recordists. Mostly, it was for his own amusement, but Milo also grew to like him.

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**Emu pen**

4:51 PM

The next hour-and-a-half was spent recording smaller birds in interior spaces: kookaburras, parakeets, macaws and similar-sized birds. They were relatively tame and didn't have a proclivity for evading microphones, and the interior environment meant that Milo could do without a windshield.

After that, it was back outside, with the largest recording subjects of the day – emus. Slightly smaller than ostriches, emus were also different from them in terms of attitude. These were generally placid birds that didn't mind the company of other creatures, so long as they weren't intrusive. Melanie's attentive eye and Milo's keen ears worked in sync once more to bring more sounds to the table. And bizarre sounds, they were – throbbing booms of very low frequency that would normally make smaller mammals like mice fall ill, and threatening hisses, as an alert that someone was too close. The recording process was made all the easier by offering the birds food as encouragement.

The only time Milo was let inside the enclosure was when the adults headed to rest and their six chicks were up and running around. Even they made great recording subjects. Just as Milo was recording them, he could feel a number of seeds falling over him – the last thing he saw before he hit the ground.

As the chicks tried to peck off any seeds that were caught in Milo's fur, they tickled him awfully. His hooting laughter, mixed with the occasional begging to stop, made Wallace smile from ear to ear, happy to know that another attempt at whimsical humor succeeded.

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**Milo's motel room**

6:53 PM

With the recording work done for the day and gigabytes of audio material secured, Milo could finally have a moment to himself. It was in this modest room, with but a bed, a TV and a balcony, that he'd spend the night.

Slouching, covered in a dried mixture of bird saliva and dust from head to toe with his cap crookedly sitting on his head, he wasted no time in setting up all of his files to be backed up. A cold shower followed by a hot drying were precisely what he was up to, what with all he's been through, so his next stop was the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, he was back in his main room, albeit shirtless with jeans. Given how hot it
was, he'd prefer to stay that way, but he agreed to have a walk around the district with Melanie in order to pass time before the night, so he had to get dressed. Looking into his suitcase with attention, he finally found a shirt to match – blue and plaid. Just as he donned it, he heard his Viper beep.

Dashing over to his phone to see who it could possibly be, Milo smiled warmly when it turned out to be his father:

"Hi son

I'm hosting a radio show on Podunk Daily and in talks for doing voiceover in an animated movie

Yippeeeeee!

How about you"

Milo chuckled in both amusement and pride; with the genuine talent Gerard possessed, there was no doubt that he'd deliver his utmost to make it work. Milo slumped into his bed and replied:

"You go, pops! I'm sure you'll nail it.
As for myself, I've had a long day on Outback Island. I've recorded about 10 different animals today, and I've got a few more coming up tomorrow. I'm going out with Melanie tonight, to check the District out. And yeah, I know they don't like bunnies, so I'll be careful."

Not before long, Gerard replied:

"I know that you will

Pick up some chicks while you're at it

Pick*
PICK*

Dammit"

Milo couldn't help a rather manic laugh; some things were, indeed, better off left to the young'uns, and Gerard's temper was no exception to humor. As for the opposite sex, Milo really wasn't all that excited or hopeful. It wasn't his looks that bothered him – Milo was considered handsome by most of the girls he'd come across. It wasn't that he was afraid of approaching them – they were mammals, after all. It was that in his experience thus far, the does of Zootopia were more chaff than wheat, discomforted by the prospect of long-term commitment or high parental investment, all of which Milo valued, and more concerned with materialism and instant gratification.

"Milo?" The mention of his name in Melanie's voice initially took him by surprise, until he turned towards the balcony.

"Oh, you're ready?" Milo came to the balcony.

"Yeah, I was wondering where we should go," Melanie conceded cluelessly.

"Well, Beanie told me about that one place..." Milo scratched his chin, talking to himself, "What was the name?"
"What place?" Melanie tilted her head.

"Dream World?" Milo raised his eyebrow. He then shook his head, "No, no, Dream Time."

"What's that?" Melanie inquired.

"I don't know… Let me look it up," Milo took his smartphone out, in hopes of figuring it out quickly. As he went through his browser, he could see a dark space engulfed in colored lighting, with a large crowd, "Oh, it's a nightclub," he sighed in exasperation. However, a few more swipes down turned that exasperation into utter revulsion, as he cringed, "Without clothes?! Nope!" And so he closed his browser.

"Huh?" Melanie was caught off guard.

"Sorry…" Milo rubbed his nape with an apologetic gaze, "I've got nothing."

As far as Melanie was concerned, this was one less place to go, "Anyway, I was going to ask about this cookout they have somewhere in the district square. Wanna check that out, maybe? Try some new stuff?"

At a loss for options and finding a good meal more than warranted, Milo shrugged, "Why not? What is it, Aussie food?"

"I think so," Melanie conceded.

"Hey," Milo begged, "Mind if you pick me up from here and put me down? I don't feel like using the stairs."

At this child-like request, Melanie couldn't help a chuckle, "All right." She gently picked the buck rabbit up from the balcony and propped him onto the sidewalk.

"Let's get going!" Milo declared with a sudden onset of excitement as he began to lead the way.

"It's gonna be a good hour's walk to the square, by the way." Melanie noted, tagging alongside him.

Milo rapidly shook his head in perceived dismay, "Wait, really?"

"Yup," Melanie nodded nervously.

While at first miffed, Milo eventually concurred, "Oh, well. I can deal with that."

And so, they went away, as the sky above soon began to turn into a shade of crimson with the Sun's fading rays of light.

Earlier that day…

Stagart Studios Parking Lot

9:00 AM

Earlier that day, back in the studio building, work continued as per usual. For the likes of Bevis, it was the beginning of another busy early shift. As he walked out of his fittingly stocky and short car, the muskrat stepped forward in a manner more relaxed than usual.

However, he turned to his left in surprise – it was Xander. A simple look at the cat was
surprisingly telling of how his days went. The normal swagger in his walk was replaced by a slight slouch of the back, and his smug grin was replaced by a disaffected scowl.

"Xander? What are you doing here?" Bevis asked, not best pleased with his newly made company.

"What, do I need a permit to take a walk around town?" Xander snapped back, shaking his head in offense.

"You shouldn't be here," Bevis lowered his voice into a quiet, yet intelligible whisper, "Somebody will call the cops if you're spotted!"

"Actually, I very much should and will be here whenever the frick I want," Xander laid his hands on his waist, with a noticeable quiver in his voice, "Whatever it takes to get back at Rabberts for making me lose my job."

Of all things, the formerly proud sound effects editor came here to make excuses and project his foulness onto others, which was something Bevis wasn't going to tolerate this time, "He made you lose your job? No, Xander. This is on you."

"On me, huh? What the hell does everybody want from me?!!" Xander turned away from him, raising his voice and grasping his head with his hands in a frantic manner, "I can't get out of bed in the morning without my parents smothering me about this whole mess, and I can't even talk to my lawyer without him saying "oh, no, that's an unlikely scenario" – to everything I ask from him! As if I stole those sounds, or something. Jesus, don't these folks ever get that when you're in a large session, accidents can happen?"

"Yo, what's going on?" The third party in this conversation was Dallgren, who was quick to come in front of Bevis when the Iberian lynx was running his mouth a little louder than normal, ready to protect his friend if the former got any ideas.

"And Rabberts? Where's that little fascist?" Xander's face was beginning to contort into a crazed mess at the notion of the rabbit, "Next time I see him, I'm gonna carve him up like a Thanksgiving turkey…"

"Oh, that's rich!" Dallgren couldn't help a sarcastic, scathing chuckle at such incredible entitlement, "Get yourself fired by stealing stuff and then take it out on someone else, why don't you?"

By this point, Xander's composure had utterly withered, as he began to shout and pump his fists, "The game sounds were a mistake, you meathead! I didn't do it on purpose! Dammit, I feel like a broken record repeating this…"

"You ain't fooling me with that," Dallgren's voice, by contrast, remained low and calm, but no less brutal to the lynx's ears, "I knew you weren't cut from the right cloth the minute I laid eyes on you – you were taking sounds from other people for a very long time," Even as the cat was beginning to bare his fangs, trembling and unable to even keep his claws sheathed, the ram continued, "You got Grunt and Roarre fired just because they didn't want to hold your hand on projects. You wanted to dupe Rabberts just because he realized you were lying to him all the same. All because you knew, deep down… that they are all better than you. Rabberts was right. You really are a scoundrel."

After this diatribe, Xander was unable to control what he was – underneath the facade of a fast-talking, suave gentleman there was naught but a spoiled kitten who only sought comfort and found it exclusively by subjugating others to his whim. There was nothing worse for him than others doing anything against him, Terrence Xander, who was so pure and without sin that he could toy with others without consequences – or so his deluded mind would see things. Especially now,
when it was so painfully obvious that Dallgren, who would kowtow to his every whim until not too long ago, wasn't even fazed by him.

"Come on, man," the ram nudged Bevis, "We'll be late for work." Soon enough, the two mammals trailed away, leaving the lynx practically digging his feet into the concrete, sweating profusely.

As they left, Xander's head flew around the street like a bee trapped in a jar, salty tears dripping down his muzzle. And then, without provocation or cause, he started to jump around his own axis, before resorting to punching the studio building’s wall while caterwauling at the top of his lungs. After a few seconds of panting, whatever small shred of reason was left in him reminded him that he was close to Stagart Studios, and that there were other mammals around him. Thus, he hastily returned to his car and closed himself inside for a while.

He wanted to relax at least a little bit. He darted for the first source of instant gratification he could reach – his smartphone. Everyone he was seeing was happy and the blue checkmarks definitely weren't helping, given how his career had practically fallen apart. And then, he saw what appeared to be Melanie, holding a fishpole boom in one hand, in a selfie on Outback Island. Upon more careful inspection, it seemed that below her, in the far right corner, was Milo.

Taking a look at this photo started to make Xander think more concisely. At least in a way that didn't involve screaming and shouting. He calmed himself as he took in the sight of what appeared to be a mammal whom he'd grown to consider an enemy, prospering and doing meaningful work while he was wallowing in self-pity. It was self-pity that he had to cure…

…and suddenly, a thought dawned upon him. Since the rabbit was still working, it meant that there was something he could do about it.

Terrence Xander's mind was filled with a dreadful thought – if Milo was still working, there was time yet to ruin it, in order to turn the table on him and make him suffer the same fate, in retaliation for scathing his pride. His inquisitive squint turned into a maniacal grin, as he started his car and began to move out of the parking spot.

"Looks like my old buddy's going to need some help backing up all those files…"

Well, here's another fun episode for you!

Recording animals is one of the most difficult assignments a sound effects recordist, and I wanted to show all that difficulty right here. I can safely say that there will be more animals, and yes; there will be reptiles.

Also, what could Xander possibly be up to now? We'll have to see for ourselves.

Wallace's Australian accent couldn't have been more authentic without Ugg Ugg the Great, who helped me a great deal with the dialect and choice of words.

In any case, let's run down the voice actor suggestions from last chapter:

**Otis** – Sam Elliott (you, my friend, have a very good ear!)

**Rick** – Josh Brolin, Kevin Michael Richardson, Kevin Conroy

**Kenny** – Jeff Bridges, Cedric the Entertainer

**Silas** – R. Lee Ermey
Anyway, that's all I have for you now. Catch ya later on, down the trail!
Judy, Nick and Jimmy investigate Outback Island for any sign of the reptile smugglers they were after. On the way, they reunite with some familiar faces, and meet some new characters.

**Port Wombat, Outback Island**

**July 2nd, 2018, 11:15 AM**

The Zootopia Police Department was divided into a total of 13 precincts, each having jurisdiction over one of the city's districts and each marked numerically. The only exception to this rule was Precinct 1, which could investigate and intervene anywhere in the city. Therefore, in an effort to find out what was happening to the stolen reptiles and eggs, officers Hopps, Wilde and Frost took their investigation to Outback Island. As a measure of precaution, they drove an unmarked vehicle and wore civilian attires.

"Agent Pardrick, this is Officer Frost; we're entering the Outback Island District – so far, no sign of anything suspicious. Over." Jimmy announced via radio, while Judy gently wheeled the car out of the ferry in search of a proper parking space.

"Roger that," Pardrick's voice was heard on the other end of the line, "Keep your eyes peeled, and pay attention to the behavior of anyone who seems suspicious. Over."

"Roger that. Over and out," Jimmy bid farewell for the time being, then rubbed his palms in joy, "Good ol' action, here we come again! Thanks a bunch for letting me take the front seat, by the way."

"You're welcome." Judy winked graciously, before taking a side glance towards the back, "As much as I like driving with Nick, I gotta say it's a lot calmer this way."

Nick promptly moved in behind Judy's seat, creeping his hands towards the doe's sensitive ears, "You know, Carrots, from here, your ears are in perfect massage distance…"

"Don't you dare, Nicholas Wilde!" Judy bayed demandingly, just as she felt the slightest touch. The red fox slid back into his seat, snickering to himself.

"You know, I've been thinking we should have a name," Jimmy's suggestion of a topic was met with inquisitive glances.

"What do you mean?" Nick raised his eyebrow.

"Oh, you know, a team name. Like…" Jimmy puzzled, before pulling the first thought, "The Copsy Kings?"

"Nah, that's cringy," Nick waved it off without hesitation.

"The Delta Fox Squad?" Jimmy asked again.
"That one's taken." Judy shook her head.

"Hmm…" Jimmy pursed his lips and laid his hand under his jaw, puzzling and puzzling. And then, he pointed up once again, "Wait, wait, I got it! The Three Copalleros!"

Judy, who smiled at the idea, nudge her eyebrows at Nick for appraisal. In response, the older tod conceded, "Puns may be the lowest form of humor, but this rolls off the tongue well, so I'll take it!" While Jimmy was grinning from ear to ear, Nick had to divert their attention to something more important, "Now, with that out of the way, we should go out a little bit, so our senses can be of use. Am I right?"

"Good point," Judy nodded, "Hey, Jimmy? Why don't you scurry over to the driver's seat and wait for us to come back? We'll need to get moving as soon as we pick out what could be our smugglers."

Jimmy was elated at the opportunity, "Sure thing!"

Before the pale-furred policeman could jump to the wheel, Judy diverted his attention, "And don't forget to adjust the brake panel height. The switch is under the wheel."

"Right," Jimmy nodded before he ducked over to check what Judy was talking about. After a while, he found it at last and flicked it. Yet lifting up his head, he dismissed all too quickly that the steering wheel was above it. Therefore, he bumped himself getting back up.

Outside, life continued as normal. Mammals of all shapes and sizes docked at Port Wombat, going further onwards about their business, and the soundscape was dominated by walla. For Judy and Nick, this made relying on their keen ears a little more difficult. Blending in was not a problem, considering that there were larger mammals in their vicinity and that the two officers kept a distance far enough for them to not be suspected as coworkers.

Judy's sense of smell didn't lend itself very well to picking out anything unusual in large crowds. Even though she'd accustomed herself to the smell of wild reptiles in her past investigation, she couldn't make it out. Nick's nose was much keener, but it didn't manage to sniff out any scales yet. So far, all they could see were payloads being carried and wheeled along.

Just when everything seemed utterly ordinary, Judy heard the most unlikely sound – a raspy, muffled hiss right behind her. As she turned around, she saw a giant armadillo and a giant anteater carrying a wooden crate ridden with narrow slits along the side. They looked like breathing holes, if the hiss coming from inside that crate was that of a reptile. While her nose twitched, she tried in vain to make out the scent. As a last resort, she yanked Nick's tie.

"Do you smell that?" Judy whispered, "In the crate, going towards that black jeep over there?"

Nick was a little taken aback, but his nose nevertheless lent itself very well to what his partner asked of him, "You bet I do. Let's get moving!"

Jimmy wasn't entertaining this part of the island much. The air-conditioning was all that prevented him from crawling out of his fur; Outback Island was influenced by the Sahara Square climate wall, and as such, an ill fit for an Arctic fox like himself. Fortunately, things got interesting soon enough.

"Officer Frost, this is Officer Hopps," Judy's voice was heard on the radio, "Start the car and move a little closer. We might be onto them. Over."

"Roger that. Over," Jimmy started wheeling along as ordered.
Meanwhile, Judy and Nick observed their suspects from a safe distance, behind a street corner. Seeing that the two South-American mammals weren't going to load any more crates into the SUV, now was the time to react.

"Frost. This is Officer Wilde," Nick addressed the vehicle via walkie-talkie, "Make a right turn and pull over for us to get in. Over."

"Yes, sir! Over and out!" Jimmy's reply was heard, and not before long, the car drove into view and stopped right at the intersection where Judy and Nick were. With their target in sight, they were on – a chase began. The SUV was making its way toward the center of the district by making a sharp right turn, and the Three Copalleros followed suit. They had to keep their distance, however, lest they'd be recognized instantly and shaken off as a result. The evading SUV made ever sharper turns as it went along, but at the back, on the middle of the trunk, the officers could see a circular logo with the head of a black snake-like creature engraved in the center. There was not a shadow of doubt that these could be the members of Basilisk.

However close they could get to the SUV, it had fortune on its side – a street light came between them, flashing green for the fleeing jeep and red for our officers. The last they could see of it was it driving about two dozen yards forward before making a right turn. Jimmy had no choice but to wait for the green light to keep going. When he got it, he took a right turn to see if he could try and cut off their quarry, but to no avail. An intense five minutes of chasing were in vain.

"Drat!" Judy snapped her fingers in annoyance, "We were so close."

"Turns out they're a cut above Robert Nero when it comes to covering up their tracks..." Nick conceded.

"Where could they go?" Judy was, nevertheless, not one to skimp on opportunities to solve problems. Then, she saw a large facility – the word 'zoo' seemed to be written on the entry arch, "Nick, what does it say over there?"

Nick squinted towards the same archway that the rabbit was talking about, "The... Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center."

"You think that's our ticket?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's the only spot that looks related to our quarry, so it's worth a look," Nick asserted.

Judy wasted no time using the radio to alert their fellow federal agent, "Agent Pardrick, this is Officer Hopps. We've reached the Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center, and we're going to investigate the location to see if our leads may be in the vicinity. Over."

"Roger that," Pardrick's voice boomed across the frequency, "Keep your wits about you. Over."

"Roger that. Over and out," With that said, Judy exchanged glances with Nick and Jimmy and nodded assertively – their trip to the sanctuary was decisive.

Steve Ermine Motel Porch
11:32 AM

Today, Wallace wasn't awfully concerned about whatever Milo was doing; since the rabbit was recording some of the more dangerous animals in the park and there already was a specialized
warden for them, he took it upon himself to kick back and relax. For him, there was no better way to do so than to sit in the shade of a grass tree and let a nice, cold beer flow down his gullet. No one getting in his way, nobody demanding anything, nothing. Just him, the pint and the sunlight.

That is, until he caught wind of three absolute strangers making their way to the motel. He knew very well that the sanctuary was closed for visitors today, and he wasn't about to go lax, "Oi! Think you're friggin' doin' here, eh? This spot ain't for bloody tourist picnics, ya know?"

"Actually, we're officers," Judy was very quick to flash her badge in front of the wallaby's eyes, "All three of us."

"Oh! Right… bloody right-o!" Wallace scratched the back of his head before properly introducing himself, "Wallace Beanie, chief warden!"

"Officer Hopps," Judy spoke.

"Wilde," Nick added.

"And Frost!" Jimmy concluded, "We're the Three Copalleros."

"Right-o'…" Wallace scratched his nose, "So, what do you want, mates? This ain't about last night at the pub, is it?"

"Well, we wanted to know if you've ever seen any suspicious cars driving by your sanctuary," Nick was the one to open the conversation, "Black SUVs with a circular ring on the back of the trunk."

"Aw, well," Wallace mused, scratching his chin, "Actually we get a couple of 'em cruisin' around here, on occasion at least, I think…"

"Could you see the symbol?" Nick raised his eyebrow.

"Well, I don't exactly go around pokin' my nose into every bloody bastard's business," Wallace chuckled amusedly, "I didn't pay attention. I mean, yeah, they could've had some bloody symbol on the back of 'em, but I didn't notice." He then muttered under his breath, "Probably too bloody off me face for it…"

Jimmy was accustomed to letting Judy and Nick do the talking, so he decided to have a look around the perimeter. Their quarry might have already been here, for all he knew. They could have wised up to their tracking and become vigilant all the same. If there's anything he'd learned thus far, it's that criminals weren't fools… other than someone he saw at the motel porch at that instant.

It was a lynx, who was checking on some sorts of implements in his hands. Upon closer inspection, the rookie officer could see that these were no screwdrivers – they were lockpicks. Jimmy ruled out the possibility that this was a handyman, because normally they'd carry toolboxes and this man didn't have one. It was a motel, so there was no way this mammal was out to fix the lock of his own apartment room. He was looking to rob another's.

His suspicion aroused, Jimmy watched closely as the cat slunk inside the motel, then followed suit as quietly and inconspicuously as he could. There was something at work, and it could be related to their suspects.

________________________________________________________

**Steve Ermine Motel**

Jimmy followed the cat's trail up several staircases, eventually leading to the third floor. From
behind the staircase corner, he could see this lynx rather erratically trying to jimmy the lock with his pick, yet he tried not to make too much noise. There was no question that the cat was looking to avoid detection and go through with his scheme unnoticed. With this in mind, the Arctic fox drew his pistol in case bad went to worse.

Meanwhile, inside the aforementioned room, the lynx first closed the door before looking around, under the TV cupboard, on the balcony and under the bed. Finally, he opened the drawer of the bedside table – what he saw were seven hard drives stacked in meticulous order. He couldn't help but be perplexed, "Wait, he's got that many? Rabberts, you must be really pathetic if you think you need them all…" Xander shrugged indignantly, "Whatever. Doesn't make a difference in how I'll screw you up!" That being said, the wretched lynx began to stuff all the hard drives into the backpack he was carrying with him. Soon, he was beginning to feel so elated he could serenade the whole city, as a wide smirk crossed his maw, "Oh, how sweet it is that you have no idea about this…"

As he slipped the backpack over his shoulders, however, whatever glee the lynx was feeling at the moment was all but gone when he heard a blaring tenor behind him, "Freeze! ZPD!"

"What the-" Xander jumped up in utter shock upon seeing an Arctic fox point a gun at him, before he started moving backwards, "Who the hell are you?!!"

"Drop the bag and put your hands in the air!" Jimmy bayed once again.

"Make me, you dweeb!" Xander retorted mockingly, before making a dash for the balcony door.

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Steve Ermine's Motel Porch

Meanwhile, Wallace was still explaining the situation to Judy and Nick, "Anyway, the bastards who do come 'round here take off on the dirt trail - little ways down from here, eh?" He pointed to his left, where there was a decently long macadam.

"Very peculiar…" Judy tilted her head, as her nose twitched.

"I suppose it bloody is," Wallace concurred, "Dunno why anyone'd use a friggin' dirt road instead of… anything else."

However, all heads turned to one peculiar sight – a small cat, a lynx by kind, flopping onto the ground just to their left.

"The bloody hell?" Wallace adjusted his hat, keeping his beer from spilling all the same.

"Well, I guess he's got eight lives left…" Nick inspected curiously. His lack of interest in the matter soon gave way to full interest when he saw a familiar fluffy fox doing the same and chasing the cat.

"Jimmy…" Judy was already fixed to sprint, "Let's go!"

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Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center

"Stop, in the name of the Law!" Jimmy bayed as he chased away.

"What is wrong with you?! Get off my case!" Xander shot back, and immediately turned his train of thought towards shaking off this meddling fox. His first opportunity was a small tree that was in
the way – big enough for him to use as a makeshift baton.

As he pushed a low-hanging branch out of his way, it springboarded back into Jimmy, who was quick enough not to get hit by anything but leaves. Brought low by this sudden attack, the officer continued his pursuit on all fours.

Seeing that the fox began to wise up to his methods, Xander did the same. He found his means of escape – a small leaf cart on wheels. He bounded and jumped straight in, wheeling himself away from an exasperated Jimmy.

"Oi! Get back here!" A hapless wombat called out angrily, waving his rake.

"Dang it! How does he come up with this kind of stuff?!"

Alas, the lynx's luck didn't last very long – in his moment of boasting, he didn't notice that there was someone else in front of him. A dromedary camel walking across the path brought his cart ride to an abrupt end, sending the cat flying off and into a chain-link enclosure with a crooked scream.

By the time he got up, he saw Jimmy standing on the other side of the fence. Triumphanty, he performed the most rude hand gesture, "Ha! Jump that, if you can!"

Jimmy, to his surprise, wasn't all that eager and slowly backed away, "Uh… I'd repeat that motion in the opposite direction if I were you."

At first puzzled, Xander chuckled and turned away with a brisk walk. Alas, in his way stood a tall, feathery figure emitting a spine-chilling hiss, "Oh, come on…"

Alligator pen

Milo's recording session took him where the more dangerous animals resided, and where a larger warden was better suited for the job of getting the animals into a cooperative mood. With alligators, this counted doubly, even though they were more docile than crocodiles.

However, whatever bellow, hiss or growl the rabbit was recording now was interrupted by the helpless cries of a male voice.

"Looks like somebody's in trouble…" the Zookeeper, a horse, opted to rush to the scene. Milo and Melanie dropped their work for the time being and joined in.

Being kicked and pecked by emus both adult and young, Xander eventually made his way to the other side of the enclosure. As he reached the top of the stone wall, he could see the alligators, Milo and Melanie all the same. With a manic grin, he removed his backpack and threw it over to the pond. Promptly, the alligators headed in its direction. He did it.

"Xander?!" Melanie was an equal measure of shocked and angry. To their left, Judy, Nick and Jimmy had already arrived on the scene, ready to restrain if need be.

"Oh, hey Rabberts!" Xander climbed down from the wall, gazing smugly at the rabbit, "I thought it was just gonna be your boyfriend trying to stop me."

"His what?!" Jimmy pulled his gun.

"What are you doing here?" For all the malice he suspected, Milo wanted answers.
"Perfect timing," Xander pointed at his former colleague, before crossing his arms in the most pompous manner imaginable, "I just came to let you know that your little redneck tail is out of Stagart Studios. Your apartment got robbed while you two were lounging around in a plaza instead of doing your job."

Milo was looking at whatever Xander threw into the water. Upon closer inspection, he could notice bits and pieces of metal and plastic floating to the bank of the pond, and he even recognized some of them – the hard drives. All of them. Utterly destroyed, and for what? A mindless excuse for a vendetta filled to the brim with hatred and spite, with no genuine cause or explanation.

Xander, on the other hand, barely resisted the urge to spill the beans, seeing that Milo had already made the connection – he started to fall apart right before him, as he should. Even though he was covered in dirt, he felt better than ever. He felt powerful, he felt like he had complete control, utterly oblivious to how moronic it all was in the end.

"Too bad... I bet you're feeling pretty confused right now. Shocked, maybe? Scared? You know, that's exactly what I felt when you ruined my life, you little noob. But you forgot one thing – I'm a fighter. And I'm going to keep fighting until I win, no matter who gets in my way or what I have to do to win. When I march back to Stagart Studios, everything will be back to where it's supposed to be – with me as the cherry on top. Hooray, Top Cat, bye-bye, Bunny."

Milo, initially shaken and staring blankly at the ground, suddenly glared at the lynx, "Actually, you got that backwards: I've got more than a few backup drives with me in this bag here," As Xander's arrogant smile was wiped from his maw, the buck handed it to the equine zookeeper, "You'll never touch it."

"By the way, you're going to jail for burglary and resisting arrest," Jimmy interjected, having more than a mouthful of red pills to give the cat, "Oh, and you insulted a ZPD officer, that being myself. I'd kindly ask you, one more time, to come along peacefully."

"Oh, Hell, no..." Pumping his face with demonic rage, Xander abandoned all thought, "Not the way you want it..."

"You don't have a choice, Xander. You lost," Milo stepped forward.

"Lost? Me? I can't lose!" Xander smirked and shook his head madly in denial, before finally lunging forth as the beast he essentially was, "Least of all, to you!" He grabbed Milo into his claws and proceeded to carry him towards the pond.

"Milo!" Melanie screamed in horror, at as much of a loss for words as everyone around her. In the meantime, the officers observed the scuffle, already preparing their gear to restrain the aggressor.

As the cat's claws dug into his shirt, Milo struggled mightily to set himself loose. Looking ahead, he only saw a savage snarl adorning Xander's face, which made things all the more unsettling. This was utter madness, but the buck wasn't going to stop and plead.

"Stop!" he growled, as he finally released the cat's grip. Nevermind the fact that he tore his shirt apart completely, Milo had to binky out of the way of some alligators that were too close for comfort. Certain that Xander was about to attack again, Milo made his way in front of the cat. This time, he wasn't going to plead with a mammal who was devoid of compassion and wasn't looking to make peace with him, but to destroy him. So, before the Law dealt with Xander, Milo would be his judge and jury.

Xander swiped once again, but the buck was prepared and redirected it to the side. And when his
considerably larger opponent was taken aback, he was airborne – and in the air, he uttered a battle cry and thrust all the power of his right leg under the cat's right shoulder.

The kick cracked his collarbone and sent him tumbling to the ground, sobbing and whimpering at the top of his lungs, "Assault! Assault! He broke my shoulder! He broke my shoulder…"

His adrenaline giving way to confusion and lightheadedness, Milo gasped frightfully at the sight of his bare chest. It also dawned to him that while Xander was exaggerating for sure, he must have been truly injured by his attack. He had to get to the motel as soon as possible.

"Milo," Melanie approached, her face completely covered in tears, "Are you okay?!" The zookeeper was standing next to them, also inspecting the rabbit.

"Yeah…" Milo gently touched Melanie's hand, "I have to get back to the motel…"

"Come on, this way," The horse opened the gate, letting Milo out and prompting the officers to come inside. Given that the buck rabbit was only using physical violence in self-defense, their minds were made up.

"Let's muzzle this schmuck," Nick declared, as they brandished their gear in preparation.

"He broke my shoulder-" As Xander writhed and blubbered, he could feel and see someone trying to slip a muzzle over his snout, "What? What are you doing?!" His ensuing struggling was meager and inconsequential – he was muzzled, cuffed and his freedom came to an end.

"Mr. Xander, you have the right to remain silent," Nick hoisted the cat back onto his feet, "Anything you say can and will be…"

"What?! I'm under arrest?!" Xander still wasn't heeding to the reality of his situation, "Officer, he kicked me in-"

"In self-defense," Nick had no patience for this, "You're not exactly helping your case right now."

"What?! Let me go!" Xander still railed.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law…"

Wherever Xander was headed now, it was for certain that it was into orange overalls, inside a square cell behind bars.

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Milo's apartment room

11:42 AM

At last, Milo was back in his room – he was treated with the sight of an opened door with some lockpicks scattered on the floor next to it, and upon closer inspection, an open bedside table. When he looked at the bedside table, he saw that it was completely empty and that Xander made sure to take every last one of his hard drives, them being personal property rather than company property.

Milo shook his head in utter disbelief. The stress of the fight that just came to pass began to get to him, as he started to shake. He shook so much that he was unable to unbutton a new shirt he wanted to put on. Wrecked by nervousness and gritting his teeth, he threw it away and slammed his fist into the bedside table, unable to comprehend how someone could allow so much bigotry to
fester in their soul. To willfully opt to destroy someone's life out of envy and rage was nothing short of evil, as far as he was concerned.

The buck rabbit eventually opted to put on a T-shirt; that done, he wanted to go back to Melanie and the keeper... but he couldn't. He had to sit down. He had to bring himself back at ease, so that he could get a hold of himself. Breathing heavily, he covered his face with both hands, his ears drooping. As much as Xander deserved every Newton of his kick and as little as Milo pitied the cat, it left a foul taste in his mouth to know that it had to come to that. After years of keeping his assertive streak, which he never knew he had, in chains, it wasn't going to be easy to adapt to this new form of behavior.

Suddenly, the room tone was broken by a female voice calling out from behind, "Are you all right?"

Milo's ears flew upwards as he turned around – it was Judy, and she was carrying the bag that he gave the zookeeper. He face-palmed, "Yeah, I mean... I'm not hurt. I'm sorry, you shouldn't have seen me this way. It's just..."

"It's okay," Judy set his bag onto the bed and approached him.

"It's just that I can't believe that self-loving, lunatic..." Milo pinched his fingers as he struggled for the word, "...cockroach was still after me! And he even busted up the door just to..." Milo shook his head in dismay, "I've got nothing, I mean, that's just sick, it's what it is!"

Judy was already sitting next to him. While she understood what he just went through, she needed to bring him back on track. She gently squeezed his left arm, "It's okay. It's over. When all the charges are put together, you'll likely never see him again. We'll make sure you don't," At this point, Milo's nerves began to ease up, "Now, when I'm done here, I'm gonna send the report to your boss so that he knows what happened, okay?"

"Okay..." Milo heaved a sigh. As he regained his bearings, it occurred to him that Judy was trying to help him, in spite of their previous spat. She didn't have anything to gain from checking up on him and giving words of reassurance, yet she did so either way. To this act of goodness, he had to respond in kind. He stammered at first, "If I can, I'd take back what I said to you at the restaurant. It was unfair of me to call you... just some affirmative action girl, when the record shows more than that. I'm sorry."

Judy seemed to be reflecting on the matter at first, then shrugged obliviously, "I actually forgot about that part."

"I didn't. I couldn't," Milo was now making full eye contact with the officer, before turning away again, "Because, then it occurred to me that I wasn't really doing the best job of working on myself and..."

"You went to that meeting," to his shock, Judy filled in.

"How do you know about that?" Milo raised his eyebrow, once again facing the policewoman.

"That day, Nick and I escorted your "charming" former associate out of the studio," Seeing how he was pleasantly surprised to hear this, Judy directed a teasing grin at him, "I heard somebody in the lobby saying that you really stuck it to him."

"Well, I..." Milo chuckled, awkwardly rubbing his nape with his hand, "He wasn't just trying to prop himself up. He was trying to tear me down, and I wasn't going to have any of it, anymore. Our
already bad history wasn't helping matters," This elicited a nod of understanding from the doe.

Indeed, Judy didn't have to ask Milo about how he was seeing things now – his behavior and how he worded his thoughts were proof enough. He definitely wasn't the same rabbit that worked with her on the Clark Halibuts sting. He wasn't looking for excuses. He wasn't blaming the rest of the world for his failings. He wasn't playing the victim card. He took on the responsibility of his life and made doubly sure to shape it into something worthy of himself and of the people he cared about. It was too soon to tell, but the buck sound designer looked a lot happier than before. He was giggling nervously, but it was a laugh nevertheless. He cracked a few heartfelt smiles here and there because he was letting loose the figments of joy that were in his soul, and not because he was compelled by social norms to do so.

"Milo?" Melanie's tearful voice was heard, as the giraffe peeped through the open balcony.

"I'm fine, Melanie," Milo smiled at her with a pang of pity in his heart, "It's over."

"Hopps, is he there?" Jimmy's voice was heard from behind, prompting both rabbits to get up from the bed. Fortunately, Nick was with him as well.

"Yeah," Judy stated the obvious.

"You dropped this back outside," Jimmy wiped his forehead with one hand and offered Milo's cap with the other – he must have dropped it during his scuffle with Xander.

"Oh, thanks," Milo smiled gracefully, taking a look to see if it was damaged, or tarnished.

"You're welcome, Mr. uh…" Jimmy tried in vain to call back the rabbit's last name, but he was cut off anyway.

"The name's Milo," the buck chuckled.

"You know, when I was a boy, tantrums didn't get you anywhere and they certainly weren't tolerated," Nick mused about his uncomfortable experience, addressing Milo specifically, "How'd that guy manage to get hired in the first place?"

"Manipulation," Melanie chimed in from outside, to which Milo nodded in agreement, "He's got plenty of that under his sleeve."

"Right," Nick nodded, before rubbing his chin, "I've seen a lion's share of those types in my life."

At last, Milo took the time to dust his cap off and put it on, "Well, I'd better get back to work."

"So, you were recording alligators?" Nick asked curiously.

"Yup," Milo explained, "Spent all of yesterday recording birds. Eagles, geese, emus, you name it."

At the mention of so many exotic animals, Jimmy couldn't help but let his mouth fall ajar and clasp his hands together in childish joy, "That is so cool!"

Judy offered a counterpoint to that sentiment, being the most seasoned of the three, "I suppose we should get moving, too."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Milo offered to lead the way, before he parted ways with the officers.

After an earful from a mortified and worried Wallace Beanie, Milo went back to work. The
alligators were difficult to round up after today's incident, but to be sure, Milo's work with them was secured. The other two outdoor animals that Milo recorded were the double-wattled cassowary and the saltwater crocodile. All that he managed to get from the giant ratite was an ominous, chest-shaking boom that made him feel very uneasy. To his astonishment, the aforementioned crocodile was one that Wallace trained to obey commands, and even vocalized at will. Naturally, after being fed. The late afternoon was spent in a reptile house, recording all sorts of lizards and snakes to complete his library.

Thus, his work at the Steve Ermine Zoological Research Center was complete and he could rest assured that the worst of dealing with unhinged coworkers was behind him. He came out of everything a changed rabbit, and he could feel it in every figment of his being.

Finally, a chapter to round up a very important part of the story, for Milo anyway. It's also a sort of white pill for anyone who might be suffering from insecurity about any part of themselves, or who feel they lack confidence. Don't let bad people walk over you, but listen to the people who care about you.

You can rest assured that Xander is never coming back again. He reaps what he sows, and to lockup he goes.

I hope you enjoyed Milo's journey so far, but don't let that make you think the fun's passed you by – you've got another think coming.

As before, Ugg Ugg the Great helped with the Australian dialect of Wallace Beanie.

For the time being, that'll be it! Catch ya later on, down the trail!

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