H&H2 - Of Help and Hauntings

by IronicSnap

Summary

Overnight, Nick's life shatters. Accused of a violent murder he can't remember, he and Judy must flee both the ZPD and a vengeful mastermind. All the while, an unearthly presence stalks him, a dark creature that forces Nick to doubt either his disbelief in ghosts, or his own mind. And the final nail in the coffin – Sly Cooper's back in town. On vacation.
Due to my strong personal convictions,
I wish to stress
that this fanfic
in no way endorses
a belief in the occult.

Dusk in Zootopia.
Another hectic day becoming another hectic night. The rhythms of this city never slowed, only shifted. The streets were packed with cars, the sidewalks crowded with mammals. Sound, light. Life.

From the twilight, the Black Phantasm watched.

It cast its gaze over the city. Above. Beyond. Detached.

The chill of autumn had no power over it. When the wind hit, pulling at the black rags on its frame, there was no reaction. No discomfort. Under the tattered cloth, there was no blood to run cold.

It watched. Two lifeless eyes shone from deep within its gleaming silver mask. Its vigil was undetected. City dwellers were too busy, too distracted, too self-absorbed to ever bring their gaze upward. And if any did, all that would greet them was the dying sky. The Phantasm was invisible. Beyond sight. Above.

The mass of mammals below was insignificant – millions of names with no importance. Each one would live and die at their own pace. Endless irrelevancies. Sprawl.

No. The Phantasm was seeking one mammal, and one mammal alone.

Gliding silently above Savannah Central, high above the streets, it scanned. Searching through the living garbage of the city, disregarding the irrelevant. Until finally, in a dead stretch of city where warehouses stood as gravestones, it found the lost soul in its sights.

A car sat on a corner, carefully nondescript. Blending into the scenery. But the Phantasm saw through the façade. It was a police vehicle. It was a stakeout operation. Two mammals sat inside, under a roof that did not shield them from the Phantasm's unearthly sight. In the driver's seat, small and soft but dangerously relevant, the partner.

But the passenger seat held the goal. The unfortunate. The Phantasm's target.

Nick Wilde yawned.

He pushed away his fatigue. Stakeouts may be dull, but they were a vital part of the job. Besides, there was nothing he and his partner couldn't handle when they were together. Their laser focus on justice was legendary.

"Who would win in a fight," said Judy, her cheek resting against her fist, "Wolford or Fangmeyer?"

"Fangmeyer. No question." Nick's aviators glinted in the dim light. Still wearing them. "You can't contain that kind of power."

"Yeah. Wolford's got no chance." She smiled. "Good thing they're partners, huh?"

"Reminds me of someone else I can name," he smirked.

"I have no idea what you mean."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes playfully. Nick still liked to joke that she wore the pants in their relationship. But he had improved magnificently from his days as an uncertain junior cop. And he was always getting better. Judy wouldn't be surprised if he surpassed her one day. Nor would she be upset. Just proud.

But the mushy stuff was only for special occasions. She knew that. So she continued their latest dumb game.
"Bogo, or Clawhauser?"

"Why would they ever fight?" said Nick, effortlessly distraught. "Don't break my heart like that, Carrots. Jeez."

"Okay, here's one that's more... tumultuous. Sly or Carmelita?"

"Carmelita, for sure. In pretty much any fight, I think." Judy didn't miss the disdain that crept into his voice. "The only question is whether he has the guts to face her instead of running away."

"You, uh... hear from her lately?"

"Yeah. Did she tell you she's nearby? Not nearby as in actually nearby, but nearby as in... less ocean than usual. Training rookies or something. She's threatening to swing by on her way home."

"Oh, I hope so!" said Judy. "I'd love to catch up with her in person. I miss her."

"Yeah, Carrots. Me too."

They drifted into silence, remembering their brief time with the vixen. She dominated any room, commanding animals ten times her size with fierce precision. And they listened.

She gave them hope that there was more waiting for them than stakeouts and parking duty. But she was more than Inspector Fox, a vision of their possible futures wrought in fire and steel. She was Carmelita, too. A woman they were glad to call a friend.

Or pen-pal, at least.

Judy's mind drifted to Carmelita's athleticism, her strength, her military-grade shock pistol. Without her help, the Nope Diamond case last year would have gone far, far worse. It may even have been Judy's last. She wondered how much easier things would have been had Carmelita helped her with...

"Ooh, here's one. Who'd win: Scar, or Bellwether?"

"Now that's interesting," said Nick. "I mean, Scar's got the obvious advantage, right? He's a lion."

"Bellwether doesn't have claws," noted Judy with a smirk.

"Right. But although Scar is a lion, he is also, tragically, Scar. Weak and neurotic and... well, not the world's toughest mammal." Nick suppressed another yawn. "Bellwether's tiny, but she's vicious. And doubtlessly has plenty of pent-up rage over Lionheart she'd be happy to unleash on poor Taka. Plus, of the two of them, she's the smarter one. Way better at hiding her plans. So I'm giving this one to our old pal Dawn." He nodded solemnly. "May she rot in jail forever."

"Amen..." Judy shook her head. "Scar was smart, I guess. But on evil plans, his one was a lot... smaller?"

"Not necessarily a bad thing."

"No, of course not. It's good to have realistic goals. But Bellwether..."

"Yeah," said Nick. "But Bellwether."

Judy was about to change the subject when her ears shot up. "Hold up. There he is."

There he was.
Wolf O'Donnell trudged toward their position, hands in the pockets of his battered trenchcoat. He almost blended into the dusk, except for his muzzle and the shock of white fur on his head. He cast one purple eye around, but didn't look their way.

"He's a bit ragged," murmured Nick. "Even his eyepatch looks dusty."

Wolf strode past them, boots audible in the otherwise silent street. He headed down an alleyway and, with a final glance around, entered a warehouse through a back entrance.

"Alright..." Judy glanced over. "What are you thinking, partner?"

Nick shrugged. "I'm thinking Wolf O'Donnell's villainy stems from the psychological urge to punish a world that named him 'Wolf O'Donnell'."

"No, seriously. What do you think? Should we call for backup?"

He paused. "Well," he said, "we don't know what's in that warehouse, but we also don't know how long Wolf will stay in any one place. This has been our first shot at an arrest in weeks, but honestly, the tip-off we got strikes me as dicey. I'd say our best bet is balancing speed with caution. Let's call it in, but investigate it ourselves while we wait for backup to arrive." He turned to her, shades glinting. "Sound good to you?"

"Sounds great!" she chirped. "I love it when you talk tactical like that."

"Copy that, Eagle One. Will pursue tactical espionage verbiage regardless of conversational context. ...Over."

She chuckled as she reached for the cruiser's radio. "Hey, Clawhauser? We've got a visual on O'Donnell."

"Oh, exciting!" came the cheetah's voice. "Need a hand?"

As Judy relayed their decision, Nick let himself out of the car. The cool air hit him immediately, waking him up. A bit.

He shook himself out, tip to tail. But the weariness crept back in. After more than twenty years working himself to the bone, he had accumulated various tricks for fighting off fatigue.

But even he needed sleep.

He heard the cruiser's door shut. He turned to meet Judy's soft purple eyes.

"Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" said Nick, failing to hide a defensive tone.

"Just checking," she said. "You seem kinda ill lately."

Nick smoothed over his urge to sigh. "Not sleeping so well. Nothing new. I'm fine, Carrots."

"Really?"

"Really," he smiled, and meant it. He'd been through worse.

Judy nodded, returning it. "Well then. Let's get to it."
'Ladies first.'

'Oh, no. Age before beauty.'

They fell into step, approaching the warehouse silently. But their police instincts, so sharp on the street, weren't tuned to the danger above. They failed to notice the Phantasm. Failed to realize they were being watched from a rooftop.

And as they approached the warehouse, they failed to see the living shadow which wormed through a window with abnormal quickness.

From the dust-choked rafters, the silent intruder observed. The warehouse was abandoned, but far from empty. Amid the stacked shipping containers, a pack of wolves stood, blacks and browns and greys and a splash of white. Watching. Waiting.

Wolf planted one boot on the only chair, giving off the air of a heavily-armed high school sports coach. He had jettisoned his trenchcoat, revealing a pink neckscarf and a brand new jacket in multiple shades of purple. Underneath was a black vest, thick and heavy and made for combat. He returned the focused gaze of his pack with a warm smile.

'Alright! Listen up, morons.' He nodded toward the wall. 'There's a car right outside. I didn't see who was inside it, but I didn't need to. Caught the slightest hint of two scents as I passed by. Fox. And Rabbit. And we all knows what that means.'

A bright white wolf raised his hand. 'It means we're all about to go to jail?'

'Ye of little faith! A little optimism, son, is that so much to ask? It means I was right, as always.'

Wolf grinned. The glint in his eye made his teeth seem sharper.

'Now, Hopps and Wilde are smart enough to call for backup, but they're dumb enough to stick their muzzles in my business before it arrives. That gives us a brief window. Like we practised, people. Like we practised.'

He glanced from face to face. Twelve pairs of eyes met his gaze. Including him, thirteen. No match for Hopps and Wilde alone. But together, with the element of surprise...

'This city loves their bunny-fox duo. And the Mayor's gonna pay good money to ensure they both come home in one piece. Real good money.'

The white wolf's darker partner spoke up. 'And then what happens? This city does love them. There'll be a target on all our backs.'

'Good point,' said Wolf. 'Which is exactly why everybody in this room would be smart to follow my lead – soon as that money's in my hands, I'm hightailing it somewhere bright and sunny with no extradition treaty.'

The white wolf perked up. 'Oh. Em. Gosh! Neverending beach vacation!'

Wolf smirked. 'This guy gets it. You two, go man the cameras. Everyone else – get in position for the surprise party.'

They went. As the pack dispersed to various hiding places – making use of the empty shipping containers, each one the size of a shed – the duo climbed a rusty set of stairs. After glancing over his shoulder, ensuring O'Donnell's attention was elsewhere, Gary turned to Larry.
"Remind me why we're working for this guy?"

"Because no-one else will hire us."

"Oh. Yeah."

They reached the second floor, entering an old security office; the only room in the warehouse that still looked habitable. A set of chunky monitors displayed various feeds. In the bottom corner, Nick and Judy fuzzily checked their shock pistols outside the warehouse's back entrance.

"Still though..." Gary awkwardly hung by the door. "Is it just me, or is trying to kidnap Nick and Judy, like... what's the phrase I'm looking for? The worst idea ever? Of all time?"

"You have a point," said Larry, eyes on the screens. "But they're the reason we're here."

"Yeah... I miss Lionheart. He wasn't a jerk."

"You're misremembering, Gary. Lionheart was a jerk, but he was our jerk. This jerk is new and scary."

"Heh, yeah..."

A few moments passed. Nick and Judy entered. Slowly.

"So, is that it?"

Larry blinked. "What?"

"Do you want revenge? On Nick and Judy?"

"I... I suppose so. If it's going," Larry looked to his partner. "What about you?"

"Nah. I mean, sure, it sucks they got Leo arrested. And it sucks that we've been reduced to doing weird jobs for scary jerks."

"Mnh."

Gary moved closer. "But I don't want revenge. Hurting them isn't gonna make me feel better. I just want what I've always wanted."

"That being?"

A smile. "You, silly."

And then he kissed him.

Larry tensed for a moment, knowing he should be focusing on work. But he soon relaxed against his partner, returning his embrace.

And the shadow crept in.

Once the cameras were disabled, and their guardians dispatched, the pack was vulnerable. The wolves were separated, hiding in darkness alone or in pairs. They were a formidable force when united. But isolated, against the element of surprise...

Easy prey.
Nick and Judy went slowly, carefully. It was dark in the warehouse. Nick had slipped off his shades, folding them neatly into his uniform's shirt pocket. He glanced to Judy as they crept through containers.

From a higher container, a wolf glared down at them. "I can't wait to nab that pompous fox..." she murmured to her partner. "Right, Freya?"

Freya didn't reply.

"Freya?" She squinted into the inky blackness behind her. "I know we should be quiet, but..."

The shadow lunged. And with a muted yelp, another wolf went silent.

The duo secured the perimeter, finding nothing. Lights were on in the centre of the room. Though the view was blocked, it was obviously where Wolf had went. The whole warehouse smelled of wolf. Suspiciously so.

They came to the last container before the central clearing. Any sound would alert their target. But Nick and Judy had been partners for years now. Every challenge they had faced together, from stealth missions like this to awkward television interviews, had honed their silent communication to a fine art.

Ready? asked Judy's eyes.

Absolutely, said Nick's smirk. Let's bust this clown.

And you're sure you okay? said Judy's nose.

Please, replied his eyebrow. We got this.

Yeah, she said. We do.

In unison, they broke cover, pistols up.

"Freeze!" yelled Judy. "ZPD! Hands where we can see 'em!"

Wolf was slouched on the chair. Arms folded. Fangs gleaming. "Hopps. Wilde. 'Bout time you got here."

Nick glared. "You heard her, O'Donnell. Hands up."

Wolf chuckled, then gently unfurled his arms, elbows resting on his lap. "Okay, okay. You got me."

Judy's ear twitched at a sound elsewhere in the warehouse. A muted thump, almost like a wolf lying in ambush being ambushed in turn, felled with a single strike. Or maybe a box falling over.

Any noise was suspicious, but Wolf was too dangerous for her to look away. Wary of any more sounds, she kept her pistol up.

"You're under arrest," Nick was saying. "For the attempted robbery of the Nope Diamond, and every dirtbag thing you've done since then to stay out of jail."

"'Stay fed' is more like it. It's rough out there." He put on a hurt tone. "Thought you of all people would understand that..."

Nick just glared. Not for the first time, the intimidation factor seemed lost on a perp larger than he
"What's the matter, pup? You look a little ill. And here I was hoping for one of your famous comedy routines."

"I don't need to come up with anything when you're already such a joke."

"Ohh!" said Judy. "Nice."

"Thanks. I've actually been saving that one for an emergency."

Judy heard it again – no, the same sound, but from a different spot. Something was happening.

Before she could get Nick's attention, Wolf raised his voice. "I bet you're convinced you can take me. Just another notch on the belt for the city's favourite cops, huh? Honestly, if anyone ever had a shot, it might be you two." His grin loomed in the dying light. "But I can't let you do that."

Nothing happened.

Wolf's chair creaked as he leaned forward. "I said," he snarled, "I can't! Let you! Do that."

Nothing continued to happen.

"Son of a...!" Wolf stood. Nick and Judy stepped back in unison, their pistols following his face. "Get out here already, you–"

The pack's bodies fell.

Container doors groaned open, pushed by the wolves slumped against the metal. One rolled into sight above them, an arm limply hanging down. Another dragged herself into the circle of light, clutching her head, only to collapse onto the concrete. She didn't stand.

Wolf looked around, frantic. Nick and Judy checked their surroundings as best they could without losing focus on him.

"What... what is...?"

Then, above them, the intruder came into view. Secrecy was unnecessary – the battle was already over, ended before it began. Containers stacked in a pyramid, reaching almost to the warehouse's roof, formed a frame like a dark messiah's advent. The three mammals stared. And the living shadow entered the light.

Judy blinked. "...Sly?!"

Legendary thief Sly Cooper gave them a friendly smile. "Hey there! How have you guys been?"

[We're back babee! Cover art by RadicalRobo! Want a recap of H&H1? Read the abridged version here on AO3! Woo!]
You're Welcome

Chapter Summary

Open your eyes, let's begin...
Yes, it's really me, it's Mau'i! Breathe it in.
I know it's a lot, the hair, the bod –
When you're staring at a demigod!

Nick and Judy stared. So did Wolf. Six perked ears. Five wide eyes.

Sly beamed down at them. He was resplendent in the same outfit they had last seen him in – the same dark blue shirt and hat, the same extraneous domino mask, the same cane ending in a gleaming gold crescent. "Did I catch you by surprise? Can't blame you. I'm basically a living shadow."

"I... you...!" Wolf glanced around, his eye wild. None of his wolves stood. "You took down everyone?!"

"I mean, not everyone," said the raccoon. "A couple got away. Literally, a couple. I stumbled on them making out, and they seemed nice, so I let them leave."

Nick glared. His fatigue made it sharper. "But you managed to incapacitate, what, a dozen wolves? Silently subdue that many trained mammals, larger than you are, without help?"

Sly shrugged. "The trick is to do it one at a time."

Wolf stared.

He stared at his team, scattered and beaten. Tallying them. All disabled or gone.

He craned his neck and stared at Sly.

He turned and stared at Nick and Judy. Almost as though looking for help.

He stared at his team again, but nothing changed.

He stared at Nick and Judy and his team and Sly and his team and Judy and Nick.

He opened his mouth to speak.

Then he ran.

"Hey!" Judy was quick to follow. "Get back here!"

Sly leapt from his perch, sprinting across another container's roof. "I've got him, Judy, don't worry!"

Nick bit back a protest. Clutching his pistol, he doubled back.

Wolf glanced over his shoulder, seeing Judy was gaining – and drew a gun. It wasn't a shock pistol. He whirled around and planted his feet, and Judy froze. "I won't repeat myself, Hopps – back off, or—"
Sly's cane swung down, hooking the pistol and yanking it away in one smooth motion. Above Wolf, Sly caught the gun. He let the magazine slide out, smiling widely. "Oh, did I interrupt? Feel free to repeat yourself."

Wolf growled, knowing the thief was out of reach. He turned back to Judy an instant before she opened fire. Her shock pistol spurted small gouts of electricity. Moving with surprising speed, Wolf dodged under them, then went to savagely kick her. She slipped back, but Wolf's boot knocked her pistol away–

and Sly's cane came back down and gently hooked Wolf's heel.

Wolf stared. He tried to disentangle himself, but Sly matched his movements, his force, keeping him unbalanced. He shot Judy a smirk. She returned it.

Coiling all her power into her legs, she shot up like a silver bullet and headbutted Wolf straight in the nose.

Wolf fell flat on his back. Sly dropped to ground level and gave Judy a crisp high-five.

"Boom!" She grinned up at him. "Thanks for the assist."

"My pleasure. That was an amazing move you just pulled!"

"Oh, that?" said Judy breezily. "Just a little something I've been working on. Good for canine perps. When it's skull against nose, skull wins." She smirked. "Little hard to aim, though, so thanks for holding him still."

"Any time. Looks like we still make a good team."

"Yeah, looks like it..." She tilted her head. "So what brings you back to Zootopia?"

"So-"

Snarling, Wolf leapt to his feet. He drew the knife he (still) kept in his boot and lunged for Sly.

Sly slid out of the way without turning. Shifting momentum, Wolf stabbed at Judy. Judy stepped back, letting the knife pass her, and grabbed Wolf's wrist. Sly caught her eye and they shared a nod and when Judy pulled Wolf forward Sly slammed the cane into his legs.

Wolf hit the floor face first.

Judy confiscated the knife, turning back to Sly. He took a breath.

"So-"

Wolf tackled him with a roar.

Pinned to the floor by the steel grip of a furious predator, Sly rolled his eyes. "Dude. Come on."

Judy braced herself. Her pistol was too far, so she ran in and threw her weight against O'Donnell's shoulder. It was like shoving steel. Keeping one hand on Sly's throat, he used the other to grab Judy. Crushing both.

Sly had enough time to choke "This – seems – familiar," before a bolt of electricity caught Wolf in the eye.
Sly and Judy looked up, seeing Nick relentlessly advancing. He sank shot after shot into Wolf's face, alternating between the two weak spots of his nose and his eye. Every shot landed.

Wolf released his grip, then deflated. "Agh... heck."

"Stay down, O'Donnell," said Nick. "You're embarrassing yourself."

"Wow!" said Sly, getting to his feet. "Impressive accuracy, Nick."

"You better believe it!" chirped Judy. "He's one of the precinct's best marksmammals! Broke a few records back at the academy."

"Ohhh yeah," said Sly vaguely. "I remember Carmelita saying that fox vision is crazy good. They can see magnets, or something." He turned to Nick. "Where were you, anyway?"

"Covering the exits," he said darkly. "That's my job. So's this."

He produced handcuffs and bound Wolf's hands.

"Wolf O'Donnell. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in court. You have the right to consult with an attorney and to have that attorney present during questioning. If you are indigent, an attorney will be provided to you at no cost."

Wolf glared. "This isn't over, fox."

"Sure."

Nick straightened. Sly was grinning at him. "Nice work!" He raised a hand. "High-five? For morale?"

"Yeah! Totally!" sang Nick, beaming back. Sly moved to meet Nick's hand and Nick smoothly grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm and handcuffed him.

"Really?" Sly made no attempt to struggle as Nick cuffed his hands behind his back. "I mean, sure, you got me. Very impressive. But I thought we were past this."

"Why? Why would we possibly be past this?"

Judy's ears wilted. "Nick..."

He pushed Sly's cane into her hands, then turned back to the raccoon. "Sly Cooper. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent–"

"I mean," said Sly, "I heard it just there. Doesn't it carry over? Shouldn't you get, like, a sixty second window? Legally?"

Nick bit back a growl. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say–"

"Nick, wait," said Judy. "Shouldn't we talk about this?"

"C'mon, Hopps!" Nick's ear flicked. "You know if I get interrupted I need to start over. You are–"

"So can't I just keep interrupting you all day?" asked Sly innocently.

"–under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Silent. Anything–"
"How is that fair?!" demanded Wolf from the floor. "I didn't get a chance to interrupt mine."

"—you say can be used ag—"

"Nah, that's not valid," said Sly.

"...against you in—"

"The suspect doesn't, like, magically undo the arrest if they interrupt."

"In court. You have—"

"I knew that already, actually."

"—the right to consult with an—"

"I was a cop too, once," said Sly with a distant smile.

Nick suppressed a sigh. "An attorney, and to have—"

"So I know that, for this jurisdiction, the exact rule is that only other cops interrupting requires a do-
over."

"—that attorney present during questioning." Nick took a breath. So close. "If—"

"That's enough, Nick," said Judy.

Nick vibrated with frustration, the cuffs rattling in his grasp. "Fine. Fine! Legally he doesn't need to
hear that until we interrogate him. Let's just get him to Bogo."

Judy sighed. "We all know that if we honestly tried to arrest him, he'd just break out again."

"You're right," said Nick. "Better dishonestly arrest him. Let's zap him until he passes out and work out Step Two from there."

"Yikes," said Sly. "I'm glad you finally cracked a joke, but that's a little grim for opening material."

"Keep pushing me, Cooper. We'll see how grim things get."

"Uh, Nick?" said Judy. "Let's maybe give the pack a once-over. Make sure everyone's okay."

Nick didn't reply immediately, glaring at Sly. "...Yeah. Good call."

They returned to the middle of the warehouse. Judy led Wolf, who was stewing in silence. Nick
steered Sly, who was not.

"Yeah, always smart to doublecheck that stuff. But don't worry. You know me, I'm not a murderer.
Doesn't gel with my Gentleman Thief vibes. Just roughed them up a little, that's all. Made sure they weren't a threat." He smiled. "You're welcome."

Judy checked the wolves – she was more mobile, bouncing between containers to get to the higher positions. Sly's cane was too tall for her, but it proved surprisingly helpful, especially when she almost fell over. Nick watched their two prisoners, one claw tapping against his shock pistol. Waiting for a reason.

Sly draped himself Wolf's chair, hands behind his back, leaving Wolf on the dusty floor. The thief's
hazel eyes sparkled as he met Nick's gaze. The silence stretched until Judy broke it.

"Sly. Why are you here?"

Nick sighed. "Yeah. Let's get this over with. Since it's officially off the record, go ahead and taunt us with it – what are you here to steal?"

"Nothing!" he said. "...Except your time."

Nick felt indescribably tired. "What."

"Me and the guys, we're on vacation! Just a break from the humdrum daily grind of being master thieves. Long overdue, honestly."

"Uh huh," said Nick flatly. "Assuming you aren't lying – and you clearly are–"

"Rude."

"-hadn't you promised Carmelita you were about to go straight?" Nick's glare could cut steel. "Last I heard, you haven't contacted her once since last year's heist."

Sly's smile wavered. "You... keep up with her, huh?"

"Someone has to."

Judy, still in Stopping Perps mode, had to actively restrain herself from complimenting Nick on his sick burn.

"So, to clarify," Nick continued, "how exactly does taking a 'vacation' factor into making things right with her?"

Sly's eyes followed a speck of dust. "Well, since you ask, this is part of the schedule. We've been hard at work on that stuff. Now we need to take a break."

"Mmh."

Judy checked the last wolf, satisfied none were in medical danger. She had to admit, Sly had finesse. He knew how to apply just enough force to get results, but no more. Shame that subtlety seemed to elude him elsewhere.

She dropped to ground level, padding up to her partner. "Well, that explains why you're here in Zootopia. But why are you here? In this warehouse?"

"To find you two! I mean, who else would I be looking for?"

"Anyone," said Nick. "Anyone else. We're cops."

"Exactly!" said Sly, which was not the correct response. "I know you've got work to do. But while you're on the clock, I can help! Just like this!" He jerked his head toward Wolf. "I got you this idiot, didn't I?"

"I can hear every single thing you're saying," drawled Wolf, but mostly to empty air. He didn't expect a reply.

None came. "I'm a huge asset, believe me. I'd be happy to help out wherever I can. And then! Once you're done with work, you can return the favour by showing me around! I wanna see all the sights
this time. Sahara Square, the Meadowlands, Outback Island... not the Canal District, though. Not my scene."

"And you expect us to just play along?" Nick's claw had started peeling paint from his pistol. "Bring you for drinks, maybe drop you at the airport on your way out...?"

Sly put on his friendliest grin. "That'd be great! But mostly, I was just hoping that while I'm here, I could crash at your place?"

Judy cringed. "We'd – we'd like that! But, um... how to say this--"

"No," said Nick.

"We only have a couch anyway."

"Which we aren't giving you."

"And we're pretty tired in the evenings..."

"From dealing with idiot thieves."

"I speak for both of us when I say--"

"Go to jail. Forever."

"Heh! Don't worry, it's cool," said Sly, raising both hands. "I don't want to crowd you."

They stared. "The handcuffs," said Judy lamely.

"Oh, these?" Sly gently tossed the cuffs back to Nick. "Not great locks. You should know better than to use standard-issue equipment on me, pal. I'm not a standard-issue guy."

"I hate you," said Nick, "so much."

Before Sly could reply, all four noticed a sound – incoming sirens. Backup had finally arrived.

"Ah, I suppose that's my cue." Sly stood on the chair and gave a graceful bow. "We'll catch up properly some other time." He gestured to Judy. "My cane, please?"

She tossed it over, to Nick's utter horror. "Why did you do that?!"

Judy shrugged. "It's the least we can do."

"No! The least we can do is hold on to his weapon! You're approaching this with the absolute wrong definition of 'the least we can do!'"

Sly laughed richly. "Oh, I missed you two... Judy. Nick. Always a pleasure."

With that, he leapt up, hooking his cane onto a container. They watched him effortlessly scale the environment, as though backflipping over a fifteen foot drop was as natural as breathing.

He went to leave through a rooftop window. "Sly!" Judy called. He paused, looking down. "Be careful out there, okay?"


He vanished.
Judy sighed. "Do you think he's upset?"

"I hope so," said Nick. Judy shot him a look.

Moments later, the doors slammed open and officers poured in. Mostly the partners' colleagues from the bullpen, street-level officers, but one figure loomed over all others.

"Chief Bogo!" Nick stood a little straighter. "Nice of you to join us, sir."

"Just stretching my legs."

Despite his workload, and the mountain of paperwork it carried, Bogo often joined his officers on the ground. He led from the front.

He looking around, mentally counting the wolves. "I take it the tip we received was an ambush?"

"Yessir," said Judy.

"An ambush which you... dealt with. Yourselves."

"Yes, sir," said Nick.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Bogo's face. "This seems outlandish even for you two."

Judy saluted. "Nothing we couldn't--!"

"Sly Cooper!" barked Wolf. "These two morons are good friends with Sly Cooper, the thief!"

Judy froze, ears tall. Nick stayed more sanguine. "Y'know, you still have the right to remain silent--"

"Oh no, I'm fine." Wolf bared his teeth in a vicious grin. "I'd love a court stenographer to read this out loud, let the judge and jury and who the heck else know how Nick Wilde and Judy Hopp are close personal friends with Sly Cooper, and he came in and helped them arrest me and then asked to sleep on their couch."

Bogo's nostrils flared. He stared Wolf down. "...Is that right?"

"You think I could make this up? I don't have the imagination for something that dumb, pal."

Bogo's gaze travelled to Nick and Judy with the slow lethality of an iceberg. He said nothing for a moment. The air was heavy.

Then he nodded to Wolford and Fangmeyer, restraining a nearby wolf.

"I trust you have adequate help to process everyone here?"

"Y-essir," said Judy, in her well-practiced Please Don't Fire Me voice. "We've got it."

"Good."

With that, Bogo strode away.

"Once you're done here – report to my office. I'd like a word."

"Yes, sir!" called Nick. Once Bogo disappeared, he turned slowly to Wolf. He resisted the urge to elbow him – police brutality, technically. "Thanks. For that."
Wolf smiled. "You're welcome."

Sly often escaped the police. Usually it was more fun.

The ZPD soon had the warehouse surrounded. All exits were covered, ensuring the capture of O'Donnell's entire pack.

As Sly slipped through the window, leapt off the roof, neatly grabbed a drainpipe on the next building over, and climbed out of sight before Officer McHorn glanced vaguely in his direction, he wondered about the two wolves he found manning the cameras. He had given them plenty of time to escape, so they were probably clear of the dragnet. He hoped so.

He hopped from roof to roof for a while, basking in the fading orange light. The sunset was much easier to appreciate from up here. But it was quiet here, too.

Once the sirens were behind him, he looked for a place to stop. A skyscraper called to him – bold white slopes curving upwards, framing an impressive decorative waterfall. It was the tallest building in an otherwise uncongested area, directly overlooking a small park.

Sly only noticed the bright orange letters reading CITY HALL after he had decided to climb it. It was about time politicians had given something to him. The little guy.

The smooth exterior was a challenge to climb. That was what drew him. But before long, he was perched atop the long antenna jutting from the building's roof. The slow metallic creak under his feet was soothing.

The city sprawled below him. Squatting comfortably on the spire's tip, he looked around. Right next door was the Natural History Museum. He smiled, fondly recalling the exact window he had entered through during his last visit. Across the park was ZPD headquarters, with a constant stream of blue ants spiralling around it. Sly reached into the pouch on his leg and took out his Binocucom to savour the details.

"Wow... I can see all of Little Rodentia from up here."

Neither the wind nor the antenna laughed at his very funny joke.

Sly sighed. His Binocucom was one of a matching set – personalized in dark blue, of course – which could communicate wirelessly with its two brothers. But not any more. Not over this distance.

The pointedly silent audiovisual feed under the scope was starting to unnerve him. He lowered the Binocucom, then put it away.

He took out his burner phone.

Sly knew what he had been told. He knew the risks. But he defied risks every day. And with no-one to talk to...

Two options. Easy choice. He made the call.

He had just enough time to doubt his decision before the phone clicked. The voice on the other end was loud and strong, choked with an unstable enthusiasm.

"Sly! Hi! It's great to hear from you!" A sudden shift. "Is everything okay? Are you in trouble?!"
Sly suppressed his urge to chuckle. He knew the concern was very real. "I'm fine, Murray. Don't worry."

"Oh." A pause. "Then... why are you calling? Are you as bored as I am?"

"You're bored? I thought you were at some crazy wrestling... buffet... foodfight... thing."

"Yeah, but these guys are all chumps. I'm the only one here who knows how to weaponize ketchup. And I'm not sure they properly screened everybody for allergies, which frankly is just..." Murray's focus snapped back. "Anyway, don't dodge the question! What's up? Why did you break the No Calling rule?"

"Nothing major." Sly's eyes followed a far-off train as it disappeared into the climate wall, swallowed by the sprawling concrete. "I found Nick and Judy, but they don't want to hang out."

"Oh." Murray's voice was soft. "You okay?"

"Course I am. I'm always okay. A little disappointed, sure, but it's no big deal. This way, I'm free to enjoy the city at my own pace! I'll shack up at a hotel, maybe that huge tree casino I've heard so much about."

"Well, alright..." Murray wasn't one to accept failure. That usually meant reacting to any brutal injury by punching the other guy even harder, but outside of fights, the same attitude manifested in more constructive ways. "Did they say why?"

"I can guess why, pal. I'm a threat to their careers – their lives as normal people. They can't be seen with me, and they don't want the hassle." Sly shrugged into empty wind. "Nick was especially hostile. Looked exhausted, too, which didn't help..."

"Gotcha. And Judy?"

"Judy was more open to it. But she didn't object when Nick shot me down."

"Yeah," said Murray. "My read on the situation is that Judy thinks you're cool. Which makes sense! Because you are cool! But Nick can't see past the potential danger you pose to them. Which makes sense! Because you are dangerous!"

"Sounds about right..." murmured Sly. "I just... I thought we were closer than we are, that's all. After Judy was so friendly last year, I figured our relationship was less weird than where I am with Carmelita." He curled up a little tighter. "Guess not."

"Awwh... hang in there, Sly. I'd hug you if I wasn't so darn... far away..."

There was a tremor in Murray's voice. Sly saw an opportunity to move the conversation away from his own problems. "You okay out there?"

"I miss you guys! A lot! Being alone like this is so weird and bad!"

"I know, pal. I know. But try to relax. Enjoy the... ketchup. We'll be together again before you know it, big guy."

"Yeah," mumbled Murray. "Okay."

Sly sensed something in his tone. "...Something wrong?"

"It's nothing. Forget it."
Sly's voice was gentle. "What is it?"

There was a crackle over the line Murray sighed. "It's just... she used to call me 'big guy', too."

Hovering behind him, unseen, the Black Phantasm observed.

It knew. It was aware of Sly Cooper's presence. He had been present from the start.

He was the end.

The Phantasm felt no confidence, no certainty, no satisfaction. There was nothing to feel. But the plan was in motion. It was time to begin.

It was time for Nick Wilde to commit a murder.
Wait For It

Chapter Summary

And if there's a reason I'm by her side
When so many have tried,
Then I'm willing to wait for it.
I'm willing to wait for it...

Arresting eleven perps meant filling out eleven stacks of paperwork.

By the time the pack was processed, night had settled over Zootopia. The holding cells in Precinct One's basement seemed starker in the cheap fluorescent light.

Nick paced down the corridor, ensuring each cell was secure. Every wolf met his gaze, beaten but defiant.

He stopped at the last cell, smirking at the pack's leader. "Have a nice night, O'Donnell. I'll see you tomorrow morning for your humiliating interrogation."

Wolf just laughed. "You'll be hiding behind the glass, right? I ain't afraid of you, pup. You can't stop one scrawny raccoon. And you can't stop me."

Nick showed no reaction. "...Don't flatter yourself."

Once he reached the stairwell, he allowed himself the luxury of a frown.

He brightened again when he saw Judy and Clawhauser chatting at the front desk. He jogged up.

"Thanks again for helping us with the paperwork, Ben," Judy was saying.

"Yeah!" said Nick. "We owe ya, Sprinkles. You're a treasure."

"You guys are gonna make me blush...!" The cheetah was lively as ever. "I'm happy to do it. You two are the big heroes, after all! Taking out a whole pack of wolves, by yourselves...!"

"Well," smiled Judy, "we had some help."

"If you can call that 'help'," murmured Nick.

"Gosh, that's right! Word is that Sly Cooper gave you a hand..." Clawhauser rested his chin on both paws. "Last year was so crazy. I wonder what's gonna happen this time?"

Nick grunted. "Is it too much to ask that we just... don't? Cooper ends up in jail with a minimum of psychological pain on my part?"

"Don't mind him, he's cranky," said Judy to Clawhauser. "Seeing Sly really put him in a bad mood."

"Really?" He blinked. "But he seems so charming..."

"Yeah. Key word: 'seems'." Nick stretched out, feeling a crick in his neck. He was exhausted.
Moreso than usual. "Let's get this over with. The sooner we talk to Bogo, the sooner we can call it a night."

"I hear that!" said Clawhauser sympathetically. "I have a few hours left here, but soon it'll be my day off!"

Nick gave him a smile. Clawhauser had a way of brightening his spirits. "Well, you've earned it, buddy. Enjoy your Saturday."

"Thanks! Catch you later."

Leaving him humming Gazelle's latest hit, Nick and Judy headed for Bogo's office.

"So," said Nick conversationally. "We're boned."

"We are not... boned," said Judy, after a self-conscious glance around. "You don't think Bogo will just take someone like O'Donnell at his word, right?"

"I guess we'll see. But I have a bad feeling about this."

The high corridor was empty. Bogo's office was the only room still illuminated. Judy knocked on the door, and after a grunt from inside, Nick opened it.

"Hopps. Wilde." Bogo's desk was covered in papers. It always was. "Take a seat."

The chair across from the desk, built for the likes of McHorn, was large enough for them both. It was far from the first time the partners shared the seat in this office. It wouldn't be the last.

Bogo took his time filing away papers and removing his reading glasses, letting them stew. At last, he spoke. "I wanted to discuss the events of the second of May last year. The night at the museum."

Judy blinked, twice. "Well, sir, we both filed reports at the time."

"Yes. Which I read, and found satisfactory." His eyes narrowed. "And now I want to discuss it again. If that's quite alright?"

"Yessir. Of course, sir." Judy bowed her head, ears low. Nick nodded.

"I reviewed those reports, since you mention it." Bogo settled his mighty elbows on his desk, one hand resting on the other. "Your accounts fully align with the security footage. The two of you, along with Inspector Fox, encountered the Cooper Gang as they were attempting to leave via the front entrance. Dorothy Perrault then remotely closed the security gate. This left you and Cooper's two accomplices outside the museum lobby..." His eyes travelled from Nick to Judy. "...leaving you, Fox, and Cooper himself trapped inside. Correct?"

"Yessir."

"As Wilde drew out the leader of the second criminal gang by publicly slandering his innocent brother, in a move which was borderline illegal if admittedly successful..."

Nick managed a smile. "'Borderline Illegal If Admittedly Successful' is my middle name, sir."

"Mmh."

"In honour of my uncle."
"While that was happening," said Bogo, turning back to Judy, "you were helping Fox contain a semi-savage Tai Lung. And... so was Cooper."

Judy nodded. "Yes. That's accurate."

"I know that Cooper volunteered his assistance, and I know it's no coincidence he happened to rob Kifalme blind the next morning. His psychological profile is well-documented; he targets other criminals, and sometimes aids law enforcement to that end. Mostly Inspector Fox."

Bogo's fingers were drumming against his fist.

"In other words, there's precedent here. Cooper aiding the arrest of another criminal is nothing new. But 'asking to sleep on your couch'? That's a serious allegation, even coming from scum like O'Donnell. This is beyond the professional realm... and it's not something I can allow."

Judy begged her nose not to twitch. "Chief, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that when that diamond was in danger, I chose to grant you certain freedoms, Hopps. I believed it was in the best interest of this department to give you free reign." His voice was quiet, but deadly. "I just hope you were using that freedom wisely."

Judy wished she could play dumb. Look the chief in the eye and swear she had done everything by the book. But she hadn't. And she remembered everything.

She remembered the texts, the jokes. Saving his life; Sly saving hers. Holding on tight as they drifted through the treetops, his paraglider shielding her from rain. Talking in that dark lounge, hearing his fears, laying a paw on his shoulder as--

"She did."

Nick's voice dragged her out of her thoughts. He stared Bogo down.

"Trust me, sir. I was with her most of that time."

"As usual," muttered Bogo.

He ignored the jab. "Chief, you know my partner. You know she's reckless and unorthodox, but you also know just how much she loves this city. And her job." His voice was firm. "I sign off on everything she did."

Judy remembered everything. How her decisions had driven a wedge between her and Nick, tormenting him with worry. But here he was, defending her. As he always did.

She resolved to give him a very, very big hug later.

Bogo seemed satisfied. He trusted Nick's judgement as a cautious counterbalance to Judy's. "...Very well. In that case, can you explain these allegations?"

"Simple." Nick folded his arms. "Last year, we had some face-to-face interactions with Cooper. From those interactions, he got the impression we fell for his nonsense 'noble thief' schtick. Now, I can't speak for my impressionable and all-loving partner here, but I personally consider Sly Cooper to be a showboating narcissist who thinks his basic empathy somehow excuses his lifelong crime spree and complete disregard for due process." He shrugged lightly. "That's where I'm at."

Bogo nodded. "An accurate assessment. I'm glad to hear that from you, Wilde. Frankly, you can be a
"I think," said Judy, with the careful but firm tone she used when challenging Bogo, "that compassion is the most important quality an officer can have. Nick's people skills are his biggest strength, and that includes his empathy."

"Thanks, Hopps," he murmured.

Bogo seemed unimpressed. "And is that your tactical recommendation for pursuing Cooper, Hopps? Asking him nicely to surrender?"

Judy cleared her throat. "Um... well, sir, if I'm being honest – and I know this might sound odd coming from me of all people! – I think my tactical recommendation would be to... not pursue him. He's got no clear goal here except to relax. With no crime in progress, and considering how difficult it is to pin him down, it might not be worth the resources. Not when we're always busy anyway."

Bogo watched her coolly. "Tell me this, Hopps. Do you think the rest of his gang is in Zootopia?"

She frowned. "I don't know, Chief. He spoke to us as though he was alone. He said the entire Gang was 'on vacation', but only mentioned himself from then on."

"Yeah, like that's unusual..." scoffed Nick. "I can't say for sure, sir. It's possible he was trying to mislead us. I'd err on the side of caution."

"Wise. But suppose Cooper is alone. He is just here to relax." Bogo's eyes narrowed. "That strikes me as an ideal opportunity to arrest him. And an exceedingly rare one, at that."

Judy smiled. She really, really, really did her best to smile. "Oh! Yes. Of course. That's a great point, actually. Ha ha."

"...Yes. So I'm going to contact Inspector Fox."

"Good call," said Nick immediately. "I keep up a personal correspondence with her, sir, so I know for a fact she's relatively close by on a low-priority assignment. She'd be eager to hear Cooper was spotted."

Judy's ears were low. "I guess it'd be nice to see her again, one way or another... but I was hoping her next visit wouldn't be chasing Sly. Again."

"Well, there's one way to make sure of that," said Nick, arms folded. "Arresting Cooper. For good."

Bogo grunted. "I have to say, I'm not sure I've ever heard you two disagree so often in the course of one conversation." He smirked darkly. "There's hope for you yet."

"Um... thanks," Nick shifted in his seat, trying not to show his impatience – his fatigue. "Is that everything, Chief?"

"No."

There was a force to his tone. Bogo was focusing solely on Nick now.

"On the subject of vacations... There was something else I wanted to mention. Concerning your performance, Wilde."

Judy glanced to Nick, then back to Bogo. "Should I leave, sir?"
"No, you should hear this too. Maybe he'll actually listen to you."

Nick, subtly, took a deep breath. He had a feeling he knew what this was. Showing no reaction, he met Bogo's gaze.

"You've been making mistakes lately. Minor errors. You're better than that, Wilde. Your paperwork is usually spotless." Bogo leaned forward. "You've barely taken vacation time since you started here. If you need to rest, rest. Dedication is one thing. Competence is another. I prefer my officers to have both, not fixate on one. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. Understood."

Bogo glanced to Judy. "Of course, your partner is already setting a dangerous example for you..."

She chuckled nervously. "Guilty as charged."

"...but even Hopps takes more time off than you do." Bogo was quiet. "I can't force you to be healthy, Wilde. But I am asking you, as your superior, to figure out what you need. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir." Nick dipped his head. "I get it."

"Good." Bogo slipped his glasses back on. "Then I suggest you start by going home."

1955 Cypress Grove Lane. Home.

Judy folded her arms tightly as Nick unlocked the door, almost hugging herself. The autumn wind was biting. Her ears hung low against her shoulders.

"I don't like lying to the precinct like that. Especially to the chief."

"At what point did we lie?"

Judy huffed. "Oh, sorry. Were we using exact words? Like Scar?"

"I just told the truth," said Nick simply.

He opened the door, flicking on the light. Judy sighed as she nudged the door shut. "...I'm glad to be home. It's such a cold night."

"Yeah. It is."

Nick headed for the living room, but Judy lingered by the door. "I wonder where Sly is right now..."

Nick said nothing.

After a moment, Judy followed him. He had collapsed onto the couch, limbs splayed. He glared blearily at the ceiling.

"So, um..." Judy clambered up to sit on the opposite armrest. "Should we feel bad?"

"No."

He was tired, but firm. Judy watched him intently. Even after all this time, it was sometimes difficult to read him.

But it was clear he wouldn't bend.
"I've seen you angry at perps before," she said. "I mean, you rarely show anger at all, to anyone, but I've seen it. But you seem especially upset at Sly."

He sighed. "Nothing's changed, Carrots. I think he's just as much of a bad influence as last year. Worse, maybe."

"Okay..." Judy hugged her knees. "Can I ask why? I don't want to start a fight or anything, I just want to know. Sly helped us last year. Why are you still so distrustful?"

Nick sat for a moment, ordering his thoughts. "At the risk of sounding like a complete moron... there are two kinds of criminals in the world."

He pulled himself upright, turning to face her.

"You've got the people who do it to make a living. When they've got no other way to pay for food, bills..."

"Ranger Scouts uniforms," said Judy softly.

Nick's mouth tightened. "...Whatever. But then you have the other type. People who could live long, happy lives without breaking a single law, and break the law anyway just because they can. Maybe they're rich, but they want more. Maybe they like pushing people around. Maybe they just really, really want to see how it feels to hurt someone." His eyes met hers. "Or maybe they think stealing is fun."

"So you're saying Sly is the bad kind of criminal."

"I'm saying he terrifies me. He's an absurdly talented guy who should be following your example and making the world a better place. He could do so much good. But instead, he just chases his whims." Nick shook his head. "I don't want to play his game. That's why I've been so grouchy. It's not funny to me."

Judy nodded. "Well, I see where you're coming from there. But no matter how you look at it, he did help us."

"Because it fit into his plan!" said Nick. "No, worse – because it amused him. We're literally a joke to him, Carrots. Doesn't that bother you?"

"I think," said Judy slowly, trying to finalize her opinions as she said them, "a lot of the time, it doesn't matter why you do something as long as you do it. That stuff is important, but nothing's more important than the actions we take. Lionheart – to use his own words – did the wrong thing for the right reasons. He's still in jail for it. And if you do the right thing for the wrong reasons – that's still the right thing. Right?"

"I think," sighed Nick, "that we're only having this discussion because you've already decided you like him. And I can easily see us having the exact same discussion, with the positions reversed, if it was someone I liked and you didn't."

"Yeah," said Judy. "Me too."

Nick blinked. "What?"

"I can totally see that too." She shrugged. "Look, Nick, I admit it. Sly and I hit it off last year. We worked well together, even made each other laugh. You and I can sit here and philosophize all night, but the simple fact is I like him as a person and you don't. I'd be stupid to ignore that."
He watched her for a moment, then smiled. "Well. Haven't you become self-aware."

"I had to start eventually," she smirked. "For one thing, if I stop myself from being dumb, that saves a lot time. Mostly yours." She lit up abruptly. "Oh, that reminds me...!"

Judy leapt over, catching Nick in a warm hug. He tensed, but only in surprise. He returned the embrace, patting her head.

"What's this for?"

Judy nestled against his chest. "For sticking up for me in Bogo's office, even though I was dumb and reckless and a bad partner."

"I mean... whatever." Nick looked very intently at a stain on the carpet. "It was a year ago. I'm over it. No sense punishing you for it now, that's all."

She chuckled. In other circumstances, she would tease him for his transparently feigned detachment. But he was tired, so she spared him the embarrassment. Somewhat. "Thank you so much. You're the best partner anyone could have, Nick. I mean it."


Judy gave him one last big squeeze, then pulled away to give him space. "You need your sleep, so I won't keep you any longer. Feel better soon, okay?"

"I will, Carrots." He smiled shyly. "But only because you asked so nicely."

She gave him a very, very gentle shove. "You are such a dork."

"You're more of a dork for liking me."

"Can't argue with that..."

Before long, the house was still. The lights were off, the doors bolted. They turned in for the night. And the Black Phantasm set to work.
Anger bled from every wall.

It was like radiation. It was like a microwave, boiling him from the inside out. Everything was the same dark grey and it all boiled.

His limbs felt too slow. Was he moving at all? He seemed to be moving, but it didn't feel like he was doing it. Maybe he was being moved.

His phone was screaming again, the way it always did, the shrill tone drilling his skull. But that pain was old. Old and normal and frustrating but old. No. A bigger fear.

It was back. The nightmarish figure that loved to loom over him, torturing him in those dark delirious hours he was too addled to remember. Silent and unreal. Staring. Just staring.

He felt rage. Searing and violent, the kind of rage he was never able to show. He always crushed it, always hid it, why couldn't he just embrace–
The anger licked his insides like fire and it felt good to surrender to it.

But he was moving, he was definitely moving, it was unnatural and his stomach lurched. His limbs were limp but he moved, it got colder, the glorious warmth of his anger gave way to cold confusion, was he dreaming? Everything felt off and wrong and bad and he was

“Nick!”

Nick jerked awake with a yelp. There was grass in his mouth.

“Nick! Oh my god, are you okay?!”

Everything was too bright, but he pushed himself to look up. 1955 Cypress Grove Lane had a backyard, technically, a small stretch of lawn tucked behind the house as an afterthought, and apparently he was in it. He was crumpled in the mud. The rear fence loomed grimly behind him.

Judy was running towards him from the house, still wearing the hand-me-down shirt and sweatpants she used as pyjamas. She crouched down to him, and he saw panic fight professionalism in her purple eyes.

“What happened? Are you lucid? Quick, who's the Mayor?”

“Uhh...” Why was the sun so bright? It seared what little of his brain was left. But Judy had asked him a question. It was important. It was Judy. “Mayor? The Mayor's Toriel. Scar wanted to be Mayor but she won. We were there for that, Carrots.”

Judy seemed more relieved by his joke than his actual answer. But she didn't relax. “Do you remember what happened? Why are you in the backyard?”

“I... I don't know.” Nick rubbed his forehead, squinting. “I've been having really weird dreams lately, but I guess maybe – maybe one of them wasn't a dream...?

Judy just frowned. “Come on. Let's get you inside. We'll work out the rest from there.”

“Okay. Okay...”

She helped him stand, then guided him up the garden. Normally he would protest, but his legs were unsteady and his head was pounding and...

“My spine is itchy. Why is my spine itchy?”

Judy sat him on the living room couch, then darted back to the kitchen. Nick sat there numbly, failing to piece together what had happened. He could remember nothing but dreamlike impressions. Nothing solid. All he was certain of was his headache.

Judy returned, handing him a tall glass of water. “Here...” She helped it into his shaking hands, and watched him drink.

It helped the headache – and the aftertaste. “Thanks, Carrots.”

Judy sat on the other end of the couch, hovering between providing support and giving him space. “Let's try to retrace your steps. We'll go slowly, okay? Tell me if you feel uncomfortable.”
“Don’t...” Nick took a breath. His voice was brittle. “Try not to treat me like any other victim here, Hopps. I'm an officer, same as you.”

“I know,” she said gently. “But you're an officer who just woke up disoriented in the mud. We need to work this out.”

“You're right,” said Nick to his glass of water. “Sorry. I know you're trying to help.”

“Hey, it's okay.” She smiled softly. “You're right. We're both officers. And that means we can work this out together.”

Despite everything, Nick managed a smile.

“Now,” said Judy. “You mentioned a dream?”

“Yeah.” Nick's gaze returned to the floor. He fidgeted with the glass, claws clinking against it. “You know I haven't slept well in, um... a while. A big part of that has been nightmares. It's never solid enough to remember. I just know it's been a long, long time since I closed my eyes at night and woke up in the morning with nothing in between.”

Judy nodded. “Okay. That might not sound like much, but it's a start. And–”

Her phone shattered the quiet.

Nick jumped, then felt stupid. Judy dug her phone from her pyjamas, glanced at the ID, then answered. “Chief Bogo! Hello!”

“Where the hell is Wilde?!” he thundered, loud enough for Nick to hear it. And flinch.

“He's – he's right here, sir, I'm looking at him.”

“Good,” huffed Bogo. “Then why has he been ignoring my calls?”

Judy glanced up to Nick. His hand reflexively went to his pocket. No phone.

“He, um–”

“Forget it,” said Bogo. “Just get him down here on the double. If you aren't here within thirty minutes, I will send someone.”

The way he spat such an innocent phrase made Judy pause. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“No. We need to have this discussion in person. Now.”

Bogo hung up.

Judy looked to Nick, her ears low. After a moment's hesitation, he just nodded.

They dressed.

Although she wasn't scheduled for a shift, Judy wore her uniform. The jumpsuit and vest always gave her an extra sense of security. Nick prioritized comfort. Unwilling to wear pyjamas in front of Bogo, he wore the next best thing; the green shirt and loose slacks he wore most often off-duty. They were easy. They were normal.

His aviators helped too. Anything to soothe this damn headache.
After dressing, he searched again for his phone. He kept it in the same place every night, right next to his bed. It was unlike him to put it anywhere else. Judy called it, listening out for its ringtone. But to no avail. It was gone. That didn't help Nick's unease.

The journey to Precinct One dragged, slow, unreal. Nick wondered if he had really woken up. Judy stuck close, checking him constantly, almost mothering him. He would have found it unspeakably embarrassing, except the only thing he knew right now was that he needed help.

He was so glad to have her.

Finally, they arrived. Despite the early hour, their precinct was even busier than usual. Some officers were handling normal business, processing nocturnal suspects or preparing for the coming hours. But there were far more personnel than this shift required.

Something had happened.

Almost automatically, Nick and Judy detoured toward front desk. Clawhauser was shifting through papers, his whiskers dishevelled.

“Ben, what's going on?” said Judy. “I thought you'd be home by now.”

“Something... came up. Something big.” Clawhauser's voice was quiet. The colour had drained from him. “You shouldn't hear it from me. The chief needs to see you. Right now.”

“Yeah, he said,” mumbled Nick. “We'll be back later.” Clawhauser just nodded.

As they left, they heard him use his intercom.

“Chief? ...They're on the way. Both of them.”

“Ben seems really worried,” noted Judy, as the duo climbed the stairs.

“Not just that.” Nick's voice felt hoarse. “He's scared.”

Even the highest corridors were busy. They slipped past McHorn and Delgato, conversing quietly. The larger officers trailed off as they passed, silently watching them.

Nick felt the unwelcome return of a feeling he thought he was past. Something he had often fought off in his first months as an officer, but which had faded with time. Something he hadn't felt in well over a year.

He felt like a criminal in a stolen uniform. Creeping around real cops, waiting for the ruse to fail at any second.

Finally, Bogo's office. The door was open. Waiting for them.

Seeing Bogo only heightened the tension. His desk had been hastily cleared to make room for new papers and files. He was reading one with grim intensity. His uniform was unbuttoned and wrinkled, his coat hanging ignored by the door. He hadn't gotten the chance to go home.

“He's scared.”

Even the highest corridors were busy. They slipped past McHorn and Delgato, conversing quietly. The larger officers trailed off as they passed, silently watching them.

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“Chief?” Judy's voice seemed small. She caught herself, trying to sound more certain. “What's going on?”

He looked up blearily. The anger he had roared down the phone had left him. “The situation is currently not public knowledge. You're some of the first to find out.” There was no pride in his voice. “Close the door. Then sit.”
They sat. Every second seemed heavy. Nick nervously removed his sunglasses, suddenly self-conscious. Bogo took a moment before speaking.

“A few hours ago, Dawn Bellwether was murdered.”

“What?!” Judy's ears shot up.

Nick froze. “In – in her cell?”

Bogo watched Nick intently, gauging him. “Yes. The prison suffered a catastrophic power outage – we've determined someone sabotaged both the main generator and the backup. This severely impeded security until the damage was repaired. During that window, someone entered the facility, found her solitary confinement cell, and killed her in her sleep. No signs of a struggle, though as of now we're not sure.”

“And the guards? Any testimony?” said Judy, firmly but calmly. As though this was any other case.

Bogo shook his head. “Every on-site guard was focused on ensuring no prisoners escaped. That's what they're telling us, anyway. That doesn't explain why the perpetrator wasn't discovered as he left. But that's all they've given us. All we know is that she was killed.”

There was a moment of silence for the dead tyrant.

Nick had sometimes joked about breaking out champagne when Bellwether eventually died. But the 'eventually' was important. He had imagined she would die after decades alone, mentioned passingly in the news as a historical footnote from a darker time. Not this. Not when her reign of terror still felt fresh.

And murder? Murder felt wrong. Brutal. There was no schadenfreude.

“Thanks for informing us personally, Chief,” said Judy. “What's our role in this investigation?”

Bogo closed his eyes. “Yes,” he said. “That's a good question.”

Nick and Judy stole a glance at each other. They had never seen Bogo react this way to a case. He seemed pained, as though he had lost someone. But he had no love for Bellwether.

His next words made everything painfully clear.

“She was torn apart by fox teeth.”

Nick stared. “...What?”

“Some of the bites on the body are quite distinct. We're cross-referencing the wounds against dental x-rays we have on file... and we're starting close to home.” Bogo turned to Nick, his expression equal parts suspicion and pity. “...Your fur was found on the scene.”

Nick's voice left him. He just stared, nothing escaping his lips but a wordless choke.

His partner, as ever, leapt into action.

“What?! ” Judy stood on the chair, stance hard. “You can't possibly know that fur is Nick's! The DNA tests can't be back already!”

“They aren't,” conceded Bogo. “We're still waiting on the lab techs. But we ran the fur by three of our top scent-certified officers, and all three separately identified the fur as Wilde's.”
“But...! But...!” Judy's fists clenched. “Now?! Two whole years after the Night Howler incident ended?! That makes no sense! Nick wouldn't do that!”

“I accept,” said Bogo slowly, “that there are many unanswered questions here. But the preliminary findings are clear.” He turned away from Judy, back to Nick. “So if there's anything you want to tell me, Wilde... now is the time.”

Nick's mind reeled. He hated Bellwether, anyone with a shred of empathy would, but... this? He wouldn't. They had already won. The idea was monstrous. Of course he wouldn't.

But could he prove that to a jury? The evidence was all there, for – for some reason. Someone was framing him. Obviously. He wouldn't.

...Would he?

His phone was missing. His mouth tasted terrible, his brain groaned with nightmares. He had woken up in his own backyard, as though stumbling home, as though navigating not by streets and roads but sheer animal–

“Nick.” Judy laid a paw on his arm. “Stay with me.”

He met her eyes. There was no uncertainty, no doubt. She looked worried, but unafraid. Purple fire burned, sharp and powerful but also warm, comforting, homely.

Nick managed his breathing. His heartrate levelled out. Judy was with him.

They would work this out. There had to be an explanation. Judy would help him find it. Together, there was no case they couldn't solve. All he had to do was stay rational. Stay sane.

Nick looked up to face Bogo and saw a ghost.

He froze. There, hovering inches from Bogo's window, was the Black Phantasm. Its mask gleamed in the morning sunlight, Sharp. Skull-like. Black robes stark against the cloudless sky like oil staining a painting. All that protruded from the cloak was a long arm ending in a blade, curved to two points. Its whole frame shimmered sickly, an abomination unfit for mortal sight.

“Wilde,” said Bogo. “I'm waiting.”

Nick, with effort, forced himself to speak. Joke. Always joke. “O-oh. Sorry, sir. I was just a little distracted by the angry dishrag eavesdropping on us.”

Bogo turned in his chair and looked directly at the Phantasm.

He turned back.

“What?”

Nick's composure was crumbling. His experience, honed to instincts, couldn't quite match a ghost. “C-come on, Chief. This isn't funny.”

“Not even slightly,” said Bogo. “Which is why it baffles me you would joke at a time like this.”

“Carrots! Help me out here.” He turned to her, pointing straight to the window. “Tell – tell them. It's not funny. You're not in on the joke, Carrots, it's too cruel for you.” His claws dug into her shoulder. “Get them to pull the plug. It's not funny. Please.”
“Nick...”

This morning had been one nightmare after another. But nothing – not the dream, the garden, Bogo, even the Phantasm, still there, still staring – scared Nick more than this. Seeing Judy hesitate, that glorious purple fire extinguished in a second.

“...What?”

Nick felt himself laugh. Abrupt, giddy instinct. “So – so you’re telling me you can't see it? The ghost? You can't see the gh–” He clasped a paw over his mouth. “Oh god. Oh no. I just realized how – how that sounds.”

“That’s enough.”

Bogo sounded exhausted. For once, he didn't seem to be solid stone. He seemed old.

“Hopps, stay here. That is a direct order. Wilde. McHorn and Delgato are waiting outside. They will escort you to–”

“Chief!” Nick's voice cracked. “This isn't – it's right behind you, how–”

“Don't you dare interrupt me!”

Bogo’s weakness vanished in an instant. Judy flinched, and Nick was almost relieved when the unreal fear of the spectre staring into his imploding soul was briefly replaced by the comforting, mundane fear of his boss.

“Whatever you're trying, Wilde, it will not work. No jokes. No cons. You will take this seriously, and you will do exactly as I say.” Every word was a bullet. “Do I make myself clear?”

There was pause where Nick was supposed to mumble 'Yes, sir'. He didn't. “Chief. Please. I...”

“Don't beg, Wilde,” snapped Bogo. “It's useless. I'm not some idiot you can trick, and I'm not your friend. I'm Chief of Police, a position I did not earn by being soft. I will do everything in my power to find and stop whoever did this.”

His voice became quiet. Deadly.

“And make no mistake. If I find out it was you, that you're sick enough to kill someone with your bare teeth, I will not protect you.” Bogo's eyes burned. “I will ensure it never happens again, by locking you up like the diseased animal you are.”

There was a polite knock. Not from the door. From Bogo's filing cabinet.

Nestled in the corner between the cabinet and the door was an ornate metal coat stand. On the coat stand was Bogo's coat. And as the three of them watched, the coat gave way to Sly Cooper.

Sly smiled softly. “Hi there! Sorry to interrupt.”
"What," Bogo stood, "the hell," ripping open a drawer, "are you doing," one hand grabbing his pistol, "in my office?!!"

He slammed the safety off and took aim but Sly was already moving. He grabbed Bogo's coat and swung toward them, low to the ground.

Before they could react, Sly jumped to the chair and whipped the coat around. Nick caught one last glimpse of the Black Phantasm, still outside the window, still staring at him and him alone. Then blue became black. He felt Judy squirming beside him, but Sly had tightly tied the coat to the chair. They were pinned.

Caught in the coat, they could see nothing. Sly's voice was close behind them. "Chief, I'm gonna borrow Nick and Judy real quick. I'll return them. Probably."

Bogo didn't reply. He just opened fire.

Judy yelped as the shot rang out, doubling her efforts to get free. Sly's voice came from elsewhere in
the room. "Huh. Guess they stuck you behind a desk for a reason, huh, big guy?"

Bogo roared. There was another gunshot. This time followed by the tinkle of broken glass.

Nick and Judy felt the chair lurch. The carpet hissed a protest. There was a wooden clatter – Bogo's blinds? Then Sly's voice. Worryingly close. "Sorry guys. We gotta go out the window."

Nick did not want to go out the window.

It wasn't just the considerable drop, easily enough to shatter his skeleton. It was the Phantasm. Nick knew it must still be hovering inches from the glass, watching, since it wouldn't disappear that quickly, unless it wasn't even there to begin with, which was actually very–

They fell.

Sly immediately realized he had overestimated his dexterity – which, he was quick to tell himself, was an incredibly rare problem and hence basically not a mistake. Clinging to the chair, he deployed his paraglider, blue and white cloth exploding outward. But with only one hand, there was little grace to the motion. Worse, the paraglider couldn't support the weight of Sly and Judy and Nick and a large office chair. It flapped painfully behind him, barely delaying the inevitable.

Bogo's office overlooked the square. Dozens of passing mammals gawked at the plummeting thief – and several ZPD officers were directly below, already reaching for their radios and weapons. Sly made an inadvisable (but, in his view, pretty cool) decision.

He steered back into the building and smashed through a fresh window.

Three seconds ago, Officer Bob Johnson had been making coffee.

Shots had rung out from Chief Bogo's office. The breakroom had cleared instantly, officers abandoning their doughnuts and anecdotes to rush out the door.

So Francine was no longer blocking the counter.

The lion felt no guilt. This was Precinct One, during what was already an emergency. There was more police in this building than most small towns. Whatever was happening, it would get handled. Johnson would just finish making his coffee first.

The window exploded.

Within the maelstrom of sound and shattered glass Bogo's coat unfurled and Nick and Judy landed face-first on the breakroom floor and Johnson found himself staring.

Legendary thief Sly Cooper hit the ground rolling, caught Johnson's eye, and screamed "Don't worry! I'll save them!"

To Johnson's (slim) credit, he was quick to react. His shock pistol was holstered and safetied so he went for the faster option, unsheathing his claws and swiping at Sly.

Sly dodged past and slipped his cane toward the counter and hooked Johnson's I HATE >:C MONDAYS mug by the handle and smashed it against the lion's face.

The mug didn't shatter, but it did spill hot coffee down his front.

Johnson roared in pain, doubling up. "Agh! You little punk!"
Sly analysed the room quickly. He'd been lucky to land somewhere so empty, but with Johnson screaming, more officers would soon arrive. Nick and Judy were only starting to recover – Judy grimacing awkwardly at Johnson, Nick numbly reaching for his aviators, fallen from his pocket to glint amid broken glass. Sly had to move, now. He only had one shot to extract them.

This room had an air vent.

Sly dodged Johnson's last futile swipe and smashed the grate off and grabbed Judy (small, faster) and flung her in and grabbed Nick (larger, tired-er) and pushed him in and jumped in himself as Wolford cleared the doorframe.

They fell, again.

They fell through darkness and dust, straight down. Sly was expecting something more horizontal. He had not properly vetted this escape route.

There was a clang and a louder clang and then Sly hit an angled stretch of vent with a clang and bounced. He landed, like Judy and Nick, in the boiler room. It was empty and dark, light filtering in from under the door.

They were quiet for a moment.

"So," said Sly, breaking the silence. "Sorry for kidnapping you. Could've handled that better. But it seemed like you could use an out."

Nick found his voice. "What are you **doing** here?!

"Uh!" said Sly. "I realized I never gave you guys my new number, so I figured I'd drop in here, brighten up your morning – I forgot where you live so I was just gonna leave presents at your desks – and hey! Breaking into police headquarters is always a fun challenge–"

Nick got to his feet. He felt wobbly. Frail. He hadn't even managed to grab his sunglasses – they were still up there, far out of reach now. But if he had to physically restrain Sly, he was very eager to try.

"...but when I got here something was clearly up, so I scoped out Bogo's office. You'd be amazed how long you can get away with just standing in a corner. I didn't hear what happened until you did, though." Sly folded his arms. "I've been to jail. It's not fun. And it's a lot easier to figure out a mystery from **outside** a cell. So I jumped in."

The situation finally seemed to catch up to him. His tail dropped.

"...But it's not like I asked your permission. I'm sorry. If you don't want my help, just say so."

There was a pause. In the silence, sound crept in from upstairs. The entire ZPD was in crisis. Voices yelling, the intercom crackling distantly.

Someone must know where this air vent led.

Sly wandered toward the door, effortlessly silent. The partners took the opportunity to discuss the details of the situation.

_CAN I DIE NOW?_ screamed Nick's eyes.

_Nick_, said Judy's brow. _Please focus. I know it's hard, but you're strong._
Right. Right. Sorry, said Nick's jaw, as he tried to regulate his breathing. This is suspicious, said his glance toward Sly.

I know, said her nod. But it's also an opportunity, continued her eyes. You're being framed. If Sly 'kidnaps' us, we get free reign to investigate.

Nick was used to making huge decisions quickly. What did he trust more? His skills (yes), Judy (yes), Sly (no)? Or his colleagues (yes), the courts (no), anyone else even seeing the ghost that– ...The Phantasm made the choice easy.

Fine, said Nick's face as it scrunched in frustration. But I hate this.

"Guys?" called Sly. "What'll it be?"

Judy looked to Nick. At the slightest hint of a nod, she stepped forward to Sly.

"We're coming with you."

"Yes!" He coughed, catching himself. "I mean, uh – right. Okay. Happy to help."

He scratched his neck, already thinking.

"Okay. They're gonna try to track your phones. Maybe you should just ditch them now. Looks like you dropped 'em."

Judy produced hers. "Nick doesn't have his."

"Ah! Nice job. Thinking ahead." Sly took her phone, gave it a curious glance, and then flung it offhandedly into the corner. "That's that. But now what?"

"We need distance," said Judy. "We need to commandeer a car."

"Correction. I need to commandeer a car, and force you to drive it. I'm the kidnapper here." He frowned. "But how? The parking lot is crawling with fu- ...with your esteemed colleagues. We'll never make it."

"Did you see the garage at the back of the facility? It's temporary storage for the precinct's undercover vehicles – Nick and I returned one just last night." She stood firm. "We can take it, easy."

"Nice thinking! I told you you'd make a great thief," Sly purred, and Nick wanted very dearly to punch him in the face.

Sly opened the door and checked the hallway. Records, just next to them, was apparently clear. He pulled Nick and Judy through the door and down the corridor.

"Okay. All we gotta do is cut through the basement and get to the garage." He moved like a shadow, quick and quiet. "Nothing simpler."

He turned a corner and Wolf O'Donnell punched him in the face.

Sly crumpled. Wolf laughed, rubbing feeling back into his hand. "Hah! That felt fantastic..."

Judy looked around. Wolf's pack stood behind him. "How did you get out?!"
"Oh, darnedest thing," drawled Wolf. "After I heard gunshots upstairs, I tried the door. And it was just... unlocked. All of 'em were." His teeth gleamed. "Some operation you run here."

"Did you do this?!" Nick barked to Sly.

"Yeah. All part of my intricate scheme to get decked in the face." Sly leaned on his cane, getting to his feet. "No, Nick, this wasn't me."

Wolf took one step forward. The trio took one step back. "Real tempting to kick your teeth out right here, Cooper..."

Sly managed a grin. "I bet. No better place for a fight than a building full of angry cops."

Wolf snorted. "I'm gonna give you the benefit of the doubt, pup, and assume you're being sarcastic."

He glanced back to his pack.

"...You're right. This ain't the place. I'll catch up later. That's a promise."

Shoving Sly back, he ran past. The pack followed, stampeding by. Some kicked or swiped at Sly or the partners as they went.

Judy bristled. "Get back here!"

"No." Sly grabbed her as the last wolf disappeared. "Let them go. Their escape will cover ours."

Nick was fuming. "Yeah. Real convenient. So I'll ask you again: did you do this?!

Sly met his gaze. "I won't lie, this is weird. Something is definitely going down. But I swear, I'm just here for you. We need to keep moving."

They hesitated. He hesitated too, until he remembered he was supposed to be kidnapping them, at which point he grabbed their wrists and pulled them along.

The entrance to the garage loomed. They entered, Sly noting no immediate threats except the shuttered doors. "Judy, find the keys. Nick, keep looking pretty. I'll get the doors."

"Don't–" Nick only finished one word before Sly disappeared from sight.

Judy raised an eyebrow.

"I know I'm pretty," said Nick. "I don't need to hear it from him."

"Of course," smirked Judy. "C'mon. Keys should be over here."

She darted to the back of the garage. Nick made himself useful by finding their car. There were only three vehicles in the garage, but the car was so painfully nondescript it still took him a moment. He mused that was probably a good attribute for a getaway vehicle.

He went around to the passenger's side – no way was he fit to drive – and saw Clawhauser hovering in the doorway.

Nick froze. Clawhauser froze too.

Judy bounded up with a big, big grin. "Got 'em! Told you it'd... be..." She turned, slowly, and saw Clawhauser. Her ears plummeted.
"Guys?" His voice was quiet. "What's happening?"

"Uh," said Judy. Nick had seen her regain control of conversations in less than a second. But her reflexes abandoned her. His own mouth felt like rust, as though it had never opened before and never would again.

When they didn't reply, Clawhauser stepped closer. "Everybody's freaking out upstairs, I don't know why, but I saw all the wolves you arrested last night run up from the basement so then everybody was freaking out about that too and I just wanted to stay out of the way, maybe see where they'd come from..."

Confusion clouded his face, as though there was an obvious answer in front of him he was fighting to avoid.

"And I thought I heard you guys down here and... you're holding keys? I don't..."

Judy took a deep breath. "Ben–"

The quiet was shattered by the metallic roll of the door.

Sly walked into view, backlit by the morning sun. "Alright, guys! We better–"

He saw Clawhauser. He saw Nick and Judy, frozen. He succeeded where they had failed.

Nick saw him instantly slip into character – shoulders forward, eyes hard, grip tight on his cane. Amateur, but effective. "Hey. What're you looking at, fuzzball?"

Clawhauser backed up a step. "S-Sly Cooper?"

Sly splayed his arms, fangs bared. "The one and only. And I'm taking these idiots with me."


"Shut it." Sly stabbed his cane toward her, his eyes still on Clawhauser. "Start the car."

"I–"

"Start," he growled, "the car. Don't tell me you forgot our little chat."

The message was clear: pretend to be coerced. Judy heaved a sigh. "Darn it! Fine."

She unlocked the car. Nick reached for the front passenger seat, recalculated his options, then got in the back instead.

Judy climbed inside. "Just – just don't hurt him, okay?"

Sly laughed. Convincingly cruel. "Hurt him? I don't think so." He swaggered forward, blocking Clawhauser from the car. "I only hurt people who could hurt me. And this puffed-up ray of sunshine couldn't–"

Clawhauser ripped the shock pistol from his belt and shot Sly square in the chest.

Sly dropped to the floor. Clawhauser looked up to Nick and Judy and hesitated. Then he reached for his walkie-talkie– and Sly was already back on his feet, rushing forward, knocking the walkie-talkie straight from
Clawhauser's paw with a brutal swipe.

"Not bad." His cane twisted around and wrenched the pistol away too. "But I'm used to much higher voltage."

Clawhauser grabbed him, trying to use his superior size, but Sly resisted. Nick and Judy watched the struggle from the car. They were haunted by a rare and unpleasant feeling. Helplessness.

With a sudden shift, Sly unbalanced Clawhauser's foot and shoved him to the ground. Sly stood over him, pistol in one hand. His cane's tip aimed at Clawhauser's throat with the grim promise of a blade.

"Listen," he hissed. "If you value your friends' lives – do nothing. I just want to borrow them. Don't mess that up."

With that, he strode to the car.

"Drive!"

Nick opened the back door for him and Judy drove. They left Clawhauser on the garage floor. He watched them go with big brown eyes, but made no move to stop them, or even stand. He just lay there. Defeated.

Silence hung in the car for a moment. Then Sly broke character.

"So! He seems nice!"

"He is," said Nick hoarsely.

Judy sank into the chair. "Ohhhh my god. My heart. My tiny rabbit heart. We're terrible people. We're awful, awful people. I hate myself."

Sly sighed. "Well, hate yourself at no less than seventy miles an hour."

"He's right," said Nick. His eyes were hard. "Don't slow. For anything."

She didn't. Soon the car was out of the garage, rolling away from the ZPD building with the quiet speed of animal sneaking behind a huge, angry predator.

Sly took a breath, satisfied with the extraction. Once out of sight of ZPD headquarters, Judy built up speed. It helped him relax, took his mind off the nice cheetah he–

"Oh! Here, Slick." Sly handed Clawhauser's pistol to Nick. "You'll get more use from this than me."

"Hey, thanks," said Nick, and shot Sly in the face.

"Nick! What are you doing?!" Judy gripped the steering wheel tighter, but didn't dare slow down.

"Keep driving!" Nick shot Sly until he crumpled and dropped his cane.

Then he opened the door.

Zootopia sped by, wind and asphalt and dizzying colour. Nick hefted Sly and threw him toward the roaring road.

Sly grabbed him.
Apparently it was sheer reflex. Sly's eyes were still closed when his hand found Nick's wrist, his grip like a vice. Nick almost lost his balance, grabbing the seat for support. He stayed in the car. And Sly stayed under him.

Judy hissed to herself as she took a high-speed turn as gently as possible. A wrong move would knock Sly and Nick from the cruiser, or worse. But every second counted. The ZPD was already mobilizing. She sucked in a breath. She could do this.

Sly's eyes fluttered open almost lazily. They met Nick's, and he saw an intensity there. One without humour.

"Nick." Sly's voice was clear despite the rush of wind. "Let me back in."

Nick bared his fangs. "No."

Sly tried to lean up and Nick pushed down on his chest, stopping him. "Nick!"

"This happened after you arrived!" snapped Nick. "After you show up, and oh-so-miraculously rescue us from O'Donnell, all by yourself. After you try to cosy up to us. And here you are again!"

Judy hit a clear stretch of road – pedestrians gawking, cars honking madly – as Nick tried to aim the shock pistol back on Sly's face.

"I know a con when I see one, Cooper!"

Sly met his glare. A parking meter screamed past, an inch behind his head, and he didn't blink. "Your partner trusts me."

"My partner, bless her tiny rabbit heart, sees the best in everyone. Even when it isn't there. And I won't hesitate to do I need to protect her. To protect us both."

Judy was balancing. Her ears felt the rising shriek of sirens and her body felt the unsteady roar of the car and her heart felt the sour terror of what was happening in the backseat. But her eyes stayed sharp. She stayed clear of civilians and weaved between traffic and–

There. Ahead. Maintenance tunnel.

Smartest choice to evade ZPD.

Too thin for their open door.

"Nick!" she yelled. "Let him up!"

"Judy--"

"Nick! Let him up or I stop the car! Now!"

He didn't hesitate. Nick adjusted his grip on Sly's chest, grabbing his shirt and pulling him up. Sly caught the door as he moved and slammed it shut. Seconds later they hit the tunnel.

Judy slowed to a more civilised pace. The tunnel was dark and empty. They drove in silence, listening as the sirens grew steadily louder, louder, louder – then, with a flash of red and blue, the sound warped. And faded.

They drove in darkness.
"Talk," spat Nick, pistol ready. "What's your excuse? Why are you here?"

"I'm not--" Sly frowned, steeling himself. He let out a low sigh. "...I'm not on vacation."

"Well," said Judy from the front seat. "I guess you were right about him lying."

Nick didn't reply. He kept his glare on Sly, prompting him to continue.

"I'm in hiding. When I reach out to Carmelita, I want to be ready. So me and the guys were getting our affairs in order, tying up loose ends. And we saw an opportunity to do exactly that."

He kept his eyes to the floor. He seemed smaller now.

"But we miscalculated – and we got wrecked. You've seen Bentley in action. Normally he can hack circles around anyone. But we barely had the encryption algorithms before we had to bail."

Nick's expression didn't change. "Get to the point."

"We were on the ropes. Running from somebody who knows how we think. So we had to think like someone else. For the first time in the Gang's history, we voluntarily split up. We're all laying low on separate 'vacations'. Me and Murray hated the idea, but Bentley thinks it's the only way to keep safe."

Nick's glare sharpened. "And how do you know you weren't followed?!"

"I guess I don't. But all this happened two days ago. I came straight here."

"He's right, Nick," said Judy. "Even if Sly was followed, the timing doesn't make sense. Whoever did this... even getting into that prison undetected would take so much planning. Framing you for murder would take months. This is our problem, not his."

"My mistakes aren't important," said Sly firmly. "What's important is that I'm here, and I'm ready to help. I'm sorry the guys aren't with me. I can't offer you the full Cooper Gang. Just me." He suddenly grinned. "But that's okay! There's enough brains and brawn between the two of you to make up the difference! With your head and Judy's legs, we can do anything."

"Hey," said Judy. "I'm not just a dumb bunny, y'know."

"I know, don't worry. You're a really smart cop, and Nick can handle himself great in a fight. Even more evidence that we'll be totally fine."

"You're really telling me this is all a coincidence?" said Nick. "Even down to stopping O'Donnell?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been waiting for a suitably dramatic entrance. At a certain point, I'd've gotten bored and approached you normally." He shrugged, restless. "But I saw you guys were on a stakeout, and I guessed something interesting was about to go down. That's all."

"And you seriously took down Wolf's whole pack by yourself?"

"I seriously did." He met Nick's gaze, hazel eyes gentle. "And I'd face down ten times more if it'd help."

"I guess..." Nick slowly, painfully, lowered the pistol. "I guess there was dumber stuff in your file..."

Sly instantly brightened. "That's the spirit! I won't let you down, I promise. I've got a lot of skills and experience and I can keep you both safe until we figure this out, that's usually more Murray's job but
"I'm sure I can–"

"Sly?" called Judy, with the patience of a kindergarten teacher. "Let's focus on the problem, okay?"

"Okay. Of course," nodded Sly. "Which is... what, exactly? Just so everyone's clear."

"Someone framed Nick for Bellwether's murder." Judy took another turn. "We need to work out who."

"Sure. I'm gonna ask a very dumb question, but I think somebody needs to say it: are you sure that someone isn't Bellwether?"

"She's dead," snapped Nick.

Sly wasn't joking. "And you know that for sure?"

"I guess we don't," said Judy. "And... it's not impossible."

Nick sighed. "Let's--"

A vision of the Phantasm flashed behind his eyes.

"Let's not get crazy," he said, forcibly pushing it away.

"Just figured I'd ask," said Sly. "So what's our next move?"

Nick saw Judy watch him in the rear-view mirror. Apparently she expected him to take point.

He did. "Once we build up some distance, we hide. Right now, the ZPD is on high alert. Bogo won't pull any punches. We'll be priority one for the next few hours. Some squads will tail us, some will check out our house, and some will be monitoring every exit from the city."

"Good thing we aren't planning to leave, then," said Judy. "We're gonna figure this out. Even if it means running from our own colleagues."

"Yeah. Once they lose our trail, they'll try to find where we're hiding. They'll run through the list quickly, so we can't turn to anyone obvious. No close friends or" and here Nick's mouth abruptly shut, as though his throat had seized up, but before Judy or Sly could ask what was wrong he was talking again as though it hadn't happened. "—family."

"Got it," said Judy, before Sly could speak. "But I'm guessing you already have someone not-obvious in mind."

"I do."

Nick looked through the windscreen. The tunnel around them was cold and dark, but ahead of them shone sunlight.

"We're hitting a bar."
With Judy driving, they went quickly. With Nick navigating, they dodged the cameras and the ZPD. Sly's contribution was to sit quietly and not distract either.

He congratulated himself for being such a good team leader.

Nick mumbled to himself during the journey about abandoning the car (improve odds of hiding) or keeping it (improve odds of fleeing), eventually settling on the latter. Judy and Sly weren't sure if he was thinking aloud for their benefit, or if it was unconscious, but it was helpful to hear his reasoning.

Before long they arrived, sequestering the nondescript car in a nondescript alley.

"So..." Sly glanced around as they left the car. "Just to clarify – our plan is to head to a bar and take a nap?"

"The first few hours of a police search are the most intense," said Nick. "We need to get off the streets and hole up. And yes, once we get there, I think the best move is to try to get some rest. Zootopia never sleeps, but its nocturnal population is smaller. And darkness works to our advantage. Whatever we do next, we're better off doing it at night."

"Right. Right. Cool. And the bar is...?"
Nick led them to the end of the alley. All three were wary, but this was a quiet street. The alley ended with a chain-link fence, rotting wood stacked against the base. Following Nick's lead, Sly and Judy crouched into cover.

The alley lead straight to another. They were right against the back of a small, red-brick building. Judy's brow furrowed. "Wait. I know where we are..."

The bar's backdoor opened and a dark wolf stepped out. She wore red and black headphones, matching her dress. She flicked up her hood, bobbing her head to the music, oblivious to the three mammals watching her.

They ducked down until she passed. Judy snapped Judy silently. Ruby's bar?!

Ruby's bar, confirmed his nod.

We're regulars here!

It'll be far down their list. We'll be gone by the time–

"Guys?" murmured Sly, watching as Ruby disappeared around the corner. "Your friend is escaping."

"Let her go," said Nick.

"Um, okay." Sly frowned. "That's gonna make it hard to ask if we can crash here."

Nick was expressionless. "We aren't asking. We need to break in."

"What?!" Judy startled them both, and herself. She glanced around, ears tall, but soon rediscovered her outrage. She continued in a hiss. "Nicholas Wilde, what are you saying?!"

"Hopps, please." Nick was starting to show his fatigue. "I don't like it either. But if we approach her, she'll know."

"You think she'll let it slip?"

"No. Well, maybe. But it's more that she'll be culpable. Aiding and abetting fugitives is a crime. Having them break into your building isn't."

Judy just sighed, clenching a fist.

But... Her ears were low. It's wrong.

"I know," Nick said, trying to soften his voice. "I don't like it either, but it's our best option. Trust me. I know her: she won't mind. And we can make it up to her later."

"For what it's worth, it makes sense to me," said Sly. "Leave no trace. Like a Ranger Scout."

Nick shot a vicious glare at Sly and Sly tilted his head and Nick realized it hadn't been an intentional reference, of course it hadn't, and quickly looked away. "...Let's go."

"Uh, yeah."

They went, climbing the fence. Judy hesitated for a moment, then pulled up a loose corner, wiggling
"For the record," she said, "this feels gross. I know we're on the run, but we should keep actual crimes to a minimum."

"Oh, should we?" purred Sly. "You're not 'on the run', Judy, you're being kidnapped by a devious criminal mastermind. Just... pretend you're putting everything on my tab. My crime tab."

Judy liked the sound of that. She did not like that she liked it. To stave off any dangerous fantasies, she went back to thinking as a cop. "Ruby left without locking up," she noted. "Someone's still inside."

"Blake," said Nick with grim certainty. "Who, as you might remember, has very sharp hearing. It's gonna be hard getting into the attic without her noticing us. Hard, but not impossible. We'll have to execute a four-step plan, starting with--"

"Hold up," said Sly. "Sorry to interrupt, but -- we're heading for the top?"

Nick glared. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say so?" Sly smiled. "Let's climb."

"Climb?!" said Judy. "There's nowhere to climb! There's no pipes or awnings or conveniently piled boxes, Sly. And not all of us are master thieves."

"No, no. It's easy." Sly examined the wall with a craftsman's eye. "This is an old building. Older than the bar, I'm guessing. This beautiful red-brick predates concrete. It doesn't try to be smooth. And all you need..." He reached out, fingers dancing along the surface. "...is one handhold..."

With a sudden motion he pulled himself up. His feet left the ground. He was suspended just by the strength of his fingers.

"...to get started." He smiled back at them. "Easy."

Judy frowned. "That's fine for you two, but I don't have quite as much... reach." She stretched her tiny arms. "It's gonna be a lot harder for me to climb like that."

"Then don't climb!" said Sly cheerfully. "Grab on and I'll give you a lift."

"Really?"

"Sure. I've held you before."

"You mean on the paraglider?" She smirked. "That was going down, not up. I'm not as light as my breezy attitude makes me seem. You sure you can carry me?"

"Try me."

Judy held the smirk for a second longer. Then she jumped up, running one- two- steps up the brick, and wrapped her arms around Sly's shoulders.

"Oof." Sly wobbled almost unnoticeably, gripping the wall with both hands. "I hate to sound ungentlemanly--"

"But I'm heavier than you expected?"
"Only slightly. Pure muscle, I assume."

She laughed. "Something like that." She gave him a playful nudge. "Now getting going!"

"As you wish."

He climbed, his motions effortlessly smooth. Judy chuckled, enjoying the ride.

Nick stood alone in the alley.

"I have no idea what just happened," he said to himself, "but I hated every second of it."

After a moment, he began climbing too.

It took him longer – the handholds weren't always obvious, and any mistake would send him tumbling. But slowly, methodically, he made it. He heard Sly and Judy chatting as he neared the top, switching from climbing to hiking as the wall eased into the roof's slope. Judy helped him up, giving him a smile he struggled to return.

Once back on his feet, Nick went to the rooftop door and unsuccessfully tried the handle.

"Aha! This door locks from the inside." Nick folded his arms. "What now, smart guy?"

"Uh, you don't need to sound so triumphant about us maybe getting trapped on a roof," said Sly. "But you also don't need to worry. There's always more than one way in."

Sly ambled along the perimeter, and soon found his target. Facing out onto the street was a skylight. Sly slid down the slope and soon had it unlocked and open. He disappeared inside. Ensuring no-one could see them, Judy followed, then Nick.

The loft was spacious. Homely. Opposite the window, nestled against the slope of the roof, was a bed large enough for a wolf. Against one wall was a table, empty except for a visible coating of dust. On the opposite wall was the roof door, and in the centre of the floor, a trapdoor leading to the bar below. Both seemed rusted, disused. The whole room did. But the bedsheets were clean.

"Perfect," murmured Nick. "I knew it..."

"Nick?" Judy stuck close, looking around. "What is this?"

"This bar used to belong to Ruby's uncle... still does, technically. He lived up here sometimes." He headed toward the bed. "For the next few hours, we're the new tenants."

He appraised the bed. It would work.

"We rest, we keep quiet, and we leave before the ZPD ever think to look here." He turned. "So, who wants to take the first shift?"

There was no answer.

"What?" said Nick. "Why are you staring?"

"Because that was a really weird question," said Sly.

"Nick, you're swaying a little," said Judy. "You need sleep. You should obviously take the first rest. Maybe even a second round, if you need it."
Nick glared at Sly. Or tried to. It came out as more of a tired squint. "And how am I supposed to let my guard down with him around?"

Judy sighed. "I'll watch him. Getting rest was your idea, Nick, and it's a good one. So please. Try to relax."

Nick let out a breath that sounded like a vengeful ghost escaping its tomb. "Fine," he said. "Thank you."

Sly thought of a sarcastic comment and actively chose not to make it. Instead, he and Judy watched Nick crawl into the bed. The look on his face was far from restful, but his fatigue overpowered anything else. In a matter of moments, he seemed unconscious.

Sly nudged Judy, voice low. "Hey, over here."

She followed him to the skylight, giving Nick space. Sly sat on the windowsill, then produced a small box.

"This is what I was gonna leave on your desk. Here."

She took it, reading the front. "Carrotcake, huh?" She smirked at him. "A little uninspired..."

"You wound me."

"But I appreciate the gesture. Thanks."

Judy joined him on the windowsill, setting the box on her lap. They sat there, looking in.

Watching Nick.

"Is he doing okay?" murmured Sly.

"Something's up," she sighed. "With Nick, I mean. Even before we heard about Bellwether, he's been tired, and sick... He acted really weird in Bogo's office, and this morning, he was..." She shook her head, realizing she might be oversharing. "...ill."

Sly nodded, unsure of what to say.

For a moment, they sat quietly. They watched the steady rise and fall of the sheets. When Sly spoke, his voice was soft.

"He really hates me, huh?"

"He's... very stressed," said Judy, ever the optimist. "But I won't lie to you, Sly. You're not his favourite person."

"I'm just trying to help."

"I know. And I'm sorry he's been so hostile. But..."

"But I can't blame him," finished Sly, his ears low. "I know."

Judy patted him on the shoulder. Sly gave her a quiet smile.

"Hey," he said. "Um..."
"What?"

"We're cool, right? You and me?"

Judy paused for a second – they had been joking so easily just moments ago. But she saw a rare vulnerability in his eyes. He visibly relaxed at her answer. "Yeah. Don't worry. We're cool."

"Great. Cool, even. Heh." He looked away. "Glad to hear it."

"If we weren't," said Judy, "we wouldn't be having this discussion. You wouldn't be here."

She caught his eye. He shrank a little.

"Nick's stunt in the car was out of line. But I know where it came from. And if I thought it was the right move, I wouldn't stop him. I'd help him. I trust you, Sly. That means Nick will give you a chance. So just... be worthy of that trust. Please."

Sly met her gaze. He nodded. "I will. That's a promise."

After a moment, Judy smiled. "Well then. Let's grab a bite to eat."

Teeth. Endless biting teeth.

There was no screaming this time, no piercing constant shriek drilling his skull, but the silence wasn't welcome. It was heavy and suffocating. Like intruding on a funeral.

Like causing one.

Teeth surrounded him in a kaleidoscope of fangs. They were no threat to him. They were outward. They were his.

He felt no fear. More than anything else, he felt empty. Since childhood, he'd been hollowing out. Leaks. Losses. Erosion. But it had been a slow process until now.

In one moment, one strike, he had lost all the rest. And now he was empty.

The teeth receded, replaced by the sharp scent of blood. It oozed into the crevices of his hands. Through the darkness, a figure bore down on him, stretched tall and thin and jagged. Green eyes like flashlights, voice like a judge's gavel.

"Nicholas... what have you done?"

He stared up at Scar, numb. Ice bubbled through him as he realized what had happened, not through words or images but through glacial realisation, sliding into the back of his brain.

Everyone was staring. Everyone knew. He felt the shock and grief and revulsion ripple through them, his colleagues, his city, his mo– and there was the raccoon, still smirking that damn smirk, as though this could be fixed.

He felt a flare of anger and tried to cling to it. But it was worthless. He knew Sly had only hastened the inevitable. Nick was a terrible cop, person, partner. And he had done this. He knew.

The scrap of fur lay beneath him, red seeping through grey and blue and purple. Ruined and lifeless and empty, that brightness snuffed out forever. She'd trusted him. She'd been dumb enough to trust him, let him get close, he did this to her and despite it all she still smiled
Nick was awake and disoriented and his heart tried to punch its way out of his ribs. After a moment, his instincts returned, and he controlled himself.

Everything else returned soon after.

He sat up. Judy and Sly watched him without comment. Maybe he had managed to stifle that panicked gasp. Maybe they were just being polite.

"Hey," said Judy. The bar below them was no longer silent, so she spoke quietly. "Sleep okay?"

"Slept okay," he echoed, and didn't consider it a lie. He pulled himself from the bed, clearing room for her.

"Thanks, Slick. Wake me in a couple hours, okay?"

He nodded, managing to return her gentle smile. His eyes lingered on her for a second. For a moment, lit in the midday sun, everything was fine. She was still here. Still with him.

Then Judy disappeared into bedsheets too big for her, and Nick was left with him.

"You always sleep fully clothed?" said Sly, eyes gleaming. "Because you don't need to worry about me. What's a bit of shirtlessness between friends?"

Nick glared.

Sly waited for a reply. When none came, he nodded to the table. "I left your present over there – blueberry muffins. I hear you've got a sweet tooth, just like me. But in case you want something else, I took the liberty of raiding the kitchen downstairs."

Nick glared.

"Smart move, hiding in a bar!" Sly continued. "I didn't take much, but you could make yourself a decent sandwich. Gotta keep your strength up. Me and Judy had a nice brunch, all things considered."

Nick glared.

Sly's smile didn't waver. "I'm detecting a bit of hostility. If you're upset about the Bellwether thing, that's fair. Or maybe you're still sleep deprived. But I'm guessing you've got some anger aimed at me? Specifically?"

Nick glared.

"All of the above?"

Nick glared.

"Tell you what," said Sly. He sat against the bed, his back on the frame. He was careful not to disturb Judy. "How about I sit here, and you glare at me, and that way you know I'm behaving myself? And don't worry. If you drift off, I'll wake you. I know you wouldn't want to miss a second of this."

Nick glared.
Sly leaned back, resting his head. "Good talk, buddy."

They wouldn't listen.

She was back in Bunnyburrow. Her family home. The living room. And the argument had dragged for hours, except it wasn’t an argument. She argued, but they just smiled and nodded and kept saying such terrible things. They wouldn’t listen.

"It's not true!" she said. "None of it is!"

"It's on the news, honey," said her mother, smiling.

"But–!"

"We know you're upset, dear," said her father, smiling. "But your safety comes first."

"You would've been next," said her mother, smiling. "Right next to him, all that time?"

"It's a miracle he didn't kill you."

"And now he's gone! You're safe!"

She stomped a foot and steeled her body, but it was worthless. There was no fight here, no villain to strike down. She was surrounded by her family and the news and lies, all she had was words. But they wouldn't listen.

"He's my friend," she said. "My closest, dearest friend, and he wouldn't – He'd never hurt me! It's all a lie, and I won't rest until I prove it!"

"Don't bother," said her mother, smiling.

"No-one will believe you," said her father, smiling. "And even if they did–"

"–it's too late!"

"He's a diseased animal–"

"–and they needed to put him down!"

The last phrase struck her like a knife to the chest, cruel and vicious, but what hurt more than the lack of warning was how anybody could say that and still smile

Judy woke. She was in a soft bed. Everything was fine.

Everything remained fine for a solid eleven seconds before she remembered what was happening.

Below her came the distant sounds of the bar. Morning had passed, and patrons were trickling in. She sat up. Afternoon sunlight drifted through the attic – not dark enough to leave yet, but getting close. She saw Sly slouched against the foot of the bed. Apparently he had dozed off.

Smiling gently, Judy threw a sheet over him. She let him sleep.

Nick was by the skylight. He stared into the city, his mouth tight. Judy joined him.

"Hey."
"Hopps." He sounded hoarse. "Why are you here?"

"Oh." She stepped back. "Sorry. If you need space, I–"

He shook his head. "No. Why are you here? In this attic, with a thief and a murder suspect?" His eyes didn't leave the window. "You could've stayed behind. Avoided this."

"Maybe," said Judy. "But then what? Bogo would never let me work this case. I'm too close. He'd put me on leave – heck, he'd probably have someone watch me to make sure I took it. If you and Sly ran off alone, I'd just be at home. Worrying."

She drew closer. She joined him in looking out to the city.

"I told you. We can work this out together. And we will."

His voice was a whisper. "Thank you."

After a moment, Judy nodded. "Okay. Lots to do. We need to gather clues on Bellwether while avoiding the ZPD. And once this is over we'll need some way to get back to normal. Preferably without getting arrested."

"Judy. I saw something."

She tensed. First name. "What?"

"At the office. I... I really saw something. Just outside the window, looking in."

He turned to her, and she saw genuine fear in his eyes.

"I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's real, Judy. I – I just–"

"Hey, hey. Easy." Judy drew closer, laying a hand on his arm. But working out what to say was a struggle. "I mean... what did it look like?"

Nick took a breath. He reconstructed the memory as analytically as possible, trying to treat it as just another case. "It's like... a ghost. It's wrapped in dark cloth, but underneath it's metal, like a mask... and I think its hands aren't even hands, they're blades. It was floating there. Looking at me."

"Judy took his paw in both of hers. "So you're not sure it's real."

"I saw it. It looked right at me. But..." He sighed. "But yeah. It's not real. It can't be."

She thought for a moment, choosing her next words carefully. There was a possibility she had to raise. "Nick... what if you've been poisoned?"

"What?"

"I mean, if Bellwether's really the one behind this, maybe she found, I don't know, some kind of hallucinogenic flower that–"

"Yes... Yes!" Nick had to fight to keep his voice down. "Oh, Judy, you're a genius! A tiny, adorable genius!"

He pulled her into a tight hug, and she laughed. "Okay, okay. Slow down, Slick. Watch who you're calling 'adorable'..."
"Sorry, sorry, it's just--" He pulled back, hands on her shoulders. "Jeez. Never thought I'd be so
overjoyed at the thought I'd been poisoned... But that has to be it! There's no ghost. There can't be.
That's absurd!"

"Right." She smiled. "All we need to do is get you to a doctor. Night Howler is very easy to cure
these days – maybe this'll be the same!"

"Yes. Yes. Totally. Everything's gonna be fine." He let out a breath. "Cure the ghost. Arrest
Bellwether. Maybe arrest Sly too--"

"Nick."

"See how we're feeling, y'know?" He smiled at her. The happiest he had seemed in weeks. "Thank
you, Judy. For everything."

She smiled back, her paws on his. "It's what I'm here for. Whatever happens, Nick, I'm with you."

He was alone.

It had finally happened. It made sense. Other people died.

People died when your life was fear and danger and fire, screaming all around him, as it did every
night. And he fixed his smile in place and walked through it.

He walked, through darkness and sloping black rock, alone. The tigress had betrayed him, then the
mouse, and what had he learned? Not paranoia. Not independence. Just to clutch his loved ones even
tighter.

Idiot.

All he wanted, all he had ever wanted from the night it was ripped to bloody shreds in front of him,
was family. A sense of home, of closeness.

Selfish. Utterly selfish. Getting close to him was a death sentence.

He crested a hill he knew wasn't going to be a hill, and there it was. He was on the lip of a volcano,
its caldera monstrously large and thick with red. And hovering there, on jagged metal wings that
blocked out every star...

"Sly Cooper."

The voice of hatred itself. Two yellow eyes, cold and furious and unnatural.

"You are alone, Sly Cooper. Where are your little friends?"

It lilted into a different voice on the last words, her voice, as one yellow eye flickered redlilacgreen.
A taunt. She knew where they were. She knew what had happened to Carmelita and Bentley and
Murray and every member of his Gang. To Nick and Judy. To his parents.

He couldn't stand it any more. Gripping his cane – still smiling! – he tried to leap toward the owl, hit
it, hate it, do something.

But his body was lead. The second his feet left the rock he was down, into the volcano, but it wasn't
lava. It was blood. So much blood, thick and dark and boiling, and he knew it was his parents'. His
parents' blood, and he was drowning in it. He had watched. His childhood home had drowned in this
blood and now so would he. He kept moving, struggling for air, as the lavablood grew hotter and thicker and crushed him from all sides. The pressure from without met the pressure from within and he was just the outer layer caught between.

He was trapped by it, cold steel fingers sealing him shut from inside. No matter how much agony tore through him he would always need to **smile**

"Sly?"

Sly let out a little cough, eyes opening slowly. The sounds of the bar below had built to Saturday-night levels, but he could easily sleep through worse. He had been woken by Judy's paw, soft but insistent on his shoulder.

"Good evening." His voice was husky with sleep. "Time to go?"

"Almost. Nick went back to bed, I'm gonna wake him up next..."

She lingered over him, concern in her purple eyes. Sly tilted his head. "Something wrong?"

"You just... seemed agitated. While you were sleeping, I mean."

Sly shrugged. "Well, I *did* fall asleep on the floor. I only lay down as a joke... guess I overcommitted." He nodded to the blanket on his body. "Did you do this?"

"Yeah," she smiled.

"Thanks," he murmured, returning it. "You're a sweetheart."

"So I'm told." Her voice was soft. "You sure you're okay?"

"'Course. Why wouldn't I be?"

He yawned majestically, fangs on display. Then he fixed her with a grin.

"So. What's the plan?"
Carmelita did not get her vacation.

She berated herself for ever thinking she would. Apparently it hadn't sunk in yet. The universe did not think she deserved one.

She wondered if, on some level, it was her fault. After all, it had been her idea. When Nick mentioned he hadn't been feeling great, Carmelita was the one who suggested a get-together. Just her and Nick and Judy, taking some time to unwind.

Then Sly had appeared, and Bogo had called her, and that was fine. It was fine. It happened. She quit her training assignment early and took the next flight and told herself that she'd still get to see her friends, even if she was working. Even if it was same old dance.

When she landed, Bogo called her again. It was not the same. Not at all.

And then she arrived at ZPD headquarters, passing a team of beavers sweeping up the broken glass. The flurry of activity had flooded out the front doors, officers arguing with each other in the street. Some noticed the tall vixen approach – her yellow jacket popped against the sea of blue – but none stopped to greet her.

Inside was even worse. Officers crowded every corner – except, she noted, front desk. Officer Clawhauser was out of sight. A shame. She could have used a friendly face.

Wasting no time, she headed for Bogo's office.

She found him buried in papers. The window was broken, blinds rattling uneasily. Nick's aviators sat on the desk, unfurled, twinkling smugly at her. They did not seem to be here as evidence.

He glared a greeting. "Inspector. I don't have time for pleasantries. Are you caught up?"

"Ah..."

The avalanche of information had been daunting, even by Interpol standards. She had read and reread what Bogo sent her during the taxi drive over. That had mostly entailed frowning at her phone.

"Mostly." She smoothed back her hair, trying to contain the dark blue curls. "But I'd like to clarify
the events of this morning. You said Cooper... *kidnapped* Nick and Judy?"

"Yes."

Bogo removed his glasses to rub at his eyes.

"Preliminary evidence from Bellwether's cell pointed strongly to Wilde, so I called him to my office. Hopps followed. Wilde was unhinged, trying to distract me with some nonsense about a ghost. Then Cooper appeared, and all three escaped."

"And this was specifically an abduction? Nick and Judy aren't collaborating with Cooper?"

"Hard to say. I don't know where Wilde stands right now – and Hopps, as usual, has demonstrated that she's his partner first and my subordinate second. For the moment, we are handling this as a dangerous criminal abducting two of our officers." His face darkened. "But if Hopps and Wilde resist arrest, or visibly work with Cooper... we will *reconsider* our perspective."

Carmelita nodded. "I see. Rest assured, no matter what's happening here, I will find them."

"You'd better," he snapped. "Who's your liaison?"

Carmelita was used to working out departmental logistics through yelling. She didn't blink. "Given that my first and second choices are both MIA, I request Officer Fangmeyer."

"Fine. I'll tell them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Them?"

"After last year, we modified the protocol. Visiting agents now work with both a liaison and that liaison's usual partner. The one-officer provision was a stupid rule anyway," he huffed. "Fangmeyer's with Wolford. You get both."

"Excellent. I'll rendezvous with them immediately." She folded her arms. "I suppose that leaves only one question. Where do we look first?"

Bogo grunted. "That's the good news."

Nick glanced out the attic's skylight. The lights of Zootopia twinkled back at him, a frozen firework show of every colour.

"Dark enough to leave," he announced, quiet enough to be masked by the sounds of the bar below. "Only question is--"

"Where to?" finished Judy. "Do you know which doctor you want to see?"

Nick tried to cut her off with a glare, but Sly was already padding up. "Doctor? We're going to the doctor?"

"I'm going to the doctor," growled Nick. "Carrots is coming with me. You'll be doing very important work searching for clues under Clawhauser's desk. I can't stress this enough. Go back to HQ and be as loud and slow as possible."

"Ooh, sounds fun!" said Sly with a bright smile. "While I'm there, you want me to pick anything up? Coffee? Case files? Proof of your innocence?"
Judy's ear perked at a sound. Something low, distinctive, familiar. She tuned out their voices to focus on it.

"I know you think you're helping, Cooper, but the second you slip up--"

"You'll what? Block me online?"

"Guys," hissed Judy. "Guys, shush."

They shushed. They shushed harder than they had ever shushed before.

Following Judy, they crept to the skylight, seeing what she had heard. Rolling down the street, its tires thick rumbling distinctly, came a ZPD cruiser.

Judy winced. "They found us already...!"

Multiple emotions fought for space on Nick's face. None were good. "I – I was so careful. No-one saw us. How did...?"

Sly was firm. "Worry later. We've got like sixty seconds to leave."

Judy joined him, trying to open the door to the roof – but Nick lingered. He stared through the window, numbly watching the car doors open. From the back came Wolford. From the passenger's side came Fangmeyer.

From the driver's side, Carmelita.

At her signal, Fangmeyer and Wolford entered the bar. But she hung behind. She looked at the building. She looked along the street. Then she looked up, directly at the skylight, and locked eyes with Nick.

He flinched back, almost tripping over himself. Sly and Judy started.

"What's wrong?!" said Sly.

"She saw me!"

"Well now we've got six seconds!"

Spurred on by adrenaline, they all pulled at the door. After a lifetime, it cracked open. They ran up the short flight of stairs, Sly unlocked the external door, they burst out onto the roof–

And Carmelita was already there. Not a hair out of place.

There was a deadly silence.

The fugitives froze in fear. Carmelita just stood there, shoulders forward, brown eyes hard. Ready to move at a second's notice. One hand hovered near her belt. Her shock pistol.

The silence was broken by the crackle of a walkie-talkie.

"Inspector?" came Fangmeyer's voice. "Where'd you go?"

Carmelita's hand went past her pistol and took her walkie-talkie instead. "I'm on the roof."

"And? See anything?"
Her voice was level. "I'll let you know if I need you."

Nick felt a powerful wave of nostalgia at hearing her voice. They had been talking all year, but over text. He had forgotten the cadence of her voice, the quirks of her accent.

Despite the circumstances, it felt great to hear her again.

"Copy that. Wolford and I will sweep the bar. Over."

With that, she clipped her walkie-talkie back into place. Carmelita smiled. "Well. Uh, hi."

The effect was instant. The tension drained from the air. Carmelita hunkered down to Judy and offered a hug, which was eagerly accepted.

Judy held her tight. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou...!"

"Easy, Judy. You're alright." Carmelita shot Nick a smile, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "Great to see you too, Nick."

"Y-yeah," he said. "Same to you. Thanks. As well, I mean."

Sly, for once, found he was not the centre of the attention. It was an odd feeling, especially where Carmelita was concerned. But he knew better than to press it.

Part of him thought she would just pretend he wasn't there. But she did, finally, glance in his direction. Her eyes were steady, and she said nothing. Then she gave him a nod.

Not much. But he would take it. With a shy smile, he returned the gesture.

Judy, reluctantly, pulled out of the hug. "So, you're covering for us?" Her voice was quiet. "You don't think we...?"

"You what?" said Carmelita. "Sly Cooper kidnapped two officers. You two haven't done anything illegal. Yet." Her expression darkened. "I warn you, that won't last. If you're solving this off-books, do it quickly and quietly. The ZPD's searching everywhere for you, and Bogo will bring you in by force if you don't seem like innocent victims."

"And... do we seem innocent to you?" said Nick.

Carmelita smirked. "You want my perspective?"

She stood, looking them over.

"Although I haven't seen Sly Cooper in a very long time," said said, shooting him a look that made him shrink, "I know he does not kidnap people. Especially not people like you two. So I would conclude you are indeed working together."

"That makes sense," said Judy miserably.

"But," she continued, "why? Gut instinct says undercover mission. Unsanctioned, inadvisable, probably not worth the risk. Judy sees an opportunity to solve this Bellwether case without departmental oversight. Nick's still hostile toward Sly over last year, but bends to his more assertive partner."

For a moment, her gaze became warmer.
"That's what I would've said. But I've been chatting to you both all year, and I know you've become an even stronger team in that time. Nick isn't some spineless new recruit, and Judy's not that reckless."

"Nick grew a spine," said Sly softly, "and Judy grew a reck."

Carmelita ignored him, but it seemed to take effort. "When I met Bogo this morning, he said Nick mentioned a 'ghost'. That caught my attention. There could be something big here, even bigger than the murder of Dawn Bellwether. If there is, the three of you have the best chance of stopping it. But you can't do that if Nick's is custody – which is exactly what I assume the real killer wants. In short, if you ran, you ran for good reason." She folded her arms. "That's my perspective."

"Whoa, hold on!" said Sly. "Nick saw a ghost?"

"That still doesn't explain how you found us," said Nick, pointedly ignoring Sly.

"Anonymous tip," said Carmelita. "Someone texted in, said they thought they saw you at this bar. We have few leads, so I checked it out. Clearly, it was accurate."

Judy saw an unfamiliar fury on Nick's face. "I was so careful," he hissed. "No-one should've seen us."

"Well, next time just be more careful," said Carmelita sanguinely. "In the meantime, I'll keep an eye on the situation from the ZPD's side of things. I won't obstruct the investigation, but I might be able to help you figure this out." She noticed their expressions. "Something wrong?"

"It's just..." Judy sighed. "We appreciate the help. But it feels wrong that, of all people, you're our link to the precinct. These are our coworkers, our friends. We've worked with them for years. Why can't we trust Clawhauser? Or Fangmeyer, or Wolford, or even McHorn, or--"

"I know, I know." Carmelita's voice was strong as ever, but there was a softness there. A patience. "It's frustrating. But strategically, I'm your best option. As an Interpol agent, I have more independence than your colleagues. Besides, Bogo is watching anyone you worked with closely."

Judy blinked. "But... that's basically everyone."

"Yes," said Carmelita. "It is."

Silence hung over them for a moment.

"How's he doing?" said Judy. "I mean, I know he's not happy, but is he – um..."

Carmelita sighed. "You don't rise to a rank like Chief of Police without a certain amount of paranoia. If you ever felt he kept you at arm's length, no matter what you did... well, this is why." She avoided their gaze. "I can't say I know him well. But compared to last year, he seems much more... agitated. Be careful. He's not going to give you much leeway."

"That's Bogo," said Nick, fatigue turning his sarcasm sour. "He is a fixed point of Jerk."

Carmelita gave him a smile. "Well, he's not the only reliable one. You know me. You know I don't give up. And I won't give up on you two."

Despite everything, Nick found a smile to give back. He was running out of smiles. But Carmelita deserved one. "Thanks."
"Don't worry. I'm already on my way to get to the bottom of this." Her expression turned serious. "Can you contact me? Do you have my phone number?"

"We do," said Judy.

"We do?" said Nick.

"I do." She smiled. "And I don't plan on leaving you unsupervised."

"Well then. I guess we do."

"Alright." Carmelita spoke slowly, as though breaking bad news. "If anything goes wrong... please. Don't hesitate to turn to me. This is your ten-second head start. After this, I will be trying to catch Sly, and that means 'rescuing' you two as well. But don't push yourselves too hard. If you think you're in real danger, and want an out... I'll find you, I'll protect you, and I'll do my best to take care of you. Even if it involves arresting you all."

She smiled again. But it didn't reach her eyes.

"Something tells me you're not going to take that offer."

No-one replied. There was no sense lying.

Carmelita's walkie-talkie crackled. "Inspector?"

She took it. "I'm here, Fangmeyer."

"Nothing down here. Owner is babbling faster than Wolford can take notes, but she doesn't seem to know anything."

Judy and Sly looked at Nick. Nick looked at the floor.

"Copy that," said Carmelita. "I'll be down in just a moment."

She clipped the walkie-talkie back to her belt. She seemed composed. Her careful, professional exterior was back in place.

"I need to go. Not to sound selfish, but I have my own reputation to maintain."

"No, of course," said Judy. "We really appreciate this, Carmelita."

She gave them a nod. "Judy, Nick. Take care of each other." She smiled sadly. "Get home safe. That's an order."

Nick didn't know what to say. He just nodded.

Carmelita turned, heading for the roof's edge. Sly caught himself. "Uh, Carmelita--!"

"Sly." She didn't turn. She didn't even slow. "Don't mess this up for them."

"...I won't."

"Hmm." Carmelita looked over her shoulder, but away from him, catching Nick's eye instead. "That said... keep him in the loop, Nick. It's the three of you versus the world. Next time you see a ghost, consider telling all two of your allies."
Nick frowned. He pointed over his shoulder. "Y'know, you can head down through the attic."

She shrugged. "I can."

She stepped off the roof and disappeared.

They tensed, but when there was no sound of breaking bones or foreign swearwords the moment passed. Carmelita had left as quickly and calmly as she had arrived.

"What a woman..." murmured Sly. "That went well, right? As well as it was gonna go?"

He turned to Nick, one eyebrow raised.

"So, ghosts, huh? Is that why you're going to the doctor? Because of ghost eyes?"

"That doesn't concern you," said Nick.

"It actually really does." Sly's expression darkened. "Carmelita's right, as usual. I'm here. I'm helping. You need to keep me informed."

"Why?" snapped Nick. "So you can crack your jokes? So you can poke holes in everything I say?"

"I'm not--"

"That's what you do! This is some game to you, isn't it? Some interactive comedy show! And you'll stick around to make dumb comments until you get bored."

"This may shock you, Nick, but I'm capable of being serious."

"No. What shocks me is that you're capable of shutting up." He stabbed a finger at the roof's edge. "That conversation with Carmelita was the happiest I've been since you got here, since apparently you're too much of a coward to speak in front of her."

Sly gripped his cane. "That's--!"

"Boys. Boys."

"Boys."

Judy planted herself between them, small but solid. "If you two can't stop arguing, we should just turn ourselves in to Carmelita right now."

"I'm doing my best, here!" protested Sly. "I mean, can't you meet me halfway? Isn't there anything I can do you make you trust me?"

Nick's voice was a growl. "Go. To. Jail."

Sly blinked. "Wait... of course! Nick, you're a genius!"

"What?"

"I'll go to jail! I can break into the prison and investigate. Poke around Bellwether's cell and stuff."

"That's... actually not the worst idea," said Judy. "Are you sure you can get out, though?"

"I've broken out of over twenty-two prisons. I'm sure I can manage."

"Well, alright." Judy looked to Nick. "What do you think?"

Make him leave, spat Nick's brain. The look on his partner's face pushed him to more diplomatic phrasing. "We could be at the doctor's all night. Sly doesn't need to come with us. This is efficient.
“Good use of time.”

“Then it’s settled.” She turned back to Sly. “Listen. The prison has its own morgue.”

“...Cheery.”

“It hasn’t been long since Bellwether allegedly died. Her body should still be there. You should check—”

“—if she’s really there. Got it. If there’s no body, we know something’s up.” Sly frowned. “I know we need to spend our time efficiently, but I’m a little antsy about splitting up if you guys don’t have your phones.”

Judy smirked. “We can handle ourselves, Sly. You know that.”

“Oh, I do. But how will we meet up again?”

“What if we just don’t?” muttered Nick.

“Nick,” said Judy, her smile dying. “Please. It’s getting old.”

Nick dropped his gaze to the floor.

“We’ll do it the old-fashioned way,” said Judy to Sly. “Remember the street we first met? Where Tai Lung attacked the ZPD convoy?”

“How could I forget?”

“Miller Avenue, if you need directions. We’ll rendezvous at that spot, no later than 6AM. Sound okay?”

“Sounds great! I’ll see you guys there. You can take the car, I’ll make my own way. Stay safe, alright?”

He backed away towards the roof’s edge, giving them a two-finger salute.

“Good luck with the doc, Nick. Snag a lollipop for me!”

He stepped backwards off the roof and was gone.

The partners stood there for a moment, letting the cool night air and sounds of the city swirl around them.

“We’re...” Nick winced. “...gonna have to climb back down too, aren’t we?”

“I mean, the bar underneath us is full.”

“Yeah.”

“This was your idea.”

“Yeah.”

“I was sorta wondering about that part, but didn’t want to second-guess you.”

“Yeah...”
Judy patted his arm. "I'm picking the next hideout."

"Yeah."
Congratulations on your new functionality; Inside of you she'll find a brand new reality! It was impossible before for her to find the light, How fortunate that you fit just RIGHT

The one place worse than a junkyard is a junkyard in Sahara Square.

In some districts, like Savannah Central or the Meadowlands, dumps were the average level of terrible. In Tundra Town, refuse froze, which actually muted the smell. The Rainforest District's dampness had the opposite effect, the rain dissolving cheap bags and producing a runny sludge.

And yet Judy thought the heat and sand of Sahara Square was, somehow, even worse.

Luckily, heat faded with nightfall. Not the sand, though. That stayed everywhere. Still, this dump was mostly mechanical parts. It smelled mostly of rust and oil, which by garbage standards was pleasant. Homely.

"So," said Judy, in what she hoped was a polite and optimistic tone. "Your friend lives... here."

"Don't be silly, Carrots," said Nick. "This is just where she practices medicine."

"Heh. Right."

Nick started walking into the junkyard, as Judy hovered behind.

"...Nick? You are joking, right? Nick!"

She ran after him, passing a battery of cameras watching them from the front gate. Nick navigated the junkyard with a familiar ease, weaving through the mounds of rusting metal. Before long, he led her to a squat building in the dead centre of the yard, its walls pale in the warm moonlight.

"Here we are." He paused, shooting Judy a look. "Be cool, okay? There's a reason I've never introduced you two. I doubt you're gonna see eye-to-eye on certain... political issues."

"Nick," said Judy. "Is your friend who practises medicine in a junkyard actually a little bit crazy?"

"Woah, Carrots, whatever gave you that impression?" he said. And then, "Yes."

The door tore open.

"Whoisit?!"

Judy blinked. Before her stood a honey badger, black and bulky and brandishing a bat. The white fur
of her back ran up to her forehead, spiking into a mohawk. She wore a green camouflage vest, dogtags, and more pouches on her belt than would ever be necessary. Her green eyes were intelligent, but wild. Very wild.

Nick hadn't blinked. "Is that any way to greet an old friend? That's what you say to everybody."

"Nicky!" She threw her bat aside with a clatter that made Judy wince. "It's been way too long! C'mere, you sly little...!"

Before he could dodge her, she pulled Nick into a tight hug. A very tight hug. Judy thought she heard something crack.

"And this must be Judy, right?" she said as she dropped Nick.

"Yep." Nick bowed, playing up the formal introduction. "Bunny, meet Honey. Honey, bun."

Judy sighed. "Oh, I know you've been sitting on that one for at least a year..."

Honey beckoned them inside. She seemed familiar to Judy somehow, but she couldn't place it. And once inside, she found herself distracted by the décor.

It was a clinic, just as Nick claimed. Counters, charts, medical equipment, a plush examination table – all surprisingly clean considering the location. But the office was also decorated with several stickers plastering each wall. One in particular caught Judy's eye: bright yellow letters against black, screaming a demand to **LEGALIZE IT**. Judy was afraid to ask what.

"The famous Judy Hopps." Honey checked the monitor for her CCTV cameras, having evidently missed their entrance. "Guess I was gonna meet you sooner or later."

"Uh, yeah!" Judy smiled. "Has Nick ever mentioned me?"

"Oh, incessantly. But that's not what I meant." She turned, looking Judy straight in the eye. "You arrested my aunt."

Judy froze. She realized why Honey seemed so familiar; a resemblance to the luckless doctor Lionheart had employed at Cliffside. A family resemblance.

Honey towered over her. She stared down. And she grinned.

"Nice work!"

Judy squinted. "Uh... what?"

"Never trusted Aunt Madge," muttered Honey. "Smart but spineless. Bad combo. I always knew she was my relative most likely to be involved in a government conspiracy, but pointing that out was 'rude' and 'incoherent' and 'ruining everybody's holiday spirit.'" Honey raised two fists in triumph. "Well who's laughing now, Grandma?!"

"Ha ha, yeah," said Judy, who was doing her absolute best. "Family. Crazy stuff."

Honey slapped her on the back. It was friendly, but only the strength of Judy's legs stopped her from flying across the room. "So, yeah! Good job there. I'm sure you get this a lot, but you're a real hero or whatever."
"Or whatever," smirked Nick. "I hate to interrupt such a beautiful moment, but can we get started? You can fawn over Carrots later."

"I guess you're still doing the nickname thing..." Honey folded her powerful arms. "Alright then, Nicky. What's troubling ya?"

"I need a quick medical exam. We came to you because you're hands-down the best honey badger practising medicine from a junkyard--"

"Shucks, you charmer!"

"--but also because you're... discreet." Nick's smile died. "Have you been following the news?"

"The cops have been vague and shady, not that that's new. They had to admit to ZNN that you two went missing, but that's it. Lot of rumours swirling online. Also not new."

Nick and Judy relaxed, slightly. This was the first they had heard of what the media, the public, knew about their situation. It could have been worse.

"Well," said Nick, "honestly, even we don't know what's happening. But the ZPD is very willing to arrest us to find out. So..."

"Say no more!" grinned Honey. "You'll be safe here, you know that."

"Yeah," said Nick, giving her a smile. "I do."

"Nick," said Judy, fresh from breaking into an innocent woman's place of business, "if you knew a safe place we could hide--"

He predicted her question. "I know a lot of places. I know a lot of people. People who don't need to be dragged into our problem. We're here because we need a good doctor. That's it."

Honey scoffed gently. "Still struggling with the whole 'asking for help' thing, too..."

"It's not my place to ask."

"Riiiight..." She shook her head. "Must be a real emergency. You hate doctor visits, Nicky." Honey glanced to Judy. "I remember dragging this guy inside one time – dude was actively bleeding – and he kept squirming in my grasp, like 'The sale! I can still make the sale!'"

"And I did," insisted Nick. "Because I still had time after your superb but appropriately speedy work."

"Wow," said Judy. "Back in the hustler days, huh?"

"Way, way back. Nick Wilde: The Early Years." Honey turned away, beginning to gather her equipment. "Those were the days. We were living on crusts, but we had each other."

"Yeah," said Nick softly. "I guess we did."

"You went real quiet for a while there, Nicky. I just stopped hearing from you. Finnick did, too."

Her tone brightened as she hunkered to a low cabinet.

"But I knew this day would come! You'd never turn cop. What an idea! Working from the inside, bring the whole system crashing down." She glanced up. "Sorry it didn't work out."
"What are you talking about? Nick's a great cop," said Judy, as Nick winced. "What's your problem with the police?"

"What's my problem? What's my problem?!" Honey didn't look up, but her claws became louder as they scraped up her tools. "It ain't my problem, it's everybody's problem! The way Nick went on about you, you sounded like you knew which way the wind was blowing. Get it together, carrotcake; everyone knows the cops just protect the status quo. Busting up marginalized communities – which oh, coincidence, just happen to be mostly poorer preds – in order to serve the interests of the elite. The bankers, the politicians... State monopoly on violence is what it is. Step out of line and you get muzzled."

Judy shot Nick a look. Yeah, you're right, said her nervous smile. She's pretty crazy.

He shook his head. That's not the crazy part, said his eyes. Firm and serious.

"And why?" said Honey, arms full. "Because the sheep run everything! The evidence is plastered everywhere, but ordinary folks are too brainwashed to see it!"

That's the crazy part, said Nick's frown.

"But hey." Honey stood, her expression softer. "You're the one who took down Bellwether. And more importantly, you're sticking with my little Nicky even at the cost of the hegemonic power your job unrighteously affords you. So you're ten kinds of alright in my book, bunny."

"Thanks," said Judy. "I... try."

"Sounds like it. Now how about we get started?"

Honey nodded to the examination table. Nick climbed up, sitting on the edge.

"This thing's still weirdly comfortable."

"If we have time, I'll let you nap on it. Just like old times." Honey produced a pen and clipboard. "Now then. What're the symptoms, Nicky?"

He swallowed. "The main one is, ah... v-visual hallucinations. But I think that's just the worst part of something bigger. Some kind of poison, maybe, like Night Howlers. I haven't been sleeping right lately. And my spine itches."

Honey scratched her chin. "Itchy spine could be your body trying to reject government chemicals. You haven't been drinking the tap water, haveya?"

Nick smirked. Judy was relieved to see his humour still on show. "C'mon, Honey. You know I exclusively drink soda."

"With the occasional melted pawpiscle, I know," nodded Honey, in a tone which was worryingly serious.

They set to it. Honey explained the tests she would be doing and what they would reveal, covering any foreign chemical that could be inducing hallucinations. Nick sat there, his tail bunched up around him. He nodded and, when asked a question, answered candidly.

Judy realized how much trust he was showing; not just to Honey, but to her, too. Nick did hate doctor's visits. He hated admitting to illness, that he was struggling with something he normally found fine. He had tried brushing off his poor sleep for as long as possible. But now he had opened
up. And the fact Judy was right here with him, during a medical appointment, didn't faze him in the slightest.

She smiled to herself. Nick trusted her, just as she trusted him. At that moment, the best way of honouring that trust was to leave him and Honey in peace.

Judy went to the window. At first it was to kill time, since the alternative was reading more of Honey's stickers. The piles of rusting detritus offered a calmer view.

Then she saw movement.

She squinted into the dark, wishing her night vision was as good as Nick's. But it was definite. There was a figure out there, moving among the piles of garbage. Silent.

"Something up, Hopps?"

Honey looked up, needle in hand. Nick was watching too, curious.

Judy felt awkward about interrupting, but Nick's safety came first. "There's somebody out there."

Nick's eyes widened. "There is?!"

"Easy..." Honey rubbed his shoulder. It looked like a familiar motion. "Hopps, is it a rabbit? 'Bout your size, maybe a little taller?"

Judy looked back. There was a small splash of light as the figure checked his phone. Two long ears. "Yeah. Looks like it."

"Okay, then you're fine. That's just Reginald."

"...Reginald?"

"Oh, I dunno his real name. But he looks like a Reginald." She was already back to work. "He comes in about two nights a week, dumpster-diving for parts. Hobbyist inventor, I guess. You can find alright stuff in here if you don't mind the smell."

Judy frowned. "And you just let him take it?"

"Sure. He's a bit of a freak – gives off real weird vibes whenever I talk to him..." She smirked, brushing the fur of Nick's arm aside to find a vein. "But he knows better than to mess with me, and that's the main thing."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on," said Nick. "That's bad doctoring. You're just gonna stab me with that thing? Aren't you supposed to warn me that I'll feel a little prick?"

"You are a–"

"Yah!"

"There, see? You're fine."

Judy smirked, relaxing a little. The tests continued, Nick and Honey joking back and forth. Judy left them to it – and tried to keep an eye on 'Reginald'. He didn't come close to the clinic, or the CCTV cameras. He never entered their line of sight, moving between peripheries and blindspots like it was old habit.
Judy was trying very hard to control her paranoia.

Satisfied with her samples, Honey began her tests. The process only took a few minutes, and before long Honey had a small print-out detailing Nick's blood toxicity.

"Alright, let's see here..."

Honey read the results. Then she read them again. Very slowly, she frowned.

Nick tensed. "What?!"

"Nicky. I'm so sorry."

"What is it?! What's inside me?!"

"...Nothing."

The partners stared.

"I mean, I can run the test again," she continued, "but there's no error with my equipment. It's all... fine. Your electrolytes are a little high from eating so much candy, but other than that... perfectly healthy. No substances at all. Definitely nothing that could be messing with your brain."

"You're sure?" said Judy. "There's no other tests you can do?"

"Oh, there are. They'd take anywhere from six hours to two weeks, though, depending on what I'm looking for. I can't say with a hundred percent certainty you're clean. But there should be some indication of an outside chemical, and there just... isn't."

Nick buried his head in his paws. "No... nonono..."

Judy came close, reaching up to pat his leg. "Breathe. Just breathe, Nick. It's gonna be okay."

"Yeah, Nicky," said Honey. "I don't know what you been seeing, but I'm sure there's an explanation."

"There's..." Nick took a very slow breath. His fangs began worrying at his lip.

Poison had made so much sense. He knew about hallucinations and Night Howlers and the frailties of the brain. These things all fit into the world as he knew it. The Phantasm... didn't. A part of him, a stubborn part, refused to believe it was a capital-g Ghost. Not after a lifetime of mundane griefs. Nick Wilde had experienced precisely one miracle, and even she was just a rabbit.

And the wonderful thing about the poison hypothesis was that poison could be cured. With the right dose of equal and opposite chemicals, he'd be free.

If it wasn't poison, that just left him.

Judy and Honey were watching him. He fought to find words. "I... I think..."

And then Judy's ear perked and he jumped on that.

"What's wrong? Is someone coming?"

"I think it's, um, Reginald." She paused, focusing. "Yeah. He's coming this way."
Honey dropped her voice. "Guys, get under the table. I doubt he's the Call-the-Cops type, but let's not risk it."

They nodded. Soon they were both scrunched underneath the table. Honey draped a sheet over it, hiding them from view.

Thirteen seconds passed. Then there was a knock.

They heard Honey cross the room, claws clacking, and open the door. "Heyyyyyy, Reggie."

"Hello, Elizabeth," he replied, apparently at ease with false names. His voice was deep and rough, almost hoarse, but he spoke politely. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah! 'Course!"

"It's just... I was pretty sure I heard someone else in here with you."

Nick and Judy stayed silent. Judy shut her eyes. Nick was grim, but didn't doubt Honey for a second.

"If I had to guess," he continued, "...Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde? Currently hiding under your examination table?"

"You don't hafta guess." Honey's voice was rock solid. "You don't hafta do nothing, 'cept leave. Now."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to cause offence. It's just... I think I could help them. With the ghost."

They froze.

Honey was saying something and Judy was watching him. Nick made his choice quickly. One way or the other, he couldn't ignore this. He nodded to Judy, and she nodded back.

"Fine," he called. "We're here."

They came out from under the table, and Judy tried very hard not to stare.

He was scarred. He was more scarred than anyone she had ever seen before. The thin sliver on Scar's eye seemed laughable in comparison. Without distance and darkness impeding her view, she could see how heavily notched both his ears were. His face was wreathed in scars, framing glassy grey eyes and a smile that was too wide. More streaked down his neck, past his collar. Judy was certain that under the faded purple of his custodian's uniform, they just kept going.

He offered a paw. It was scarred. "Hello there. You can call me Dave."

Judy shook it, keeping Nick behind her. "Uh, hi. I guess you know our names already."

"That I do. And your problem." His smile was unwavering. "Troublesome things, ghosts."

"Right." Nick glared. "And how exactly do you know that?"

"I'm something of an expert when it comes to, ah... remnants. And you've got something nasty coming after you, don't you, Mister Wilde? I can practically taste it."

Judy's brow furrowed. "But how did you know it was us? I was keeping an eye on you from here. You never came close."
"Just a lucky guess. I've been following the news, after all."

He spoke so calmly and confidently. He was either telling the truth, or a very practised liar. Every instinct pointed the partners to that second thing.

Before they could reply, he coughed. "I... understand why you would hesitate. It's the scars, isn't it?"

"What? No!" said Judy. "That's not it at all."

"There's no need to lie, Miss Hopps. We both know there's little room in this world for a bunny who isn't cute."

He shrugged, eyes on the floor.

"It's a big city. I'm sure there's another ghost expert you could ask. Somewhere."

"Excuse us for a second," said Judy. She and Nick turned into the wall so they could silently confer.

Nick's eyes were tired. This is the most obviously evil mammal I have ever met.

Yes.

And I have met so many evil mammals.

Yes...

So there's no way we're–

"Uh, guys?"

Honey was staring at her CCTV monitors.

"Did anybody order a candygram from a well-dressed wolf?"

Nick stood next to Honey and Judy stood next to him and Dave stood next to her, which she wasn't especially pleased with, but she had other concerns.

Wolf O'Donnell stood at the front gate. Stance wide, jacket vivid despite the grainy feed. He grinned straight at the camera and gave a little wave.

"He's just... waiting," said Judy.

"Honey," said Nick. She was already reaching for the remote. She cycled through other feeds, revealing more and more wolves.

Two stalking through the yard together.

One picking up a length of pipe from the sand, swinging it, satisfied with its feel.

Gary excitedly pointing to a pile of garbage and saying something that made Larry rub his eyes.

"They're everywhere," said Honey distantly.

"Oh dear oh dear," said Dave. "Friends of yours?"

Nick was furious. "First the bar, now this... How?! How did they...?!"
"You guys drove here, right?" said Honey. "Can you make it back to your car?"

"I... don't think so," said Judy. "We parked close to the front entrance. I bet they've already found it."

"Ah," said Dave. "In that case, you can take mine."

Nick shot him a glare. "I don't remember asking for your help."

"Yet I'm offering it nonetheless." The rabbit smiled. "I'm... camera-shy, so I tend to enter and exit via the rear of the compound. If we hurry, we can avoid the wolves and get clear."

"And then what? We go ghost hunting?"

"Precisely," smiled Dave. His scars really accented his teeth.

Nick looked to Judy, seeking her judgement.

_Worst case scenario_, said her narrowed eyes, _we can take this creep in a fight._


"Oh, you don't even gotta ask, Nicky."

"Thanks." He smiled. "I can always count on you."

Without warning, Honey pulled him into another hug. "Stay safe," she murmured. "And don't be a stranger."

"I won't."

"Hoppus!" Honey bent down to give Judy a hug, too. "You look after this idiot, y'hear? I really like him, for some reason. No accounting for taste I guess."

Judy tried to return it. Her arms barely reached Honey's sides. "I know. I like him too."

Honey straightened up. "Reggie. You ain't getting a hug." The rabbit just smiled.

Without another word, Honey retrieved her bat, gave them a nod, and stomped out of the clinic. They could hear her yelling in the distance as they ducked around the building and towards the perimeter, careful to avoid any stray wolves.

Dave brought them to a purple sedan which was, considering they had met its owner pawing through literal garbage, suspiciously clean. Nick squeezed into the back, nose wrinkled. Judy sat in the passenger's seat, weathering Dave's constant discussion of how nice and purple her eyes were.

It was almost midnight when they arrived. Dave parked in a dark alley and left the car without a word. He led them to a small, squat building, alone in the sand. Nick was glad to leave the car, but his relief didn't last.

"...You've got to be kidding."

"What?" said Judy. She joined him, following his gaze.

In letters so old and sandblasted they were barely legible, the building mumbled **FRED Y F ZBEA P ZZER**!
"...Where are we?"

"Carrots," said Nick. "Do you remember Frederick Fazbear Junior? Ran for Mayor last year?"

"Uh... yeah. Vaguely. He was the other candidate who ended up facing criminal charges, right?"

"Yeah. Because the family business is, uh..." He rubbed his eyes. "It all happened before your time – okay, that makes me sound older than I am, I was like, three – but suffice to say that a lot of weird stuff happened over the years. I thought they'd torn down all the old restaurants."


"Yeah, I bet. And the smell is--"

Nick's comment died in his throat. He stared up.

The Phantasm stared back down.

It hovered for a moment, its mask gleaming in the desert starlight. Then, suddenly, it pulled away. Gone.

Judy nudged him. "What? What is it?"

His voice was hoarse. "I saw it," he said. "Just there. It was on the roof."

She cringed. "I'm sorry, Nick. I didn't see anything..."

"Ah," said Dave. "But I did."

Nick's ears shot up. "You did? Seriously?"

"Seriously," said the rabbit. He gave Nick a little smile. "We'd better get inside, hadn't we...?"

He led them through the sand to the front door. Judy noted that the flimsy glass doors seemed inadequate. They had aged, just like the rest of the restaurant, but even brand new they would be far from secure. There was no way to lock them.

She was wondering about the security system – Do they even have one? Is that why they went out of business? – when they stepped inside and she almost gagged.

It was like walking into a corpse. Whatever nasty comment Nick had intended to make about the smell, it was accurate. The lights were off – no, broken – leaving the corridors even darker than the starlight outside. Wires bled from the walls and ceilings and garbage littered the floor, cans and cardboard and browning paper. The detritus of ancient birthdays.

And Dave laughed.

"Run," said Nick. "Ru--"

The door slammed shut behind them. It was monstrous, thick steel, falling from above with the cold speed of an industrial crusher. Nick and Judy backed up a step, then turned to face Dave.

He grinned, with too much teeth. Far too much. Out of the darkness behind him, two more sets drifted up. And tall, jagged monstrosities came with them. As Nick and Judy steeled themselves, the rabbit's grin grew.
"Oh, yes... The trap is sprung."
Chapter Summary

All alone on Pirate Cove,
It broke my heart in two!
You never came to see me,
So now I'm coming
TO SEE YOU.

The scarred rabbit's laughter carried through the dark, musty air. Judy planted herself in front of Nick, staring down their opponents. But she had no idea how she was supposed to fight off two mechanical monstrosities.

They hovered behind the rabbit like shy children, meeting Judy's gaze. Despite the danger, part of her still managed to feel disdain. They were robots – they could look like anything or nothing, as long as they worked. But they were shaped, roughly, cruelly, along the lines of a fox and a rabbit. It felt like a personal insult.

"I'm so glad you were stupid enough to come visit," said their host. His voice sounded even worse without the pretence of civility. "I knew exactly what to tell you, and now, here you are. How wonderful. My friends were just dying to meet you, and I do so enjoy the formal introductions. Please, allow me. This is Foxy," he said, gesturing to the sharp angles of matted red felt, watching them with one sole, soulless golden eye, "and this here is Bonnie," he added, turning to the purple behemoth with two red specks of light staring out from the black toothy void where its face should have been.

Judy clarified all her data. The door behind them was closed and definitely not about to open. She was no expert on robotics, but despite their poor condition, the two animatronics struck her as genuine threats. 'Foxy' had a sharpened hook for a right hand – Nick's eyes seemed caught on it. And the scarred rabbit stood there. Just grinning.

Judy raised her hands defensively. "Listen to me. There's no need for anyone to get hurt here, Dave. I--"

Raspy laughter killed her next thought. "Oh, that's adorable," he wheezed. "Don't tell me you actually think my name is 'Dave'."

Judy's eyes narrowed. Confirmation he had been lying from the start. "Alright. What is your name?"

"Oh, thank you for asking. A moniker is a window to the soul, wouldn't you say? Especially the ones that arise by themselves, replacing whatever drabness you were saddled with at birth..." He took a theatrical bow. "Within these hallowed walls, I prefer to think of myself as... **Springtrap.**"

Silence hung over them, thick as the choking dust, before Nick burst out laughing.

Springtrap's brow twitched. "Losing your mind already, fox?"

"Eh, maybe." Nick's grin shone. Judy was glad to see it. "Just needed a laugh, is all. Thanks for
utterly ruining all the tension you built."

"Hey now," said Judy, joining in. "It's cool to have a codename. It's not that weird."

"It is not," snarled Springtrap, "a codename. It is an expression of my true self."

"Ah," said Nick. "So it's more of a... murdersona?"

Springtrap was silent for a moment. He looked to his creations. "...Kill."

With matching shrieks, the robots lunged.

Judy grabbed Nick and pulled him aside, dodging Foxy's hook. Nick reached for Clawhauser's pistol, tucked into his belt. The animatronics were huge and close and terrifying, but he knew the strategic target. He aimed the pistol for Springtrap – and found just empty space.

"Where'd he–?!"

"Move!" yelled Judy as Bonnie's huge hands swiped for them. She shoved Nick clear, but fell straight into the robot's grasp.

Its grip was a vice. One hand caught her shoulders, the other closed around her waist, and both were instantly crushing. Judy felt her feet leave the ground, but it was a vague footnote compared to the pain. Pain that was quickly building.

"No!" Nick raised the shock pistol – his target was obvious. He unloaded a fierce salvo into Bonnie's empty face, teeth bared, trigger finger firing as rapidly as possible.

It wasn't immediate – Nick had just enough time to start thinking his assault was pointless – but the exposed wiring yielded to the electric blasts. Bonnie spasmed, losing its balance. As it collapsed, its hands jerked open and Judy fell free.

Nick pulled in close. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine. Just gimme a sec."

"Good. I was worried y–"

The hook swept for him.

Nick jumped back. Foxy loomed over him, grotesquely tall. Bonnie was down, but so was Judy. She needed time.

Backing up, Nick fired directly into the robot's eye. It didn't slow. It stalked after him with a speed surprising for its size, its weight, and Nick's foot slipped on some kid's creepy drawing of a clown–

The hook swung down again. Nick twisted out of the way, but not quite fast enough. The sharpened metal stabbed into the pistol, ripping it from his hands.

Foxy shook the pistol loose. It hit a wall, snapping into two pieces. Useless.

Nick took a breath, raising his fists more from muscle memory than any hope of damaging it.

_C'mon, Officer Wilde. Tall perp attacking with a sharpened weapon. Pretend it's a scrawny lion with a sword._
Foxy swiped and Nick moved with it, grabbing the robot's wrist. He twisted, and nothing happened, and then threw his weight against its leg, and nothing happened.

Still metal.

He kept a hold of Foxy's arm, which juddered sickly in his grip, but then the other hand shot towards him. It caught him by the muzzle, dirty metal fingers digging into his face.

"Hands off, ugly!"

Judy, apparently, had recovered. Gripping a loose metal pipe, the strongest weapon to hand, she leapt to the wall, bounced up, and brought the pipe down against Foxy's muzzle. Backed with momentum, she managed to shatter some teeth. Shards of white spilled onto the floor, Judy rolling over them as she landed.

The robot rocked, and Nick managed to pull himself loose. But that was it. Shrieking vengefully, Foxy unhinged its jaw, the half-shattered teeth just as sharp and deadly. Nothing would phase it. It persisted.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!" said Nick, ducking under another swipe of the hook.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" agreed Judy. She pulled Nick's sleeve, leading him down a dim corridor. The robot shambled after them.

They reached an open space, dotted with miniature carnival rides, cheap plastic shapes huddled in the dark – and Nick lurched as Judy pulled him back against the wall. She slammed her finger against her mouth. Nick nodded.

With silent care, Judy adjusted her grip on the pipe. She took aim, steeled her arm, and flung it down the room. It clattered noisily against a carousel.

Then they waited.

Pressed against the wall, hearing the grinding and shuffling and painful creak of old metal as their pursuer got closer, Nick tried to control his breathing. His paw had found Judy's. Her grip was firm, reassuring. He watched her. She was poised, ready to run at a second's notice – it was getting so close – but she was confident.

The hook came first, gleaming sickly in the dark, but soon the whole behemoth creaked out of the corridor–

and kept going, shambling toward the carousel.

Nick blinked, watching it move past. He looked to Judy.

Auditory sensors! said Judy's ears. They track us by sound.

Noted, said Nick's nod. Silent screams only.

They turned back they way they came and set off through the darkness, slowly, picking over debris and dust with absolute caution.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! said Nick's eyes, silently.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! agreed Judy's eyes, silently.
They had soon holed up in a supply closet. They shut the door and used a heavy metal cabinet to barricade it. It was the only item in the room that was not creepy robot parts.

"Nightmares," whispered Nick, his voice quiet but firm. "This is a room for storing nightmares." He poked a skeletal black arm with his toe. The arm twitched suddenly and Nick flinched, barely managing to stay silent.

They watched it for a second, but nothing moved. Judy let out a slow breath. "Well. I'm starting to see why Fred Junior got arrested last year. Were all the restaurants this… deadly?"

Nick shook his head. "From what I remember, he was arrested for mishandling the business. I knew this place was shady from the start, but I thought it was just badly run. I mean, it was badly run, definitely, but…" He ran a hand down his face. "I like to think 'killer robots' would have made their way down the grapevine. That's what I'm saying. I think they're new."

"Right…" She sighed. "This is bad. Really, really bad. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, Hopps. I'm the one who…" He swallowed, letting the sentence die.

She moved closer. "You... said you saw that thing again?"

"Yeah. Right over the roof."

Judy frowned. "Do you think it's a robot? Created by this rabbit, like those things in the hallway?"

"A robot?" said Nick hollowly. "A robot that only I can see? That can fly through the air and frame me for murder? Those monstrosities are scary, but they're held together with duct tape and pizza grease."

"Yeah, okay. Doesn't sound like he built it..."

"Yeah. But I saw it here. It might still be nearby." His voice was quiet. "If... if it was even here in the first place."

"Nick, what do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean," he growled. "I'm not poisoned, Hopps. I trust Honey on that. So that just leaves... y'know."

"I don't know." She was firm. Focused. "What does it leave?"

"It leaves I'm – crazy!"

He caught himself, his voice too loud. They waited for a moment, but nothing came.

Nick broke the silence with a sigh. "I'm... crazy. That's the only explanation. I'm seeing things that aren't there, and dragging you down, and just--"

"Nick. Nick."

Judy took his paws in hers. She met his gaze. Smiling. Somehow.

"...So what?"

He just blinked.
"Yeah, okay. Let's entertain this theory. There's no ghost, there's no poison. You're just going through some kind of... episode." She shrugged. "So what? It happens. For heck's sake, Nick, you had a lot of trauma before you became a big-city cop. Honestly, I'm surprised you're as sane as you are."

She squeezed his paws gently.

"But no matter what happens, whatever you're going through, you're still my partner. I know you aren't dangerous. And I'll help you through this."

"I..." Nick stared. "I don't trust myself any more."

"But you still trust me, right?"

Nick nodded. No hesitation.

"Well. I still trust you." Her eyes were soft. "You just need some help. I'll make sure you get it. So hold on just a little longer, okay?"

Nick felt his eyes water. "Judy..."

She let the moment last, but not for too long. Nick didn't need too much at once. "I can't solve this problem by myself. My job is to keep you safe." She coughed. "Right now, that means surviving the night."

"Right. Sure." Nick wiped his eyes, and suddenly, it was business as usual again. Judy never got used to how quickly he could switch. "You think we can't escape?"

"It's unlikely. Da- Sprin... That creep brought us here to kill us. We have to assume he's covered every exit. We could maybe brute force a vent open or something, but that would take time."

"Time we don't have. Because robots."

"Exactly. So I suggest we do what we always do: survive." She shifted her weight, smirking. "It's, what, half past midnight? In a little over five hours, we'll fail to make our rendezvous. I guarantee that if we don't show up, Sly will come looking for us. Maybe he'll even grab Carmelita, too. We just need to hold out."


He regretted it immediately. He knew how Judy felt. But to his surprise, she just chuckled.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just... last year, I was in the exact opposite situation. Stuck somewhere with Sly, waiting for you to notice and rescue us. And Sly sulked about that just like you did now." She smirked. "But hey. He came around, right?"

Nick dodged her gaze. "Right. Well, what's the plan? We just gonna hide?"

"Hiding seems to be working. But while we're here, let's see if we can figure anything out..."

From one of her belt's pouches, she produced a white shard. She squinted, turning it over in her fingers. Nick hunkered closer. It took him a moment to place it. "That's... one of teeth from that nightmare fox. You grabbed that?"
"I sort of did it on autopilot. Detective instincts, I guess."

She frowned thoughtfully.

"It's... ceramic. You can make dentures out of ceramic. You can also make knives." She glanced up, her eyes grim. "This seems closer to the knife variety."

"God. What is this creep's deal?" He let out a breath. "I really don't understand how I never heard of him."

"He should've been on the ZPD's radar, you mean?"

"That too, I guess. But I meant... I know everybody." His eyes narrowed. "Everybody worth knowing..."

For a moment, they were silent. Judy kept examining the tooth, but part of her already knew it would offer no help. Nick just listened. There was a distant thump from elsewhere in the building – was something in the airvents? That would fit this horrorshow. Danger from any angle.

"Say..." he murmured. "How many robots do you think he has?"

"You think there's more?"

"Maybe. He made a show of the first two, but there's no guarantee that's the whole ensemble." He met her gaze. "I'm just saying, stay on your–"

The arm swung straight for him.

Police training kicked in, and Nick was dodging out of the way before he fully processed the attack. They watched in horror as what had just looked like a pile of rusted parts – what was just a pile of rusted parts – began dragging itself toward them with painful, murderous intent.

"Agh! I think there's a fox head somewhere in there...!" Nick glanced over. "Do something!"

"Do what?! It's already broken! I can't even push it over, it's not standing up!"

The mangle persisted, letting out a low hiss of static. There were definitely enough sharp angles to pose a threat. It backed them against the cabinet blocking the door.

"Okay. Okay. Idea. Gimme a boost!" Judy climbed to the top of the cabinet with Nick's help. "Move on my signal. Until then, can you just – stand there?"

"What?!" Nick's eyes darted between Judy and the pile of encroaching murder. "Why?"

"I'm sorry! But we only get one shot."

He bit his lip, then nodded. "Say when."

Nick stuck to the cabinet, heart in his mouth, black metal oozing and twitching toward him. No less than two eyes were staring at him from within the mangle – different colours, different shapes, different places. His gaze settled on the one in the fox head. A stupid, animal part of him almost felt pity.

"Now!"

He moved. Judy had wedged herself between the door and the cabinet, and by unfurling her legs she
managed to tip it forward. It crashed into the mangle, crushing the head. With a cry of static, it went
dead, one over-long limb at a time.

Nick and Judy caught their breath, alone in the musty dark.

"Well," said Nick. "This is gonna be a long ni–"

The door exploded with a shower of splinters as Foxy slammed its hook through the thin wood. It
wrenched the door off its hinges, exposing the partners.

They dodged under its legs and ran.
Breaking into a prison is considerably easier than breaking out. Mostly because there's no restriction on equipment, but partly because few guards ever expect it.

Once he arrived, Sly's first move was to circle the perimeter. He noted the multiple ZPD vehicles in the prison's parking lot. The investigation was continuing long into the night.

The prison sat outside city limits, and he had lost a few hours getting here by foot. But he would make up the lost time. Somewhere within these high walls were answers, and Sly wouldn't leave without finding them. He owed that to Nick.

He smirked to himself. Thinking like a cop again. Right now, he needed to think like a thief.

The front door was, generally speaking, not an option. He needed a weakness to exploit, some gap in the armour. That gap came in the form of a tall tree vaguely close to the rear wall. Evidently, the management did not expect anyone to climb the tree, take a running leap off a branch, and fling themselves into the prison with no following means of escape.

Sly Cooper was just too brilliant for them.

He picked himself up with only a minimum of bruises and set off. The late hour offered no advantage but darkness. Guards and inmates alike would still be active. The prison was legally required to operate both day and night, to accommodate nocturnal schedules. Prisoners could move between areas at any hour; if they never actually slept, that was their own problem. Sly wondered how many systems in this marvellous city only just about worked. It was a worrying train of thought.

Focusing on the mission, he crept through the courtyard. He was close to a cell block, a few residential lights still lit.

Sly debated whether to try interviewing any inmates. Part of him thought they might be more open to a Fellow Criminal then they would to ZPD interrogators. But Sly did not always gel well with other criminals. In fact, 'other criminals' were the sole victims of his thefts, assaults, and insulting monologues. Sly believed himself to a be better, smarter, and far more attractive than 'other criminals', as he would gladly outline in detail through an insulting monologue.

And they might be jealous that they had been arrested and he hadn't.

He decided against any interviews, but angled toward the cell block anyway. There was little in the courtyard. A rusted grate offered a way inside, and soon, he was lowering himself into a darkened room. Undetected, like always.

"You..."
Sly froze.

The lights snapped on, revealing the cell. No bars; concrete walls and a heavy steel door. Private. Not quite solitary confinement, but a vague attempt to slow an inmate's worsening mental state. Sly recognized the type.

He also recognized the lion.

He looked terrible. During the Nope Diamond incident, he had been gaunt – now he was worryingly underweight, not scrawny but sickly. His eyes, once sharp and imperious, were tinged with green mania. His claws were still out. They looked worn down.

"You..." His voice was coarse, unused. "You're another delusion, aren't you?"

"Um," said Sly, "yes."

"Remarkably lifelike, this one..." Scar stalked forward, claws ready. "I wonder how loud you'll scream."

Sly backed up, cane in hand, calculating his options. He could probably take Scar down, but how quickly? How quietly? Every second here endangered him, endangered the mission, endangered Nick and Judy. He needed to move, he needed silence, he needed–

The door flew open and hit Scar in the face. He fell and did not get up.

Sly found himself looking at another lion – tall, broad, possessing the regal stature and confidence Scar utterly lacked. His orange prison jumpsuit did little to impinge his urbane air.

He glanced around. His voice was loud, but rich.

"Hey pipsqueak, you in here? Guess not."

His eyes finally caught Sly's. He blinked, then smiled.

"Well! What have we here? A visitor outside visiting hours – though if you are who I think you are, I doubt the rules have ever given you much pause. Mammal after my own heart."

"Uh, sure," said Sly. He glanced to Scar, who still did not get up. "And who do you think I am?"

"It's pretty obvious." The lion folded his huge arms. "You'd be Sly Cooper. Heir to the Cooper line, face of the Cooper Gang, and person of interest even before you tried stealing a diamond from my old pal T'Challa."

"Right." Sly felt increasingly out of his depth. "And... you would be?"

"Oh, sorry! I'm used to everybody knowing my name. I guess a globe-trotting mammal like you isn't concerned with local politicians." He offered a huge paw. "Name's Leo! Leodore Lionheart. Former mayor of Zootopia, current prison kingpin. Great to meetcha."

Sly shook it. It took both hands. "Oh, of course. You were the guy trying to cover up the Night Howler incident, right?"

"Key word 'trying'!" He laughed, trailing off into a cough. "Limited... limited success there. But that's the way the news goes."

Sly relaxed a little. Lionheart exuded a friendly air. Sly knew better than to trust him, but if nothing
else, he seemed like a great source of conversation. "Well, it's a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise, kid." Lionheart looked him over. "Now I don't mean to pry, but anybody breaking into this place is a real interesting development. Can I ask what you're up to?"

"Actually, I'm here on beha– because of Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde."

"Ah! Judy Hopps." Lionheart's eyes brightened. "Got where she was thanks to my Mammal Inclusion Initiative, y'know. Knew from the moment I saw her she was destined for great things. Of course, I had hoped said great things didn't include destroying my operation and ruining my life, but hey. What's she up to?"

Sly had to take a second to process Lionheart's sheer cheerfulness. "Uh... I need to investigate Dawn Bellwether's cell. She might be pulling something."

"Ugh. That'd be just like her. You think rumours of her death have been greatly exaggerated, huh? Smart. Can't always trust the media these days, take it from me."

"Sure." Sly tilted his head. "I... gotta say, I didn't expect to find you in here. They really put you and Bellwether in the same prison? That seems like a riot waiting to happen."

Lionheart chuckled. "Yes, that's astute. As it happens, I used to be in another facility entirely. But, well, in prison... things happen."

"Besides," Lionheart continued, "Bellwether's a riot waiting to happen anyway. Prisons have disproportionately large predator populations. And the prey in here are just like the prey anywhere else. Some buy into Bellwether's disgusting politics. Many are smart enough not to. Either way, there's a lot of mammals here who would gladly push her down the stairs."

"So, what? They just keep her in solitary confinement?"

"Right again! You're sharp. Good grasp of how law enforcement thinks. I suppose you'd need it."

"Yeah. I've... got some experience." Sly checked on Scar, still stuffed behind the door. The scrawny lion hadn't moved. As with all things, following Scar's example would be a mistake. "I'd better get going. Where's her cell?"

"Solitary confinement wing's at the southern corner." He waved a paw. "I'll walk you there! Come on."

Lionheart left without another word. If he noticed Scar, he didn't react.

Sly followed, sticking to the shadows. Lionheart was smart enough to move at an amble, giving Sly plenty of time to dart between safe spots as they travelled to the right block. They dropped to a murmur, but with no-one in earshot, the conversation flowed on.

"So," said Sly, waiting for Lionheart at a corner. "Seems kinda... understaffed around here."

"You'd think having a ton of cops on hand would make things more secure, right? But there's so much friction between the ZPD and the guards that they've almost cancelled each other out. The cops think every guard is a suspect, and the prison staff don't like anybody over their shoulders. Makes it harder to beat us up for no reason." He winked. "End result? If you're quiet, you can enjoy a pleasant stroll through the grounds. Not that you'd
"Need my help sneaking around!"

"Well, I appreciate being pointed in the right direction." Sly tilted his head. "Say, you seem to know a lot about me."

"Well, sure! You're all Taka talks about."

Sly stared blankly.

"Taka Kifalme?" prompted Lionheart. "Scrawny, sour, only in here because of you?"

Sly's stare only got blanker.

"Oh, that's right, he's got that dumb little..." He cleared his throat. "'Scar'?"

"Oh! Oh. Scar. Yes."

They moved down a new corridor. Lionheart nodded subtly to a security camera, and Sly crept under its line of sight.

"Could he be involved?"

Lionheart frowned. "I doubt it, honestly. His first day here, he got jumped by those hyenas he'd hired. Turns out they didn't take kindly to being poisoned, so they, uh... aired their grievances."

"That's hilarious."

"Ha ha, right? Always respect your bodyguards, even I know that much. After that, he kinda lost it. Not sure he's got any schemes left in him. Ones that'd work, anyway." Lionheart scratched one claw against his chin. "Don't know about that little hacker lady they had, either. She was in another facility. I hear she got a light sentence, did her time, and left town a couple weeks back."

"What about Tai Lung? Has he been acting suspicious?"

"Probably!" said Lionheart. "But I couldn't tell you. He's not here."

Sly froze, wide eyes staring from shadow. "What? He broke out?"

"Yep. He stuck around for the pottery class. One afternoon, after an advanced tutorial, the teacher joked that she didn't have anything left to show him. And he said, 'Then I suppose I may as well leave!' And she laughed, and he laughed, and the whole class laughed, and in the morning he was gone."

"And you didn't think to maybe mention that first?!"

Lionheart gave him a dry look. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did he beat you to death seven months ago?"

"Not that I remember."

"Then you're probably fine. Not one for nuance, that guy. If he didn't come straight for you, I imagine he's moved on."

Sly stopped short, his ear perked. "Is someone around that corner?"

Lionheart wandered up, glancing down the concrete corridor. "Ah!" he murmured. "Ol' Bogo himself."
"The Chief? He's here personally?"

"Why not?" Lionheart's eyes gleamed. "Hopps and Wilde are his pet projects too. They haven't even sent him to jail. Yet."

"I'd better stay low. He's not my biggest fan."

"No. Really?"

"Shocking, I know." Sly glanced around. "Are we close?"

"Oh, sure. Her cell's hereish, but two storeys up."

Sly's eye landed on an old, reliable friend: a grate leading into the airvents. "Then I think we part ways here. Thanks for everything, Mister Lionheart."

"Please, kid, I'm a little past 'Mister Lionheart'. 'Leo' is fine. And thank you for the distraction! Gets boring in here."

"I can imagine..."

Lionheart helped Sly reach the vent – and the second Sly was inside, he was walking off. "Well, good luck!"

"Wait—"

"Hey, Bogo!" Lionheart yelled down the hallway, grinning massively. "Come to visit your old boss, huh?" And like that, he was gone.

Sly hesitated, suddenly fearful that Lionheart would reveal his location. But the Chief's far-off yelling seemed more irritated than urgent. Lionheart was buying time.

Sly set off through the dust.

Investigating the cell took much longer than had hoped. On arrival, he discovered a desk and two chairs set up by the only entrance. The vents didn't lead into the cell, leaving Sly staring down at the checkpoint. Good as he was, Sly doubted he could casually break in and out of a political tyrant's prison cell by any other route.

A pair of ZPD officers were stationed below, a tiger and a wolf. They were quietly chatting to each other, reviewing the evidence and lamenting Nick and Judy's absence.

Sly knew it would be more efficient to skip straight to the morgue. But the sentries were an unknown variable. They could both take a break; they could be joined by five more officers. And he needed to see the cell for himself.

As much as it pained him to sit still, he waited. Perched in the ceiling, he listened to their conversation. He hoped to overhear something useful, but all they got from them was their low mood.

Time dragged by. Sly caught himself, for the fourth time, wondering what the tiger officer looked like out of uniform. (Definitely his type, that one.) He yawned silently.

*I'm really screwing this up. Stuck in a vent... And I bet Nick and Judy are laughing it up somewhere.*
Bonnie lumbered towards them, powerful hands flexing out of sync. Its empty face stared them down.

"Oh, come on!" protested Judy. "We broke this one!"

"He built them," said Nick, his voice hoarse. "He can fix them."

"Fix this, you son of a–!"

_heck_, thought Sly. _They have all the fun._

Fangmeyer finally drifted off to check on their 'fun new boss'. Wolford agreed to watch the entrance alone. Sly roused himself. This was probably his best shot.

Once Wolford was alone, he took out a radio – an older model, distinct from the walkie-talkie holstered on his belt – and began fiddling with it, opening the casing to play with its innards.

Sly opened the airvent and began meticulously lowering himself down behind Wolford's back. He moved with absolute care, drawing on every fibre of his stealth. This was a cop, and a wolf, _and_ someone Nick and Judy trusted. Underestimating him was not a good idea.

As he hung there, Wolford suddenly tensed, nose in the air. Sly froze, trying to fade out of existence by sheer force of will.

Wolford sniffed, sniffed, _sniffed_ – and sneezed.

"Agh. Stupid dusty prison..."

Sly let out a silent breath. He dropped down and slipped into the cell.

The first thing that hit him was the smell of blood.

No body. Just an empty cell with bloodstained bedsheets. Sly recalled what he had overheard in Bogo's office – _'No signs of a struggle.'_ It certainly seemed like she died in her sleep.

_Seems like_, Sly told himself. _Jury's still out._

He lingered for a while, applying everything about forensics he had picked up from Carmelita. But there was no smoking gun, no revolutionary clue stuffed under the pillows.

All that waiting, and no results.

Frustrated, Sly crept away before Fangmeyer returned. Lionheart's tour had given him a better idea of the prison's layout, and once back in the vents, he headed straight for the morgue.

Soon Sly was letting himself into what would have passed for a doctor's office – desk, posters, paperwork – were it not for the steel drawers dominating the back wall like the world's worst filing cabinet. He glanced through the labels, neat little names in a neat little font, until he found her.

**Bellwether, D.**

Sly took a breath. He was no stranger to death, but being alone in a morgue at night was starting to unnerve him. And now he had to open the locker containing Schrödinger's Lamb.

There was no sense letting the tension get to him. He grabbed the handle, heaved it open, and was
Sly sighed. "I've never been so disappointed to not see a dead body."

He rubbed his face. It was hard to say whether this was good or bad news. Now he knew it was Bellwether, but he also knew it was Bellwether. And if she was out there somewhere...

"Okay. Now I gotta--"

His ears perked. Two sets of footsteps in the hallway. One brutal and heavy. The other, he knew very, very well.

Moments later, the door opened. Chief Bogo stormed in, Carmelita close behind.

"Total waste of time," Bogo was rumbling. "Exactly as I predicted."

Carmelita held herself tall. "Chief, you've been working this case for hours. Might I suggest you go home and rest?"

"Might I suggest you actually show me some progress?! I can hardly relax when this is the best Interpol's finest can offer."

He grabbed a set of papers from the coroner's desk, shoving them under his arm.

"I'll be at headquarters. Working. Call me if you find something."

He stomped out, slamming the door behind him. Alone, Carmelita let out a sigh. Her façade faded, her eyes becoming tired, her rigid posture deflating.

Bogo was tired, and he was angry, and that was affecting his professional judgement. She was right to point that out. But she doubted she'd ever stop feeling like a hypocrite.

Still, here was a chance to be alone, just for a moment. There was no-one around except--

She tensed. After so many years, her instincts could kick in without her consciously processing the data. It could've been a scent, a sound, something she saw out of place. But she felt it, and she knew she was right.

She stalked to the lockers. She found Bellwether's name. She opened it.

Sly grinned nervously up at her.

"Ah! Carmelita! It's so good to--"

Without a word, she began to close the locker.

"Nonowait it's cold and dark in here I don't really fit--!"

Carmelita hissed out a sigh. Slowly, she pulled it back far enough to see his face. She kept her hand on the cabinet, stance solid, blocking any escape. "Sly, what are you doing?"

"Investigating."

"By yourself?! You're supposed to be protecting Nick and Judy!"

"I was!" he protested. "They told me to come here. We thought it'd be efficient."
Carmelita scoffed. "All those years spent trying to put you behind bars, and this whole time all I had to was ask nicely?"

"I'm as surprised as you are." He shifted a little, trying to get more comfortable. "If I'd known you were coming here, I would've hitched a ride."

"No."

Sly looked up. Carmelita's eyes were hard.

"I didn't want to say this in front of them. They don't need any more stress. But let me make this clear: our only common ground right now is their safety. And if anything happens to them, I'm blaming you."

Sly met her gaze. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The moment dragged. Carmelita stared him down, but Sly wouldn't bend. That seemed to satisfy her. "Fine."

"So, while we're here... feel like comparing notes? I know I'm not your favourite person right now, but helping me is helping them, so..."

Carmelita glanced to the door. "Make it fast."

He did. "Apparently Tai Lung broke out a while back. Is he in on this?"

She shook her head. "Already checked. Last spotted thirty-six hours ago, halfway across the world. He's avoided Zootopia since escaping. I doubt he's here."

"And Peridot?"

"Retired to a farm. No suspicious activity since."

"Then I got nothing." He sighed. "Some investigation... You?"

"The guards were useless, so we tried interviewing prisoners. Only one said anything – he claimed to see something vault the fence near Bellwether's cell. In and out. Times match the murder, and it looked nothing like a fox."

"That's a lead!" said Sly.

"No, it's not. He's a fox too, arrested for con-artistry. Bogo refuses to take it seriously. Insinuated he was an old friend of Nick's." Her expression darkened. "Did not care for his tone."

"Oh."

There was silence for a moment. Then Sly tried to press on.

"I took a look at her cell, but didn't find anything."

"Understandable," she said. "We're still waiting on some lab results, but the preliminary findings seem accurate. Someone broke in and killed her as she slept. The wounds are consistent with the size, shape and biting strength of fox fangs, maybe a little stronger." She frowned. "It's sickening."

"Carmelita."
"What?"

"Aren't you going to ask why I'm hiding in this empty corpse cabinet?"

"Why would I?" she said. "You were snooping around, heard us coming, and needed to hide."

"Accurate as ever, but you're missing an important word." He smirked. "Why, do you suppose, is this corpse cabinet empty?"

"It's called a cold chamber, and it's empty because her body was moved to a ZPD lab four hours ago for analysis."

"Oh," said Sly.

"Why? What were you getting at?"

He coughed. "...We think Bellwether faked her death."

Carmelita gave him a look.

It was not an encouraging look.

She squinted at him as though he was very far away.

"What?" he said, suddenly self-conscious.

"I... really don't see how that's plausible. Faking your death is absurdly hard without the restrictions of prison. So much of this case already veers on impossible."

"Exactly!" said Sly. "What's a little more impossibility for the pile?"

Carmelita rubbed her eyes. "I can't argue with that logic... Look. I can double-check everything, the body, the reports. But I'm sorry, I just don't see it."

"The fake body."

"Sly."

"The fudged reports."

This time, they both heard it – those footsteps thundering back toward them. Before Sly could protest, Carmelita shoved the locker closed and leaned against it.

Bogo burst in, glaring. "Fox!"

"Yes, Chief?"

"Clawhauser got another anonymous tip. Hopps and Wilde spotted at an abandoned restaurant in Sahara Square."

Carmelita's poker face was flawless. "Excellent. I'll be right there."

"This time, maybe you'll actually find them," he growled.

He disappeared.

Carmelita was tempted to just follow him, but she was a woman of principle. She opened the locker
and Sly spilled out, eyes a little wild.

"Okay. Thanks. I've had enough of that now." He dropped to the floor. "He sounds like he's doing well."

"After years under Barkley, nothing phases me. But yes. I'm concerned." She turned to Sly. "Bogo's not a patient man. We're running out of time. Every time I come back empty-handed, I feel him respect me less."

"Maybe you can just arrest one of us?" said Sly with a shrug. "We could take turns."

"Sly..." Carmelita glared. "There's no time for jokes."

"Normally I'd disagree, but... you've got a point." Sly turned pensive. "Nick said they might be all night at the doctor's place. I have no idea what they're doing at a restaurant, but if the ZPD's closing in already, they won't make it to our rendezvous. I need to get there fast, help them escape..."

His eyes met hers. He give her a timid smile, hoping it looked sufficiently cute.

"Um... Can you give me a ride?"

She didn't reply immediately. That alone was good news, he supposed. She would be within her rights to arrest him. Helping him was a real risk.

But they both knew what was at stake.

"Sly. Remember that 'romantic surprise' you tried to pull on me?"

"Carmelita, you will need to be much, much, much more specific."

She sighed, sharply, but stayed focused. "Two years after we met. I'd been transferred to a new headquarters, and you weren't sure where it was, so you..."

"Oh yeah. That. In my defence, nineteen is a reckless age, and the week before I'd seen this romantic comedy where – wait. Are you saying what I think you are?"

"Not unless you've got a better idea."

Sly gently took hold of both of her hands, looking deeply into her eyes. She tensed. Told herself it was police instincts rather than the urge to blush.

"Carmelita," he said tenderly. "I never have a better idea."

Her two liaisons were already in the carpark. Wolford shook himself out, and Fangmeyer gave him a smirk.

"What? Carsick?"


"Yeah, that's fair," said Fangmeyer, smile dying.

"Having an actual squad car is one of the few things that isn't stressing me. I'm sick of your motorcycle."
"You're a baby. It's a tiger-sized bike, there's plenty of room."

"For the last time, it's not the room! It's that you drive like a—" Suddenly Wolford stood to attention. "Inspector Fox! Hi."

Carmelita strode up. "Fangmeyer, Wolford. Ready to go?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Great." She tossed the keys to Fangmeyer. "Could you do me a favour and take the wheel? I've got something I need to think about."

"Sure thing."

Fangmeyer got into the car. Wolford paused. "You coming?"

"Of course. Just give me a second out here, I thought I heard something loose in the... what's the term here?" She knocked on the back of the car. "Trunk?"

"Ah, okay." He got in.

Carmelita opened the trunk, blocking their view, and Sly crawled out from under the cruiser. "I managed to go car to car without getting spotted," he whispered proudly.

"Just get in."

He did, curling up to fit. "Hey, Carmelita?" he murmured. "I just wanted to thank you. You're really being the bigger person here, putting Nick and Judy first, even though I haven't been—"

Carmelita slammed the trunk shut.

"Oh, I needed that." She strode for the backdoor. "Alright, kids, let's drive."
"Carrots, if you won't say it, I will."

It had been a long night. Nick and Judy were catching their breath, crumpled against the wall in an empty corridor. There were no safe spots left. Every time they found a room to barricade – the supply closets, the kitchen, behind the ancient stage – the robots would batter their defences until they were back to running. Every time they disabled a robot, they would be chased away from its broken frame, and within the hour it would be functional again. They saw no sign of Springtrap, or escape.

They were exhausted.

"Say what?" said Judy, her eyes tired.

Nick grinned. "Getting almost killed by barely-working animatronics meant to entertain children is an embarrassing new low on the list of people, objects and abstract concepts that have almost killed us."

"Yeah," she chuckled. "It is."

They sat in silence for a second. This patch of floor was slightly below average on grime and
garbage. Far from comfortable, but the best respite on offer. Their only method of survival was to flee and rest and flee again, and the intervals were getting shorter every time. Nick and Judy both had excellent endurance. But they were still mammals. And they couldn't outlast machinery.

Judy stretched. "Any idea what time it is?"

"Sorry. No."

She nodded, slowly, as though it took effort. "Well, 6am can't be far off. We just need to wait a little longer."

Nick's smile, his veneer of cheerfulness, cracked. "How are you so sure?"

"What?"

"Of rescue. Of Sly." He hoped he wasn't glaring at her. He was tired and it was getting hard to tell. "Isn't it more likely we'll just die here?"

"Maybe," said Judy, but it didn't sound like a concession. "I don't know what to tell you, Nick. If no-one's coming, it's moot. But if Sly is on his way, we're gonna still be here when he arrives. That's what I'm..."

She trailed off. They both heard it.

Rounding the corner, its metal feet stomping through the grime, came Bonnie. It fixed its faceless red eyes on them and let out a low shriek.

"Yeah, yeah," yawned Nick. "Skreeeeeee to you too."

They both dragged themselves upright. Nick looked to Judy.

"Gonna kick it?"

"No. Running low on kicks. Saving them."

"Right. Let's go."

They turned and walked away.

Sprinting was a waste of energy. Bonnie could be evaded with a brisk pace, so that was exactly what they set. No more.

"Where to?" said Nick, trying to give the vibe of a gossip-laden Sunday jog. All in the hips.

"Ugh," said Judy. "Back near the front, I guess."

By now, they had the building mapped out. Nick suspected the exact dimensions of this restaurant would serve as settings for future nightmares, assuming he had that luxury.

They knew the front door was barred by steel. They had found the back door similarly blocked. They knew every corner, every camera, every vent. It was still horrifying, but at least there were no more surprises.

Nick and Judy got halfway down a familiar corridor and stopped short.

A wall had opened.
The cruiser rolled through the dark sand. At Carmelita's instruction, Fangmeyer parked it some distance from the restaurant.

"Wolford." Carmelita took point as they stepped out into the early morning air. "You're scent-certified. Do you think Nick and Judy might've passed through here?"

Wolford inhaled and immediately choked.

"Wolford?"

"Sorry. Sorry. I'm fine." He rubbed his nose. "It's, uh... I mean, they might be here. But that place..."

"Smells like an abandoned restaurant?" offered Fangmeyer.

"Worse. Much worse."

"Hmm," said Carmelita.

Behind them, the trunk quietly opened. Sly slipped out like a shadow.

Carmelita was being her usual self. She was exuding enough authority to hold the attention of her liaisons. Sly stayed low to the ground and circled around, sneaking up to the restaurant's rear.

His search for a back entrance turned up a puzzling discovery – a thick steel door, barring any access. Sly did a quick scan for other openings, careful to stay out of the officers' sight. But there was nothing. This children's pizzeria was impenetrable.

Sly knew two things immediately. That anonymous tip had been accurate; Nick and Judy were here. And they were in trouble.

He crept back towards the front, just close enough to make out Carmelita's voice. Apparently the front door was similarly blocked. She ordered Wolford to call in the fire department, hoping a team with axes could do what Fangmeyer's powerful arms could not. Sly shook his head. Typical cop solution. Sensible and collaborative and fast. But maybe not fast enough.

Sly slunk back to his own door. He frowned at it, alone with his thoughts. Sly hated being alone. It was a rare and unpleasant sensation. His brain adapted.

"Hey, idiot, said his inner Nick. If you don't show some hustle, I'm gonna die mad at you. Is that what you want? Me to bite it before admitting how cool you are?"

"I'm on the way!" murmured Sly. "I just don't see a way past this emergency door."

"C'mon, Sly! said his inner Judy. Don't you remember the fun safety trivia I taught you? Emergency doors open if..."

"The power goes out! Of course. All I need to do is cut the juice."

Exactly! Now get moving. I think you're pretty cool, but I'd also rather not die.

Sly glanced around for power lines, but none came close. This building used its own generator. He was assaulted with anxieties – what if it's underground? Inside? Buried in sand? – and dodged past them like the harmless potshots they were.
The roof. Always check the roof first.

Sly's faith was rewarded – once he pulled himself to the roof, he saw his target. As well as the generator, there was also the rooftop exhaust for the pizzeria's airvents. But Sly ignored it. If Nick or Judy were injured, a vertical escape would be too difficult. He had to open the doors. And he was definitely past his airvent-quota for the night.

He stood before his victim. "Here's the generator. Now what...?"

_Electronic engineering is a delicate science_, said his inner Bentley. _Only very smart people can do it, like me. But since you're a quick study, you might be able to disable the generator safely by opening the hatch and systematically–_

_Your friends are in danger!_ screamed his inner Murray. _Smash the thing and get moving!_


_I vote smash_, said his inner Carmelita.

"Then we smash it!"

_Great_, she said. _I definitely love you._

"I definitely love you too."

He started smashing.

The restaurant's interior was still hopelessly dark. There was no indication of Sly's slow progress with the generator, of Carmelita and Fangmeyer and Wolford establishing their perimeter. Nick and Judy had no idea how close help was.

It was just them, a robot, and a hole.

Bonnie was still lumbering after them, relentless. The partners stayed wary, but their attention was on this new opening. Grey light filtered through the gap.

"This was a wall," said Nick. "This was definitely a wall. We passed this spot a dozen times."

Judy kept her eyes on Bonnie, her back against Nick's. "Should we check it out?"

"You're kidding, right? It's a mysterious death hole. There's no way I'm–"

A shriek cut the air. They looked up. As Bonnie kept coming from the hallway's rear, Foxy had appeared from the other direction. It paused, sizing them up with its one eye. It lined itself up.

And it charged like a festering bullet.

The hook sliced cleanly, and would have caught both partners if they hadn't moved in time. Judy had the right idea, throwing herself down to slip between Foxy's legs. But Nick, to his own exasperation, threw himself in the one direction there was enough space. Towards the hole.

_stupid reflexes always keeping me alive why can't i slip on a banana peel or something and be done with it_

His paws hit the ground, one hand joining his feet. He wobbled, inertia still sliding him across the
floor. He landed in the new room.

Judy's eyes widened. She ignored the robots, reaching out to her partner.

"Nick! No!"

Judy's voice was abruptly cut off by a slam of steel. Another door.

"Clever. Clever clever clever."


"I suppose I should expect nothing less. Outlasting my friends like that. But I saw everything on the cameras. And now..."

Springtrap stepped into the light. In each hand, he held a butcher knife. Gleaming.

"What would you say is your best feature, fox? Your tail, perhaps?" His tongue darted out, licking scarred lips. "No question for that partner of yours. Her eyes. Her pretty purple eyes. I must find some way to preserve them..."

Behind Springtrap was a vent – *that's how he was getting around* – but Nick had no thoughts of escape. He steeled himself, eyes hard. "You won't hurt her."

"Oh, I will." He grinned ear to notched ear. "But right now, you should worry about yourself!"

He darted forward, knives cutting luminous trails through the darkness. Nick backed up best he could, weaving through the tight corners.

"That's it! Try to run! Just like they did." Springtrap slashed and slashed and slashed. Every movement closer. "Everyone else is gone. Everyone else moved on. Forgot about this place. Left it to rot." He hissed each word, mania in his eyes. "But I'm still here. And I won't wait here alone!"

He feinted with one knife, letting it glint past Nick's face, as the other sped to the weak flesh under the ribs–

Nick caught his wrist.

It happened too fast for Springtrap to follow. A second after his strike was halted, Nick slammed a knee into his chest, knocking the air from his lungs. One knife clattered uselessly to the floor. Then Nick grabbed him by the neck and, one-handed, tossed him into the desk. Springtrap smashed against it, disoriented.

Nick knelt to the knife. "Y'know, Springfield–"

"Springtrap," wheezed Springtrap.

"That's what I said. Springbok." Nick took the knife, examining it. "I may not know you personally, Springsteen. And I don't know who you've hurt. But I know your type. You're a bully. You're used to picking on weaker targets, aren't you?"

With a stylish flourish, Nick slipped the knife into a solid grip. He stood. Smirking.

"When's the last time you fought somebody with combat training?"
Springtrap pulled himself upright with a snarl. "No... no, she–" He brandished his own knife. "She told me you'd be weak."

Nick’s smile died. "Who did? Bellwether?!"

With a scream, Springtrap lunged.

Nick parried, the knives shrieking a protest as they met. His grip held, claws digging into the handle. Springtrap swung again and Nick blocked again, and on the third swing he followed the parry with a kick. Springtrap coughed and wobbled and backed up.

The tide had turned. Suddenly, Nick had the easier job. All he had to do was beat down this punk. Poor Judy was still out there, surviving those abominations.

She would. She was Judy.

"Nick! Can you hear me?! What's happening in there?!!"

Judy banged her tiny fists against the door – painted to blend with the wall, a trick aided by the darkness – but there was no moving it. She growled to herself.

And then she had to dodge that hook. Again.

Metal shrieked against metal as Foxy missed, its hook sparking against the door. Judy cringed, but didn't have the luxury of stopping. She dodged under Foxy and past Bonnie's grasping hands.

Keep moving. Keep breathing.

Judy leapt for the wall, bouncing off to kick Bonnie. She bounced off Bonnie, too. The same result she had gotten all night.

Judy made a strangled noise of frustration, too angry for a sigh but too tired to be anything else. She was at her limit. This was a cruel exaggeration of her fights against larger perps. She couldn't disorient them, let alone cause actual damage. But they could still hit her very, very hard.

She sucked in a mouthful of stale air. No. They could hit as hard they could. She would always be faster.

Judy backed up to the wall, letting them stomp after her. Bonnie was closer. She watched its movements, the twitches of its limbs, before it shot a claw out to crush her–

She slipped to the side. Bonnie's hand kept going, slamming into the wall with a shower of old plaster. It jerked, caught on a tangle of wires.

Against living opponents, Judy couldn't pull the same trick twice. But although these machines had the physical edge, they weren't smart enough to understand hustles. She stood by Bonnie's leg, watching Foxy line up its strike.

As predicted, the hook came down. Judy dodged, and Foxy ripped Bonnie's leg apart at the shin.

But debris caught Judy in the back, knocking her down. She hit the floor, and for a moment, she was very tempted to just stay there.

Her body ached. She had been running and kicking and surviving for, what? Six hours? That was definitely less time than she had slept. She had watched over Nick and Sly as they both took twice as
long in bed. She had thought she could handle that.

*Because I can*, she told herself. *And I will.*

Hissing in a breath, she stood. Her knees creaked and her hands wobbled, but when she turned to her opponent, her eyes burned.

Bonnie was still caught in the wall, but Foxy was realigning its hook, preparing to strike her again. Judy squared her stance. She was unarmed and alone and exhausted, but she wasn't beaten. Not yet. And when the doors opened again, she would be ready.

They moved in separate unison. Judy fought the robot. Sly fought the generator's outer casing. And Nick fought the monster.

He pressed his advantage, pushing Springtrap back. The rabbit tried slicing at his arm, his face, but Nick never sunk to his level. He would disarm him, interrogate him, and then hand him to Carmelita. Springtrap would face justice without any new scars.

Nick allowed himself the luxury of a smirk. Not only would he survive the night, he'd walk away with a lead. As the knives clashed and the rabbit grew more frantic, Nick was already planning the next move.

Then he saw it.

There. Hovering by the open airvent. The Phantasm.

The split second of broken focus was enough. Springtrap slashed and Nick reacted too slowly. Their knives met and his skittered across the floor. Towards *it*.

"So much for the hero cop," grinned Springtrap. "Now hold still..."

Nick could not hold still if he tried. "The – the ghost."

Springtrap laughed. Like sandpaper. "Oh my god! That again? I was lying! There's no ghost. You're just crazy." He grinned, teeth shining in the half-light. "And coming from me, that's saying something..."

The Phantasm did not bend down. It simply lowered itself to the floor. Its bladed arm remained still, but the other emerged from the cloak. A claw. Gripping Nick's knife.

Nick stared. "Please! It's **behind** you!"

The rabbit laughed, loud and hearty. "Yeah! Sure! Seriously, fox, that's the oldest trick in th–"

There was a terrible wet noise as the blade met flesh.

Grey eyes widened, transfixed on Nick's. After a second of shock, he tried to speak. But all that came out was a breathy hiss.

Then, blood.

The smell hit Nick, acrid against the dust and mould in the air. It spurred him, police instincts pushing him forward. But before Nick could even take a step, the Phantasm's head snapped up.

And everything went white.
Nick stumbled, completely blind. The musty darkness was replaced instantly with a searing light. He curled up, paws against his eyes. Trying to will his vision back.

His other senses heightened. His skin pricking. His nose and tongue disgusted. His ears reporting sounds he wished he didn't recognize.

Finally, the room swam back into focus. Nick looked around, eyes wild. But the Phantasm was gone. Of course it was.

Nick found himself kneeling. Despite everything, his training had kicked in. Despite everything, he was checking the rabbit's vitals.

Despite everything, he felt a twinge of sorrow when he found nothing.

Judy dodged and dodged back and rolled under a low swipe of the hook. Foxy was mechanically patient, always ready with another swing, but mechanically predictable too. Judy knew its patterns. All she had to do was survive.

And then the power surged.

The building couldn't handle a panicking raccoon brutalizing its generator. Electricity burst through every wire. Bonnie ripped itself loose from the wall, and flame followed, licking up its arm. It fell against Foxy, its lifeless eyes watching as fire crawled up its body.

Judy tensed. Dozens of similar fires were already breaking out all through the building. The exposed wiring found and feasted on papers and grease. Flame tore through the old corridors in moments.

On the bright side, she was now definitely awake.

Then the power died. And behind her, the security door opened.

Judy turned quickly. The robots weren't disabled, and the entire building was suddenly a fire hazard. But she knew her priority.

"Nick, I--"

She froze. Nick was crouched over Springtrap. His blood on his paws.

"What happened?!" she shrieked. "What did you do?!"

"It wasn't me!" Nick couldn't stop it from spilling out, couldn't hide it under something less ludicrous. "It was the ghost!"

Anyone else would've laughed. Stared. Screamed. Left him there in the darkness, as the obvious liability he was.

Judy didn't hesitate.

She darted forward and grabbed his hand. "Then we can't stay here! We'll be next!"

"No, Judy--"

"Move! I'm with you!"

She dragged him to his feet and they were running. Nick wanted to tear his hand away. He felt like
Carmelita's first instinct when the front door snapped open was to charge in herself. But she wasn't an angry young officer any more. There was more room in her tactics for a defensive approach. She ordered her liaisons to hold the line.

And then smoke began to spill from within.

Wolford watched the blaze, nose wrinkled. "Agh, the stench..."

"Inspector?" Fangmeyer's voice, usually level, was tinged with fear. "What are your orders? Are Nick and Judy inside?!!"

"Stay here." Her voice was firm against the smoke. "We already called the fire department. They have training we don't. I share your concern, but we can't save Nick and Judy by burning to death. And that's assuming they're in there at all." Her eyes matched the fire's heat. "Just stay sharp."

"Look!" said Wolford. "Someone's coming out!"

Framed against the billowing black smoke, a distinctly vulpine figure was staggering toward the front door.

Nick. Carmelita was running forward before she could stop herself. Fangmeyer and Wolford followed close behind.

The figure came closer, growing larger and larger until it was as tall as Nick, then taller. Carmelita slowed, eyes narrowing, hand at the ready.

The smoke gave way to a monstrosity. Writhed in sputtering flame, a huge robot dragged itself free, a mass of boiling metal shaped into an insult against foxes. It stared the officers down with one melting gold eye, and let loose a shriek which was either a battlecry or a plea for help.
"What in the goddamn?!" Fangmeyer backed up defensively. Wolford yelped, ears tall.

Carmelita didn't hesitate. She whipped out her shock pistol and fired shot after shot into the creature's face. It didn't slow, dragging its burning body toward them.

Fangmeyer followed her example, then Wolford, and suddenly the robot's neck gave way. Unable to withstand both the flame and three streams of electricity, the head came loose, toppling into the dirty sand. The body followed suit, and with a final moan of gears, it lay still.

Wolford caught his breath, still shaken by the sight. He noticed Inspector Fox looking at him.

"Are you scared?"

He just nodded.

"We're all scared," she said.

The three officers stood there, as the abandoned pizzeria guttered out into an empty husk. The encroaching sound of sirens was slim comfort against the vast plumes of black smoke choking out the sunrise.

"You'd have to be crazy not to be scared."
Nick sat with his head in his hands. Eyes open but unseeing.

He was back in the terrible purple sedan that belonged to Dave or Springtrap or whoever the hell he was. Had been. Sly had led them around Carmelita, Wolford, Fangmeyer, the fire brigade. He had hotwired the car and curled into the front passenger seat, leaving Nick more room in the back. And now Judy was driving them away.

But where? And why?

Nick had seen the Phantasm kill someone. It happened right before his eyes. And it happened in an empty room. No witnesses. He had been alone with the murder victim and a ghost only he could see.

Nick's natural pessimism drew the obvious conclusion.

As he sat in silence, Sly turned to Judy. "This is bad," he murmured.

She just nodded.

"Do you know what we can do next?"

She shook her head.

Sly paused. "...Gotta say, this isn't my most relaxing vacation. This is a weird, terrible time."

Judy shot him a look. "Well, Nick's having the worst, weirdest time of all. And today I almost got crushed to death by a faceless robot with the same name as my mom. So."

"Uh, yeah..."

The silence hung for a moment.

Sly raised his voice. Gently. "Nick? Buddy? You've been a little quiet back there... Any ideas?"

Nick looked up. He looked at Sly, then Judy. Then, out the window.

He pointed to the climate wall, just north of their position.

"See that?"

"Yeah?"
"See the empty area right in front of the heaters? Where there are no buildings or anything? Because the heat would boil you alive?"

"...Yeah?"

"My plan," said Nick, "is to walk up to the wall and die trying."

Judy slammed the brake. "Okay. Time out."

She parked the car behind an empty shed. They had driven to the edge of Sahara Square, and this close to the climate wall the buildings were thinning out. They needed to keep moving. But more importantly, they needed to talk.

Sly and Judy turned in their seats to face Nick. "What happened in there?" said Judy, her voice soft. "What did the ghost do?"

Nick felt a flare of anger he found hard to suppress. "Nothing. The ghost didn't do anything, because it's not real."

He caught himself, trying to calm down. But that was just old instincts, he realized. He was right to be angry. And it could prove useful.

Nick locked eyes with Judy and growled. "You need to leave. Now."

"What? No!"

"I know you aren't dangerous," he snarled. "That's what you said to me. That's why you stuck around. But I am! Judy, I just killed a rabbit."

Silence hung like a dagger.

"I just killed a rabbit," said Nick again. Quieter. "I didn't want to do it, but that just means I can't stop myself from doing it again. Let's not mince words. I am going insane. So while I'm still... myself, I'm begging you. Both of you. Leave."

Judy met his gaze, steadfast. "Nick, you know I won't abandon you."

"But maybe you should." His voice was hoarse. "For your own sake."

"Let's back up," said Sly. "You still haven't told us what happened. Walk us through it. What did you see?"

Nick hissed out a sigh. "The – the thing. The thing I've been seeing. I was alone with Springtrap, and he pulled two knives..."

"Wait, Sly doesn't know who that is," said Judy.

Sly waved a hand. "I'm guessing from context he's not a friend. Don't slow down."

"So Springtrap drops a knife, and I take it, because I figure it's my best choice tactically, I have zero intention of..." Nick trailed off into a low breath. "But that thing was there, and it took the knife from me. And now he's dead."

"...Okay," said Sly levelly. "Then it sounds like the ghost did it. Not you."

"Ghosts aren't—!" Nick had to fight to keep calm. After a moment, he raised both paws. "Look. The
thing, its right hand..." He jabbed his own hand for emphasis. "It's not a hand. It's a curved blade.
More than enough to kill a rabbit. But it didn't use that." Another jab, this time his left. "It picked up
the knife. My knife. The knife I held." He watched them both. "Don't you know what that means?"

"Well," said Sly, "many ghosts are too angry and disoriented to be held to moral standards. Same as
young kids or the mentally ill. But this guy is clearly smart, and also a massive tool. It's targetting you
on purpose."

"It's intelligent," agreed Judy. "And it's trying to frame you for murder."

Nick stared. "No!" he said. "No, that's – it means I'm crazy! I did it! I used the knife, and the ghost is
some kind of delusion."

"Really?" said Sly. "Our version makes more sense."

Nick rubbed his eyes. "This is some sick irony," he muttered. "I'm supposed to say it's a ghost
and you're supposed to call me crazy..."

Judy went to say something, but just frowned. For all their closeness, she couldn't find the words to
comfort her partner. They sat in silence for a while. Until Sly coughed.

"Okay. So you ruled out poison? At the doctor?"

"We did," said Judy quietly.

"Not poison," said Sly. "Maybe insanity, but that would be bad, because it seems you have Murder
Insanity rather than something more benign." He adjusted his hat. "Then why are you so resistant to
it being an actual ghost?"

Nick's expression wavered somewhere between confusion and disgust. "Are you serious?"

"Sure."

"The same reason I don't think it's an alien! Or a demon! Or a robot from the future!" Nick sat back,
arms folded. "Honestly. Just when I think you can't get any dumber."

"Look," said Sly, in what he hoped sounded like a patient voice. "You've only lived in this city,
right?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"That's a yes?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why?"

"...You don't get ghosts in cities."

Sly's voice had lowered.

"I get that you're sceptical. But I've been travelling all my life, and it hasn't just been cities. Jungle
swamps, isolated manors, outback deserts... Places where civilisation just... falls away. Don't get me
wrong, this city is incredible, but it's – it's normal. The more people there are in one place, the more
Normal gets in the air. Normal keeps this stuff away. But in empty spaces, away from the crowds..."
He shook his head. "I've seen things. That's all I can tell you. So I'm asking you, Nick – even if it
goes against what you've thought for years – keep an open mind. It could save your life."
For a moment, the car was silent. Judy didn't know what to say, but the conviction in Sly's voice had swayed her.

"Wow..." said Nick with quiet reverence. "I still don't care."

Sly sighed. Instead of firing back, he turned in his seat. "What do you think, Judy?"

She took a moment before speaking. "I'm trying to be pragmatic about this. I don't think we can rule anything out. Even if it sounds crazy."

Nick's brow furrowed. "Seriously, Carrots? You too?"

"But," she said, "Nick's right. Saying it's literally a ghost is... well, it's a big jump. And it's not like we have any proof."

"Alright," said Sly. "Then let's get some."

Judy blinked. "What?"

"You two chill here for a second. See if you can make Nick feel any better."

Sly opened his door, letting the morning sunlight spill into the car.

"I'm gonna make a call."

Sly was used to height, to getting off the ground and staying there. Perching. He couldn't stray too far from the car, but sitting on its roof gave him some modicum of comfort.

With his tail wrapped around his feet, he took out his burner phone and dialled the second of two numbers.

Bentley had decided to spend his vacation at a symposium on the development and mechanics of the crossbow. Said symposium was held in a hotel with a high-stakes casino, and every night Bentley was pushing his luck counting cards.

Bentley hadn't even wanted to reveal that much to Sly and Murray. Their defeat had really rattled him, worsening his paranoia. But they were still a team. A family. And Sly knew he could always rely on the genius of his brother.

The call went through – and the answer was immediate. "Sly, this plan hinges on one simple premise: we don't call each other. What? What is it?!"

"Not so much as a 'hello'?" Sly's tried to sound nonchalant, open with a joke. But he couldn't disguise his irritation.

Bentley caught it. He paused. "...Hi. Sorry. I'm a little stressed, that's all. What's wrong?"

Down to business. Probably for the best. "Well, I showed up in Zootopia, and somebody immediately framed Nick for the murder of Dawn Bellwether."

"Oh," said Bentley. "That's... bad."

"Yeah," agreed Sly. "We're handling it. More or less. The real problem is that Nick's also been seeing a ghost."
"Ah."

"The ghost framed him for murder."

"Right."

"It just did it again, actually."

"I see."

"...So, ah, any input you have would be helpful. For the ghost thing, specifically."

"And he's not delirious?" said Bentley, with the calm detachment of a computer technician. Sly wondered if he might suggest turning Nick off and back on again. "Poisoned by some kind of hallucinogenic agent, perhaps?"

"Already thought of that. He's clean. I've been trying to float out that it's actually just a legit ghost, but he's not buying it. Sceptic type."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Well, I was hoping we could meet some kind of... ghost expert. Mainstream science has failed us. I'm open to other, weirder options."

Bentley paused. "Y'know what? I have just the guy. Chatted to him once or twice about paranormal phenomena. He seems learned on the subject, although a bit naïve otherwise..."

"Naïve?" Sly blinked. "Bentley, Nick's spooked real bad. It's gonna be an uphill battle to convince him to do this – are you sure we can trust this guy?"

"Beggars can't be choosers, Sly. He's the best option I have. Look, if it counts for anything, he's quite possibly the most polite person I've ever met online. I don't doubt that if you asked him for help, he'd offer as much as he could."

Sly considered it. But not for long. "Okay. Let's do it."

"Ten-four. I'll get in contact and arrange a meeting. He's mentioned that he lives in Zootopia... hopefully he's not out of town."

"Thanks, Bentley," smiled Sly. "You're a lifesaver. As usual."

"Don't mention it. And I mean that literally! Murray doesn't need to know we were in touch, understand?"

"...Yes."

A raspy sigh. "You already called him, didn't you?"

"We're dying out here, Bentley, both of us are!" Sly rubbed his eyes. "You know we trust your judgement, but splitting up just doesn't feel right. Imagine if all three of us were in Zootopia right now. We'd have Nick and Judy back home before sunset!"

"If we were all there, they'd be in worse danger."

Without warning, he hung up.
Sly sighed. "...Drama queen."

Sly convinced Judy, and Judy, with difficulty, convinced Nick. They left the desert in their awful stolen purple car and headed north, outside the city proper and into the placid Meadowlands. Within the hour, Nick found himself hunched on a park bench.

The crisp morning sunlight did not improve his mood.

"This is a waste of time," he growled. "Worse, we're exposed out here."

"We're fine." Judy sat close, casually pressed against his right side. "This is a good spot. We're obscured by bushes on all angles. The park's deserted, and if someone *does* come, our lookout can warn us. Isn't that right?"

"Yep!" came the voice above them.

Sly, finally, was back to perching. Easily blending into the shadows of a thick evergreen tree, he scanned the park with his Binocucom. The park was indeed empty, probably because of the early hour.

"Fine, it's quiet," said Nick. Then, demonstrating his limitless capacity for pessimism, he added "Which means the idiot we're supposed to meet isn't here either."

"Uh... yeah." Judy glanced up. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

Sly checked the details Bentley had texted him. "Yep, Hometown Park. We just need to keep our eyes out for our new best friend, X_Hyper_DEATH_God_X."

"You don't need to pronounce the underscores as 'Underscore', Sly."

"Oh, but I do. I really do."

He returned to his vigil. Sly was staking what little trust Nick had in him. If this expert didn't appear, or couldn't provide answers...

Sly finally caught movement by the park's main entrance. He swung his Binocucom over and zoomed in. "...Huh."

"What?" said Judy. "What do you see?"

"It's that kid I saved! Last year, at the museum!"

"Asriel?"

It was, indeed, Asriel. The young white goat was ambling through the park, eyes bright. He had a heavy book under one arm.

He seemed to be looking for someone.

Sly did another sweep of the entire park. "There's no-one here but him."

Judy's ears fell. "I mean... you don't think...?"

Nick said nothing. He just sighed. Loudly.
"Look," said Sly. "You guys... just stay here. I'll handle this."

"The second something goes wrong," said Nick, "we're going back to the car. Even if that means leaving you behind. Especially if you leave me behind, I know." Sly slid down to ground level with a rustle of leaves. "At least the kid won't sass me..."

He set off.

His instincts wanted him to keep a low profile. But he knew the park was empty, and sneaking up on a smiling child did not exactly feel heroic. Sly just waited by a shady corner until Asriel caught side of him.

"Oh wow!" He ran up, eyes shining. "Mister Cooper!"

"Please, 'Sly' is fine." He tilted his head. "Uh... how've you been, kid?"

"Very good, thank you!"

"Good, good. I like the people I save to stay saved. You stay in school, alright?"

That got a chuckle from Asriel. "I will, I will...! Can I ask what you're doing here?"

"Y'know, I was just about to ask you the same thing..."

Sly soon had his suspicions confirmed. Before long he was leading Asriel back to Nick and Judy.

Nick did not seem impressed.

"Hi, Sly. Hi, Asriel, who is the son of the Mayor. So great to see you."

"Great to see you too, Mister Wilde! And you too, Miss Hopps!" He blinked. "Um, sorry. I should've said 'Officer', right?"

"It's okay," smiled Judy. "Given the circumstances, you can call us whatever you'd like."

Judy was a Hopps. If anything, the presence of a child was giving her energy. She seemed more awake, more alive. The terror of the last few hours rolled off her, or at least stayed hidden behind bright purple eyes.

But Nick was an only child, and unused to kids, and dreading having to curtail his fear into a careful performance.

*don't freak out the child*

*don't be weird with the child*

*do not admit to murder in front of the child*

"Mist– Sly told me you're dealing with a ghost!" said Asriel.

Judy winced a little. "Well – we might be. We're certainly dealing with something. But Nick doesn't think it's a ghost."

"Yes, Sly told me that too," said Asriel. His smile didn't waver.
Nick kept his eyes firmly on Sly. "This is seriously your 'expert'? An actual child?"

"Um... Yes."

"I like talking about ghosts online," smiled Asriel. "But I had no idea I'd been talking to one of Sly's friends!"

"And Bentley had no idea he'd been talking to an unusually polite legal minor!" smiled Sly. "The Internet is terrifying and no-one should ever use it."

"Fantastic," said Nick. "This was an awful idea. I am not taking advice from an eight year old."

"Excuse me, but I am nine and one quarter," huffed Asriel.

"Well, take it from someone who's three decades and a third-ish – life experience is important." Nick stood. "Thanks for coming out here, but please, go home. Don't worry your parents."

"Wait!" Asriel moved in front of him. "I know I'm just a kid, but you don't need to take my word for it! I brought an encyclopedia!"

"A... what?"

Asriel took the book under his arm and thrust it forward, letting Nick see it. It was a hefty journal, bound in faded brown, with a golden pawprint on the cover. It took a moment for Nick to notice the paw had one too many digits.

"This is a compendium of all kinds of supernatural things!" said Asriel. "I'm sure it'll have what you're looking for."

"'Compendium' is a great word," said Sly, balancing himself on the bench's left armrest. "I think your vocabulary is better than mine."

"Shucks...!"

Nick felt lost. Asriel was a nice kid, and he certainly meant well. But Nick needed definite answers, not bright smiles and a fantasy book. Still standing awkwardly, he tried what he usually did when he felt lost. He glanced to Judy.

*Hear him out*, said her eyes. *It's worth a shot.*

He sighed, flopping back onto the bench. "Fine. Okay. Thank you. Hand it over."

"Okay!"

Without further ado, Asriel opened it out. He passed the journal into Nick's paws. The pages were thick and brown, opened to a specific page.

Asriel smiled at Nick. "Look, see? All the entries are illustrated! Here's the chapter on ghosts – just flick through and see if any of these drawings seem familiar."

Nick wished he was dealing with an adult. He could be so much more rude to an adult. Since he couldn't bring himself to meet Asriel's bright smile with sarcasm, he just took the book and began leafing through it.

It was a group activity. Judy on his right, Sly on his left, Asriel in front of him. They followed along in watchful silence as Nick turned each page, squinting at the grotesqueries and the paragraphs of
cursive text. Occasionally Judy or Sly would glance up to ensure they were alone, but mostly their attention was rapt on the book.

Nick suppressed a scoff. It would have been funny if it wasn't such a painful waste of time. These ghosts were laughable. Harmless or odd or incredibly specific, if not all three. They seemed like intentional jokes. If Nick hadn't personally known the Dreemurr family, how innocent Asriel was, he would be convinced this was a sick prank.

Then he turned a page and found the Phantasm staring at him.

He must have frozen. The air changed, the others all drawing slightly closer. And from the page, Nick's wide eyes were met with that same gleaming, skeletal mask.

"This... this is it."

"Oh, yeah!" Judy leaned in. "You said it has a curved blade on its right hand." She tapped a finger to the illustration. "There. Clear as day."

"I remember this one," said Asriel. "It's called the Phantasm. It's a revenant – something that comes back. The book says a lot of the time it's connected to an ex-lover."

Sly nudged Nick. "Well, heartbreaker? Any candidates spring to mind?"

Nick swallowed. Eyes still on the journal, he answered reflexively. "Don't think my high school crush is trying to kill me, no..."

Sly chuckled. His eyes wandered to the illustration, growing more serious. "...Weird question, but – what colours does it come in? This cloak looks like a dark grey, but it's hard to tell with the shading."

"Uh... I'm not sure. I think it just says it's 'dark'." Asriel looked up. "Ghosts usually aren't very colourful."

"Yeah..."

"This is very helpful," said Judy. "Thank you so much, Asriel. Do you mind if we borrow this?"

"No! Not at all!"

"Thank you. It'd probably be better with we read it somewhere safer."

"Yeah," sighed Nick. He shut the book, and felt an irrational surge of relief that the Phantasm wasn't watching him any more. "Thanks, but we gotta go. We need somewhere quiet to hide until nightfall."

Asriel's eyes brightened. "Um!"

"It'll be hard," noted Sly. "I mean, that bar seemed like such a safe bet, and they still found us."

"Don't remind me," growled Nick.

"Um!"

"So where are we headed, Nick?"

"Oh, no," said Judy, cutting off his answer. "I'm picking this time."
"Sure. Okay. Where are we headed, Judy?"

"Um!"

Judy looked over to Asriel, her eyes soft. "Oh, sorry! I know it's frustrating when adults ignore you. Is there something else you want to say?"

"Hopps," said Nick. "Priorities."

"This is priorities," smiled Judy. "It's clearly important. What is it, Asriel?"

"Just..."

Goldenflower was one of the nicest suburbs in the Meadowlands. In Zootopia, for that matter. Somewhere one could really call home.

The early morning sunlight shone on green grass and happy homes. It was shaping into a beautiful day. Perfect for sharing with friends.

Asgore whistled quietly to himself, kneeling amid flowers as bright as his blonde beard. It was sunny today, and he was enjoying the garden before winter rolled in fully. The autumn breeze carried the sounds of the suburb – the laughter of children, the rumble of sensible cars, the clatter of the commuter train back to central Zootopia.

He wondered where his son had run off to in such a hurry. It was uncharacteristic, but Asriel was a good kid, and this was a good neighbourhood. He wasn't worried.

Sure enough, he soon heard a familiar patter of footsteps approaching the house. He looked up as Asriel let himself into the garden through the side gate.

"H-hi, Dad, I'm back!" Asriel hovered by the gate, clutching his book a little tightly. "Uh... I have a question. And I know it sounds like a lot, so, it's okay if you say no! But, um – remember how Mom thinks I'm old enough to have friends stay over?"

Behind him, three heads timidly poked around the gate.

Asgore stared. Three fugitives of the ZPD stared back at him. He blinked.

"Um... howdy."
Chapter Summary

Any hope of success is fleeting.
How can I keep leading
When the people I'm leading keep retreating?

Things had already been bleak at Precinct One. Bellwether's murder had put the officers on edge. Hopps and Wilde disappearing had thrown them into a frenzy. But the atmosphere turned funereal when the fire department cleared the pizzeria's wreckage.

Amid the charred wood and burnt-out circuitry, they found a rabbit.

There wasn't much left. The blaze was short but intensive, and the crime scene was thoroughly ruined. But outside, by the back entrance – which Carmelita knew she should have been watching – they found the murder weapon. A knife, still soaked in blood. A fox's claw marks on the handle.

Bogo was furious. Carmelita couldn't blame him.

She took the steps to the front door one boot at a time. She stopped, realizing she hadn't dismissed her liaisons. Sure enough, Wolford and Fangmeyer were just a step behind her. Eyes tired but sharp.

She stopped. "You don't need to come with me, you know."

"Maybe not," said Fangmeyer. "But we can. If you'll have us." Wolford nodded firmly.

Carmelita gave them a smile. "I appreciate it. But let me take responsibility for this. If there's any updates, I'll call you immediately. For the moment, go home. Get some rest."

"You're sure?" said Wolford.

"I am." Even when warm, Carmelita didn't waver. "Sleep. That's an order."

Wolford looked like he wanted to protest, but didn't have the words. Fangmeyer laid a huge paw on his shoulder, giving him a gentle rub. "C'mon, big guy. I'll give you a lift home."

"In—"

"In the squad car, yes. Not my motorcycle. ...You baby."

Fangmeyer returned Carmelita's smile, then guided the wolf away. Carmelita lingered for a moment, watching them go. They were good officers. She was lucky to have them. Would she ever have gotten to know them, she wondered, if it wasn't for...?

Her smile died a slow, private death. Back to work.

She pushed herself through the front doors and up the stairs. The mania of yesterday morning had settled into something quieter but no less unpleasant. A slow boil. Officers didn't crowd every walkway and corner, but there were still more than usual. All grim and tired.
Carmelita didn't feel any better.

She made it to Bogo's office and, for a moment, actually hesitated. It didn't take years of honed police instincts to tell her that nothing good awaited her behind that door. But Inspector Fox did not hide from her problems.

She pulled the door open and stepped inside.

The office was dark. The left window, still broken, had been hastily covered in black plastic. The sunlight meekly creeping in through the right didn't reach the entire room.

And then there was Bogo. Hunched over his desk like an ageing mountain, he looked up from his growing pile of grim paper to glare at her.

"Inspector."

"Chief." Carmelita stood tall, hands behind her back.

Bogo brandished a fresh file. "Lab techs returned the fur from Bellwether's cell. Every test confirmed Wilde's DNA." He dropped it, only to hold up another. "And Grizzoli's squad tracked down Wilde's phone. A bush near the prison." His voice darkened. "In the exact direction of Wilde's home address."

He dropped that file too, leaned forward in his chair, and met Carmelita's gaze.

"And now here we are. With a new crime scene."

"Chief," began Carmelita, voicing what she had been mentally practising for the last few minutes. "There's something going on with this case."

"Oh," said Bogo, so deadpan it veered on dead. "You think so."

"Half of the facts makes no sense, and the other half are remarkably convenient." Her eyes narrowed. "Before we discuss what happened in that restaurant, I need to know we're on the same page."

"The same page?" Bogo sat up, his old chair creaking. "And what page would that be, Inspector?"

"That Nick is the target of some... conspiracy."

Bogo didn't reply. He just watched her with cold eyes.

"There's precedent," insisted Carmelita. "Need I remind you that there was a serious level of corruption in your municipal government just two years ago? Now that mastermind behind that plot is the alleged murder victim of one of your finest, most upright officers. I am asking you, tactically, how you are preparing for the possibility that Nick is being framed."

He huffed slowly, nostrils flaring. "Inspector. Just so we're clear – Wilde was at that bloody restaurant. You missed your chance to recover him. I'm holding you accountable for that."

Carmelita nodded. "I missed him. There's no sense denying it."

"And now," he said, "instead of tangible results, you're trying to sell me on some implausible–"

"It's not implausible!"
"–very unproven theory that none of this is his fault. A theory that would make things very nice and clear-cut and easy, but which grows thinner and thinner as we gather more evidence." He glared. "Evidence like a bloodstained knife that smells of Wilde and has claw indentations like Wilde's because it was held by Wilde."

Carmelita stood firm. "The formal tests aren't back."

"No. They aren't. But these ones are." He slapped a hand on the files cluttering his desk. "Everything in the Bellwether case points to Wilde. We cannot ignore that."

"What we can't ignore is the gaping holes in that theory! Did Nick seriously get in and out of a prison completely undetected, except for a crime scene plastered in his DNA? That's absurd!"

"It's the leading theory," growled Bogo, "because it's the only theory. There are no other suspects. And the evidence points only one way."

"Exactly!" said Carmelita. "Look at this rationally. We found the murder weapon outside the building. Carried safely out of the fire, then dropped right where we'd find it. Don't you think it's strange that this was the only thing that survived the blaze? Another smoking gun implicating Nick?"

"I am concerned with what the knife did, Inspector, not where it was." He met her gaze. "It was drenched in blood. Rabbit's blood, for god's sake! It could've been Hopps!"

"It. Wasn't." Carmelita had to physically prevent her teeth from grinding. "Wolford confirmed it wasn't her scent."

"But it could have been. Hopps is out there. She is undoubtedly with Wilde." Bogo's eyes burned. "We need to find her. You need to find her. And apparently you can't."

"Neither can you," said Carmelita. It wasn't professional. But it wasn't wrong, either. And it struck a nerve.

Bogo's eyes widened, and instant later he was out of his chair, slamming a hand on his desk.

"How dare you, Inspector Fox!"

"Just an observation, Chief," said Carmelita, icily calm. "This precinct has been working tirelessly to find Nick and Judy. From what I've seen, the entire ZPD is collaborating on this one case. And yet our best efforts come from the anonymous tip helpline. Now, the officers I've worked with on the ground have been thorough, dedicated and effective. I don't have a single complaint." Her expression didn't waver. "So in light of the poor results, I'm forced to question the commanding officer."

Bogo's eyes gleamed. "Oh? Is that your professional perspective?"

"It is."

"Well here's mine." Bogo's massive fingers flexed, viciously crinkling the top layer of reports. "This entire debacle began hours after Sly Cooper – your criminal – arrived in this city. I refuse to chalk that up to coincidence. Cooper is involved, he could be the damn key to all of this, and it's your job to find him!"

"And it's your job," she said, "to serve and protect this community. That includes your own officers."

"You think I don't know that?"
"I think you're not up to the task," said Carmelita, the fire inside of her beginning to crack her cold exterior. "I think if it were up to me, someone else would be in charge of this operation."

"That's not your decision!" His nostrils flared. An ancient warning of an incoming charge. "And your own track record has not impressed me."

She wouldn't be intimidated. She met his gaze. "You're right. I haven't single-handedly solved this case for you. Yet. But I'm going to go back out there and keep trying."

Carmelita drew on every single inch of height she had, boots solid.

"Because that's one thing I can guarantee you, Bogo – I'm used to failure. My career has been constant, grinding failure. It's my oldest colleague. And I know how to handle it." Her eyes were sharp. "Do you?"

"Of course I–"

"I don't think you do! Based on your track record, I think you went soft years ago. During the Night Howler incident, you and your detectives just chased your tails for two weeks. You needed a complete rookie to blow in, fresh from Academy, and do your jobs for you. And now she's gone!"

"That's–"

"Without your star player, you're just as useless as you were then. Nick and Judy aren't the only good cops here, far from it. But results need to come from the top." The fire in her eyes was merciless. "Face it, Bogo. You're a terrible leader."

"I know!"

Carmelita blinked. She had expected yelling, but not in this direction.

"I know I need Hopps!" he thundered. "And Wilde! I relied on both of them, I trusted them, and I...!"

Bogo sank back into his chair.

"...I let this happen."

His head was low. His voice quiet.

"I was too soft. On her. On them. I looked the other way. Didn't press them too hard as long as they kept getting results. And now..."

Carmelita's stance softened. "I see. You think this is the endpoint of their, uh, natural policing style."

Bogo didn't reply. The paper on his desk seemed to consume him.

Carmelita sighed. Slowly. "Bogo, I know what you're going through. I've... dealt with it more than once. Wondering just when you lost them. Asking yourself, over and over, how you missed the signs. Whether you could've reigned them in if you had only noticed." Her tone changed. Strengthened. "But there's still hope. I am asking you, not as an officer, to just... trust Nick and Judy. They wouldn't go rogue. And they haven't."

Bogo didn't reply at first. His head was still down, eyes on his desk. Carmelita frowned sympathetically.

But when he looked back at her, his eyes were hard.
"Inspector... you seem to misunderstand our relationship. You are an officer, and as far as I'm concerned, very little else. Where, may I ask, is this certainty coming from?"

Carmelita met his gaze. "It's because I also know what they're going through. Tell me, Chief – when's the last time you were framed for a crime?"

He stared her down. But didn't reply.

"I thought not," she said. "It's... It was the worse thing to ever happen to me. And believe me, there are some impressive contenders for that title. But it was such a unique feeling of... helplessness. I trust the system. All of us do. If we don't, there's no point enforcing it. So when that system turns on you, and you know you're innocent but none of your colleagues can see it..." She sighed. "It's a living nightmare. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, least of all all cops as good as Nick and Judy. People you and I both know are better than this."

Bogo took a moment to mull her words. She wasn't sure what else she could tell him. She just hoped explaining her experience would help.

It seemed to soothe his self-doubt. Now he was angry again.

"I've read your file, Inspector. I know about Captain Neyla's falsified allegations, and I know you were reinstated." He sank to a growl. "And I know you were reinstated because for once in your career, you actually arrested Sly Cooper. For two glorious hours, he was in Interpol custody. A feat, might I add, you seem to have difficulty replicating."

He stabbed a finger in the direction of the front door.

"If Wilde and Hopps walk in here with Sly Cooper in handcuffs, then yes. I will write this off as another one of their idiotic, dangerous... useful adventures." He sighed. "But I am Chief of Police. I can't show favouritism. And based on the evidence..."

"I see." Carmelita folded her arms. "That's understandable. But I believe Nick and Judy are good people, and good cops. They'll come back if they get any chance to. All I ask is that you remain open to giving them that chance."

Bogo grunted. "Right. Show them and everyone else that your actions don't matter as long as you're friends with the chief."

"You're being obtuse. I didn't say to ignore the rulebook. Just that if they're innocent..."

"That," said Bogo, "is still an 'if'. I don't want to waste time on daydreams when we're still so far from closing this case."

His eyes narrowed.

"And I have to say... I didn't expect you of all people to argue this. I'm not an idiot. I know my officers are still fond of Wilde and Hopps, and are having trouble looking at this objectively. But you? The legendary Inspector Fox, so soft and sentimental?" He brought his hands together, leaning closer. "I will ask you again. You seem remarkably confident in their innocence. Why is that?"

Carmelita showed no external discomfort, but her mind was hurriedly pushing aside her anger and doubt in search of a valid answer. Bogo would accept no vague platitudes, and probably wouldn't settle for 'police instincts'. That was a generally useful handwave when dealing with civilians – or, hypothetically, smirking criminals – but not officer-to-officer.
Carmelita's certainty came from talking to Nick and Judy and Sly and letting them get away.

Then, without warning, Clawhauser burst in. "It's not Judy!"

Bogo looked up as Carmelita stepped to one side. "What?"

"Preliminary dental records on that rabbit! It's definitely not Judy."

It was only Carmelita's years of reading people that let her catch the tiny glimmer of relief in Bogo's eyes. "Obviously. We already knew that. This is just confirmation."

"Uh, yes, sir." Clawhauser fiddled with the papers in his hands. "But it's really really good confirmation to have, right?"

"I'd say so," said Carmelita, giving him a gentle smile.

"So it's not Hopps," said Bogo. "Who was it, then? Any information?"

Carmelita saw a rare expression on Clawhauser's face. Disgust.

"Actually... Chief, Inspector, you know I try to see the best in everybody, but working this job you sometimes see some really, really..."

He took a file from the stack he was holding.

"The records are a bit patchy. But if this guy is who we think he is, well... the world just became a better place. Because he's not in it."

Clawhauser added the file to Bogo's increasingly unstable pile. The cover read 'Afton, W.' and little else.

"I see," said Bogo gravely. Carmelita wasn't sure whether he recognized the name. She certainly didn't. She also didn't know whether the rabbit's identity had any relevance to Bellwether's death.

They weren't going to get any answers directly from Mister W. Afton. Not now.

She turned to Clawhauser. "Any information on that... thing? Whatever we disabled at the front door?"

"Well, it's hard to say..." He hurriedly pulled out another page from his stack. "Near as we can tell, Afton was an engineer. He modified the pizzeria's old characters to walk around off the stage. The one you guys destroyed was just one of a set. Inside the restaurant, we've found evidence of more animaltronics."

"Animatronics?"

"Is that not what I said?"

Bogo coughed, pointedly. "Is that everything, Clawhauser?"

"Um – at the moment, yes. There's still some leads being looked at, but I don't think we'll find much else."

"No." Bogo rubbed his eyes. "Alright. Keep the press releases vague. We're still in no position to weather the public reaction to all this. But update the internal communications. Wilde is now wanted in connection to two murders. Advise all units he is dangerous."
Carmelita Montoya Fox was not, historically, a patient woman. She tried. In a world where ‘fox’ – ‘vixen’ – was almost antithetical to ‘cop’, she knew she had to stay professional.

But there were too many moments like this one, when her last shred of patience burnt up like old paper.

"How in god's name can you say that?!"

Bogo's voice was cold. He seemed less tired now that he had to justify his stance. "You do not decide this precinct's approach, Inspector. I do. And in light of the evidence, this is the only choice."

Carmelita managed to downgrade her scream of rage into a low growl. "'The evidence'? How many times do I–? Nick is clearly being framed!"

"You have no proof of that. And I won't accept it just because it's nicer." He glared. "Frankly, if I were Nicholas Wilde, and I wanted to commit a murder, this is precisely what I'd do. Use the victimhood angle. Falsify a conspiracy."

"That's ludicrous. Your theory isn't more plausible – if anything, it completely ignores Nick's character profile. He isn't responsible for any of this!"

"Then who is? Believe me, Inspector, I am all ears. But Bellwether is dead. None of the minor criminals Wilde has antagonised could pull this off, including our failed diamond thief Kifalme. Without a definite suspect, all we're left with is Wilde himself.

Carmelita's anger turned cold in her chest. "...Do you honestly trust your people so little?"

"I trust no-one, Inspector Fox. Not in the face of hard evidence. And if you continue putting sentiment ahead of results, I will demonstrate exactly how much trust I have in you. Is that understood?"


Finally, he spoke. "Get back out there. Stop wasting my officers' time."

Carmelita was caught between remaining deferential to her local contact and refusing to dignify such disrespect with a response. Her brisk nod seemed an adequate compromise.

She turned on her heel and Clawhauser followed, eager to give Bogo distance. When the door clicked shut behind them, the tension broke. Slightly.

Clawhauser coughed. "I'm, um, sorry that the Chief's been rude. He's very stressed. All the time, I mean, but..."

"No. I know. Don't worry about it." Carmelita caught a look in his eye. She paused. "...What?"

"Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to freak you out or anything, I was just wondering..." His voice was quiet. "Are you doing okay?"

Carmelita met his gaze. "I could ask you the same question."

Clawhauser shrugged. "I'm – well, I'm still here, aren't I?" His tone strengthened. "Yeah. I'm a little shook up, we all are, but I'm a long way from giving up."

She nodded. "Then it sounds like we have the same answer, too."
He didn't reply. Instead, he just gave her a smile. She found herself returning it.

"Hey, uh..." Carmelita brushed a strand of hair behind one ear, trying to seem natural. "This is probably nothing, but I was thinking – just a hunch – there might be something in Bellwether's autopsy reports. I was going to give them another look. Do you know where they are?"

"I know Delgato had a copy. I can check with him." Clawhauser's eyes brightened. "I could help you look! I'm good with paperwork. If you want any company, that is."

"Now that you mention it... I think I could use some company. I'd be happy to have you."

"Great! I'll grab us some snacks!" He headed down the corridor with a wave. "I'll be back in a second!"

"Meet me at my office!" she called. He nodded just before he disappeared down the stairs.

She knew she should get moving – Clawhauser was faster than he seemed, and could plausibly beat her to her temporary room across the precinct. But for the first time in hours, Carmelita found herself alone. She needed the space.

Walking slowly, hands in her jacket pockets, she tried to clear her mind. Her mind was never clear. Even without an active case, she would pull and paw at problems constantly. But quiet moments like these helped her find new perspectives.

She was caught. Her principles forbade her from impeding an active investigation, and she had pushed her luck dangerously far already. But she knew Nick was innocent. And that knowledge wasn't wishful thinking masquerading as intuition. She had spoken to Nick personally, seen the fear and confusion in his eyes. A good mammal out of his depth, not a murderer covering his tracks.

She trusted Nick, and Judy. Based on their previous outings, they would be able to solve this mystery. But only if they got the chance. The duo had pulled off incredible feats while the ZPD failed to help them. How much harder was it if the ZPD was actively in the way?

That made Sly necessary. Sly was their best shot to get some breathing room, the time and space they needed to figure this out. And that meant Carmelita had to purposefully, repeatedly fail at the goal which defined her career.

She just wished Bogo was more... understanding. She didn't want him to shirk his duties. Of course she didn't! But his attitude worried her. Had the damage already been done?

If they couldn't, what was the point?

She shook her head. She would keep arguing – subtly – in defence of Nick's motives. But there was no getting through to Bogo. Despite her own certainty, she couldn't communicate anything to him. Not when everything hinged on her trust in an infamous criminal.

And then, alone in that empty corridor, Carmelita had a terrible thought. It was rare for her to feel real, genuine fear. But for an agonising second she stopped there, the realization freezing her blood like ice in her gut.

Did she trust Sly?

The bond they had was... intuitive, based on unspoken agreements in the heat of the moment. She could shift her weight and she knew, on some level, he'd match her, catch her if she fell. It was
almost a dance.

But then a year had passed in silence, and how much changed in that time? How much had Sly changed? She knew he would end a life if it was necessary, was it really that much of a stretch that he might – oh god, they had actually done it, Sly was covering for Nick after they actually–

Carmelita clenched a fist and took a breath and was instantly back in control.

She was tired. She was tired, and that was the only reason she would believe, even for a second, that Nick would be violent enough and Judy passive enough and Sly cruel enough to end the life of an unarmed prisoner. The idea was ridiculous.

But there was a kernel of truth there, too. Whatever careful progress Sly had built with her had eroded with time, unattended. She would do her best for all of them. But now, after so many years, Sly Cooper was no longer her priority.

Carmelita stood by the railing, looking down into the unhappy bustle of Precinct One. A microcosm of the huge, impossible city outside, its endless corners hiding her friends. Alone and tired, she found herself making the same promise she had all her career.

"I'll find you. All of you. Wherever you are."
Home

Chapter Summary

So let me keep you safe and warm, here in my arms,
Think of the life that we could live, the joy that it could give.
Even if we're worlds apart, stay in my heart!
Someday, when you've a choice to make, I hope you'll think of me...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"This is utterly insane. This is the Mayor's house! The Mayor lives here!"

The Dreemurr residence was comfortably large. Authentic wood floors. Soothing wallpaper. Big, soft armchairs.

A sitting room, quiet and detached from the world, perfect for any occasion. Including yelling at your best friend.

Judy cringed. "It's... it's outside the box! No-one will think to look for us here."

"Yes!" said Nick. "Because if we stay we'll immediately be discovered!"

"You said I could pick the next hideout!"

"I did! Because I kinda assumed you wouldn't pick something this ridiculous! I'm legitimately going insane, Carrots, what's your excuse?!"

Judy sighed. She lowered her voice, trying to calm the atmosphere. "Nick. You aren't going insane."

"Oh, so you believe what the nine-year-old showed us?"

She met his gaze. "The picture in that book matched what you've been seeing. Right?"

"I mean..." He folded his arms. "...yeah. I guess."

"Then I believe it."

Nick sighed. He eased himself into Asgore's favourite armchair, which was considerably too large for him. It was a good problem for an armchair to have. Certainly better than the reverse.

Judy stepped a little closer, but made sure to give him space. They were alone. Sly had disappeared, and wrangled Asriel away as he went.

Just Nick and Judy.

"I don't know," said Nick. He kept his eyes on the rug. "Am I being stubborn? Is it dumb to rule stuff out so strongly?"

"Well, I see where you're coming from. It's not unreasonable..."
"Right..." he sighed. "I'm just – so tired." He buried his head in his hands. "Bellwether died, except maybe she didn't, and there's a ghost, or maybe there isn't, and it's all my fault..."

"But maybe it isn't," said Judy firmly.

"No. That's the one thing I'm sure of." He still wasn't looking at her. "Even in the best case scenario, where I'm innocent and only a little insane, I should be doing more. I should be fighting to make sure no-one else suffers with me."

"That's exactly what you're doing."

"It doesn't feel like it. Whatever about Sly, we shouldn't be endangering the Dreemurrs. They're good people. And..." His voice was quiet. "And so are you. I really don't want you to get hurt."

"Yeah," she smirked, "because I'm such a delicate flower..."

"I'm not kidding!" he snapped, more loudly than he intended. "I know you're tough. Tougher than I am. But we rely on each other now. I'm supposed to watch your back." He glared at his own shaking hands. "And how am I supposed to do that when I don't know even what's real?!"

Judy said nothing, and Nick felt a sudden rush of fear, followed by shame. Here she was, by his side like always. Trying to help. And he had lost his grip on himself and yelled, and now she was upset. Silent.

But even after years together, Judy had a knack for surprising him. She wasn't silent out of anger. She had a better idea.

Nick started when he felt a warmth around his chest. Judy had joined him on the armchair, hopping up to catch him in a tight hug.

"Wh-" He coughed, suddenly self-conscious. "What are you doing?"

"Just an idea." Her voice was soft. "I'm real, aren't I?"

"I... You feel real."

"Good." She settled into his lap. "Then maybe that's where we start. We'll work out the rest from there."

Nick focused very, very closely on the window. "Is this – This is a real bunny solution. Y'know? Hugging. Jeez."

"You want me to stop? I can stop."

Nick didn't reply. Then, firmly but gently, he returned the embrace. Pulling her close and keeping her there.

She chuckled, then went quiet. Nick lost himself in the moment, letting everything – his fear, his doubt, even the persistent itching of his spine – fade away.

He had rarely hugged anyone for this long, even his mother. Even Judy. Little details became evident. Her pulse, her breath. The texture of her fur. And under that, the muscle.

"...You've always been stronger than me," he murmured. "I give up. I give up all the time. But nothing puts you off."
"Don't put yourself down, Nick."

"It's true. One bad night set me back twenty years. But you never gave up on your dream."

She laughed. "Yeah. I held onto my dream so hard I almost broke the whole city with it."

Judy gently rubbed his back.

"I don't know when to quit. That's a real, genuine flaw. It's still something I'm working on." Her little arms were tight against him. "But it means I won't quit on you. No matter what."

"You're such a dumb bunny."

Nick's voice cracked on the last word. He held her closer, eyes scrunched against tears.

"Thank you."

She didn't reply. She didn't have to.

They stayed like that, clutching each other as though nothing else mattered. For a while, nothing did. They didn't hear Sly pad up to the door, pausing to watch them for a moment. The sight brought a quiet smile to his face. He knew better than to intrude.

He gently clicked the door shut, leaving them in peace. Instead, he ambled down the hallway. The walls were lined with family photographs, depicting the Dreemurrs throughout various happy times. Other faces dotted the hallway – apparently Mufasa Kifalme was a close friend, judging from the photograph of their two families posing together. But mostly, the collection felt very personal.

Sly slowed to a stop in front of one photograph. It focused on a young Asriel – well, younger – laughing in an amusement park. Whoever had taken the photo had angled down to his level, but there was no mistaking that the two pairs of legs in frame belonged to Toriel and Asgore.

There had been a photograph just like that in Sly's childhood home. Mom. Dad. Son.

Sly had to forcefully pull himself back to the present. The sound of heavy footsteps provided a welcome distraction.

"Hey," he said, slipping a smile into place. "Just admiring the fine art. Don't mind me."

"Oh, I see."

Before Sly stood the man of the house – a stout goat in a pink floral shirt. Asgore Dreemurr was a calming presence. He had a deep voice and spoke slowly. Despite his strong build, there was a softness to his eyes.

"Tea?"

"I'm more of a lemonade guy, but sure. Long past due I started acting my age."

With a chuckle, Asgore led him into the kitchen. A few minutes later, Sly was furnished with a chair and a warm mug.

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome," said Asgore, sitting across from him.
"Not just for the drink, I mean." Sly took a sip. Inexperienced as he was with tea, he could tell Asgore made a good cup. "You're a good man. Not everybody would've given us shelter. I hear aiding and abetting fugitives is a crime."

"Well... I admit it's my first time harbouring a thief." Asgore met his gaze. "But you protected our son when no-one else could. We owe you a great debt."

"Hey, like I told your wife – I don't charge a fee or anything." He smiled, softly wry. "I'm just not as profit-driven as all the other master thieves. I see a kid in danger, I try to help. Just like anybody else would."

"Whatever your reasons, you saved his life. My family will always remember that."

Sly couldn't quite find a response. He stuck to his tea.

"As for Mister Wilde and Miss Hopps," continued Asgore, "I suppose you could say we owe them a favour as well."

"Did they help you with a case or something?"

"Not specifically... but yes." His face darkened somewhat. "I used to run a flower shop. It was broken into during Dawn Bellwether's scheme."

"That's right..." murmured Sly. "A flower was the main ingredient of that poison, right?"

"It was."

"Did you lose a lot?"

Asgore frowned at his cup. "The actual theft was not very taxing. But it was a deeply unpleasant experience. As occupations go, 'florist' is quite placid. We couldn't understand this sudden spike in break-ins."

Sly folded his arms. "There's absolutely no honour to targeting innocents like that. I'm sorry you had to face it."

"Thank you."

Asgore glanced toward the living room, his eyes gentle.

"After they solved that mystery, it was a huge relief. Not just for my shop, but the whole city. You say not everyone would help them, and I suppose that's true. But I think we are also far from the only ones."

"Still though," frowned Sly. "Your wife is the Mayor. Mightn't this be dangerous for her career?"

"Yes, that does concern me. But as it happens, she just left town for a conference, and I am expecting no company. As long as you leave soon – which Mister Wilde seems quite eager to do – I don't anticipate a problem."

"Alright then. It's your call." Sly took another drink, then realized something. "Say. You said you 'used to' be a florist. What happened to the shop? If you don't mind me asking."

Asgore beamed proudly. "I retired so I could be a full-time dad!"

"Oh!" Sly's ears perked. "That's great."
"It is..."

Asgore glanced at an armchair in the corner of the room. It had been claimed by a steadily mounting pile of papers. An invasion.

"Tori's always so busy. Being Mayor is a huge responsibility. But at least it pays better than her work as a schoolteacher. For the moment, we don't need the income of the old Flower King shop." His smile was luminous. "So I decided it only made sense to come home! It's not as easy as it sounds – I doubt I'll ever come close to Tori's baking – but Asriel and I, we get by very well."

Sly smiled shyly into his cup. ".I think I'd like that."

He looked to Asgore, that gentle wryness returning to his eyes.

"Most of the women I meet are, um... career-focused. I've got enough money to retire right now, but if C—" He coughed, too smoothly. "If my hypothetical wife wanted to keep working, that's fine with me. And... I really want kids. Someday."

Asgore blinked. "Really? I apologise if it sounds rude, but you didn't strike me as the type."

"That's fair," chuckled Sly. "Between my demeanour and my chosen career, I can see why you might have difficulty picturing me, y'know, wearing a sweater and attending PTA meetings."

He gazed into his tea, both hands around the mug. The warmth was comforting.

"But my dad... He got there in the end. He went from living like me to living like you, and honestly, I think that was his greatest achievement."

Sly smiled at Asgore, but it didn't fully reach his eyes.

"And they seemed happy, him and my mom. Maybe every kid thinks that of their parents. I didn't get a chance to talk to them more seriously about their relationship or anything. But I have really, really happy memories of my early life thanks to them. So, y'know."

Asgore seemed thoughtful. He somehow spoke even more slowly. "As a parent, I can tell you... it is no small undertaking. It has not always been easy, or fun. Toriel and I have not always agreed on what is best for our son." He smiled. "But we both want what is best for him, and that is the core of it. Parenting is the ultimate act of selflessness, I suppose. You must commit to always putting your child ahead of yourself."

"Right..."

Asgore's smile grew. "And if you don't mind me saying... judging by how committed you seem to your friends, I would say you have the makings of a good father already."

"Why would I mind you saying that?" said Sly, mildly awed. "That's maybe the nicest thing someone's ever said to me. Thank you."

"You're welcome!"

"Most of the strangers I meet call me names and try to murder me, so... I guess I'm not used to compliments."

Sly took a long sip of his tea, looking out the window.

"Well," he said, "if you don't mind me saying, you seem like a pretty good dad yourself. Asriel is a
wonderful kid. You two have done a great job raising him."

"You're too kind."

"No, I think I'm a justified level of kind. In most situations."

Sly looked back to Asgore, one eyebrow raised.

"That said... I don't mean to step on your toes, since you're a dad and I'm not, but you need to
monitor his Internet use. Like, seriously."

"Yes."

"He has been talking to actual criminals."

The afternoon passed quietly. Sly spent the day with Asriel, regaling him with stories of the Cooper Gang’s adventures. He sanitised certain details, especially when Asgore was nearby, to ensure there was nothing that would traumatised a nine-year-old boy. But Sly had very distinct memories of being a nine-year-old boy, and certain law enforcement agents might argue that in many ways he still was one. As such, he knew better than to sanitise everything. Asriel deserved to hear the good parts.

Asgore offered him a bed more than once, but Sly declined. He assumed Nick and Judy were completely unconscious after the night they had. They needed sleep. Sly preferred to stay awake in case anything went wrong. He was used to missing sleep on longer operations. Ambling around a pleasant family home was rest enough.

The several cups of expensive coffee he downed helped too.

Eventually the sky began to darken. Sly wasn't sure what the plan was from here – how they intended to fight back against the Phantasm, or Bellwether, or both – but he remembered what Nick had said about working at night. That much hadn't changed.

It was time to check in on the partners.

Sly padded back to the living room. Deciding that kicking down the door wasn't funny enough to be acceptable, he just let it swing open silently. He was glad he did. The sight was lovely.

Nick and Judy hadn't moved. They were still on the armchair, but sleep had relaxed them. Instead of the tight embrace they had been sharing hours earlier, Judy was now comfortably rested in Nick's arms, slack with sleep.

Sly smiled. He took out his Binocucom and snapped a photo with its camera. Finally, a decent vacation photograph.

That accomplished, he gently nudged them awake with his cane.

Nick woke quickly, sucking in a breath through his nose. He tensed, a bolt of fear pushing him awake. When his eyes landed on Sly, however, he relaxed.

"Oh. S'you."

"S'me!" Sly beamed as the partners roused themselves. "You two fell asleep like that. Every time I think you couldn't get more adorable, you prove me wrong."
Nick yawned, long and leisurely, before speaking in a sleepy mumble. "I'm gonna throw you outta window."

"Feisty, Nick. Only makes you cuter."

"Ahh..." Judy rolled her neck. "I think I needed that."

"I definitely did," said Nick quietly. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

"Weirdly enough... I think I am sleeping better." He stretched. "Sleep hygiene's a real mystery, alright. Turns out what was keeping me awake was my job and home and life prospects and reputation as a decent person who doesn't immediately need to be arrested. Who knew?"

"And your phone," smirked Judy, sliding off him to the floor. "Don't forget that, too."

"How could I? I haven't been online in almost two days, now. That's good sleep hygiene."

"Silver lining!"

"Silver lining."

"I'm really glad you guys are feeling better," said Sly. "Now come on. Asgore's letting us sit in on Sunday dinner. Smells about as good as vegetables ever get. Us omnivores make do, right Nick?"

"That's so nice of him." Nick lowered himself from the chair. "He doesn't have to..."

"I don't think he has to do any of this," smiled Sly. "He wants to."

Nick just nodded.

And so, Nick Wilde, a ZPD fugitive and possible haunting victim and almost definite murderer, found himself sitting at an old, solid table in a warm living room. The head of the table. An honoured guest.

Judy sat next to him, close as always, watching him with bright purple eyes. Making sure he was okay. Sly sat at her right, giving Nick space. At the foot of the table was Asriel, with Asgore on the left by the window. The autumn sunset trickled in behind him.

The food was delicious. Nick's last meal had been a cold sandwich assembled from stolen parts; and ethical quandaries aside, he had eaten it a full day ago. So much had happened since then – so much of it terrifying – that Nick had no chance to realize just how hungry he was. Thankfully, Asgore was a committed host. The portions Nick was given would have struck him as overkill in any other circumstance. As it stood, he took it all, and gratefully.

Nick was quiet at first, focused on sating his hunger and blocking out recent bad memories. But conversation flowed around him. Asgore and his son were wonderful hosts, Sly had already become a family friend, and Judy was... well, still Judy. The table was awash with laughter and anecdotes. Before long, Nick was eagerly jumping in between mouthfuls.

By the time the meal was over, Nick felt like a weight had been lifted from him. As Asgore began collecting plates, he stood. "Here, Gorey, let me give you a hand."

"Oh, no. I can do it."
"I insist! I'm used to handling my own."

Nick followed Asgore to the kitchen. As he passed Judy, he gave her a wink. She visibly relaxed at seeing him so relaxed, and that made him relax further.

Good conversation over Sunday dinner. The world felt less cold.

"Thanks again for everything, Asgore." Nick set his share of plates down by the sink. "I... I'll pay you back. Somehow."

Asgore chuckled. "No need, Nick. I find helping others is its own reward."

"Yeah. Maybe." Nick smirked, shifting to more comfortable territory. "Gotta say, though, I'm surprised. I didn't know you and Tori were into, y'know... occult stuff."

"Um... what?"

"The book?" Nick held up a hand. "The one with too many fingers? Full of ghost stuff? I figured Asriel borrowed it from one of you."

Confusion passed over Asgore's face like a slow cloud. "...Is that what you came here for?"

"P-pretty much." The food in Nick's stomach, so warm a moment ago, turned to ice. "Why?"

Moments later, he was storming back to the living room.

"Guys. We need to talk--"

He froze. Judy and Sly were also frozen. Asriel was doing his best to freeze, but couldn't quite hide the tremors in his hands. Sitting next to him, in his father's empty chair, was a wolf with a gun.

"Well, now." Wolf gave Nick a lazy smile. "Great minds, pup. I was just saying the same thing."

Chapter End Notes

The wonderful art featured in this chapter was drawn by TrashasaurusRex herself! I'm really, really pleased with it - ain't it lovely?
Bergentrückung

Chapter Summary

I'll remember your friendly face
I can't lie, I will miss this place.
No more pain! Our saviour be!
Come on, Mountain King!

Nick stood very, very still. Judy, Sly, and Asriel stayed frozen in their chairs. Only Wolf had the luxury of movement.

"I told you it wasn't over. I told you I'd catch up. And I like to think I'm a mammal of my word." Still grinning, he gestured with his pistol – but never aimed it away from Asriel. "Come on in, Nick. Relax."

Nick came in, slowly. Paws up. "Don't do anything rash."

"I won't if you won't. All I want is a chat." He jerked his head. "Please. I believe that seat was yours?"

Nick walked sideways to his chair, his eyes never leaving O'Donnell. He sat, hyper-aware of every detail.

"There's a good pup. I'm guessing from how you three have shut your mouths for once that you realize what I'm holding here." His grin grew. '"Cause it ain't a shock pistol. It ain't a tranq gun. It's not gonna send you to the goddamn Shadow Realm. This is, in fact, a nine millimetre Smith & Weasel semi-automatic pistol. It is loaded with actual bullets. Amateur hour is over, kids."

"How did you find us?" said Judy. She spoke carefully, searching for answers without provoking him. "Here, and at the junkyard?"

Nick's tone was less steady. "What did you do to Honey?!"

"'Honey'? Is that the badger chick? She's something else. Gave us all an earful for trespassing, and when I asked after you, she looked me dead in the eye and said – get this! – 'Never heard of him'." He chuckled. "I've never been lied to so forcefully. I was actually pretty impressed. Didn't feel like pressing the issue, not with a woman that sure of herself. Besides," he grinned, "only a matter of time before I caught up, huh?"

His eye travelled lazily between the trio.

"And better yet, I've stumbled into some gainful employment. There's a lady you might know who's getting real tired of you."

Judy glared. "And she paid you to kill us?"

"I wish," he snorted. "That's what I'd do. But you know her type. Wants to make certain that your utter defeat is written across your faces, yadda yadda whatever. Y'know. Monologue to ya or... something."
"Can we pay you to kill us now?" said Nick flatly.

Wolf laughed. "There's the comedian! Crack a few more decent jokes, and maybe I'll kill you for free."

"So, what?" said Sly, after checking for the nineteenth time that Asriel wasn't panicking. "You're here to kidnap us?"

"More or less. I only get my commission if I bring you back in one piece." He gave them his biggest, most wolfish smile. "Let's do what's best for everyone, huh? If you come quiet, everybody wins. I get paid. My employer gets to meet you. And this ball of fluff gets to go to school tomorrow."


Wolf kept grinning, but Nick and Sly caught the odd emphasis. They followed her gaze to Wolf's gun.

Sly broke into a smile. He caught Asriel's eye. "Hey Azzy, listen to me, okay? You aren't in any danger. Don't worry."

His eyes were wide. "C-cause you'll save me again?"

"That'd be my pleasure. But I don't have to. See that little lever?" His smile widened. "This dummy still has the safety on."


"Yeah," said Nick. "He's not. I think you know you have the safety on. You need to be real soulless to threaten a kid like this. Guess you're more of a softie than you let on."

"You willing to bet on that, pup?"

"Nick's a pretty good judge of character," smirked Sly.

"And either way, it doesn't matter," added Judy. "The safety is on. You can't fire. And that means there's a window where--"

Asgore slammed a shovel against Wolf's head.

Wolf staggered, and the others darted forward. Judy dove over the table and snatched his pistol while Sly grabbed Asriel, pulling him back. Nick toppled the dining table, forming makeshift cover. Sly settled Asriel behind it, all three ensuring he was okay.

Wolf stood to face Asgore, and the goat smashed the shovel into his chest. Wolf tried to draw another weapon, and Asgore battered his hand. Wolf opened his mouth to say something and Asgore struck him directly in the face.

Asgore was relentless, eyes burning with fury. He hit Wolf over and over and over, until the metal began to dent and the wood of the handle started splintering his hands. The hits were fast and powerful and unending, leaving Wolf no chance to recover.

Judy was taking the chance to unload and disassemble Wolf's pistol. But Sly was transfixed. He had seen a man fight like this only once before. And it filled him with just as much awe as when he had been a terrified eight-year-old watching from a closet.

But Asgore wasn't outnumbered. And when the shovel finally failed him, snapping like a twig
against Wolf's muzzle, he still didn't slow. With a roar, Asgore grabbed Wolf by the shoulders and hefted him straight through the window. Glass shattered and Wolf crumpled, landing unmoving on the lawn.

The trio stood. "Wow!" said Sly, getting to his feet. "That was—"

When Asgore turned to him, none of the rage had left his eyes. "Out! Get out of my house, now!"

Sly's words died in his throat – and a second later, he nodded. With a final glance to Asriel – shaken, but unhurt – they left.

The trio ran through the hall towards the back door. They needed distance. If Wolf only wanted them, leaving the Dreemurrs was the safest option. All three were silent, thinking the same thing. Worrying about the damage they had already done.

Sly ripped open the back door, and they stepped out into the back garden.

"Oh!" said Gary. "Hi there!"

Larry leapt in from the other side and suddenly they were fighting two wolves.

Sly brandished his cane, eager for the familiar territory. But Judy grabbed his arm, pulling him up the garden.

"Come on!"

"What?" Sly frowned, disappointed. "We can take two guys!"

"Wolves don't fight alone," snapped Nick. "They're just the first."

They came to the Dreemurrs' back fence. Judy leapt up and cleared it, grabbing the top with both hands and swinging over. Nick and Sly followed suit. They landed on a small path, tucked between gardens, and ran for the exit.

Their pursuers were relentless – but perhaps overenthusiastic. Sly's ear caught the words "Wait, Gary, don't!" followed by a groan of wood. He looked over his shoulder just in time to see the fence elegantly collapse, bringing Gary with it. He landed nose-first, Larry rushing to his side.

"Hah!" Sly savoured the humour while he could. "What's the plan? We left that awful car back at the park!"

"Yep," said Judy.

"We're just gonna run all the way back there?"

"Yep!" said Judy.

Nick hissed a sigh, but kept running. They couldn't slow.

They came to a junction – and saw three more wolves guarding the laneway. The wolf in the middle reached for her walkie-talkie. "Targets spotted. Moving to engage."

Gary and Larry had recovered, sprinting down the lane. The trio glanced between them and the new wolves, then ran down the only free path.

"They're heading north!" The other wolves fell neatly into step behind Gary and Larry. "Lock down
the train station!

They ran. They pushed themselves as the wolves chased them, as fatigue pulled at their limbs, as the warm food inside them suddenly turned heavy and draining. The suburbs became a gauntlet. Two wolves became five, then seven, then nine...

And the way forward became a dead end.

They had reached a pathway near the train station, the foot of a hill the tracks carved through. A van blocked the main road as three wolves lay in wait, closing off the path leading up the hill.

"Don't panic," said Judy, as they slowed to a stop. She scanned every direction for an exit, but the pack was closing in around them. A circle. "We just need to stay calm, and--"

"And what?" came a familiar voice.

Wolf strode up. His fine jacket was crumpled, the purple stained with mud and grass in places. His fur was ruffled. And two lines of blood ran from his nose, drying into his fur. Asgore's assault was evident.

And he was still completely, utterly solid. The most brutal beating Sly had seen in a year hadn't slowed Wolf down an inch.

The pack parted for him, but didn't break their perimeter. He looked them over slowly. He adjusted his eyepatch – it had gotten a little out of place. "Well now. That lasted a good, what, two minutes? Three, maybe?" That grin slid back onto his face. "Getting shorter every time, huh?"

Judy glared. "You haven't won yet."

"Maybe. But I don't think you know how bad you're losing." He fished something out of his pocket. "Here, guess I forgot to mention this..."

He dropped something sad and purple at their feet. A wing mirror from Springtrap's car.

"You're not going anywhere," he grinned, "unless it's with me. So do us all a favour and quit squirming."

Nick stared at the broken mirror. He had chosen their parking spot carefully, certain it would be safe. And the wolves had still found it. Like it was nothing. Like Nick's efforts didn't matter.

Nothing he did seemed to matter.

Judy squared herself, stepping towards Wolf. "Guys, get ready. They have us cornered. That means we fight our way out."

Nick's reply was cut off by Wolf barking out a laugh.

"Oh, sure! Thirteen against three, but that's no problem for you, right? Since you're all so special?"

"Judy confiscated your peashooter," said Sly, matching her position. "You're unarmed, and looks like your cronies are too." He gave his cane a twirl, settling it gracefully in his hand. "So I'd say our odds are good."

"You would, wouldn't you?" Wolf's eye gleamed in the twilight. "But this time you can't hide in the shadows like the coward you are. Now I get to demonstrate the power of a unified wolf pack. Oh..."

Somehow, his grin widened. "And who said I'm unarmed?"
Wolf did not reach for the knife he kept in his boot. He merely flexed his fingers, allowing his quarry to see this gloves. Gloves that ended, on each fingertip, with claws of sharpened steel.

"Oh," said Sly. "I – I want to make a joke about your weird hobbies, but those things are so sharp I think my brain reset."

"Damn right. Important fact about wolves: we're always dangerous." Wolf shifted his stance, and the trio felt a change in the wolf pack, the atmosphere rippling with electric anticipation. "And here's another–"

Wolf charged forward with sudden speed. Judy and Sly readied themselves – and were caught off guard as Wolf ignored them, passing them both.

"The weak die first!"

Nick had a second to react before five steel claws came for his face. He threw himself to the side just in time. He was pretty sure they still got one of his whiskers.

Wolf was already following his first slash with another, bringing his other hand sweeping up. When Nick dodged that, he had to dodge another, and another, backing away from Wolf's assault – until he almost walked straight into Gary's waiting arms.

Nick caught the sound of Gary's breath, which was his only warning before two paws nearly closed around his shoulders. Nick slipped down, relying on his smaller height, and scrambled past Wolf's triumphant grin.

The perimeter of wolves persisted. Wolf had them penned.

Nick glanced to his partner. It was uncharacteristic for her to stand by and let him fight alone. But she and Sly had their own problems.

Four wolves had broken from the perimeter – not enough to thin the line, but enough to pose a threat. Two to one. Judy was out of her element, unable to build up the speed she needed for her big hits. She kept moving, dodging their grasp, but was still figuring out how to fight back. Sly was having better luck, keeping his attackers at bay with long sweeps of his cane. But the two wolves weren't even trying. They just drifted close, watching him with confident eyes.

"Enjoying the show, pup?" Wolf was ambling up to Nick. Nick pulled his focus back on the mercenary leader, trying to match his fighting stance. "This is the plan I was going to show off back in that warehouse. Adjusted for your new friend, of course."

Nick raised his fists. "He's not with us. You're welcome to him. He's a master thief, probably worth more than me and Hopps combined."

Wolf chuckled. "Little Nick Wilde, always so humble... when will you realise?" He grinned, surging forward. "You're the big prize here!"

He swept towards Nick, who didn't dodge. When Wolf's claws came for him, his feet stayed rooted as he just moved his torso. With sharp, quick motions, he avoided the heavy arcs of Wolf's attacks.

And the second an opportunity appeared, Nick rammed his palm straight into Wolf's nose.

Nick had relied on that trick more than once in his younger days. What was new was the follow-up. As a hustler, Nick would strike a wolf's nose as a last resort, and then run very, very fast. As a trained cop, he had a few more options.
Wolf hunched over in pain – but tore his eye open, glaring at Nick. He swept his arm clumsily, and Nick grabbed it, shifting Wolf's momentum. With the right twist of his shoulders, Nick was able to topple his much heavier opponent, slamming Wolf into the asphalt. He kept hold of Wolf's arm, angling the claws away, and planted his foot firmly on Wolf's chest.

"I have him! How are–"

Nick trailed off. Judy had tried to build momentum by running across the circle in a straight line. The resulting kick might have broken the perimeter if Larry hadn't figured out her path. Nick looked up just in time to see him intercept Judy with a dive, pinning her somewhere underneath that dark coat.

The sound caught Sly's attention, making him turn around. The second he did, one of his pursuers swept a leg under his feet as her partner went to grab him. Sly struggled, but he had lost the distance he needed to stay safe. The cane was already being wrenched from his hand.

"Not bad, pup..."

Nick felt a sharp pressure. He looked down to see Wolf gently pressing his free hand – all five points – into Nick's stomach.

"But you're still surrounded and outnumbered. Just quiet down, willya?" Wolf grinned. "For the sake of your shirt, if nothing else."

Nick glanced around, watching Sly and Judy getting dragged to their feet. Restrained. There was no-one else around. No other options. No plan.

Ears low, Nick let out a slow breath. His grip on Wolf's arm slackened.

"There. Was that so hard?"

Wolf pushed him aside as he stood. A wolf left the perimeter to hold Nick. The whole pack watched their leader.

He just stood there for a moment, smirking. And then he howled.

Gary was the first to join, clearly anticipating it, but it was only seconds before the whole pack took part. Nick kept his eyes low, buried in triumphant harmony. Thirteen mocking voices.

Wolf trailed off, the rest following suit. "Alright, alright. We can do congratulations later. Let's bag 'em and tag 'em. Quickly, now, it's a long way back to the boat."

The pack was fully outfitted. Judy was soon being eased into a set of handcuffs appropriate for a rabbit. She was unusually quiet as Wolf bound her wrists together.

"What was it you said, raccoon?" he grinned, glancing to Sly. "Standard-issue cuffs just don't cut it with you?"

"I mean, I don't remember the exact wording..."

"Heh."

Wolf produced something from his jacket pocket – two long, polished metal cylinders, connected by a thin but sturdy chain. One side ended in a curve. The other was an open hole.

"Well, my employer let me borrow these. They're electronic. No locks to pick."
Wolf slid one of the cylinders onto Sly's right hand. Keeping it there, he took a black device from his pocket, very similar to a remote car key. He clicked one of two buttons on the key fob, and the bottom of the cuff slammed shut around Sly's wrist.

"Great. Loving this." Sly realized Wolf wasn't moving to put the other cuff on his left hand. "What's the holdup? Technical difficulties?"

"Seems to be working fine, actually." Wolf nodded to the wolf holding Nick, who then shoved him closer. "C'mere, pup. I think you'd work well as some dead weight."

None of the retorts or gripes or self-deprecating jokes in Nick's mind formed into a solid sentence worth saying aloud. He just watched as Wolf secured the second cuff onto his left wrist, chaining him to Sly.

Sly shot him a small smile. "Feels kinda clammy, huh? Don't worry. Might be a good bonding exercise."

"Mister O'Donnell?" said Nick. "Can I please get a new lab partner?"

"No. I'm gonna enjoy watching you drive each other nuts."

Wolf went to restrain Sly's other hand, but his eye was caught by the flash of red on Sly's leg – his pouch of equipment. With a sudden swipe, he ripped it off.

"Hey!" Sly glared. The humour left his eyes. "Give that back. Now."

"These are your toys, huh?" Wolf glanced up. "The cane, I'm gonna hold on to. Fun souvenir. But this junk?"

He fished out Sly's Binocucom, looking it over. He peered into the scope, holding it vertically against his eye. Without warning he tossed it aside, sending it crashing against a trash can. Sly growled. He was trying to hide it, but Nick sensed he was really upset.

"Ah." Wolf found what he was searching for – Sly's burner phone. "Hopps and Wilde ditched their phones, didn't they? Otherwise the ZPD would track 'em." His eye narrowed. "Let's make that three for three."

He dropped the phone, letting it crack against the pavement. And with one sharp stomp of his boot, he crushed it.

The three watched as Wolf pawed through Sly's things, their odds of escape dwindling with each discarded item. Nick couldn't ignore the look in Sly's eyes. Out here, separated from his Gang, he needed his equipment more than ever. This wasn't just a tactical loss. It was emotional, too.

And then Wolf pulled out something small and round. He frowned at it. "The heck is this? A mint?"

Wolf was holding a smoke bomb.

Judy shot Sly a smirk – the same smirk she had given him back at the warehouse. He realized what she was planning, but before he could react she was already moving.

Her legs weren't restrained. She shot up and headbutted Wolf in the nose.

"Agh!" Wolf stepped back, clutching his face. He dropped the bomb, which instantly exploded into blue fog.
The pack was thrown into chaos. The smoke wasn't particularly odorous, but it caught their sensitive noses by surprise. Nick felt Judy's paw find his own amid the smoke.

Wolf's voice, tinged with nausea, came from somewhere ahead of them. "Damn it! Grab them! Someone grab them!"

They ran.

The pack recovered quickly. They had only bought seconds of time. Judy pushed through angry wolves and sprinted up the hill, Nick and Sly close behind. Jangling.

"This won't work!" yelled Nick. His voice was almost lost somewhere between the roar of a coming train and the cries behind them. "We can't get enough distance! They'll tail us!"

"No," said Judy. "They won't."

She reached the top of the bridge, stopping to look over the side. With a roar of displaced air, the train back to central Zootopia burst from the hill. At this rate, the caboose would come soon.

Judy took in everything – the charging wolves, the train, the drop from the bridge, her friends and the handcuffs binding them – and made her decision.

"Nick." She tried to sound like she knew what she was doing. "Stay safe. I'll see you soon."

"Wh–?"

Then, because he would be better able to take it, she shoved Sly off the bridge. He fell, and Nick fell with him.

Her timing was perfect. The cuffs snagged on a light fixture on the caboose as it cleared the hill. They were caught on it. Good. If Nick could clear the train too easily, he'd just come back to her. Get caught alongside her.

It was painful. But it was their best chance.

Sly seemed to accept it, hanging loosely from his arm. But Nick thrashed, desperately trying to get free. His eyes caught hers. "Judy! No!"

The wind and distance muted his scream. In seconds, he was an orange blur. Judy smiled, bittersweet. She knew he'd come back. She would be ready when he did.

With that, Judy Hopps turned on her heel, braced herself, and threw herself into a fight she knew she would lose.
"Mirror Mirror"

Chapter Summary

Mirror,
Tell me something,
Tell me who's the loneliest of all...?
Fear of
What's inside me
Tell me, can a heart be turned to stone?

"At the risk of sounding stupid," said Sly, "I don't think this is so bad."

By the time they had disentangled themselves from the train, they were out of the Meadowlands and back in Zootopia proper. Sly had managed to avoid detection, and was now ambling down a dark alleyway. Nick dragged behind him, his left arm lamely raised by the link to Sly's right.

"Sure, we're handcuffed together," conceded Sly, "but only one hand each. That's still two hands! That's the normal amount! And sure, now we have no way to call for help. Even if we wanted to surrender to Carmelita, we – wait, no! We'd totally call the guys first. Bentley and Murray would come running if they knew how bad things were. But I didn't memorise their new numbers... in my defence, what kind of nerd still does that?" Sly's brow furrowed. "I forget what the silver lining there was supposed to be."

He glanced around, slowing to a stop. The alley had led to a dead end. Faded orange brick surrounded them on all sides.

"And I have no idea where we are," he added. "But I'm sure you do! We just need to work out where they took Judy, and get there. Nothing simpler."

He felt a tug. He turned. Without warning, Nick had sank to the ground. Head down.

Sly frowned. "Nick? ...Nick, you're just sitting th--"

Nick screamed and slammed his free hand into the wall.

Sly started. "What are you doing?!" He glanced around, then bent to Nick's level. "What's wrong?"

"'What's... wrong?!'" Nick pulled his gaze to Sly, and he shrank under it. Nick's eyes were wild, bristling with pain and fear and fought-off tears. "You seriously have the gall to ask me why I might be upset? After this?"

"It's okay! We can turn this aro--"

"No," he hissed. "No. We can't."

He lowered his head, forehead against the wall. Claws digging through the brick. His voice was a dying breath.

"We can't."
"Why do we keep running?" Nick was hoarse. "We're just delaying the inevitable, and letting other people pay the price. The Dreemurrs took us in, and Wolf attacked them. Threatened them in their own home. I turned to Honey for help, and Wolf found her too! And we broke into Ruby's bar, and... and Clawhauser. Oh god, poor Clawhauser."

"Yeah." Sly kept his eyes down. "I remember. That was hard to do."

"But what was the point?" Nick pressed. "We haven't gotten anywhere with this. And now Judy is in danger." His eyes narrowed as he tried to strengthen his voice. "I think... it's time we call Carmelita. I'm done."

"Whoa, whoa." Sly's eyes widened. "That's the nuclear option – Carmelita said so herself. If we do that, she'll have to arrest us. Our investigation is over."

"Good." Nick sighed. "I'm sorry. I know it's not... I know I'm supposed to..." His eyes screwed shut in frustration. "I'm just so lost. And I want this to end. Please."

Sly went quiet, trying to find the right words. Before he could, Nick continued.

"All this time..." He sucked in a breath. "I've been trying so hard. For twenty years, I hadn't been. I had given up. It was so much easier than trying. And then Judy came, that stupid, annoying, reckless..." Another breath. Shakier. "...brave, lovable genius of a rabbit. She made me try. And I did."

Nick opened his eyes, but they seemed unfocused.

"I worked so hard. It was painful and slow, but it paid off, and I was her partner. I wasn't a lowlife anymore. I mattered. I mattered a lot. I was helping her make the world a better place. I was... Ugh. I was a role-model."

He punched the wall again. Sly winced.

"And now," he said, voice rising with anger and pain, "now what? I don't even know what's happening any more, but it looks clear from the outside. I'm nuts. I kill people. Two people are dead, and I did it."

"What about the Phantasm?" said Sly. "We found it! It was in that book!"

"Yes. The book." Nick's eyes locked with his, and Sly almost flinched. The fox was furious. "The precious book full of answers. That's what I wanted to tell you, before Wolf arrived. Before we traumatised that poor kid. Is he ever gonna sleep again? His own home, and that awful--"

"Nick. Believe me, I'm with you, but try to focus. What's wrong with the book?"

"What's wrong with the book," spat Nick, "is that it's a toy."

"...What?"

"Asgore told me! It's not some ancient family heirloom, it's from a cartoon." Nick ran his hand down his face. "There's – there's this show about ghosts, or something, and they printed and sold the book from the show, and that's what that was! Asriel thought it would help because he's nine."

"But – you saw that thing! That specific thing!"
Nick waved a hand. "I must've seen it somewhere and forgot. My subconscious drew on it, that's all. It's the only explanation." His voice dropped. "For the last time, ghosts aren't real. So it was me. It has to be. I killed them."

"You don't know that," said Sly quickly. "And they both sound like pretty awful people, really, so—"

"They're people!" he roared. "They were people. They aren't magically exempt from being victims. That's not how that works."

Sly said nothing.

"And you're right," said Nick. "I don't know. But I don't know anything."

His voice had lowered again. There was no more anger. He didn't have the energy for anger anymore.

"I don't matter. All that matters is the evidence. This story's gonna break eventually, everyone's gonna find out what happened. What I did. And it's so, so much worse than being a hustler. Every kid in the country, every fox, is gonna hear on the news that Nick the Friendly Policefox eats people. What will they...?"

His head sank, resting against the cold brick.

"I don't matter," he said again, quietly. "I never mattered. If my life goes to hell, I probably deserve it. But Officer Wilde meant something. I let everyone down." His breath hitched. Sly heard how his voice tremored, almost cracking. "I let down my mom."

For a moment, they sat in silence. Sly hesitated, uncertain if he should—could—intrude on Nick's thoughts at a moment like this.

But duty called. And with a gentle smile and gentler tone, Sly spoke up.

"What's your mom's name?"

Nick started, realizing how vulnerable he was. "What?"

"Your mom. What's her name?"

"Shut up. I'm not—"

"It's okay, Nick." Sly kept his voice low. "I'm not joking around. I'd just like to know."

There was a pause as Nick kept his eyes on the wall. Tired, but calculating. Finally... "...Marian."

"Oh, that's nice," said Sly. "I've always liked that name. My mom was named Beatrice. Beatrice Fletcher, before she married my dad. But she liked people to call her 'Trixie'." He smiled, moving around Nick to settle more comfortably against the wall. "I'd tell you more, but... I don't know much more."

Nick watched him, not putting the question into words.

Sly smiled back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I mean, how much does the average eight year-old know about his mother, y'know? Really know..."

Nick didn't need it spelled out. Like Judy, he had read Sly's file. One of the few areas that didn't lack detail was the description of that night, years ago. The file was thick with matter-of-fact discussion of
wounds and blood loss and presumed times of death.

He imagined how much worse it would have been to see it happen. His own home. Eight years old.

They sat there for a moment. Nick absently followed Sly's lead, shifting from his kneeling position to something more comfortable. Sly was still watching him with that quiet smile.

"Listen. If your mom's still around, if she supports you, follows your adventures as a cop... that's – that's really cool. And we aren't gonna let her down. You and me, we can fix this. Just watch."

"How?" Nick's mind felt blank. "Everything I do backfires. I thought I could keep Judy safe, and I couldn't. We kept getting discovered." He winced as his spine, still itching, set against the wall in an awkward way. "There's nothing we can do."

"Oh, hardly. Like I said, there's a way to turn things around. We just need to think of it!"

Nick sighed. He went to say something, then stopped himself.

Sly smiled thinly. "Something on your mind?"

"You don't want to hear it."

"I might surprise you. Hit me."

"I want to." Nick shot him a glare. "I just – you know there's nothing you can say to make me feel better, right? You realize that?"

Sly shrugged. "Mathematically speaking, the right combination of words must exist."

"But wouldn't want to hear them from you." Nick's ears flattened, adding to his glare. "I get you're trying to be optimistic, but the positive outlook isn't helping. Drop the chummy attitude. We aren't friends."

Sly's smile didn't waver, but his eyes flickered. "Yeah. You've made that pretty clear."

Nick went to fire back, and realized he didn't have a reply. He saw a vision of Judy and stopped short. Silence dragged.

"Listen," said Sly eventually. "I know that you don't like me. I, uh... I've been thinking about it. In between thinking about everything else, that is."

He shifted his weight, ending up a little closer.

"The fact is, whether you like it or not, I did befriend Judy last time I was here. We fought side by side. We shared some heavy conversation. We fooled around—" Sly caught the look Nick was giving him and hastily clarified. "Joked. We joked around. And by the end of it, I genuinely considered her a friend."

Nick eyes were growing sharper. Get to the point.

Sly sighed, getting the message. "Like a lot of people, I sorta see you two as a package deal. I never really thought about how I treated you – I just figured that since I was cool with Judy, I was cool with you too. But that was dumb. You're your own person. And if you don't like me, well... I can see why."

"Uh..." Nick coughed. "Thanks? I suppose? For recognising that, I mean."
"Again: very clear. Entirely on me it took that long to piece together."

There was silence for a moment. Not comfortable. Then Sly spoke.

"But you gotta admit, Nick. We're more similar than you think."

"Are you kidding me?" Nick's brow twitched. "No. No! Where to start? I don't break laws for fun. I don't... cling to strangers because they were nice to me one time. But most of all, when I was given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by an amazing woman whose continued patience I don't deserve, I was able to make it work." He turned to Sly, eyes narrowed. "How long did your stint at Interpol last again? Was it a full week? Or just until the coffee machine broke?"

Sly's eyes were serious. He didn't get angry. He just pointed to Nick. "That. That's what we have in common."

"What?"

"The joke." His voice was level. "You're upset. Lost and angry and alone with a guy you don't even like. But you still phrase it all in jokes. The long description that applies to both Judy and Carmelita, the coffee machine... decent material for the middle of an emotional outburst."

Nick met his gaze. Sly's eyes usually held a spark of humour. It was gone.

"I know what it's like," he said. "To think like that. To twist everything you see into a joke, because jokes have order. They make sense. And when they land, they're fun. Distracting. They defuse a situation, numb whatever else you're feeling. Because if you stopped joking for one second, and actually looked back at everything that's happened to you..."

A growl. "Shut up. Now."

"Exactly." Sly smiled. It was humourless. "We have that in common, too."

The silence hung for a few moments. Sly gave Nick the chance to calm a little before he pressed on.

"Nick, I'm not as stupid as I look. I know this is bad. I know you're upset for good reason."

He gestured to himself with his free hand.

"But am I freaking out? No! I'm not."

"Yeah." Nick hated how much his voice sounded like a teenager fresh from crying. "Because you think you're so great."

Sly smirked gently. "You'd think so, but no. Not this time. I'm calm because I think you're Nick Wilde," he said, with all the weight the name was worth. "I can barely tell left from right in this crazy city, but you? You're the king of these streets. You're the smartest guy in Zootopia, and your only problem is how you don't seem to realize that. I know what it's like to switch sides, Nick. I know that insider's edge you get, working as a cop after spending years running from them. But you're right. When you say you're better at this than I ever was, or ever will be, you're absolutely right." He planted his hand on Nick's shoulder. "I'm a thief. But you? You're a genius."

Nick didn't reply. He knew a con when he saw one. He knew when a compliment was insincere, calculated, just an input to generate a specific output. He scanned Sly for any of those tells. He found
"I guess what I'm trying to say," continued Sly, "is that Judy needs you right now. But not this version of you. You're tired and afraid and there's a ghost, apparently, and now you've lost your partner too. Except you haven't lost her. Not yet. We've just... misplaced her. And we can get her back, safe and sound. You just need to be Nick Wilde."

Sly leaned back, giving Nick space. He waited. Nick realized he was waiting for him.

There was nothing else to talk about, at least for the moment. It came down to finding Judy. It came down to Nick.

Nick took a breath, trying to clear his mind. Predictably, there was far too much cluttering his brain for that to work. Instead, he picked out the important details. Let the huge fears that were crushing him continue to crush him, but distantly, as he focused on the practical problems.

And with an ease he found worrying, Nick Wilde was back to his old self.

"Okay. Wolf's been hired to capture us, right? Not kill us, capture us. Present us to Bellwether like trophies. He needs somewhere to actually contain us, and that's where we'll find Judy."

"Great!" Sly turned to him, watching eagerly. "And where is that?"

"He... he said something, just after he captured us. He complained that it was 'a long way back to the boat'. That means..." He frowned, settling the pieces together as they came. "They're using a ship. Kidnapping Judy Hopps is already hard, and it's even harder with the ZPD so on-edge, so they're using a ship. Spacious and defensible but not obvious. And, worse case scenario, mobile."

"Yes. Yes!" Sly beamed. "Look at that sexy brain in action! What next, Slick – where is it?"

"He said 'long way' in the Meadowlands, so I'd say it's in Zootopia itself. But that's not much. All the main districts have docks..."

Sly saw him begin to stall. "But...?"

"But – but – everything's regulated. Canal District gets the bulk of industrial freight, Savannah gets most of the tourists, everywhere else needs additional safety oversight because of the artificial weather. Government inspection protocol is pretty hardcore, which is bad news for Wolf, so..."

"So?"

"If I was a dirty criminal...?" Nick clicked his fingers suddenly. "Wait! Duh! Same place all the dirtbags go. If I wanted to moor a ship where nobody would ask questions, I'd go to Tundra Town. Quiet 'import export' stuff is a cornerstone of Mister Big's empire, and you can rent your own corner for the right price."

"Okay!" said Sly. "So we ask him?"

"No. No no no. He's fond of Judy, sure, but not me. And he'd probably try to sell you. We don't have time to sweet-talk him into breaking his policy of confidentiality." Nick managed a smirk. "And we don't need to. There's only a couple places Wolf could be. And I know all of them."

"Yes!" Sly reached over, his free hand on Nick's shoulder. "See? See? I told you, Nick. You've got this locked down."
"Thanks." Nick pulled away, and Sly didn't press it. "No sense wasting time."

"Agreed. Let's get to Tundra Town and get ourselves a boat."

Nick blinked. "Why?"

"To storm Wolf's ship! Any kind of boat would be fine. I can drive pretty much anything," said Sly, as though this was in any way a reasonable statement.

"I – no. No. We don't need a boat." Nick shifted his weight. "It'd be simpler for Wolf to just use the ship as a big, rusty warehouse. It might not even be fuelled up. Stealing a boat could take too long, especially when we'll be able to get in from the docks. Or maybe swimming..."

Sly's smile froze. "S-swimming."

"Yeah," said Nick, now mostly to himself. "Swimming is slow, but there's more freedom. More potential angles. We'd have a better shot at taking them by surprise."

"Um–"

"We sneak on, free Judy, then swim away. Judy's a great swimmer – unsurprising, I know – so she'd probably be down for it."

"Nick..."

"The obvious drawback is the freezing water. If we take too long there's a serious health risk. But maybe I can call Finnick – he owes me for his promotion – and he can be waiting with–"

"Nick."

Sly caught Nick's eye, then immediately looked away again. His ears were low and his hand fidgeted, desperate for his cane.

"I can't... I can't swim, Nick."

"...I don't get it."

Sly looked back up. "What?"

Nick was stoic. "Usually," he said, "your jokes are just bad. Not incoherent. I legitimately don't get this one. Why would you say you can't swim?"

"Because," said Sly in a voice that felt far too small, "it's true."

Sly had never met Flash. He had never seen what happens when a sloth hears a really good joke. But if he had, he would have felt a strong wave of déjà vu.

It was slow. Nick started the same as he'd been all week – stressed, irritable, insulted that Sly was even speaking to him, and most of all, tired. But his face shifted, gradually but evenly. His scowl unfurled. His ears rose. His eyes, so beaten and bleary, began to shine with a bright emerald spark. And, like a sunrise finally breaking through constant cloud, Nick grinned.

Then he burst out laughing.

"Oh – oh my god!" He could barely speak between fits of laughter. "You can't – swim!"
"Yeah," said Sly. "I can't." Nick laughed harder.

"It's so easy! Everyone can do it! And here you are, Mister Master Thief, and you – there's something I can do you can't, and it's not even hard–!"

"Hey," he protested, "not 'everyone' can do it. The guys can't either! And they're a hippo and a turtle, so that's–"

"Hold up, hold up!" By this point Nick was leaning against the wall for support. "Is your defence seriously that it's – okay because your friend in a wheelchair can't swim either?!"

"N-no!" Sly's ears shot up in alarm. "I didn't mean – it was before–!"

"Bahahahaha!"

Sly clenched his fist. He struggled to find a reply, but everything he'd said only made Nick laugh harder. Laugh at his weakness. Laugh at his fear. Laugh at him. Sly felt a surge of shame, and the urge to stop him, shove him, shut him up–

And then he saw a tear of mirth, barely noticeable, in Nick's eye. An eye that was brighter and greener and more alive than Sly had ever seen before. For the first time, he wasn't looking at an overworked cop or a struggling victim.

He was looking at Nick Wilde.

Sly took a breath, taking his pain and his pride and letting them go. Then he smiled. It came out wobbly, but it was a smile.

"Yeah, I'm... it's a blind spot in my skills, I guess. Carmelita didn't believe me either, y'know. One time I was halfway through a dramatic declaration when I tripped and fell in a river." He rubbed his neck ruefully. "She, ah, just stood there and watched for like half a minute. Thought I was flailing around because I was being funny, and not that I was, uh. Drowning."

"Hah! Wow." Nick's eyes still shone. "What happened? She fish you out?"

"Oh yeah, once she realized. And we talked about it a little, like you and I did just there, and I made the mistake of pointing out I had never seen her swim either. And she said..." Sly darkened his expression, emulating Carmelita's tired glare. "'Of course I can swim. It's a mandatory part of my training. I just don't. Because of the huge electrical current on my belt.'"

That set Nick off again, laughing so hard he jangled the handcuffs. Sly watched him, his eyes warm.

"Oh... I love her," managed Nick between his laughter.

"Me too," murmured Sly. "Me too..."

Nick rubbed his eyes, his laughter bubbling down into a chuckle. "Hoo. Oh my god. I needed that."

"Yeah," said Sly. "Seems like it."

"Okay." Nick took a breath, his eyes sharpening. "I can keep laughing at you later – and believe me, Sly, I will. For now, let's get moving. It'll take us a while to get from here to Tundra Town, and obviously that's only Step One."

"Lead on, Officer Wilde."
They stood, helping each other balance. Nick hesitated to say he felt 'good'. But with a new plan and his fears spoken aloud, he certainly felt better.

Sly coughed. "And, Nick?"

"What?"

"You might not believe me, but... I do genuinely want to help you. I know you don't consider me a friend." Sly smiled. Simple and innocent. "But I like you. And I hope, someday, you might like me too."

Their eyes met, and in a moment of clarity Nick noticed details he had never noticed before. The spark of humour, revived to its full glory. The years of experience behind the breezy attitude. The exact shade of hazel, striking and pure.

Nick caught himself, glancing away quickly. He straightened his shirt and cleared his throat and worked out the best reply.

"You're the most exhausting person I've ever met."

Sly beamed. "I'm taking that as a 'Maybe'!"
Android

Chapter Summary

I've no emotional attachments
That's an optional extra.
You didn't plumb for that package
Now, you've ended up with a heartless machine!

Judy Hopps was now cargo.

They had taken her to a freighter of some kind. They had tried to blindfold her on the journey, but she knew they were in Tundra Town, on the docks. She felt the room creak slowly from side to side as cold waves rolled in.

She was deep within the vessel, not that it stopped the cold. A room of grim steel, near the centre of the ship. There was a table, and on either side of it, a chair. She was being tied to one.

The entire pack had brought her in – O'Donnell hadn't bothered sending anyone to follow the train. She hated being alone with them. She missed Sly's easy confidence, and getting separated from Nick felt like losing a limb. The only upside was she could swear.

"Darn it darn it darn it!" she spat, twisting in place. "Darn this! And darn you!"

For some reason, Nick always found that funny.

As his partner finished the restraints – Gary was something of an expert on knots – Larry watched on, dubious.
"Restraining her like this seems... difficult."

Wolf was finishing a cigar. "Believe me, boys, I recognise that it'd be a lot easier to shoot her and dump her off the side. But we've got direct orders. And those are a necessary evil on the long road to getting paid."

Gary finished with the ropes, giving a final tug. "There!" He smiled at Judy. "Is that alright? It's not too tight?"

"Yes," she said. "It's too tight. Please loosen it."

"Okay, I'll just–!

"Gary," said Larry. "She's lying."

"Oh. Ohhhhh."

"Oh, OHHHH."

"Oh, OHHHH."

He grinned. "That's sneaky, Hopps."

"No, I'm not kidding."

"It really hurts. Please?"

His ears fell. "Um–"

"C'mon, Gary. I know you're a good boy."

"Um!"

Wolf growled. "Oh, for – get him out of here!"

Larry took hold of his partner and steered him out of the room. Gary shook his head, awed. "That's so freaky! It's like she was inside my head..."

Wolf watched them go. He took a long, slow drag, held it, then exhaled.

"...Those two are too cute."

He extinguished the cigar under his boot heel, then sat across from Judy. He fished out a cellphone, dropping it messily on the table, before producing a thick bottle and two glasses seemingly from nowhere.

"I don't suppose you want any whiskey?"

Judy didn't reply. She fixed him with a steady, dignified glare as he poured himself a glass.

"Oh, don't give me that look. I'm not some sadist, playing with my food before I start torturing you. Just making conversation, is all."

"What's the matter?" she said. "Too unpopular with your own goons?"

"Heh. No, it's the opposite. Sycophants, every one. Or terrified of me. Or both. Can't be level with any of 'em." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Gary's easy on the eyes, but not much of a conversationalist. Not with me, anyway. Think he's just scared. Most are. Keeps 'em in line, but gets a little lonely."

Judy tried very hard not to think of Chief Bogo.

"We got time to kill, Hopps," he continued. "And I'd like to take this chance to actually talk to you."
She glared.

"Uh huh," he said. "Maybe I'll do most of the talking."

He took his first swig of whiskey. He swilled the drink in his hand before speaking.

"I was a fan of you, y'know. I know that sounds a little dumb, but it's true. Heard about you way back when graduated, and thought... 'Huh. There's somebody with talent.'" He smirked. "'Course, that talent's being wasted on policework, but hey. Free country. You do you."

"And now?" said Judy. "If you're still 'a fan', you've got a bad way of showing it."

Wolf shrugged. "Sure, we've got some, ah, professional conflict going on at the moment. But that doesn't stop me from recognising talent, does it? Even my new boss holds a certain... wary respect for your abilities."

He leaned forward, voice lowering a little.

"I mean, that play you pulled back there. Genius. You knew I wanted you alive, and you abused that. You can kick us as much as you want, letting your boyfriends – plural – slip away. And we just have to take it until you run out of steam. Poor Kyle's got the bruises to prove it. For that plan to work, you need to be strong enough to buy more than five seconds, and smart enough to think of it, and... let's be nice and say 'brave' enough to actually follow through." He bore his teeth. "You're the whole package, Hopps."

He sat back, looking upwards.

"You remind me of a guy I knew... back in the military. Friend of mine. Sort of." She caught something in his tone, but before she could place it he was briskly moving on. "Actually, Wilde kinda looks like him. But he doesn't act like him. Wilde isn't some heroic robot, always so brave, always so cheerful, smiling so widely in the face of impossible odds you just want to reach over and smack him." His eye landed on her. "That'd be you."

"I don't... smile," said Judy. "I look determined."

"You smile. You totally smile. Because you enjoy this." His eye narrowed. "This is like a game to you, isn't it? You crave the danger of your job, because that's the fun part. I bet Cooper understands that – you two seem to be on the same wavelength there." Wolf grinned. "Well, Hopps, I understand it too."

Judy scoffed. "I don't get why people think I'm some kind of – barbarian. I'm a cop. And I have nothing in common with a greedy, amoral kidnapper like you."

"Ya got me on 'amoral',' said Wolf. "'Kidnapper', too. I'm not gonna argue that after tying you to a chair. But greed is what gets us through life. It's just a matter of where you point it." He gestured with his free hand. "I break bones to get money. You break bones to get a smug feeling of self-satisfaction. I think mine's more useful, but like I said. Your choice."

She glared. "You don't understand me at all."

"Sure I don't."

There was a lull as Wolf took another long drink. As he refilled his glass, he glanced to Judy. She met his gaze coldly. Wolf shrugged, leaving her glass unfilled.
"Some eyes you got there."

"Please don't start. The last guy who kidnapped me wouldn't shut up about them either." She sighed. "Yes. My eyes are purple. I have pretty purple eyes. I've known this all my life, because they are a part of my face."

Wolf raised an eyebrow. "What, was that all he told you? Just that they were pretty? I've heard all kinds of stuff about purple eyes through the years. Well," he clarified, "most of the eye-related comments I get are... one-sided. But people who noticed the actual colour sometimes had interesting stories or whatever. You never heard any?"

"Uh," said Judy, "no?"

"Most of them sounded pretty cheesy," he conceded. "Not much more profound than the other things dudes would shout at me in the club. You know how it is."

Judy made a noise that indicated that she perhaps did not in fact know how it was.

"The best one came from my folks, actually. I don't remember the exact wording, but..." He rubbed his neck. Judy saw the mist of nostalgia in his eye. "Blue's cold. It's calm, logical. Moves slow. Red's hot. It's loud, emotional, smashes through rules. Strengths and weaknesses to both. And purple's a mixture." He glanced back to her. "You get what I'm saying?"

"I guess," said Judy. "Though I'm not sure how this hostage situation became a discussion of your favourite colour."

"It's a metaphor!" said Wolf testily. "See, it's hard to blend two extremes like that. It's rare. And I used to think it was this, like... symbol of my talent or something. Back in the military, I broke the rules all the damn time. And I got results doing it. I weaved through loopholes with just as much grace as I had in the air." He sighed into his glass. "But it doesn't last. It can't. And now look at me. Doing the heavy lifting for some crazy chick's revenge scheme."

"So, what?" said Judy impatiently. "The big bad wolf is a cautionary tale?"

Wolf's tone darkened. "You're alone, restrained, in the middle of nowhere, about to meet someone who paid good money to end your life. You're done, Hopps. Too late now to learn any lessons." He shook his head. "But... yeah. You had to pick a side. The law, or your crazy adventures. Your fox. Not both. It doesn't work that way. And now you're paying the price."

"Pick a side?" she said. "No. I serve the law by doing what I do. I always have that as my goal. And so does Nick. That's what makes us such an effective team."

Wolf rolled his eyes. "Ugh, the partnership thing again. Do you ever give that a rest? It's pathetic the way you drag him around. Like, we get it. You're real proud of yourself. You don't need to remind us."

Judy frowned. "What?"

"You 'fixed' him," he said, fangs out. "He was a dirty hustler, and now he's a cop, all because of you. It's like you fixed up an old car, and now you drive it everywhere. Even when the paint flakes off and the engine starts making weird noises. Not the noises you fixed, but weirder, scary noises. Which you ignore, because you're so full of yourself you can't fathom that eventually you'll need to just move on."

She glared. "Nick's a person. Not an object."
"Yeah, genius," he said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Judy went to fire back, then stopped. She frowned at the floor for a moment.

Wolf calmly went back to sipping his whiskey. He had almost drained the glass when she spoke.

"You're wrong."

"Oh. Am I?"

"About why I'm with Nick." She met his gaze. "Yes. I helped him a lot. But saying it was some kind of investment is... gross. I didn't do it so I would get something out of it. I did it because it was right. And when he helps me in return, he's doing the same thing."

Wolf scoffed. "Yeah. Bet it's real easy to 'do the right thing' when that just means sticking to your best friend. Face it, Hopps. You're being naïve. There's only one person you have any business helping, and that's yourself. It's the only way to live."

"I'm sure," said Judy, her eyes icy. "After all, it's working out so well for you."

He growled. "Don't backtalk me, you little–!"

"Oh, spare me your empty threats! I know you can't hurt me. So either leave me alone, or tell me something useful." Her gaze didn't waver. "Like who you're working for."

"I don't really see the point. I think you can guess."

Wolf finished his drink and stood.

"Besides, you'll be meeting face-to-face soon enough. I'll tell you this much – she's real eager to get you back for what you did. But she'll be happy to explain that part herself."

He straightened out his jacket, then collected the bottle and glasses. He glanced to the phone he had left on the table, but made no move to take it. Judy assumed he had been told to leave it there.

He had been told a lot of things.

It was clear to Judy that Wolf was being directed from afar. He was a formidable enforcer, but didn't lack tactical prowess either. He was perfectly capable of running a mercenary pack without supervision. And yet, his employer was micromanaging him, pushing him into some grand plan even when it conflicted with his own style.

Shadowy conspiracy and suffocating oversight stank of Dawn Bellwether.

But something rubbed Judy the wrong way about that theory – aside from the obvious issue that Bellwether was supposed to be dead. Judy had seen Bellwether's utter hatred for predators first-hand. Wolf was no political activist, but he was as predatory as they came. Was she really that desperate for muscle? Or, once again, was Wolf serving as unknowing cannon fodder?

Judy had little sympathy for Wolf, especially now. But Bellwether was worse. And she knew better than anyone how the ewe used people. She opted to test the waters, at least indirectly.

"I mean... don't you think it's a little odd she would hire you?"

Wolf cocked an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't she? I'm great."
Before she could reply, he turned on his heel, sauntering for the door.

"Wait!" she called. Now that Wolf was leaving, and taking his chatty mood with him, Judy realized she couldn't squander this opportunity.

There were many questions she still had, but one pressed down on her. She needed to ask. For Nick. She locked eyes with Wolf, purple on purple.

"Tell me about the ghost."

"...The what?"

"The ghost," she snapped. "The thing that's been following Nick around. What is it?"

Wolf stared.

It wasn't a look of fear, per se, but it wasn't comfortable either. He just frowned at her for a few seconds.

"...the heck are you talking about?"

"Nick's been seeing something," said Judy, feeling stupider with every word, "and we... it's got to be a trick. Obviously. And we know you're behind it! So just... tell me. About it. Please."

Wolf opened his mouth, then slowly closed it. "Wow," he said. "That's depressing."

"Just–!"

"What a note to end on," he murmured. "Wilde's gone nuts and you can't even admit it." He opened the door and stepped through. "I'm sad now."

The door slammed shut. And Judy was alone.

She huffed – and, after a few moments, sighed. Alone, restrained, surrounded by enemies and isolated from her friends. From Nick. She hated to admit it, but Judy Hopps was beaten.

For now, she told herself. Nick's on the way! Sly, too! Until then, I just need to do what I always do. Stay alive. Stay awake. And stay posit–!

The phone rang.

The noise was sudden, catching her completely by surprise. The phone Wolf had left was getting a call from a blocked number. Judy had just begun to wonder whether they expected her to answer it despite leaving her tied to a chair when, just as suddenly, the phone somehow answered itself.

She watched the call interface come up and the speaker-phone setting become enabled. And after a second of silence, a voice came through.

"Hello... Judy."

There was no mistaking that voice. Not when Judy knew it so well.

"Bellwether!" said Judy, almost reflexively.

She let out a peal of evil laughter. Well, it was less 'laughter', more giggling. But evil nonetheless.
She let out a peal of evil giggling.

"You're enjoying yourself, I hope."

Judy growled. "Once I get out of here, I swear..."

"All in good time. Where's... Nick?"

"He's on the way," said Judy solidly. "With help. You won't hold me for long."

"Uh huh. Sure. I tell ya, the love between the two of... you... is sickening. Legitimately. Did I interrupt your date?"

She was taunting her. Judy felt her teeth grind. "You listen to me, Bellwether! There's no way you're getting away with this, understand?!"

"Uh huh. Same old Judy. You're starting to bore me."

"You...!"

"I was just checking in." The grim satisfaction in Bellwether's voice gave way to a much lighter tone. "We can talk again soon, okay?"

Judy glared at the phone. "You're gonna regret this."

With a final chuckle, the line went dead.

Judy was left alone, in silence. Without something to focus on, negative thoughts began to seep back in. Powerless. Powerless to protect Nick and Sly. Powerless to protect herself. And now powerless to stop her enemies from taunting her. It was hard to stay optimistic, alone in an empty room, restrained, nothing around her except—

Wait.

Working cellphone.

Judy tested her bonds, but there was no way she could wriggle loose. So the solution was simple. She wouldn't.

All she needed was to get near the phone. Her nose would do the rest.

Little by little, she coaxed her chair closer to the table. It took a lot of time and muscle, but she was soon making progress. Until the legs caught on the floor.

A slight rise where two metal sheets met. Insurmountable.

Judy did not see eye-to-eye with words like 'insurmountable'.

She began to swing backwards and forwards, building up momentum. The chair creaked dangerously. Judy took a breath, trying to steady herself, and then threw herself forward as powerfully as she could.

The chair cleared the rise by immediately sacrificing its balance. Judy managed to smack her head into the table, recover, and bite the phone before she tumbled to the floor.

The ropes held. She wasn't about to get loose. But now, nestled against her face, sat a working
Two things made her captors confident enough to leave Judy alone with a cellphone. The first were her restraints, which she had already conquered – or bypassed, at least. The second was the reasonable assumption that, in this age of automated contacts, no-one memorised numbers any more.

But Judy did. Because she was that kind of nerd.

She knew several. She could call her parents in Bunnyburrow, but that would accomplish little other than terrifying them further. (Judy hoped they weren't following the news too closely. She pushed aside the thought before it could take root.) She could call Nick, which would only produce his smug Leave A Message recording.

And she could call Carmelita.

Carmelita, ever the professional, had a signature on every email with her full contact information – a digital business card. Judy had never been more amazed by something so dull. It was a statement to the world that Carmelita was an Inspector, with Interpol. That she was important and valuable and meant something. And Judy knew that someday she too would some similar badge, mundane and triumphant.

She was so used to it she could recite it from memory. Including Carmelita's internationally-functional phone number.

Judy pressed her nose firmly against the screen, moving slowly to minimize error. She locked in the number, triple-checked it, and booped Dial. The call went through on the third ring, Carmelita's voice coming in crisp.

"Inspector Fox," she snapped. "How did you get this number?!"

Judy blinked. "Is... that how you always answer the phone?"

There was a pause. "...Judy?!!"

"Carmelita! I need help. Can you–?"

"Yes! Yes, of course I can." There was a rustle as Carmelita shifted position. "Where are you?! Stay on the line as long as you can. I can try to trace you, if I can just get the–"

"No, it's fine! I know where I am. I kept track of the car journey when they took me."

Carmelita stayed focused, but her tone warmed. "I should expect nothing less, Judy. You're an exemplary cop."

Judy took half a second to truly savour the compliment before answering. "Thanks. Seriously. I'm on a ship docked in north-eastern Tundra Town. A large, dark freighter, pretty sure its name begins with 'T'. I'm not sure whether they intend to sail it..."

"I'll get a speedboat. An Interpol badge is very good for getting equipment on short notice."

"Right. Smart plan." Judy bit her lip. "Will...?"

"I come alone? ...We'll see. Fangmeyer and Wolford need rest, and I don't know who else I could trust. But your safety is my main priority, so..."

"Yeah," said Judy. She took a breath, seeing an vivid image of Bogo's cold, angry eyes.
"I'll think about it. I need to get changed, leave the hotel–"

Judy frowned. "Did I wake you?"

"I'm perfectly combat-ready, if that's what worries you. I've pulled off harder ops with less sleep."

"No, I didn't mean – just – uh..." She sighed. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Judy." Carmelita's voice was soft. "Don't apologise. Never apologise for what isn't your fault. I'm happy to help you."

Judy smiled at the phone, wishing Carmelita could see her. "Thank you so much."

"And if I'm really desperate for an apology," she continued, "I'll beat it out of the scumbag who hurt you while I'm breaking his teeth."

"Carmelita?"

"Yes?"

"I want to be you when I grow up."

A rich, melodious laugh came over the phone. "Thanks. I'll see you soon, Judy. Hang in there."

"I will!"

The line went dead. Judy sighed, partly with not-entirely-professional awe, but mostly relief. Carmelita was on her way. Judy knew in her bones that Nick would be, too. Everything would be fine by sunrise. All she had to do was–

Her ears shot up. The benefit of a metal environment was that footsteps were even louder than usual. Someone was coming.

The handle on the door began to turn. With impressive speed, Judy bit the phone, stuffed it under her body, and lay limply.

Wolf stepped inside. "Hey Hopps, you talking to yourself in h–?"

She froze, praying he wouldn't notice the phone. But his focus was on the immediate facts.

"Did you fall over?"

Judy sighed. "...Yes."

He paused. "Want me to help you up?"

"No!"

"Well, alright," he shrugged, and closed the door.
Shiny

Chapter Summary

Well, well, well.
Little Mau'i's having trouble with his look.
You little semi-demi-minigod...
Ouch! What a terrible performance! Get the hook! (Getit?)
You don't swing it like you used to, man...

It took hours of moving and searching and collaborative deduction, all while keeping out of sight.
But they found the ship.

It loomed in the cold starlight. Dark blue paint faded to purple closer to the water, barnacles infesting
the old metal. Its loading bay was open, huge and dark like a monster's maw. The ship announced
itself as TAMATOA, shiny gold lettering sharp against the night sky.

Nick and Sly watched from an alley which opened out to the dock. This was an obscure nook of
Tundra Town, and no-one was in sight. But they knew the ship wouldn't be empty.

Nick saw Sly's free hand reach for his Binocucom – and twitch painfully around empty air. He
pretended not to notice.

"So," said Sly, squinting at the freighter. "Sneak on, spring Judy, sneak off?"

"Yeah," murmured Nick. "Quick and quiet."

"I don't mean to talk down to you or anything, genuine question here – how stealthy are you?" Sly
raised his other hand, jingling the cylindrical cuffs. "I can't cover for you by just... being
quiet harder. We're only gonna succeed as a unit."

"I know." Nick wasn't offended. It was a reasonable concern. "Don't worry. This isn't the first time
I've crashed a party. I can keep up." He kept his eyes on the ship. "And, um... you probably know
more about sneaking past people than I do. On balance. So I'm fine with, y'know... following your
lead."

"Thank you." Sly gave him a genuine smile. "This is my speciality. Your detective work got us here.
I'll get all three of us out. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Sly's smile turned playful. "Okay. Let's talk contingency plans. I think if we are caught, we should
do that thing in movies where the two spies pretend to be a couple and start making out and the
guards get all embarrassed. Works every time."

Nick glanced over. "You've gotten steadily more brazen about wanting to kiss me."

"Our love is fated, Nicholas. Succumb to my charms."

Nick chuckled, feeling himself relax a little. It didn't last. When he looked back to the Tamatoa, his
blood froze.

It was hard to see from this distance, but he had become very familiar with the silhouette. Hovering just to the left of one of the ship's smokestacks, looking in at the dock – at him – was the Phantasm.

"What?" said Sly, seeing him tense. "What is it?"

Nick forced himself to answer. "It's here."

Sly followed his gaze, eyes sharp. "The ghost, right? ...I think I see it."

Despite everything, Nick felt a mad surge of relief. Sly's tone was so sure, so reassuring. Judy was right. Whatever he was facing, whatever this thing was, Nick wasn't alone. Sly was experienced, he had weird thief skills honed by years of strange adventures. Maybe, just maybe, he could drive this abomination off.

The Phantasm drifted lazily behind the smokestack, out of sight, and moments later – in that same sure tone – Sly remarked "Yeah, I definitely see it. Not too handsome, huh?"

Far from the first time in his life, Nick wondered why he ever allowed himself the false luxury of hope. It existed only to taunt him.

Sly looked over, seeing how tense Nick was. How fear fought fury on his face. "Hey, should we bail? Because if you're not okay..."

Nick was not okay.

The first time he had seen the Phantasm was after he had allegedly killed Bellwether. The second was before he had almost definitely killed Springtrap. The Phantasm was not constant. It showed itself in specific circumstances.

Nick was going to kill someone else.

He growled to himself, trying to snuff the thought before it got any further. "No," he said. "I'd – I'd maybe consider sending you in alone, if we could, which we can't." He met Sly's eyes. "But Judy's in there. I need to help her. No matter what else is on that ship."

Sly nodded. "Okay. Then let's do this. You and me, handcuffed together..."

"...basically no plan and completely on the ropes." Nick met his gaze. "It's..."

"-great, right?" Sly smiled. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

"I hate you."

"I know."

They set off.

Sly led them from shadow to shadow, traversing the dock silently. They scanned the Tamatoa from behind battered metal barrels. This close, the scent of wolves was beginning to make itself known amid the salt and old fish. But the way to the loading bay was clear.

Nick mimicked Sly's movements closely. Quick, quiet, low to the ground. He took note of how easily Sly could move without making noise, the way he shifted his weight. He was a natural. Nick supposed that made sense. Following his lead, they made good progress.
They entered the ship through the huge loading bay doors. Nick ignored the sensation of walking into a waiting mouth. For Judy, he would go anywhere.

But his confidence took a hit when, moments later, the whole ship lurched.

Nick had been overthinking about where to put his feet and the motion caught him by surprise. Sly slipped in close, helping him get steady.

"Don't worry, I got you..."

"Uh – thanks." Nick frowned. "What was...?"

He looked back down the length of the loading bay. Sly followed his gaze. The door was closing itself over, closing out the lights of the dock.

The door shut, sealing them in darkness. And then the ship began to move.

"Oh no," said Nick. "No no no."

"I thought you said they wouldn't sail this thing?" said Sly. Not accusatory. Just as anxious as Nick.

"They shouldn't. And I definitely don't like that they waited until we were onboard." Nick glanced around. His free hand scratched at his back – would this damn itching ever stop? "Are you sure we haven't been spotted?"

"Seems empty to me. I think they're all on deck."

"I don't like this," said Nick absently. "I don't..."

"Stay focused," said Sly, his voice soft. "I don't like it either, but we can't save Judy by standing here. We can still steal a lifeboat or something, right?"

Nick sucked in a breath. "Right. I'm fine. I'll be fine. Just give me a second."

"Sure." Sly smiled. "It's okay."

"No," said Nick. "It's not."

After one second, they moved on.

They made it to the deck – and caught sight of wolves patrolling alone and in pairs. They had come out near the centre of the ship, on the starboard side. With a nod, Sly suggested heading down to the stern. With a nod, Nick agreed.

They stuck to the shadows, staying low and staying sharp. They caught snippets of conversation buffeted by the sea breeze. Many of the wolves were complaining about the cargo the ship had come with, something odd and foul-smelling they had been instructed not to investigate.

Others had different gripes.

Sly and Nick had arrived at the stern to find only two wolves in sight. They were apparently not on patrol, unless snuggling on the railing and taking in the view of Zootopia together counted as being 'on patrol'.

"What a great city," murmured Gary.
"Yes," said Larry. "Sometimes I forget it, but honestly, it's such a marvel."

"And all of it is cool! Well," amended Gary, his nose wrinkling, "most of it. I'm never going back to Sahara Square, not even for a job."

"Gary, please don't start on about sand again."

"I'm just saying!" he just said, waving an arm. "It's coarse! And rough! And irri..."

He trailed off, then stuck his nose in the air. Larry tensed, but let his partner work. Gary whipped around, his eyes landing on Sly and Nick. The shadows couldn't protect them from such a direct search.

"Well, well, well!" he declared. "What have we here? Two boys!"

"And not just any two boys," said Larry. "The exact two boys O'Donnell is waiting for."

Nick squinted. "Why are you calling us--?"

"Boys!" Sly sauntered forward, eyes bright. "Good to see you. Remember me?"

"Oh, sure," said Gary. "You gave us a big fright back in that warehouse."

"But I let you go! Out of the goodness of my heart. Remember?"

"Yes," said Larry. "Not that it mattered. The pack escaped twelve hours later."

"It's not like I knew that," said Sly, and Gary nodded.

"Why are you guys still here?" said Nick, since apparently they were chatting now. "I'd've cut and run, in your shoes."

"We were going to," said Larry. "But Gary left his scarf at the pack hideout, and while we were looking for it O'Donnell burst back in, yelling about some huge client."

"And huger money!" added Gary.

"So we kind of got swept up. It's nothing personal, Wilde, if that's what you're wondering. But we don't have a lot of options, here."

"Gentlemen," said Sly, trying to bring his hands dramatically together. The steel covering his right ruined the effect. "In life, we always have options. When I came across you in that warehouse, I had the option to let you go, and I chose it. And now--"

"You want the favour returned," said Larry. "You want us to throw away this job and risk O'Donnell tanning our hides."

"You're being pessimistic, L," said Gary, turning to him. "Wolf mightn't find out!"

"You actually want to do it?"

"I mean, maybe. It's only fair. But..."

As they debated, Nick leaned closer to Sly. "Is this seriously the plan?"

"I guess?" Sly whispered back. "We'll see how it plays out."
"'How it plays out'? They know we're here!"

Sly smirked. "Don't panic. If we need to, we can totally take two unimportant guys like this."

"I'm sorry, we're what?"

Sly's smirk froze. He and Nick looked up to see the wolves watching them.

"You two," said Larry, eyes cold, "whisper too loudly."

"Yeah." Gary seemed hurt. "We're right here, y'know."

"Okay..." Sly rolled his shoulders. The handcuffs jingled with the motion. "I'm guessing this has factored into your decision-making, to our detriment?"

"If you mean we're going to turn you over to Mister O'Donnell, because you hurt our feelings," said Gary, "yes."

Sly prepared himself, rolling his neck. He exuded an easy confidence. "Okay, Nick, follow my lead," he said. "First–"

Gary punched him in the face.

Nick watched as the wolves fell on Sly, moving in perfect synchrony. He was reminded of his silent communication with Judy. There was something equally beautiful in the brutality on display. The common thread between violence and dance.

Sly would have stood some chance against the flawless barrage of wolf limbs if his own hands were free, which they weren't, or Nick had done literally anything to help him, which he didn't. The fox just stared for a moment, and when that moment passed and he remembered Sly was his best chance of saving Judy, it was already over.

Sly dropped to one knee, disoriented. Eyes wide.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Gary's innocent smile had returned, as though it never left. "Were you not done talking?"

"Yeah." Larry, for once, seemed to be enjoying himself. "We'd hate if unimportant guys like us interrupted someone big like you."

His sharp blue eyes turned to Nick, and Nick stared back.

"Are we done here?"

"We – I think we might be. Yes," stuttered Nick.

"Good." Larry grabbed him by the shoulder as Gary hauled Sly to his feet. "Then let's not keep O'Donnell waiting."

As they walked, Gary shook his head. "You guys had no chance. You don't have any synergy!"

"'Synergy', Gary," murmured his partner.

"Darn. I always forget how many Gs there are."

Larry glanced over, eyes soft. "Only one G matters to me."
"Awwh!"

"Shoulda gone with the kissing plan," wheezed Sly.

Judy was at the bow of the Tamatoa, tied to the thin safety railing that circled the deck. The black sky above her, the black sea below her, and the black metal of the ship's cold deck under her. She snarled her defiance.

"Quit making that face," said Wolf.

Now that the ship was moving, they were out in the sea air. Wolf puffed a cigar, the smoke plummeting backwards toward Zootopia. The lights of the city grew steadily distant.

Judy tested her bonds for the umpteenth time, but the rope held. "You won't—"

"—get away with this', I know. Hush."

"I mean it! Help is already on the way, so make this easy on yourself and—"

Wolf's ear perked. He glanced over his shoulder, then shot Judy a smirk. "Oh, you're right! I'm so sorry, Hopps, please have mercy. I see the cavalry charging in as we speak!"

He stepped aside, giving Judy a perfect view of Gary and Larry dragging Nick and Sly up the ship. She stared. "No..."

More wolves had followed, almost forming a parade, and by the time Gary and Larry reached Wolf the entire pack had gathered at the bow. Wolf finished his cigar, flicking it over the side, and turned to them.

"Found these two skulking around the back, sir," said Larry.

"Sly called us unimportant so we beat him up," added Gary.

"I mean," said Wolf, "you would've beaten him up anyway, right?"

Gary smiled.

"I am paying you," said Wolf slowly, "to capture these three. Which includes, if necessary, beating them up when they try to rescue each other. So you would've done it anyway. Right?"

Gary smiled.

"Yes," said Larry.

Wolf sighed. "Just... just hold 'em still."

He fished the key fob from his pocket and pressed one of the two buttons. The handcuff on Nick loosened, and he pulled it off.

Then, abruptly, he grabbed Nick's muzzle with one hand. "Eugh," said Nick. "Personal space." At least Wolf wasn't wearing his pointed metal claws.

Wolf grinned, fangs sharp. "Betcha think you're real smart, huh?"

"Smart enough to wash my hands."
"Yeah, yeah. And smart enough to work out where we were keeping your princess." Wolf's eye narrowed in triumph. "But not smart enough, I guess. You didn't wonder why I didn't bother following you?"

Nick didn't reply, his eyes widening.

"We know where you are," said Wolf, "and where you're going. We were sitting here, waiting for you to show up again! All you did was waste of my time. And I'm getting paid by the hour!"

He laughed heartily at that. Then he nodded to his pack.

"Some of us – like Larry here – were worried you'd call the ZPD or something. But I told 'em, 'Those two? They'll charge in alone, the second they find us.'" Wolf shoved him into Larry's arms. "So thanks for proving me right."

"How?!" Nick bared this teeth, a growl in his throat. "How do you keep finding us?!!"

Wolf leaned down slowly, his nose almost touching Nick's. His eye gleamed. "I think it would be funnier," he murmured, "if you die not knowing."

Nick glared at the deck. There was nothing he could say, no witty comeback that would spare his dignity. He had miscalculated. He had wasted the chance Judy gave him. And now he was here, in Bellwether's grasp.

With no reply coming, Wolf soon got bored. "Put him by the bunny." Larry nodded, walking Nick over. He set the fox kneeling, pulled his wrists back, and affixed him to the railings with a far simpler set of handcuffs.

Sit tight, Nick! whispered Judy's smirk. I'll think of a way to free you.

No, said his eyes. Free yourself. Leave me handcuffed.

...What? said her tilted head.

Nick said something Judy didn't understand.

What? she mouthed. What's happening?

The Black Phantasm, he mouthed slowly, almost angrily, is here

Someone is going to die

I am going to kill them

Leave me handcuffed.

Nick... said her ears, wilting like dead flowers. You can't mean that.

He frowned in genuine pain, then began to mouth something else. I–

"Hey!" snapped Wolf. "Knock that off, you two. It's weird."

He was sliding Nick's cylinder onto Sly's other hand, reactivating it with the key. Sly smiled humourlessly as both his hands became useless lumps of steel. "Thanks, pal. The asymmetry was really starting to bother mHHG"
With brutal speed, Wolf slammed a fist into Sly's stomach. Sly wheezed, practically folding over Wolf's fist, then fell to the floor.

Judy bristled. "What are you doing?! He's unarmed!"

Wolf met her gaze, calmly pocketing the key fob. "I got my orders, Hopps. You and that ticking time-bomb you call a partner are off-limits. My employer wants to deal with you personally."

His gaze returned to Sly with a sneer.

"But you... You're just some guy. Some guy who keeps humiliating me and my pack." He planted a boot on Sly's chest. "Not laughing now, are ya?"

"Leave him alone!" roared Judy, but her voice was drowned out by various jeers and yells and barks from the wolves. Nick knelt in silence.

"Wolves are proud, little man," continued Wolf. "We don't enjoy being insulted."

"You cannot claim that as a species thing," said Sly, trying to hide the strain in his voice. "No-one enjoys that."

"Joke all you want." Wolf increased the pressure on Sly's chest, driving his boot down. "You won't get another chance."

"Wolf!" Restrained and tiny, Judy exuded as much angry authority as she could – and it worked, getting Wolf's attention. "This is your final warning. Stop it. Now."

He just smirked at her. "Please, Hopps. I know what's happening here. Don't forget, I was there in that warehouse. I watched this runt try to cash in on your hospitality. And I've watched him follow you around, making his dumb jokes, stroking his own ego. You two are a captive audience. He's lapping it up."

Wolf pressed down harder and Sly gasped.

"The way I see it, I'm doing you a favour. You don't want this clown here any more than I do. You're just too nice to say so."

"Sly is my friend." Judy's eyes burned. "And it isn't a good idea to hurt my friends."

Wolf just shook his head. "You don't need to lie, Hopps! There's no point sparing his feelings..." He looked back to Sly. "Not when he'll be dead in five minutes."

He grabbed Sly and pulled him upright, only to punch him in the stomach again.

"End of the line," he growled. Another punch. "Once I'm bored—" Another. "—I'll dump you over the side." Another. "Then we'll see who..."

Wolf trailed off. His eye widened.

Sly was hurt. His breathing was strained. But his smirk was unstoppable.

Fury overtook Wolf's face. "Damn it! Why are you still smiling?!"

"Oh... I have at least two reasons."

Sly met his gaze, hazel eyes bright.
"First off – yeah, I'm sure you... 'have your orders'. But the one thing I know about you is that... you're garbage at actually following instructions. You ditch the plan if you think you can – get away with it. If your employer finds Nick and Judy with a few bruises, well, that's just how these things go, right?" His smile was serene. "So go ahead. Kick me as much as you want. Every second you drag this out is a second you aren't hurting my friends."

Wolf scoffed. "Yeah. 'Friends'. Hopps, maybe. But Wilde's probably enjoying this."

A little shrug. "Couldn't blame him. If he's having fun, that's – a third reason to smile."

"Right," he drawled. "And what was the second supposed to be?"

"Whenever this happens," said Sly, "whenever I'm alone and out of my depth and some dirtbag twice my size is making me regret every sarcastic remark I've ever made... she's always there."

"Wh–"

A burst of electricity exploded against Wolf's head.


The moon hung behind Carmelita Fox, posed above them. Shock pistol smoking.

"Step away from the idiot."
Carmelita wasted no time. She dropped to the deck before the pack had a chance to recover.

"Sly! Found your cane!" she called, a second before throwing it at him.

"Wait, I–" said Sly, a second before it hit him in the face.

She sped past and he hurried after her, balancing the cane in his handcuffed arms.

"Was that on purpose?!"

"Focus!"

"That's a 'yes'!"

Carmelita ran to Judy, who was watching her with bright eyes. "Oh, Carmelita...!"

"Don't worry, Judy, I'm here." Carmelita's own expression softened. Keeping her pistol in one hand, she loosened the ropes tying Judy to the railing. "Everything's going to be alright."

Judy stepped clear. "Coming from you, I believe that."

Carmelita glanced around. The pack was waiting on Wolf, who was still lightly smoking, face-down on the deck. But they weren't completely lost. Any escape route was blocked, and some wolves were beginning to drift towards the escaping prisoners.

Carmelita turned to Judy, watching as she stretched her stiff body. "Could you get us some space?"

"On it! Anything you need!"

Sly got her attention. "Say, Jude... I could maybe loan you my cane, since I can't exactly get a good grip on it right now. But be careful with it, okay? Family heirloom. One of a kind. My dad's."

He slid it awkwardly out of his grasp and she caught it before it hit the deck. She tested it, holding it with both hands like a spear. "It's still a bit big for me..." She met his worried gaze with a smile. "But I appreciate it. And don't worry. I'll keep it safe."

"Thank you."

They took a few steps towards the wolves – Judy armed and dangerous, Sly moreso giving moral support.

Behind them, Carmelita turned to Nick, examining the handcuffs binding him to the rail. "Alright.
"How do I...?"

"No!" he said. "N-no. Leave me handcuffed."

"What?"

Nick swallowed. It was scary enough trying to explain the Phantasm to Judy. "Just – trust me. I'm trying something."

Carmelita watched him for a moment – which was terrifying – then gave a brisk nod. "Alright. I don't get it, but going by your expression, I don't have to."

Nick exhaled. "Thanks..."

"Let Judy and I handle this, then. Maybe Sly can guard you..."

He frowned. "Seriously?"

"Yes, Nick, seriously." Carmelita met his gaze. "Why? Has he been giving you trouble?"

"He is trouble! He only helps people when he feels like it!"

"And has that impeded your investigation?"

"I--" Nick blinked. "...Well, he..."

She sighed. "Nick, remember what I told you about Sly faking amnesia?"

"Yes! Exactly! He thought it would be fun, and that's the only reason he--"

"Nick." She glanced to the wolves. Still circling. "Shut up and listen."

"...Right. Sorry."

"Sly's excuse for that amnesia was a head injury. But it's not like he tripped on a rock. I arrived just as a fight was winding down – and his opponent, hoping to 'make him suffer', fired at me with intent to kill. The only reason that bullet didn't hit me is because Sly blocked it. With his skull."

Her eyes were steady as she spoke.

"You're smart to treat Sly with caution. He's got a selfish streak, and doesn't even notice it. No-one knows that better than me. But don't write him off, either. When it really matters... he makes the right choice."

Nick's mouth twisted. "...You'll forgive me if I still don't trust him."

"That's fine," she said. "Just know that I do."

Behind them, Wolf was getting to his feet. He rubbed his eye, getting his bearings. "What the heck--" He squinted. "Hey, I remember you! You're that crazy vixen who tried bringing that bazooka into a fancy party."

"And I remember you, too." Carmelita turned slowly, her voice steel. "You're the brainless lowlife who thought he could hurt my friends and get away with it." The pistol hummed. "It is my duty, and pleasure, to prove you wrong."
"Uh huh." Wolf's eye travelled over them. Nick still bound to the railing. Sly still handcuffed. Judy still testing the weight of the cane. "I suppose it doesn't matter that you're completely outnumbered?"

Carmelita stepped forward, protecting the others. "Not when you're completely outmatched."

Wolf stared – then burst out laughing, bringing his hands together in a loud clap. "Hah! Fighting words, sister. I like that." He settled, easily, into a fighting stance. "Alright, I'm intrigued. Let's see what you got."

Larry frowned. "What are our orders, exactly?"

Wolf had produced his clawed gloves. "Lock down the cargo. Especially Hopps." The right glove slid into place, points gleaming. "But give me and the new chick some room." The left. Ready. He grinned. "I'm about t--"

Carmelita shot again.

Wolf twisted out of the way, then fiddled with something on his belt. When Carmelita fired again, the blast connected with his face. Nothing happened.

Nick noted that Carmelita's expression of surprise was just a different kind of glare. She fired again, and his time Wolf swatted away the massive blast of lightning with his fingers and a chuckle.

"Had some bad experiences with shock pistols recently," he drawled. "Lucky for me, this gig comes with certain technological benefits. Your precious lit--"

Carmelita shot him again.

"I," said Wolf, "just told you that--"

Carmelita shot him again. Twice. Thrice.

"Woman. I'm talking here! Can't you take my word for this?"

"You're hiding behind a gadget," said Carmelita. "Gadgets need batteries. Batteries run out."

Wolf smirked. "Alright, then. Let's see which one breaks first."

He lunged.

The pack followed suit, surging forward. Carmelita blasted a hole through the crowd and slipped through it, Wolf and his claws close behind.

"Agh!" Judy swung the cane, putting her whole body into it, and managed to hit one wolf in the face. He stumbled back a little. The other eleven did not.

"Hopps, get moving!" said Nick. "You're cornered. You can't fight them back here."

"What about you?! I won't leave you!"

Nick managed a smile. "Trust me, Carrots, I'm not going anywhere."

"Hey!"

Sly planted himself of the largest wolf he saw, looked her in the eye, and kicked her shin. That accomplished, he jumped onto the railing, effortlessly balanced.
"Didn't your boss tell you to apprehend me? I don't feel very apprehended!"

"You aren't the priority," replied the wolf, unfazed. "Hopps is."

Judy backed up another step, eyes darting around. The wolves had entirely closed off the bow, leaving no escape. They ignored Sly, watching from the railing—

Railing.

A final glance to Nick. **You're sure?**

His tired smirk. **Go get 'em.**

She nodded, returning it. Then she jumped off the boat.

The wolves gasped, almost as one, but Judy didn't get far. The cane hooked onto the railing and then she was running along the ship's outer hull, diagonal yet perfectly secure – and fast.

Before the pack reacted she had cleared most of them, and then – with a yell – she kicked off. The cane brought her in a beautiful arc, more than half a full rotation, and within a second she was landing feet first on a wolf's face.

He fell and didn't get up. The other wolves stared, their quarry suddenly behind them.

Judy adjusted her grip on the cane, smiled, and ran.

They followed, leaving Nick alone. He watched his partner with warm eyes. "That's my Carrots..."

Sly, likewise ignored, looked around for Carmelita. She and Wolf weren't hard to spot, trading blows a few meters away.

Carmelita fired blast after blast into Wolf's torso, to no effect. He ambled towards her, grinning. "You still trying to wear down the batteries? Don't think it's working."

He lunged abruptly, claws cutting the air, and Carmelita rolled under his swipe. She slid along the deck, still firing.

"Heh." He followed. "Or maybe you just don't know any other tricks."

Carmelita growled, jumping toward him with a kick. Wolf caught her boot, laughed, and twisted his wrist. Carmelita fell face-first.

"Face it!" he yelled. "Without your little toy—"

Carmelita kicked both her boots into one of his, making him wobble. In the instant of weakness, she sprang up and slammed the full weight of her pistol against his face.

Wolf stumbled back – and growled. No comeback for that.

He attacked again, more viciously, and Carmelita started losing ground. Sly leapt from the railing, dodging past other wolves to approach.

"Carmelita!"

She snarled under her breath, dodging Wolf's sweeping claws. "Busy."
"I know!" said Sly. "I want to help! If you can get the handcuff keys off him--"

With a successful feint, Wolf shouldered Carmelita aside. He turned to Sly, pulling the key fob from his jacket. "You want this, runt?"

"Yeah that'd be gr-"

"Then fetch!"

Wolf flung the key down the length of the boat. By the time Sly ran past him, Carmelita was back on the offensive.

Sly sprinted past wolves and danced past obstacles, his eyes squinted against the dark sky to follow the key's path. Wolf's throw carried it down the ship, and the wind nudged it toward the sea–

It landed, perilously, just under the railing on the side.

Sly smirked, dropping into a slide as he reached out to grasp it – and remembered halfway through the motion that this was the key to the handcuffs he was wearing which he needed to remove the handcuffs blocking his fingers and that currently he did not have use of his fingers and as such could not grasp things.

He slid to a stop. The edge of the handcuffs gently bumped the key. Nothing happened.

And then the key slowly, leisurely, fell off the boat. With a gentle _blip_, it hit the water and sank straight to the bottom of the bay.

"Oh," said Sly.

Closer to the ship's bow, Judy was doing better. Only _two_ wolves had cornered her against the railing this time. Larry on her left, lips curled in a slight snarl. Gary on her right, the innocent glint in his eyes suddenly artificial.

"Boys," said Judy firmly, "you're adorable, but I won't hesitate to hurt you if I have to."

"You can't take us both, Hopps," said Larry.

"Yeah! We've got too much synergy!" said Gary, then quietly congratulated himself for getting it right that time.

Judy backed up a step, but she was at the edge of the ship. No ground behind her. Except for a lifeboat, she supposed, but...

She smirked. "Oh, I don't need to beat you both. I just need to beat one!"

She darted forward, weaving right of Gary to ensure they couldn't both reach her. She slipped the hook of Sly's cane over his ankles and sprang up, swinging around to throw her weight into his back.

Gary yelped as he tripped over, falling toward the rail – and straight over.

"Gary! No!" Larry leapt forward, grabbing his boyfriend by the waist. "I got you. I got you. Don't worry."

He felt the cane around his own ankles, and despite everything, all he could do was sigh.

"...Well played."
Judy knocked him over too and both wolves fell onto the lifeboat. They looked up in time to see Judy give them a friendly wave, then flip the release switch. The lifeboat fell from the Tamatoa, and in a matter of seconds the two wolves had been left behind by the ship's roaring engines.

Sly ran up, still jangling. "Wow! Nice one."

"Think you can help me do a few more?"

He nodded. "I can try."

There were too many opponents to politely arrest. They needed to thin the pack somehow, and this was the safest option.

Nick watched as they tried to goad any more wolves near the lifeboats. But the pack learned quickly. Judy and Sly were only able to jettison two more wolves before the remaining eight all understood the trick. They were still outnumbered.

And now the wolves were armed.

As Judy and Sly had tried to cajole more wolves closer to a lifeboat, Nick saw a smaller one slip away, disappearing inside the ship. He returned with an armful of poles, almost twice Judy's height from ear-tip to toe. Thin, but metal. He began to pass them to his comrades.

When Judy swung the cane, the poles swung back. Her opponents had equal range. She had lost her only edge.

She was soon lost in a throng of attacking wolves. Two came for Sly, who managed to use his handcuffs to his advantage – shielding his face with the metal, or catching an oncoming pole with the chain. But Judy was still the target. And as good as she was, Nick knew six co-ordinated opponents would soon prove too much.

Nick bit his lip, tearing his eyes away. A frightened, animal part of his brain wanted to glance around for the Phantasm. He purposefully ignored it, focusing instead of Carmelita's fight.

She wasn't doing much better. Her shock pistol still had no effect, except as a blunt instrument. Even then, Wolf was capable of just weathering her blows as they came. Was she equally durable? If those claws caught up with her, would she...?

Carmelita dodged one swipe and then another but wasn't ready for Wolf's boot. He kicked her suddenly, catching her in the stomach and knocking her back.

She collided with Judy, punted by a wolf's kick. The two women landed back-to-back on the cold deck.

"Judy."

"Carmelita!"

"Progress?"

"Some. You?"

A growl.

The pack was gathering. Wolf stood tall. Invulnerable to Carmelita's shots. She couldn't damage him with her pistol. And Judy couldn't fell enough wolves with the cane.
They came to the same realization at the same time – and shouted the same word.

"Switch!"

They switched. Carmelita tossed her trusty shock pistol to Judy as she threw over Sly's cane. And then they sprang up.

Wolf's eyes widened as Carmelita came in swinging with the cane. He backed up instinctively before realising he could counter-attack. But she had already won ground.

Judy, meanwhile, was facing the first challenge of using Carmelita's shock pistol – not immediately falling over. She had never held it before, and only now did she appreciate its ludicrous weight.

Her enemies weren't giving her time to adjust. The nearest wolf was almost upon her, bearing down with a pole. Judy sucked in a breath and aimed with both hands and fired.

The blast almost took her off her feet. More importantly, it caught the wolf right in the chest. With a yelp, she stopped short, her momentum completely cancelled.

Judy stared. And fired again. This time the wolf crumpled.

Judy looked down at the pistol in her hands, red and powerful and oh-so-inviting. She looked up, and saw seven wolves staring back.

She smiled. She grinned. She fired.

In seconds, the pack was thrown into chaos. Hardened mercenaries gave way to a single, small rabbit wielding a gun larger than her own head. The sea air was awash in crackles and a yells and increasingly loud laughter. Nick watched on in amazement and a healthy dash of fear.

Nearby, Carmelita pressed her advantage. She took to the cane immediately, drawing on her weapons training. Wolf swiped and she parried, redirected his whole arm, and hit him in the face. With a sharp motion, she pulled the cane back along his arm. It caught Wolf's left glove and ripped it off in one smooth motion.

Wolf barely had time to register he was being disarmed before the cane came back around, poking him once twice thrice in the face. He stumbled, startled, and Carmelita swung hard, knocking him in the side of the head. Wolf almost lost his footing, but righted himself with a growl, focused on the cane. He reached out to grab it – and Carmelita copied his trick, kicking him suddenly in the stomach. A second later, she pulled the cane back, removing his other glove and letting it fly over the railing.

Carmelita spun the cane in her hand, planted her boots, and glared.

Sly stared, taking in every movement. "...I love her. So much."

Wolf backed up, his eye wide. He glanced briefly to his pack – terrorised by a rabbit, some willingly throwing themselves onto lifeboats in a desperate attempt to placate her. The sight did not improve his mood.

"Just give up." Carmelita stalked after him, the cane ready in her hands. "We can do this quietly if you stop struggling."

"Frankly, lady, I'd rather take my chances with the sea..."
Wolf's boot hit something uneven on the deck – a pole, dropped by one of his disappearing employees. Before Carmelita could stop him, he snatched it up and matched her stance.

"And who says I'm done?!"

He charged, and the weapons met. Carmelita grunted, exerting herself to match his superior strength. But she had the sturdier weapon, and the stronger resolve.

Judy had almost finished with the pack, herding them onto lifeboats with shot after shot of crackling electricity. Her cackling rose over the noise, purple eyes burning.

The final pair of wolves scrambled onto the last lifeboat in view. Sly ran up and hooked his handcuffs around the release lever, sending them down.

"That's it! Run!" yelled Judy over the side. "Run from your superior!"

"Judy! Judy." Sly hunkered down to her, keeping his voice even. "You've gone mad with power, and honestly I'm loving it, but you've run out of wolves now. There's no more wolves, Judy."

"That's right!"

"So it's time to put the pistol down."

She frowned at it for a second, then took a breath. "...Right, yes. Okay. Fight over."

He smirked. "Good. If you were any more into that thing, I'd need to throw it into a volcano or something."

"You have to admit, it's very, uh..." Her voice was reverential. "...impressive."

"Believe me, I know. I see down the barrel every time I close my eyes." He stood, looking up. "Speaking of, let's check in on our violent guardian angel."

"Right!"

Judy headed back towards the bow, Sly behind her. It wasn't hard to spot the last two combatants on the ship.

The fight had become slower, but somehow, more brutal.

Wolf slammed the pole into Carmelita's side. She staggered, then rallied, viciously counterattacking with Sly's cane. Wolf staggered, then rallied, hitting her with the pole. Carmelita staggered, then rallied, bringing the cane down.

Judy stared for a moment before Sly spoke. "Uh oh. I've seen this before."

"You... have?"

"The rare times Carmelita's faced an equally tough opponent, they get caught in a loop of perfectly symmetrical violence. This'll go on for hours." He smirked at her. "Unless someone tips the balance."

Judy nodded, returning it. "Copy that. With Wolf down, Bellwether will be defenceless!"

She took aim at Wolf, but lowered the pistol again. Carmelita had made quick work of Wolf's gloves, but hadn't removed the device on his belt that nullified electric blasts. Judy would need to move in
physically, once the right moment appeared. She just needed to wait. Wait until–

"Hopps!" yelled Nick. "On your left!"

A huge paw knocked the pistol from her hand.

Judy found a mountain of gold bearing down on her. Sly tried to help, but with his hands bound he could only delay the inevitable. Then someone equally powerful grabbed him as well.

Judy squirmed, testing the hold, a furious yell rattling through her. Then claws slowly unsheathed, just to the point they met her skin, and she tactically considered maybe calming down. Just for a second.

Two more approached the scuffle. Sly had been right. All it took was one solid punch to the back of Carmelita’s head for her to fall. She pulled herself upright, trying to fight back, but both newcomers grabbed her. One arm each. Wolf, for his part, took a moment to catch his breath. "Uh... thanks."

Nick watched helplessly as Judy, Carmelita and Sly were dragged back toward him. The cane and pistol were dumped unceremoniously at their feet. They had been so close. They had almost turned this around. And they had fallen at the last second, because of these...

"Lionesses," he murmured to himself. "Wolves are one thing, but lionesses? Bellwether wouldn't..." His eyes widened. "No. No. It can't be."

"Nick?" said Judy. She seemed tiny in the lioness' grip, arms behind her back. "What's happening?"

He didn't respond. He just looked up, and everyone followed his gaze – Judy, Sly, Carmelita, the lionesses, even Wolf. Footsteps broke the silence, the steady clink of claws on metal. And from the dark bowels of the ship, finally stepping into view, came their adversary.
Now the past I've tried forgetting
And my foes I should forgive.
Trouble is – I know it's petty! –
But I hate to let them LIVE

"It's Zira," said Nick. Almost flatly.
"It's... Zira?" said Judy, entirely at a loss.
It was Zira.

Before them was another lioness, tall and wiry and grinning viciously. She was mostly a dull tan, but a darker strip ran vertically down her forehead, nicely complimenting the sheer mania in her red eyes.

"Guys," said Sly through a forced grin. "Who is this? What is happening?"

The four lionesses stood to attention; two restraining Carmelita at the shoulders and wrists, one holding Judy and one Sly. Nick, still cuffed to the ship's railing, was apparently not a threat.

Wolf moved to intercept Zira, falling into step with her as she stalked closer. "Well, ma'am, they're here. Plus an extra. Ran into some trouble, but we handled it."

"Yes, yes... excellent." Her voice was loud and raspy. She was either unaware or unconcerned that Wolf was, in fact, alone, the majority of her hired mercenaries currently adrift far from the Tamatoa. "Exactly as I pictured it."


"So," she proclaimed. "At last, you lie broken at my feet!"

"Hi!" said Sly, waving an encased hand. "I'm Sly Cooper. Who are you?"

"I am your doom," she said, tail curling behind her. "And my name is Zira Wazimu."

"Great!" His grin didn't waver. "But, um... who are you? To us?"

"What Sly is trying to say," added Judy, "is we aren't... sure... why you'd want to kill us."

"Bah. Some detective you are, rabbit." Her fangs shone. "I," she declared, with what should not have been pride, "am Scar's lover."

"...You are?" Judy turned to Nick, horrified. "She is?!"
He just winced.

"But – but!" Judy's brow furrowed. "He never mentioned you! Not once! And you weren't listed as a known associate on his police records..."

This gave Zira pause. Briefly. "Uh – of course! I was his secret weapon! And still am!" She folded her arms. "And I worked."

Carmelita opened her mouth, and Sly thought she was going to say something, but instead she tried unsuccessfully to bite one of her captors' paws. He spoke up. "We actually thought this was all Bellwether."

Zira laughed. "It wasn't Bellwether! It was me, Zira!" she said, jabbing a thumb at her chest. "I am the one who defeated you! All of you! Because of Scar's peerless planning!"

She sighed, one paw dramatically against her forehead.

"It was a rough few months. Especially for the children–"

"There's children?!!" squeaked Judy, almost too high to be words.

"–but my faith was rewarded! A series of instructions sent via encrypted texts, surely formulated by Scar himself! No-one else is as smart and ruthless and... wealthy..."

"Wealthy?!!" said Sly, suddenly affronted. "No – Bentley was so thorough."

Judy was still boggling. She turned to Wolf, hovering nearby. "So – you've been working for her this whole time? Not Bellwether?"

"Uh, yeah," he said. "Reduced rate, too. She's got three kids! I'm not a monster. You have any idea how hard it is to be a single mom? And a pred, too?"

"Yes!" snapped Nick. "First-hand! But my mom isn't evil!"

"Well, we don't all have that luxury," said Wolf flatly.

"Right?" said Sly. "Been trying to get that through his head all day."

"No. Hold on." Nick turned to Zira. "You want to kill me and Judy for arresting Scar?"

"Correct!"

His brow furrowed. "And – and you didn't prioritize Sly over us? O'Donnell called him 'just some guy'. Shouldn't he be as much a target as we are?"

Zira blinked. "Why?"

"He-!" Nick's ear twitched in frustration. "He destroyed Scar's house! The train? That was him! So was stealing all of Scar's money! He helped us stop his plan, he was integral, and then he went like fifteen steps further! He's the one you want, not us!"

"You really think I was 'integral'?" said Sly.

"I regret statements I may have made in the heat of the moment," said Nick, instantly calm.

"Bah!" Zira waved a hand. "I won't entertain your pathetic attempts to distract me, with your so-
called facts and logic! It won't work! Besides..." She unfurled another grin. "What does it matter? All four of you will die right here!"

"Joke's on you!" yelled Nick, instantly not calm. "Carrots can't die!"

"We, uh, don't need to test that." Judy met Zira's gaze. "Miss Wazimu, please. Think about this. The whole city is looking for us. Our friend here, she's with Interpol. Yes, you've cornered us. But do you really think you can get away with this?"

Zira laughed. "Of course! I would gladly cut you all open and face whatever punishment the courts handed down. Such is my devotion to Scar! But he has returned that affection by protecting me with his genius!"

She splayed her arms, letting the sea wind rush past her.

"His plan is elegant in its simplicity – and brutality. We shall sail until we reach international waters. Then, when I torture you to death, it will be entirely legal!"

"That's," said Judy, eyes closed, "not remotely how international waters work."

And Scar should know that.

Judy and Nick shared a glance, communicating the same sentiment. Something wasn't adding up. They tried to gauge what Carmelita made of it, but her attention was elsewhere.

"No trace of you will remain!" Zira was proclaiming. "Everyone will look to the empty space that you once occupied, and know that to cross Scar is to court doom! You will be remembered forever as an example, but otherwise forgotten! And – you, uh–" She frowned. "The loud fox is distracting me. Can't you hold her still?"

"We're doing what we can, boss!" said a lioness. "She's like, all muscle."

"NGAAAAHHHHH!" Carmelita's eyes were pure fire. She wasn't just strong, she was unpredictable, her boots shifting under her faster than her captors could anticipate. "I am not a hostage! Let me go before I skin you all!"

"It's a whole thing for her," Sly murmured to Nick and Judy. "One too many kidnappings."

"See – Miss Wazimu – this is exactly what I mean," said Judy. "The second my good friend and professional mentor Inspector Fox gets the chance, she's going to inflict a lot of violence on you."

"Knock out your teeth and feed them to you!"

"Heh!" said Sly. "Classic."

"So, please," said Judy. "Can't we work out something more reasonable?"

Zira laughed, again. "How rich! My prisoners begging I surrender! I think the totality our victory simply hasn't sunk in for you, little rabbit."

She counted on her fingers. Like Scar, her claws were unnecessarily unsheathed.

"We defeated you on every front! Your partnership is legendary, so we separated you. Your colleagues love you, so we isolated you. And your raccoon friend of little importance has dangerous fingers, so we encased those fingers in steel!" She took them in, her grin darkly triumphant. "So let's
cease the preamble and get to the good part. After all, tonight's a school night."

Silence hung for a moment. Then Sly laughed.

In their time together, Nick had heard Sly crack constant jokes. But if he ever found something funny himself, he would just smirk, letting his amusement twinkle subtly in his eyes.

Now he was laughing. Full and rich, his shoulders shaking in the lioness' grip.

"What?" Zira's eye twitched. "You dare mock me? Mock Scar?!"

"No. Well, yes. Of course I do. But it's not that..."

His laughter trailed into a genuine smile.

"This whole time... my hands have been covered in metal."

Sly kicked off the ground and slammed both metal cuffs into his captor's face. The lioness stumbled, too disoriented to even yell, and with a vicious shove Sly shouldered her over the ship's railing and into the ocean below.

He was moving before anyone could react, mind and body equally fast. He slid on his knees to Carmelita and backed with momentum his hands cracked into a lioness' knee. She cried out, her grip breaking.

Carmelita wrenched her arm from the injured lioness and shifted her weight, slamming her palm into the other's stomach. Her technique was flawless. Her target wheezed painfully and released her other arm, and Carmelita stood free.

Working together, she and Sly soon pushed both lionesses off the ship.

One lioness remained. Judy felt her paws shaking where she gripped her.

"Hey." She looked up, giving her captor a diplomatic smile. "There's no shame in leaving a bad situation."

The lioness nodded whitely, dropped her, and leapt overboard.

"That's what I thought."

Judy grabbed Sly's cane and Carmelita grabbed her pistol and Sly still could not hold anything but now it seemed he didn't need to. They faced down Zira and Wolf.

"Hey, Sly?" Nick caught his eye, giving him a little smile. "...That was pretty good. High-five? For morale?"

"I'd love to!" said Sly. "But I don't think it counts with these things on. Fistbump, maybe?"

"Sure."

Zira roared in frustration. "I will not be denied my victory! O'Donnell, stand ready."

Wolf glared. "What? I'm supposed to fix this myself?"

"That's what I'm paying you for!"
"Ugh... that 'reduced rate' I offered is getting less reduced by the second."

"Okay, guys." Judy was low to the ground, brandishing Sly's cane like an ancestral spear. "We know Carmelita and Wolf are evenly matched. Sly, I suggest you and I take out Zira."

"Then help Carmelita finish off Long John Purple!"

"Solid plan, Judy." Carmelita lovingly adjusted her pistol, ensuring it was okay. "You're going to make a great commander someday."

Nick smiled to himself, relieved that the tide was shifting back in their favour. And then a voice in his head reminded him that this was the exact kind of moment life tended to kick him the hardest.

He took stock of the situation, searching for weaknesses – telling himself it was just so he could celebrate properly when he found none. Judy's plan seemed solid. They were out at sea, but it would be easy to turn the ship around once the fighting ended. The Phantasm...

...had been worryingly quiet.

Nick glanced up, past the escalating shouting match just ahead of him, and saw it. There. Hovering above a smokestack.

Was the Phantasm... holding something?

Nick could make out something in its claw-hand, something small and dark and adorned with several flashing LEDs. It returned his gaze for a moment, as though ensuring he was watching.

And then it dropped it down the smokestack.

Nick felt as though he had been kicked awake. As the object disappeared into the ship, he realized with horrible clarity what it was.

"The ghost has a bomb."

Judy turned. "What?"

"The ghost has a bomb!"

"Seriously!" snapped Wolf, raising a hand. "Is no-one else hearing this?! Wilde's lost it! Stringing together absolute nonsen-!"

The bomb went off.

The whole ship juddered as the freighter's engines took a direct hit. Nick's knees scraped painfully against the deck as the rest fought to maintain their balance.

Wolf's eye widened. "Fine okay maybe he's onto something."

There was another series of explosions from within the ship, rattling the frame. Nick suddenly recalled the complaints he had overheard about the ship's cargo. Something that smelled odd. Something that was probably reactive.

Judy's ears were tall. "It's tipping over!"

Wolf ripped his walkie-talkie from his belt. "We're going down! It's every mammal for himself – if you can hear this, get off, now!"
Zira smirked. "Why, Wolf. I didn't know you were so–"

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Everyone shut up and go!"

"He's right!" said Sly. "Now's not the time – we all need to leave!"

Wolf ran – but only made it two steps before Zira's paw grabbed his shoulder, twisting him back around. "Oh no you don't! The battle is far from over!"

"Are you nuts?!" Wolf struggled, trying to pull himself free. "The ship is sinking!"

"And I'll make sure they all sink with it! Even if I go down too!"

"...Yeah," mumbled Nick. "She's nuts."

Zira was focused on Wolf. Judy silently drew the attention of the others.

Just Zira, said Judy's eyes.

Just Zira, said Carmelita's nod.

Please, after you, said Sly's smirk.

"This is the day of reckoning!" Zira was screaming. "This is the path to Scar's glorious return to power! And it shall not be ruined by–!"

Carmelita shot her in the face as Judy slid across the deck, slamming Sly's cane full force into her legs, and as the lioness toppled Sly leapt up and cracked the handcuffs into her muzzle.

Zira fell and did not get up.

They turned to Wolf and without hesitation he raised his hands.

"Okay, okay. We're done. I'm not gonna fight you when I can feel this ship sinking under me." He ducked down, trying to heft Zira by the waist. "Just – help me get her to a lifeboat, wouldya? There's still an outside chance I'll get paid for this."

"You don't have to lie, Wolf." Judy ducked under Zira's collarbone, using the cane to push up her shoulders, as Sly gathered up her legs. "It's like you said. You aren't a monster."

"Ugh. Whatever. Don't read into it."

"Now we just–" Judy gasped. Not from the weight. "Wait! Nick's still restrained!"

"On it!" said Carmelita. She took aim

no no please no

and with one well-placed shot blasted the handcuffs apart. Nick stared at his freed hands – and could almost taste the Phantasm get closer.

Then the ship shifted again and suddenly Carmelita was grabbing him, pulling him close against her, and Nick became very aware that the lioness hadn't exaggerated by calling her all muscle.

She pulled him down the ship, apparently not trusting him to move. That's fair, he realized dimly. I didn't. Judy, Wolf and Sly were close behind, managing a decent pace by sharing Zira's bulk.
"We gotta go further!" roared Wolf. "Somebody released all the nearby lifeboats!"

Judy winced. "Yeah, okay, that seemed smart at the time, but in hindsight..."

Carmelita led the way. "There's lifeboats further back, and I have a ZPD speedboat tethered to the stern. Just keep moving!"

Nick scanned the night air for the Phantasm. He couldn't see it. Of course he couldn't. He was struggling to understand what had even happened, but the ship shifting under his feet took most of his attention.

"There!" yelled Carmelita. A speedboat in black and white, as she said – and another lifeboat. "There's enough room for everyone. Move!"

The ship was beginning to tilt under them. Carmelita hurriedly untethered her speedboat as Judy and Sly released the lifeboat. Nick glanced between them – and his eyes landed on Wolf. Standing there, Zira in his arms. Frowning.

"What? What is it?!"

"It's just..." Wolf's brow furrowed. "D'you guys smell someth–"

The deck exploded under him.

Sly didn't see what happened to the others. He had the rare and unpleasant sensation of completely losing his balance as he was thrown from the ship. Then he hit the water. And sank.

He was dragged down into the freezing depths, darkness on all sides. A panicked part – a growing part – wondered why he wasn't getting the precious seconds he was owed, a chance to flail around on the surface and at least take a breath.

Steel handcuffs. Sinking steel. No air.

His legs thrashed, but all his natural grace was gone. None of the movements made sense any more, there wasn't – he couldn't – it was cold and dark and crushing he couldn't breathe

One last, sad bubble left his mouth, and he watched it merrily rise past him. And then he saw something coming straight for him.

Something orange.

Sly felt a pair of strong arms wrap around him, and for a horrible second he thought the cuffs would drag them both down. But pressed together, they had enough buoyancy. In moments, he was being lifted to the surface with the smooth, confident motions of fox legs.

They broke water. For a few seconds, they heaved in air, Sly coughing and coughing until the water left his airway. And then he could breathe again.

Sly's mask had slipped over his eyes, but his grin was unstoppable. "Carmelita! You saved me!"

Ecstatic, he gave his rescuer a long, slow kiss on the cheek.

"Actually," said Nick, "it's me."

"Oh!" said Sly brightly. "Cool. ...You can go ahead and let me drown now."

He said it like a joke, but Nick held him a little tighter. Just in case.
Nick looked around, treading water. Luckily, help was at hand.

"Nick!"

Carmelita waved to them from the lifeboat. They began swimming over – Nick doing the majority of the work as Sly mostly tried to stay afloat.

"This... isn't awful," he mumbled. It was quiet, so quiet Nick could barely caught it. "Thank you."

Nick heard him. "It's what I'm here for."

They reached the lifeboat. Judy was already motoring the speedboat toward them, having quickly learned the controls.

Carmelita grabbed Sly's shoulders, heaving him up to safety. She didn't let go immediately. It took Sly a moment to realize he was being hugged.

"Carmelita...?"

"You scared me," she muttered.

She noticed his mask was askew, and she fixed it. His hazel eyes stared up at her, quietly reverent. Her expression was torn.

"I know you're bad in the water..."

"Yeah," murmured Sly. His voice soft, close. "I mean, turns out Nick's got better reflexes than you, or maybe he just loves me more, but either wah—"

Carmelita dropped him. Tenderly.

Meanwhile, Judy was helping Nick onto the speedboat. "That was amazing!"

"I've always been an okay swimmer," he said. He shook himself out a little, but the seawater clung to him. "It's no big deal."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." Judy hugged him, her face nuzzling his wet shirt without a hint of discomfort. "You're a good cop," she said, "and a good friend, and a good guy. You see someone in trouble, you help them. No matter what." She looked up. "I'm proud of you."

He didn't have a reply to that. He just hugged her back.

Nick savoured the embrace for a moment, but eventually pulled away. The Tamatoa was still sinking, succumbing to the waves like a dying giant. He looked over to Carmelita's lifeboat, noticing the other occupant. Sprawled across the floor was Zira; fur sodden, eyes closed. Hands cuffed.

"She's unconscious," said Carmelita. "I wasn't about to let her drown."

"And what about Wolf?" asked Judy.

Carmelita just shook her head. There was a moment of silence.

Silence would reign over the dark ocean for some time, broken only by the sound of approaching sirens. Black waves broke bleakly.
A full six and a half minutes after the Tamatoa sank, with a heave of air, Wolf broke water.

He wiped saltwater from his eye. "Well," he said, with a firm finality. "To heck with this."

He swam away.

"Regardless, we've won here," Carmelita said. "The coast guard is already mobilising. I'm confident they'll pick up all the wolves and lionesses." She shot a glare at Zira. "And I'll personally ensure her arrest. You have my guarantee she'll never bother you again."

"That's my 'Lita," smiled Sly. "Protecting the innocent... and me."

She sighed. "But it never feels good arresting a parent. I hope the kids will be okay."

"Just put 'em in an orphanage!" said Sly. "Orphanages get a bad rap. I mean, I grew up in one!"

"Yes," said Carmelita, watching him trying and failing to wring water from his hat with handcuffed paws. "That's my exact concern."

Judy glanced up to her partner. Her smile died. "Nick?"

He was staring at Zira, his eyes dull. "It... doesn't make sense."

Sly and Carmelita stopped joking. They all watched as Nick sank slowly to his knees.

"It had to be Bellwether." His mouth twisted in a numb smirk. "Well. It had to be poison too, and it wasn't. It's..." He swallowed thickly. "I don't know what it is. I don't know anything."

"Oh no," said Sly quietly. "It's happening again."

Nick dragged his eyes to Carmelita. She felt an uncomfortable pang of pity. Kneeling in the shadow of a sinking freighter, he was wet and exhausted and... beaten.

"Carmelita. You should arrest me."

"What?!" Judy stepped closer. "Nick, why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Nick sounded more frustrated than anything. "Look around, Hopps. We won. We've stopped Wolf. Thing is, Wolf has nothing to do with Bellwether or the Phantasm. This has all been a dead end in some sick maze, and I want out."

Judy frowned. "I know it's – it's really weird that it turned out to be Zira. But you're right! This is just a detour! I know Bellwether's the one behind this, because she called me!"

"What?!” said Nick. Carmelita stared, silent.

"While I was alone, they left a phone with me, and she called me. I'd recognize that voice anywhere." Judy stood firm. "So you can't give up yet. She's still out there."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Is... that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Nick?"

"Okay. So Bellwether's still out there. There's still somebody trying to destroy me, entirely separate from the other people we just stopped. Hooray? Great news? Halle-freaking-lujah?" His voice was
rising. "How many more layers is there to this? If Zira was just a proxy, some idiot Bellwether was manipulating, how many more idiots might almost kill us?!"

He caught himself. Judy's ears were low. With a sigh, he laid a hand on her shoulder. On his knees, he was at her level.

"Judy. You..." He swallowed. "I can't thank you enough for sticking with me. No matter what happened, you wouldn't give up."

"Of course!"

"But," he said, "you told me yourself. It's a flaw. You don't know when to quit. That's my decision."

His eyes were down. "And I think we've officially hit that point. We've got nowhere to go from here. At least turning ourselves would be safe. If we keep pushing our luck, we're just going to get hurt. All we've done so far is... survive."

"I..." Judy fidgeted with one of her ears. "I don't know."

"Yeah," he said. "Me neither."

Nick couldn't look at her any more. Resolutely, he stood and faced Carmelita.

"Well? Don't just stand there, Inspector. You said you'd arrest me."

Carmelita took a breath. He was right. She had made this offer. It was all she could offer. The cold but certain safety of a cell.

She thought of Bogo. She wasn't supposed to be here. She had even left Fangmeyer and Wolford behind. Coming back with Nick would help smooth that over, even if Sly and Judy slipped away. They could keep working this if they wanted, while Nick kept safe. It was the sensible decision – and more importantly, her duty as an officer.

"No."

Nick stared. "'N...no'?

"I know what I said, Nick. But I meant that offer as a last resort. And frankly, I'm with Judy. You're giving up too early." She met his gaze. "For one thing, have you tried following the ghost?"

"Well, I guess that'd make sense, but–"

Nick froze.

"You saw it?!"

Carmelita was calm. "I take it you mean the flying thing with the black cloak and silver mask."

"Y...yes."

"Then I saw it." She stabbed her thumb through the night air. "It flew overhead while you were underwater. Heading north-west, and fast. You'd need to hurry to catch up. Something I'd suggest anyway, with the coast guard closing in."

"Yeah. We need to get gone." Sly danced up to her, giving her the kiss on the cheek he felt she was still owed. Then he leapt over to the speedboat. "Thanks for everything, Carmelita. I'll have them both home soon. I promise."
"You'd better, Sly. I mean it." Her eyes went from Sly to Nick to Judy. "I have faith in you. Finish this."

Lacking words, they just nodded.

Judy went to sail away, but Carmelita's voice rang out again. "Judy!"

"What?"

Carmelita hesitated. Then she tossed over her shock pistol, leaving herself unarmed. "Give 'em hell."

Judy blinked in surprise, but recovered, giving Carmelita a wide grin.

Their boat tore through the dark water, and they were gone.

Nick watched as Carmelita disappeared against the night. "I can't believe she let us go..."

"It's more than that." Sly's voice was serious. "We have her shock pistol. I've never seen Carmelita share that thing with anyone." He glanced to Judy. "She gave it to you twice."

She lay the pistol carefully at her feet, next to Sly's cane. An odd pair. But something about seeing them together gave her confidence.

The ghost hunt began.

Chapter End Notes

shoutout to everybody who asked me if i'd include lion king 2 characters
also,
rip everybody who asked me if i'd include lion king 2 characters
Nick Wilde was freezing, sea air whipping through his soaked clothes. And he was afraid, his eyes scanning the night sky for a ghost.

But he wasn't alone.

Judy steered the speedboat with exactly as much terrifying energy she had when driving, blasting their craft through the choppy water. Sly stood at the bow, hands still cuffed, like a larcenous figurehead.

"Is this the right way?" He fought to be heard over the engine's roar. "Looks like we're going back toward the city!"

"Carmelita said north-west!" Judy called back. "This is north-west!"

"What if somebody sees us?"

"Someone would definitely see us if we hung around that sinking ship! I bet the coast guard's already there!"

"Okay! Yeah!"
Nick hugged himself, trying to keep the cold and the doubt at bay. They were making quick progress, the lightshow of Savannah Central already glimmering to their right. *Starboard*, corrected a thoroughly unhelpful yet somehow still functional part of Nick’s brain. *On a boat, it’s starboard.*

They tore along Savannah Central, approaching the dark islands dotting the edge of the Rainforest District. And still nothing. He was wasting their time. They should be escaping, leaving this damn city behind. Not looking for a ghost.

The stars were drowned out so close to the city. The sky was uniform in its unnaturally pale darkness. No light but the moon and a passing plane, no movement but the plane and that dark sploge, no hope for Nick to ever–

Wait.

He squinted, ignoring the cold, ignoring the fear, ignoring Sly and Judy loudly discussing how weird Zira was. The boat lurched under him, but his vision was steady. And he saw it.

"There!" He stabbed a finger upwards. "Oh my god, there! I think that's it!"

"What? Where?" Sly craned his neck. "No, Nick, that's a plane."

"Only he can see it, Sly," said Judy, with a certainty that gave Nick mixed feelings. She looked to him. "Bearing?"

"What?"

"Which direction is it going?" she called. "We need you to navigate!"

Nick swallowed. He watched it for a second, calculating its trajectory. "It's veering back into the city. North by north-east!"

Judy, somehow, made the boat go even faster. They followed the Phantasm, Judy correcting the course as per Nick's yelled instructions. Sly stood there, frowning into the night.

They weaved between islands, curving inward, until the land around them began to thicken. Soon they were past the Rainforest District.

"Ugh. Canal District." Sly glanced around. "I'll keep an eye out for people, I guess. Are we gonna end this or what?"

Nick was keeping his eyes on the Phantasm. "What?"

"Carmelita's pistol is right beside you! If you can see it, shoot it!"

The Phantasm turned.

It was an abrupt and inorganic motion. It shunted itself around without slowing or changing course, and Nick almost froze with those unearthly eyes glaring down at him.

"You... made it mad."

"Good!"

"He's right, Nick!" Judy edged the pistol closer to him with her foot, most of her focus on navigating the tight canal. "If it reacted to that..."
Maybe it's scared.

Nick, eyes still wide, took the pistol. It shook in his hands. This was absurd. It was a ghost. It probably wasn't real. He was just crazy, and there was no point–

He gritted his teeth. No. Carmelita had seen it and she had given them this gun, her gun, to stop it. It wasn't just his struggle. Carmelita believed him. And Sly. And Judy.

His grip tightened and he focused on the Phantasm – only to see its head snap upward in a familiar motion. He had under a second to remember what that meant. Even less to–

"Guys! Close your–!"

Too late.

A blinding flash burst from the Phantasm. Nick's eyes, half-closed, were half-protected. But Sly and Judy weren't prepared, and with two yells, they flinched.

Judy dropped the boat's controls. The boat did not slow down.

"No, no, wait!" Nick dropped the pistol and tried grabbing the brake. But inertia is a cruel mistress.

The speedboat lurched to the side. By chance, their trajectory took the boat straight up an industrial ramp, over the hard cobblestones below, and into the empty husk of what was once a mattress factory. It sailed through a destroyed window, now a spacious hole in the wall, and settled gently on a pile of old mattresses, its momentum dissipating into a completely harmless landing.

Unfortunately for the trio, they were no longer in it.

Nick hit the cobblestones at full speed, rolling along the factory's courtyard. A dozen lances of pain shot through him, which he knew would form a dozen new bruises. But he was alive. He could see.

He had to find the others.

"Judy!" Nick dragged himself upright, squinting in the darkness. "Judy, are you okay?!"

He couldn't see her. But nearby, he saw a figure shakily stand. Sly, blinking uselessly, his night vision still recovering from the flash.

And directly behind him, the Phantasm.

Nick didn't think. He moved. In seconds he had cleared the distance, tackling Sly to the ground.

The Phantasm's blade sliced through empty air.

"Nick?" For the first time, Sly seemed... scared. "Is that you? What's happening?"

Nick knelt over him, hands on his shoulders. "Just – just stay down." He looked up. Met the Phantasm's gaze. "I've got this."

The Phantasm regarded him for a moment. No passion in its impassive, lifeless eyes. It persisted.

"Back off!" Nick held Sly a little tighter, baring his fangs. "You aren't hurting him."

The Phantasm persisted.
"I'm not afraid of you! This ends here, do you hear me? Huh?!” Nick channelled his anger, letting it push aside his fear like a slow flow of magma. "I won't let you scare me any more. I won’t!"

The Phantasm persisted.

"You... y'know something?" Nick took a breath. "Maybe you are a ghost. Maybe I am insane. I don't know! Maybe it's both! But nothing's gonna stop me from doing my job. I protect people. And I'm protecting him from you." He glared. "I won't tell you again. Leave."

The Phantasm persisted. It raised its arm, letting the moonlight dance sickly along the blade. The message was clear.

Nick tensed. "...Fine. Just try it."

"Nick?" Sly's voice was just a whisper. "...Thanks."

Nick glanced down, meeting his gaze – Sly's vision had recovered, not that it would help. Nick gave him a smile, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Then he looked back to the Phantasm, advancing like the tide, and prepared himself. He wasn't sure for what, exactly. Maybe just the end. All he knew was there was threat in front of him and a person behind him, and his job was clear.

"YAAAAAAAAAH!"

Judy flew in from the side and kicked the Phantasm in the head.

The image slowed, freezing in Nick's mind – the fury in Judy's eyes, her perfect form, the way her foot connected so hard the Phantasm's neck twisted. Then it shunted sideways, drunkenly trying to regain its equilibrium.

Judy landed smartly. Nick stared. "You... kicked it. You kicked the ghost."

"She sure did!" said Sly, standing. "That was incredible! I saw your foot whack into nothing... Do it again!"

"Gladly." Judy squared her stance. "That was a lucky guess, though. Help me out here, Nick – where is it now?"

"I..." Nick's mind reeled. "I thought it wasn't real."

She smiled. Almost vicious, and yet, so warm. "Come on, Slick. If it's real to you, it's real to me!" She scanned the air. "And I need to teach this thing what happens when you mess with my partner!"

The Phantasm had realigned itself. Its blade-hand jerked furiously – and Nick watched it lunge for Judy.

"Go left!"

She went left. The attack missed. It went to strike again–

"Jump!"

She jumped, and the blade kicked up sparks against the cobblestone. Judy stared as the sparks erupted from nothing.
"Now counter!" yelled Nick. "Hit it like you hit Wolf!"

Judy coiled her legs and sprang forward. Her head hit the Phantasm's with a clang.

"Ow!" She rubbed her forehead. "What's this thing made of?"

"Jughee!" Sly ran up – Nick hadn't even noticed him slip away – with his cane in his teeth. He kicked it over to her. "Try this!"

"It hasn't moved!" added Nick. "Wolf height!"

Judy grabbed the cane and swung it bodily, cracking into the Phantasm's side. Her arms juddered. "Yep! Yep, definitely hit something!"

"Keep it up, I'll be back!" Sly darted away again.

The Phantasm shook, as though enraged. It swiped again, but with Nick's warning Judy easily parried. And then she struck back.

Anyone who knew them understood that Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps had an impressive partnership. But few would ever witness just how deep that bond ran. It went beyond a shared sense of humour. Beyond working and living together without friction. Beyond even saving the city.

It was communication. They were two different people, capable of their own thoughts and goals and lives. But they could practically act as one.

Judy didn't need to see the Phantasm. Nick didn't need to fight it. With his eyes and her body in tandem, they rained blow after blow on it, never giving it a chance to retaliate. And they did more than withstand it. They beat it back.

Nick saw an opening and Judy brought the cane down. She slammed its head at full power. The Phantasm wobbled, sinking almost to the ground.

Then it rose.

"It's trying to escape!" said Nick. "Lion height, now!"

Judy stabbed the cane into the ground and kicked off, using it as a pole vault. She whacked into the Phantasm and blindly grabbed fistfuls of its cloak, managing to slow its ascent with her weight. It vibrated unnaturally, unable to shake her.

"Nick! Here!"

Sly had returned. Carmelita's pistol cradled in his arms.

Nick took it, feeling its ludicrous weight. Scuffed. But indestructible as ever. Like its owner.

"Let's see that flawless accuracy, Slick." Sly smirked. It seemed shy. "Just don't shoot me this time, okay?"

Their eyes met for a second. Nick saw the gently earnest mammal under the suave, smirking mask. Someone who had helped him from the start.

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks."

And there was Judy.
She was yelling furiously, her fists bunched in the Phantasm's cloak. Nick had no idea how she must have felt, clinging mid-air to something she couldn't even see. But he knew it wouldn't phase her. He needed her help. Here she was.

He took aim. "Hopps, get clear on my mark!"

"Right!"

"...Now!"

Judy dropped. The Phantasm rose. And Nick fired.

The shot was perfect, intercepting the Phantasm's path as it fled. It was a direct hit. As the blast caught it, its arms locked up, sticking straight out. There was a piercing shriek that caught all three mammals by surprise, making them flinch.

Then it dropped like a stone. The Phantasm fell with metallic crash. It lay still. Dead.

Nick stared. And so did Sly and Judy.

"Oh my god," she said. "I see it."

"You do?!"

"Yes!"

"I do too," said Sly. As he examined it, the shock on his face gave way to something else. "It's black."

"Yeah?" Nick felt giddy. Victory hadn't quite sunk in yet – part of him resisted it, wary of the Phantasm leaping back up. "It's always been black. Is that important? The colour?"

"Yes."

Nick and Judy tore their eyes away from the ghost. Sly was grim.

"I've finally worked it out. I should've known sooner. I had my suspicions, but it didn't add up. For one thing, I didn't think she'd pull the same trick three times in a row. She needs to pick a new favourite colour."

He turned to them, hazel eyes dark.

"It's Penelope."

"It's Penelope?!" said Judy.

She blinked.

"Who the heck is 'Penelope'?!"

"An old friend," spat Sly. "She used to be one of us."

Nick was still staring at the Phantasm, taking in the details. The damage revealed scraps of truth. Motorised rotors under the cloak – flight. High-powered flashlights – blinding lights. Cold technology began filling the corners ghosts had lurked. "I knew it! I knew I wasn't crazy!" He turned on Sly, eyes wild. "And I knew this was all your fault!"
"Nick, easy." Judy laid a paw on his arm. "Sly, we need to know more. How do you know it's her?"

"Because this is just like her!" he said. "Penelope's an engineer. She builds these characters for herself – the Black Baron, the Black Knight, The Black Phantasm. It's good tech, too. She's easily the most dangerous mouse I've ever met. Remember why I came here in the first place? How we tried and failed to tie up a loose end? That was her! She's the one who kicked our tails!"

"And... you think she would target Nick like this?"

"I don't see why not," sniffed Sly. "I'm not saying it makes sense. Quite the opposite. We're talking about someone who betrayed my gang for absolutely no reason."

"'No reason'?" said the Phantasm. "Oh, bite me."

They froze.

A voice was coming from the ruined robot. Female, chipper. Dissonantly cheerful. "Well, well. Suppose this rig had a good run. You really did a number on the poor guy. Lucky for me, the microphone and speaker are still working."

"Guys, keep your distance." All traces of humour left Sly. He pushed ahead of Nick and Judy, projecting his shoulders protectively. "The little psycho wires all her tech to explode when touched."

"You remembered! That's so sweet, Sly. And so unlike you..."

Judy peered into the Phantasm's eyes – its cameras. "You're... Penelope?"

"Hi. Nice to meetcha."

"And you did this?" Her voice was quiet. "All of this?"

"Oh, I can't take all the credit. I mean, it was originally Dawn's plan, so..."

"Dawn?" Horror took hold on Judy's face. "Dawn Bellwether? It was her! And you!"

"Yup! Pull up a chair, I'll tell you all about it."

Nick's brow furrowed, but before he could speak Penelope was ploughing forward.

"Let me start off by saying: it's nothing personal. You two seem nice. But reading the news coverage of that diamond heist, anyone with prior knowledge of the Cooper Gang could tell Sly... imprinted on you, or whatever the heck he does. In other words, I could attack you to get to him. Even if he didn't flee straight to Zootopia after I recently kicked his Gang's collective butt – which he did – he'd show up once he heard you were in trouble. He wouldn't be able to resist quote-unquote 'helping' his quote-unquote 'friend'."


"Aren't you? He befriended Judy. That means he befriended you. Same difference. You're basically her sidekick, after all. And now he's here."

"Yeah," said Sly. "Right here. You can stop talking about me in the third person whenever."

"I can see you, Sly. I'm just ignoring you. I know that's a hard concept for you to grasp..." Penelope clicked her tongue. "So! I figured if you can make friends, so can I. I wasn't gonna waste my time with a loser like Kifalme, though. I wanted to meet somebody with real talent."
Judy glared. "Bellwether."

"Obviously! I snuck a phone into her cell, and let me tell you, it was love at first call. We hit it off immediately. And she was just brimming with ideas for how to ruin your lives! That's really all you think about in prison."

"Plans she couldn't act on without you."

"Yup. Like framing you for murder. Bellwether wanted to destroy you utterly – you know what she's like, heh – and showing the world how 'violent' and 'uncivilised' you are seemed ideal."

"Not enough to just kill me," muttered Nick. "She had to prove herself right while she did it. Even if the whole thing was a lie."

"Exactly! You understand. That's what Dawn tasked me with doing, and boy, it was a fun challenge. You've got a decent home security system – I'd guess you'd want to, with your reputations – but once I cracked it, well, you go out on all your shifts together. I had plenty of time to snag some fresh fur from Nick's bed using this drone. It's real handy moving things without leaving your own fingerprints on them. After retrieving the phone I gave her, I sprinkled some fur around Dawn's cell. That was all the ZPD needed to raise their hackles. Pretty great plan, right?"

"No!" yelled Judy. "Bad plan! Nonsense plan!"

She stabbed a finger at the Phantasm's camera.

"So, what? You frame Nick for an **impossible** crime? You had the fur, but no explanation for how he got in and out undetected! Any decent lawyer would tear the case to shreds! It would never stand up in court."

"Who says it had to?" said Penelope. "It'd never get to court. All we needed was that first arrest. Reasonable doubt. When Sly heard you'd been detained, I knew he'd come running. He'd never miss the chance to bust you out and induct you into his sad little gang. And was I wrong?"

"Oh, come on," said Sly. "It was spur of the moment. I was just offering them an out, it wasn't–"

"Was. I. Wrong?"

Sly glared at the Phantasm. "I hate you."

"Not as much as I hate you!" She laughed. "Anyway. When the Cooper Gang tried to take me down earlier this week, and bounced off my defences like flies, I figured now was a good time to pull the trigger on this. I packed up my stuff, set up shop, and here we all are!"

"So, wait," said Judy. "Sly helping us escape the ZPD was part of your plan?"

"Oh, totally! It'd be way harder to kill you if you were in a jail cell. That was my half of this arrangement – I wanted Sly dead. Still do! Heh. If the three of you were running around, trying and failing to solve our little mystery, you'd be nice and vulnerable."

She sighed.

"Although I admit I underestimated you there. I thought Dawn was exaggerating about how hard you'd be to kill. But an hour ago you were cornered by an entire wolf pack *and* a crazy lioness, on a ship that I *also* filled with plastic explosives as a definitely lethal last resort – and you're still here. Barely a scratch."
"That's right." Judy's eyes burned. "And we're not done yet."

"Yeah, see, that's exactly what Dawn was talking about. She knew it'd take a lot to stop you, so she went for a war of attrition. While the ZPD chased you for the murder, more and more enemies would get in your way. There's plenty of candidates from your old case files, for starters. O'Donnell was an obvious choice – despite appearances, he's good at what he does. Breaking him out was definitely worth it. I can't take credit for Zira, though. Didn't even know she existed. But Dawn did, and thought using her as a proxy would be hilarious. And it was! But also, y'know, sorta depressing. What a ludicrous woman."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "And that rabbit. He preyed on us because someone told him I was 'weak'."

"Oh yeah, Afton! Him too. I nudged him in your direction when I saw you were in his neck of the woods. Desert. Whatever."

The smile returned to her voice.

"By the way, Sly, thanks so much for burning down that entire pizzeria in a blind panic. I mean, leaving the bloodied knife in view was the main thing – again, drone, none of my fingerprints – but the extra arson really helps sell the angle that your pal here's a deranged murderer."

"Yeah, when my friends are in danger, I tend to let the little details slip." He glared into the camera. "I don't remember you critiquing my methods all the times I saved your life."

"You..." Judy looked pained. "He saved your life? And you still turned on him?"

"He's exaggerating," snapped Penelope. "He saved me twice, from messes he got me into. Took his sweet time, too. See how charming you find him after he abandons you to the clutches of a gross pirate."

"...Does O'Donnell count?"

"No. O'Donnell's a gentleman compared to what I had to put up with." She grunted. "Ugh. Where was I?"

"What the hell is this thing?!" yelled Nick. "And why couldn't anyone else see it?"

"I don't think that's where I was... but I'm really eager to tell you, so whatever! Great question! I'd been developing my little buddy the Phantasm separately. Actually, what you're looking at is one of my dream projects from since I was a little kid – an invisibility cloak. I got so close! The metal and fabric are coated in a dense, long-chain macromolecular polymer. Adaptogenic, of course."

"Of course," murmured Sly.

"The magnetic interference spoofs cameras fine, and most people's natural vision. But thanks to some quirk of vulpine eyesight, some obscure cone, foxes can still see it... So frustrating. Then it hit me. Sometimes inventions aren't failures, they just need a different purpose. And if only foxes can see it..."

"It's a pet ghost."

"Exactly! Cribbed the design from something I found online – I think it's from some kids' book. Easier to work to a blueprint, y'know?"

Penelope's tone turned nostalgic.
"I was thinking of using it on Carmelita. She's awfully rigid. One good push away from some real
cognitive dissonance. But you know as well as I do that it's hard to 'push' Carmelita Fox in any
direction. If she sees a ghost, she'll just shoot it. But you, Nick – d'you mind if I call you Nick? –
you're more cerebral. Thoughtful. Pathetic enough to question yourself. One look at your file and I
knew you'd be a perfect target for the Phantasm. And Dawn loved the idea. I couldn't tailor the
Phantasm to be 'for your eyes only', so to speak. Had to be careful about when and where to use it. I
just had my fingers crossed Carmelita wouldn't show up so soon." She trailed into a chuckle. "Gosh.
Saying it out loud, it sure sounds dumb. She's always just one step behind, isn't she?"

"So that was it." Nick's voice was quiet. "It's all just been one sick joke from the start."

"A joke? Hardly. I take my work seriously. It's called gaslighting, pal. And it wasn't hard. Ruining
your sleep, for instance: easy! Like most modern mammals, you keep your phone by your bed. Once
I cracked into it, I remotely used the speaker to play subaural infrasound every night to disturb your
sleep patterns. Amazing how the brain is so susceptible to what the ears can't even process... Of
course, if you ever worked out your phone was the problem, I'd need a Plan B." Her voice lilted.
"But ya never did. Guess you just aren't quite the detective you think you are."

"That was my sleep," muttered Nick. "The Phantasm was moving things, which is how my fur
ended up at the crime scene and I ended up outside, that first morning..." He frowned. "My spine...?"

"That's the long and short of it, anyway," said Penelope loudly. "All good old fashioned Earhart
engineering! Well, mostly. You remember Mister Afton. Not my match as an engineer, not even
close, but capable of some interesting stuff. Like using sharpened ceramic to create an accurate set of
fox teeth. Fully functional, and modular, too. I had no trouble installing them onto this rig. Heck of a
thing!" She sighed. "Sadly, I've already destroyed them. Hate to waste quality craftsmanship, but I
can't let the ZPD find the actual murder weapon."

Nick's face darkened. Almost unnoticeably. "'Actual murder weapon'?"

"Oof, right... See, there was just one problem with Dawn's plan. She wanted this big elaborate
jailbreak where you seem to murder her, and her faked death covers her escape. Beautiful concept,
but frankly, unworkable. Definitely a politician's idea; perfect on paper, impossible to actually do.
That was the biggest difference between us. I'm not a politician, I'm an engineer. Practical problems,
y'know. And even I couldn't pull this off. Break her out, or fake her murder. One. Not both."

Nick already knew. "You..."

"So one night we were both just spitting balling, and I said 'Hey, why don't we actually murder you?'
And she laughed, which personally I interpreted as consent, so..."

Judy gasped, her eyes wide. Sly just glared, cold.

"Oh, don't give me that look! If she didn't want me to do it, she should've said so! A simple 'no'
would've sufficed..."

"You – you killed her!" said Judy.

"And the rabbit, too," said Nick, eyes closed.

"Uh, yeah. Listen, before you get too worked up, I should tell you that guy's grave is not a hill you
wanna die on. I talked to him online, and... yeesh. What's that phrase you keep using? 'Make the
world a better place'? Trust me, I know a monster when I see one. And the world is not gonna miss
him." Penelope's tone turned quizzical. "And the same goes for Dawn. Don't tell me you're sorry for
“Her all of a sudden?”

“I'm not–!” Judy was almost beyond words. “Of course I'm upset! You killed somebody! Somebody who trusted you, even!” She stared, her voice quietening. “Don't you feel even a little...?”

“Don't bother,” spat Sly. “It's not the first person she's stabbed in the back.”

Judy's mind reeled, but amid her tangled moral outrage and emotional uncertainty, a practical question bubbled up. “Then – how did she call me?!”

Penelope's voice perked. “Oh, you really bought that, huh? That's great! I was worried you'd see through it eventually – or hear through it, I guess. Heh. No, see, we mostly communicated through text, but since she was in solitary confinement, we sometimes managed phonecalls. I recorded all our logs for future reference, and I figured I could use them for some mischief. Check it out!”

There was a pause. Then over the connection came Bellwether's voice – saying the same words. Now she was listening for it, Judy could make out the irregularities where Penelope cut and reshaped the audio.

“I – Sure – love – Judy. I hope. – We can – date?!”

Penelope's voice returned with a chuckle. “Pretty cool, right? She really was obsessed with you. I think in another life, you woulda made a cute couple.”

“But she responded to me!”

“Uh, yeah. I was on the other end of the line, chaining fragments together. Have you really never heard of soundboards? They're big with thirteen year olds. Fooling you was literally child’s play.”

Judy tried to reply, but nothing came to her. She glared at the ground, doing her best not to show weakness.

Penelope chuckled darkly. “Say, Nick. You've been quiet. Whatcha mulling over?”

Nick met the Phantasm's gaze. His eyes were cold. “I'm trying to work out why you're telling us this.”

“Yeah!” said Judy, springing to life. “Bellwether must have told you how gloating at the wrong time ruined her plan.”

“Oh my god, I know. She never shut up about that. But that's where she and I differ. She needed her reputation. But even if you were recording this – and you aren't – what would that change? I'm a ghost. You'll never catch up to me. And you'll never have actual proof for any of this.” She sighed dramatically. “Officer Nick Wilde, after brutally murdering two people, came up with this outrageous lie about a robot ghost... pinned it all on some criminal mastermind he'd never even met. What a shameless liar.”

“That's not what I meant,” said Nick. “Just because you can tell us doesn't mean it makes sense. What are you getting from this?”

“Can't a girl vent a little? I work on this stuff for so long, and I have no-one to talk to about it. Dawn was great, actually. She got me. But, y’know...”

Penelope cleared her throat. When she spoke, her tone had changed.
"But you're right, Nick. You're very astute – that was actually just one reason. Y’see," and then Sly felt something cold pierce his back.

He instinctively cried out, although it just came out as a breathy gasp. Nick whirled around, his worst fears confirmed.

Penelope could see them, but they couldn't see her. And while she distracted them, she had been manoeuvring another drone into position. Directly behind Sly, its blade in his back, was another Phantasm. The same design, but larger.

"What's that you were saying about me stabbing backs?" sang Penelope. Her voice rang louder, stronger, from the mask. "Wouldn't be the first person... or the last."

The second Phantasm raised its blade, bringing Sly with it. He yelled in pain, too shocked to move.

"Say hello to the Phantasm's older brother! This is the prototype I built to test the concept. It's slower and clunkier and, if I'm honest, not as scary—"

Nick sank several shots into the drone's mask. They fizzled.

"But the armour's a lot better," finished Penelope. "Now hold still."

Nick and Judy stared and Sly stared back, suspended by the blade. Helpless. There was no escape, no counter-attack. Nothing but the dragging seconds until the Phantasm's next strike.

Then with a roar of diesel a nearby fence exploded.
Nick had always been quick on his feet. Police training had only improved that. But even he struggled to follow those frantic seconds.

The first part was clear. The image of Sly hanging off the ground by the blade of a drone modelled after a vengeful ghost was... memorable. Vivid. He wouldn't forget it soon. Maybe ever.

And then there was a bang and then a van and then before the van had stopped moving a hippopotamus leaping from it and the hippo punched the robot in the face.

There was a terrible noise as the robot's blade slid free of Sly's back. Nick winced. Removing the weapon after a stabbing worsened the bleeding. He knew that much.

So did Judy.

She ran forward to help Sly and like that Nick found himself fighting alongside the hippo before he had even remembered his name was Murray.

Penelope's voice rattled through the speaker. “Oh, uh! I'm sorry you saw that, big guy, but we can--!”

Murray wasn't talking. Tears in his eyes, he just roared, slamming his fists into the second Phantasm's face.

*And only the face*, said Nick's brain at full speed, *because I shot it in the face and that fried the invisibility there so that's all he can see--*

Nick fired. He blasted one bladed hand, then the other. No damage registered, but Murray elegantly worked detours into his attacks like a graceful warhead. Soon both blades were snapped off, Sly's blood spilt on the cobblestones.

The Phantasm tried to retreat, but Murray closed his hands around its hood. The fabric ripped free into his hand, and the robot rose.

Nick sank several more shots into its exposed metal back, and Murray leapt up and dragged it down.

“Work fast, Murray!” called a voice from the Van. “Detonation in five!”
Murray slammed it into the ground and gripped its head. With a roar that rattled Nick's teeth, he wrenched it — *wrenched the metal* — and tore it off. Penelope's voice, distorted by damage, made a dying plea.

Murray covered Nick with one arm as the Phantasm exploded.

They both did, the smaller model also disappearing into a burst of flame. Judy yelped, trying to shield Sly from the blast with her body.

Murray ran to Sly. “Ohmygod! Sly, can you feel your legs?!”

“Murray—”

His voice cracked, every word thick with history. “*Can*! *You*! *Feel*! *Your*! *Legs*?!*

“Yes. Yes, I can!” Sly moved his feet, out of sync, to prove it. “I don't think she hit anything important. It just hurts, a lot.”

“I am never letting you out of my sight again!” Shoving the Phantasm's cloak under his armpit, he bent down and gingerly lifted Sly.

“Sly!”

Bentley stuck his head out of the back of the Van. His glasses glimmered sickly in the dim light, framing an anxious frown.

In her brief dealings with Bentley, he had always struck Judy as calm, almost robotic. He wasn't calm now. “Just – just hold on! We'll think of something! We have to – okay. Hospitals. There's plenty of hospitals, but how can we – the ZPD's everywhere, we–”

“Wait! I know where to bring him!” said Judy. “There's a doctor in Sahara Square. She's under the radar, but she's good and we trust her. She can help.”

Murray was already running to the Van. Bentley called to Judy. “Are you sure she's safe?”

“I think so. Wolf found us there, but I don't think he's a threat any more.” She turned. “Right, Nick?”

Nick shambled after her. His gaze was glassy.

The Van was idling, dutifully waiting for them. Murray ran to the back, Bentley awkwardly wheeling back to clear room. They laid Sly down on a small mattress. It seemed comfortable, despite the clutter.

“Ugh – thanks, pal.” Sly smiled up at Murray. “Don't freak out, okay? Everything's gonna be fine.”

“That's what you always–” He stopped, noticing the metal encasing Sly's hands. “What are these?!”

“Ah,” said Bentley. “Tartarus handcuffs. They're difficult to hack into, but with enough time, I can find a signal w–”

Murray bent down and hooked his fingers into one cuff and with straining muscles and a furious
scream he bent it open. The metal curled slowly and then snapped, freeing Sly's hand with a piercing clatter. The other cuff automatically opened and slipped off, as though in surrender.

Murray shook feeling back into his hands as he walked away. “Ow.”

Bentley smiled quietly. “Hysterical strength. Heck of a thing.”

Murray took the wheel while the Nick and Judy got in the back. The Van roared to life under them, and they were off.

“I'm no doctor,” said Judy, sitting by Sly. “But I know enough first aid to stem the bleeding.”

“Thank you.” Bentley rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “We really appreciate you two helping him while he was alone.”

Judy chuckled, already tending to Sly. “Us, helping him? ...Sure. Let's say it was mutual.” She tilted her head. “Wait, how did you find us? Wolf smashed Sly's phone.”

“He did,” said Bentley, “which was an instant red flag. I configured it to give off an emergency beacon if damaged. We were already regretting our separation, and that clinched it. Murray and I hurried here, tracking the source of the signal. But the trail had already gone cold.”

“This city's a maze, especially with the ZPD so riled up,” called Murray from the front. “We've been searching non-stop!”

“Whenever I'm at a loss, I return to the basics,” said Bentley. “I ran a scan along our usual frequencies, hoping to find Sly's Binocucom.”

“Which was ten feet away,” noted Judy.

“You got it, right?” mumbled Sly. “There's an important photo on it…”

“Of course we did, don't worry. Just… the scan turned up something else, too.” Bentley seemed uncomfortable. “It led us straight to this position. A frequency that I sometimes used, but… Penelope seemed to favour.”

Judy stared. “She's been tracking us?”

Nick said nothing.

Then he immediately began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Yessss,” said Sly. “Finally...”

Everyone watched as Nick wrestled the wet fabric over his head. “Hopps!” he said. “Spine!”

“What?”

“Can you check along my spine?”

Judy blinked, but she caught the fear in his voice. She nodded firmly. “On it.”
She stepped close, scanning intently, but saw nothing. She started moving a hand through his fur, still damp with saltwater, until—

“Ow.”

A lump.

“Barbaric...” muttered Bentley, wheeling closer to take a look. “She's implanted you with a small subdermal tracer.”

“That's why my spine was itchy...” murmured Nick. “She shoved it into me while I slept.”

“Was that before or after she dumped you in the backyard?” A note of disgust had entered Judy's voice. “I guess she didn't reveal everything. She held back certain details, just in case they'd still be useful.” Her eyes widened. “And this explains how we kept getting discovered! Ruby's bar, the junkyard, the pizzeria, the Dreemurr's house... Nick, we were never spotted. We just stayed in one location too long. Penelope kept us off-balance by either sending an 'anonymous tip' to the ZPD, or texting Zira pretending to be Scar. Or more likely, texting Wolf pretending to be Zira—” Judy suppressed a groan. “Why can't bad guys meet in person?!”

Bentley nodded. “I’ve always believed that our genuine bond of trust was what elevated the Gang to success – it's sadly rare in our line of work.”

“Guys,” snapped Nick. “Can we remove it?”

“Sorry, you're right. This is no time for sentimental tangents.” Bentley shook his head. “I wouldn’t recommend physically tampering with the device. You've seen how Penelope rigs her creations...”

“And I don't want anything exploding inside of me. Yes. What can we do?”

“Penelope outclasses me as an engineer,” said Bentley, “but I'm the better hacker.” He reached for his laptop. “All I need to do is get a lock on the signal. Then I can disable the transmission.”

Judy frowned. “But won't she notice? I know we need to shut it off, but if there's any chance there's a bomb in that thing, and she realizes we found it...”

“Hmm. Good point.”

“Unless...” said Judy. “It doesn't turn off.”

“Ah, of course!” Bentley began to type even faster. “If I can find the signal, I can clone it! And feed Penelope false information...”

“Guys I don't mean to yell,” yelled Murray, “but my best friend is dying and I don't know where I'm going.”

“Ah! Sorry.” Judy leapt onto the seat, balancing next to Murray's head. “You're doing great! Take a left down that street, see it? Then...”

Her voice faded from Nick's focus. He knelt there, silent, so overwhelmed by the last few minutes that part of him switched off. He took stock from a distance, as though 'Nick Wilde' was someone he once knew well but hadn't spoken to in years.
He was wet and shirtless, hiding in the van of three criminals who had repeatedly humiliated him. He was here because there was a homicidal genius out there with the ability and whim to ruin his life. And she was ruining his life because of Sly Cooper.

“We. Are Not. Friends.”

“Aren’t you?”

Murray flew through the junkyard's front gate, weaving through piles of garbage with a careening grace. He screeched the Van to a halt right next to Honey’s office, and to Honey, who burst through the door with her baseball bat and a camouflage dressing gown.

“Who in the hell–” She paused when Judy followed Murray out of the van. “Hopps? Is Nicky okay?!”

“Yes!” She winced. “Well, I mean – he's more okay than Sly–”

Murray ran to the back of the Van, hefting Sly and rushing him inside. Honey followed, straightening her gown, as Judy hurried through an explanation.

“Don't worry,” said Bentley, “I've already cracked the tracer. I've started with a simple spoof program for now – to Penelope, it'll look like we passed this point and kept driving. She won't know we're here.”

Nick just grunted.

After a moment, Bentley nodded. “Well, um... better get inside.” He lowered his wheelchair onto the ground. “Gah. Sand. Perfect.”

Nick didn't reply. Slowly, he began to claw his shirt back on, the sodden material resisting his fur. Bentley cleared his throat.

“Um... Mister Wilde?”


Bentley indicated a box in the Van's corner. “Those are some general-use disguises – Sly's should probably fit you. Feel free to pick out something dry.” He was quiet. “He wouldn't mind. Quite the opposite.”

Nick looked at the box, then back to Bentley. “...Thank you.”

“Don't mention it.”

Bentley wheeled himself to the office. Nick shut the door, leaving himself in the dark.

He changed.

In the office, Murray had set Sly on the table. Honey looked him over, one fang worrying her lip.

“Well, hello.” Sly's voice was faint, and yet somehow, still rich. “Didn't think getting stabbed could
have such a silver lining.” His hand, only shaking a little, found hers. “Name's Sly. Wonderful to meet you.”

“Sly!” Judy stared. “You are bleeding to death. Stop flirting!”

“Yeah, no,” said Murray. “He doesn't stop.”

“If anything, this is sort of reassuring,” said Bentley.

“Yeah, Hopps,” said Honey. “Let the man talk. As his physician I think it's important for his recovery.”

“You're really smart,” said Sly, who was finding it steadily harder to string words together. Simple compliments. Wide eyes.

Honey patted his hand. “Don't you worry, sugar, you'll be just fine. Quick question: d'you think you're in shock?”

“I don't think so?”

“Good enough! Now hold still while I poke around.”

She pulled his shirt up – Sly's scandalous comment lost in the wet fabric – and set to examining the wound. Judy glanced to Bentley and Murray, just as uncomfortable as she was. More, probably. “Um... Honey, should we all be in here?”

“Probably not,” said Honey, waving a bloodied paw. “But I could use an assistant if you've got the stomach for it, Hopps. Just – nobody sneeze, alright?”

Once again, Judy was awed at how focused Honey became as a doctor – but instead of a check-up for a friend, she was dealing with a dying stranger, and the effect was even sharper. In moments, Honey had determined the wound had caused a minimum of internal bleeding. Not life-threatening if treated immediately. With Judy's help, she disinfected it and began to stitch it closed. All the while, she played along with Sly's murmured flirtations. Judy realized it was important for his recovery. Bedside manner.

“I don't want to pry, sugar, but did you get into a fight? Can't imagine anyone wanting to damage a work of art like you.”

“I,” declared Sly, “can be very annoying. I'm told.”

“Well, we're getting along fine, aren't we? Though maybe that's the blood loss.” Sly hissed at a stitch. “Sorry, sorry. We're getting there. So who did this?”

“I was stabbed,” said Sly, pointing a finger at Bentley, “by his ex-girlfriend.”

“All right!” exclaimed Honey. “Now hold still while I stitch it closed.”

“Sly,” sighed Bentley, and then stopped. “Actually, no, you're bleeding. Babble if you need to.”

But Sly's mind had already moved on. “I had a girlfriend once,” he said distantly.

“Ah,” smirked Honey, threading a new stitch. “Enjoying the single life?”
Judy felt the atmosphere lurch slightly, like a misplaced note in an familiar song. She knew Bentley and Murray were thinking the same thing. Sly had lost a worrying amount of blood. He was being honest. About his feelings. Instead of flirting.

“I messed up really bad,” he continued, his voice wobbling. “I was stupid lucky to even have her – it was, y’know, we weren't ever supposed to be dating but then we were. And now! There was one thing I wasn't supposed to do but it's kind of my whole thing so I did it without telling her and turns out it was the not telling her that really did it? Maybe we could've actually done it together. But she hates me now and even though she wanted me to call her I kept delaying it, finding excuses like stopping Penelope first, and – yeah. I'm an idiot. And I miss her so much.”

“Um, wow,” said Murray. “I'm still super worried, but this is also really good for him to be saying out loud.”

“It does explain why Operation Leverage has been taking us so long,” noted Bentley. “Obviously blood loss is less than ideal, but maybe we could achieve a similar in vino veritas if we–”

“Boys,” said Honey, “trying to concentrate.” She gave Sly a gentle smile. “Listen, sugar. You'll be able to apologise to your girlfriend in just a little while, okay?”

“Okay.” Sly's eyes were shut. “Thanks.”

“It's what I'm here for.”

Bleeding stemmed and wound stitched shut, Honey washed her hands of blood. “He'll need rest,” she said. “I don't exactly got gallons of raccoon blood to hand, so the best I can offer is orange juice and a bed. But you got him here in time. He'll be okay.”

“Thank you so much,” said Bentley, as Murray heaved a massive sigh. “We'll pay you handsomely once this is done.”

“Awh, I woulda done it for free,” she said, shooting Sly a smile. “But if you wanna pay me, I ain't gonna stop you. Cash. Unmarked bills. Dead drop only.”

“Obviously,” said Bentley. “We're not running a lemonade stand, here.”

“Guys,” said Judy, drying her own hands. “I'm glad Sly is okay, but we're not out of the woods yet. What are we gonna do about Penelope?”

“I'll handle that.”

Nick's voice, from the door. Monotone. Judy looked up – and couldn't meet her partner's gaze.

Nick had chosen black trousers and a black dress shirt, tightly buttoned except to the collar. A pair of thick black sunglasses completely obscured his eyes.

“Hiya, Nicky,” said Honey, the only one who seemed unperturbed. “Lookin' sharp.”

“Thanks.” He strode in. “I've done some thinking. The Phantasm was fake. I was never insane. And
now that I know that... I'm taking charge. I refuse to be a liability any more.”

Sly, eyes still shut, was apparently not asleep. “No offence, Nick – loving the enthusiasm – but this is Penelope. Even Bentley's dumber.”

“Not how I would phrase it, but yes,” said Bentley. “And that's exactly why I think Nick should take point.”

He turned to Nick, spectacles meeting sunglasses.

“Penelope outmanoeuvred me because we were too close. She knows all my tricks, my exact methodologies. Splitting up was supposed to be a completely outside-the-box solution, something we wouldn't consider – and it only made things worse! I can't take her by surprise, Nick. But you could. As far as she's concerned, you're just a victim. She won't be expecting your line of thinking.”

Nick just nodded.

“But...” Murray's giant hands fidgeted. “We don't even know where she is.”

“Not far,” said Nick. “She said she had to ‘set up shop’. She's here, somewhere in Zootopia.” He pointed to one of Honey's less egregious wall decorations. “Hopps. Map.”

She nodded, pulling the map down and laying it on the floor. They gathered around. “You saw the Phantasm at ZPD headquarters,” she noted, “then at the pizzeria in Sahara Square, which was... hereish?”

Nick jabbed both points with a claw. “I'm less certain about exact placement once we hit the water. But I saw it at the dock, then further out...” Two more points, followed by a long curve up the city's western waterway. “Then back up this way until we hit the Canal District.”

He calculated the trajectory, noting the curve was mostly over water.

“Penelope said the invisibility doesn't work on foxes. All foxes.”

“Carmelita saw it,” mumbled Sly. “And Carmelita saw a guy who saw it...”

“She was avoiding the city, taking a safe route as she brought it back to her hideout, which would have to be...”

Nick continued the Phantasm's projected arc. Over the Canal District, cutting the north of the rainforest, until hitting–

“The Meadowlands,” said Judy. “...Huh.”

Murray frowned. “But Penelope must have crazy range on those things. Couldn't it be, like, a hundred miles in that direction?”

“No. She called that second robot 'slower and clunkier'. And she only sent it towards us once we damaged the first one. With how quickly it showed up, she can't be hiding far from where we had that fight.”

“Penelope's probably holed up somewhere high,” said Bentley. “Altitude would be useful if she's
deploying and housing aerial drones. It would also need to be remote, away from prying eyes – standard issue for any hideout – and...” He sighed. “Aesthetically, she has a flair for the dramatic. If there was a castle in this city, that's where she'd be hiding.”

Nick and Judy shared a look. They didn't need to say it. Nick just followed his arc through the Meadowlands, hitting the exact co-ordinates.

“Cliffside Asylum,” said Judy. “It matches that description perfectly. And it worked pretty well for Lionheart.”

“Until us,” said Nick.

“Until us,” she smirked. “Sounds like we need an encore.” She turned to Bentley. “How long do we have? I'm guessing she's gonna leave...”

“Oh, but when?” he replied. “This seems like a major operation. Penelope hates to leave equipment behind – if she set down roots, so to speak, she won't just disappear. Between that, and her generally low opinion of our chances, I'd say we have at least twenty-four hours.”

“Alright,” said Nick. “Now all we need is a plan.”

He stood, taking in around the room.

“Let's tally our resources. There's me. There's Judy. There's you three. We've got your van, Carmelita's shock pistol, and a junkyard. But other than that, equipment is scarce.”

“Oh!” Murray waved the fabric he had ripped from the second Phantasm. “I got this spooky ghost cloak! Can't even see what I'm holding...”

Nick appraised it. “...Yes. Good. That should be enough.”

Murray frowned. “Um, enough for what?”

“Bespoke work.” There was a ghost of a smile on Nick's face. “Don't worry. I'm good with a needle.”

A second later, he was monotone again.

“Bentley. Sly told me you had gotten Penelope's... encryption algorithms?”

“Well, yes,” he replied. “But I can't shut her down with just those. Not from here, anyway.”

Nick grunted. “Whatever. We'll think of something else.”

Honey cleared her throat. “Nicky, I don't mean to interrupt, but your friend needs his rest. Mind taking this conversation outside?”

“Fine.”

“Oh!” said Murray. “I have some blankets and stuff in the Van, dry clothes, that kinda thing. I'll grab that for you, Sly.”
“Thanks, pal...”

Murray headed back out to the Van. Bentley followed.

They watched the sun slowly crawl over the horizon. The sunrise usually filled Murray with a sense of optimism, borne of warm memories realigning his spiritual centre in a distant desert. But this sunrise, wading its way through rust and decay, seemed cold.

“This,” articulated Murray, “is super scary.”

“Agreed,” said Bentley. “I... definitely regret splitting up. If we had stuck together, maybe this...” He rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't beat yourself up about it. It was worth a shot. How were you supposed to know Penelope had all this going on too?” He shook his head as they reached the Van. “I'm really glad we're back together. And I'm sure we'll figure this out – we always do! But...”

“Yeah,” said Bentley. “I know.”

“You. Bentley.”

They turned. Nick strode towards them, sunglasses glinting in the morning light.

“Uh, yes?” Bentley turned his wheelchair. “What is it?”

“You know about tranquillizer darts, right? I need your help with something.”

“Yes, they're something of a speciality of mine. Whatever you need, I'm sure I can arrange it.”

“Good,” said Nick.

He glanced back to the office. Judy patting Sly's paw.

“Later,” he added.

Then he strode off without a word.


“Yeah...” said Bentley. “A marked improvement.”
I Earn My Life

Chapter Summary

I think about my self a lot,
'Cause it's the only one I've got.
I've earned this life.
What have I done to earn this life?

Sly slept fitfully.

The day passed around him. The others came and went. The only constant was Honey, checking his wound and reading his charts and muttering to herself about nanomachines.

The junkyard made for a workable hideout. Neither Penelope nor the ZPD interrupted the preparation, the planning. And while Nick and Judy and Bentley and Murray set to work, Sly was left on the bed. Alone with his thoughts.

Like his friends, sleep came and went. Sly caught snatches of conversation, the speakers cycling. Judy and Murray swapping war stories and combat advice. Bentley discussing cyber-security with Honey. Nick was quiet. Sly heard him only once. He gave Murray candy recommendations.

There was only one exchange he fully remembered.

"Awwh!" Judy's voice, sweet as ever. "As a rabbit, I do not use this word lightly, but – that is adorable!"

"What?" Bentley. "What is?"

"Sly!" She didn't realize he was awake. Eyes closed but ears open. "See how he's cuddling with his cane like that? It's so cute! Like it's his favourite childhood toy..."

Bentley hadn't replied.

They seemed to avoid the clinic itself. It was central, but they tried to give him space, let him rest. He wished they didn't. When there was no conversation to follow, just Honey's inaudible mumbling, Sly was left only with himself. He avoided that whenever he could. When he was alone, he had to think. And on that bed, he thought a lot.

By the afternoon, he was thoroughly sick of thinking. He struggled into a fresh shirt – left nearby by Murray – and began to drag himself out of bed.

"Whoa, whoa." Honey strode up, concerned. "You should really be resting. You look like you can barely stand!"

"Then it's a good thing my ancestral weapon is a cane."

Sure enough, slipping the cane under his armpit helped him get steady. He stood proudly, with only a minimum of wobbling.
Honey sighed, running a paw through her mohawk. "Just – go easy on that back of yours, alright? I did what I could, but too much pressure could make the stitches reopen, and that is not something you want. Then your pals would have to rush you to a real hospital."

Sly fixed his hat in place. "I'm a little worried about the way you just said 'real'."

"We're in a junkyard, sugar. I'm honest about my medical limitations."

He did a few laps of the office, gaining speed, balance, confidence. By the time the others returned, he was sturdy enough to stand without the cane.

"Sly!" Judy's ears shot up as she entered the office. "You're out of bed so soon?"


"We?" said Bentley. "Standing up is one thing, Sly, but are you sure you want to–"

"Let him," said Nick. "We need all hands."

If Bentley had any objections, he held them down. Everyone did.

"Sly," the fox continued. "I'll run through the plan for you. Once. Pay attention."

"You got it, boss." Sly sat back on the bed, hoping the movement seemed casual. "I'll try to limit my dumb comments."

The others went quiet. The plan had been constructed in pieces, so they were all eager to hear Nick lay out a more complete version.

"Alright. We need to maximise our chances here, so for simplicity's sake, we're staying out of each other's way. We break back into our usual teams – Hopps and I go one way, you three go the other."

"Play it oldschool. The way we're used to." Sly grinned. "Plus, you're getting tired of looking at me."

Nick watched him, seeing the pain and fear that smile couldn't hide, and didn't fire back. "Tactically, our main knowledge of Penelope is that you guys tried fighting her less than a week ago, and immediately lost."

"Harsh but fair," mumbled Sly.

"So we'll be dealing with her instead. We'll travel by river to Cliffside, making use of our new outfits." He looked to Bentley. "You're sure you disabled the tracer?"

He nodded. "I've tapped the frequency and recalibrated the signal to a plausible spoof. She'll never see you coming."

"Good. Especially because you three will be making a scene." He turned back to Sly. "We've got the kidnap angle. We're gonna use it. The ZPD needs to show up at exactly the right time. Too late, and Penelope could escape. Too early, and we won't be ready. In order to control Bogo's movements–"

"We'll be playing cops and robbers," said Sly. "Well... cops and hostage-takers."

"Speaking of cops..." Murray towered over everyone else in the room, but seemed the most lost. "Are we sure we aren't gonna ask Carmelita for help?"
"We can't," said Nick. "This is delicate. Hopps and I staked our reputations when we went with Sly. Carmelita's knows we aren't being kidnapped, but she's the only one, and she's pushed her luck as it is. So no. Contacting anybody at the ZPD, including Carmelita, just runs the risk of getting everyone into worse trouble."

His sunglasses obscured his eyes, but his voice made his conviction clear.

"There's only one approach here."

Arresting fifteen perps meant filling out fifteen stacks of paperwork.

Five lionesses and ten wolves had been scooped up after the Tamatoa sank. Four of the lionesses had been treading water not far from the wreck, eager for arrest if it meant dry land. Their leader was brought in separately, waiving her right to silence multiple times to insist to the officers how intelligent she was. But not all known members of the wolf pack were recovered. Wolf O'Donnell was notably absent.

So was Cooper. So were Wilde and Hopps. And then, so was Bogo's last shred of patience.

Leaving alone would have almost been permissible if Carmelita hadn't returned alone too. But she had. Bogo had yelled at her, right there in the lobby, and Carmelita was tired and angry and important enough to actually yell back.

He blamed her for everything, up to and including the ship sunk outside city limits, and said if she was really the world's best chance of catching Cooper it was obvious why he was still at large. She postulated Nick and Judy would turn up halfway across the world, completely unharmed, having seized the chance to escape such a terrible and soulless boss. And all the while, his officers watched on, with the silence of a broken family.

He had finally told her to get out, and upon her helpful reminder that some local cop couldn't kick an Interpol agent off her own case, he had patiently explained that Precinct One was withdrawing its support for clerical reasons and that she should report at her convenience to Precinct Two, but not to hold her breath because Deputy Chief Wuntch was, in fact, a witch.

Carmelita had kicked open the door so hard it vibrated.

Bogo had ordered Fangmeyer to report to the bullpen – only to be looked in the eye and calmly, firmly, reminded that protocol was clear that a liaison to an external law enforcement agent represented the entire ZPD, not one precinct. Without another word, Fangmeyer had turned and followed Carmelita.

Wolford had stood there for a second and then nodded and followed Fangmeyer.

Like that, Bogo had lost three more good cops. Losing two had been hard enough.

He sat in his office, thumbing through the arrest reports. The anger was gone again. He missed it. Bogo was angry too often, and it tired him, but it always reminded him he was alive.

Now...

His door was open – hadn't closed properly when he slammed it – and Clawhauser nervously peered through the crack. "Um... Chief?"

Bogo voice was just dust. "What?"
"We, um – that is, well, the whole precinct, everybody who's working this case, which is kinda *everybody* everybody..."

Clawhauser crept inside like he was dealing with a sleeping dragon.

"We... don't know what to do now?"

It lilted up at the end, a question. One Bogo couldn't answer. He met Clawhauser's gaze without replying.

"It's just," said the cheetah, "Inspector Fox was kind of our main – like – she, uh, was sorta lead investigator on this? And all the legwork we've done, looking up family and associates and stuff, hasn't really led anywhere, so...?"

There was a terrible silence as another question went unanswered.

"Chief," said Clawhauser. "Please. We need something to go on, here."

Bogo took a breath. It was time. Years as the unstoppable Chief Bogo, hard as stone and half as flexible, a fixed point for everyone in this building. And the day had finally come. He had to look Clawhauser in the eye and say the words, 'I don't kn-

His phone rang.

One of Gazelle's more obscure and artistic singles filled the air, and Bogo hurried to answer before Clawhauser got weird about it. "Yes? What?"

"Ah," said a voice he had only heard once. "Chief Bogo."

"Cooper." Bogo's grip tightened on the phone. He locked eyes with Clawhauser, who stared for a second, then bolted from the room.

Bogo watched him leave, knowing he had to keep Cooper talking.

"What are you doing?!"

"That's a good question, big guy." He spoke leisurely, drawing out each sentence. "One I've asked myself a lot recently. The truth is, I had fun playing with Nick and Judy – a good time was had by all – but now I'm bored. And I'm ready to give them back. Just like I said."

Bogo found himself choosing his next words carefully. The obvious priority was to ensure his officer's safety. But the thought Hopps and Wilde were colluding with their own abduction still wouldn't leave him. If they didn't need saving, begging for mercy was a mistake.

But some risks were worth taking.

"All we want," he said slowly, "is our officers' safe return. That's all."

"Then we're on the same page! I want to do this with a bit of class. More challenging. Any idiot can dump two bodies in the river – I'm trying to land a trick shot here, you know what I'm saying?"


"Jeez, big guy, you're being awful demanding." Cooper's tone turned to ice. "Maybe I'll just give you proof of life for one, and for the other, you have to guess."
A second later, he laughed.

"Nah, just kidding. I've got them both! Hang on..."

The audio quality shifted as Cooper switched to speakerphone. For a moment, Bogo listened out for environmental data – a breeze, running water? – before another voice cut in. "Chief! Chief, it's Judy."

"I'm here too," came Wilde's voice.

"See?" said Cooper before Bogo could reply. "The full set."

"And how do I know those aren't recordings?" snapped Bogo.

"Oh! You're..." Cooper's voice faltered. "...smart. That's really smart. Some people wouldn't think of that." He recovered. "Tell you what. Chief, you and I – and I know how cliché this sounds, but let me have this – we're going to play a game. Games are kind of my thing. Especially ones where I take something valuable. This time around, I have the valuable thing, or rather things, or rather people, and you're the one who has to take them back. Fun change of pace. And because you've already proven to be a smart player, we're starting now. First round is: you get to ask Nick and Judy exactly one question each. Sound good?"

Clawhauser returned, out of breath, clutching a small device and a bundle of wires. McHorn and Higgins had been caught in his wake, and they hung by the door, silent.

"Fine," huffed Bogo, helping Clawhauser connect the tracking device to his phone. "Hopps first."

"Here's Hopps!"

The tracer wouldn't take long – with two questions, and Cooper's obvious love of his own voice, time was the one factor not weighing on Bogo. He didn't overthink it. "Hopps. Are you unhurt?"

"We're physically fine," she said, and Bogo noted the worrying specificity of that phrase, "but we really want to come home."

No hesitation. "You will."

"Thank you, sir! We–"

"That's," said Cooper firmly, "your first question down. What'll be for Wilde?"

Here, Bogo paused.

Clawhauser hadn't reported a location yet, but that was only part of it. Cooper had a game planned. The questions wouldn't have been offered if there was any chance of disrupting that. Asking something direct like 'Where are you?' or 'What is he planning?' would be pointless.

And Cooper wanted Bogo to play. He wanted Wilde and Hopps returned to the ZPD. If he was going to dispose of them, there was no need for this ceremony. And so Bogo's mind returned, as it had kept doing for days, to that one awful possibility:

This wasn't Cooper's plan. It was Wilde's.

He chose his question. "Wilde... what do you recommend?"

Wilde sounded uncertain. "Sir?"
"He can't clarify, Slick, that'd be cheating," said Cooper, jumping in with an impressive certainty considering he was definitely making these rules up as he went. "You heard him. What do you recommend?"

Wilde paused. "...Play along, sir. We just want to get home. Please."

"I see."

Bogo glanced to Clawhauser. Nothing. The cheetah was nervously biting his lip, watching the tracking device spew out nothing but junk data.

"Well, question time's over." Cooper's voice became clearer as he reclaimed the phone. "That was fun. Almost as fun as picturing you trying and failing to trace my location..."

Bogo felt his teeth grinding. "You can't hide."

"I really can, pal. It's one of my many skills. But sometimes I want to be found. Now listen; I'm not saying I'm run of the mill, but sometimes first impressions are worth revisiting."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?"

Cooper laughed. "What, do I need to do everything for you? It's a hint. You're a cop." The mirth left his voice. "Figure it out."

The line went dead.

"Well," said Sly, hanging up. "That was fun." He calmly dropped the phone into the river.

This bridge had been specifically chosen by Nick – just like everything else in the plan – as the perfect spot for the teams to diverge. The Van idled nearby, Bentley monitoring ZPD frequencies from inside. Before the call had ended, Nick had stalked off to help Murray set up their trusty craft, a plastic canoe salvaged from Honey's junkyard. ("Shoulda been recycled anyhow," she had noted.)

It was Sly's last chance to talk to Judy.

"So," he said, trying to ignore how odd she looked in her new cloak. "I guess we part ways here." He took in the river, sprawling blue snaking through soft green. "Cliffside's back that way?"

"Yeah," said Judy. "Penelope was onto something. Travelling by water is probably the safest option."

"Shame we lost that speedboat, huh?"

"We'll be fine. It'll take a while, but we'll get there." She smirked. "The trick is to get off before the waterfall."

"I'll bet." He returned it for a moment, then grew serious. "Hey. I, uh – I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

She blinked, tilting her head.

"I tried my best to help you these past few days," he said, "and it wasn't always enough. You're on the run, and you nearly died a lot, and I couldn't save you from Wolf. And I've been making dumb jokes this whole time and – I mean, none of this would've happened in the first place if it weren't for me."
"What are you saying? It's not your fault Penelope targeted Nick."

"Maybe it isn't," said Sly in a tone that indicated maybe it was, "but if I had stopped her before I came here... if I had stopped her when she first--"

He shook his head violently, clearing his mind.

"Whatever. Let's not waste time with hypotheticals. The here-and-now is: I'm sorry, and this sucks, but you're Judy Hopps so I know you'll do great. You'll be back at the ZPD in no time, and that's a promise."

"Thanks, Sly." She smiled up at him. "For everything."

He smiled back. Then, with typical grace, he swooped down to give her a hug.

"Well! This is nice." She returned the embrace, holding him tight. "Didn't know you were the hugging type."

"I am with my friends." He pulled back, squeezing her shoulder. "Stay safe, Judy. The world's a better place with you in it. Believe me."

"You too," she murmured. "And don't worry. You can come back soon to have a proper vacation!"

"Yeah," said Sly. He wasn't meeting her gaze any more. "Sure."

He stood as Nick approached, wearing a larger version of the same cloak Judy wore. The fox was impassive, sunglasses cold and black.

"I think the right goodbye present here," said Sly, "is to not hug you."

"You'd be right."

"Cool. Gotcha. Glad we have that down."

With a final nod, Sly began walking towards the Van.

"Sly," called Nick. Sly turned immediately, ears perked. Nick suppressed a sigh. "...Thank you. For all your help."

Sly smiled. "Hey, what can I say? ...You're welcome, Nick. Happy to do it."

After a moment, he went to the Van. They watched it drive off, a home on four thick wheels.

"Hoods up, Hopps." Nick covered his head. "Time to go."

She followed suit. And then they were gone.

---

"I love our ship."

"When it's this small, Gary, I think it's just a boat. ...But yeah. I like it too."

Gary and Larry were lounging in their lifeboat. They had spent the morning debating whether it qualified as theft if a) they were forced onto the boat by another party, and b) the ship the boat had been attached to had subsequently exploded. Their eventual consensus was that probably didn't qualify as 'theirs' but at this point they were just going to keep it.
With no word from O'Donnell, they had taken the day off. After a tour of Zootopia's sprawling waterways, they had laid anchor in a quiet stretch of the Meadowlands. They lay side by side, lounging in the afternoon sun. Clouds were rolling in.

"And I love you," said Gary, almost idly.

"I love you too," said Larry, pulling him a little closer. "And I love being out here with you. We spend so much time in packs or in crowds or just in the city, surrounded by other mammals. It's great to just go somewhere quiet, where there's..." He froze. "There's..."

Gary tilted his head. "There's what?"

"There's...!"

A canoe paddled past them, an oar slicing through the placid water.

There was no-one aboard.

At least, that's how it looked. The boat was clearly sailing, rather than drifting aimlessly down the river. But with no guidance.

The ghostly vessel passed them by, a dark omen in cheap plastic, leaving the two wolves in silence. The silence only grew as the boat grew steadily more distant, until it disappeared around a bend and the lovers were left only with wordless awe and each other.

"What," said Larry eventually, "was that?"

"Huh!"

"Was – was it empty? It looked empty."

Gary sniffed the air, concentrating. His dark eyebrows shot up. "Uh–"

"What is it?"

"I think... I think I smell Nick and Judy."

Larry closed his eyes and focused. His nose wasn't quite as sharp as Gary's, but...

"I smell it too. I wouldn't be certain, except we've been around them so often lately. It's them."

Gary turned to him, brown eyes wide with fear. "Did – did they die?" he breathed. "Did the explosion kill them and now they haunt a tiny boat forever?"

Larry chose his next words carefully. "...If they were ghosts, how would we smell them?"

"Ah, great point. Must just be an invisibility cloak, a little bit of magnetic polymer to refract the light." He laughed. "Man, I was spooked for a second there, though! Heck."

Larry frowned. "What should we do? I don't think we're getting paid to chase them any more."

"But we were fighting them just yesterday. Feels weird to switch gears so suddenly."

For a moment, they were quiet. Then, suddenly, Larry chuckled.

"What?" said Gary. "What's funny?"
"Sorry. It's just..." Larry pulled him closer, his eyes warm. "I just remembered what you said back when all this started. That you didn't want revenge on Nick and Judy. That spending time with me was enough."

"Oh." Gary smiled shyly. "Yeah, I did."

"I think you were onto something."

Larry kissed his forehead, and they both lay back comfortably.

"They're doing... something. I say we just lie here and let them do it."

"You're so smart, Larry." Gary pulled in close against him, eyes shut restfully.

"Not always. Sometimes better ideas come from my great boyfriend."

"Awh!"

Bogo figured it out.

The first clue – Cooper's awkward sentence featuring the words 'mill' and 'first impressions' – pointed to Miller Avenue, the spot he had first appeared during the Nope Diamond case. Most likely, his 'game' would follow some suitably dramatic route before culminating at the Museum of Natural History, where that incident had reached its climax. It did not take the entire ZPD to work that out.

Bogo brought the entire ZPD anyway.

Several squads were dispatched to Miller Avenue, and while some officers would search for anything left by Cooper, most were locking down the area. More squads had been dispatched to Lombax Labs, the 'Red Like Roses' bar, even the ruins of Scar Kifalme's home. Any location associated with the case was buried under as many officers local precincts could provide.

But none more than the museum. Right across from Precinct One's headquarters, it was swarming with ZPD presence. The entire plaza had been cleared of civilians, many lingering as close as possible to watch the spectacle. No less than three police helicopters swept the nearby skies, watching the rooftops. And Chief Bogo himself was climbing the steps.

"Chief, are you super sure this is the right play?" Clawhauser fought to keep up with Bogo's angry strides. "I mean, we are so close to HQ! All we had to do was cross the street! Do you think he'd really be brazen enough to...?"

Bogo's only reply was a glare.

"Yeahokayit'sSlyCooperhe'dbebrazenenough."

Bogo left Clawhauser at the front door, thundering into the lobby. Wilde had said to play along. To accept Cooper's game. But Bogo had calculated the risks. If Wilde was lying, if this was all some sprawling con, then his advice was poison. And if he was innocent... well, he had a history of underestimating his own worth. He probably thought Cooper was his only option. But the entire force was united.

They were finding Hopps and Wilde. One way or the other.

Higgins saw him approach, awkwardly falling into step with the chief.
"Where the hell is Okonkwo?" snapped Bogo.

"I got him on the phone, sir. Says he and his sister left town. Visiting home."

Bogo grunted. "Is he coming back?"

"He's too far out, sir, he'd never make it in time. But he says he has 'utmost confidence' in his acting Security Chief. Exact words, sir. 'Utmost confidence'."

"And who—?"

There was a very deep clearing of a throat.

Bogo looked around, failing to see the Security Chief. Embarrassed, Higgins gestured low to the ground. Bogo finally looked down.

A tiny fennec fox looked back at him. A sharp black uniform, hands on his hips, sunglasses glinting in the dying afternoon sunlight.

"So," said Finnick. "What the hell you doing in my museum?"
The plan was good. The plan was solid, intricate but not complicated, challenging but well within their abilities. And it had already failed.

Bentley and Murray had created a treasure hunt for Bogo, bouncing the ZPD's attention around the city before finally leading them toward Cliffside. Bogo had simply refused to play. He had locked down half their planned locations, and concentrated the ZPD at the spot he assumed the game would end. Worst of all, he had assumed correctly.

"This is bad. This is really, really bad!" Bentley gripped the edges of his laptop tightly, watching footage of the ZPD's stranglehold on the museum. "I needed them out of the building! I don't have enough time to establish control over the security systems – after last year, Okonkwo's beefed up his software even more!"

"Relax, buddy, relax."

Sly sat nearby. He was still woozy, but he always felt better in the comfort of the Van. Murray had found them a nice dark alleyway to park in. As it stood, they couldn't even get close to the museum.

"Nick said his friend would buy us time." Finnick wasn't in on the plan; Nick just trusted his lifelong antagonism with law enforcement would be a healthy, natural source of inefficiency and friction. "Maybe there's still a way into the museum."

"There isn't. There just isn't. The ZPD are out in terrifying numbers, and they have the equipment to match." Bentley sighed tersely. "Sly. I hate to say I told you so--"

"Do you?"

"--but remember when we cleaned out Scar's funds? And you suggested we give some to the ZPD? And I warned you that it would just make things hard on us?"

"...Yes?"

"I told you so!"

"Guys," said Murray, turning around in the driver's seat. "We made a promise to Nick and Judy. Can we stop yelling and just – just think of something?"

Bentley went to reply, but decided against it, turning back to his laptop. Sly's eyes lingered on Murray. "Hey, you alright?"
"Y-yeah! Course!" He shifted uncomfortably. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're looking a little pale, is all." Sly smirked. "You didn't even lose any blood."

"That's–!"

Murray cut himself off, eyes low.

"Nevermind. It's not a real problem, like Bentley's."

"Come on, big guy." Sly's voice was soft. "If something's bothering you, we want to hear it."

"He's right, Murray." Bentley glanced up. "Your concerns are valid too."

"Thanks..." He rubbed his neck nervously. "It's just... you know The Murray has always wanted to fight an entire city's worth of cops at once. It's like, bucket list stuff."

"The trick is going one at a time," said Sly.

"Yeah. But..." Murray sighed. "It's been a weird week. We lost to Penelope, and then we were all alone, and we only came back together because, hey, turns out! We never stopped losing to Penelope! You got hurt really bad, Sly, and joking about it doesn't make me feel better. I'm just not..."

He trailed off. "Your heart isn't in it?" offered Sly.

"Exactly. And – and I know that sounds dumb! But it's getting harder and harder to get my anger flowing. I could fight a couple dozen cops for Nick and Judy, sure. But that many?" He was quiet. "I'm worried I might let them down."

For a moment, no-one spoke. The only sound in the Van was the faint sound of police footage from Bentley's laptop.

"Look, I said it was dumb!" said Murray suddenly. "We made a promise, so–"

"No."

Sly stood, mostly as a demonstration he still could.

"You're right. We did make a promise. But we didn't promise to stick to this specific plan. Come on, guys – we're the Cooper Gang! When the plan goes sideways, we throw together a new one." He smiled. "If you don't want to fight, Murray, then don't fight. How's your driving? Still up for that?"

"Uh – yeah! Sure!"

Sly nodded. "Bentley, is there anywhere on our treasure hunt Bogo hasn't completely painted blue?"

"Uh..." Bentley pulled up the hasty emails Bogo had fired out across the city. "A-ha. Police presence in the Rainforest District has been bolstered, but not specifically. Your fight with Tai Lung did cover the whole district – I suppose he's just covering the bases."

Sly's eyes were sharp, his mind taking stock of what was and was not an option. Bentley was the tactician, the mastermind. But Sly was the expert at thinking on his feet. And he could still stand.

"...Have we eyes on Carmelita?"
"Man," observed Wolford aptly, "this sucks."

Relocating to Precinct Two had turned out to be mostly symbolic. All the central precincts had been mobilised for the Cooper operation. The museum was buzzing with as much police presence as it could physically fit, but Precinct Two had been drafted to man the perimeter.

The third perimeter.

Three streets out.

Fangmeyer's claws drummed against the steering wheel. Carmelita sat in the passenger's seat, one leg twitching. And Wolford was hunched in the back, despondently chewing on a doughnut.

"So we're just gonna sit here? Three blocks away?" Wolford shifted on the seat. "Even if he does show up, what can we do? We'd just be one squad car in a fleet of squad cars. We wouldn't even be near the front."

A ghost of a smile grew on Fangmeyer's face. "I could get you near the front. If you got on my–"

"No. I take it back. Squad car is good."

Carmelita sighed. Her usual impulse would be to remind her officers of the direct order from their superior. But Deputy Wuntch wasn't their superior, and hadn't given them a direct order. There was imperious gleam in the goat's eyes when she had suggested they join the perimeter, if Carmelita's three-mammal taskforce had 'nothing better to do'.

They didn't.

There were no leads, no trace of Sly or Nick or Judy, and Carmelita felt it like a personal failure. Time was running out on every front. Every second of silence brought her closer to the terrible thought they this time, it had been too much. They had taken a gamble and lost. Out there, alone. Where she couldn't protect them.

She had to find them. All of them. She owed them that much. And they weren't the only ones.

"Fangmeyer?"

"Yeah?"

"Why did you follow me? You stuck up for me, even though I didn't tell you about the Tamatoa. You didn't need to do that." Carmelita sighed. "And I hope you haven't damaged your relationship with the Chief."

"The Chief," said Fangmeyer, "has had anger management issues since day one."

The tiger's tone was level but subdued. Eyes resolutely forward.

"I was there, y'know. Judy's first weeks on the force."


"Yeah. Specifically the missing mammals." Fangmeyer exhaled slowly. "Judy worked so hard. Maybe too hard. Maybe it didn't come from a healthy place. But Bogo was determined to see her fail. She ever tell you about the 'deal'?"

"Passingly, once or twice."
Fangmeyer scowled. "It was cruel, Inspector. No other word for it. And Bogo didn't even honour it! Tried to end it ten hours early as soon as Hopps slipped up." The tiger's glare faded, gaze growing distant. "I was there when Nick stood up for her. Looked the Chief straight in the eye and said 'None of you were gonna help her, were you?'' That still kinda haunts me. Because he was right. We're cops, Inspector. Our nine-to-five is dictating how people should act, but we had just sat back and..."

Fangmeyer coughed, as though embarrassed.

"Anyway. Chief's not always right, is all I'm saying."

"It's hard, though," noted Wolford through a mouthful of doughnut. "To stand up to everybody else. You get complacent when it's, what's the word... cultural? Everyone went along with it because no-one spoke up, and vice versa. That's why I like Hopps and Wilde. They're fresh. They still shake things up."

"Yeah. I hope they're okay." Fangmeyer sighed, but tried to give Carmelita a smile. "You're a good cop, Inspector. And maybe you can actually find Nick and Judy. We wasted all this time investigating by the book, when we all knew it wouldn't work."

"Interviewing Wilde's mom was so depressing," murmured Wolford.

There was a moment of silence.

Carmelita was searching for some rallying platitude – cursing herself for always being so cold – when her phone rang.

She it took out, glaring uncertainly. Withheld number.

"Who is it?" said Fangmeyer.

Carmelita's only reply was to deepen her frown. She answered. "Inspector Fox," she said warily. "How did you get this number?"

"Hi."

For a second, Carmelita forgot her own name.

Then she was out of the car, ignoring the looks Fangmeyer and Wolford gave her. She darted for a nearby alley, seeking any shred of privacy. "What," she hissed, "are you doing?"

"That's... a good question," sighed Sly. "I guess I'm calling you, like I said I would. I'm so sorry it took me this long. I shouldn't have..." He trailed off. "Yeah. Sorry."

Carmelita's brain was at full speed. She should tell her liaisons, tell the ZPD, tell Bogo. Trace the number, assuming that would even work, it wouldn't, Sly was still talking–

"Listen. I want to apologise."

"Now's not the time!" She listened intently for any background noise, some clue for his location. "Tell me where you are!"

"Yeah, that's fair." He sounded forlorn. "You're always so focused on the job. Just a couple steps behind me. Just once, I wish we were at the same place."

Carmelita caught something in his tone. "What?"
"I never meant to drag you through the mud," he continued. "But when I think about you, I just feel... paralysed."

"Paralysed?" she echoed slowly.

"Yeah. I'm glad you get it." A pause. "I'm sorry I can't talk longer, 'Lita. But... I hope I see you soon."

The line went dead, and Carmelita was alone with her thoughts. Her mind arranged and analysed the data.

*Steps behind. Mud. Paralysed.*

She left the alleyway, glancing around. A vehicle. She needed a vehicle, and a weapon. She wasn't an official part of the perimeter, she was free to leave. To solve this. Bogo wouldn't like it, but Bogo already hated her, so–

Carmelita caught herself. Bogo disliked her, but she would be foolish for assuming everyone did.

She wasn't alone.

Carmelita returned to the squad car. Fangmeyer and Wolford watched her intently, the question unspoken but clear on their faces.

"Kids." Carmelita found herself grinning. "Remember how, last time, I didn't let you in on my little field trip?"

"Oh no," said Wolford.

"Oh yes," said Fangmeyer.

A few steps behind on their Nope Diamond-themed treasure hunt stood an old sports field, thick with mud, where Tai Lung had paralysed Sly. Where Carmelita had saved his life. Where the Cooper Gang now waited for the chase to begin.

The rain pattered against the Van's roof. It would have been soothing in other circumstances. But the Gang was on the job, and their conversation had darkened.

"I don't quite follow," said Bentley. "You're really blaming yourself for everything?"

"Hard as it is to believe... yes." Sly's smile was humourless. "I'm taking responsibility for what went wrong."

"But... okay." Bentley looked up from his laptop. "I can see the logic for Nick and Judy. It was your idea to approach them, ergo, it's because of you that they are, however vaguely, our associates, ergo, one of our enemies attacking them does lead back to you."

"Yes."

"But Penelope is my nemesis. My burden. I can't see how anything she did is your fault."

"It all comes back to me. You two met because we needed her for my mission," he said, copying Bentley's emphasis. "And according to her, I'm the reason she turned on us too."

"Yes," deadpanned Bentley. "She did blame you. Using Crazy Person logic we, to this day, do not
follow. At a certain point, you can't blame yourself. She was looking for an excuse."

"You guys are both wrong!" said Murray. "She's not Sly's problem. She's not Bentley's problem. She's our problem. We're a team! If someone hurts one of us, we all need to step up!"

Sly nodded. "Murray's absolutely right."

"Thank you!"

"And I think the person most harmful to this team is me."

For a moment, the silence was louder than the rain. Murray stared. Bentley frowned. Neither replied, so Sly continued.

"We've always been a gang. I love that about us. But ever since we were little kids, I've been the centre of attention. And you guys seem okay with that, and I'm definitely okay with that, because it's the most fun. But it can't be a constant party. I need to fix this."

"You've already done your part," said Bentley. "You're assuming you can solve this entire thing by yourself."

"I can. And if I can, shouldn't I?"

Sly turned to Murray.

"Nick and Judy are great, right?"

"Totally!"

"And they didn't deserve what Penelope did to them."

"Totally."

"So, because Penelope's our problem – your words – it's on us to do everything we can for them."

Murray made a little noise with his mouth.

"Murray. Where's my last 'totally'?"

He cringed. "I'm sorry! I don't want to sound mean – that's Bentley's job. Uh, no offence."

"No, that's accurate," he said.

"But..." Murray frowned. "I get what you're saying? But my job is keeping you two safe. And a lot of the time that extends to other people, like Carmelita – or Nick and Judy, sure! But we're in a really tight spot, and Penelope's already beaten us once..." He sighed. "It sucks to say this. But if we get a clear shot to leave, we better take it."

"I agree," said Bentley. "Not to sound callous, but it's the logical choice."

"I wish I could be angrier at you guys," murmured Sly. "But I can't. Everything you're saying makes sense..."

"Let's try to frame this optimistically," said Bentley. "The current plan is very impressive! It protects the three of us, and that's our main concern." He waved a hand. "And if it doesn't work for Wilde and Hopps, we'll still be safe! We could form a new plan from a secure location. It couldn't be that
hard to break them out of prison.”

Sly's face darkened. "That's not the kind of help they want. They aren't criminals. We've only got one shot to clear their names – it's this, or nothing."

"You're starting to sound like Carmelita, y'know."

"I don't think that's an insult."

Bentley grunted. "Maybe not."

The Van was silent for a few moments. Sly glaring at nothing. Murray awkwardly quiet. Bentley lost in thought.

"I'm sorry, Sly," he said eventually. "We did what we could."

"Yeah."

"That said, I have to admit... I admire your conviction." He smiled. "I think Carmelita would be proud of you."

"Heh." Sly returned it. "I hope so."

They trailed off again, the brothers alone except for the sound of rain. And then Bentley's laptop began to shriek.

"Ah, speak of the... Motion alarm. She's here."

He angled his laptop so they could both see the screen. A nearby traffic camera displayed a single squad car, sirens off, heading directly for the field.

"Okay," said Sly. "Remember, the goal is to buy time. I'll see if I can get her talking, but Murray, be ready to book it."

"Gotcha! The Murray stands ready to literally drive circles around the ZPD."

"That's the spirit. And you can navigate, right, Bentley?"

"I've got the traffic cameras, local maps, 'encrypted' ZPD channels... We should be fine."

"Thanks, guys. I can always count on you."

He let his smile linger for a moment, but he could already hear Carmelita's car approaching.

"Well. I don't know what exactly I'm gonna say here, but... I better go say it."

He left the Van, stepping out into the rain, and walked to the middle of the small, disused road. He moved slowly, hoping a calm body would help calm his mind. Playing the villain, baiting the ZPD, buying time for Nick and Judy – that made him nervous, sure, but those were the kind of professional jitters he was used to.

Alone. With Carmelita.

Or so he thought. As the cruiser rolled to a stop in front of him, he made out a figure in the passenger's seat. Wolford. Glaring at him with cold disdain.
Carmelita stepped out, but no further. "Cooper."

"Inspector Fox." Sly managed a grin. "Y'know, I spoke in super-secret backwards talk for a reason. I was sort of expecting you to come alone."

"You didn't," she said. "Why should I?"

"That's... fair enough, actually." He shifted his weight, hoping she didn't notice the movement was stiff. His back was far from healed. "So--"

"Sly," said Carmelita. "I'm here to bring Nick and Judy home. The ZPD won't play any games, and neither will I. I'll give you one chance to tell me where they are."

"I'm sorry, Carmelita. But that's not the plan."

"I don't care what your plan is," she snarled. Her hand curled into a fist – but then faltered. She met his gaze, voice carrying through the rain. Eyes tired. "Just end this. Please."

Sly felt a stab of ice in his chest. Carmelita's anger he could deal with, but not this. There were no one-liners, no dramatic proclamations he could use. For a second, his mind went blank except for his own voice mumbling.

There was one thing I wasn't supposed to do but it's kind of my whole thing so I did it without telling her and turns out it was the not telling her that really did it? Maybe we could've actually done it together. But she hates me now--

Sly caught himself. He had promised to trust Nick's judgement, and that's what he intended to do. No matter how much it felt like the same mistake. No matter how much it hurt.

"I'm sorry," he said, and meant it. "But I can't. Not yet."

Before he could hear Carmelita's reply, he bailed. He turned back to the Van and ran for it, hearing her shout, hearing her car door slam. He leapt for the passenger's seat, his back aching. He tried to focus on that pain. It was preferable.

"Alright, punch it!" he yelled, and Murray punched it. The tyres threw up mud as the Van shot away, Carmelita's cruiser close behind.

"You okay, buddy?"

"Just drive!"

"Relax!" Murray sped through a turn with usual speed. "I'm used to Carmelita by n-"

The roof almost caved in.

Something had hit them, slamming from above, the metal denting. A second later, it landed alongside. It was a motorcycle, sleek and black, roaring down the road at a pace that made Carmelita seem reserved. The tiger driver stared through Sly's window, helmet on, visor down.

Murray slammed the accelerator. The cat matched it. He swerved away. The cat followed. With an intake of breath and a noticeable wince, he sped back suddenly in a ramming motion. The tiger smoothly hit the brakes, and a second later was tailing the Van from the other side.

"They're on my right!" Murray swerved. "They're on my left!"
"There's more than one?!

"Singular 'they' Sly get with the times!"

"Just keep driving!" said Bentley. "We'll – we'll think of something."

Sly turned to him. "Jam their communications or something!"

"I'm trying! I can't... They...!"

Sly moved past him, looking out the Van's rear windows. Carmelita's cold determination was a familiar sight. But the officer beside her was holding something that only vaguely jogged Sly's memory.

He placed it. Wolford had been fiddling with it back at the prison.

An old radio.

"Bentley," said Sly quietly. "What would happen if the ZPD switched to earlier models of their radios?"

"Um – going back far enough, they'd be–" Bentley started. "They'd be disconnected from any digital interference! Th-the older ones, they're clunky, but unhackable!"

"Then I've got bad news about Carmelita's new friends."

"Oh – oh, that explains it." Bentley wiped his brow with one hand, shaky fingers still typing. "They've taken their communications off the grid. I can't slow them down, and they're matching our mov– left, Murray, hard left now!"

The entire Van lurched, but Murray stayed on the road. Yet another cruiser sprang from the foliage. The perfect spot for an ambush if they hadn't turned. Instead, it joined behind Carmelita, another screaming siren.

It wasn't the only one. A full force was building. Carmelita wasn't alone.

Sly gripped the back door's handle for balance. "I don't mean to nag, guys, but I thought you said you could outmanoeuvre them."

"I thought we could!" said Bentley. "They're showing unprecedented co-ordination!"

Murray didn't answer, too focused on the tiger staring in at him.

"Stay calm!" said Sly. "Bentley, can you at least hear what they're saying?"

"On it!"

A voice suddenly crackled through the laptop, coherent despite a smattering of static.

"All units, be advised Cooper is heading north along Tujunga. Copters are five minutes out. Maintain the pursuit. Ensure every vehicle has at least one analogue radio tuned to this frequency, as per Officer Wolford's suggestion. Over."

Sly almost didn't recognize the voice. There was no uncertainty, no fear. No indication of the frightened young officer he had intimidated in that garage.
Benjamin Clawhauser was in his element.

Sly grip on the handle tightened. "This'll work..." he muttered. "This has to work..."

The Rainforest District stretched under them – they were speeding down one of the highest roads, trees and homes and vehicles beneath them. And sirens. So many splashes of red and blue, a tide slowly converging towards them. The air buzzed with the roar of engines.

Murray kept driving and Bentley kept searching, his eyes tearing through maps and information.

"Go right!" They swerved, and Bentley looked up. "Yes, there!"

Ahead of them, the climate wall. The service tunnels. Just at the end of the street.

"Get to the tunnels!" Bentley cycled through labyrinthine maps on his laptop. "It's our only chance to escape!"

Murray glanced to Fangmeyer, just behind them. Staring in. "I can't shake this cat!" he said. "It won't work if we're followed!"

Sly shook his head. "We underestimated them. They're too angry, too numerous, too well-equipped. We didn't buy enough time."

He slowed himself down. His next words were spring-loaded, ready for hours. Ever since his long stretch alone on that clinic bed. But he waited, he considered them, and he made absolutely sure they made sense.

"We can save Nick and Judy if someone stays behind."

"No!" said Murray immediately. "We're not breaking up! Not again!"

"Agreed." Bentley's eyes didn't leave his screen, but he was firm. "We're a team. And whatever happens next, we're facing it as a team."

"You guys..." Sly's voice was soft. "You're really serious, aren't you?

"Of course!"

He sighed. He was still smiling, but for once, he seemed tired. Very tired. "In that case," he said, "please forgive me for being selfish one last time."

Sly flung the door open and leapt out.

Fangmeyer managed to dodge the door, only to come face-to-entire-body with a woozy raccoon. Sly wrapped himself around the tiger's broad shoulders, completely blocking visibility – and deployed his paraglider.

The effect was immediate. The motorcycle spun, its driver blinded and its momentum ruined. It fell behind, and the Van sped ahead. Sly's eyes managed to catch Murray's, wide and fearful and heartbroken in the rear-view mirror.

*Man. How'd Judy make this look so easy?*

Then the Van disappeared into the tunnel. The motorcycle kept spinning, too fast for the brakes Fangmeyer was desperately slamming. It spun into Carmelita's path and she hit her own brakes, losing her window to follow Murray.
It kept spinning until it spun off the road. And Sly was thrown.

His paraglider disintegrated, torn apart by the torque and the pounding rain. For Fangmeyer, the damage was already done. The motorcycle hit a tree and its driver came with it, eliciting a spray of leaves and a low yell of pain.

But Sly kept going. There was a fence, solid mahogany to seal off the terrifying drop, and he sailed right over it. Time seemed slower as the district unfurled beneath him, his teeth bared in a rictus grin.

_Don’t be sad. You always knew this day would come._

_Just be glad no-one's going down with you._

He fell.
He landed on something soft.

Sly looked down. Not for the first time, he'd hit the envelope of one of the red blimps that floated through the district like lazy clouds. His back injury had subsided to a low growl. So far, so non-fatal.

He looked up to the tiger he had semi-intentionally sent careening into a tree. With a hiss of pain, Fangmeyer pulled off the helmet, revealing sweat and a grimace.

"Hey!" called Sly. The blimp hadn't stopped, and he was gently floating away. "I'm sorry, pal, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. A little scuffed, but–"

Fangmeyer's brain caught up, green eyes sharpening.

"Hey! What do you care, dirtbag?!"

Sly winced. "I just..."

He heard something behind him. The sound of boots on the blimp's soft envelope. He turned, catching sight of the vine swinging back as Inspector Carmelita Montoya Fox released it.

"Sly."

"...Carmelita."

Wolford ran to Fangmeyer, helping his partner stand. "Sasha! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Maxie. Don't worry."

"Good," called Carmelita. "Alert the pilot of this blimp. Make it land."

"That's an automated model, Inspector," replied Wolford. "There's no-one aboard. We'll need to contact the company."

"Then do it!"

She was loud, her officers growing steadily distant. One tree later, they were out of sight.

Carmelita fixed her glare on Sly. Two fiery coals in the rain. "Where are the others?"
"They're gone, Carmelita." He tried to keep his voice level. "Escaping in the Van, like they always do. So don't eve--"

"I don't care," she snarled, "about Bentley and Murray."

Sly realized he was no longer looking at Carmelita. Carmelita, the woman he had shared laughter and long evenings and a bed with, was gone. Back at the headquarters, maybe. Or on a lifeboat out at sea.

The woman staring him down was indisputably Inspector Fox. And she was furious.

"You're here," she spat, "so they'll come back. And I'll deal with them when they do. I am asking you for the location of the others. Nick Wilde. Judy Hopps. Tell me their location, now."

"I... I will."

Sly glanced to his Binocucom, pulling from his pouch just far enough to read the time display.

"...but not now."

"Not now." So low and deadly there was no question mark.

"No. Not now. You know me, Carmelita. Always a slave to the schedule. I promise I'll tell you – I told you I'd get them home! Just not yet."

The silence dragged for a moment. Just them, alone in the forest sky, nothing between them but rain.

Carmelita's voice was iron.

"You know something? I'm done."

She took one step forward and he, on cue, took one back.

"I'm done being your girlfriend one minute and your parole officer the next. Whatever's more convenient for you. I can't be both, Sly. Not any more."

Sly stayed silent. Not to buy time.

"And I'm done being used as one more cog in Bentley's plans. I saved your life yesterday," she hissed, "and now, you won't even tell me where my friends are. Because of some 'schedule'. Because the people around you are pawns to be played."

His ears were low, his tail flat against the blimp. "It's not Bentley's plan," he mumbled, almost too low to hear.

"I don't care whose idea it was. You signed off on it. You decided to leave me in the dark, after everything I've done. And if you're not going to tell me where Nick and Judy are--"

Her hand, her whole arm, struck to the side. And with a solid clack, she unfurled a collapsible baton.

"–I'm done asking nicely."

Sly backed up another step, clutching his cane a little tighter. He couldn't fight Carmelita. He wasn't strong enough. Not just because of his injury, still growling, still threatening to break open any moment.
He loved her. He had always loved her. And despite his jokes and jabs and everything he did to her, everything he had to do to escape arrest, he always felt that affection returned. Quiet smiles and gentle glances. But there was no love in her eyes now. If she had any left at all, it was buried under cold focus.

The game was over.

Carmelita brought a hand to her ear. "Max. Report."

Sly couldn't hear the reply. He watched Carmelita's glare shift.

"How could they be locked out of their own system?! They--" Her eyes shut suddenly, frowning in frustration. "...Digital. The whole system is digital, isn't it?"

Sly's heart leapt. He glanced around, and – there. Traffic cameras. The ones on the highest roads could see the blimp. The raccoon and the fox staring each other down.

_Bentley... he thought. And Murray, too. Murray's keeping him safe while he buys me more time. He smiled at the cameras, hoping they could see. You guys forgive me too easily._

His smile died as he turned back to Carmelita.

_Or maybe they don't realize..._


"I've got Cooper."

She lunged.

Sly dodged to the side and almost fell, his foot slipping on the wet tarpaulin, the fight over before it began. But his balance realigned and he darted back from Carmelita as her baton swung for him again.

She was relentless. Sly quickly realized he was out of his depth. He was used to the shock pistol – powerful, yes, but slow. Big, ponderous blasts fired from a distance. He had never fought Carmelita this close.

He had never _fought_ Carmelita.

She had chased him, swore him out, managed to land hits with the pistol. But this was different. The baton was thick and heavy and so _fast_, taking all his concentration to avoid.

"The _prison_–!"

_**Swing**_

"The _ship_–!"

Swingswingswingswing

"Two perfect opportunities to arrest you, that I _wasted_!" Her eyes burned. "I thought I was making the right choice, but here we are! No Nick! No Judy! Just you and another damn plan!"
Sly bit his lip. Carmelita would understand. She wanted them to come home safely, but they couldn't, not yet. Not without Penelope. It would so simple to just tell her—

And then a helicopter swooped by, like the world's largest, loudest gnat.

There were cops watching. He had to assume they could hear the conversation. He was lucky they hadn't lost patience and opened fire. Here, close quarters with Carmelita, was the best place to buy time. No matter how much it hurt them both.

So he fought. Or tried to.

*Stay alive, and wait for an opening.* The strategy that kept him alive in a thousand fights. The ancient Cooper tactic of letting your opponent throw their weight around until you could topple them.

But this was Carmelita. As his mind processed the furious cop doing her dammedest to take him down, all his heart could see was *her*. His first crush, his constant protector, a woman he wished he deserved. There were openings. She swung too hard, too angrily, left herself vulnerable. The moments came and went, unused. He wouldn't fight back. He couldn't.

He dodged instead. He dodged every blow, because he needed time and one hit would end the fight in an instant. His wound sang angrily.

She must have sensed his hesitation. "What are we doing? Why am I trying to beat answers out of you?"

Sly swallowed. The rain pounded, drenching his clothes, his fur. But his mouth was dry.

"Why are Nick and Judy playing along with one of your stupid games? They could just come to me directly. They know they can trust me."

For a moment, Inspector Fox faltered. Carmelita's voice was quiet.

"Or... I thought they knew."

"Carmelita," said Sly, hyper-aware of the nearby cops, "you've done enough."

"No. I haven't."

She caught herself. Her eyes met his, burning coldly.

"I won't stop. Not until they're safe and every guilty party faces justice." She growled. "Including you."

She swung in, putting her whole body into the motion. Vulnerable. Sly slipped under the baton and backed away, watching as she turned around. Her glare didn't waver.

"What's the matter, Cooper?" She stalked forward, rain in her hair. "You're barely trying."

He had to hide his weakness. But he hid it under the truth. "The rooftop," he said. "At the museum. I told you I never wanted to hurt you again. I meant it."

Her glare burned. "Oh? Is that it?!"

She lunged suddenly, faster than he could dodge. He managed to parry with his cane, but the force of the blow vibrated down his arm. She didn't stop, and he struggled to meet each swing of the baton as it came.
"Well, you did hurt me, Sly! You crushed me with a year and a half of silence!"

The fight continued at its new pace, Sly parrying instead of dodging. A swordfight without swords. It was working – he was alive, he was on his feet, he was buying precious time. But this was so much harder than just avoiding her strikes. Every reverberation down his arms made him weaker. He felt the blood loss catching up to him.

Carmelita noticed too. "No... You're not just holding back. You're slower." Her eyes narrowed. "Last time I saw you, you were helping Nick follow that ghost–"

She struck, he parried.

"–which allegedly killed two people..." She struck again, but her gaze was less hostile. One eye blocked by his cane. "Sly, did it hurt you?"

Sly grimaced. He couldn't let things wind down, not yet. Time to fight dirty. "Why would you care, Inspector? If I'm slower, I'm easier to catch."

Carmelita growled. She kicked suddenly and Sly managed to slip back, dodging it.

She stood there, glowering at him. Sly noticed a slight tremor in the hand holding the baton. He wondered whether it was from anger, or...

"Shut up." Her voice was just a growl. "You're trying to make me angry."

"It's not that hard to set you off, Insp–"

"No," she roared. Sly almost flinched. "You're trying to make me angry," she repeated, "probably because of this precious plan. It won't work. Whatever this is, I'm not letting you manipulate me."

Sly swallowed. It was hard, hearing it phrased that way. He tried to stick to playing the villain, but his own voice sounded distant. "Is it a cop thing to be paranoid of everything?"

"Paranoid?"

It was almost too fast for him. One second, she was still standing there. And then the baton was swinging for his face. He dodged, less and less graceful with every motion.

"Paranoid of thieves? Paranoid of liars?!"

Carmelita followed his every movement, only half a second behind.

"Paranoid of the man who handcuffed me to a volcano?! Who used me to clean up his messes? Who built a relationship with me based on a lie?"

Sly watched as her swings grew slower. Gradually, inevitably, she burned herself out.

Alone, in the rain, out of breath.

She met his gaze. Her voice was embers.

"...Who left me? Who never called, even when he promised he would?"

Sly ached. "I'm sorry."

It didn't seem enough.
It wasn't.

"Don't apologise," she said. "I don't need your pity."

Sly stared. "Carmelita...?"

"Frankly, I never should've expected change from you. You're Sly Cooper. You can't be fixed." Her glare was sharp as ever, but she aimed it at her own feet. "I'm more angry at myself. For being dumb enough to trust you in the first place."

"D...dumb enough'."

That was how she saw it. Their adventures, their synergy, the trust they had built. Their relationship. All some embarrassing mistake. Something she was too good for.

That was how she saw him.

Sly gritted his teeth. Suddenly Murray's words came back to him, what he had said about channelling anger.

Anger could be useful fuel. Sly understood that very well after fighting so many vile people. But any anger at his loved ones went into the same dark pit as his fear, his doubt, his grief. Smoothed over with a smile.

He wasn't smiling now.

"Y'know something? No!" He gripped his cane tighter. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry for leaving, and for going quiet. But you're not blameless either!"

Her eyes flashed. "What?"

"You heard me!"

"You heard me!"

Sly brought his cane down, hard, and she blocked it. He knew she could block anything he threw at her. So he threw everything.

"I admit it! I'm terrible! What we had fell apart, and it was ninety percent my fault." He struck again and again and again, gaining ground, as Carmelita met every swing. "But the rest was you! Can you just acknowledge that? Or is ten percent too much for Inspector Fox to ever admit to?!!"

"I–"

"Maybe it could've worked, if I had just been able to retire! If I didn't have to get to grips with the exact opposite of my life's work! But no! I lied about my memory, and you lied straight back!" His attacks were wild now, Carmelita struggling to keep up. "I was ready to stop being a thief. That's it. Interpol? 'Constable Cooper'?! Your idea!" Full swing. "I never wanted to a cop! I just wanted you!"

Their weapons met on the last word. Sly snarled, his arms straining – and then noticed Carmelita's expression. She stared at him. No anger. Just surprise.

Catching himself, Sly leapt back. There was a silence.

Sly wiped his eyes on his sleeve, hasty and childlike, until nothing remained but rain. "Jeez. Sorry. We swapped roles there for a second..."

"Sly..." She had recovered too, but her voice was soft. "Do you mean that? Was it the policework
that drove you away?"

He shrugged at a passing tree. "Didn't help, I guess. It was a lot to get used to. I'm not Nick."

Carmelita sighed. "In that case... You're right to blame me. It was my idea." She smiled thinly. "I can admit to a little more than ten percent."

"Heh. Thanks."

"You should've told me," she added. "I was excited at the prospect of working with you. But we didn't need to do that if it's not what you wanted. I... I just wanted you, too."

Sly met her gaze. "I love you, Carmelita. And I'm really sorry. For everything."

"I know," she said. "Me too."

For a moment, they both just stood there. Weapons lowered. Alone in the rain. But Sly didn't relax, realizing that Carmelita's guard was still up.

"...And I'm sorry for this."

Suddenly she had a finger to her ear.

"Now!"

The helicopter behind her shone a high-beam light directly into Sly's face. He yelled, covering his eyes too late. His natural balance kept him upright, but he couldn't see, couldn't dodge, couldn't escape.

Carmelita's boots on the tarpaulin, barrelling towards him. Her baton audibly cutting the air. One strike. That's all it would take, and the fight would be over. Sly braced himself to be reduced to a bleeding wreck, instinctively curling up, unable to choke down a panicked gasp–

Nothing.

Sly stood there, ready for the end, but it didn't come. He felt Carmelita's presence, her breath, but she had stopped short. Slowly, his vision returned, and confirmed it. With perfect control, she had stopped the baton an inch from his stomach.

"Wow."

He lowered his arm, meeting her gaze. He wondered if he looked scared. She seemed solid as ever. At least on the surface.

"You are hurt, aren't you? You just flinched. That's the first time I've ever seen you flinch. For god's sake, you even whimpered."


Carmelita scoffed gently. Her eyes softened. "Always ready with a joke, aren't you?"

Then she slipped her boot into his ankle and grabbed his throat.

She dropped him to the soft material of the blimp – because it was soft, he realized, as she applied enough force to restrain him but not an ounce more. Pinning him with her body, she took his cane,
hooking it into the back of her belt. He couldn't reach it, but it was safe.

With one hand, she grabbed both his wrists. The other slid into his shirt and down his back.

"Whoa, hey, okay." He grinned. "Had a dream like this once. No shame about all the watching cops, huh?"

"Perfectly professional check for hidden weapons," she muttered.

Her fingers came to his wound and he felt them tense, as though in horror. His smile died.

"This... this is bad." She was quiet. "The original injury and the hack job keeping it closed."

"She did her best."

"Sure. But did 'she' also tell you that one solid blow would rip this right open?"

"...Yes."

"Sly," hissed Carmelita. "Why are you like this?! Don't you care about yourself at all?"

"Sure I do." He met her eyes. "Just not as much as I care about my friends."

"You're a trainwreck."

She sighed, slowly.

"But... you're my trainwreck."

She cuffed his hands, still keeping him down.

"If you really care about your friends, you need to recognise they care about you. If you got hurt, Bentley and Murray would be heartbroken." Her voice dipped. "And they wouldn't be the only ones."

Sly's eyes widened at the touch. Carmelita was still on top of him, her body blocking the view of the helicopters, the cameras, the gathering cops.

And in the little pocket of gentle darkness, she was holding his hands in hers.

They had never held hands much, even during the time they shared. Sly decided he'd been a fool to scorn it. There was something in the gesture, so intimate and innocent, that really reminded him he was alive.

"Sly." Her voice was a whisper. "Please. Never go quiet on me again."

"I won't." He returned the gesture, squeezing her hands. "I promise, I won't."

He savoured the moment, trying to commit it to memory, before breaking out another woozy smile.

"Matter of fact, I think we're gonna be seeing a lot of each other..."

The blimp was descending, completing its preprogrammed route. And the docking area was choked with cops.

Carmelita dragged Sly to his feet – she seemed reluctant to resume the role of Inspector Fox, but duty called. A firetruck, drafted into the armada, extended a ladder to the top of the blimp. She helped Sly
"Inspector Fox!" called Wolford from the crowd. "Couldn't stop the blimp, but we managed to prevent any further alterations to its course. Once we learned its destination, we locked down the entire area."

"Exemplary work, Max. Thank you."

He saluted, trying to hide a smile, but she caught how his tail perked. Carmelita scanned the crowd. Near the back, a medic was giving Fangmeyer's arm a once-over. Carmelita caught the tiger's eye, earning an offhand salute and a wink. She smiled.

Then she found who she was looking for. In the centre, at the front. Bogo.

She and Sly reached the ground. Bogo stayed where he was, but officers began filtering forward. Dozens of mammals, all sizes. A personal escort.

"So." Sly was quiet. He stood in front of Carmelita, watching them come. "This is it, huh? The end of the line."

"Looks like it." Carmelita's voice, low in his ear. Comforting. "Sorry, Ringtail. This can't be fun. But I'm so glad you're safe."

"Carmelita..."

It was her turn to be surprised. His hands, still bound, found hers. He gripped her tightly. A simple gesture, but one that slowed the world down. For a moment, just them.

"...I'm really sorry."

He burst forward, sudden and violent, getting clear of her reach before she could react. The oncoming officers tensed and snarled and reached for weapons. He smiled.

Handcuffed, half-dead, an entire city of cops before him? This was living.

He dodged under and around and over them, letting their sheer numbers work against them. They struggled, all clustered together, and he laughed and danced through them. Past Grizzoli, under McHorn, kicking off Johnson's face into the air. He was fast, he was unpredictable, he was alive.

And then he was in front of Bogo.

Time slowed. The jump had brought him closer to Bogo's height, but the chief still towered over him, cold fury in those hard eyes. His arm was moving. He was so much faster than that massive frame implied.

His fist.

Sly heard Carmelita yell a warning, but it was too late. He saw, in slow motion, how perfectly his trajectory matched Bogo's punch, and had enough time to think Oh, cool. This is how I die.

The punch caught him in his chest, his entire chest, and rattled every nerve in his body. But miraculously, his stitches didn't reopen. He was still alive.

Then he hit the concrete like a skipping rock and that did it.

In a matter of seconds, he was lying in his own blood. The atmosphere changed instantly. With a
ripple of breath, the officers' anger turned to shock. Bogo stared. Speechless.

"Sly!"

Carmelita ran to him, eyes wide. She dropped to her knees, holding him, far past caring how it looked. Then, suddenly, she dipped a claw in his blood and tasted it. Sly wanted to laugh, quip about how weird it was. The words wouldn't form.

Carmelita stared. "It's not fake. It's not--" She turned over her shoulder, roaring. "He needs medical attention, now! That's a direct order!"

She turned back to him. The world fell away, and they were alone. Carmelita held him, her arms strong but her voice soft.

"Sly, just – just stay with me. Please..."
"Nick, if you won't say it, I will."

They were trying to keep quiet. Their cloaks were working well, the repurposed fabric shielding them from view. After a close call early on – the murmur of two mammals talking – it made sense to stay silent.

But Judy just couldn't.

"Say what?" Nick's voice was low, coming from somewhere behind her. It was bad enough she couldn't see her own body, but it was worse not seeing Nick. She had grown used to watching him, trying to pick up the little cues he'd never say aloud. He needed that. Especially now.

"Bellwether is dead."

They sailed in silence. When Nick didn't reply, Judy pressed on. Or tried to.

"Back when Bogo first told us, I didn't believe it. I just assumed it was a trick, which... I was right, but not completely, and..."

She stalled.

"...She's dead. She's really dead."

She bit her lip, trying to order her thoughts.

"I mean, I know it's good news – or it's at least not bad news. It's... She... Even from prison, she was plotting to hurt us. And now she can't. So that's – y'know. But..."

Judy frowned.

"Am I crazy? I... I don't feel relieved or happy or, or, vindicated. It's just starting to sink in. Bellwether's dead."

There were a few more seconds of silence. Judy wished Nick would say something. She had no more words left.

Finally, his voice floated by.

"I don't know what to tell you..." His tone darkened. "Other than you'll have to figure it out on your
own time. We're here."

Judy looked up. He was right.

Cliffside Asylum jutted against the sunset like a skeletal finger. As the dark tower got closer, so did the constant roar of the waterfall. Judy remembered exactly how tall that waterfall was from that time she had fallen down it. It wasn't an experience she intended to repeat.

"Okay. Time to land."

Nick just grunted. It pained Judy that he was so... wordless, so lacking his usual unstoppable wit. But pointing that out would just make him feel worse.

With subtle movements of their only oar, Judy nudged their canoe into the bank. They were still a distance from the asylum, since they couldn't risk getting seen early.

"Alright..." murmured Judy. "You ready?"

"Yes," said Nick. Judy heard the eager buzz of Carmelita's pistol somewhere beside her.

She took a breath. "Okay. Let's go."

They went. Judy listened carefully for Nick's footsteps – he was right behind her.

Before long, they made it to Cliffside's main entrance. After Lionheart's arrest, the ZPD had locked the building down. But as months passed, the new security had eroded, constantly tested by teenagers eager to explore the abandoned asylum that had made headlines. At first, the only changes Judy noticed was a sharp drop in wolves and a sharp rise in crass graffiti.

But then she noticed something else, small and black and barely visible. Perched over the front doors, keeping watch.

"Cameras," she whispered. "Someone's put up little spy cameras to watch the door. Penelope really is here!"

"Like I said." Nick's voice was low. "Don't slow down. The cloaks work on cameras too."

She heard him overtake her, heading for the door. Penelope had taken the time to install cameras, but not bolt the entrance shut. Judy saw the door creak open very slowly, just enough to fit a fox. She waited one second, then followed.

Cliffside was dark.

Once her vision adjusted, Judy noted that the main lobby was still empty. But there were strange tracks through the dust coating the floor. Recent.

Nick's eyes suddenly appeared, floating in mid-air. The sight took Judy off guard for a moment, but she realised he had adjusted his cloak and sunglasses intentionally.

*We go to the top,* said his glance upwards. *She's probably there,* said his glare.

Judy nodded, knowing he could see her despite the cloak. He nodded back, and his eyes disappeared.

She followed his footsteps up the stairs. To the highest floor.
Moving through silence and empty corridors, it was easy to make out a distant sound coming from above. They took every flight of stairs, passing floor after floor of cracked windows, until there were no more stairs left. Then they crept down the hallway, following the sound to an old security room. The door hanging open.

Police instincts made Judy take cover against the doorframe. Even invisible, she moved cautiously. She thought she was prepared for facing the mastermind behind the Phantasm. But once she glanced inside, she stopped short.

The room itself was unremarkable – old furniture shoved to the walls, one desk reclaimed as a workbench, cluttered with tools and spare mechanical parts. Even the dour grey bricks, so claustrophobic and dark, had faded to background noise. What had shocked Judy was the occupant.

It could only be Penelope. Donned in a dark yellow jumpsuit and thick gloves and heavy boots, face obscured by a industrial welding mask – all topped off, incongruously, with a fun red bandanna.

She was almost five feet tall.

What the heck?! said Judy's eyes. Sly said she was a mouse! How is she taller than you?!

Nick said nothing.

Penelope was at the desk, idly tinkering with her tools. Next to her sat a pastel pink laptop, connected to a set of pastel pink speakers. The source of the noise.

"...joining us, this is Katherine Cougic reporting live from the Museum of Natural History. The massive police presence in the plaza is finally being withdrawn, but the ZPD has still made no comment to the press as to the purpose of the blockade. This comes amid continuing public concern for the city's own Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, missing since Saturday morning. More devel--"

Penelope reached over and turned off the speaker. She chuckled lightly. "Where oh where could little Nick be?" She switched tabs on the laptop, watching a small green dot weave through a map of Zootopia. "Let's see... Rainforest District. Probably about to leave the city, I guess. Smart fox."

Judy watched Carmelita's pistol materialise from thin air next to her. And then Nick stepped out and shot Penelope in the back.

The force of the blast threw Penelope from her seat. She flew over the table, taking the laptop and speakers and half the mechanical pieces with her, before crashing against a stone wall with a terrible clatter.

She lay on the floor, motionless. Nick and Judy approached, cautious.

Then she sat up. "Oh. Okay then. Dumb fox." Her mask turned to face them. "Hi."

Nick shot again and Penelope just raised her hand and caught it. The fingers of her gloves dug into the electricity.

"She's--" Judy backed up a step. "She's got the same gadget Wolf had on the ship."

"Huh? Oh, yeah," said Penelope. "Gave him a prototype to play with."

The blast of electricity hadn't dispersed. It vibrated in her grasp, struggling like a trapped animal, becoming more and more unstable--
"But this one's more advanced."

She flung the blast back at them. They went to dodge, but the electricity dissipated like smoke, spreading and thinning, until it was a thin mist passing over them with nothing more unpleasant than a tingle in their teeth.

Penelope stood. "Oh, by the way, speaking of prototypes..."

Their cloaks fizzled, electricity licking along the edges. Suddenly, Judy could see Nick again. She could see herself again. Just black fabric.

"Smart of you to use my own tech against me." Penelope sounded genuine. "But as we all now know, an electric current totally disables the polymer. Thanks for the field test, Nick, I'll work on that."

Nick literally tore off his cloak, pulling the fabric hard and letting it rip against his shoulder. His sunglasses were locked on Penelope's mask.


Nick said nothing. Judy frowned. "What...?"

"Y'know, Bloodgunn! The really edgy character? Epitomises everything wrong with the comics industry in the Nineties?" She sighed. "My wit is wasted on you normies. See, after the success of—"

"Shut up," snarled Nick. Judy glanced over, worry in her eyes, before snapping back to Penelope. "Just surrender," he continued. "This ends here."

"You're right about that," she said. "If you got here without me noticing, that means you've bypassed my tracer. If you bypassed my tracer but didn't flee the city, that means you're really serious about stopping me. Ergo, only one of us can walk out of here." She shrugged. "Not what I would've done, but hey. Your funeral."

"Nick's right!" said Judy. "You're alone out here."

"Probably because you murder your partners," spat Nick.

"Y-...yeah. So don't kid yourself. It's two against one."

Penelope chuckled, one hand on her hip. The light glinted on her visor. "...You sure about that?"

"Wh-"

With an explosion of masonry, a wall shattered.

They stared – and had sudden flashbacks to Springtrap. But this wasn't the work of some deranged hobbyist, a shambling concoction just about able to stand. This was professional. It was hulking, decked from top to bottom in thick black armour. It was deliberate, moving slowly but nowhere near slow enough not to be a threat. And it was armed, hefting a huge axe with both arms.

"Ohdear," said Judy.

The robot swung its axe and they fell back. Penelope was laughing.

"Did you seriously fall for the same trick twice?" she crowed. "Why'd you think I stood there
talking? Not everybody is as chatty as Sly." She reached for her toolbox. "Honestly. A life-or-death situation, and I start explaining comic book history? Is that really so normal for you that you didn't question it?"

The axe swung again and again, pushing them out the door and back down the hallway. Penelope's voice followed.

"This is the Black Knight. Got tired the character – not my best work – so I replaced the manual controls with a rudimentary AI. Now he's my home security system!"

Nick was firing at the Knight's helmet, but as with the prototype Phantasm, the shots just fizzled. They kept losing ground.

Penelope appeared in the doorframe, watched them for a second, and ran the other way. Her laptop – the evidence – was under her arm.

Nick growled. "She'll escape!"

"No." Judy struggled out of her useless cloak, bunching it in her arms – she needed the full mobility of her uniform. "You're gonna catch her."

He glanced over. "Hopps?"

Judy smirked. "C'mon, Slick, slaying giants is my speciality. I've got this."

The axe came down inches away, kicking up sparks, and they both stumbled back. Nick hesitated.

Judy's expression turned serious. *I'll be fine. Go.*

*I'll be back for you.*

*I know.*

Judy threw the cloak, covering the Knight's helmet. It paused, lifting a huge hand to remove the obstruction to its internal cameras – and Nick scrabbled between its legs and down the corridor.

Judy watched her partner disappear. Then she took a breath, rolled her shoulders, and tried to work out how to kill a robot.

Nick followed the sound of Penelope's footsteps, eyes hard. He found her in the only other accessible room on the floor. It was large but cluttered, evidently used for storage. Mechanical debris littered the space, and stocky metal barrels slightly taller than Nick stood in groups of two or three throughout.

Penelope whirled around as he entered, the light catching her visor.

Nick raised the pistol. "You aren't going anywhere."

"Obviously," she said. She nodded to her laptop, sitting on a barrel. "I was just moving my stuff so you wouldn't mess with it. You do realize I can't let you live, right?"

He just fired.

This time she didn't even move. The blasts caught against her jumpsuit, slowly fizzling out. "Yeah, still immune to electric shocks. Clearly you've been spending too long around Carmelita."
He watched the blasts dissipate. She watched him.

"That thing is symbolic of her, isn't it? Sure, it's impressive. Packs a real punch. But it's childish, too. It's childish to think you can just zap your opponents and lock them up somewhere. Me, on the other hand... I go for more permanent solutions."

She raised her hand, and Nick was moving to dodge even before he put words to the object.

*oh my god real gun*

Shots rang out, tearing through the space he had just been. Nick had managed to throw himself behind nearby barrels. The motion was too violent for his sunglasses, and they clattered to the floor. They lay on there, defenceless.

"Really?" called Nick, pressed low against the barrel. "Just a gun? I was expecting a freeze ray or something."

She chuckled. "I'm an engineer, Nick. We look for efficient solutions. And nothing's more efficient than a metal slug tearing through you at supersonic speed."

He heard her boots moving. He crept silently, trying to keep cover between them.

"Of course, I'm also a trained boxer and not too shabby with a sword, so I could kill you a couple different ways if you pinky-swear to hold still. But I think you've earned the quickest method."

Nick squinted into empty air. This sounded like a former friend of Sly's, alright.

These people were exhausting.

Judy was definitely starting to wonder about Penelope Earhart.

There were dozens of ways a genius of her skill could incapacitate or even kill Judy. A sonic blast would be the obvious choice, given rabbits' sensitive hearing, but Judy would be just as vulnerable to blinding lights or neurotoxin or a set of automated turrets. Or a net.

But no. Judy was fighting a big, black robot swinging a big, black axe. Now she understood what Bentley had said about 'a flair for the dramatic'.

The Knight had followed her down a corridor, back towards the stairs. The stairwell was dominated by a huge glass window. The glass was cracked, unstable, wind whistling angrily through the weaknesses. Grey clouds still choked the sky, but the setting sun was punching through a few dim red rays.

Judy glanced behind – and yelped, leaping to one side. The axe slammed into the floor, barely missing her. She sprinted to the stairs, and then, slowed to a stop.

Maybe the Knight wouldn't follow her down. But then what? This was only the access to this floor. There was no point descending.

She was wasting time. Nick needed her.

Judy turned, glaring at it. "This is unfair! You aren't supposed to hurt people! Isn't that the First Law of Robotics or something?"

The Knight stomped toward her. Impassive. Axe ready.
Judy shook her head, trying to clear it. She had to stay focused. But for some ungodly reason – probably Penelope's weird tangent about comics – all her brain was giving her was a half-remembered summary of the classical laws of robotics. A robot shouldn't harm mammals, or allow mammals to be endangered, or endanger...

Itself.

She looked up. She ran some very, very quick calculations, comparing the speed of a huge axe against the speed of a rabbit cop.

It would work. It would probably work. She smirked.

Judy slid over to one huge foot and waited. The Knight watched her, lined up its swing, and struck. When she jumped clear, the axe slammed into the robot's own shin. It bounced off.

Judy examined the blow. "The armour's stronger than the axe..." Her smirk strengthened. "But you still proved my point. No fear means no self-preservation instinct."

She backed up, closer to the stairs. The broken glass, the rush of wind, the distant roar of water.
"See, us mammals, we feel fear for a reason. It's a useful warning."

She cast a glance down the hall as the robot lumbered closer.
"The only problem is when you start feeling too much..."

Judy returned her focus to the Knight, preparing herself. Her smirk grew into a grin.
"Or, in my case – not nearly enough."

The Knight brought its axe down and she slipped aside, then ducked under its legs. The Knight turned in place, but Judy was ready. She leapt up to its elbow and grabbed on, then swung to the other side, coiling her legs against its metal arm and jumping even higher.

Until she was clinging to its face.

The Knight's internal cameras struggled for a moment to focus on something so close. But it recognized its target. It neatly rotated the axe. And it swung.

All Judy had to do was drop. The Knight hit itself full force. For a moment, it stayed upright. But the call of gravity was too strong, too close, and slowly, slowly, it tipped backwards. It clattered down the stairs, the noise loud and ghastly. By the time it reached the window, it was unstoppable. The brittle glass cracked around it, giving way, and with a crash it fell through.

Judy watched it plummet down the tower and into the waterfall. There was a distant boom as it hit the water and disappeared.

She smirked. "Lawbreaker."

With that, she hurried back to Nick.

Nick stayed low. And he stayed alive.

He was outgunned. Even if Carmelita's pistol worked, it couldn't match a ballistic firearm on speed or lethality. He could blast Penelope a thousand times and her gadget might still protect her. If she
got in one good shot, it was over.

So he stayed low. It felt humiliating to skulk around. He had come this far, just to cower for his life. And she wouldn't shut up.

"What's the matter, pal?" Penelope's boots echoed through the room. "Don't tell me you came all this way without an actual plan..."

Nick saw her reach his sunglasses, still lying on the floor. She paused over them, looking down for a moment. And then, with an abrupt motion, she crushed them. The hard plastic broke under her boot, shattering instantly.

Nick glared.

Penelope resumed walking, turning her head slowly. "Listen, Nick. I bet you're expecting me to monologue, to call you a fool or an insignificant trash-eater or whatever. I won't. You and me, we're pretty similar."

"Ah. So you're opting for that cliché instead."

"Seriously, we are! We're both smart. We're both capable. And both of us know Sly Cooper as the self-obsessed scum he is."

She looked around. Not for the first time in Nick's life, back-talking had been a mistake. Penelope now had a better idea of where he was.

"You played this all wrong. If you brought me Sly, I could end this. Clear your name in an instant. What's it to me? Dawn's dead. It's not like she cares." The pistol was steady in her grip. One step after another. "You know where he is right now, don't you?"

Nick said nothing.

His grip tightened around Carmelita's pistol. What would she do? If her best weapon was rendered useless, how would she adapt?

It wasn't much of a thought experiment. He had seen it first-hand back on the Tamatoa. When Wolf was immune to her pistol, she just beat him with it instead. It was reliable. Blunt.

Penelope was advancing on his position. Nick took a silent breath, steadied himself, and threw his only weapon across the floor. The pistol skidded into a pile of drone parts, arriving with a crash.

Penelope stopped, her head rotating toward the noise. Nick watched as she changed direction.


She passed Nick without seeing him and he pounced.

He elbowed her mask, doing no damage but managing to startle her, and seized the chance to grab her pistol. They wrestled for a second – how was her grip so strong?! – but Nick's police training won out.

Judy returned just in time to see Nick push Penelope back. He had the gun.
"This isn't for Sly," he snarled. "I'm doing this for me."

Without an ounce of hesitation, he aimed for Penelope.

Judy froze. "Nick, no—!"

He shot her six times in the chest.
Spiral of Ants

Chapter Summary

Over,
It's over,
The pheromones,
The self-avoiding odyssey
Consuming
The colony
THE CIRCLE RULES YOUR LIFE

Judy stared in horror. Penelope stumbled back, bullet holes torn through her jumpsuit. Nick just glared.

"You... y-you..."

Arms stiff, fingers shaking, Penelope stood there. Her voice was breathless. Judy couldn't drag her eyes away, a captive of every detail. So she noticed immediately when the holes began to bleed, slowly oozing and staining Penelope's yellow overalls... black?

"...You jerk! You busted one of the central actuators!"

Penelope tried to turn, but her whole frame was stiff, unresponsive. Nick pulled the trigger again, but only produced a click. Without hesitating, he flung the empty pistol straight into Penelope's mask, eliciting an annoyed grunt.

"Hopps! Get ready!"

Nick was already moving, sprinting forward to tackle Penelope to the ground. She fell with a crash of metal. For a moment, they struggled on the floor.

Then, the mask popped open, and something small and pink leapt out.

Judy, on cue, was ready. The pink blur was shooting for the door, but Judy was just as fast. Sprinting into a dive, she caught her target with both hands.

Judy looked down to see two furious brown eyes glaring up at her.

She had caught a mouse. Long blond hair, pink fur – dyed? Red bandanna, round spectacles, a tiny set of light blue overalls over yellow, much more vivid than the jumpsuit. Struggling.

"Let me go! If you think I'm too dignified to bite you, I'm really not!"

Judy sighed. "Just full of surprises, aren't you?"

She glanced to Nick. He tugged at the jumpsuit, ripping it. Underneath was a labyrinth of metal, fashioned into a functioning bipedal shape. A steel skeleton.

"Thought so. I bet tiny mouse hands are great for fine circuitry, but for working on anything bigger,
you'd need more strength." He flashed a lopsided grin. The insult was nothing new, but there was a strange venom in his tone. "Especially since you don't have any friends."

Judy frowned, but said nothing. She focused on restraining Penelope. They were both well-trained in arresting mammals of all sizes, but normally they would have appropriate handcuffs. Instead, Judy found a sturdy piece of wire and wrapped it tightly around Penelope's delicate wrists.

"Alright, Penelope Earhart. I hereby place you under provisional arrest."

She scoffed. "Oh, this'll be fun. Maybe we'll all get put in the same cell, huh?"

"We're prepared for the consequences," said Judy firmly. "Are you?"

Penelope shook her tiny head. "Like I said! You played this all wrong. You were Dawn's target. I just wanted Sly. If you had just asked me nicely – and let me kill him – I'd've been happy to straighten this out. It's not like Dawn's gonna sue me or anything." She shrugged, sullen. "But you've really ticked me off now. So you're getting nothing from me. No testimony. No evidence."

"Fine. Either way, we're bringing you in to the proper authorities."

There was silence for a moment. Then a low, dark sound.

Nick laughing.

It started as just a chuckle, calm and quiet, but it built slowly, filling the room. Penelope watched as laughter began to rack Nick's chest, shaking his whole body, echoing off the walls. He turned to Judy, grinning in mirth, his fangs on full display.

"Oh, Carrots..."

In an instant, his humour died. His face went slack, devoid of emotion. Green eyes glassy.

"No."

Judy stared. "Nick...?"

His voice was low and even. Emotionless. "If we bring her in..." He turned slowly to Penelope, looking straight through her. "...she'll exercise her legal right to say nothing. And she's rigged all the evidence to explode if we touch it. Best case scenario, the ZPD goes easy on us and we only spend a few months in prison before someone throws us a bone. Worst case..." He shrugged, the motion stiff. Unnatural. "We go down anyway. And all this will be pointless."

Judy's mouth twisted. "So... what? You just want to run? Flee Zootopia, leave behind everything we have here?"

"Sure. Sounds rational, doesn't it?" His gaze hadn't left Penelope. "But first..."

The mouse watched as something returned to his eyes. Not mirth. Not life. Just cold green fire.

"She ruined my life. So I'd like an eye for an eye."

Judy's eyes widened. "You can't mean that."

"Oh, I 'can't'?" Only a vague note of irritation. An irregularity in his flat, dead tone. "After the week I've had, I can do whatever I want."
He took a step forward. Penelope began to realize just how large he was compared to her.

"Nick, be sensible," tried Judy. "We – we all worked so hard to get here."

"Yes. All according to plan. Even the Cooper Gang did their jobs… adequately." His mouth curled. Slightly. "I suppose it doesn't matter if they get away, though I hope Carmelita gives them the beating they deserve. Either way. They got me here."

Another step. Penelope regretted destroying Nick's sunglasses. His eyes were so cold. So… humourless.

"So that's it." Judy sounded like she was fading out of focus. Smaller. Weaker. "You – you planned this. All of this."

"Yes. I was never going to stay. You're welcome to join me, of course." His tone didn't waver. "But before I go, let's give Bogo a real reason to fear me."

Another step. Penelope's wrists twisted against the wire. No escape.

"Nick." Judy drew herself to her full height. It wasn't much. "You stop this right now, do you hear me? It's not funny."

"No. It's hilarious."

Another step. Penelope backed up and hit the wall. No escape.

"Nick!" Judy shoved him and he backed up.

"That's enough!"

Judy planted herself in front of Nick. She glared up at him. It seemed unsteady.

"This isn't okay. This isn't you. I'll... We can pretend this didn't happen, if you just stop. Please."

Nick watched her. Impassive. And then he tried to push past her. Towards Penelope.

"Nick!" Judy shoved him and he backed up.

Penelope tried to sidle away, moving along the wall. She got a perfect view of their faces. Nick's blank stare giving way to irritation. Judy's eyes wide with confusion and anger and pain.

"What's gotten into you? Why are you acting like this?"

Nick's eyes narrowed. "You don't get it, do you? I suppose that shouldn't surprise me – you're always too idiotically optimistic to accept the facts. If you're really that dense, let me spell it out for you. You didn't save me, Judy. You were too late. I'm... broken."

She stared. "Broken?"

"That's the simplest word for it." Nick turned to Penelope, who froze against the wall. "After what she put me through... I questioned everything. My mind. My life. My morals. If it's so easy to believe a lie, why should I bother believing in anything? Why can't I just do whatever I feel like?"

"Because it's the right th–"

"There is," he snarled, "no 'right thing'. There's no order here, Judy. People do things because they can. She ruined my life because she could. Now I can return the favour. You don't want me to do it, but you can't give me one good reason why not!"
"Don't do this! Nick, please..." Her voice was barely a whisper. "I... I love you."

"Oh."

For a moment, silence. Penelope heard nothing but her own heartbeat.

"Oh, Judy..." Nick's face softened. The anger left him, and like that, he was his old self again. Her partner.

He took a breath, as though trying to steady himself. One hand drifted down to his belt.

Nick looked up, giving her a warm smile; but the pain in his eyes made it bittersweet. "I love you too. I really do. More than I've ever loved anyone." He gave a little half-shrug. "But I can't trust my own feelings, can I? Everything I know is... fake. Which makes my love – and by extension, you – meaningless."

The movement was almost too fast for Penelope to follow. Nick whipped out another pistol and shot Judy right in the neck. Her famous reflexes only had her paw reach the dart as it struck her.

She stared, purple eyes wide. Already she was starting to wilt. But the emotions on her face were obvious. Fear. Shock. Betrayal. "N..."

"Sorry." He had already returned to his emotionless state. "I can't let you stop me."

Judy's knees buckled, but with one shaking paw, she still tried to reach out. "N... Ni-ick..."

Penelope watched as she crumpled to the floor. Face down.

Motionless.

"No more distractions." He turned his attention back to his captive, discarding the empty pistol with a clatter. "Now hold still."

Penelope stared. And then she ran.

She shot for the door as fast as her tiny legs would take her. Penelope glanced behind to see him ambling – ambling, moving at an easy pace – past his fallen partner. He barely looked at Judy as he stepped over her small, unmoving body.

"Stay there, sweetheart." His expression darkened, just an inch. "I'll be back for you."

And then he lunged.

The change was so abrupt Penelope flinched, nearly losing her balance and then he was upon her. She threw herself out of the way as his paw swept through empty air, one claw almost snagging her overalls.

"Stay there, sweetheart." His expression darkened, just an inch. "I'll be back for you."

And then he lunged.

She ran down the hallway, suddenly vast and looming. She sprinted for the security room, and it crawled towards her. Slowly.

He was following her. Slowly.

Satisfied she couldn't get far, he was back to ambling behind her. Penelope glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of his gleaming fangs.
"Stay back, you freak!"

"Hey." His voice was level. "No need to be rude. What's got you so upset?"

Penelope pushed herself, her feet pounding. But no matter how fast she went, she couldn't escape the fox's shadow.

"What's the matter, Penelope? You're not laughing. I thought you liked jokes. Go ahead and laugh. I'm a funny guy."

Penelope bit her lip, trying to tune him out. Focus on running. But his voice was inescapable.

"You know why I crack so many jokes? Fun story. Back in school, there was this group of kids who'd laugh at me no matter what I did. So I figured, y'know, maybe I should make people laugh on purpose... Because that's all I am, Penelope. A mirror. I am what people make me. Society wanted me to be hustler. Judy wanted me to be a cop. And you? You wanted me to be a monster..." A low whisper, yet so loud. "What's the matter? I thought you wanted this, Penelope..."

After an eternity, she reached the security room – and flung herself under the desk. She couldn't outpace him. Her best chance was to hide. Wait in darkness until she could slip away.

She wished she could fight back.

Penelope cowered behind one leg of the table, wrists bound, tiny. She glanced over the room. The commotion had left her things scattered everywhere. Amid the wreckage of the wall the Knight burst through, she could see her favourite sword. A gleaming sabre with an ornate golden handle. More than enough to kill one psychotic fox.

It was also several times her actual weight. It was useless. No – she was useless.

In moments, he was at the doorway. He sauntered inside, looking around for her. He saw the sword, too.

"Huh. Nice letter-opener."

He picked it up, feeling its weight. Examining the handle. And then, as Penelope watched, he snapped the thin metal over his knee. He dumped the pieces on the floor. As though they were trash.

"I'd rather stay au naturel, though." He turned, eyes searching. "Just using your teeth... Can you imagine, Penelope? It actually sounds pretty fun..."

He slowly began to sweep the room. Penelope stared at her sword. A practical thought pushed through the fear, the rage. The broken blade was probably enough to cut through the wire on her wrists.

She would need to leave cover.

But he would find her anyway. It wasn't that large of a room. If she had any shot of escaping, she needed her hands. So while his back was turned – while he kept talking – she darted toward the sword.

"If the world's only gonna see me as violent and murderous – well, why bother being anything else?" Anger was starting to bubble through his monotone. "Quit hiding already. You did this. You pushed me too far and couldn't handle what you found. You underestimated me. Everyone always underestimates me." A growl. "I'm just Judy's sidekick, huh?"
Penelope reached the blade, her eyes darting dizzily between his back and her wrists. She could do this. She just had to be careful, but firm, enough force to cut the wire without injuring herself, and silent, obviously silent—

She backed herself against the blade. Nothing happened. She pushed and pushed and suddenly the hilt dragged against the ground.

The noise was quiet. But it shattered the silence.

In an instant he had spun around, those eyes finding her. Predator and prey.

"There you are."

He moved with deadly grace. Penelope squeaked, stumbling aside before his claws found her.

She ran back for the hallway. It didn't make sense. But nothing made sense any more. There was no planning around this, no trick or gadget that would put her back in control. All she could do was run from room to room. One tiny, pounding heart and little else.

The outcome was already decided.

Penelope felt the air leave her lungs as he kicked her in the back. It was light. Just enough pressure to knock her over.

She had the terrible realization that he was really going to drag this out.

"You're making a mistake!" she yelled. "I can give you anything! Money, fame, power – please, no!"

She barely dodged another swipe of his paw. She lost her footing, but he didn't stop. Penelope began to scrabble backwards, unable to tear herself away from those cold eyes.

"Nick, please! Judy wouldn't want this!"

"Judy's not here." The fox licked his lips. "For that matter... neither is Nick."

Penelope squeaked. She scanned his face for any weakness, any inkling of mercy. She found none.

She hit the wall. Dead end. Nowhere to go. Dead end. He just stood over her, expressionless.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I – I can still fix this! Please! Let me help you, I can – I –!" Her breath was ragged. "Please! I'm not Bellwether! I'm different!"

"No. You aren't."

Someone politely cleared their throat. Penelope dragged her eyes away from Nick, and then Judy Hopps was smiling down at her too.

"For one thing, you fell for pretty much the exact same trick."

"I... wait." Her brow started twitching. A lot. "Y-you're – you're not...?"

Penelope stared up at that haunting face, those dead, glassy eyes – and then she blinked and Nick Wilde was smiling down at her.

"For one thing, you fell for pretty much the exact same trick."

"I... wait." Her brow started twitching. A lot. "Y-you're – you're not...?"

Someone politely cleared their throat. Penelope dragged her eyes away from Nick, and then Judy Hopps was smiling down at her too.

"No," she said. "He's not."
“Stay there, sweetheart.” Nick’s voice above her. Fully in-character. "I'll be back for you.”

Sounds of scuffling as he broke into a sprint. A terrified squeak. The gradual fading of those scuffles and squeaks and growls and villainous monologues.

Judy, still flat on the floor, perked an ear. Silence.

She got up, slowly. There was no room for overconfidence. They had beaten the Phantasm, and the other Phantasm, and the Knight, and now Nick was distracting Penelope herself. But for all Judy knew, there were yet more ludicrous tricks in the mouse's toolbox. A giant attack robot, perhaps.

She crept over to Penelope's pastel laptop, still on a nearby barrel. Still on. Resisting the urge to turn the news back on – don't make a sound, don't threaten the plan, you're so close! – Judy grabbed it.

She had actual, physical access to Penelope's computer, which made the job of 'hacking' her data so much easier. But as soon as she touched it, the screen turned red and displayed a very, very short timer.

Rigged to explode.

Judy would charitably describe Penelope as 'thorough' (and uncharitably as 'insane'). Even her personal computer would blow at the slightest wrong touch. There was only one possible way to stop the timer once it began. Judy had it on her belt.

She took a flash drive from one of the pouches and plugged it into the laptop. In seconds, the drive activated, pausing and dismissing the timer. Penelope's own encryption algorithms.

Judy began her search.

Penelope stared. "How did you resist the tranquillizer?!"

"What tranquillizer?" Judy produced the dart, letting Penelope get a good look. "It's a complete fake. Not even a real needle. Nick's a big softie, really."

Nick just shrugged, still smiling.

"Convincing, though, right?" continued Judy. "Your boyfriend put it together for us. Well. Ex-boyfriend. He's a smart guy. Shame you couldn't make it work."

"Ugh! Don't you dare even–" She started. "Wait a second! What – what did you do? This whole time this maniac was chasing me around, you were..." Her voice dropped. "...alone with my laptop."

"Yup!" said Judy. "Apparently, you didn't change your encryption algorithms after Bentley grabbed them a few days ago. And guess what I used them to do!"

"I'll kill you."

"Incorrect answer! I disabled all your weird explosives! Once the ZPD gets here – which should only be a couple minutes, now – the bomb squad will give everything a once-over, just in case. Then this'll all get taken into evidence."

"But Judy!" said Nick, with the cadence of an infomercial. "What if something goes wrong? A second booby-trap, perhaps?"
"Never fear, Nick!" she replied, in the same tone. "As a modern professional in the digital age, I understand the importance of backing up data. So I also copied some important files off of the laptop. One or two blueprints for the Phantasm, and of course..." She smiled at Penelope. "...audio logs of you laying out this plan, in complete detail, with Dawn Bellwether. That's gonna be super useful, thanks."

Penelope hissed a sigh. "Dammit."

"Hey, this is your own fault," sang Judy. "Don't you know you should never leave a personal device unattended? All Nick had to do was flash some fang, and you went running. I caught some of that performance, by the way." She put on a low, gravelly voice. "'Ugggh, Nick's not here'... How edgy can you get?"

"Indulge me, Carrots. It was my big scene." His smirk had returned to Maximum Smug. "What, you weren't impressed with my murdersona?"

"Oh no, he's great! Did you name him?"

"He doesn't have a name. That's how dark he is."

"Ooh! Next level."

Penelope's eyes bounced between them, horrified. "Ugh! I can see why Sly likes you. You're just as insufferable."

"Hey!" snapped Nick, and for a moment it seemed his good mood had been ruined. Then he smiled. "I'm ten times more insufferable than Sly, and you know it."

"It's not a contest, dear," said Judy. "That's what Sly thinks, and it's why he's losing."

"Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up!" Penelope kicked her tiny feet against the ground. "You aren't smarter than me! And you haven't won! Just because you performed one of your dumb dramas doesn't mean you... it doesn't...!"

When her point evaporated into hot air, Nick and Judy shared a look. He hunkered down to Penelope, meeting her gaze. "Listen. I know you might have difficulty grasping this, being an amoral traitor with no lasting relationships, but I would never hurt Judy. And the fact my little temper tantrum didn't immediately tell you it was an act? Well..." He shrugged amicably. "Guess you just aren't quite the mastermind you think you are."

"Common problem," said Judy. "Scar was the same."

"Yeah, he was! Man, you are in the same bracket as Scar. Trust me, Nelly, that's not a compliment."

"Mark my words." Penelope's eyes burned, her voice a low threat. "I'm not done. This is not over. And the second the opportunity presents itself, I am going to--"

"Hey Nick look what I found," said Judy, seconds before covering Penelope with a glass jar.

Penelope started, whiskers flaring. She shouted a string of obscenities which were almost muffled by the glass. Almost.

Nick sat down by the jar, his back to the wall. He kept a hand on it. "She's going be okay in here,
right? Enough air and everything?"

"Sure. It won't be long now, anyway."

"Right. Just double-checking."

Judy smirked. "To think a few minutes ago you were playing serial killer. You are a big softie..."

She flopped onto him, cuddling close. "And you've got the fur to match!"

"Carrots, contain yourself." He smirked at her. "We're on official police business."

"We're fugitives, Nick! Bringing down a villain completely off-books! So there's no rulebook keeping me from hugging my best friend in the whole world!"

"Dear god, you've gone mad with power." Keeping one hand on the jar, he used the other to pull Judy closer. "I have no choice but to bend to your evil whims."

"Nyeh heh heh...!"

They lapsed into silence for a moment. Eventually, Judy looked up to him.

"So, uh... it got pretty real back there. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine."

"Nick..." She leaned up, her expression kind but serious. "Don't brush this off. Don't brush me off. I'll ask you again – are you sure you're okay?"

Nick sighed. "Honestly, truthfully, with one hundred percent sincerity... I don't know if I qualify as 'okay'. This whole thing took a chunk out of me. I'm sorry if I've been acting weird these last few hours, I..."

"It's okay," said Judy quietly. "This was so hard on you."

"But that said..." He gave her a little smile. "I wasn't being flippant. I will be fine. I'll recover, and this'll just be another notch on the belt. I'm confident of that. Because... I have you."

He met her gaze, eyes warm.

"Just to be completely clear... you mean the world to me, Judy. And you always will."

She returned his smile. She said nothing. There was nothing that needed to be said. Instead, she held him close, their breathing in sync.

"So..." murmured Nick. "You really went all in, huh? Pulling out the L-word like that?"

"Hey, you reciprocated."

"Course I did!" He smirked. "I do love you. It's just, y'know, you said it first. So you lose."

"That's not how that works. That's not how any of that works. You're a dork."

"I'm your dork."

"Yeah. You are." She pulled tighter into the hug, nestling her face against his chest, and he returned it. "...dork."
"Kill me," muttered Penelope.

They did not. Instead, the partners simply waited, until the comfortable silence was slowly eroded by the oncoming sounds of sirens, even helicopters. Judy had been right. It wasn't long.

They both felt a rising, giddy excitement. But they didn't move. They waited. And before long, he appeared.

His silhouette, looming and almost ominous, was backlit by the setting sun. Their senior on the force had finally found them. And he wasted no time.

"Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh you guys!"

They grinned as Clawhauser hurried up to them, pulling them into a tight hug they gratefully returned.

"You're okay! You're here and you're both okay!"

"We are! We are." Nick put all the energy he could spare into the hug. "It's so great to see you, Sprinkles."

"See me? You're the ones who – Chief! Chief, get over here, they're alright!"

He reluctantly pulled away, stepping to one side. Behind him came Chief Bogo. Solid as ever. Eyeing the partners quietly.

They stood. They met his gaze. And they saluted.

Bogo examined them. His eyes were sharp. And then, the ghost of a smile began to shine through. "Well. This is outlandish. Even for you two."

Nick nodded, back straight. "Officer Nicholas Borderline Illegal If Admittedly Successful Wilde. Reporting for duty. Sir."

Bogo chuckled at that – actually chuckled – but before Nick could savour his most impressive achievement of the day, another voice cut through.

"You! What kind of operation are you running?!"

They glanced down. Penelope was fuming inside her glass prison.

"This psychopath," she spat, jerking her head towards Nick, "threatened to kill me! Several times!"

"Oh?" Bogo raised an eyebrow. "He explicitly stated that?"

Penelope blinked. Her mind replayed the last few minutes with vivid detail and rapid speed.

I'd like an eye for an eye give Bogo a real reason to fear me I can return the favour Now hold still Just using your teeth why bother being anything else?

"It was... very strongly implied!"

"I'm sure." Bogo turned to the cheetah gently vibrating beside him. "Clawhauser?"

"Sir?"
"Escort her outside, would you? She seems shaken, so... make sure she's never left alone."

"Sir!"

Penelope's eyebrow twitched. "Wait. No. It's fine. You don't need to take a statement or anything I'd really rather– no, put me down you son of a–!

Clawhauser tightly locked his paw around the jar's opening, muffling Penelope's voice. He gave Nick and Judy a sheepish grin. "I'll, uh – see you soon!" He returned their warm smiles and hurried off.

"Don't worry," said Bogo. "We'll be using the tightest possible security when transporting and containing Miss Earhart."

"That's good to hear, Chief, she's--" Judy blinked, cutting herself off. "Wait. You know her?"

"Yes," he said. "Cooper told me."

Nick and Judy shared a look. Getting the evidence was their job; Sly was never supposed to reveal that much to Bogo. They had the same expression in their eyes, the same question.

*What happened?*

Bogo's voice caught their attention. "Don't worry. He's already confessed to everything."

---

*Sly lay in the hospital bed, breathing steady. Carmelita sat right next to him, slightly too close than was professional. All he wanted was to hold her hand; and from how the fire in her eyes had subsided to a gentle warmth, it seemed like she wanted that too."

*Unfortunately, the two dozen other cops squeezed into his room sort of killed the vibe. Sly might've tried it anyway, if one of those cops wasn't Chief Bogo.*

*Sly met his gaze. His voice was weaker, hoarser, but he kept it steady. "First thing's first, big guy. I'm thinking I won't press charges over how you punched me in half."

"I," said Bogo carefully, "did not know the extent of your pre-existing injuries, and would have exercised due caution if I had. Obviously."

"Obviously," echoed Sly. "But you still punched me in half. That's not gonna look good if I make a fuss." His grin was woozy but triumphant. "So I won't. If you hear me out."

*Carmelita caught his eye. Was this accidental? said her eyebrow. Or did you plan on maiming yourself? I don't know which option is less dumb, replied his quiet smirk, so I'll let you decide.*

*He turned back to Bogo. "I will fully surrender on two conditions."

*Bogo's eyes narrowed. "You are handcuffed to a hospital bed, awaiting a worryingly large blood transfusion."

"Ugh. Fine. I will promise not to break out again on two conditions."

"Chief, can't we table this discussion?" said Carmelita. "He needs rest."
Sly raised a hand. His handcuffs jingled softly. "No, this is urgent. You accept my surrender, the game ends. The game ends, I tell you where Nick and Judy are."

That got their attention. A ripple went through the ZPD officers. Bogo leaned down, one hoof on the bed railings. "Talk."

"First: no criminal charges against Nick or Judy. They're blameless." He glared. "I'm serious!"

"Your confession would prove their innocence," said Bogo. "The professional punishment, if any, is up to Internal Affairs. But they wouldn't face legal action."

"Good. Second: when I go to jail – and will I ever – I want to be in the same facility as Penelope."

Bogo frowned, but thoughtfully. "That... may be hard to arrange. There'll be resistance to imprisoning you with a former member of your Gang."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought my psychological profile was well-documented."

With effort, Sly leaned up. Teeth gritted against the pain.

"Penelope has already escaped at least one maximum-security prison. I'm offering to help keep her in."

Nick and Judy stared, unsure of what to say.

"I can see you're tired," said Bogo. "You two have gone through quite the ordeal. But we can straighten all this out..." He smiled. It seemed shy. "If you'd follow me?"

Judy turned to Nick. Her eyes softened and she gave him a little smile. They had made it.

Nick returned it, then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, we're... ready to come home. Sir."

"Glad to hear it."

Bogo guided them out of the asylum, walking just behind them. It felt dreamlike to Nick as they cleared the dark hallways and emerged out into the courtyard. The darkening sky was lit by dozens of quiet sirens, red and blue stretching out ahead of them. And their colleagues, watching. Relieved.

"Chief?"

Nick craned his neck, green eyes tired but warm.

"I'd like to cash in some vacation days now. Please."

Bogo chuckled. "Fine with me."

Moments later, they were being guided into a cruiser. A long night awaited them, but not an unpleasant one. The danger was behind them. Ahead, their normal lives.

Dusk in Zootopia.
Epilogue: Gold

Chapter Summary

Don't worry
I've got you
Nothing will ever harm you
I'm close by
I'll stay here
Through all things, I will be near...

The Zootopia Police Department Internal Affairs division has completed its investigation of Case CR 18-74447-ZTP, known in the media as "the Phantasm incident". Panel interviews were conducted with all relevant parties, including Officers Nicholas Wilde and Judith Hopps, separately and together.

The Board is confident that had events proceeded as normal, Officer Wilde would have been cleared of the charges of murdering Dawn Bellwether and William Afton. However, the Director would like to personally acknowledge the problematic nature of the case. Given the severity of the allegations, and the difficulties in fully disproving them, the Board accepts that Wilde's reputation as both an officer and a private citizen would have no doubt been impacted.

The Board agrees that Officer Wilde was the victim of psychological warfare. The tactics used against him by Miss Penelope Earhart were cruel and unusual. In such circumstances, fleeing ZPD custody is understandable, but not justifiable. Proper protocol was not followed, and had Wilde and Hopps left of their own volition, this Board would be forced to pursue at least some avenue of official reprimand.

However, the decision was not undertaken by Wilde or Hopps. Mister Slytunkhamen "Sly" Cooper, infamous thief, has fully confessed to abducting both officers. In an interview with this panel, he made clear he considered Wilde and Hopps useful in his own rivalry with Earhart, while also acknowledging a major factor in his motivation was, direct quote, "funsies". Cooper is willing to take full responsibility for the incident, and this Board is willing to grant it to him.

Thus, in light of Cooper's confession, the complexities of the case, and the outstanding service records of both officers, this Board hereby finds Officer Nicholas P. Wilde and Officer Judith L. Hopps innocent of misconduct. Both are free to resume their assignments at Zootopia Police Department Precinct One at earliest convenience.

We look forward to seeing what you do next.

Undersigned,
Director Raymond Colt, ZPD Internal Affairs

Things had evened out at Precinct One.

The morning sun shone on Nick and Judy as they approached the entrance. She glanced around. "Wow, look at this. It seems so quiet here now."
"Yeah. Quieter than usual, even."

Nick scratched his back, a reflex that was slowly waning. A minor surgery, as quick and painless as surgeries got, had removed the tiny subdermal tracer. As it happened, it contained no explosives. But he was glad they had erred on the side of caution.

They weren't in uniform. Not yet, at least. Judy was wearing a warm purple sweater that matched her eyes and kept out the autumn breeze. Nick was back to his usual green shirt. It felt good.

She smirked up at him. "Think they're gonna make a big deal of us?"

"What? Why would they?" He returned the look as they came to the door. "We're just two coworkers stopping in on our day off. Background noise. Nothing special."

"Uh huh."

They stepped inside and immediately stopped.

"Okay," murmured Nick, "maybe not."

There was a cheer, punctuated by the applause of paws of all sizes. It seemed like all of Precinct One – the detectives, the patrol officers, the civilian employees, even lab technicians – had filled the lobby. Three banners hung from the ceiling. The first read **Welcome back, Nick & Judy!**, with the second declaring **YOU WEREN'T NUTS!**

The third was really more of a mural.

"Oh my god!" Nick clapped his hands together, laughing with open joy. "Who – who drew Carrots kicking a ghost?!"

"That was me!" Clawhauser waved them over, and all three looked up to his work.

As a cartoon Nick watched on, his amazement evident from his :O facial expression, a stylized Judy struck her foe. The ghost was round and black and had innocent white eyes.

"I didn't know what it looked like," Clawhauser said sheepishly, "and you guys were super busy so I didn't want to bother you with dumb questions. Did it look scarier? I bet it looked way scarier. Sorry. Dumb idea."

"Oh, Ben, it's perfect. I want it framed." Judy hugged him as tightly as she could. To Clawhauser's surprise and delight, Nick did too.

"We're... sorry," murmured Nick. "For scaring you like that."

"And letting Sly push you around," added Judy, frowning at the memory. "That was so hard to watch. You didn't deserve that at all."

"Guys, guys. I'm okay. I'm a cop, I can handle a criminal trying to hurt my feelings." He beamed down at them. "I'm just glad you're back home."

Nick pulled back. "Well, not quite yet. Carrots and I are taking some time off before getting back to work."

He turned to address the lobby.

"As you know, we've been on administrative leave while Internal Affairs sniffed around. Wasn't as
dreary as it sounds, though. Since we had time to kill at home, we recentred our emotional cores by
catching up on critically-acclaimed animated movies." He smirked. "Not to brag or anything, but I
totally cried."

"He shed like, three tears, total," translated Judy. "But that's progress! We're working our way up to
a sob."

"We're just stopping in to do something real quick. This isn't our grand return yet," said Nick. "But I..."

He trailed off for a moment. Judy came up beside him, laying a paw on his arm.

Do you want me to say it?

No, said his smile. I can do this.

He took a breath and went slowly, finding the words as they came.

"All my life," he said, "I've been alone. Kinda by choice, but kinda... not. I tried joining a club with
uniforms once before, and..." He chuckled. "Some of you know how that went."

Judy's paw squeezed his arm. He glanced back at her.

"So I was kinda dubious when Carrots, uh, happened. To me. And even when I got used to her, I
wondered – was it really a good idea to follow her here? I got the concept. I knew I could use my
skills to make the world a better place. But would it work? Would her colleagues ever accept a con-
man fox as one of their own? ...Could they?"

He looked around. Took in all the faces watching him.

"Well, after this... After the Phantasm, after how hard you all worked, after so many of you took the
time to tell us you were worried or relieved or always knew I was innocent, which," he added with a
grin, "I'm choosing to take at face value, not just that you're all saying that now that I'm back..."

A ripple of laughter went through the crowd. He savoured it for a moment.

"After all that... I guess you can. Accept me, I mean. So speaking as a fox, as a hustler, as a murder
suspect: thank you. All of you. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm part of a team." He trailed
off, scratching his neck. "Uh. That's it."

There was another cheer, but this one was gentler. Accepting. Judy pressed up against his side as he
took in the room, the sea of smiles around him.

"Oh my god," said Wolford, clutching Fangmeyer's arm. "I'm gonna cry."

"You are too cute, Maxie," snorted Sasha, pulling him closer.

The cheer quieted as one figure moved up from the crowd. He loomed over them, and for a moment
the room was silent.

Bogo, for once, seemed unsure of what to say.

"I..." He coughed. "It's good the process went smoothly. Colt over in IA is sensible, he tends to
always, uh..."

He paused. After a moment, he found the four words he needed.
"You are," he said, "good cops."

Judy smiled. "Thank you, sir."

Nick did too. "Yeah. And if you don't mind me saying, you're a good Chief of Police."

Bogo smiled thinly. "Heh. Don't lie for my sake, Wilde."

The tension broke. Many officers visibly relaxed. The last barrier to Nick and Judy's return was gone.

Bogo folded his arms, but his expression stayed light. "So. Aside from wasting valuable police time, why are you here?"

"I'm sorry, Chief. That's on me."

Carmelita pushed through the crowd, joining the partners. She gave Judy a smile, and then – to his surprise – pulled Nick into a quick hug.

"Nice speech," she murmured.

"Thanks."

She stepped back, speaking at a louder volume. Half to him, half to the room. "I let slip you'd be coming in today... I think some wires must have gotten crossed. I'm sorry if this is all mis-timed."

"Not at all!" Nick grinned. "You guys can just do it all again next time. Oh! Can me and Carrots get this welcome every morning?"

"Show of hands," called Bogo. "Who else is regretting Wilde coming back?"

"You know you love me, Chief!"

Another ripple of laughter, this one dispersing the lobby. As they went to leave, Bogo caught Carmelita's eye. "Inspector."

"Chief?"

"You've been doing exemplary work here. My officers and I would be happy to pick up the slack if you felt it appropriate to take a few days off." His smile was quiet. "Hopps and Wilde still have some vacation left. I'm sure they'd be eager to show you the city."

Judy practically spun on her heel, looking up at Carmelita with bright eyes. Carmelita suppressed a chuckle, glancing from her to Bogo. "I... think I will."

"Good."

They made very, very slow progress out of the lobby. Nick took time to savour everything. Clawhauser beaming up at Bogo. The sound of Max and Sasha laughing. People he had barely seen before shouting welcomes and encouragement and jokes as he passed.

Part of him was embarrassed they were making such a fuss. Most of him loved it.

But this wasn't why they had come in. Soon, Carmelita was leading them to one of the few quiet corners of the building.
"So..." Nick grinned nervously. "Are we–?"

Carmelita sighed, but with a smile. "Yes, Nick. For the fifth and hopefully final time, we are cool. You and Judy and I, we are all cool."

"It's just – when we heard about what happened, we–"

"'Felt terrible, and we should've told you! But without disabling Penelope's explosives first the ZPD would have no evidence, etcetera etcetera...'' Carmelita broke her stride, turning to him. "I know, Nick. Heck, I've been there. Clearing your own name is a delicate science."

She laid a hand on his shoulder. Her eyes were warm.

"But one I knew you two could handle. I told you I had faith in you. And I was right."

Carmelita squeezed his shoulder, and he returned her smile. After a quick wink to Judy, she continued leading them down the corridor.

"Now, Sly, on the other hand..." She shook her head. "I told you I trusted him, Nick, and I suppose on some level I always did. I always will. But when he showed up without you, acting weird... I assumed the worst. And I let out some things I'd been, um. Bottling up."

She smiled to herself as they reached their destination. The interrogation room.

"But I got a hold of myself. And now..."

She opened the door. Sitting at the desk, waiting patiently, was Sly Cooper.

The partners had rarely seen Carmelita so relaxed. "I'm pleased to say he's making a full recovery."

"Hi, guys!" Sly waved. His hands were cuffed to the desk, but the cuffs were light and the chain was long. Nothing like Wolf's pair. Nick assumed he could easily break out if he chose. "Great to see you!"

"You too!" Judy ducked inside, giving Sly a hug. He laughed, returning it.

Nick tried to make his concern seem nonchalant. "Ha ha, kinda weird behaviour for a recent kidnapping victim, Hopps...!"

"Don't worry," said Carmelita. "No-one's going to see or hear this except the four of us." Carmelita was at ease, arms folded, smiling. But she was still Inspector Fox. "You're safe, Nick. I guarantee you."

"Thanks..."

Judy finally pulled back, her eyes shining. "I'm so glad you're okay, Sly."

"Same. I mean – I'm glad you're okay. And myself too. Obviously." Sly coughed. "Let's start over. I'm Sly?"

Judy laughed. "Sorry we didn't visit sooner. This is the earliest we could make it." She nodded to her partner. "Nick's been dying to talk to you."

Nick hesitated in the doorway. Carmelita gave him a playful shove as Judy went to leave.

"I'll leave you to it. But don't worry, Sly. I'll visit too!"
"Glad to hear it. I missed you."

Judy returned to the hall, still smiling. Carmelita looked to Sly. Her face was warm, her voice quiet. "I'll be out here."

He was the same. "I know."

With a nod, she shut the door. Sly gave Nick a smile.

"Great thing about getting arrested – me and Carmelita hang out all the time!" He sighed. "Nothing like a near-death experience to remind me how much I love that woman."

Nick eased into his chair with a wince. "Uh, right. And... are you okay?"

"Sure, sure." Sly was at ease. "I gotta move slow, but the wound on my back is healing nicely. Like I said, I bounce back quick. Funny story! They actually ran out of raccoon blood when they were stitching me back together. Had to switch to tanuki to top me up. It's cool. Rioichi Cooper married a tanuki way back in the day, so I already had some tanuki blood. But now it's not metaphorical."

Nick did his absolute best to return Sly's grin. He could not.

Sly coughed. "So yeah. That's cool."

"I'm, um, glad to hear it." Nick let out a breath. "And... you and Carmelita? I heard about that fight you had."

"Yeah," frowned Sly. "That was... something. I never had to stand my ground and fight her before. It was weird. And bad."

"I'm really sorry."

"You're fine," said Sly. "It's not your fault. Or hers. After everything I did, including disappearing on her for a year... She was gonna run out of patience eventually. She trusts me, but not blindly. Which is how it should be, I guess."

He smirked.

"On the other hand, I was starting to wonder if there's anything that could drive Judy away from you. She's quite a partner, huh?"

"Yeah." Nick's voice was quiet. "Although... don't misunderstand."

"Huh?"

"You're implying she does have blind faith in me. But that's not it." He met Sly's gaze. "She knows I can hurt her, just like she could hurt me. And she's willing to take that risk. She calculates the danger to herself, and weighs it against the potential good she could do. That's why she stayed with me. No matter how bad things got, she still saw a chance to save me. She's not stupid enough to trust anyone unconditionally, even me. She's a different kind of stupid."

Sly raised his eyebrows. "You know she might be listening, right?"

"Oh, I'm quoting her on that. That's how she put it when we were hashing this out. I'm a different kind of stupid, Nick'. Exact words!"

"Huh!" Sly chuckled. "Well... I won't argue."
For a moment, they were quiet. Sly watched Nick with those gleaming hazel eyes. After all that had happened, that spark of humour was as bright as ever.

"So. I could gladly chat all day about the wonderful women in our lives, but I'm curious. What's this about?"

"I, uh... I just wanted to see you. Partly to thank you, of course. I'm not sure I could ever thank you enough. But also to ask..."

Nick looked up. He couldn't match Sly's easy smile.

"Why did you do it?"

"Crime tab," said Sly simply. "The plan was good, but there was no guarantee the ZPD would take you back. I've already racked up a couple life sentences. Adding another to make sure you and Judy are safe just makes sense."

"No, I get that. But... why?"

Nick swallowed. There was a lot he wanted to say, and he had to move slowly to keep it from all spilling out at once.

"I don't know if you've heard any of the media coverage, but -- it's bad. People love me and Carrots, so now they hate you. The heartless criminal who kidnapped us as a joke, to use us like pawns in a game. I know how much your reputation means to you, that you're better than other criminals, but now the public thinks you're one of the worst--"

He fidgeted in his chair, his words steadily speeding up.

"And that's not getting into how you're going to jail, and I guess staying there at least for a while? If you disappeared too fast the suspicion would be back on us -- and you got stabbed, you got really, really badly hurt, you legitimately could've died, and all this time I've done nothing but insult you and push you away and--" He paused for breath, his voice uneven. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sly."

"It's okay, really. You don't have to apologize."

Nick took a slow breath, regaining control of his nerves. He met Sly's gaze, searching. "I just... I don't understand. Why would you throw away everything like this?"

"Nick. You do understand."

Sly leaned forward. His smile didn't fade.

"Correct me if I'm wrong. You'd know more about this than me. But that's the thing about being the good guy, right? Sometimes you do something even though you don't want to. It's not fun. It doesn't benefit you. But you do it anyway. There's no reward except protecting other people. The people you need to protect." His expression darkened for a moment. "If Judy was in trouble, what would you sacrifice to save her?"


"There you go, then."

Nick blinked. "But -- that just shifts the question. Me and Hopps are as close as two people can get. But you're..."
"What, a thief? A nuisance? Just some guy?" Sly smirked. "I don't know how much clearer I can make this, Nick. I like you. Both of you. And I'm the kind of person who goes all-in on a relationship."

"Even for a fox who can't stand you?"

"Nick, you've met Carmelita."

Nick found himself laughing, caught off guard. Sly chuckled too. They savoured the moment.

Nick wished he could end it there. Crack some conclusive quip, shoot Sly a wink, and leave. But slowly, his smile faded.

"Still. I'm grateful. And sad, too. This must be a lot for you."

"Easy, Slick. Trust me. Nothing's more important to me than the safety of my friends."

Sly reached across the table. His hand found Nick's wrist.

"Nick, take a minute to realize what happened here." His eyes were serious. "Penelope and Bellwether, two of the most dangerous people I could name, teamed up. They put together this plan meant to kill all of us. And now it's over, and none of us died. I'm calling that a win."

Nick didn't pull away from his touch. "As simple as that, huh?"

"Yeah. The Penelopes and Bellwethers of the world – they know we look out for each other, but they don't understand why. And that means it's never a real weakness."

Nick went quiet, processing Sly's words. Sly leaned back, giving him a few moments before speaking again.

"I'm glad you're here. No point doing all this unless I can see you're okay with my own eyes, right? Plus... I wanted to thank you, too."

Nick looked up "You did?"

"Vengeance blackens the soul, Nick."

Sly's smile had faded. Nick felt the grim certainty of his words.

"After so many years, dealing with some of the worst people out there... it can get real tempting to punish them yourself. Give them everything they deserve, then more. Make them suffer." He sighed, eyes closed. "But that's a dangerous game. You're better off remembering what makes life worthwhile in the first place. And you did. As much as I hate Penelope... I'm glad you're the one who stopped her. Everything she put you through, and you still stuck to your principles."

Sly brightened again. Nick had never seen him look quite as warm.

"You're a good man. One of the best I've ever met. Don't forget that, okay?"

Nick wasn't sure what to say. After a moment, he pushed past the hesitation, matching Sly's warmth. "Hey. Don't kill. Don't be killed. That's how the saying goes, right?"

"Yeah. Or it should be."

They held each other's gaze for a moment. Comfortable.
But even now, with all the danger past, Nick's brain had a habit of ruining nice moments.

"But... what about your Gang?"

Sly cringed. "Yeah, that's one thing I really can't pat myself on the back for. They didn't want this. And I went and did it anyway."

"You think they're upset?"

"It's... not the first time I've left them without warning," said Sly. "I don't know if that makes it better or worse. Either way, I feel terrible about it. I really hope they'll forgive me."

"I'd think so," shrugged Nick. "Especially since you never meant to hurt them. The official search for them is still ongoing..." He smirked. "I'll pass on your apology when I'm thanking Specs and Pecs."

"Yeah, I'd appre-" Sly almost started. "Nicknames! You gave them nicknames!"

"Of course. We couldn't have done this without their help. It's the least I can do."

"Really good ones, too! 'Specs' sounds like 'spectacles' or, like, computer specs, and Murray would love that they rhyme..." Sly's eyes lit up. "Wait, wait, what's mine? It was Stripes, right?"

"It was Stripes," said Nick, "but I dunno. That didn't quite stick. Too basic, maybe." He leaned a little closer. "I think Carmelita has the right idea. I'm tempted to borrow 'Ringtail'. If that's alright with you?"

"Nick," said Sly, "you can borrow Ringtail any time."

Nick returned his smile. Something occurred to him, something he once would have resisted tooth and claw. It still had risks. But Carmelita had guaranteed their privacy, and he trusted that.

Sly watched Nick stand, leaving his chair. He assumed their interview was coming to a close.

Instead, before he could change his mind, Nick swooped down and pulled Sly into a hug.

Sly's ears shot up. "Oh my god. Oh my god! You're hugging me!"

"Yeah. I've... gotten better about hugging people. Recently."

Sly eagerly returned it. His grin was massive. "I lied. I actually did do this for a reward, and it's this. All worth it."

"Glad to hear it." Nick pulled back, letting Sly see his smirk. "Save my life a couple more times, and maybe you'll get that kiss."

"We're not counting the one right after you stopped me drowning, right? I thought you were Carmelita, so, do-over."

"Do-over."

Nick stood. It felt like a good place to end. If nothing else, he needed to check if Judy wanted a turn.

"Well, um... thanks. Again."

"You're welcome." Sly's smirk was soft. "And those aren't empty words. I'm really glad you're okay."
Nick lingered at the door. Unsure of what to say, he went with what felt natural. "I'll be seeing you, Ringtail."

"Yeah." He smiled. "Catch you later, Slick."

The door clicked shut. Sly sat quietly, letting out a small sigh of satisfaction.

"...Ha ha, I'm going to jail."

For a city like Zootopia, even villainous inventors came and went. In the weeks after the murder investigation, life continued.

The media buzzed with the 'Phantasm Incident'. Pundits sang the praises of Nick and Judy, and denigrated Penelope and Sly in almost equal measure. Both were imprisoned, put under heavy guard before their trials. If she were still alive, Dawn Bellwether would have been unspeakably insulted by how often the media treated her actual, genuine murder as a vague footnote.

Carmelita's temporary office at Precinct One turned out not to be so temporary. She soon settled into a natural rhythm; working alongside Clawhauser, Fangmeyer and Wolford by day, laughing with Nick and Judy by night, and keeping a very close eye on her favourite prisoner at all times. Carmelita never settled in one place for too long. But she found herself definitely getting used to Zootopia.

The ZPD de-escalated back to its usual operations. Its officers were safe and the culprits were detained; the main ones, anyway. The other two members of the Cooper Gang had never surfaced. Weeks passed without any incidents on the ZPD's perimeter of the city, and most officers assumed the elusive thieves had somehow slipped by them. Carmelita said nothing.

After hearing of Sly's arrest, Honey assumed she wasn't getting the payment she'd been promised. But, days afterward, she received a large amount of cash, in unmarked bills, via a dead drop; exactly as all monetary transactions should take place. This money funded her new podcast, 'The Wools Among Us', chronicling her attempts to awaken the populace to the ovine conspiracy encircling them. She also gave her thoughts on movie trailers.

True to form, Ruby was more flattered than upset that Nick and Judy had chosen to break into her bar. True to form, they still felt they owed her. They agreed that henceforth, Red Like Roses could brand itself as THE SECRET HIDING PLACE OF NICK WILDE AND JUDY HOPPS! This satisfied Ruby, because it was a cool tagline and great advertising, and it satisfied her long-suffering landlady, because loudly declaring that would ensure Nick and Judy could never secretly hide there again.

Mayor Toriel returned from her conference to find her city in disarray, her living room window shattered, and her family very badly trying to cover up the specifics. One firm conversation later, she established three things. Asriel's safety was always paramount; the Mayor's family was absolutely not supposed to abet criminals; and she was proud of them for doing the right thing.

Asriel, wise beyond his years, suggested omitting the part about the loaded gun. Asgore, fearing armed mercenaries far less than his wife, agreed.

Scar's small, sad cabal of followers soon joined him in prison. When asked for his thoughts on Zira's arrest, Mufasa Kifalme gave no official comment. However, less rigorous publications claimed his initial reaction was to murmur "Who?"
No-one mourned William Afton.

For neither the first nor last time, Wolf O'Donnell disappeared into the night. All the ZPD could establish was that he was no longer in Zootopia, leaving for parts unknown.

Gary and Larry continued to make every day a treasure.

Nick had survived. In fact, he did more than that; he reclaimed his life and then some. His job, his reputation, his nights of well-earned sleep all returned to him. His colleagues presented him with a brand new phone as part of welcoming him back, a sturdy model with impenetrable security. He enjoyed showing it off to his mother at the weekly meal they shared.

Everything taken from him was returned. His partner had never left.

Judy suggested to him that it might be time to see a therapist – not just for the Phantasm, but for everything before it. Everything after. Nick’s instinct, as ever, was to avoid help. But he had come to realize that instinct belonged in the past. And so, when Judy’s voice was joined by Carmelita’s, then his mother’s, and then even Bogo’s – just with the simple statement that the department could cover the expenses – Nick went. To disclose what Nick discussed in those sessions would be a violation of patient confidentiality. But he would be the first to tell you that his recovery was going well.

Despite everything, he was still Nick Wilde.

H&H2: Of Help and Hauntings

Starring:

Jason Hateman as Nick Wilde
Mevin Killer as Sly Cooper
Ginnifer Badwin as Judy Hopps
Grey Gryphyn as Carmelita Montoya Fox

Talented and wonderful artists:

Main headshots – RadicalRobo
Nick and Judy image – TrashasaurusRex
wasn't even commissioned or nothing and went ahead and drew rad art anyway - SecretMellowBlog

With Apologies To:

Lin-Manuel "The Tomcat" Miranda
Andy "Mandopony" Stein
Jeff "Faunus Rights" Williams
toby fox [hey, that works by itself!]
With lyrics via Man on the Internet [that one doesn't]
Joss "Lion King 2 Writing Credit" Whedon
uh... Savlonic.
Phil "Brother Bear" Collins

and most especially
Neil "Ghost in the Form of a Mongoose" Cicierega

Well, here we are. April 9th. Exactly three years after the first chapter of 'Of Heists and Hustles'
hit the internet.

Don't you love it when things sync up?

I spent most of those three years dreaming up this story – yes, including the time I should have been spending actually writing the first one. I have a chronic habit of thinking of sequel concepts. And yet this is the first sequel I've ever actually produced.

I gotta say, I'm really happy with it. And I'm definitely very, very happy that people have enjoyed it. Every single review I've gotten on this story has been super affirming. I was worried there wouldn't be much of an audience for this fic – by which I mean there wouldn't be an audience, period – but I've been happily proven wrong. I can't thank you all enough. You've made this story more than worth the effort.

If you're wondering why I just listed a bunch of musicians, they're the sources for my chapter titles! In particular, I'd like to give a big shout out to Neil Cicierega's 2016 album Spirit Phone. It's a fun, spooky time that's a huge source of inspiration for me, both for this story and in general. I definitely recommend it.

It's my custom to take a break from long fics after finishing one, so don't expect much from me in the next few months. But before you ask: yes, I have plans for a third instalment. If you're anxious to see where things go from here, more is on the way! Slowly.

Can you imagine? Can you picture someone chucking Sly into a remote, depressing location for dramatic effect, and then ending the story, and then never producing a follow-up? Can you envision that? Can you believe that's a possible timeline on which we could exist? A nightmare. Not worth thinking about.

Well, that's enough rambling from me. In conclusion, thank you for your lovely support, and I hope you enjoyed this 100,000 word episode of Scooby Doo.

Happy April.

The bars slammed shut behind him. Sly surveyed his new home.

There wasn't much to comment on. It was a cell. The walls were dark grey. The bars were a different dark grey. The bed, if something so ugly could be called a 'bed', was a third dark grey.

He sat on it, instantly confirming it was as uncomfortable as it looked. He tallied the positives. The guards had seemed receptive to his offer to watch Penelope, judging by how politely they had told him to shut up. Lionheart had welcomed him with open arms, so he already had a seat at the cool kids' table. (Prison was just adult school, right?) And this orange jumpsuit was only mostly terrible!

All he had to do now was wait.

He sat there. He tried and failed to look out the tiny, tiny window. He sat there. He rattled the bars, just for fun. He sat there again. He sat there.

He sat there.

Sly smiled into the darkness. "...I've made a huge mistake."
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!