The Long Game

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The Long Game

by Mikey2084

Summary

In Zootopia where anyone can be anything some things are still forbidden. Judy is confronted with a choice between suffering the consequences of protecting her family and being with her soulmate, she chooses to protect her family. As Nick tries to find a way for the two of them to be together our heroes find themselves once again protecting the city from a new threat. A Zootopia AU
Broken Heart

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Zootopia and all related characters are owned by Disney.

It was a dark and stormy night. No, it was actually quite the pleasant Zootopia afternoon, dark and stormy was how Nick felt. The red fox, dressed in his standard-issue khaki pants, flowered Pawaian shirt, and tie, was standing in front of the Grand Pangolin Arms apartment building looking up at Judy’s window with a pained look on his face. An overweight pig in an expensive jogging suit slowly passed the stationary tod. “Damn Fox, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, move out of the way.”

Nick started walking, and within moments he was on autopilot headed towards the Metrorail station. Ever since they’d first met, he had promised himself over and over that this wouldn’t happen.

When Judy had dug up some old information on him and used it to blackmail him into helping her with the Missing Mammal case, he was so impressed by her hustle that he went along with it. He’d promised himself that he’d lose her later, he didn’t.

Waiting on the rail platform, oblivious to the dirty looks he was getting, Nick remembered when Chief Bogo had tried to welsh on his deal with Judy and take her badge when she still had ten more hours to find Otterton. Nick had stood up to the large Cape Buffalo and helped Judy keep her job. Afterward, he swore to himself that he wouldn’t start caring about her.

After claiming a seat in the railcar, Nick knew things had gone south with Judy after they boarded the gondola car and he told her about his disastrous attempt to join the Junior Ranger Scouts. When she’d put her paw on his arm, and said she believed in him and that he could be much more than what others expected, emotions long buried started to emerge.

The railcar started to slow as he thought about how he walked out on her after the news conference. Try as he might, to hate her for what she’d said, he couldn’t. He even had to give up hustling, because, for three months, all he could think about was the gray bunny and how much he missed her. When Judy found him under the bridge and apologized for what she’d done, he waited a whole two seconds before forgiving her and then they were off, best friends again, solving the Nighthowler case.

Stepping out of the railcar onto the platform, Nick slowly made his way out to the sidewalk. He remembered helping her while her leg healed after Bellwether had been arrested and then being amazed when she pulled his old ZPD application out of her back pocket and asked him to be her partner again. That was when he knew he wanted her in his life, but as what? Friend or girlfriend? He’d sworn to himself that he’d keep that answer buried inside his heart.

Still on auto-pilot, Nick walked for a few blocks through a rougher part of town, he hadn’t been this way in a while and was barely conscious of where he was going. The academy training was the hardest six months of his life, physically demanding and academically challenging. Judy was there for him the whole time. Meeting him for extra workouts, near-nightly phone calls, sharing her old study guides and testing him on the material until he knew it backward and forwards. She even
kept him from giving up the day his death count on the obstacle course reached double digits.

The day Judy visited him, injured from a shooting, Nick felt like he’d been gut punched. That was the moment he vowed he’d have her back no matter what. And, since graduating top of his class was the only way to guarantee they’d be assigned together as partners, he promised himself that too.

When he actually did graduate valedictorian of his class, she was the one that pinned his badge on. When she smiled and saluted him for the first time, he gave up lying to himself, he’d fallen for her.

Unfortunately, he knew nothing could ever happen between them. She was amazing, and he was a pelt. A fox and a rabbit could never work. He decided (more promises) that having her as a best friend was more than he deserved and it was enough.

Until it wasn’t.

Walking into the Foxburg Pub, Nick headed to a booth he hadn’t sat in for over a year and tortured himself going over, in excruciating detail, the worst mistake he’d made in his whole life. Even the skunk butt debacle paled in comparison to this horror show of a train wreck. Six months of working together, their success rate top tier, movie nights, showing her the city on their off days and spending most of their free time together, it was the happiest he’d been since he was a kit, happier even because he was hopelessly in love.

Months of promises had held firm until they were on break eating lunch in the park one day. Judy saw an interspecies couple taunted by some speciest old bitty of a goat. That seemingly minor event started them both on a path they never expected, a path that had Nick break every promise he’d ever made to himself and ending with him sitting by himself in a bar.

“Good evening sir, what can I get for you?”

Nick didn’t look at the waitress, didn’t see the curious look on her face as she wondered why such a good-looking guy was in an empty bar all by himself in the middle of the afternoon.

“A whiskey, please. Make it a double.”

The waitress returned a couple of minutes later and slid the glass of amber liquor in front of Nick. “My name is Holly. Please let me know if you would like anything else.”

Holly made her way back to the bar and took up her station by the cash register. After a few minutes of trying not to look bored, Holly cleaned a few glasses and then wiped down some tables. Checking her watch as she looked at the fox in the corner, she realized that he hadn’t moved an inch in the last ten minutes. As far as she could tell, all he was doing was just sitting there staring at his whiskey glass.

Holly started to go over and check on the fox when Mr. Blackpaw, the owner, stepped out from the kitchen. “How are we doing Holly? Looks dead.”

Holly waved her paw towards the fox sitting in the corner booth and replied. “Yeah, the only customer is in booth eight, and he hasn’t moved a hair in ten minutes, ordered a double whiskey, but he hasn’t touched it yet. I was just about to head over to see if he wanted something else.”

Ned looked around the corner of the bar and saw Nick unmoving, with a blank look on his face, staring at the shot glass as if daring it to move. “I know him, leave him be. I’ll take care of him for you.”
“Sure, Mr. Blackpaw, no problem.”

Ned pulled out his phone and sent a quick text. You don’t tend bar as long as he had without knowing when something was seriously wrong. The tension was coming off Nick in waves as he debated the drink sitting in front of him. Ned grabbed a clean glass out of the sink and started rubbing it dry. All he could do now was keep an eye on Nick and wait.

Twenty minutes later a small fennec fox with outsized ears, wearing shorts and a red and black bowling shirt pushed open the door to the pub. Finn pulled his aviators off and let his eyes adjust to the dim light for a moment. He gave a nod to Ned behind the bar and headed over. “How is he?”

The old fox nodded his head towards one of the booths in the rear. “He still hasn’t moved.”

“Send over his regular.”

Finnick slid onto the bench across from Nick without saying anything. A couple of minutes later Holly placed a blueberry seltzer in front of the small fox, he nodded without looking at her, and she left without having said a word.

After waiting a few minutes for Nick to acknowledge him, Finnick finally broke the silence. “Nick, you know you aren’t going to drink that. So, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Maybe today’s the day I do it.”

“Yeah, and I’m going to drink this horse piss that you usually order. Spill, what’s going on?”

“Finn, I screwed up bad.”

“What, ‘hide in my van for a night or two’ bad?”

“No, worse.”

“Don’t tell me it was, ‘skunk butt rug’ bad.”

“This is so way worse than that, I’d take being iced by Big over this any day.”

As Finnick took a quick look over his shoulder to make sure there weren’t any hit-mammals bursting into the bar, he suddenly realized what was going on. “Alright, what happened with your bunny girl?”

Nick groaned, head still down. “I asked her out. I called in my favor with Martinelli and went all out. I was in his kitchen all afternoon preparing the perfect meal for her. I made her favorite dishes and then surprised her with something special I cooked from one of Martinelli’s secret family recipes.”

“Whoa, Martinelli let you into his stash? I don’t even want to know what you gave up for that.”

“Yeah, you really don’t because that’s not all he did for me.” Taking a couple of breaths, Nick continued, “When Judy arrived at the restaurant, Martinelli led us both up to the private table on the roof. As we sat there, watching the sunset, he had someone bring up the meal I had cooked so I could serve it to her.

Finnick leaned forward, “So, she accepted the meal, didn’t she?”

A slight smile played across Nick’s face. “Yeah, and then we went back to her place. It was amazing, she was amazing.”
“So why do you look like crap? She accepted your meal and then you played tonsil tag. You’re golden!” Nick flinched at that which caused Finn to pause, something happened. A visual popped into his head, and he started to laugh. “No way, did the two of you rut? Did she wake up pissed and throw your ass out? You must be a hell of a lot better cook than I remember.”

That got a reaction, “Screw you, Finn! We didn’t rut, you of all mammals know I would never disrespect a girl by trying something like that.”

“Okay, okay, I was kidding, don’t bite my face off. I’m shutting up now.”

“Everything was going so much better than I could have dreamed. Finn, she told me she liked me. We made out, and it was great. I knew, one hundred percent, we could make it work between us. When I left her apartment last night, I was the happiest fox ever until, barely fifteen minutes into my walk home, I got a “we need to talk” text.”

“Is that where you were this afternoon?”

“Yeah. I was an idiot, Judy’s a bunny, not a vixen, none of what happened at the restaurant meant anything to her, nothing we did together last night made a difference. She told me that her parents would never accept her being in an interspecies relationship, especially with a fox. And it wasn’t just her parents she was worried about, she said her family’s business would be destroyed and all her young siblings would be treated as social pariahs by the rest of their town if she were caught dating outside her species.”

Nick closed in on himself, he looked even more miserable than before. “Finn, as I was leaving her apartment, I said some horrible things, I was so disappointed in her and hurt by what she said and angry at myself for ruining our friendship and pissed at her parents and their whole rutting town I went off on her. It’s over Finn, there’s no coming back from what happened between us.”

Nick looked like he was about to break down, he dropped his head and started staring at the shot glass in front of him again. He felt like his whole life had just been flushed down the toilet. He berated himself again and again for asking Judy out on a date. Thankfully Finn was here, he’d be able to help him make sense of this disaster and come up with a way to get Judy…

Odd noises crept into Nick’s thoughts, noises that were coming from across the table. Nick slowly looked up to see Finn with his phone out. “What are you doing?”

“Cat videos, the whole reason the internet was created.”

“Not even three hours ago I had my heart ripped out of my chest and stomped into the ground by the girl I want to be with, and you’re sitting there watching porn?”

“Oh-huh, it’s amazing the different ways a feline can bend. Here let me show you.” Turning the phone around so Nick could see, Finn started pointing at the small screen. “See, that? How is that even possible?”

Nick took a closer look, angled his head sideways and grunted. “Whoa, you’re right, haven’t seen that… NO, NO, NO.” Nick jerked back in his seat and started waving his paws back and forth as if he were trying to erase the disturbing images from his mind. ”Geez Fin shut that crap off, how about helping me with Judy instead of looking for your next ex-girlfriend.”

Finn paused the video and put the phone down. Waving one of his paws in a circle around Nick, Finn asked, “Depends, are you done with this pity party or do you need some more time to get it out of your system?”
“Well, it hasn’t been very long since she dumped me and I kind of thought I’d get a little more time to wallow in despair.”

Finn reached for his phone, “Take your time, I found this cool site that posts sloth mating tips, with videos.”

With his forehead on the table, Nick groaned. “I hate you so much.”

Patting Nick on the head like he was a small kit, Finn laughed at the larger fox. “That’s why daddy’s here.”

Finn straightened up in his seat and put his game face on. “Okay Nick, serious fox here now. Be straight with me. Do you really want the bunny girl or is this some sort of fanboy phase and you’re just crushing on her?”

“I really want this, she’s the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I don’t want to lose her especially when we were so close to making it happen.”

“You’re sure, ‘cause I can hook you up with a couple of the hottest vixens you’ve ever seen, one night with them and you won’t remember your name let alone any of this.”

“Finn, I’ve never been surer about anything in my life.”

Finn scratched his eyebrow and grimaced, then he pursed his lips and spent a few moments lost in thought. “Assume this is a con, what would you do?”

Nick leaned back again and rubbed the back of his neck. “Judy’s probably pretty angry with me, so I need to come up with a plan to fix that before figuring out how to hustle her into saying yes to another date.”

Finn shook his head, “Not going to work.”

Nick started to speak up but was cut off by Finnick, “Hear me out. Yes, you need to apologize to the bunny for being an asshat in her apartment today, but a couple of minutes ago you said she already likes you.”

Looking like he was trying to solve a complex puzzle, Finn continued. “If the bunny is in the bag, who’s the real mark and what do you want from them?”

It had been a while, but Nick started to channel his inner hustler. Finn was right, as the wheels turned, he realized all the mistakes he’d made over the last few days. Not the ones he believed he’d made that had turned him into an emotional wreck, but the ones that mattered: no research, no plan, no backup plan, and no contingency analysis. Barely a year away from the game and he’d already lost the touch. Nick chewed at his lower lip, and a smile started to creep onto his muzzle. Maybe he was rusty, but the skill was still there.

“Finn, I’m going to need your help to pull this off.”

Smiling, Finn slid the untouched fizzy blueberry drink over to Nick, grabbed the shot glass of whiskey and downed it in a single gulp. Slamming the glass down on the table upside down he looked at Nick, “Hooyah, it’s nice to see you’re back.”

As Finn left the pub, Nick pulled out his phone and started his research, he wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice.
Parking Duty

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Zootopia and all related characters are owned by Disney.

Anyone looking down on Zootopia would assume that the city was waking up to a normal morning. They would be wrong.

The sun was just starting to creep above the horizon as the weather control machinery in the Central district’s walls geared up to deliver another perfect day. Commuters were moving throughout the city filling up the roadways while other mammals gathered on the metro platforms to begin their daily trips to work. A few of those mammals stood with newspapers in their paws, most were looking at their phones for the latest news or social media phenom. All of them ignored one small bunny in a ZPD uniform slowly making her way to the district one headquarters.

Judy Hopps was a perpetual bundle of energy, she tackled each day with an enthusiasm that amazed her coworkers at the ZPD. Judy Hopps, first bunny cop, was never down or defeated.

Until today.

Judy’s eyes were bloodshot with faint bags underneath from a rough night’s sleep, and her droopy ears lay flat against her back, further broadcasting the bunny’s mood. She walked without her usual pep, and as the ZPD building came into sight, her eyes glistened as they threatened a new set of tears.

Normally, she would be meeting her partner Nick, at their regular Snarlbucks. They’d pick up two muffins, one blueberry, one carrot, and two coffees one black and the other half-caf. After a brief walk to the ZPD precinct one building, they would head up to their shared desk, finish their breakfast and then she would drag him by his tie to the bullpen for the morning brief.

Normally.

Instead, this morning she was a mess. After her talk with Nick, she’d spent the rest of the weekend in tears, watching Pawflix, and trying to ease her mood with carrot juice and ice cream. She knew she had done the right thing breaking it off with Nick. Her family would never accept him, and if she dared to date him, her family would be destroyed by prejudice and their farming business along with them.

Nick had trusted her. For so long, she had encouraged him and promised to stand by him and then, in a few minutes, she had destroyed everything they had built together. She had never seen Nick so hurt and upset. He had picked apart her arguments and tried his best to convince her to change her mind. After a while, he’d finally given up, and in a fit of frustration, lumped her in with all the other speciest mammals that couldn’t get past the possibility that two mammals from different species could be friends or more.

She wiped away a tear forming in her eye with the back of her paw. Nick didn’t understand how it was with her family. She had a choice, she could selfishly ruin almost 350 lives to indulge in a fantasy or she could destroy her own life with a decision that she knew she would never forgive
herself for making.

Judy stepped through the main doors of the ZPD building and into the lobby, she dreaded what was about to happen. How was Nick going to treat her, would he even talk to her? She had already rehearsed in her head what she would tell Bogo if Nick didn’t want to be her partner anymore. As the possibilities that ran through her head got darker and darker, Judy started to tense up. She wasn’t a very patient mammal and worrying about what was going to happen was eating at her, best to confront it quickly and deal with the fallout before the stress made her puke.

She looked around the lobby for Nick but didn’t see him. It was still a little early for him to be here especially since they didn’t meet up for coffee. Judy saw Clawhauser munching on a doughnut and walked over to his desk.

She put on her best fake smile, the one she saved for her parents and greeted the plump cheetah stuffing doughnuts in his mouth. “Good morning, Ben.”

“Hey, Judy, I was wondering when you were going to show up. It’s so unusual to see Nick here before you.” Wiping doughnut crumbs off his muzzle, Ben reached under his desk and grabbed a Snarlbucks cup and bag and handed them to Judy.

“Nick asked me to give these to you.”

Judy looked confused, she had mentally prepared for all sorts of possible scenarios, but Nick treating her to breakfast wasn’t one of them. “Thanks, Ben, where is Nick?”

“He’s upstairs talking with Bogo. He said he needed to catch the Chief before the bullpen meeting.”

Judy was about to ask why when Ben pointed at the lobby clock and said, “The morning meeting is about to start you better hustle if you don’t want to be late.”

Judy rushed over to the bullpen and made her way to the chair she shared with Nick at the front of the room. The chair was empty. She hopped up into the seat, being careful not to spill any of her coffee, and looked around for Nick. Not seeing him, she placed the cup on the desk and the bag on the seat next to her. That was when she noticed the note taped to the side of the cup. She pulled it off using a claw to tear it open since it was sealed.

‘Sorry, I was an asshat – Nick’

She folded the note closed just as she heard the pounding of fists on desks and loud grunting. Bogo entered, his look shutting everyone down. The day looked to be a quiet one, so the assignments Bogo passed out were the same as last week except for when he came to Judy.

“Hopps, Wilde is on parking duty for the next two weeks, so you’ll rotate partners starting with Officer Garrison when she gets in at ten.”

“Why did you put Nick on parking duty? What did he do wrong?”

“Hopps, he didn’t do anything wrong, he volunteered for the duty. He’s doing your two weeks so you can go to some Bunnyburrow vegetable celebration that’s happening in the next couple of months.”

Someone from a few rows back laughed and yelled out, “What do you bunnies do, paint yourselves orange and dance naked around the great pumpkin?”
Bogo snorted and dismissed the room full of officers with a thump on the podium, turned and left. Judy looked at the note crumpled in her paw and then at the empty podium. “What the heck, Nick?”

Judy stood in the building’s large lobby looking for her carrot-picking partner. He was up to something and she was going to find out what. She hadn’t ever broken up with anyone before, well truth be told she hadn’t ever actually dated anyone before either, but setting that aside, this wasn’t how it was supposed to work. Growing up with hundreds of siblings Judy had seen every permutation of a breakup and its effects. Usually, there was one or more of the following: anger, crying, video games, yelling, crying, listening to breakup songs, boy or girl bashing, ice cream, crying, binge eating berries, breakup movies, and a few M rated reactions that can’t be thought about in mixed company. Point being, buying her breakfast and working her parking duty were not on the approved list of breakup responses.

Judy headed over to the reception desk. Clawhauser was alone moving his head to the beat of the latest Gazelle release. She threw away her trash from breakfast and then hopped up onto the desk startling the large cheetah into dropping the doughnut in his paw. “Judy, you surprised me, wait, five-second rule.” Grabbing the doughnut and blowing off some lint, he started eating it again. “What’s up?”

“Ben, have you seen Nick? He skipped the bullpen meeting this morning.”

“Yup, I heard he’s on parking duty for a while. He headed out to the garage a few minutes ago to sign out the parking cart.”

Judy hurried to the garage and bounced through the large doors. Quickly looking around, she found Nick. He was easy to spot decked out in the required yellow and orange striped vest topped with the ever-fashionable bowler hat. She started to giggle at how ridiculous he looked in the outfit, but now was not the time, she took a breath, balled her fists, and pasted a serious expression on her face. It was a determined bunny that went to confront the unsuspecting fox.

“Nick, what are you doing?”

He replied with a smirk and gestured with his paw from head to foot “Right now I’m making this outfit look good.”

“Yeah, no Nick, it makes you look like a dork, especially with that hat. I’m asking about the breakfast and you working my shifts.” Judy’s ears fell behind her back and her voice grew softer as she looked down. “You were pretty upset when you left my apartment and I was upset too, but I said what had to be said and I can’t change my mind, I’m sorry, but that’s how it has to be. So, what is this really all about?”

“Look Car… Hopps,” Judy unconsciously cringed at his use of her last name. “I want to apologize for what I said. I thought about it a lot and you aren’t anything like what I said. I know you think you’re watching out for your family. I don’t like it and I don’t agree with it, but I don’t have any family, so I have to accept it for now.”

“Now I’m more confused, if you’re okay with what I said, what’s up with doing my parking duty?”

“Hopps, I didn’t say I was okay with anything.”

Judy stood in front of Nick, her right foot rapidly tapping the floor and ears upright trying to make
sense of what he just said.

Before she could ask a question, he continued, “I asked for the parking duty because it will buy me the time I need to figure out what’s going on. I barely know anything about your family or where you grew up and I can’t solve a problem I don’t understand.”

“Nick, there is no understanding anything and there aren’t any problems that can be solved, whatever you are thinking, you need to stop thinking it. As much as I want things to be different, the risk is too great. Us being together is just a pipe-dream, something that can never happen.”

“Judy, we’ve been friends long enough for you to know that I don’t give up on the things that are important to me. I never have and I never will.” Nick looked into her eyes and with a softer voice said, “It wasn’t too long ago I heard a very special mammal say in a speech that we all should try. That we should try to make the world a better place. So, if that’s what I have to do for us, then that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Judy’s foot had stopped thumping and she seemed frozen in place listening to his words. Nick turned slightly and with his head down looking like he was about to get punished, he quietly added, “Judy, you’re my partner and the best friend I’ve ever had and I respect you more than you can imagine, but sometimes you leap without thinking about other possibilities. I’m going to prove to you that this is one of those times.” He paused, pursed his lips and continued in a determined tone. “No matter what happens, it will all be on me. The worst that happens is I get fired.” Looking her in the eye again, a smirk back on his face, he added, “But, don’t worry, if that happens, I’ll give you some snark-cards to use on Bogo in the morning bullpen meetings.”

Nick slid into the parking cart’s front seat while Judy just looked at him. Smiling now, he gave her a quick two-fingered salute and gunned the cart which sputtered and slowly made its way out of the garage.

Judy huffed as he left. With paws clenched at her sides, she wasn’t sure if she should be angry because Nick hadn’t accepted her decision without question, frustrated because she didn’t have a partner for two weeks or pissed because she didn’t know what he was up to. After a very calm, careful, well thought out evaluation of all the possibilities, she decided that, for now, she would go with a combination of frustrated, pissed, and a touch of curious. But, while glaring at the receding parking cart, she also decided that if necessary, she would hunt the fox down and pound him into the ground.
Nick floored the accelerator on the joke-mobile and headed out of the ZPD garage. He tried to take advantage of the cart’s speed by hanging his head out the side. The canines in the movies always seemed to get a kick out of the wind blowing through their head fur, sadly it wasn’t doing anything for him, maybe it was the fact that the cart was struggling to move faster than a drunken deer.

Nick headed over to city central. It was a bit early for any meters to expire, so he kept busy chalk marking tires. He figured 50-60 tickets would be enough for the day and give him time for a few calls.

An hour later, Nick slipped his wireless headset over his ear, put his phone in his pocket and called Finn.

Nick’s phone rang a few times before he heard a shout through his earpiece. “Who the hell is calling me this early, tell me now so I can bite your face off!”

“Buddy, think caller ID and you’ll save some time figuring out who to punish.”

“Ugh, Nick what do you want? I only got to sleep a few hours ago.”

Nick stopped his cart at a crosswalk and let a couple of bears cross in front of him. He smiled and waved while they gave him mildly dirty looks in return. Shrugging, he waited until they had finished crossing and then continued down the street.

“Finn, I need you to set up a charity for me.”

Nick heard a yawn and the creaking of some bones from Finn, “Okay, when do you need it?”

“Today, and I don’t want our names associated with any of the paperwork fillings or the startup funds, have a lawyer do it for us and be the agent. Also, the funds should be a gift, not a write-off, I want to keep this on the straight and narrow in case things go south on me.”

“Text me the details. I’ll meet you downtown at 2:30 with a notarized copy of all the paperwork.” With a click, the line went dead.

Nick smiled and his ears twitched as he heard the sweet song of meters expiring. He wrote a few tickets and headed down the block to look for more clients.

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Judy was catching up on some paperwork when Clawhauser called to let her know that her temporary partner, Sasha Garrison, had made it in. Judy walked down to the lobby and saw Garrison waiting near the reception desk talking with Clawhauser. Garrison was a powerfully built jaguar with the typical yellowish-brown fur covered with black rosettes.
Judy had never worked with Garrison before. She was five years her senior and up for promotion next cycle. Judy had heard she was a no-nonsense cop who didn’t take any attitude from the perps she collared. She also ran a pretty tight ship in her patrol areas which included occasionally parking her cruiser in favor of short foot patrols. Judy had heard Garrison liked to get up close and personal with the district locals.

With a friendly smile on her face, Judy greeted the large feline “Good morning Officer Garrison, looks like we get to partner up for a couple of days.”

As Judy put out her paw for a quick handshake, Garrison’s nose started to wrinkle and twitch a bit. She left Judy hanging and took a small step back. She disguised the movement by turning towards the parking garage door and waved for Judy to follow her. “Let’s get going, first, though we need to make a quick visit to the locker room.”

Judy followed the jaguar into the female’s locker room and watched as Garrison made sure they were alone. “Hopps, you reek of fox. You’ve got the scent of that partner of yours all over you and there’s no way I am going to spend the next couple of days stuck in a patrol car with that smell.”

Judy was shocked, she hadn’t been near Nick since their talk this weekend and she had showered since then. Rabbits didn’t have the greatest noses, but she sure couldn’t smell anything. Besides, Nick’s scent never bothered her, quite the contrary, she liked his scent, it was pleasant even comforting. With a confused look on her face, she looked at Garrison and said. “I don’t smell anything, what are you talking about?”

“Hopps, you’re obviously noseblind to the smell of that fox. Jaguars have the best noses amongst felines and right now, fox is all I can smell. There’s some industrial strength Musk Mask over there on the shelf, grab some and rub yourself down, it should help deaden the smell for a while.”

As Judy’s shoulders sagged, she turned to go lather herself down. Before she took her first step, Garrison continued, “Hopps, that smell is probably all over your apartment and everything you own. Buy some Musk Mask household cleaner and clothes detergent on the way home tonight and use it to sanitize everything including rewashing your clothes and uniforms with it. As Senior Officer, I’m telling you, don’t show up tomorrow smelling like that animal again or you can forget about patrolling with me, I don’t want to spend a full day trying to scrub his stench out of the seats.”

Judy numbly continued over to the shelf, grabbed the canister and thoroughly rubbed herself down. Walking back to the jaguar, Judy gave her a wide-eyed, questioning look as she raised her arms partially away from her body, palms up and waited.

Judy heard a couple of sniffs and then the response. “Better, let’s go.”

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Judy and Garrison patrolled the north side of Savannah Central. Garrison drove her regular squad car while Judy rode shotgun. Garrison kept the conversation focused on work as she talked about the different neighborhoods, local criminal activity and some of the security issues that the local businesses had to deal with.

Judy had patrolled a few of these areas with Nick in the past and she smiled to herself at the difference in the type of commentary between Nick and Garrison. Nick’s knowledge of the city allowed him to provide a much more personal touch. Nick was able to put names to some of the faces and also tell her fun tidbits about the people he knew, including a lot of the local
neighborhood gossip. Judy also enjoyed it when she and Nick would play their game of mammal watching, where they each tried to guess what a person did for a living or where they were headed. Between their patrols and spending her time off with Nick exploring, Judy had learned a lot about the city over the last six months.

Garrison’s dialog, on the other hand, seemed to focus mainly on the need to keep an eye out for certain species. She didn’t exactly call it profiling, but weasels, raccoons and especially foxes were at the top of her list.

The rest of the morning went by pretty quickly with only a couple of traffic violations that needed to be handled. After they finished writing up a teen for running a red light, Garrison decided it was time for a late lunch.

Over lunch, Judy and Sasha got to know each other a little better. Judy told the story of her deciding to be a cop at nine years old and how her parents tried for years to talk her out of joining the ZPD. Sasha, on the other hand, had been born into a police family. Her Dad had recently retired from District 8 as a senior officer and her Mom was still a dispatcher also at District 8. Judy and Sasha swapped stories about their academy training and then they both laughed as they compared the ‘you’re dead’ names that Friedkin had used on each of them.

After finishing lunch, the two officers returned to their patrol. The mood was a little less formal between the two as they continued to talk about their backgrounds while watching for trouble.

About a half an hour into the afternoon patrol, Sasha brought up the Missing Mammal and Nighthowler cases. “Hopps, that was some outstanding police work in solving those cases. New on the job, no real resources and you solved cases that the rest of the precinct had spent weeks on without any results.”

Sasha rubbed her chin and added, “Hopps, why after those successes did you get saddled with a fox as a partner? You could have pressed Bogo to partner up with anyone, it doesn’t make sense to me that he would do that to you.”

“Garrison, I didn’t get saddled with Nick, I recruited and sponsored him and then I requested him as my partner even before he graduated from the ZPA. He’s a good guy, he knows the city like the back of his hand and we work extremely well together.”

“Hopps, I heard rumors that you sponsored him, I just didn’t believe them. You know you can’t trust that fox. I’ll bet he’s running some kind of con right now and when he springs it on you, you’re going to be left holding the bag, your career in ruins and probably get fired for your trouble.”

Sasha looked directly at Judy, “Foxes are sly, shifty, bottom feeders, they always have something going on and you don’t want to be on the receiving end of whatever they’re planning. Hopps, you’ve barely been in the city for a year, a young, impressionable doe like yourself is an easy target for someone as slick as that fox. I don’t want to see that animal take advantage of you.”

Judy’s mouth fell open as she stared back at Garrison in shock. Nick wasn’t like that at all. He was kind and caring and hadn’t taken advantage of her at all. Well, except for the first time they met when he hustled her out of $20 for an elephant-sized popsicle to melt down into smaller Pawpsicles and resell them for a profit. But that didn’t count, and it certainly didn’t count that he tried to get her to quit her investigation out of embarrassment by taking her to the Mystic Spring Oasis naturalist club. She supposed maybe it counted a little that he made her waste a whole day at the DMV waiting for his sloth friend, Flash, to look up a license plate number.
Judy closed her mouth and looked out the front of the cruiser thinking about this morning. She had grown to trust Nick, but he’s only been an officer for six months and he had admitted to her that he was planning something. She was still miffed at him for not listening to her and she didn’t know what he was up to. Maybe Garrison has a point about him.

Judy shook her head. ‘No!’ Despite the rocky start to their partnership, Nick had come through for her and more than made up for all his delaying tactics by standing up to Bogo when he demanded she give up her badge that night in the Rainforest District and then Nick went on to help her solve both the Missing Mammal and Nighthowler cases. She absolutely, positively trusted Nick.

“He’s changed from his time on the street, I don’t think he would ever do anything to hurt me. We’re best friends and he knows how important being a cop is to me.”

“You only think he wouldn’t hurt you, you don’t know! No one volunteers for parking duty, so the reality is, he’s either being punished for something we don’t know about or worse, he’s up to something and when that something blows up in his face anyone nearby will be taken down with him. You said yourself that he spent years on the streets, no one unloads that kind of baggage in just a few months, you best watch yourself or you could get caught up in something really ugly.”

Before Judy could argue more with her temporary partner, she spied a purse snatcher on a skateboard having just pulled a bag away from an elderly deer. Judy pointed and yelled for Garrison to turn left at the intersection and follow the thief.

Garrison turned sharply towards the alley entrance the thief had ducked in to. “Hopps, call it in. You wait here by the alley entrance, use the car as cover, and make sure he doesn’t get past me.” A moment later, the cruiser door slammed shut and Garrison was running into the alley.

Judy grabbed the microphone from the dash radio, “This is Hopps, we have a 4-84 in progress, we are in pursuit of a purse snatcher on a skateboard. Location is an alley between 1st and 2nd avenues at Plumb St. The suspect is a male ocelot, approximately 18 years old, wearing jeans, a white t-shirt, and a blue hoodie.”

Judy heard Clawhauser reply, “10-4, stay in contact with status.”

Judy held her position using the squad car’s open door as cover. Barely ten seconds went by before she couldn’t take it anymore, ‘This is ridiculous, I’m not some frail doe that needs to be protected from trouble.’

Deciding the situation didn’t warrant using a lethal, Judy drew her tranq pistol and moved out from behind the cruiser. She went to the entrance of the alley looking for Garrison or the ocelot. Not seeing either, she proceeded into the alley. With her ears at attention and pivoting around like small dishes, Judy listened carefully for the sound of her partner or their quarry.

She finally heard Garrison down towards the end of the alley heading back. As Judy raised her paw to signal Garrison, the ocelot jumped out of his hiding place behind a leaky, smelly dumpster. The thief had used the smell of the trash to hide his scent from the jaguar’s better nose, and now he only had a small rabbit to worry about.

The ocelot mounted his skateboard and started to coast towards Judy. As he angled his board to try and get around Judy, he pulled a knife out from under his hoodie and started waving it around.

Judy pointed her tranq at the teen in a two-handed grip, “ZPD, drop the knife and get on the ground!” Not that any perp actually ever listened, but it was procedure, so Judy had to try.
As the ocelot continued to come toward her, Judy aimed her tranq pistol at him and yelled out, “Last chance, drop the knife and get on…”

The ocelot suddenly jerked up, his arms shot out from his sides and his muscles started to twitch violently as a pair of wired darts hit him in the back and the follow-up 25,000 volts caused him to fly off the skateboard and land in a quivering mass on the ground.

“…the ground.”

Garrison kicked the ocelot’s fallen knife away and pulled her handcuffs from her belt and secured the dazed teen. “You should have listened to her and hit the ground. Purse snatching is now an attempted assault on an officer with a deadly weapon.”

All Judy heard in response to Garrison’s quip was a low moan, so she holstered her tranq gun and moved to help secure the prisoner. Garrison waved her off, picked up the smaller feline with one arm, carried him to the cruiser and then locked him in the back seat.

As Judy was recovering the knife, skateboard and purse as evidence, Garrison came up behind her.

“Hopps, I told you to call it in and wait outside the alley entrance, not to come in. Ocelots can be vicious animals; besides the knife he was carrying, his claws could have gutted you with a single swipe.”

Judy looked incredulous. “Don’t worry about me ma’am, I am quite capable of taking care of myself. For the ocelot to hurt me, he has to get near me and I’m a lot quicker than you think.”

“Don’t care. Next time, follow instructions and stay in position; otherwise, you might get hurt.”

After the evidence was bagged, they went and found the elderly victim, took her statement and drove back to the precinct. Discharging a weapon for any reason meant that the rest of their shift was going to be spent on paperwork.

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Nick loved parking duty in the afternoon, all those mammals taking a bit too long of a lunch break padded his ticket total. Another 15 tickets and he would have all he needed to meet the daily quota.

Everything was coming together. Nick had just finished picking up the paperwork Finn had gotten from the lawyer and now he was ready for the next item on his list. Nick pulled out his phone and opened up the Zoogle app with his research notes. Tipping his head side to side as he weighed the options, he finally decided and tapped a phone number on the screen, a few minutes later he had a lunch appointment with a history professor at Zootopia Metropolitan University for the next day. He made a note to himself to work the area around ZMU’s city campus tomorrow to make getting to the appointment easier.

Nick headed down the sidewalk, humming a happy tune, as he looked for more meters that needed madding.

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Exiting the locker room Garrison turned to Judy, “You remember what I said about cleaning up your apartment, right?” Judy nodded as she saw, out of the corner of her eye, Nick leaving the male’s locker room. He looked over her way, smiled and gave her a low, shy, half wave with his paw. Garrison saw where Judy was looking and said to her in a low voice, “You need to keep
away from that damn fox, he’s no good for you as a partner.” With a huff, Garrison headed out to the parking lot and home.

Judy turned in time to see a fox’s tail slip out another exit before the door could slam shut on the fuzzy appendage. Nick would be heading back to his place. Usually, they left together and grabbed a bite to eat or wandered through a park that only Nick knew about. Not tonight and probably not ever again, she had made sure of that a couple of days ago. With a sigh, she made her way through the front lobby, waved goodnight to Clawhauser and pointed herself towards the nearest market to pick up cleaning supplies.

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Nick walked to the metro station a little slower than normal. He was missing the company of one bundle of energy that he’d gotten used to spending his spare time with. He could count on one hand the number of times he had left work by himself over the last six months and he didn’t like adding to that total.

As he reached the station, he felt a text alert from his phone. *I’m on the train, I can’t believe I let you talk me into doing this. If it doesn’t pan out my boss will have my ass. You owe me big - hate you!*

Nick chuckled and texted back, *If anyone can find what I need it’s you and don’t worry, your ass is too cute for anyone to take it from you – thanks and you’re right, I owe you big.* Nick added a couple of off-color emojis just for fun.

As his railcar arrived, he checked his phone for a reply and saw, *I still hate you* followed by some animated emojis doing hmmm, Nick decided it would be best not to look too closely at whatever they were doing, count on someone in the business to find stuff like that.

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Judy finished drying herself off from an extra long shower. She had almost started to worry that she was going to use up the building’s hot water supply in one go. After a quarter of a bottle of extra strength Musk Mask shampoo, she was certain that there was no remaining fox smell on her fur. Three loads of laundry and an hour of scrubbing with Musk Mask detergents made sure that everything she owned was antiseptically clean too. Looking around her apartment, Judy hoped it would be enough to satisfy Garrison’s nose.

Judy slipped on an oversized t-shirt to sleep in and then sat down on the edge of her bed. She grabbed her phone to turn it off but ended up staring at the background picture instead. It was a selfie she had taken of her and Nick the morning he left for the academy, she was in her uniform and he was wearing one of his ugly Pawaiian shirts and a tie. They were so happy. And then she had to go and ruin everything.

Judy whispered to herself in frustration, “You are such a dumb, stupid bunny.”

Groaning into her paws, she couldn’t help but start in on herself again, she shouldn’t have said ‘yes.’ It’s just that it had all happened so fast and when she got to the restaurant, everything was so wonderful. The view from the rooftop was amazing and Nick looked so handsome, and he took such good care of her. He’d cooked her favorite dishes and once they’d eaten some of those, he brought out a dish so special that she’d nearly done a binky it tasted so good. It was a wonderful dinner, and afterward at her apartment, well, that was even more wonderful.

She’d felt it building throughout their date, a feeling she’d never experienced before and then when
Nick kissed her goodnight, it happened. A dam burst open in her heart as she realized that she’d been wanting him as more than a friend since the day of their first patrol together. Holding Nick in her arms as he kissed her, she’d been the happiest she’d ever been.

But now it was over, and it was all her fault.

Taking a deep breath, Judy settled herself. Rehashing what she’d done, again, wasn’t going to help anything, so with a last, longing look at the picture on her phone, Judy sighed and turned it off.

Crawling into her bed, Judy took a few sniffs. After all the cleaning she’d done, she couldn’t smell anything anymore; her scent was gone and so was Nick’s. Closing her eyes, a small tear started to form as she realized that from now on, this is what it was going to be like without her best friend.
Bunny Collision

A/N: Thank you for all the comments/follows/reviews/kudos. I took a pause and reviewed a few things which resulted in me deleting the chapter 3 lunch scene. I removed it four weeks ago. So, if you read chapter 3 when I posted it, please ignore the scene and forgive me for being a rookie, otherwise, enjoy…

Disclaimer: Zootopia and all related characters are owned by Disney.

………

Judy sat alone in the large chair in front of the bullpen. Nick was on parking duty, so he was exempt from attending the morning briefing. Bogo had just finished passing out the day’s assignments. Judy covered her mouth and stifled a yawn, she needed coffee. She’d overslept, well actually over tossed-and-turned-in-bed-all-night, and couldn’t stop at Snarlbucks on the way in this morning. Now she’d be stuck with the pitch-black tar brewing in the break room.

Garrison came over to Judy’s chair while everyone else was filing out. Garrison lowered her head to Judy’s level and took a deep sniff of her fur. Nodding slightly, she gave her approval. “You look like you need some coffee, grab some and I’ll meet you in the garage.”

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Judy, nursing a larger than normal cup of coffee, was waiting for Garrison by the cruiser when she saw Nick by his parking cart. She walked over as he was putting on the meter maid vest. “Hey”

“Hey,” Nick said with a smile.

Judy stood for a moment wanting to say something more when she heard Garrison shout over. “Hopps, the smell.”

Judy got an annoyed look on her face and huffed. As she was about to yell something back at Garrison, Nick raised his paw to stop her.

“Don’t worry, I’ve heard worse.” Nick nodded toward the Jaguar, “You should get going, keeping her waiting will just piss her off more.”

Nick watched as Garrison’s cruiser left the garage and he followed soon afterward in the parking cart.

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Nick tapped the small keys with a flourish and then tore the printed parking ticket off of the hand-held computer. Placing it on the windshield of a medium sized convertible, he checked the time on his phone and walked back to the joke-mobile. After calling Clawhauser to let him know he was taking lunch, Nick pulled out of his parking spot and drove to the ZMU’s main campus. Metro was a mix of green open spaces, walking paths and water features surrounded by taller buildings that housed classrooms, labs, dorms, and offices for the administrators and professors. Nick parked his cart in front of one of the older classroom buildings. He recalled that his appointment was with an Associate Professor. Chuckling to himself, he noted that even in academia the best offices went to the more senior mammals.

While talking with Finn at the Foxburg Pub a couple of days ago, it became glaringly obvious that
Nick needed more information on rabbit social etiquette and courting. Judy wasn’t a fox and he needed to know how it worked with rabbits.

Nick had spent a couple of hours searching the internet for information on rabbit courting practices. Unfortunately, the search results that came back led him to either porn sites that he was now having trouble unseeing, or to a series of popups for ‘Lewd Lagomorph Ladies’ and ‘Randy Rabbits’ which crashed his browser. When he finally found a few legitimate relationship sites, they all assumed the reader was a rabbit and skipped over the basic practices that he really needed to know more about.

Giving up on figuring it out himself, Nick decided it was time for an expert. His research had given him two names in the city that were experts on lagomorph customs. One was a psychologist specializing in relationship research; the other was an assistant professor of history with a focus on the lagomorph pre-Commonwealth law, social customs, and language. Nick needed a hook, he couldn’t just walk into someone’s office and ask how to woo a rabbit. Foxes hunted rabbits, they didn’t court them, and as much as talking to the love doctor would be more on target, he decided his time spent studying the Zootopia legal code looking for loopholes and opportunities would give him an in with a history professor who specialized in law.

Nick took off the meter maid vest and hat and locked them in the storage compartment under the seat. He checked his head fur in the mirror and smoothed down his uniform. He needed to look like a cop on a mission to get what he needed.

Walking down the second-floor hallway, Nick checked the office nameplates until he found the right one, Associate Professor Pachter. The door was partially open. Knocking lightly with a single knuckle, Nick called out, “Hello, Professor Pachter?”

“Come in, I’m almost done.”

As Nick stepped into the small office, he saw a doe in a red blouse and blue jeans typing on a keyboard. There hadn’t been a picture of Prof. Pachter included in the Zoogle search results, but it made sense that an expert on lagomorph law and customs would also be a member of that species.

Glancing around Nick saw that the Professor’s U-shaped desk and the wall shelves were stacked with papers, exam booklets, and old law books. On the side of the desk, next to the Professor’s monitor, Nick spied a picture of the doe in a wedding dress hugging a tall buck in a tuxedo. Seeing the happy couple in the picture, Nick couldn’t help but think about him and Judy. A heartbeat later, Nick buried the happy thought and chastised himself, ‘Keep your eyes on the prize, Wilde, being together is today’s goal, being legally mated is tomorrow’s problem.’

Prof. Pachter turned her chair around and stood up as Nick reached out to shake her paw. “Professor Pachter, I’m Officer Wilde, ZPD, it’s nice to meet you.”

As Prof. Pachter set her glasses down, she motioned towards a chair in front of Nick, “It’s nice to meet you too Officer Wilde, please have a seat. You mentioned on the phone that you are researching lagomorph law, what can I help you with?”

“Well, I was researching the law in the Tri-Burrows, specifically Bunnyburrow, and I was getting confused. I found the current legal code, but there were a few references to another codex called the Old Law and there wasn’t much online about that.”

The Professor smiled at Nick and asked, “Are you planning on changing careers and practicing law in the Burrows?”
Smiling back at the doe he replied, “No ma’am, I’m enjoying being a cop too much, besides I’m not sure I could take all the lawyer jokes.” They both laughed as Nick continued, “In my last career, I found it very useful to have a thorough understanding of the law. You never know when someone might ask to see your permit to sell food or a receipt of declared commerce and fines or penalties aren’t good for business.”

“Well, let’s see, you asked about the Old Law and Bunnyburrow. Bunnyburrow is the oldest, by far, of the three major burrows. Hundreds of years before the formation of the Commonwealth the law of Bunnyburrow was recorded in the original Lapine tongue, in a codex. This codex was the law until Bunnyburrow joined the Commonwealth. From that point on the codex was referred to as the Old Law and a new codex written in Common was created and called the New Law. The Old Law wasn’t repealed, it was just modified, clarified or, in the case of some sections, superseded by the New Law or the current Bunnyburrow legal code.”

Nick rubbed his chin, “You said that the Old Law is in the original Lapine, I guess that would explain why it’s not posted anywhere. Does a translation into Common exist somewhere?”

Prof. Pachter hesitated before answering the question, “Yes, a workable translation of the Old Law codex was created when Bunnyburrow joined the Commonwealth. Back then, the translation wasn’t widely published since the New Law referred to the Old Law in its original form and the translation was mainly used by the Commonwealth bureaucracy. Nowadays, the translation is still used for reference, but only rarely since the Old Law is so outdated it’s considered useless and everyone ignores it. The end result is that neither document is easy to find because no one really uses either of them anymore.”

Nick smiled a bit broader, “You said workable?”

Prof. Pachter smiled and nodded enthusiastically back at Nick, “Yes, let me explain.

“The translation has been the center of my work since grad school. It has a number of flaws that are very interesting and I’ve written a treatise on the mammals that performed the translation and explanations, based on the Bunnyburrow society at the time, as to why they made the decisions and assumptions they did. Part of the completed research, which should be approved for publication soon, includes my rework of the Old Law translation. It’s been fascinating to look at the Old Law and the rabbits of that time as they adjusted to being new members of the Commonwealth.”

Nick nodded his head. “You said that you had to rework the translation of the Old Law, is that something I could get a copy of? You wouldn’t believe how many hours I’ve spent looking at the Zootopia legal code and I think being able to spend some time with the Bunnyburrow code, old and new, would help me with my upcoming task.”

Prof. Pachter thought about it for a moment, her work was basically done, except for being published, so she wasn’t too worried about someone copying her research, but better safe than sorry. “I can send you a copy, but you have to promise that you won’t give it to anyone else until after all my research is published.” Nick nodded and she continued, “I have a layered document with the text of the original codex in Lapine, the old translation and a layer with my changes and notes discussing those changes. I can email it to you if that works.”

Nick stood up and handed the Professor a card with his email address and contact information. “That would be terrific, here’s my email address.”

Nick paused, time to ask for what he really needed, “Professor I have one more favor to ask. Do you have any information on rabbit social customs and, uh, courting practices, something someone
who isn’t a rabbit could understand and reference so they wouldn’t offend rabbits in social situations?” Nick dipped his head briefly and folded his ears down as they started to turn a little red from embarrassment. In a slightly quieter voice he continued, “Just in case, you know, a situation happens.”

The doe smirked a bit seeing the fox officer looking, just for a moment, like a teenager out of his element. Prof. Pachter rubbed her chin and thought about the request and the mammal in front of her. With a slight nod, she decided. “Okay, I’ll make you a deal Officer Wilde, I’ve been looking for a new area of study. And as you’ve noticed, some of the information about rabbit culture is hard to find and I’m sure you’ll agree that the same information about fox culture is pretty hard to find too. So, I propose a trade, I’ll share what you’ve asked for on rabbits if you share the same with me on foxes.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. Will there be anything in your files on why a bunny can call another bunny cute and not get in trouble?”

“Nope, that’s a bunny secret and if I told you, I’d have to kill you, and we wouldn’t want the janitors to have to clean up that kind of a mess, now would we?” Smiling at Nick, Prof. Pachter added, “Don’t worry, what I have should be enough to keep you out of trouble.”

Nick laughed, “Alright then, you’ve got a deal. Thanks.”

Prof. Pachter shook paws with Nick and walked with him to the hallway, “I’ll email you the files this afternoon.”

Nick walked back down to his traffic cart and put his vest and bowler hat back on. He was happy with himself and was looking forward to seeing what the Professor sent him. He called Clawhauser to let him know he was back on duty and then drove toward the next closest meter-rich area of opportunity.

……

Judy and Garrison were assigned to patrol a business district that ran between Foxburg and Happytown. Foxburg was an old bedroom community of predominately small predators. Most of the houses were around 80 to 100 years old, so they were smaller homes on smaller lots. The families living there took pride in their homes but didn’t have a lot of money, so while not rundown, the neighborhood looked worn out. Over the years, a few blue-collar prey had moved into Foxburg, not enough to start gentrification of the area, but enough that it had a hint of diversity to it.

Happytown, on the other hand, was one of the poorest areas in Zootopia. Some sections were only run down while others were blighted. The ZPD patrolled ‘around’ Happytown more often than ‘in’ Happytown. One of these days, the ZPD would have the resources to clean up Happytown, for now, the best they could do was keep the blight from spreading.

Garrison drove the squad car in a zig-zag pattern through the business district that sat between the two communities while Judy was on the lookout for any issues. Garrison talked down the whole area and its residents, she only saw the problems and the troublemakers. Judy looked out the cruiser’s window, shaking her head as Garrison continued her rant. Judy didn’t see problems as much as she saw hope. The mammals she saw out the window cared about their community, looked after each other, and were raising their kits with the expectation that they’d have it better than their parents.

Judy could tell Garrison was getting frustrated, the Jaguar had picked this patrol area in the hopes
of picking up a perp or two, but so far all they’d come across was an elderly couple that needed help with a flat tire and a guy illegally parked in a loading zone. Judy tried her best to keep up a dialog that included some of the positives about the area Nick had told her about, but the more she said, the quieter Garrison became. After a while, Judy went silent too, and then a little bit after that, Garrison decided to call them out for a break.

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Judy exited the diner behind Garrison and they both headed down the sidewalk towards their parked cruiser. As they walked, Judy listened to Garrison relay a story about the last perp she’d chased down in Savanna Central. Judy was about to ask a question when she was distracted by a car horn behind her. Turning to look, Judy didn’t see the young silver fox kits come bounding out of the alley she was crossing in front of. One of the bluish-gray furred kits skidded into a turn right in front of Judy, his grocery sack swinging wide as he tried to keep away from his younger brother. Unfortunately, the second fox kit wasn’t quite as steady on his feet and slid into Judy taking out her legs and knocking her flat on her tail.

Looking up from the sidewalk, her legs still tangled up with the small fox, Judy saw Garrison leaning over Judy holding the older kit by the scruff of his neck. “Hopps, are you okay? Did these little delinquents hurt you?”

Judy extricated herself from the squirming fox limbs and shook her head, “No, I’m fine, it was just an accident.”

Garrison reached down and picked up the younger kit and, now holding them both out in front of her, she gave them a full display of her large teeth and growled at them. “Who are you two running from? Who did you steal those groceries from?”

Both the kits started crying, they were probably ten and eleven years old and now they were terrified out of their minds.

Still on the ground, Judy yelled at Garrison, “Officer Garrison! They’re kits, what are you doing?!”

Ignoring Judy, Garrison glared at the kits, “Stop your crying and tell me who you’re running from and where you got those bags.”

Still crying the older kit wailed out, “Please don’t hurt us, my name is Tyler Greytail and that’s my brother Aidan. Our mom sent us to the store.”

Aidan was choking words out between his tears, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to run into the bunny lady, please don’t put us in jail.” Aidan’s crying increased as he realized that he may never see his mom and dad again. “Please, I want to go home, I’m so sorry. I want my mom.”

Judy jumped straight up, grabbed both of Garrison’s wrists and put herself in between the kits and the Jaguar’s muzzle. “Put these kits down, NOW!”

Judy jumped down just as Garrison set the kits on the sidewalk. Judy quickly put her arms around the two crying boys and tried to calm them by pulling them into a tight hug. “It’s okay, I’ve got you, everything is going to be alright. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Both of the kits hugged Judy tight and cried into her chest. Judy soothed them and continued to hold them close until they stopped crying.

Garrison stood with her paws on her hips, fuming, as she watched Hopps console the two foxes. After a full minute of waiting for the spectacle to end, she couldn’t take it anymore and growled
out, “Where do you foxes live?”

Both boys simultaneously dug themselves deeper into Judy’s chest and pointed towards a set of houses a few hundred yards away, across an abandoned lot and an overgrown dirt road.

“We are going to your house to talk with your mother. If you try and run, I will handcuff you and take you downtown. Understand?”

Judy quickly stood and held the kits behind her, “Officer Garrison, that’s enough. Nobody’s running anywhere and no one is going to be handcuffed.”

Turning back to the fox kits Judy pulled them close again, “Tyler, Aidan, everything is going to be fine. I want you to go pick up your grocery bags and then come back here and hold my paws. I’ll take you both home and then we’ll talk to your mom, okay?”

Judy glared at Garrison as the two kits retrieved their bags and then rushed back to her side. Garrison continued to growl quietly as each of the boys took one of Judy’s paws and then guided the bunny toward their house.

As they walked, Judy stewed. Garrison was overreacting and Senior Officer or not, she needed to be reigned in. After a few minutes of walking the group approached a small row house in the middle of the block. Garrison walked around the group and knocked on the door. A few moments later, Judy heard the sounds of an adult mammal approaching the door.

The door opened and Judy saw a vixen in sweatpants and a loose top start to greet the jaguar officer when suddenly, both boys let go of Judy’s paws, dropped their bags and rushed into their mother’s arms. The kits started crying again and then they yelled out. “Mom we’re sorry, please don’t let her take us to jail.”

The vixen got down on her knees and pulled the boys to her in a hug. She looked up at Garrison and asked, “What happened, what did they do?”

“Ma’am, they were running from someone with these bags of merchandise and then ran into my partner knocking her to the ground. Their negligence could have seriously injured her and I believe that this kind of unsupervised behavior warrants the attention of Protective Services.”

The vixen looked back and forth between the two officers with a look of horror on her face. “You’re not going to take my boys away from me, are you? I asked them to go to the market for me because I was babysitting my neighbor’s two kits. Please don’t take my boys away.”

As the vixen started to cry, her boys started crying again too. “Please let us stay, we said we’re sorry, we didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

Judy had had enough. This had gotten completely out of hand. Speaking in a voice loud enough to be heard over the crying, Judy stepped forward. “Officer Garrison, if I may, Mrs. Greytail I believe that this situation can be resolved without the involvement of the ZPS. I can see your boys are very sorry and accidents do happen. If you talk with your kits about being more careful, I think everything will be alright. Don’t you think so, Officer Garrison?”

Garrison was livid, what was this rabbit doing undermining her authority? “Well Officer Hopps, I don’t entirely agree with your assessment and I still believe some oversight is needed in this situation.”

Judy could see Garrison was pissed, but she wasn’t going to back down either. “In that case, how about if I stop out and visit with the family in the next week or so. Would that provide enough of a
review without having to get the ZPS involved?”

Judy quietly waited as Garrison stared at her. After a few tense moments, Judy broke the standoff with an offhand comment, “You do realize the amount of paperwork you’ll be filling out if you want to turn these kits over to the ZPS, don’t you? Then there are the hearings, and the follow-up assessments and then even more paperwork. Sounds like a lot of work to me.”

Garrison growled, “Fine, it’s on you then. But, understand me, Hopps, if these delinquents cause any more trouble I’ll call the ZPS regardless of the paperwork.” With a final glare, Garrison stepped back and walked out to the sidewalk to wait for Judy.

Judy picked up the grocery sacks and walked over to Mrs. Greytail who was still on her knees. Setting the sacks down, Judy crouched down and said softly, “I promise, everything is going to be fine, give me your phone number and I will call you so we can set up a time for a visit, alright?”

Holding her kits close with one arm, she pulled out her phone and exchanged numbers with Judy. As the vixen looked at Judy she bent forward and tilted her head, exposing her neck so Judy could see the gray fur covering her throat, “I’m sorry about my boys, please, please don’t let her take them away.”

Judy reached out and placed her paw on Mrs. Greytail’s arm and whispered, “I meant what I said, it’s going to be fine. Nobody is going to take your kits away from you, I promise.”

The vixen glanced at Officer Garrison in the distance and then back at Judy, her eyes were filled with tears of fear and worry, “Please” was all she mouthed.

Judy nodded and gently squeezed her arm. Judy straightened up and turned around to see a seriously pissed-off jaguar pacing back and forth on the sidewalk.

……

Judy closed the door to her locker, well, locker was a strong term for what she’d just tossed her unused workout clothes back into. A week after Nick had left for the ZPA, Judy had gotten frustrated with her locker setup. The locker was too big and too high up and she was too small. Hitting a swap meet, Judy had found an old medium-mammal sized cabinet and a small kit’s bench. She’d removed the cabinet’s shelves and then nailed it to the wall of a relatively private alcove she’d found in the locker room. The alcove was formed by a wall to one side and some covered ductwork on the other side. The resultant setup made for a quiet place to think when she needed one, like now.

Judy had really wanted to do a workout or go for a run, something to take her mind off of a certain fox she couldn’t stop thinking about. Unfortunately, Garrison had refocused Judy and not in a good way. After leaving the Greytail’s house, the rest of her shift with Garrison hadn’t gone well. The Jaguar hadn’t said a thing to Judy on the walk back to the cruiser and had continued the silence well into the rest of the patrol.

Judy stood and walked to where Garrison was changing, it was time to have a talk with her senior partner. “Hey Garrison.”

“Yeah, Hopps.”

“Do you know how many siblings I have?”

Garrison glanced over towards Judy wondering what her sibling count had to do with anything. “I heard you have a big family, so five or six I suppose. Why?”
“I have 168 brothers and 179 sisters.”

Garrison’s eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open. “Hopps, you’re not serious. That’s not a family, that’s a ZIP code.”

Judy gave the Jaguar a severe look. “I can take on anyone in my family, foot race, wrestling and even the occasional sibling fight.” She paused taking a deep breath. “Those were little kits back there, you scared the entire family half to death and it had nothing to do with me getting knocked over. I’ve taken worse spills during pillow fights with my sisters. You were out of line and I won’t stand by and allow anything like that to happen again.”

“Hopps, they’re foxes. They’re sly and shifty just like your partner. Once you’ve worked the streets as long as I have, you’ll understand what I’m talking about. Right now, I’m the senior on this team, so you need to watch and learn, especially when it comes to those animals.”

Judy looked at Garrison in frustration, what the heck was her problem? “Garrison, those kits were just being kits and Nick is an outstanding—”

Judy was cut off by Garrison as she stood up from her bench, “Hopps, this isn’t a debate, it’s the way things are, so get used to it.” With that said, Garrison picked up her pack and walked out of the locker room.

Balling up her fists, Judy stared furiously at the now closed door. After a few seconds of trying to burn holes in the thick wood with her glare, she turned around and headed back to her locker to get her workout clothes. She’d changed her mind, a workout was exactly what she needed, a workout that involved a punching bag, and if she was lucky, a large, black spotted, sparring partner.
Nick strolled into the lobby of the ZPD. Carrying a box of Clawhauser’s favorite doughnuts, Nick stopped at the reception desk to greet the overly large cheetah. “Morning Ben, I brought you an entire box of crème filled this morning, make sure you save one for Hopps. Okay?”

“Morning Nick, will do.” He reached in the box and pulled out a Bavarian crème filled treat and smacked his lips. “You’re the best Nick. Where is Judy? I still can’t get used to seeing you two not being partners and coming in together.”

“Don’t worry, we’re still partners. A little more parking duty and everything will be back to normal. A side benefit is that I get to skip the bullpen meetings.” Glancing around and lowering his voice to a whisper he added, “Although I do miss seeing that vein on Bogo’s forehead throb every time he looks at me during the briefing.” Waggling his eyebrows, he gave a two-fingered salute to the now chuckling dispatcher, “See ya, Ben.”

Nick jumped up and grabbed the handle to the male’s locker room and swung open the large door. Six months, a year for Judy, and still no modifications to any doors, fixtures, furniture or anything in the building except his and Judy’s computers and one patrol car. Really feelin’ the love.

There were a pawful of others in the locker room, but none of them acknowledged Nick as he walked to his locker. Looking at his locker door, Nick shook his head, ‘Great, not again’ he thought to himself. A booklet was taped to his locker, removing it, Nick read the title and then stuffed it under his arm. Stepping up on a small wooden box, he unlocked his locker door and then holding the door so no one could see his face, he closed his eyes tight and counted to five. His usual mask of indifference had slipped a bit. What did he expect? All anyone saw when they looked at him was an ex-hustler fox pretending to be a cop. They didn’t like him and they didn’t want him here. Quietly sighing he counted himself lucky that no one had broken out a muzzle, yet.

After a couple of deep breaths, he was able to get a semblance of his hustler’s mask back in place. He put his backpack and his clean workout clothes in the locker, quietly shut the door and went to leave.

The other mammals in the locker room could tell from watching Nick that he wasn’t happy, a couple smirked while the rest either looked at the speciest hazers with disgust or shook their heads and looked away.

With the booklet in his paw, Nick jumped again to grab the door handle and opened the door. Once out of the locker room, he crumpled the booklet up and threw it in a trash can, well, underhanded it into a trash can at least as tall as he was.

With his head down and his tail droopy and dragging near the ground, Nick went to check out the parking cart. Slipping through the door to the garage, Nick missed seeing Judy, who had been watching him leave, and was now wondering what had happened to her partner to make him look so miserable.
“There’s the place, looks like Leah is already there.” Garrison gave a head nod towards a bistro up the block as she pulled the cruiser into a parking spot.

Garrison opened the door and held it open for the small rabbit. As Judy’s eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, she could see that they had missed the lunch rush and almost all the tables were empty. No crowd, good, hungry bunny wants food quickly. A lioness sitting with a female honey bear at one of the tables waved a paw in their direction. Garrison and Judy headed over to the table and sat down.

“Hey Leah, how was it with your cousin?”

“Hey Sasha, we had a great time. My cousin’s all checked in and has her dorm assignment for the fall. She’s staying in the city with a friend until freshman orientation starts.” Looking at Judy, she raised a paw in greeting. “Hi Judy, I’m Leah Corin, Sasha’s partner, we haven’t had the chance to talk at the precinct, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

Pointing at the small black-furred bear, “This is Emily Abele, she works in records.”

Judy smiled as she greeted Leah and Emily. Leah had on a light summer outfit, jeans and olive-green blouse that went well with her brown fur color. Judy remembered hearing that Leah graduated from the ZPA the year before she did. She seemed nice, weird that they hadn’t seen each other more often at the precinct. Judy didn’t recognize Emily but hadn’t been down in records for a while. Emily was small even for a Honey Bear. She also had on jeans and a low-cut green top that showed off her distinctive white chest patch.

The girls continued to trade stories about work until the waitress came and took their orders. Once she had ordered, Judy excused herself to go to the little doe’s room.

Judy rubbed her paws under the air dryer and sighed. She was glad to be getting a short break from being alone with Garrison. Today’s patrol wasn’t quite a continuation of their last one, but close enough, and it hadn’t helped matters any that she was still pretty upset with how Garrison had treated the Greytail family yesterday. Gritting her teeth, Judy looked at a clock on the wall, an hour for lunch and a short three block drive back to the precinct to catch up on paperwork and then she’d be able to give Officer Corin her partner back.

On her way back to the table, Judy was about to turn a corner into the dining area when her sensitive ears picked up Emily’s voice as she was relaying a story. Judy stopped in her tracks when she heard Nick’s name. Easing an ear tip around the corner, she listened carefully.

“They said he was so piss... ‘Parking Enforcement Supervisor’s Exam Study Guide.’ I guess he ripped it off the locker and stomped out of the locker room.”

Judy heard Garrison laugh as she said, “Almost as good as a few weeks ago when they left him a booklet titled, ‘Five Star Prisons – A Vacation Guide for Foxes.’”

Judy was livid! Now she knew what had upset Nick this morning and to hear her partner had been hazed before really pissed the bunny off.

She walked out from around the corner and stomped up to the table, folded her arms across her chest and glared at Garrison. “Sounds like I missed something funny, care to repeat your story?”

Garrison looked at Judy and smirked, “Nah, just a few of us having a little fun with your partner.”

Pointing a finger at all three girls, Judy nearly yelled, “You should all be ashamed of yourselves. Nick is a good officer, he was top of his class at the academy and together we have one of the top
case closure rates in the precinct. He doesn’t deserve to be hazed just because he’s a fox. It’s already hard enough being a small mammal in the department, piling on abuse from your coworkers isn’t funny, it’s just plain cruel.”

Garrison didn’t care about anything positive Judy had to say about her fox partner. “Look, Hopps, you can stand there and defend that fox all you want. I don’t trust him and I’m not the only one either. I know a couple of the guys that he graduated with and neither of them know how he managed to do so well without cheating. There’s always something going on with that animal and I don’t like it.”

Judy glared at the Jaguar, “I know exactly how Nick made valedictorian, he studied more and trained harder than anyone else in his class! We talked on the phone almost every night and I visited him every day off I could, so I saw firsthand how hard he was working. Nick put in extra workouts and study sessions while his classmates played video games or posted to Muzzlebook. He even ran the obstacle course an additional half a dozen times on his mid-session break when everyone else went home. That fox was the only one I saw putting in the extra effort. He absolutely earned that top slot.”

“Hopps, none of that is going to make any difference in the long run. He’s a fox and being partnered up with him is only going to hold you back. The sooner you realize that, the better. He’s trouble.”

Emily broke in and added, “There’s a record on him in the archive, a record that I don’t think even Bogo knows about. It shows that someone picked him up for questioning at least a half a dozen times in the years before he became a cop. The record didn’t have any reasons why he was questioned all those times, but it happened.”

Garrison smiled thinking Emily had won the argument for her. Seeing Garrison’s smirk, Judy turned back to Emily and tore into her, “You may not know why, but I bet I do. Nick told me all about how the ZPD treated him while he was on the street, including all the times he was picked up and questioned just because he was a fox. So, does he have a history, sure, has he ever been arrested or even charged with anything, no, not even once.”

“Yeah, so what! He’s in the system, so he must be guilty of something.” Emily retorted.

Leah added, “He just hasn’t been caught yet, no way someone with his background should be a cop, especially a fox. How is he going to uphold the law when half the people he needs to arrest are his buddies?”

“‘So what?’ are you kidding me?” Waving a finger between Leah and Emily, “You two are exactly why it’s against the law for the ZPD to pick up mammals based on species and then keep records on them without ever charging them with anything, it’s called profiling. And if those kinds of records exist, it is your job, Emily, to report the officer creating them and then have the records removed. Right?”

Suddenly looking a lot less comfortable, Emily nodded in response to Judy’s glare. Hopps was right and worse, she’d lose her job in a heartbeat if her boss found out about that record and the fact that Emily knew about it and hadn’t done anything.

Judy turned her glare on Leah, “Yes, Nick knows a lot of people in the city, and yes some of them are shady characters. But you know what? I don’t care! He’s my partner and the best friend I’ve ever had. If it weren’t for him helping me and standing up for me during the Missing Mammal case, I wouldn’t even be a cop right now. Heck, he’s not only saved my job a couple of times, but
he’s also saved my life too. I asked him to become a cop because he is a good mammal and I wanted him as my partner.”

Leah and Emily were staring at the angry bunny trying to process what she had just said. Neither had ever heard another cop talk about their partner with quite that much feeling. Garrison, on the other hand, didn’t seem like she’d heard a word of what Judy had said.

“You’re still not getting it. Wilde is a fox and a con artist, he’s trouble.” Waving her paw towards the other mammals around the table, she said, “Don’t just take my word for it, listen to your friends here. You’re still new to the big city, you need friends like us to help guide you and keep you from falling in with the wrong crowd and being taken advantage of.”

Judy was at the absolute end of her rope with Garrison and everything to do with her. Done with having to listen to Garrison just because she’s a senior officer, done with her rants about the neighborhoods she patrolled and the hard working mammals living there and done with her speciest attitude towards anyone on her list, especially Nick.

“Garrison, you just spouted off about being my friend, let me tell you something about being friends. Real friends respect each other, they understand each other’s differences and support and depend on each other. Real friends communicate on a level you’ll never understand and they look out for you even when you don’t deserve it.

Friends aren’t speciest, bullies like you.”

Her tone went cold as she continued, “Nick Wilde is my friend. And, so help me god, if you or any of your speciest buddies ever think about going after him again, you best remember that this rabbit has got his back, and it will be my great pleasure to demonstrate exactly what that means with either a private sparring match,” Judy leaned in closer to Garrison and spat out “or a meeting in Bogo’s office about your bigoted attitude.”

Garrison sat up in her chair and took a quick look around the table. Not seeing the waitress or anyone else nearby, she relaxed a little and sneered at Judy, “Bogo’s not going to take the word of a rookie over a senior officer about anything us girls have been saying over lunch, especially when I have witnesses and you don’t.”

Judy replied with an “Uh-huh.” Suddenly there was the sound of a recording being played in reverse followed by a familiar voice, “Bogo’s not going to take the word of a rookie over a senior officer—”

Judy clicked off the carrot shaped recorder pen she was holding and pointed it at Garrison, “Bogo may not take my word on anything you’ve said, but I think he’ll take yours.”

“Shit”

With a satisfied look on her face, Judy stepped back from the table, ”Yeah, I think we’re done here. Enjoy your lunch, I’ll see you ‘girls’ back at the precinct.”

Judy took a couple of steps toward the door before stopping and turning her head slightly back toward the table. “Emily?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll take care of it.”

With a nod, Judy pushed open the door and left the three silenced predators behind.

……
Nick was slowly walking in from the garage when he saw Judy coming out of the female’s locker room. Nick smiled, she had changed into one of his favorite outfits, jeans and a pink hoodie. He wanted to rib her about how cute she looked, but he could tell from her droopy ears that she wasn’t in the mood for his quips.

“Hey, Hopps, long day?”

Judy cringed again at Nick’s use of her last name. She was starting to get used to it, which only made her feel worse. “Yeah, how about you? Break my record yet?”

“No chance, that record is unbreakable. I had maybe 45 tickets today.” Nick shrugged his shoulders adding, “Got yelled at a lot more to make up for it though.”

Judy was examining her foot as she rubbed her big toe along a seam in the floor. Nick put his paws in his pants pockets and looked away from the bunny in front of him.

“So, you want to get something to eat or maybe do something, you know, like tonight?”

Judy looked up at Nick with hope in her eyes, but after a moment she sighed and looked down again. “Um, probably shouldn’t, you know, since we aren’t, I mean we can’t um, I uh, ate a late lunch, you know, have to get home, maybe later.”

“Yeah, uh, me too, I guess.” Nick walked around Judy, stretched up and opened the door to the male’s locker room and just before walking in he said, “See you tomorrow.”

Judy stood in the hallway until she heard Nick’s footsteps fade deeper into the locker room. As she walked towards the atrium and the exit, she sighed, it was going to be another lonely walk home.
Ride Along

A/N: A shout out to a friend on FFnet who took a peek at this chapter before I posted it - Thanks!

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Bogo pounded the podium in front of the bullpen, “Quiet down everyone. First up, I’d like to introduce Senior Police Constable Viola Bechtail from the Duchy of Mordinia. She is participating in an exchange program between the DMPD and the ZPD, and for the next couple of days, she will be working patrol duty with different partners. Hopps, she’s with you today. McHorn, with you tomorrow.”

As Bogo continued the briefing, Judy looked over at her partner for the day. SC Bechtail was a large Mastiff with a lovely tan colored fur and a dark muzzle. She had on what must be the standard issue DMPD uniform, it was khaki colored with a red belt and a red sash that ran from her left epaulet to her right hip. On each sleeve she had a black chevron with two horizontal yellow stripes indicating her rank as a Senior Constable. Overall, a very different look from the ZPD standard blues everyone else in the room was wearing.

The rest of the bullpen session was quick with Bogo only making slight rearrangements to the patrol areas from yesterday’s assignments. As everyone filed out of the bullpen, Judy made her way over to Bechtail. Holding out her paw, a broad smile on her face, Judy welcomed her new temporary partner. “Hi, I’m Judy Hopps, nice to meet you!”

Reaching out to shake the bunny’s small paw, Bechtail smiled slightly and returned the greeting. “It is a pleasure to meet you also Officer Hopps. Your exploits here at the ZPD precede you.”

Smile faltering a bit, “Uh, thanks, I guess.”

In the garage, Judy adjusted the front passenger seat of her and Nick’s cruiser to better fit the much larger mastiff and then they loaded themselves up. As Judy belted herself in, she looked over to see the parking cart already gone, Nick must have gotten an early start.

Judy and SC Bechtail relaxed into the morning’s patrol. The city’s citizens were well behaved today as Judy spent most of the morning cruising around their designated patrol area. Bogo had wanted them to keep their morning route near the city center, work their way through the business district and then some of the park areas later in the day.

“How long have you been a cop?” Judy asked pleasantly.

“I was recently promoted to Senior Police Constable, prior to that I was a Police Constable for five years. How long have you been an Officer?”

“I’ve been with the ZPD for about a year now.” Judy gave Bechtail another smile as she continued. “Being a cop has been a dream of mine since I was nine years old. This city is fantastic, and I feel like I’m really making a difference.”

Bechtail looked at the energetic bunny and replied. “Well, you certainly made a name for yourself with your first two cases. I have read about your work and found it fascinating that you were able to so quickly solve those cases while your fellow officers were unable to make any progress for
such a long time. Had you had formal investigative experience prior to working for the ZPD?”

Judy laughed, “First off, I had help on those cases, so it wasn’t all me. And no, growing up on my family’s farm in Bunnyburrow the only investigating I did was of my siblings when toys went missing, so no, I didn’t have any formal experience. Although I did volunteer at the sheriff’s office one summer, that was pretty cool even though they just had me do filing and simple office tasks. It took me forever to get them to take me on a ride along and then that was just to ticket a fruit vendor that had let his license expire.” She smiled remembering that vendor’s face when a 15-year-old gave him a ticket.

Bechtail chuckled at Judy’s story, “My father always said it was better to be lucky than good. You certainly demonstrated that adage solving your first cases. Although, I am sure you were aided by a University education that was able to make up for your lack of practical experience with a challenging curriculum of study.”

Judy’s smile fell some. “I guess so. I went to Tri-Burrows College near Burrow’s Edge. I graduated with a BS in Criminal Science and a minor in math.” Looking at SC Bechtail, Judy felt a twinge and the need to add a little more. “I uh, was accepted to ZU but I couldn’t afford it, so I went to Tri-Burrows instead.”

“Is this Tri-Burrows an elite school for rodents, such as yourself, out in the farming communities?”

“No, it’s just one of the public colleges—,” Judy did a double take and looked over at Bechtail, what did she say? “Officer Bechtail, I am not a rodent. Rabbits are lagomorphs.”

“Senior Constable if you please. Now that you mention it, I do recall that over here in the Commonwealth there was a recategorization some time back. In Mordinia we can be a bit traditional about things like that. I will endeavor to remember your classification in the future.”

Judy quietly added, “We’ve always been lagomorphs, it wasn’t a recategorization it was just getting other mammals to stop calling us rodents.”

“Of course, as you say. So, you were describing your higher education experience. It is a shame you were not able to go to the more prestigious city university that you were accepted into.”

“Yeah, I have a very, very large family and my parents didn’t have much money when I was growing up and they also weren’t ‘happy about me becoming a cop, so I decided that if I needed a degree to become a cop, I was going to have to pay for it myself. Two part-time jobs, a small scholarship and a lot of student loans later I was able to graduate from Tri-Burrows.” Judy’s smile started to reappear, she had been proud of herself for being able to work and go to school at the same time and still graduate with a 4.0 and top honors.

“Tuition for higher education in Mordinia is guaranteed for certain castes. As my pack has provided a valuable service to the aristocracy for generations, I was able to go to the University of Clareford. I graduated with two degrees, one in Forensic Science, the other in Psychology.” Looking out the window, Bechtail added, “My Father arranged for the settlement of any other expenses that were incurred during my stay at the University.”

Judy sat silently, not sure what to think. Bechtail continued a moment later. “You must be pleased with your family and the farm they maintain. I do not typically visit rod—, lagomorph habitats, but I am sure that your species is especially well suited to the types of manual labor required to be successful.”

Judy gripped the steering wheel a little tighter and with a tight-lipped smile, she forced out a reply.
“Yes, I guess we are. My family’s farm produces some of the finest fruits and vegetables in the region.”

Bechtail ignored the bite in Judy’s voice and carried on. “It was fortuitous that Mayor Lionheart implemented the Mammal Inclusion Initiative. If not for that legislation and his intercession you would not have been allowed to attend the Police Academy or join the ZPD. It seems you narrowly avoided joining your family as a produce farmer.”

Judy’s smile gone again, replied, “Okay…, I suppose you’re right, if the MII hadn’t been passed I wouldn’t have been able to join up, but Lionheart had nothing to do with me getting accepted to the ZPA. I qualified on my own and made valedictorian of my Academy class by working and studying my tail off.”

Bechtail gave Judy a raised-eyebrow look of doubt. “I am sure that you worked very hard, in your own way, at the Academy. I also believe you when you say that you are unaware of any of the success criteria in the program being adjusted for you, but Mayor Lionheart most certainly had a political agenda and I would wager that it required a small mammal, such as yourself, to graduate and join the ZPD. I also remember reading the details of your investigation and seeing that you were almost fired a couple of times by Chief Bogo and you needed Assistant Mayor Bellwether to give you access to the city’s JamCam network to help solve the Missing Mammal case.”

Bechtail gave out a low “Hmmm” and rubbed her chin jowls, “I find it interesting that you received critical assistance in becoming a police officer and solving your first case from two mammals that had their own criminal agendas and ended up being arrested.”

Judy sputtered, “That’s not true at all! Like I said, I never met Lionheart until I graduated from the ZPA and Bellwether didn’t help Nick or me do anything. Well, rotten cucumbers, you’re right, Bellwether let us use her computer to access the JamCams, but it’s not like she fed us a clue as to Lionheart’s activities or anything, I mean she had no way of knowing what he was up to. She wasn’t even there when Nick figured out where those wolves…” Flustered now, her face fell, ‘That is not what happened.’ She looked over at SC Bechtail and was greeted with an ‘I told you so look’ on the mastiff’s muzzle.

“Senior Constable Bechtail, the only critical assistance provided was from my partner Nick Wilde. Anything else was incidental and the result of solid police work.”

“Mmm hmm.”

Judy stopped at a red light. She stared ahead intensely, not wanting to look at Bechtail or anything else. Her thoughts were bouncing around in her head. How could this mammal, a fellow officer of the law, be saying all these things? Her thoughts were disrupted by a car behind her giving a polite toot of their horn. Judy looked up and saw the green light. She started the cruiser moving again as Bechtail continued.

“Was not Mr. Wilde, a fox no less, a petty criminal at the time he was assisting you with your investigations?”

Judy reacted to that, insult her fine, but go after her partner, not gonna let that go. “Senior Constable Bechtail, Officer Wilde’s history before joining the ZPD is none of your business and if you have a problem with the fact that he is a fox I would appreciate it if you would keep it to yourself.”

With a slight smirk on her face, Bechtail lifted a paw to stop Judy’s response. “You misunderstand Officer Hopps, I do not have any sort of issue with Officer Wilde. As a matter of fact, foxes, such
as he, played a role in our society almost as old and storied as my own people.”

Judy, relieved at the statement, blurted out, “Really? Wow, that’s so cool. Foxes here seem to always get the short end of the stick and Nick is a really great cop, so it’s amazing to hear that in Mordinia foxes have such a different reputation. I can’t wait to tell Nick. Were foxes part of the Royal Guard or a special elite force or something?” Judy’s ears began to perk back up and some of the more horrible things that Bechtail had been saying started to fade a bit.

Bechtail chuckled at the enthusiasm from the bunny as she replied, “No, no, nothing like that. Foxes were specially trained and even some selectively bred for the sport of hunting. For the ancient aristocracy, this was very important and those successful at the hunt were held in the highest regard.”

Judy suddenly got a disgusted look on her face. “Eww, foxes back then hunted other mammals just for the entertainment value and mammals watched, that’s really gross. Why would anyone find that even remotely entertaining?”

SC Bechtail laughed this time, “Oh my,” Bechtail laughed even louder. “Foxes hunting another capable mammal, that would be a sight to behold. Foxes are low-born animals, practically scavengers, even the best of their breed were incapable of hunting anything except the most ignorant and helpless of small prey creatures. Such a display would hardly be interesting to the nobility back when the hunts were still held.”

Bechtail paused again as if thinking. Judy looked over and noticed her rubbing her chin jowls again. Oh no, she thought to herself. What is she going to say now?

“Come to think of it, foxes were quite successful at hunting rabbits back in those days, were they not?”

There it was. “Yes ma’am, they were.” Judy didn’t add anything else to her monotone response, just waited for the next foot cover to drop.

“I thought as much. To answer your question, the high-born predators of that day enjoyed the challenge of participating in a hunt. You see, foxes did not hunt, foxes were hunted. For many generations, the smartest, strongest, most capable foxes were trained to run, hide and evade to make the hunt as glorious as possible. Once captured and slain, their tails were mounted on spears or pikes as trophies.”

Judy’s face turned a little green. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Oh, do not fret over the fate of those low-borns, they died a worthy death entertaining their betters. On occasion, some particularly capable foxes would even survive the hunt through the time limit. For those that did, they were rewarded by being treated as champions, given the best accommodations and allowed to mate with the most desirable vixens.”

Judy was afraid to say anything. She knew she shouldn’t. The silence started to eat at her. Don’t do it. She glanced to the side as Bechtail just sat there. She gripped the steering wheel tightly and ground out her reply. “I suppose that doesn’t sound too bad for the foxes that won. I guess. How many foxes survived the hunts?”

“Interesting question.” Bechtail looked up and thought for a moment. “I do recall stories of eight or nine foxes surviving their first hunt and even one surviving three hunts, but eventually they were all caught and dispatched in the way they deserved.”
Judy really wanted to puke now, how could Bechtail sit there and talk about hunting and killing other mammals like it was nothing. She shook her head, horrible, just horrible.

Bechtail must have (finally) noticed Judy wasn’t enjoying her history lesson because she spoke up and added. “If it makes you feel any better, foxes were considered too disgusting to eat, so their carcasses were always burned. Of course, their ashes could only be properly disposed of in a cesspool.”

Judy, looking straight ahead over the steering wheel replied in a slow even tone. “No, that actually doesn’t make me feel any better, not even a little bit.”

“I see, how about we talk about something you might find more pleasant?”

“Yes ma’am, that would be nice.”

“You said earlier you have a large family, why don’t you tell me about your mate and kits.”

Judy sank in her seat and wanted to groan again. What happened to something more pleasant?

“I don’t have a large family, I come from a large family, I have almost 350 siblings.”

“Ahh, so no mate? A boyfriend maybe? I just assumed a bunny your age would already be mated given your species’ propensity for propagation.”

Judy grimaced, just shoot me in the head, I might as well have invited my parents on this ride-along, they could be sitting in the back seat feeding Bechtail embarrassing questions about her lack of a love life. Gritting her teeth, she replied, “No mate, no boyfriend. Being the best cop possible has been my focus since I joined up.”

“I see, how noble of you to sacrifice so much for the greater good. I was blessed to meet my mate a few years ago, he is quite understanding of my commitment to law enforcement.”

Okay, a safe subject at last. “That sounds really nice, what’s he like?”

Bechtail beamed, “Oh, yes, he is quite the handsome mastiff. He is a large mammal, with the softest light brown fur, dark brown eyes, and the floppiest ears. He is so sensitive and kind, wonderful with pups and he still calls his mother at least once a week.”

Judy could see the starry-eyed look in Bechtail’s face as she continued. “I never believed in love at first sight until that night. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was supporting a drug raid that turned into a firefight when the Special Operations team arrived in their armored transport. I was instantly smitten when I saw my future mate breach the building with his team and take down half a dozen armed enforcers before the rest surrendered. We couldn’t take our eyes off each other while handcuffing the survivors and by the time we finished the paperwork, he had asked me out on our first date. The rest is history.”

With a genuine smile on her face, Judy said. “Wow, that sounds so romantic. Handsome guy sweeps a building clear of bad guys and woos the beautiful maiden. I like it.”

“Thank you, he is very special to me.” Bechtail paused and gave Judy a look she had grown to fear since her shift with Bechtail began. Judy braced herself.

“I am sure that there is a handsome hero out there just waiting to sweep you off your feet.”

Well, that wasn’t too bad.
“I did mean to ask…”

Oh, no.

“…as I mentioned before, I have not met a great number of your species, but I have noticed that
you have a different look about you than what I expected. Other rabbits are rounder and fluffier
whereas you are thinner, less fleshy, more tomboyish. Your fur coloring and pattern, from what I
can tell, also seem… unique. Your fur is a bland two-tone gray and lighter gray, I was expecting
multiple earth tones in a mottled pattern or a solid color, not the simplistic pattern of your fur and
your black colored ear tips are extremely unusual. So, I was wondering, are your features
considered desirable by rabbit bucks? Or does, whichever?”

Boom!

Judy froze, besides keeping the cruiser moving in a straight line, she could barely even breathe.
Ever since she was nine, she had worked hard to become a cop, that included as much physical
exercise and work as she could possibly undertake. Unfortunately, it also meant that she’d never
developed the same attractive curves that her sisters had.

Then her thoughts were suddenly replaced with the sing-song of one of her brothers calling her
Jude the Dude, a horrible nickname that her whole family started calling her when she was 12
years old. They thought it was clever, but every time they called her by that nickname, it made her
feel homelier and more undesirable.

The hurt of years of hearing her family use that awful nickname was followed quickly by the
memory of her asking a buck to the Freshman Fling high school dance. The buck laughed in her
face and then proceeded to humiliate her in front of everyone at school. He loudly mocked her
dream of becoming a cop and then grabbed her loose-fitting dress and yelled out to the crowd,
“Look at this, she’s so skinny she barely qualifies as female, she’ll never be able to fill out a dress
because all she wants to be is one of the boys.” As she stood there crying, the buck finished by
telling her that no guy in their right mind would ever want to date a crazy, pathetic doe like her.

Bechtail broke into Judy’s thoughts as she motioned her paw from Judy’s head down to her feet
and said, “Do not fret dear, I am sure that some mammal finds… that attractive.”

She just gestured to all of me.

“Oh my, look over there, a tea house. I would love a short respite, how about you call us out for a
break and we enjoy a nice cup of Caravan tea.”

It’s as if she has no idea what she’s saying and all the while, she spews a caustic verbal vomit that
burns everything it touches. Judy vowed to herself that this horrible mammal wouldn’t get to her,
she would not cry in front of her, she was way tougher than that, well maybe not way tougher but
tough enough. As she felt a tear starting to form, she decided that maybe a quick break would be a
good choice, she’d work on being tough after that.

With a bit of a hitch in her voice, Judy replied, “Sure”

……

Nick was working the city central business district today. Driving the parking cart down the lines
of parked cars marking the tires with chalk to catch the meter-feeders. A two-hour limit means a
max of two hours in the same spot, move it or get a ticket.

As he marked tires, Nick made an occasional call. He needed to work a few more details and he
wanted everything in place by this weekend. He wondered how Judy was getting along, she hadn’t been her usual chipper self in the mornings. He really missed meeting up with her before work, and after work, and during work too. He shook his head to stop that train of thought, things would work out and then everything would be good again, better than good even.

The meters started chiming and Nick got down to work. About 30 tickets later his phone rang. Glancing at the number, he smiled. “Hey Cassy, how’d it go?”

Cassidy Longtooth, Cassy to her friends, was a reporter for the Zootopia Times Newspaper and Online Journal. She was a single groundhog in her mid-30’s, a great writer and one of the rising stars amongst internet journalists. Nick had met her for the first time shortly after his mom had died. He’d been looking for help in investigating her death and the resulting expose Cassy wrote shone a bright spotlight on some pretty outrageous treatment of the cities under-class by some in the medical industry. Ever since then, Nick would give Cassy a tip whenever he saw something that might need a closer look. Between them, they had helped more than a few mammals, and it hadn’t hurt Cassy’s reputation as an investigative journalist either.

“I thought for sure that you were wasting my time by sending me on some sort of wild goose chase, but I was wrong. Hell, I may end up owing you for this one instead of the other way around.”

“Gotcha, now spill, were you able to come up with anything?”

“Yeah, I’m on the train back now. I should be able to send you a review copy later. It probably won’t be until after midnight though, it still needs some work and I want this on the net in the morning and ready for the print version tomorrow afternoon.” Nick heard a sigh before Cassy continued. “Nick, I know you wanted me to investigate the treatment of the town’s predators, and if there was any discrimination going on to come up with enough of a story to get the attention of the local town leadership, but there’s a lot more going on in that town than what you thought. I’m assuming you’ve never been there because it’s bad.”

Nick frowned, she was right he had never been to Bunnyburrow. Instead, he’d taken a huge gamble on the tiny fact that Judy had told him that her dad had tried to load her up with an assortment of Fox Away products when she first moved to Zootopia. Now, he was wondering how bad it could be in a town full of fluffy, cute, bunnies hopping around.

“Okay, what’s the real story then?”

Cassy steeled herself and started, “Alright, I started out by looking at the treatment of predators, but then I found out that what’s going on there involves more than just the preds. Bunnyburrow is over 90% rabbit now and a century ago it was a lot closer to 100%. So, everything about the town, including the law is rabbit-centric which means if you’re not a rabbit, it hasn’t always been so easy to live there.

“Most of the rabbits are just hard working, go to Sunday church, move along, get along folk, but there are a few Orders or Sects that don’t want to have anything to do with anyone who’s not a rabbit and they definitely don’t want to be around preds. So, up until around 30 years ago when the law was changed to include rights for all prey mammals, those that weren’t rabbits were often discriminated against. You know, where they could eat, shop, redlining, that sort of thing.

“Once the law changed, a lot of those problems went away, legally, but as far as full acceptance into the community, they still have a little ways to go before the prey in Bunnyburrow are as integrated as they are in Zootopia.”
Nick chimed in, “What about the predators?”

Cassy cleared her throat, “Yeah. Predators are still treated like crap. Aside from one predator who was able to open his own bakery and the predators that found work on a couple of farms, the best jobs predators can find are all either basic manual labor or the nasty jobs no one else is willing to do.”

“Do you think the treatment of predators is bad enough for the Commonwealth to trigger an Article 18?” asked Nick.

Cassy chuckled, “No idea, that’s your bailiwick. What I was able to do though, was get a few minutes with the Mayor and ask her about the treatment of predators. She told me that she’s submitted three proposals to change different parts of the law including one to adopt all the same mammal rights laws that exist in Zootopia. To her credit, the Mayor was pretty forthcoming in letting me know that her proposals are being blocked or delayed in various committees and that she’s frustrated with the town council.”

Nick took a breath, “Alright, that’s a lot to think about. What about the other part?”

Cassy snorted, “Interspecies relationships? Yeah, well, it’s basically the same in Bunnyburrow as it is in Zootopia, it’s against the law for an interspecies couple to become mates.

“In my mind, the biggest difference between Zootopia and Bunnyburrow with regards to interspecies couples is that in Zootopia, couples are apt to try and work around the law using living wills, power of attorney documents, trusts and other legal maneuvers to create partnerships or unions and no one is really trying to stop them anymore. In Bunnyburrow, the law is the law and I didn’t hear of anyone trying to work around it. So, interspecies couples keep a low profile and if a rabbit is involved with someone who isn’t a rabbit, they’re keeping it very, very quiet.”

With a sigh, Nick shook his head, “Well, none of that is exactly what I wanted to hear, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised either. You said you're going to publish your story tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve already cleared it with my editor, just a few more things to add and then I’m good to go.”

Nick replied, “Sounds good.”

Cassy spoke back up, “Hey, I almost forgot, my editor wants me to stay on top of this story, so whatever else you find out if it makes for good follow-up material, I want an exclusive on it.”

“Sure thing, Cassy. Thanks again.”

The line went dead and Nick put away his phone. As he turned to go look for an expired meter, he saw his and Judy’s cruiser pass him on the street. He waved, but there was no response from the stone-faced bunny driving like she was headed to the gallows. The cruiser pulled in and parked up the street in front of a few small diners and a coffee kiosk. Nick decided a quick detour was called for to find out what was up with Judy.

As Nick approached the parked cruiser, he saw Judy sitting near the kiosk with a cup of half-caf sitting untouched on the bench next to her. Her head was drooped down against her chest, ears flat against her back, and her eyes closed tightly. With her paws gripping the edge of the bench, Nick could see her shoulders trembling as she tried to fight back the tears. No way a bunny could look more miserable than this one.
Nick quietly sat down next to Judy, she didn’t move or acknowledge him at all. Nick wanted to say something but he was worried, he’d never seen Judy this down before. Instead, hidden by the bench’s backrest and their bodies to either side, he gently placed his paw on top of hers. It rested there for a few seconds until he felt her fingers relax and move apart so they could interlace their digits.

Judy sniffed, “Nick, she’s a monster.”

“I heard you got saddled as a tour guide for a cop from the DMPD, a real piece of work, huh.”

“She called me a rodent.”

Nick knew there was more to it than that, but he also knew that Judy didn’t need him to say anything right now. So, he just sat and occasionally rubbed the side of her paw with his thumb pad letting her know he was there for her.

As the minutes passed, Judy started to relax. Nick always had a way of soothing her mood when she was down, and the feel of his paw meshed with hers felt right on so many levels. Nothing had changed, they still couldn’t be together, but Judy decided that for just a few more minutes she’d put ‘not being together’ on hold. Maybe like, fifteen more minutes, then totally back to being not together, no go-backs this time, ever again, for sure.

As her breathing leveled out, Nick felt like it was safe enough to find out what had happened to his bunny um, partner. Just as he was going to ask a question, the sun was blocked out by a large canine approaching the two small officers.

“There you are Officer Hopps, I was wondering where you had wandered off to.”

Nick quickly removed his paw from Judy’s before the larger canine could see anything and turned around to greet the stranger. Noticing the uniform as he rose, Nick stuck out his paw, ”Hello, you must be Officer Bechtail from the DMPD, nice to meet you, my name is Nick Wilde. I’m Officer Hopps’ regular partner.”

Looking a bit indignant and making no effort to try and shake Nick’s paw, Bechtail replied, “Senior Constable Bechtail, thank you.”

Nick smiled and let his paw drop to his side, “Of course, my mistake.” Recovering from his faux pas, he added, “Are you enjoying your stay in Zootopia and working with the ZPD?”

“Yes, yes, quite an interesting city. Officer Hopps has been an adequate partner so far today.” As she spoke, Bechtail focused a little more on Nick and gave him a detailed examination. Nick was wearing the meter maid vest over his standard issue uniform and he had the small bowler hat firmly placed between his ears so it wouldn’t slip. Bechtail’s continued examination reminded Nick of going through a uniform inspection at the academy, so much so that he almost reached up to give his badge a quick shine.

Bechtail finally spoke, “You seem exceptionally fit for an animal of your species.”

Hearing the compliment, Nick puffed up his chest and whispered to Judy, “Told you, I make this look good.”

“Dork” was all he heard whispered back.

Bechtail continued, “In particular, I must compliment you on your tail, it is quite long and bushy and with very nice coloring. I was just telling Officer Hopps about the ancient hunts the Mordinia
nobility hosted in which only the most capable mammals competed. I believe you might have been an excellent choice as a participant.”

Nick seemed pleased, “See Carrots, back in the day, I would have been an elite predator.”

Judy rolled her eyes, she knew exactly where this conversation was going.

“Yes, I imagine you would have done quite well, you might have even survived through a couple of hunts.” Looking up as if she were reminiscing, she continued. “It would have been glorious, the pack chasing you down, you, exhausted and worn, dying the pitiful death of the low-born scavenger that you are and finally having your tail mounted on one of my pack member’s war pikes. We are obviously mammals living in the wrong time, do you not agree?”

Nick’s smile fell and his jaw dropped open.

“Told ya,” Judy whispered again.

Bechtail came out of her reverie, “Now that I think about it, ever since the hunts were discontinued it has been difficult for your kind to find a useful purpose in Mordinia. It is nice to see that over here, the ZPD has been able to find a function that someone, such as yourself, can adequately perform. Albeit, I expect that exhaustive training in parking enforcement was required before your superiors would trust you to be able to work unsupervised.”

“Well, um…”, Nick looked at Judy and then back at Bechtail. He grabbed his phone and checked the time. “It’s getting late and you know those meters won’t maid themselves.” Looking back at Judy he added, “I’ll let you two ladies get back to your patrol. Carrots, I’ll see you back at the station.” With that, Nick zipped down the sidewalk to retrieve his parking cart.

“Fairly speedy that one, especially when he is running away. Maybe three hunts.”

Judy shook her head as they walked over to the cruiser. Only half a shift left, she could make it.
It was 5 am outside a nicely kept, five-story condominium building. Fronted with brick, it had a few trees planted along the front sidewalk and some shrubs and small planter boxes near the main entryway. The building was dark with most of its occupants still asleep except for one small mammal in a unit on the top floor. Through one of the large windows, light peeked around heavy curtains to show a red fox in boxer shorts sitting in an old folding chair and staring at the dimly lit screen of his phone. The red fox took a sip of his coffee and then set his mug down on a rickety end table. A moment later, he tapped the phone screen and closed the file he’d been looking at.

Nick had gone through Cassy’s article on Bunnyburrow. Rubbing the back of his neck with his free paw, he sighed. The article pretty much covered what Cassy had told him yesterday, it lightly referenced some of the intolerance she talked about, but really focused on the predator issues by highlighting the speciesism built into some of the local regulations and policies and then describing the more subtle bureaucratic biases against predators that occurred when they applied for permits or services, like losing paperwork or sometimes needing extra approvals over what might be required for a prey mammal.

Cassy then went on to describe the Mayor’s efforts to change the local laws and put forth a more welcoming and inclusive agenda that included all mammals regardless of their being predator or prey. The mayor was a rabbit doe named Karen Ackerbunn. Nick saw that she was only 30 years old, which made her young to be a mayor. She was a local that had gone away to school and come back and quickly gotten involved in politics. Nick figured she had to be pretty well connected to rise so far so fast.

In the article, Ackerbunn said she was trying to attract diverse businesses to Bunnyburrow and was counting on both private capital and Commonwealth block grants to help with infrastructure upgrades and technology improvements. From the notes Cassy included with the article, she described Ackerbunn as a passionate leader that was committed to bringing Bunnyburrow into the social mainstream and willing to fight as hard as it took to get what she wanted. Nick highlighted Ackerbunn as somebody he’d need to watch carefully.

Setting aside Cassy’s notes, Nick thought about the plan and any tweaks he might need to make. Ackerbunn had a vision and she needed outside funding to achieve it. That funding depended on a positive town image that had just been shown to be more illusion than reality. Another sip of coffee and Nick nodded to himself. He made a few notes on his phone and set a reminder. He’d talk with Finn before lunch and give him the final prep. Setting his phone aside, Nick headed into the bathroom to get his shower. The next few days were key.

Judy yawned as she pushed open the door to the precinct lobby. The lobby was empty except for Clawhauser munching away on a bowl of Lucky Chomps at the reception desk. She tried again to rub the sleep out of her eyes while slowly plodding over to Clawhauser.

“Good morning, Ben,” she said, her paw covering another yawn. “Did anything interesting happen overnight?”
Clawhauser’s cheeks jiggled as he put his cereal bowl on the desk and looked down at Judy giving her a high-pitched greeting. “Good morning yourself, sleepy head. You’ve been dragging all week. Have you been staying up late watching Gazelle’s latest video? It’s really great, I have it here on my phone if you like.” Clawhauser grabbed his phone and started to turn it towards Judy.

“No Ben, I just haven’t been sleeping well.” Another yawn escaped as she tried to talk through it. “With Nick on parking duty and me on patrol with different partners, it just hasn’t been the same.”

“I know, it’s so weird, you guys always come in together and patrol together and hang out after work together and hang out on your days off together, it’s like you’re always together.” Clawhauser gasped and with his paws squeezing his cheeks together, he whisper-shouted, “OMG, did you guys have a fight? Did you break up? What happened to my favorite couple?”

“Ben, nothing happened. Nick’s on parking duty, that’s all. Besides, we’re just friends, okay?”

“Awwwh, but you guys are so cute together.”

Judy weakly raised an eyebrow and gave Ben a ‘look’. Unfortunately, her look was too sleepy and bloodshot to be particularly fear-inducing. Clawhauser continued to smile and coo as Judy tried as hard as she could to put some force behind her glare, but after a few seconds, she gave up and just waggled a warning finger at the rotund cheetah. “Ben, what did I say about the C-word?”

“Sorry Judy, you know I didn’t mean it, sometimes I just get excited. Although, you and Nick really are perfect for each other.”

Judy sighed, if Ben knew how much she agreed with him he’d probably explode in shrieks of joy and never leave her and Nick alone. Of course, she couldn’t tell him that Nick was the reason she wasn’t sleeping well. She missed him. Hardly a day had gone by since they’d met that they hadn’t hung out together or at least talked. And it hadn’t helped that Garrison had insisted that she clean and Musk-Mask her apartment. It had only taken a couple of days of trying to sleep in her now sterile bed for her to realize that being surrounded by Nick’s scent was the next best thing to sleeping in a bunny pile of her siblings.

Judy shook her head, “Ben…”, looking up at his expectant face she powered forward, “I really need some coffee, I’ll talk to you later.”

Judy pulled herself up into her chair in the bullpen and set her coffee on the table in front of her. Thankfully, as she sat waiting for Bogo, her first sips of the breakroom brew started taking effect. One of her ears perked up as she heard McHorn introduce himself to Bechtail. Mentally, she wished him luck and hoped that Bechtail would be more impressed doing a ride along with a former Navy Chief Petty Officer than with a simple farm bunny.

As the clock ticked to 8:30, Higgins called for everyone’s attention and the pounding on the desks started. Judy stood up in her chair to see over the desktop but decided to skip the pounding this morning.

Bogo positioned himself behind the podium and called for quiet. “Alright everyone, we have a busy day. This afternoon city square will be blocked off for the setup of the Taste of Zootopia festival that starts this afternoon. I want those of you on patrol to keep an eye on the vendors. They start setting up around 11 am and won’t break down their booths until Sunday evening.”

Shuffling his papers, he added. “This morning starting at 10 am, a TV production crew will be filming for an episode of some show. They have their own security, but I want some extra support. They need to get done quickly so they can move out before the first festival event starts.”
“What show is it, Chief?” Someone from the back of the bullpen yelled out.

Head tilted down while looking over his reading glasses, Bogo replied, “Don’t know, don’t care.”

Someone else yelled out, “I heard it’s for Parkside Blues.” The volume of the chatter started to rise as the mammals in the room talked about the show.

Judy smiled wide, Parkside Blues was one of her and Nick’s favorite police dramas. Every Tuesday night they cuddled up on her bed and watched it on her laptop and ate popcorn as Nick pointed out the flaws with how the perps were portrayed. It would be so cool if she and Nick could work with the production crew.

Judy turned to elbow her partner and instead stared at the empty spot next to her and sighed, no Nick again today. Judy refocused as Bogo’s voice shook her out of her thoughts. “Hopps, you and Schweinly meet the crew and make sure no one interferes with the production and get them gone quickly.”

As everyone filed out of the bullpen, Judy met up with Schweinly in the back by the door. She didn’t know much about Schweinly. He was a large boar with brown fur and typical of his species he had a very harsh bristly outer coat of hair, a couple of small tusks and a bit of a belly. Judy couldn’t tell how much of his belly was normal versus too many doughnuts. Schweinly had transferred in from District 9 a couple of months ago and was usually partnered up with a third-year bull moose, but the moose was on leave until next week.

Putting on a friendly face with a medium-good fake smile, Judy put her paw out and introduced herself to her new partner, hoping against hope that he was better than Bechtail had been.

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A small coffee mug hit the wall and shattered. Fortunately, it had been empty so it didn’t make too much of a mess in the corner of the otherwise well-appointed office.

A pair of soft rabbit paws proceeded to pound the top of an old wooden desk. “Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!”

The paw of a porcupine subtlety set a new mug on the rabbit’s desk and then picked up his own to take a sip. Nodding his head towards the computer screen on the desk, he calmly added, “I warned you that something like this was going to happen. Applying for those block grants got us noticed.”

Karen Ackerbunn, youngest ever Mayor of Bunnyburrow, stared daggers at her computer screen while her Executive Assistant, Ken Quillbert, stood quietly next to her desk. They both had a plan for Bunnyburrow, a plan they’d been working on since they met in college, and sure as hell, that plan didn’t involve the town getting called out for speciest treatment of predators in an article by a major online journalist.

“I know. But we need those grants.” Fists balled up, Karen tried to relax.

“So now that you know I’m worth my salary as a psychic, we need to come up with a plan. It’s almost the weekend, and everyone in Zootopia thinks we’re out in the sticks, so that gives us a little time to come up with something before this blows up on social media.”

Karen reached over and picked up the new mug and started tossing it from paw to paw as she thought. After a few moments, she stopped and said, “Call an emergency meeting of the Co-op board for tomorrow after lunch. Let them know about the article and that I want to talk about the issues that were brought up and any ideas on how we can address them.”
“You seriously want the Co-op in on this? Most of them are part of the problem, I don’t see the
worth in getting them involved in trying to come up with any solutions.”

Karen nodded, “Yeah, I want them there. The city council has been having a party blocking all my
proposals, so I think it’s time I tried working with someone else. Go set the meeting up and then
get your tail back here with a couple of extra-large coffees, you and I are going to think of
something to fix this problem and then we’re going to prepare our best sales-pitch to make it
happen.”

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Schweinly checked out a patrol car and then he and Judy drove to where the production company
was preparing to film. He parked the cruiser behind a group of trailers and then both of them made
their way to where the production crew was set up. The area was barricaded off with cones and
tape to warn away passersby and a couple of private security mammals were already working
crowd control. Judy was thrilled to see all the actors and extras in replica ZPD uniforms looking
over their scripts or drinking a last cup of coffee, it reminded her of when she played a cop in her
Carrot Days’ play so many years ago.

Schweinly suggested they split up and he headed over to manage the crowds by the trailers while
Judy walked the production area perimeter barriers to make sure no overly aggressive fans
disturbed the production crew.

Judy stopped to see a couple of the show’s stars coming out from their trailers and meet with the
director. As the shot was being laid out, Judy noticed Schweinly leaning over one of the barriers to
talk with a large cream-colored rabbit buck wearing jeans and a Parkside Blues t-shirt. Judy
watched for a moment to make sure her partner didn’t need backup and then went back to walking
her part of the barrier.

This was so sweet, she was only a few yards away from some of her favorite TV stars. Judy wanted
so bad to take a couple of pictures of the actors with her phone, but ever the ZPD professional, she
resisted. Of course, Nick would already have a dozen selfies and be working on some autographs
by now. Shaking her head at the thought of Nick and his antics, Judy scanned the crowd and kept
Schweinly in view in case something came up.

“Good morning Officer, how are you today?”

Judy turned towards the voice and saw the buck that Schweinly had been talking to. “Hello, can I
help you?”

The buck gave Judy a broad smile, “Actually, I think it’s me that can help you. I saw your cute tail
from over there and I figured I should introduce myself. Now that I’m close enough to feel your
need, how about we go somewhere and I help you out, hmmm?”

Judy’s mouth hung open in shock. First, she was surprised that he had called her cute, no boy had
ever called her cute before, well except Nick but he didn’t know what cute meant to a bunny, so
that didn’t count. Second, what did he mean by ‘helping her out’?

“I’m sorry, you’ve made some sort of mistake, I’m working, please move along.”

Ignoring the request to leave, the buck pressed on, “My name’s Neil and I know a private spot
nearby where we can take care of your condition and have you back in a jiffy.” Neil smiled even
broader and stepped closer to Judy. “You look really nice in that outfit, how about you take a break
from your character for a few minutes, we both know a doe has needs and I’ll be gentle.”
“Places everyone! Cameras ready!”

Judy went from shock to anger in a heartbeat, which for a rabbit is pretty fast, “I am Officer Judy Hopps with the ZPD! What in the carrot-picking world do you mean ‘take a break from my character’?”

“Quiet on the set!”

Neil leaned in, put his arm around Judy and pulled her to his side. Then, speaking in a fake husky voice, “I can tell you haven’t been with anyone for a long time and it’s making you tense and fidgety, a little ‘break’ will do you good.”

“Action!”

Judy grabbed the buck by his wrist, spun him around and pushed him to his knees. Pulling a pair of handcuffs from her belt, she cuffed his paws behind his back and yelled, “You are under arrest for interfering with an officer, you have the right to remain silent and I suggest you do exactly that!”

“Cut! Who the hell is that? I said I want it quiet on the set!!”

Judy turned towards the director as her ears started to turn red from embarrassment, “Sorry, I’ll lock this guy up in the cruiser.”

“You do that, now, quiet on the set!”

Judy pulled Neil up on to his feet and pushed him towards where Schweinly was standing. As they got closer, Judy noticed that her temporary partner was smiling and chuckling to himself. The buck, on the other hand, seeing the laughing boar, suddenly realized that something was wrong and started to get upset.

“Whoa, wait one second, he told me you were an extra playing a bunny cop in the TV show. Holy crap, are you the real Judy Hopps?” Eyes bugged out, he looked at Judy desperately hoping that he hadn’t just tried to proposition a real ZPD cop.

Judy just nodded.

“NO! I was set up! He gave me a fifty to proposition you and promised me another hundred if you went through with it. Please! I would never have done that if I’d known who you really were!”

Judy looked back and forth between the upset buck and Schweinly, who was now full up laughing, and started to get angry.

“Please, I didn’t know, I swear” the buck pleaded.

Judy glared at her so-called partner who was still laughing and then set the buck free, “Get out of here and if I ever see you again, I’ll lock you up for being a sleaze.”

The buck took off in a flash as Judy stomped the rest of the way over to Schweinly, “You want to tell me what that was all about?”

“Hopps, you should have seen your face! I couldn’t tell if you were shocked or you wanted to ask him out.” Waving towards the retreating buck he added, “I can’t believe you let him go, hell, you had him cuffed, you should have dragged him into one of the trailers and had some fun. Briggs always said you were wound pretty tight; a quickie probably would have done you some good.”
“You wanted me to do WHAT?!” Glaring at the boar, Judy was incensed. “How dare you talk to me like that. I’m an Officer with the ZPD and you’ll treat me with the respect I’ve earned! And what the heck does that ram, Briggs, have to do with any of this?”

Schweinly tried to mirror Judy’s indignant look and yelled back, “Respect, what respect? You got into the ZPD on a technicality and the first time you were under fire you folded. Briggs told me how you screwed up, got wounded, and then blamed him.”

Judy sputtered, “You have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“CUT! What the hell is going on around here! Paula, fire whoever is making all that noise! I want it quiet now!”

Paula, one of the shows Assistant Directors, scurried over the two police officers and hushed them. “Look you two, you need to quiet down. If you have something you need to talk about, use one of the makeup trailers.” Paula opened the door of the nearest trailer and gestured for the two officers to move their discussion inside.

Judy glared at Schweinly as he led the way into the trailer.

As Judy closed the door, Schweinly turned on her. “Briggs had to ask for a transfer to District 13 and he said it was because of you. You couldn’t hack it under fire and threw him under the bus. That’s what’s going on.”

Judy was pissed now, “Schweinly, whatever Briggs told you is a pile of pellets! He was the one that hung me out to dry and almost got me killed.”

Schweinly started to tell Judy she was full of crap when Judy held up a paw to hold him from speaking. Judy took a calming breath and said, “Look, I don’t know exactly what Briggs told you but I’ll fill you in if you let me.”

Schweinly closed his mouth with a click and made a waving motion with his hoof for her to continue.

“A wolf from one of the most violent gangs in the city was running from a robbery. Someone called the ZPD when they saw him cross a park and head toward a house that backed up to the green space. Briggs and I were the closest, so we were the first on scene. By the time we arrived, the wolf had already broken into the house and we could hear him trashing the place. We didn’t know if the wolf was alone in the house or if any of the homeowners were in there with him, so we moved into the house to make sure there were no civilians at risk.

“What we didn’t know at the time was that the wolf had a gun and had downed a heavy dose of PCP because he was looking to kill a cop.

“Briggs went to the left and I went to the right towards the kitchen. The wolf howled and screamed that he’d kill anyone he saw and then fired a couple of shots. I signaled Briggs to circle around to the dining room and he acknowledged. I leaned around a half wall separating the kitchen from the family room and saw the wolf standing in the trashed kitchen.

“Briggs was supposed to be coming around the other side of the kitchen to cover me, but he didn’t. Instead, the wolf spotted me and decided to take a shot. I was able to get a shot off first, but I only had a tranq gun. The dart wasn’t having much of an effect on him, probably due to the PCP that I didn’t know about, so I readied another shot.

“I yelled for Briggs, but he didn’t answer. The wolf came around to where I was and took a shot at
me at the same time I hit him with another dart. His shot grazed me in the arm and I fell back under a large chair. The wolf came over, tossed the chair away and aimed his gun right at me. I rolled away just as he fired and the shot hit the floor where I’d been lying. I hit him with another dart and tried to dive behind another chair, but I was too slow. He was aiming his gun at me to take another shot when the tranqs finally took effect and he collapsed. If the tranqs had taken another split second, I’d be dead.”

Schweinly asked, “What happened to Briggs?”

With an angry look on her face, Judy replied, “He was in one of the bedrooms hiding next to a bed, cowering in fear. I found out later that he’d never drawn his weapon before and never been involved in a shooting. He didn’t follow procedure, he signaled that he had me covered and then he ran and hid. It was like he wanted me to take on an armed wolf all by myself with only a tranq gun to defend myself, hardly fair odds.”

“He blamed you for ending up in District 13.”

“Briggs should have been suspended or even fired. Him ending up riding a desk in the Meadowlands was better than he deserved.”

“Hopps, I’ll take your version of what happened under advisement, but I’ve known Briggs for a while and I find it hard to believe he would abandon his partner like that.”

Schweinly moved towards the door adding, “I don’t like you and I think you are a publicity stunt. The fact that you were on patrol with only a tranq gun is proof positive that the ZPD higher-ups don’t trust you either. You should have stayed outside that house and let Briggs go in with some real cops to back him up.”

Looking at the rabbit with disgust on his face, he added, “You’re going to get someone killed one day and I don’t want that someone to be me, so how about we patrol opposite sides of the festival until our shift is over.”

Judy waited until the boar had left before making her own way out of the trailer. She quietly patrolled the TV production area until they were done filming and then stayed as far away from Schweinly as she could for the rest of the afternoon.

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Hooyah! Ticket number 75 and the clock says it’s time to drive back to the precinct. Nick had the joke-mobile floored and his head hanging out the side, mouth open and his tongue out ready to taste the speed. Still nothing, even downhill. What fun is it being a canid if you can’t feel the wind in your face while driving? Maybe Carrots would let me soup this cart up with a bigger engine or a pair of booster rockets.

Nick heard the beeping of an incoming call, grabbing his phone he answered it. “Wilde here.”

“Nick, you wanted to hear when I’d started revving up the social media campaign, it’s been up for a couple of hours now.”

“Hey, Finn. Are you getting enough of a response for tomorrow?”

“Looks good so far. I’ll make the call in the morning according to the plan. Anything else?”

“Nah, thanks, big guy, I’m gonna owe you a solid for this one.”
Nick pulled into the precinct garage and parked the small cart next to its charging station and plugged it in. Walking towards the male’s locker room he wondered what Judy was up to. He missed her. The major downside to his plan was that it kept him away from his bunny. For the first time since he’d graduated, they had missed their movie night together last night. Snuggling up with Judy on her bed for movie night with a bowl of popcorn and a couple of sodas was always the highlight of his week. Sighing, Nick opened the door to the locker room and wished that he was getting ready to meet Judy and walk her home instead of heading to his place by himself.

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Judy walked into the precinct atrium and over to the reception desk. “Hey, Ben.”

She intended to keep walking past the cheetah towards the female’s locker room but was stopped by a wave from Clawhauser. “Judy, the Chief wants to see you before you go off shift. He’s waiting in his office.”

“Okay, Ben. Thanks.”

Judy knocked on the Chief’s door with her signature triple tap. “Come in, Hopps.”

“Ben said you wanted to see me, sir.”

“Yes, Hopps, take a seat.”

Judy jumped up into the large chair and made herself as comfortable as she could. Judy watched as Bogo sorted through a stack of papers on his desk. She could see that he wasn’t happy. Whenever Nick irritated the Chief too much a certain vein on his forehead throbbed. Judy could see the same vein pulsing now. She sat and tried to keep her paws from fidgeting, but quiet patience was more Nick’s forte than hers.

After a few minutes had passed and the bunny’s tension level had escalated appropriately, Bogo spoke.

“Hopps, I have this week’s daily shift reports on your performance and I’m not happy. Care to explain?”

Judy swallowed nervously, “Um, well, was it a difficult week? Yes, yes it was.” She gave Bogo her best fake smile, even showing her buck teeth for better effect.

Glaring at the rabbit, Bogo slammed his hoof on the desk, “Hopps, don’t play word games with me. I’ve got a report here from Officer Garrison that details insubordination. You disregarded her decision to turn over a case to the ZPS and took it upon yourself to volunteer to perform the reviews instead. Is this report true?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Garrison also documented that you ignored her instructions while in pursuit of a purse snatcher and were out of position.”
“Sir, Officer Garrison was being unreasonable, her efforts to keep me safe were not necessary and she had no respect for my—”

“Hopps!”

Judy gritted her teeth, “Yes, sir, I disregarded Garrison’s order to hide behind the squad car.”

Bogo flipped through the papers and looked back up at Judy, “Garrison didn’t send me anything the day of your last shift together, I’ll assume that’s a good thing.”

Judy nodded in silence.

Bogo reshuffled the stack of reports. He let Judy stew for another minute before glaring at her again. “Senior Constable Bechtail’s opinion of you was significantly less than stellar. She attacked the MII as a waste of resources based on the program’s acceptance of a ‘classless rodent’.”

“Sir, I…”

“I don’t want to hear it, Hopps.”

Bogo held up a page of handwritten notes. “And today? I gave you specific instructions to keep that TV production quiet and on schedule. Instead, I get a phone call from the producer telling me that you disrupted the shoot not once but twice and the second time had something to do with an argument between you and Schweinly. Which part of ‘get them gone quickly’ did you not understand?”

Judy sat quietly with her head down and wrung her paws together as Bogo glared at her.

“I’d like to hear what this argument between you and Schweinly was about.”

Judy, still looking down, nervously bit her lip. “Officer Schweinly is a friend of Officer Briggs. Briggs told him that it was my poor performance during that shooting with the gang-banger wolf that led to me getting hurt. He believes that Briggs had to request a transfer to Precinct 13 because he was being held up as the scapegoat for the whole incident. I explained to him how it was Briggs not following protocol and failing to support his partner in a dangerous situation that led to me being injured. I walked Schweinly through what really happened and told him that, in my opinion, Briggs should have been more severely disciplined for his actions.”

Bogo studied Judy’s downturned face. He hadn’t known that Schweinly and Briggs were friends. If he had, he never would have partnered him with Hopps.

Bogo grunted and shook his head. “Not one of your best weeks was it Hopps?”

“No sir, I suppose not.”

“Half a shift of foot patrol tomorrow morning to support the festival and then starting this weekend you meet with that family at least weekly for the next eight weeks and turn in your reviews to me. And Hopps no overtime, the reviews are on your own time, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re dismissed.”

Judy climbed down from the chair. As she turned to leave, she remembered something Schweinly had said to her this morning during their argument. “Sir?”
“Yes Hopps, what now?”

“Why haven’t I ever been issued a ZPD weapon or a full-size vest? All the other rookies were assigned gear their first month here. I’ve been working for a year and I filled out all the proper forms, but the ZPD hasn’t issued me anything but a tranq gun.”

Bogo gave Judy a confused look. He started to point out that she was wearing a weapon when he remembered back over all the paperwork related to her and Wilde that he had signed over the last year.

“You’re right, I haven’t been given any requests from the Quartermaster to approve ZPD gear for you. I do remember that procurement said they were having trouble finding a weapon sized to fit a rabbit, but that was a while ago.”

Pointing at the holster on her belt, Bogo asked, “If that weapon didn’t come from the Quartermaster, where did you get it?”

“A few days after I was injured, I went to visit Nick at the Academy. When he found out what had happened and that I hadn’t been issued a weapon yet, he got pretty upset. He made a couple of calls and then took me to a gunsmith he knew. They took measurements and laser scans of my paws and torso and a few weeks later I picked up a weapon and a vest. They had me come back for a final adjustment on the pistol after I had fired a few hundred rounds, but start to finish it didn’t take them all that long.”

Judy looked intently at Bogo, “Sir, if Nick was able to help me get a weapon so quickly, how come the ZPD hasn’t been able to? Is there something else I should be aware of that is keeping me from being issued ZPD equipment?”

Bogo opened his mouth to reply but closed it instead. He gave Hopps a dumbfounded look. She should have been issued a service weapon months ago. Someone had dropped the ball or worse, was purposely trying to put one of his officers in harm’s way. As he tried to come up with a plausible explanation, he could see a look of resignation fill Hopps’ eyes.

“I don’t suppose a meter maid needs a weapon or a vest, do they sir?”

Bogo sighed, “Hopps, it’s not like that. You should have been outfitted with gear as soon as you were assigned to the precinct. I’ll look into what happened right away.”

Looking at her feet, Judy replied, “Of course, sir.”

Judy’s shoulders slumped and her ears were as droopy as they had ever been. Bogo watched as a look of failure and disappointment swept over the bunny. It wasn’t quite the same look that he had seen just before Judy turned in her badge after the Missing Mammals case, but it was bad enough.

As Judy made to leave again, Bogo halted her, “Hopps hold on. May I see your weapon and vest, please.”

Judy unzipped enough of her neoprene uniform that Bogo could see some of the thin mesh that covered her entire torso. Next, she pulled her weapon out of its holster, checked the safety, removed the magazine and verified the chamber was empty. Once they both could see the weapon was safe, she handed it to Bogo.

Bogo took the small weapon and examined it carefully. He put his reading glasses on when he noticed a small engraving on the frame above the grip. Recognizing it, his eyes went wide and he looked over his glasses at Hopps. If she noticed his reaction, she didn’t say anything.
“This is the pistol that Wilde helped you get?”

Judy remembered Nick practically begging her to let him buy her a gun and vest. She had only agreed to let him pay the difference between her savings and the total cost of the gear after he had gotten down on his knees and used his puppy-dog eyes on her. Of course, being the hustler he was, he continued to use the look on her until she’d agreed to let him order upgraded models over the ones she had picked out.

“Yes, sir. Nick said it was one of the better ones available that would fit a rabbit.”

Feeling Bogo’s eyes on her, Judy continued in a soft voice, “It was more than I could afford by myself, so Nick helped me pay for it. And, um, even with his help, it ended up costing me all of my savings.”

Bogo looked at the gun in his hoof again and then back at Judy but didn’t say anything.

Judy started to get nervous that she’d done something wrong, “Sir, I filled out all the proper paperwork for having a personally owned weapon and submitted it to the Quartermaster like I was supposed to. I also made sure Nick’s paperwork was in order since he’s using his own weapon too.”

Bogo handed the weapon back to Judy.

“Hopps, I’ll check with the Quartermaster, but Wilde is right, any weapon the ZPD can find for you won’t be as good as what you have there. My advice to you is to keep using the equipment you already have and I will make sure that your and Wilde’s files reflect that I have given you permission to use your personal gear while on duty.”

Judy nodded without saying anything.

“Hopps, I’m sure this was all just a procurement snafu.”

“Yes, sir.”

Judy slowly walked over to the door and then jumped up to grab the handle. With a swing to the side to turn the handle, she opened the door.

“Goodnight sir.”
Judy sat at her desk dressed in pajama shorts and a light t-shirt. She’d been sitting staring at nothing for over an hour.

Judy tapped her radio and a melancholy love song started to play, tapping it again a country western song about a lost mate or a trusty lizard dying started up. In no mood to hear her neighbors yell through the wall to shut off the depressing music, Judy thanked the gods that they were both on travel.

After she left work, Judy had stopped at one of her and Nick’s favorite parks. Some nights after work they’d sit under a tree and watch the sunset over the city. Then they’d walk back to her place and watch bad movies. Tonight, she’d sat and watched the sunset by herself wishing this whole week hadn’t happened. Most of all she’d wished that she’d never pushed Nick away.

Now here she was, trying to figure out what happens next. For a week, all she’d heard was that Nick was a crook and a cheat and she was a joke, heck, according to Bechtail she was an internationally renowned joke. Then it was that someone at the ZPD didn’t think it was worth gearing up a pathetic rabbit that was only suited to be a meter maid. And finally, the icing on the cake, Bogo dressing her down for almost everything she’d done while on duty this week. Holding her head in her paws, Judy was trying not to start crying again, so far this had been the worst week of her life and not in a million years could it possibly get any worse.

As if on cue, her phone started to ring. She flipped it over and saw her parents' picture showing. “No, not tonight.” Judy rejected the call and then balled her fists up. “Please don’t call back, please leave me alone.”

The phone rang again.

“Why are they calling tonight, they usually wait until Sunday?” Staring at the phone she wanted to reject it again, she absolutely did not want to talk with them right now. Staring up at the ceiling and groaning, she knew they would just keep calling and calling until she answered. Finally, Judy shut off the radio, put on a fake smile and accepted the call. “Hi, it’s my parents, why are you guys calling tonight?”

Judy did a double take, it was just her dad on the screen. Her first thought was how did he get the phone to work, then she wondered what was going on, he never called without Mom.

“Judy, it’s just me. Sorry, I couldn’t wait until this weekend to call, I need to talk with you about a Zootopia Times article that came out this morning. The article was on Bunnyburrow, have you seen it?”

“Dad, no, I haven’t seen anything, but I haven’t had time to look either. It’s been a tough week.” Then adding with a slight smile, “Besides, I didn’t realize papers were still printed anymore.”

Stu huffed, “Hey, I know how to Zoole a article if I have too.” A little more business-like he followed up with a summary of the article. “So, basically the reporter is telling everyone that Bunnyburrow doesn’t accept predators and that since the town is predominantly rabbits, a few of
us aren’t that accepting of mammals that aren’t rabbits either.”

Stu spent a moment nervously rubbing his chin with his free paw before continuing. “Judy, as head of the Co-op, the Mayor called to let me know that she is concerned about the bad publicity this article could generate. She’s worried that the Commonwealth may deny the grant funding the town has applied for if we are branded as being anti-predator. She’s also concerned about mammals protesting and how that may impact tourism, especially with the upcoming Carrot Days festival.” Stu started fidgeting again “The mayor wants to talk to the board tomorrow and I was hoping you’d give me your opinion on the article.”

This was not a conversation Judy wanted to have, “Dad, Bunnyburrow is a small town, and I haven’t been there for a while, no one cares what I think, do we really have to talk about this now?”

“Please, Judy, I’d like your opinion on if the article is accurate.”

Judy shook her head, “Dad, please stop, you don’t want to know what I think.”

Stu focused on her, “Of course I do, I read the article a couple of times and I think it’s a load of pellets. I think rabbits here, treat predators properly, I mean they all seem fine, the predators working the farms seem happy they’re being taken care of. And the public service issues the article talks about sound more like bureaucracy problems, not examples of speciesism.”

“Dad, please…”

Stu paused for a moment and then continued. “Judy, I’ll admit that when I was a young buck, some of the families in town weren’t as accepting of predators, but that was a long time ago. So, it would help me to know if you think we have a real problem or if this article is just a hack-job like maybe someone in Deerbrook County hired the reporter to smear us?”

“DAD, STOP!”

Of course, he’d try and deflect the blame onto someone else. Judy had lived with his attitude long enough and with the constant speciest drumbeat against Nick from half a dozen mammals at the ZPD she had had enough. With the whole week suddenly crashing down on her, she lost it.

“You want to know what I think, well I’ll tell you! Bunnyburrow isn’t exactly a shining example of inclusion and neither are you. Trying to load me down with Fox Away products when I left for Zootopia was about as anti-predator as you can get. I should never have let you talk me into carrying that fox spray around. The only thing it did was nearly cost me my best friend when they saw it on my belt.”

Shocked at her response, Stu jumped on her words with an indignant tone, “Judy, giving you that spray was justified. After Gideon clawed you when you were little, I was so scared I couldn’t sleep for days. When you left to be a cop, I was afraid for you, a small bunny in a big city filled with predators.”

“Like foxes?” Judy interrupted.

“Yes, especially foxes because they’re the worst of the lot.” Taking a breath and calming down Stu continued, “But I will have you know that thanks to you, we permit Gideon to buy some of our produce for his bakery and I even occasionally talk with him when he is on our property. I think you will agree that I might have had a problem with foxes, but it was only with foxes and that I’m much better now.”
Judy was shocked at what her dad had said, her mouth hung open for a moment and then her eyes narrowed in anger. “Fine, even though I don’t really believe it, I’ll take your word for it that you think you’re getting better with foxes, but sweet cheese and crackers, how can you sit there and tell me that you haven’t had problems with other mammals too?”

“I can remember it like it was yesterday, I was 11 years old and you railed on David and me about Cynthia Longear. David was helping me with some homework when you went off about how wrong it was for Cynthia to date a bunny buck just because she was a hare. As young as I was, I couldn’t understand your problem with her, but I do remember you spouting psalm and verse about how hares are so different from rabbits, and rabbits and hares should never be allowed to get together.

“I liked her, she was always super nice to me whenever she was over studying with David. She was the only one in town who didn’t think my dream of becoming a cop was a waste of time. It hurt when you said Cynthia being friends with David would hurt the family; I cried when you forbid her from coming to our house, and I still remember how sad I felt when the Longears moved away.”

Judy sniffled and then continued in a softer voice, “Later, when David got sick, it felt like I’d lost the only one in the family who understood me. First Cynthia and then David, the two mammals that supported my dream the most, both gone.”

Now it was Stu’s turn to be shocked. “Jude, that was years ago.”

“Don’t Jude me! That was just the beginning. You started giving the few friends I had a hard time especially my predator friends. Bobby Cartmull and Ronny Tibs stopped coming over to play because of the looks you gave them and I felt like I had to walk on pins and needles to play with Sharla just because she was a ewe. No sleepovers, no parties, no meetups, no concerts, no hanging out at the park. Every time I tried to bring someone home that wasn’t a bunny from school, you made sure to make them uncomfortable enough that they’d never come back.”

“Judy you’re exaggerating, sure I worried about some of the kits you wanted to play with, but I don’t remember keeping you from having friends over.”

“Dad, don’t you dare tell me that I just imagined what happened. You chased away any of my friends that weren’t rabbits, I was 11 years old and none of them could stand to be around me because of your holier than thou attitude. You have no idea how bad it was for me growing up.” Judy was in tears now, she was unloading on her dad and she couldn’t stop.

Stu tried again to reason with his daughter, “Judy, there were still plenty of bunnies to play with and you played soccer all those years, what about the bunny kits from your team?”

Judy shook her head, he seriously didn’t know, “Dad, you don’t get it, because I was working so hard to become a cop, no bucks were interested in me and all the does thought I was weird for not wanting to settle for being mates with a buck and pumping out kits. With no bunny wanting anything to do with me and you effectively chasing everyone else off, I had no friends.”

The memory of being humiliated by that buck she tried to ask out flashed into her mind again as did the decision she’d made later that night. “I decided the best thing for me to do was to stop worrying about boys or friends or any of that stuff and to just focus on the things I needed to do to become a cop; school, athletics and ZPD training.”

Judy wiped her eyes, sniffled and in a softer voice, she continued. “Did you know that I actually got asked to the senior prom, the only time in school that any guy ever asked me out. You know
what I did, I turned him down. I turned him down because he was a chipmunk and I knew you would freak out. Instead, I stayed in my room and cried while studying a ZPD manual.”

Judy paused again, lips pursed together and her eyes closed tight she gathered herself before continuing, “Ever since I was 11, I haven’t had a close friend. I finally found someone here in Zootopia, someone who I considered my best friend and then pulling a page from the playbook you used on Cynthia, I pushed them away because I was worried about hurting the family.”

“Judy, everything I did, I thought I was doing for your own good. I needed to protect you. I didn’t know I was hurting you.”

“Dad, I just spent an entire week at work with speciest, bigoted mammals thinking, in their own twisted way, that what they were doing was protecting people, and you’re just like them, you always have been.

“I’ve had my fill of them, and I’ve had my fill of you.”

“But, Judy—”

“Dad, what I really need right now is for you to stop talking to me. You think you’re better now, but you’re not and you know it. And until you change your attitude and I mean really change, I don’t want to have anything to do with you. Don’t call me and don’t try to visit. We are done.”

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Judy hung up on her Dad, put her head down on her folded arms and cried. She’d never laid into anyone like that before. She’d held all that hurt and pain in so long she’d forgotten it was there. Then, with all that had happened this week and his holier than thou attitude she’d gone off on him.

A few minutes later, Judy snifflled and wiped the tears out of her eyes. She turned around in her chair and stared bleary-eyed at her empty bed. Bunnies were not solitary mammals, they lived in tight-knit family groups and had an instinctual need to touch and be close to others. For all the problems she’d had growing up, Judy hadn’t ever felt truly alone, until now. She’d just closed the door on being with her family, and without Nick, she had no one.

Wringing her paws together, she started to feel a dull pain in her chest, as the pain grew and her heart started to pound, Judy felt like things were crashing down around her. She needed to calm down and get control of her bunny emotions, but she couldn’t figure out how to make it all stop.

Judy spied a large bag under her bed and remembered that she’d put all her plushies away when she’d sterilized her apartment. Grabbing the sack, she dumped all the stuffed animals onto her bed and then crawled into the pile. Judy was squirming around in the plushies to get comfortable when she felt a plastic bag under her back.

Seeing the bag, Judy snifflled and wiped her eyes, she’d forgotten about this plushie. Looking at the stuffed red fox inside the bag, she recalled the night, a few weeks ago, when Nick had seen it on her bed. He’d teased her about it and then as a joke, he’d thoroughly marked it. Of course, a fox’s mark is pretty strong so she’d punched him in the arm and zipped the scented plushie into an airtight bag so his scent mark wouldn’t get all over her other plushies.

Chewing her lip, Judy held the bag in front of her. She looked at her door to make sure it was locked and then at the curtains to make sure they were drawn closed. Confident that no one was going to catch her, Judy gently pulled open the bag and was instantly surrounded by the powerful smell of her fox partner. Breathing in deeply while holding the stuffed fox to her chest, she rolled
back into the plushie pile and felt herself relax as the pain in her chest began to fade. A few minutes later, Judy fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

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Stu started to reply but realized that the connection was dead and all that was left was the final freeze frame of Judy with streaks of tears running down the fur of her cheeks.

Stu continued to stare at the phone sitting on the table when he heard the thump-thump-thump of a rabbit’s foot rapidly hitting the floor behind him.

“How much of that did you hear?”

With arms crossed Bonnie replied, “Enough.”

Stu sighed and continued looking down.

“She’s right you know.”

“Bon, I really don’t want to talk about this.”

Bonnie walked around Stu’s chair and took a seat across from him. “I know you don’t, but we’ve needed to talk about this for a long time now.”

Shaking his head with a bit of frustration. “I can’t believe it. Out of all the things I’ve said to Judy over the years, she had to remember that conversation.”

Bonnie nodded, “Sometimes parents forget that occasionally our kits actually do hear what they say.”

“You know, for years I blamed that Longear doe for what happened to David.”

“That Longear doe? Stu her name was Cynthia, she was a sweet, kind hare and our David was in love with her.”

“Bon, I know that now, but at the time I didn’t believe it. I thought going along with the Longears’ decision to break them up by forbidding their daughter from seeing David was the best solution for both families. It surprised me that they went as far as moving out of Bunnyburrow, but I was secretly pleased, I thought them leaving would solve all our problems. I didn’t realize until it was too late that David would fall into such a deep depression and never come out of it. I thought it was an old wives’ tale that rabbits could die from a broken heart, to actually see it happen tore me up inside.”

He looked at Bonnie and put his paw on hers as he quietly spoke. “I love you and all our kits, but I wasn’t ready for David and the rest of our first litter. We were so young and unprepared. I didn’t know how to be a father, so I took the easy route and defaulted to the way that my parents raised me.”

Bonnie huffed, “Growing up like that must have been difficult. I remember being around your parents when we first became mates, they were so hateful towards anyone that wasn’t a rabbit and the fact that they, along with so many others in this town, think of hares as outsiders is sad, to say the least.”

Stu nodded, “I never meant to be like them, it’s just that too much was changing in town and in society at large. We had our first litter about the same time old Mayor Burns convinced the ZTA to
make Bunnyburrow a train stop. When that happened, more species than ever before started to move here and make Bunnyburrow their home. Seeing all the newcomers around town, their kits going to our schools, stores carrying new products, and even the new sounds and smells, was a lot of change for me.

“When Judy was clawed by Gideon I didn’t take it well. I remember losing it with the Greys over the attack. Seeing Judy scratched and bleeding hit me harder than I thought and reinforced what my parents had taught me all those years about strangers, especially predators.

“What Judy just said about me was right, when David passed away, I blamed the Longears, the newcomers, and all the change I was seeing. I became even more overprotective and isolationist than I was before and I started trying to discourage our kits from being friends with anyone that wasn’t our kind. I thought I was protecting the family, but instead, I ended up hurting everyone, especially Judy.”

Bonnie nodded as Stu went silent. Ever since David had passed, she’d run interference on his attitude with the family trying to keep the kits from developing his biases, but it would have been so much easier on everyone if Stu would have talked with her about what he was feeling and where his prejudice had come from. If he had, they could have avoided so much hurt and pain.

Pulling her paw back from Stu’s, Bonnie asked, “Stu, do you know why all of David’s littermates moved away?”

Stu sighed. “Because of me?”

“Yes. They knew the real reason David passed away and they waited for you to take responsibility for your part in what happened. Instead, they watched as your attitude got worse, first, as you tried to isolate the family from anyone that wasn’t a bunny, and then as you started to become involved with one of those speciest groups in town. Dennis was ashamed to be around someone so prejudiced and Danielle and Daren both felt you were betraying David’s memory with your behavior. And Diana, sweet little Diana, she told me that she forgave you, but she couldn’t stand by and watch what you’d become.

“They all swore that they’d never set foot in our warren again unless you’d changed and I haven’t heard a word from any of them since.”

Stu twisted his paws together, he knew David’s littermates had been angry with him, but to hear Bonnie say it out loud hurt. “Bonnie, I’m sorry about David, I didn’t know what to do.”

Bonnie took a breath, his speciesism had been blinding him for too long. “I’ll tell you what you could have done. You could have supported your son and found a way to help him.”

“But Bon, what would everyone have thought?”

“Stuart Hopps, do you think I give a load of pellets about what the people in this town think? Well, I don’t! Growing up, my family wasn’t anything like yours. No one in my hometown cared about who played with who, bunnies, hares, ewes, deer, even predators, we all got along just fine.”

Standing up, Bonnie moved closer to Stu sitting in his chair. Glaring at him, she waved a finger in front of his muzzle and growled out, “Your prejudice has been a blight on this family for years. I forgave you when we buried our boy out by the lake and I forgave you again when his littermates moved away, but now that your speciest attitude has hurt Judy so badly that she’s stopped speaking to us, you need to understand that I am done forgiving you for hurting this family.”
Taking a breath, Bonnie continued, “I’m only going to say this once, so listen to me carefully Stuart Hopps. I will not lose any more kits over your prejudices so you will fix this. I don’t care what you have to do or how hard it is, but you will figure out how to make things right with Judy and then you will do whatever is necessary for me to get my daughter back.”
The Taste of Zootopia festival was gearing back up for the day. Some booths were already open and catering to those looking for breakfast or an early deal on some jewelry or a crocheted scarf. Even though the entertainment wasn’t due to start for another few hours, Judy saw families with blankets setting up in the grassy areas near one of the stages. Kits were running around as their parents tried to keep them within earshot. Judy even saw some rabbit kits trying to argue with their mother as she marked each of them before letting them go play.

Judy felt good, she knew she shouldn’t, but she did. Last night she’d gotten the best night’s sleep she’d had in a week. Judy had woken up before her alarm went off and headed out for a ten-mile run. She’d been skipping her morning runs this last week because she’d been feeling so tired, but today it had felt good to get out, stretch her legs, and clear her mind.

It had taken most of the run, but Judy had finally come to terms with what had happened with her dad. The blowup had been inevitable. Maybe if they had talked things out years ago, it wouldn’t have happened. Unfortunately, she’d been too young and too hurt to confront him before now.

Sometimes things happen for a reason and it may not be a very nice thing to say, but distancing herself from her dad felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Judy knew now that some of her worries about Bunnyburrow and her family had been magnified by her dad. It wasn’t to say that Bunnyburrow didn’t still have a lot of very real problems, some of which may still stand in the way of her and Nick being together, but the fight with her dad had given her a lot to think about.

Shaking her head, Judy decided that she’d put off worrying about her dad, her week of terrible partners and even Bogo reprimanding her yesterday. If she had to work the festival this morning she was going to try and enjoy it, she’d get back to worrying about everything else later.

Judy walked down the rows of vendor booths. She stopped at one run by a possum and almost laughed, ‘We’re All Ears!’ The booth was dedicated to earrings, ear cuffs, clips, wraps, and any accessory a mammal with ears could want. Judy smiled as she picked up what was either an earring made for an elephant or a hula-hoop for an otter. Looking at the displays, she tried to imagine the mechanics of how some of the jewelry was worn by their respective mammals. Brushing a few dangly ear wraps with her paw she slowly padded through the displays.

A display towards the back caught Judy’s eye. She rushed over and then let out a little chirp of excitement, quickly covering her mouth she looked around to make sure no one had heard her. There was a display of rabbit ear bangles and one of them looked just right. It was made of two soft cords braided together. One cord was made from a purple fabric intertwined with green metal threads and the other was a green fabric with purple metal threads.

Judy looked around again, this time to make sure there weren’t any rabbits around, and then she slipped the bangle over her left ear. Looking at herself in the mirror, Judy turned her head back and forth and waggled her ear to get a better view. She smiled, it was perfect.

Judy took the bangle off and pulled a twenty from her pocket, but before going over to pay the
owner, she hesitated. Her ears started to droop as she whispered to herself, “Stop being such a bunny.”

She started to put it back when the possum came over, “Good morning Officer. You know that bangle looks beautiful on you, it complements your eyes wonderfully. I’m sure your boyfriend will think so too.”

Judy smiled as her ears turned pink, she let them drop all the way down her back to hide the blush. “I ah, don’t have a boyfriend.”

With a nod and a knowing smile, the older female replied, “The way you were trying that on, you could have fooled me. I’m sure whoever you were just thinking about will tell you it looks almost as attractive as the doe wearing it.”

Judy held the bangle in her palm for a moment, ‘No one needs to know, and maybe…”

Judy smiled as she gave the bill to the possum, “Thanks!” Slipping the bangle in her pocket, she bounced away from the booth and resumed her patrol.

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A few blocks away, Nick was walking toward his cart parked up the street. He couldn’t believe that Bogo had assigned him parking duty today of all days. Yes, he’d volunteered, but only a fool would try and drive down to city central today. The crowds were going to be crazy and most of the parking was blocked off for the vendors. So, knowing that the ticket count was going to be non-existent, Nick decided to do the next best thing, he found a breakfast burrito booth and was happily munching away on a toasted cricket and veggie special.

Nick was in his element, crowds of people looking for food, entertainment, and souvenirs. He remembered how much he and Finn used to like working this event. A few card games or maybe selling some knock-off watches. They’d make more in a weekend here than they would in two weeks of selling pawpsicles. Being a cop was great but every now and then he missed the fun of the hustle.

Nick heard the ping of an incoming text from his phone. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he saw the short message from Finn, Making the call now. Nick slipped the phone back into his pocket and took another bite of his burrito.

Walking away from the few people that he could see, Nick crossed an alley the ran along the backside of some businesses that catered to a more late-night crowd. It was quiet now, but Nick knew that it would be hopping later on this evening especially once the bands finished playing on the outdoor stage.

As Nick paused, he heard something from the alley. Listening more carefully, he heard a growl. Definitely feline. He called into the alley, “Hello, Officer Wilde, ZPD, are you okay?” The growling started to get louder and he heard a trash can get knocked over.

Not good, Wilde.

Maybe it was an animal waking up from a bender, or maybe it was one drugged up on something. It was against policy for those on parking patrol to carry weapons of any kind and Nick’s radio was a couple of blocks away in the joke-mobile. To be safe, he needed backup.

Setting his burrito down on the brickwork ledge of the building, he pulled out his phone and called Judy. A moment later he heard his partner on the line.
“Nick, what are you doing, you’re not supposed to be calling my cell during work hours.”

“Carrots, I need you! How close are you to Jimmie’s Deli, you know, the lunch place you like where they make the lettuce wraps you always order?”

“I’m about two blocks away, why?”

“I’m in the alley behind their building and I hear an animal growling, they may be drugged or something and since I’m on parking duty, I’m not allowed to carry my tranq gun.”

“On my way!”

Judy met up with Nick at the alley entrance in less than two minutes and they took up positions to go in and investigate.

The growling was louder now as if the animal was fully awake and getting ready to hunt. Judy went in first with Nick behind her and to her right. Nick had found a short pipe and was wielding it like a club.

A trashcan crashed as it was knocked over followed by a loud feline yowl. Looking in the dim alley, Nick could see a female caracal on all fours tearing into an old chair cushion. “Carrots, a feline, your side of the alley behind that busted chair. I’ll draw her out in the open and you knock her out.”

Judy nodded in acknowledgment and moved into position. Nick moved opposite Judy and started tapping the pipe on the alley wall. “Here kitty, kitty, come out and play. I have a nice ball of yarn for you.”

Judy whispered, “Nick, be serious.”

The feline’s ears had folded back when Nick started making noise with the pipe. As Nick moved towards the center of the alley, the caracal began tracking the fox. Crouching low, the feline hissed as it slowly crept forward.

Nick stepped back with a paw raised in front of him, “Carrots, her eyes, she’s not high. They don’t have quite the same look as Manchas’ did, but I think she’s gone savage.”

“Okay, start backing up towards the wall so I can get a clear shot as you draw her out.”

The hisses and growls suddenly became a loud screech as the caracal leaped at least two meters into the air toward Nick. Her paws, with claws fully extended, were spread wide as she made to trap her red furred prey. Nick rolled away from the caracal’s claws as she landed on the ground. As Nick sprang back up onto his feet, he saw a tranq dart sticking out of the girl’s leg.

The savage feline growled at Nick and then reached back and with her teeth pulled the dart out. Spitting it out on the ground she crouched down in preparation for another attack.

“Caaaarrots, I think that just pissed her off.”

‘Shwaaap,’ another dart hit the caracal in the shoulder. The hisses were a lot louder now. She reached around and pulled that dart out too, this time biting it in half as she spat it out. Her head pivoted towards Judy ten yards away and still in her firing stance.

As the caracal started to move towards her new target, Nick waved his arms and yelled to get the feline’s attention. It worked, the caracal, a little unsteady now, turned back to stalk the annoyingly
Nick slowly backed away making sure the caracal kept her eyes on him and not his partner. “I think the tranqs are working, her eyes are dilating and she’s starting to weave. Get ready to toss me your cuffs and when she goes down, I’ll restrain her. Keep her covered and hope you don’t have to dart her again. No matter what though, we can’t let her get out of the alley with the festival going on.”

Nick kept up the noise as the savage feline became more and more unsteady. After another 30 seconds or so, the caracal made a meowing sound as her eyes rolled back in her head and she went down in an unconscious heap.

Judy tossed Nick her handcuffs as he approached the sleeping animal cautiously. “She’s out cold. Nice shooting, Carrots.”

Nick reached down and rolled the caracal over to bind her paws when he heard the sound of glass breaking next to the unconscious female. Nick looked near her waist and saw a broken vial with clear fluid running out onto the ground.

“Carrots! I’ve got a liquid here, I need something to keep it from draining all over. Do you have a bag or anything?”

“No, I didn’t grab any evidence bags today.”

“Wait, over on the ledge, grab my burrito and hand me the plastic wrap.”

Judy hopped over and pulled the plastic off of Nick’s breakfast. She handed it to him and he covered the spill and scooted the edges of the plastic under some of the glass pieces without touching any of it. The liquid was evaporating pretty fast. Nick had gotten a little whiff of the chemical and was now leaning his head back to make sure he didn’t breathe anymore in.

“Call for a CSI team. Tell them to get here fast, I don’t know how long before all of this liquid evaporates.”

Judy made the emergency call and then tended to the unconscious Caracal. She looked to be in her early twenties, wearing cargo pants and a light gray hoodie over a khaki t-shirt. Judy found her ID in one pocket and a couple of wallets in her other pockets.

“Nick, her name is Katie Leyton, she’s 23, her address is in the Rainforest District.” Judy opened up the other wallets and turned them around in her paws. “I think she’s a pickpocket or a small-time thief, she has a couple of wallets in her pockets that aren’t hers.”

A moment later, a ZPD van with a single CSI tech pulled into the alley. The tech grabbed a small case and rushed over to where Nick was kneeling.

Nick held the plastic in place while the technician slid the broken piece of the vial holding the remaining fluid into a small bag and then sealed it up. By the time they finished bagging everything, there were only a few drops of the liquid left. Hopefully enough for the lab to figure out what it was.

Leaving the rest of the crime scene for another tech, the CSI took off to get the sample secured somewhere it wouldn’t evaporate. Just after he left, an ambulance showed up, as did another team
of officers. The paramedics gently restrained the girl, checked her vitals, and then loaded her into the ambulance. A few minutes later the ambulance was gone.

Nick and Judy inspected the alley while the other officers taped off the scene. They took pictures of the entire area and poked around looking for any drug paraphernalia or something that would tell them if Nighthowlers were involved. If at all possible, they wanted to rule out that evil drug.

It had been a year since the last time a predator had gone savage from a Nighthowler attack. Since that time, pred-prey relations still hadn’t fully healed. A lot of progress had been made, but if word got out that predators were being targeted again with that drug, it could cause a city-wide panic.

Nick walked over to where Judy was taking another picture. “Hey Carrots, let’s head over to the hospital and check on our victim. She should be coming around in the next hour or so.”

“Good idea, let the other team know to keep the area secure until CSI is done. I’ll radio Bogo and let him know what happened and that we are heading to the hospital to wait for the girl to wake up. If she wakes up normal, we need to find out what happened, if she wakes up savage we have a big problem.”

Nick let the other patrol team know about his parking cart and they promised to take care of it, namely put it in the trunk of their squad car and drop it off at the precinct garage.

The two small officers walked over to the Metro station and boarded a crowded train. The hospital was only a few stops down the line. Nick grabbed hold of one of the stanchions to steady himself as Judy held onto Nick. As the car started to move, the crowd swayed and Nick took his free arm and steadied Judy by pulling her in close. She looked up at him as he smirked. With as crowded as the car was no one would notice their closeness. Judy relaxed into the impromptu hug as she felt Nick’s tail wrap itself around her ankles.

About 15 minutes later the partners were standing outside a secure section of Zootopia General. This was a high-security area, cordoned off and reserved for high-risk patients, violent criminals and more recently, Nighthowler victims. The wing had a mammal-trap entrance and each room was separated by a heavy-duty door that could withstand a rampaging elephant. Each secure room also had an adjoining observation room that allowed staff members to observe the patients from behind a two-way mirror made from a 4-inch thick slab of transparent aluminum.

An older Badger wearing green scrubs and a white lab coat joined Nick and Judy at the security desk. “Good afternoon officers, I’m Dr. Badger, I was told you are here for Miss Leyton.”

Presenting her ID to the security guard, Judy replied, “Yes doctor we are.” Judy took a closer look at the badger and lifted her finger in thought.

“We’ve met before, haven’t we?”

“Yes, Officer Hopps, we have. I’m embarrassed to say, but you arrested me a little over a year ago at the Cliffside Asylum. I led the team trying to treat the savage mammals. If it hadn’t been for you discovering what Bellwether was up to, we might not have ever found the cure.”

“Thank you, it was a team effort. Officer Wilde here did more to solve the case than I did.”

Nick rolled his eyes, “Officer Hopps is too kind, I was just along for the ride. Nice to see you again Doctor. I remember hearing that you were cleared of all charges and put in charge of all Nighthowler research, congratulations.”

Dr. Badger motioned them towards the large door being opened by hydraulics. “This way to Miss
Leyton’s room.”

The small group of mammals walked down a sterile, wide hallway. Dr. Badger stopped at the door marked ‘Observation Room 2’. “Here we go, you should be comfortable in here, Miss Leyton is resting comfortably in the next room.”

Nick asked, “Doctor, how soon until the results from the test for Nighthowler comes back?”

Dr. Badger replied, “Don’t worry Officer Wilde, Nighthowler is included in the standard battery of tests we run and we should have most of the results available soon. In the meantime, we have Miss Leyton restrained and you can observe her through the window there. Until we know what, if any drugs were involved, all we can do is wait.”

Looking at the sleeping caracal, Judy nodded, “We’ll wait here, the double dose of tranquilizers should be wearing off soon.”

“That button there will open the door to her room, if her condition changes or you need anything, please use the intercom over there.” The doctor closed the door leaving the two officers alone.

Judy sat down and watched Nick. He examined the heavily reinforced doors and then scanned the rest of the room. There were seats of varying sizes so that almost any size mammal would be comfortable. A table and podium were up front but pushed to the side so that all the seats had a clear view of the two-way mirror embedded in the front wall. Nick went up to the ‘glass’ and tapped it with his claw.

“Thought this stuff only existed in the movies.”

“You’re such a geek, come over here and sit down.” She patted the empty part of the medium mammal sized seat she was sitting in.

Nick snickered and went over to sit next to his partner.

Judy turned in the seat and sat crisscross facing Nick. She took his paws in hers and gave him a thoughtful doe-eyed look, which her being a doe came pretty naturally. “Thank you, Nick.”

Scooching closer, Nick leaned in toward Judy a little confused, “Okay, but what did I do to deserve being thanked?”

“This morning, when you called me for backup, you could have called anyone, but you didn’t.” She sighed, “It’s been a real bad week. I haven’t felt like much of a cop and I know I’ve been a horrible friend. I hurt you and then I kept leaning on you like nothing had changed between us. It’s not fair and I’m sorry. I just wanted you to know how much it means to me that you haven’t given up on me or on us, um, being partners.”

Nick reached over and cupped her cheek in his paw, “Judy, I called you this morning because you’re the best cop on the force and the only one I trust—” Smiling now, he added. “And, you’re my partner and my best friend. Please believe me when I say, no matter what can or can’t happen between us, I will always be your fox.”

Judy leaned her cheek into his paw and reached up to hold it there with her own paw. She closed her eyes and relaxed into his touch. After a few moments, Nick heard a purring sound coming from his bunny.

With her eyes still closed, Judy hummed, “You know you drive me crazy, right?”
Nick laughed, “Do I know that? Yes, yes I do.”

Judy gave Nick a light punch to his shoulder. “Dumb fox.”

“Beautiful bunny.”

Judy harrumphed as she glanced over at the still unconscious caracal. Nick leaned back against the armrest, folded his arms, and grinned at his partner.

The insides of Judy’s ears started to turn pink as a growing blush colored them. She let her ears drop down against her back so Nick wouldn’t see the effect he was having on her. “Whaaaat?”

“Nothing, just taking in the sights while we’re waiting for our victim to wake up.”

With a coy smile Judy motioned her head towards the sleeping girl, “She’s over there, Slick.”

“Yup.”

“Okay you, enough of your teasing, cops on duty, remember?”

“Mean bunny, always making the fox work.”

“Nick, speaking of work, I was wondering if you could help me out with something. A few days ago, when I was on patrol with Garrison, I sort of volunteered to take on a social services case. I was trying to keep her from turning a couple of fox kits over to the ZPS and now I’m supposed to check in on the family once a week.”

“Ugh, Garrison has it in for a lot of small predators.”

“Yeah, she lost it with the kits and their mom. I’d like to make it up to the family, you know, show them that all cops aren’t like Garrison. I was thinking of visiting them tomorrow afternoon and was wondering if, maybe, you’d go with me.” Judy’s words started tumbling out quickly now. “You know, you being a fox and all, I was hoping you could give me some advice, maybe I should take something, I don’t know, they were so scared and the kits were so cute and I was so worried and I couldn’t stop her fast enough, wouldyouhelpmeplease?”

Nick looked a little stunned but recovered quickly. “I think I caught some of that. Wait, how come you can call foxes cute, that doesn’t seem fair?”

“Since it’s a bunny rule, we’re exempt.”

Judy decided to pull out the heavy artillery. Her purple eyes went wide as she slightly tilted her head to look up into his green orbs. She dropped her ears, clasped her paws together and let her buck teeth nibble her bottom lip just a little. “Pleeeeeease, Nick.”

Nick put up his paws to block her look and made a symbol with his fingers as if to ward off some sort of demon. “Make it stop, please, I’ll do it, anything, but stop it with the face!”

Judy dropped the look and smiled, “Thanks Nick, you’re the best.”

“Geez Carrots, warn a guy next time you’re gonna do that.”

“I’ll give them a call, what time do you think?”
Nick scratched the back of his neck as he thought, “You’re trying to make a good impression, right?”

Judy nodded.

“Okay, tell them that you would like to visit them at 4:30 tomorrow and that you would be honored if they would allow you to contribute a dish to their evening meal.”

Judy raised an eyebrow in response. “I’m inviting myself to dinner?”

“It’s a fox thing, trust me. Oh, and Carrots, since this is supposed to be your meetup, don’t tell them my name or that I’m a fox.”

She gave him another look.

“Don’t worry…”

“It’s a fox thing, I got it.” Judy walked over to the side of the room and called Mrs. Greytail to make the arrangements. Judy could tell that the vixen was initially concerned about the inspection request, but that concern became curiosity as Judy repeated the meal request exactly as Nick had said it to her.

“Hey Carrots looks like the tranqs have worn off, the girl is starting to wake up.”

Judy quickly finished her call with the vixen and walked over to the window. She watched as the young girl stirred, she tried to stretch her arms and legs but was held tight by the restraints. The caracal began to panic. Her head tossed back and forth as she started to cry. The muzzle prevented her from yelling for help, the poor girl was alone in a bright white room and began to thrash about.

“Nick, she’s not savage, whatever it was it wasn’t Nighthowlers. We need to help her.” Judy pushed the large button next to the secured door leading to where the girl was restrained. The door bolts all opened with a clang and the hydraulics swung the heavy door open. Judy rushed in with Nick following her.

“Miss Leyton. Please calm down. Can you understand me?”

Judy watched as the young girl tried to say something but the muzzle interfered with her attempts. Judy could see the girl was starting to panic, “Miss Leyton, Katie, look at me, you’re okay. Please, if you can understand what I’m saying just nod.”

Katie nodded slowly and then whimpered.

“My name is Judy Hopps and this is my partner Nick Wilde, we’re with the ZPD. You’re in a hospital room. You’ve been restrained because you tried to attack Officer Wilde in an alley this morning. Do you remember anything from this morning?”

Katie shook her head. Tears were flowing from her eyes now. Judy could tell the young girl was scared and the muzzle was only making things worse.

Judy looked at Nick. He shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“I’m going to remove your muzzle, do you understand?”

Katie nodded again and held her head still as Judy undid the restraints and removed the device. Judy stepped back out of the range of the caracal’s sharp teeth. “How are you feeling?”
She coughed and then whispered. “Water”

Nick grabbed a small water bottle and went over to the bed. He used the bed controls to lift Katie into more of a sitting position. With all her paws still restrained Nick had to open up the bottle and put it to her lips. She took a couple of small sips and took a deep breath.

“Thank you.”

Judy came closer, “Katie, do you remember trying to attack my partner this morning?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember anything from this morning or anything about attacking anyone.”

“That’s okay, why don’t you just tell us the last thing you do remember.”

Katie thought for a moment, “Well, I remember finding a mark at a bar last, I mean uh, having a drink at a bar last night when—”

Judy tapped her muzzle with her finger and then asked, “How about the people you took the wallets from, would they have seen the capybara?”

“No, I picked those up near the main entertainment stage maybe five hours earlier, I was hanging out there most of the night to watch the bands play, they had a sweet lineup this year.”

Judy sighed, “Alright, what happened next at the bar?”

Katie shuddered, “It got weird. He must have spiked my drink with something because I remember getting up and feeling a little woozy and then losing my balance. The guy tried to grab me but ended up pushing me into some zebra guy. The zebra got pissed and took a swing at the capybara.”

“While the two of them were going at it, I staggered out of the way. I must have looked drunk
because some waiter yelled at me to get the hell out and go sleep it off or he’d have someone throw me out. I headed out the back way to avoid the fight and vaguely remember making it into the alley and just past a dumpster before collapsing. After that, nothing, until I woke up here.”

Judy looked concerned, “Were you hurt?”

Katie shook her head, “No, aside from sore spots on my leg and shoulder, I feel fine.”

Judy nodded, “The sore spots are from where I darted you and I’m glad you’re not hurt, but we’ll need to let Dr. Badger look you over anyway.”

Katie nodded, “Okay.”

Nick raised a finger, “So, Miss Leyton, “Do you remember what time it was when you met the capybara?”

Katie thought for a second and then replied, ”It had to be around 1:15 or 1:30 since I was trying to get in and out before last call at 2.”

Nick nodded, “And when was the last time you ate or drank something before stopping at the bar?”

“A tofu and shrimp kabob around 7:00 for dinner.”

Nick looked at Judy and said, “Carrots, I think she’s right, it must have been the drink she had in the bar. With her getting woozy, I’d say it was spiked with something like Nyxum or Cynsanol, but neither of those knock someone out the way she described and they certainly don’t cause someone to go savage.”

Katie looked at the two officers and started to panic, “Do you think my drink was spiked with that Nighthowler drug? Am I going to go permanently savage?”

Judy moved closer to the bed and put a paw on the girl’s shoulder. “Katie, please stay calm. Once the blood tests come back we’ll know more, but I will tell you that Nick and I have been around mammals dosed with the Nighthowler serum and if that’s what you had been given, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.”

Doctor Badger’s timing was impeccable as she knocked on the door as the hydraulics were opening it and came into the room. Good afternoon Miss Leyton, it’s nice to see you awake. I have the results of your blood tests and you will be happy to hear that the standard test for Nighthowler came back negative.”

Katie exhaled in relief, “Thank goodness.”

“Miss Leyton, I would like to keep you in the hospital overnight. Our tests didn’t find anything unusual in your system, but you did have an episode of some sort this morning and it would be wise to observe you for a day before you go home.”

“Um, doctor, I don’t have any insurance. I can’t really afford to be here.”

“Don’t worry Miss Leyton, cases like yours are paid for by the city as part of the savage response program.”

“Okay, thank you, Doctor. Do I still have to wear these restraints?”

“No, I don’t think we will need those anymore. Officers, if you wouldn’t mind, would you please
help Miss Leyton.”

Doctor Badger called for an attendant to take Katie to a standard room. Judy gave her a contact card in case she remembered any other details. Judy also let her know that someone from the ZPD would be by before she was released from the hospital to ask some more questions and possibly get her help in working up a detailed description of the capybara that may have poisoned her. The two officers then wished her well and said their goodbyes.

Once Katie was taken out, Nick spoke with Dr. Badger, “She absolutely went savage. The eyes were different, but Carrots and I know, same as you do, what savage animals look like up close. Is there anything else you can check for in her blood? What about the liquid from the broken vial?”

Dr. Badger started to say something and then stopped and changed her mind. “You really think she went savage? The tests we ran didn’t detect Nighthowler in her system and she appears fine and in complete control of her faculties.”

“100% doctor. You know, one tranq will bring down a wolf, but one dart didn’t even phase her. It took two darts from Quick-Draw McBun over here before she started to even stagger and a lot longer than normal for her to lose consciousness. You have to keep looking.”

Judy held up her small notebook and added, “Miss Leyton also told us that whatever she was drugged with it happened the night before. Whatever it was made her feel woozy or drunk and then she collapsed in an alley. It wasn’t until this morning that she had the savage episode.”

“Alright Officers, I’ll set up for a more detailed, broader set of tests, including more common drugs. I’ll speak with Miss Leyton and gather more samples. I have to warn you though, some of these tests take a long time to set up and run, so you will need to be patient.”

Flipping through the folder she was carrying, Dr. Badger added, “And with regards to the fluid Miss Leyton was carrying, almost none of it survived the spill. We are working hard to recover enough to test, but I can’t make you any promises.”

“I understand, I’m sorry I couldn’t save more of the fluid.”

Seeing the fox’s disappointment, “Don’t worry Officer Wilde, it is an incredibly volatile substance, I’m actually amazed you were able to save what you did. I’ll work the tests and keep you and Officer Hopps up to date with what we find. If there’s anything to be found, rest assured we’ll find it.”

Nick and Judy followed Dr. Badger out to the security desk where they checked out. After thanking the doctor, Judy called Clawhauser and told him that they were headed back to the precinct to give Chief Bogo a preliminary report.

They walked back to the rail station and only had to wait a few minutes for the next car. Fortunately, the crowds had thinned so they were able to find seats together where they could talk. Nick spent the ride back prepping Judy for her dinner meetup the next night. By the time the train arrived at their stop, Judy was feeling a little better about what she was supposed to do, but she’d also asked Nick to come by her place early so he could help her with the food bags and prep her some more on what to do so she wouldn’t embarrass herself.

Arriving in the precinct lobby, Nick and Judy went to check in with Clawhauser. As the two small officers walked up to his desk, Clawhauser put his paws together and scrunched his face up to make a cooing sound. Judy, anticipating the impending comments on her and Nick being perfect for each other, bounded up onto the reception desk, rolled across the surface and popped up in front
of Clawhauser’s face with a finger across his lips silencing him before he could let out even a small squeal.

“Ben, what did I tell you yesterday about Nick and me?”

“You’re just friends?”

“Uh-huh”

“You’re still perfect for each other and…” Looking around, Clawhauser leaned in and whispered, “…you smell a lot more like fox than you have all week and you’re the happiest I’ve seen you since Nick went on parking duty.”

“Okay, okay, Ben, you’re not hearing me. We’re just friends. Like, really, really, ah, really good friends but that’s all. Okay?”

Jiggling and nodding in happiness Clawhauser replied, “Anything you say, Judy.”

Judy rolled her eyes, “Nick help me out here.”

Nick snickered as Judy suffered Ben’s dreamy looks. “Ben, we need to see the Chief to fill him in on the girl we had to tranq this morning. Have any of the other teams reported in with anything interesting?”

“The Chief’s up in his office and he told me to send you up. Let’s see, I got a note from Jackson that they pulled all the video of the alley they could find and they should have it loaded into the system by Monday morning. There’s also a note from the CSI team that they finished up in the alley and didn’t find anything interesting. They also said that they’d send you a preliminary report on whatever they have early Monday.”

“Come on Carrots, Chief Buffalo Butt is waiting.”

Judy did another hop and flipped off of Clawhauser’s desk and then both she and Nick started up the stairs.

Judy whispered, “Does he still have that goofy look on his face?”

Nick looked back, “Yup. Want me to kiss you so we can see what happens?”

“Please, his head would explode. Besides, we’re not together, remember?”

“Depressing bunny.”

“Persistent fox.”

Judy lifted her paw to knock on the Chief’s door when they both heard Bogo’s deep voice, “It’s open Hopps, come in and bring Wilde with you.”

She mouthed “How does he do that?” to Nick

Judy jumped up and grabbed the handle and opened the door. She and Nick went in and climbed up into the large chair in front of Bogo’s desk and sat quietly while waiting for the Chief to finish shuffling a few papers.

“All right you two, good work this morning subduing the caracal, and Wilde, that was quick thinking on using that plastic to wrap the remains of the vial and its contents. Did you get anything
from the girl?"

Judy answered for both of them. “A little sir, she remembers a capybara she thinks might have slipped something in her drink and he’s also the one she got the vial from. She said that he had more in his pocket, but she only got one of them.”

Bogo looked over the tops of his glasses at Judy and then over to Nick, “Did she explain how she knew what he was carrying in his pocket and what she was doing with one of his vials in her possession? I also believe there were a couple of wallets that weren’t hers found at the scene?”

Nick took this one, “Sir, it’s all really pretty easy to explain. The poor girl grew up as an orphan and…”

Judy groaned and facepalmed. Bogo shook his head, “Can it, Wilde. I’ll assume you worked a deal with the girl, just make sure the wallets are returned when you’re done with them and that she behaves herself going forward.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bogo motioned to Judy for her to continue. “Dr. Badger was certain that it wasn’t Nighthowler nor any other drug they tested for, but Nick asked her to run some more thorough tests especially since there was a delay between the girl being drugged and her going savage. The doctor agreed to run more tests but said not to expect any results soon. She also said that she would keep us up to date on what they find.

“And Clawhauser told us on the way up that any surveillance video found and the preliminary CSI inventory will be ready for review Monday.”

“Anything else?”

“No sir,” they both replied.

“Alright. I’m worried there may be another round of savage attacks and until we can prove that this wasn’t another savage plot or some crazy copycat, I’m locking down all information on the liquid you found to only those involved. That means me, you two, the tech that gathered the sample, Dr. Badger and her staff and Clawhauser. So, keep all this quiet and if anyone asks you about the case let me know right away.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Write up a quick summary and then get out of here. Enjoy your day off, see you Monday.”

About 30 minutes later Judy hit the send button on the draft report and shut her computer down. Elbowing her napping partner in the ribs she told him it was time to go.

Nick yawned and followed Judy out of their shared cubicle. It was pretty quiet with everyone either off duty or working the festival. They waved their goodbyes to Clawhauser as they passed through the precinct lobby and out the doors.

“Hey Carrots, it’s still pretty early, want to do something, you know, together?”

Judy chewed her lip, “Nick, I ah, I don’t know…”

“No worries, I was thinking I’d change and then probably head over to the Mayan tonight, you know, by myself since I’m not seeing anyone. There’s a 7 pm showing of a romcom, I think, and
the balcony is roped off so anyone that sneaks up there can watch a movie without being seen.”

Judy hmm-ed, “Is that the place with the strawberry slushies?”

“Uh huh.” Nick looked at Judy for another moment with a smirk on his face and then waved, “See you later, Carrots.”

……

Nick took a sip from the slushie sitting in his armrest cup holder and waited for the movie trailers to start. He loved the previews, sometimes they turned out to be better than the actual movie they were hyping. Nick’s ears twitched as he heard someone coming down the aisle. Looking over, he saw a large tub of popcorn with long black-tipped gray ears approaching his seat.

Laughing, he helped Judy set the oversized tub down on the floor in front of the seat. “Well, when we’re done eating the popcorn, we can use the container as a hot tub.”

“Hardy har har, that was the smallest tub they had left. At least they only charged me for a rabbit-sized popcorn.”

Judy jumped up into the chair and slid next to Nick. “Strawberry slushie?”

“You!”

“Good thing or you’d be in big trouble. You told me this movie was a romcom, what kind of a romance has a bunch of giant robots fighting alien beasties from another dimension?”

“A good one?”

“You do realize the real reason I broke up with you is because you can’t pick a good movie to save your life, right?”

Nick groaned, “Now you tell me. I promise from here on out only romances and buddy-cop movies for my bunny.”

“And no black licorice, I like red.”

“Fine, anything else?”

“Nope.” She replied popping the ‘p’.

As the trailers finished up and dancing cartoon characters reminded everyone to turn off their cell phones, Judy put her paw on Nick’s leg.

Nick felt the soft touch and looked at Judy.

Looking at him, she whispered, “Nick...”

Nick smiled and put his arm around Judy. Gently pulling her close, he wrapped his tail around her, resting the tip in her lap. Judy smiled at him and started to pet his tail just like she used to before this crazy week happened.

……

A gray colored ram in a dark suit opened the door to a large, modern office. Seeing that his boss was on the phone, the ram went and stood quietly in front of his desk and waited. After the phone
call was completed, the ram spoke up, “You wanted to see me, Mr. Brown?”

“Yes, Mr. White, I’d like to know what in the hell is going on in my lab? You’re responsible for running it, how does this happen?”

“Sir—”

Slamming his hoof down on his desk he yelled, “First, that idiot of a rodent takes vials of my formula out of the lab. Then for some reason, this dumb-ass goes to a bar at two fucking o’clock in the morning and gets in a bar fight. Then, just to complete the trifecta of stupid, he loses one of my vials.”

Glaring at the ram, he added, “Do you want to know about the phone call I just got? One of my informants intercepted a call for an ambulance to pick up a savage mammal and then found out that some filthy pred bitch went savage on a couple of ZPD cops this morning about eight hours after our moron was in the bar. Eight hours, do you think that was just a coincidence? What the hell was he doing?”

“Sir, we need a healthier test subject for our next set of experiments, I believe all he was doing was trying to find one.”

Brown shook his head, “With an old version of my formula? How could anyone be that stupid?”

White shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t know, sir.”

In a calmer voice, Brown continued, “About the only luck we had in all this is that my informant was able to get to the scene in time to see the pred being loaded into an ambulance. He told me that once the ambulance pulled away, he was able to see the remains of the missing vial smashed on the ground. He said it looked like the girl must have had the missing vial on her when she went savage and it broke during the fight with the ZPD.”

“Sir, if that’s the case, then we may be okay. The vial that went missing only had unstabilized Part-B in it, and in that form, it’s volatile enough that if the vial were broken like you said, it would almost certainly have broken down and evaporated by the time anyone collected the shards your informant saw.”

The Ram looked at his boss thoughtfully and added, “If your informant was right on the timeline, by the time the pred was captured all the obvious chemical markers of the formula should have been flushed from her system. The ZPD would have to run some pretty specific, non-standard tests to pick up anything we’d need to worry about.”

Tapping his hoof on his desk, Brown replied, “My informant said it was that pelt of a fox officer that was working the scene. No way is he smart enough to figure anything out. That traitor of a rabbit was there too, but she’s just a publicity stunt, so I don’t think we need to worry about her either.”

“What do you think sir, shut down and move the lab?”

Brown thought for a few moments, “No, as long as we’re careful going forward, I think we’ll be okay. Hold off for a while on acquiring any of the new test subjects you were after, I want this to blow over first. If you absolutely need an animal, make do with one from our usual source.”

“And our rodent friend?”

“Besides being compromised, he’s an idiot and I want him gone. Put him in with our failed
experiments and pass the word that this kind of stupidity won’t be tolerated. We are too close to solving the predator problem once and for all to be dealing with this kind of crap.”
A Fox Thing

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…..

Nick had been standing outside the door to Judy’s apartment for a few minutes now. Looking down at her carrot print welcome mat, he sighed. Amazing how much can change in a week. Last time he stood here, it was just before Judy dropped the bomb on him. He’d left that afternoon, knowing they’d never be together and probably wouldn’t even last as partners. Today there was hope, maybe not much, but he’d learned a long time ago that sometimes a little hope is all a fox needs.

Nick knocked on the door and heard shuffling inside. “It’s open, come in.”

Opening the door, Nick stepped in and saw Judy loading up her wheeled cooler with some vegetables. With a twinkle in his eye he asked, “Carrots, how did you know it was me? You need to be more careful, I could’ve been Hannibun Lecter come to make a dinner out of you?”

Judy zipped up the cooler and turned around to face Nick with a big smile on her face. Pointing up at her ears, “You know these aren’t just for decoration, I had no problem hearing a disreputable fox shuffling around outside my door for the last few minutes.” Giving him a light punch in the side, “What took you so long to knock, afraid the big bad bunny might eat you?” She emphasized the last part by putting her paws up and making a clawing motion.

“Okay, okay, put those claws away. Remember, I’m the scary predator in this relationship.”

“Pfft, sure Nick. How about you get your scary self over there and grab the cooler.”

As Judy was closing the door to her apartment, she asked, “Are you sure we shouldn’t wear our uniforms and sign out the cruiser?”

“Carrots, the last thing a fox wants to see is a ZPD cruiser stopping in front of their den. Landlords are always looking for an excuse to evict foxes and cops showing up too often is at the top of the list of reasons to boot someone out. We want to keep this meetup relaxed and low-key. Besides, I love your casual-girl outfits.”

After Judy practically begged him to leave his yellow and green flowered Pawaiian shirt home, Nick had gone with khaki pants and a nice fitting black golf shirt. Judy was dressed in her newest blue jeans with a solid pink V-neck shirt over a white tee.

“Is this okay? You look so handsome and I look so… ugh, I spent like an hour trying to figure out what to wear, I can change again if you think I should.”

“Carrots, you look great. Let’s go or we’ll miss the metro.”

……..

Nick sat down in the nearly empty train car with Judy next to him. Nick’s tail rested between them, the tip brushing against Judy’s leg. Smiling, she reached for the fuzzy appendage as the
train pulled away from the station. Suddenly, Nick called out with a nervous look on his face, “Carrots, this is no good, everyone is staring.”

Judy’s paw stopped mere inches away from Nick’s tail as her head snapped up and she looked around. “Who’s staring at us, I don’t see anyone?”

“Not us, the cooler. Where in the world did you find a carrot print cooler?” Gesturing toward the green cooler with orange smiley-face carrots printed all over it. “You know, I’m a fox and I have a reputation to uphold. If I see a picture of me and that cooler posted on Muzzlebook, I’m going to blame you.”

Judy elbowed Nick in the side. “Very funny, it was a graduation present from some of my sisters, so be nice.”

Turning in her seat toward Nick, Judy folded her arms across her chest and looked at him. “We have some time, how about you finish prepping me for this dinner.”

……

Judy stood in front of the door, arms at her sides with her fists balled in tension. Nick stood well behind Judy at the edge of the small porch.

“And you gave me a hard time. Come on Carrots, it’s not like they’re going to bite you.”

Judy looked back at Nick with an eyebrow raised.

“Okay, well, I suppose they might. Just knock already.”

Judy sighed, reached out a paw and knocked lightly on the door. Stepping back, she waited. A moment later the door opened and Judy was facing two silver foxes. She recognized the bluish-gray furred vixen as Mrs. Greytail from earlier in the week. The silver gray-furred tod next to her must be her mate.

Out of habit, Judy started to raise her paw to greet the couple, but she checked her motion and just said, “Good afternoon, my name is Judy Hopps.”

Judy willed her ears to stay erect and her nose not to twitch as she stood on the porch. As one, the two foxes both bent down low and partially exposed their neck fur to Judy.

The Vixen spoke, “Welcome to our den. Thank you for interceding with your partner and helping my family. We owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Judy stepped forward and put out her paws palms down and was about to reach toward the foxes when she heard a quiet noise behind her. A quick glance back and she saw Nick motioning with his palm up in a lifting motion. Judy grimaced and reversed her paws. Lightly placing them on the underside of their shoulders, she gently lifted up until the two foxes were upright.

“Thank you for extending the hospitality of your den to me. I know that this was to be the greeting of a guest, but I wish to be considered a friend to your family. And as such, I would be honored if you would allow me to contribute a portion of my harvest to your meal that we may learn more about each other in comfort.”

The two foxes looked at each other. The tod shrugged his shoulders slightly and then the vixen raised an eyebrow. They both looked back at Judy who was now fidgeting with her paws and then Mrs. Greytail took a half step forward and replied, “As friends.”
Judy heard Nick step forward with the cooler. “This is my Kohai, Nicholas Wilde.”

Nick stopped one step behind Judy and remained quiet. He tipped his head forward in a slight bow and focused on a spot on the ground in front of the couple.

Both of the foxes acknowledged Nick with a measured nod and then faced Judy again. A final nod and the greetings were complete. Judy let out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding as the formality of the moment dissipated. The tod waved Judy and Nick into the house, “Please, both of you come in.”

Nick placed his paw on Judy’s shoulder and whispered, “You did good, Carrots.”

As everyone entered the foyer, the tod reached out a paw to Judy and introduced himself, “Officer Hopps, I’m Walter Greytail and this is my mate, Toni.”

“It’s nice to meet you, please call me Judy and this is my partner Nick.” Looking at the vixen, she added, “Toni, Officer Garrison isn’t my normal partner, Nick is.”

Before Toni could reply, a couple of loud voices halted the conversation as two kits came tumbling into the room. They both stopped and yelled out, “Mr. Nick, Mr. Nick what are you doing here?” Eyes wide, they looked back and forth between their parents and Nick, excitement growing on their faces.

“Boys, Officer Hopps is here to check on you, is this how you behave around a respected mammal?”

In unison they replied, “No, sir.” Both boys then bent down in a posture that sort of resembled what their parents had just done. The position was marred by the fact that both the boys were smiling as they kept trying to look over at Nick.

Judy saw Walter as he rolled his eyes and motioned to Judy with a nod of his head toward his kits.

Judy put on a stoic face and went through the forms with the boys. When they were done, Judy kneeled down and said, “Where I come from, we say ‘Hi’ to friends with hugs.” Opening her arms wide she added, “If that’s okay.”

Both boys jumped into Judy’s arms and enjoyed one of her special hugs. Before releasing the boys, Judy gave them a serious look, “What happened the other day was not right and I’ve made sure that officer Garrison won’t ever hassle you guys again. So, if anyone ever gives you guys a hard time make sure you let Mr. Nick or me know right away, alright.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Judy smiled as she reached out and ruffled their head fur.

Both boys squealed as they raced over and nearly tackled Nick. “Is that Officer Carrots? Is she your partner?”

“Yes, yes she is.” Nick winked at Judy as she shook her head.

“Wow, would you ask her to show us how to do some bun-fu?” Aidan started to do some high kicks and punch an imaginary foe.

Tyler chimed in “Yeah, I want to be able to knock out a rhino too!”
Aidan pulled on his mom’s pant leg, “Mom, Mom, Mr. Nick said she can jump like twenty feet in the air.”

“And she has super ears that can hear bad guys through walls six feet thick.”

“And she can punch through steel plates.”

“And…”

Toni could see Judy starting to blush at all the talk. “Boys, why don’t you two go find some games to play while your dad and I visit with Miss Judy and Mr. Nick.”

“Awww, mom, she’s so cool though.”

Judy facepalmed and shook her head, “Nick, what have you been telling those boys about me? For that matter, how do you even know each other?”

Nick laughed, “Carrots, I told you, I know everyone.”

Judy just lifted her eyebrow and stared at Nick, she was getting really good at her ‘seriously’ look.

“Fine, fine. I had no idea it was Aidan and Tyler that you were talking about. I know them both from Sister Mary’s.”

Motioning for everyone to sit down, Toni chimed in. “I never put two and two together that the Mr. Nick the boys mentioned was THE Nicholas Wilde, first fox officer at the ZPD. You’ve made quite the impression on my boys.”

Nick and Judy had made themselves comfortable on a small couch while Toni and Walter each took chairs. Judy had scooted next to Nick as his tail wrapped behind her back and draped itself next to her leg on the couch.

Judy looked at Nick with a smirk and gave him a light punch in the arm. “Yeah, quite the impression. What’s that about me punching through steel plates?”

Nick pulled on his collar as if to loosen it and replied, “No idea Carrots, I’m sure all I told the kits was that you set records at giving out parking tickets. Well, maybe the part about the ears too, but that’s true.”

Judy looked over at Toni. “Can you believe this is what I have to deal with on a daily basis?”

Judy shook her head and absentmindedly picked up the tip of Nick’s tail, placed it in her lap and started to gently stroke it. “So, Toni, I’ve never heard of Sister Mary’s, is that a school?”

Toni’s eyes widened for a moment at what Judy was doing and then she answered. “Sister Mary runs a center for kits. The center includes an orphanage, a school, a daycare, and a youth center. Mostly predator kits from around the Foxburg area attend, although a few prey go there now too.”

Toni reached over and patted Walter’s paw as she added, “Sister Mary’s was one of the reasons we moved here a few months ago. Now that we’ve settled into our jobs, I’ll start spending a couple of half-days each week helping at the center to offsets some of the costs of our kits being there.”

Nick added, “Helping at the schools and centers like Sister Mary’s is a way for the mammals in Foxburg, Happytown and a few of the other neighborhoods here to pool their resources and help take care of the kits. Since some of the politicians in city center don’t think the mammals here are
worth bothering with, the community has to be much more involved."

Walter added, “The city throws enough money here to keep up appearances and we make sure the kits get a real education instead of leaving it up to what the city establishment thinks is right for young preds in neighborhoods like ours.”

Judy looked confused, “What do you mean?”

Nick put a paw on Judy’s leg as he answered her question. “Basic educational plans, old supplies and computers, older facilities and sometimes teachers that don’t want to teach here. Some of the city educators don’t think poor young preds, especially foxes, are able to do anything more than the most basic jobs, so fighting for funding and resources is always a challenge.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

Toni smiled and looking at Judy, said, “It’s okay, we’re foxes it’s just something we deal with.” Looking at Walter she added, “Honey, I left the appetizers in the kitchen, would you help me please."

“You two relax for a moment, we’ll be right back.”

Toni and Walter stepped into the kitchen. As Toni pulled a veggie tray out of the refrigerator, Walter silently mouthed, “Are they mates?” Toni smiled and just shrugged her shoulders.

In the living room, Judy was still processing the conversation. Her nose started twitching more rapidly as she tried to understand how that kind of attitude could exist in city hall, Zootopia was supposed to be better than that.

Nick reached over and put a finger on her nose to still her thoughts, “Relax Carrots, it’s not a problem you’re going to be able to solve while we’re here.”

Judy reluctantly nodded, “Fine.”

From in the kitchen, Toni called out, “Are either of you thirsty? Is water alright?”

Nick turned to reply when he heard the front door being opened. Another silver fox, this one carrying a couple of bags, was backing his way in while pushing the door open as he went. “Hey Sis, I got the beer and that gross juice you wanted. Who actually drinks carrots anyway?”

The black-furred fox had turned around while yelling toward his sister and was now staring at Judy. Judy and Nick had both stood up and were about to greet the new fox when instead, they heard a loud growl and the clanking of bottles as the bags the fox had been carrying dropped to the floor.

“YOU! What the hell are you doing here!” The black fox followed his yelling with a gekkering screech and reared up with claws extended and teeth bared.

Judy stood looking at the enraged fox when her view was suddenly blocked by her partner. As Nick took a position in front of Judy, his fur bushed out as he bared his own claws and teeth. Nick’s tail reached out and brushed against Judy’s thigh and maintained contact so he had no doubt where she was. Nick returned the other fox’s gekkering with a deep growl.

Judy tried to move around Nick to be able to clearly see the other fox and figure out how to help if necessary.
A hissing voice came from Nick, “Carrots, stay back, you’re not armed.”

A blue-gray blur swept past Judy as Toni slammed into her brother pushing him back toward the front door. “Kyle, what do you think you’re doing threatening our friends?! They are our guests and under the hospitality of this house. If you’re going to disrespect my family and me with your behavior, then you need to leave!”

Nick had quit growling but hadn’t moved. Judy still felt his tail on her thigh even as she tried again to get around him to see what was going on. This time Nick didn’t try to stop her, but he still didn’t let her move far enough away that he couldn’t feel her.

Judy saw Toni yelling at her brother and heard Walter holding back the kits behind her. She also saw Nick, claws out and teeth bared, ready to defend her against any animal that came near.

Judy jumped in front of Nick and as he started to hiss again, she yelled, “Nicholas Piberius Wilde, you stand down this instant!”

Nick looked at Judy and then back at Toni and her brother. Judy could see it in his eyes that Nick was evaluating her words, but he wasn’t ready to back down.

With her most threatening growl, Judy grabbed the front of Nick’s shirt and pulled him close enough that their muzzles were almost touching. “Nick, I know what you’re doing and I appreciate it, but right now you need to holster your claws and relax.”

Nick sighed and nodded once. He sheathed his claws and resumed a more casual non-threatening stance. Judy noticed the only thing that hadn’t changed was that Nick’s tail was still hooked lightly around her leg.

With her paw on Kyle’s chest, Toni growled out, “You will apologize to our guests immediately.”

Kyle yelled back at his sister, “No! That animal ruined my life. I lost my job because of her rant about predators at that press conference a year ago.” Turning to face Judy, he shook a finger at her, “Do you know how hard it is for a fox to find a job? Ever since you shot your mouth off, it’s been open season on any mammal that wants to discriminate against predators by playing the ‘he might go savage’ card.”

Walter stepped up from the back of the room, “Kyle, you know that whole thing was orchestrated by Bellwether to create hate and distrust between predators and prey and what you are doing right now is exactly what that psycho ewe wanted.”

Toni backed away from Kyle to join her mate. She grabbed Walter's paw and made to try and reason with Kyle again.

Judy silenced everyone when she exclaimed, “Everyone, please stop! He’s right, all of this is my fault.”

Judy stood looking down and wringing her paws, “I’m the one that should be apologizing. Not a single day goes by that I don’t regret everything I said at that horrible press conference. I was naïve and small-minded and I hurt so many predators that day.”

Nick reached over and put his paw on Judy’s shoulder, “Carrots, you were set up to fail by Bellwether. There is no way that anyone should have allowed a rookie cop with only a few days on the force anywhere near a press conference, especially with no prep from the PR mammals.” Looking earnestly at her, “Judy, none of that was your fault!”

Judy turned to face her partner, “Nick, I’m a grown doe, and I need to take responsibility for my mistakes. Even a year later, I still get letters and emails from the mammals I hurt. Some lost jobs, some didn’t get promotions and others had friends or family hurt in the riots. I even have a letter from a Grandmother whose kits and grandkits moved away because they were afraid for their lives, she misses her family horribly, and it was all my fault.”

Judy sniffed. She looked at Nick and then focused on Kyle, “Not only did I make life so much worse for so many innocent predators, but I also hurt the best friend I’ve ever had. He stood up for me when I was about to lose my job and he was there for me every time I needed help, he even risked his own life to help me find all those missing mammals. He did all that for me and I repaid him by saying all those terrible things. I made him hate me.” Judy’s voice hitched as she held back her tears. “When he left me after that news conference I died inside. I tried as hard as I could to make things right, but it hurt so bad I quit my dream and went home.”

Nick pulled Judy into a hug as she started to tremble. “Judy, I could never hate you. You’re the most important mammal in my life.”

Judy hugged Nick a little tighter, “The day you forgave me under that bridge and I got my best friend back was the happiest day of my life.” Judy sniffed and then said quietly, “And then a week ago, I hurt you again.”

Nick loosened the hug enough to look Judy in the eye, “Judy…”

Judy pulled Nick back into the hug and whispered into his ear, “I’m sorry.”

After a moment, as everyone looked on in a growing silence, Judy gently pushed out of Nick’s embrace, wiped her eyes and faced Kyle again. “I won’t ask you to forgive me because I haven’t earned that, but I want you to know that I’m sorry for what I did to you and to all the predators in Zootopia and if you give me a chance, I’ll spend every day trying my best to make up for what I did.”

Judy moved closer to Kyle with her small paw extended and offered it to him. Kyle stood with a stunned expression on his face. He had expected a lot of different things but not this. The cop he had hated for so long was apologizing to him. Kyle stared at the outstretched paw for another moment and then reached out and gently grasped it.

Walter walked over and picked up the drinks Kyle had dropped while Toni properly introduced Kyle to Judy and Nick.

Toni clapped her paws, “Alright, that’s enough drama for one night. All the boys outside to the grill, Judy, you’re with me in the kitchen."

Judy rushed to the kitchen before anyone else moved. “Hold on, I brought something that I read is good grilled.” Judy opened up her cooler and pulled out some fruits and vegetables and put them on the counter.

“I’m sorry, but I’m a terrible cook and I didn’t know exactly what to bring, so I looked things up online. I hope this is okay.” She pulled two plastic-wrapped trays out of the cooler and gave them to Toni. “Here you go.”

Judy rocked on her feet as she looked at Toni with anticipation. Toni looked at the packages in her paws and said, “Judy, thank you, this is very generous of you. It will be a wonderful treat.”

Walter came into the kitchen, “Do you have the tofu steaks so I… Whoa, salmon!”
Toni laughed, “Think you are up to the challenge?”

Walter started grabbing various jars, sauces and spices as he replied, “Pfft, I’m a fox with a grill, prepare to be amazed.”

Walter took everything out to the grill where the other tods were and was met with a chorus of oohs and ahhs.

Judy and Toni arranged the vegetables for cleaning and Toni had some lettuce, shredded cheese, assorted dips, hummus and some dough for rolls. Oven going, the girls started peeling and slicing the veggies Judy brought along with some tomatoes and cucumbers that Toni had.

Judy had been humming as she rinsed off some peeled carrots when she noticed Toni looking over at her with a smirk on her face.

Judy looked down at her shirt to see if she had spilled anything on herself. “Whaat?”

Toni laughed, “So how long have you and Nick been together?”

Judy smiled broadly, “We’ve known each other a little over a year now. We met right after I started with the ZPD. I convinced him to help me with the Missing Mammal and Nighthowler cases even before he went to the academy. He graduated about six months ago and we’ve been partners ever since.”

Toni couldn’t help but smile as she continued to prep more veggies. Leaning toward Judy in a more conspiratorial fashion she said, “I meant together, together, you know, the way you two are around each other, I assumed Nick was your boyfriend.”

Judy got a wide-eyed look on her face, “Oh, no, we’re just friends.” She saw that Toni was still smiling. “Um, I mean I really like him, a lot, but I’m a bunny and he’s…” Toni was nodding now as if she didn’t believe anything Judy was saying.

Judy huffed, “It’s complicated.”

“Uh-huh”

“Really complicated.”

“Gotcha”

“Ugh, I mean, how would the fox community react if Nick were to date a bunny?”

“Hmm, well, I’m pretty sure that half the population would be pretty upset to hear about that.”

Judy looked stricken, she knew how the rabbits of Bunnyburrow would feel about a fox and a bunny dating, but hearing that foxes would react the same way was disheartening.

Toni laughed at the crestfallen look that darkened the bunny’s face, “Judy, I’m talking about all the vixens that will be heartbroken to hear that a handsome tod like Nick has been taken off the market.”

Judy perked back up and smiled at Toni’s statement, “Sooo, you’d be okay with it then?”

“Oh, Judy, of course, you two seem so happy together.” Pointing a paw toward the sliding glass door leading to the patio, Toni whispered, “Besides, just look at him!”
Judy leaned around the side of a cabinet to see Nick standing by the grill, talking with Kyle and Walter. As she stared at Nick, she started to see him differently. The academy regimen and their workouts together had treated him well, his form-fitting shirt was showing off his lean frame and his exposed fur was glistening in the waning light. Her eyes landed on his fuzzy, warm tail and she felt a shiver go through her. As she started to chew her lower lip in thought, Nick looked at her, smiled and gave her a cheers motion with the water bottle he was holding. Judy gasped and jumped back as if she were a kit caught spying on the boys in their locker room at school.

Seeing as Judy was in full-on blush mode, Toni decided to up the ante. “Rowrrrr, you don’t need to be a predator to want to eat that up, hmm.”

Giggling, Judy pulled her ears over her eyes to hide from Toni, “You’re so mean.”

Toni patted her lightly on the back, “I know, it’s a vixen thing. Let’s get the appetizers set up outside. The cool air should help you get that blush under control before your ears catch fire.”

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Walter unwrapped the salmon and placed it on a cutting board next to the grill. Rubbing it down with a mix of spices, he prepped it for cooking.

Looking up from his work, Walter smiled at his guest, “So, Nick, you and Judy seem pretty close.”

“Yeah, she’s something else. I helped her out when we met a little over a year ago and then she asked me to become a cop. She’s completely turned my life around.”

Kyle drank a sip of his beer and then asked, “How do you mean? What were you before you were a cop?”

Nick looked over at Aidan and Tyler playing nearby and chuckled, “Well, let’s just say that I wasn’t the tod my parents hoped I’d grow up to be. And if it hadn’t been for Judy, I wouldn’t have gotten a second chance to make something of myself and maybe become the kind of mammal that my parents would have been proud of.” Looking back at Walter, Nick continued, “Judy’s my best friend and an amazing girl. I don’t want to think of what my life would be like without her in it.”

As Walter continued to prep the salmon, he smiled to himself, realizing that his question from before about this unusual couple had been answered. They may not be mates yet, but Walter could tell from the look on Nick’s face and the wagging of his tail that he was head over tail in love with his bunny partner.

Kyle spoke up again and with a little bite in his tone, asked, “You and that rabbit… even after what she did?”

Nick sighed, “You saw five minutes of her at her worst, I’ve known her for over a year and been her partner for the last six months, Judy is a great cop, and a great mammal. Not a day goes by that I don’t see her trying to help someone, pred or prey, it doesn’t make a difference to her, all she wants to do is make the world a better place. And I’m not kidding about that last part, I used to laugh when she said it, but she means it and she’s gotten me to believe in it too.”

Kyle thought about what Nick had just said and what Judy had promised him inside, “Fine, maybe I overreacted a little, I’ll try and keep an open mind and see what happens.”

Nick nodded at Kyle and then went still as he felt a tingle run up his back like someone was staring at him and trying to undress him with their eyes. Looking around, he spied a pair of long ears poking out from around the side of a cabinet inside the house. Nick smiled at Judy and lifted his
water bottle in salute. Nick laughed as the suddenly pink ears quickly slipped back behind the cabinet and out of sight.

Judy raised her head as Walter finished the blessing. She was holding paws with Toni on the end of the table to her left and Nick to her right. Tyler sat next to him, then Walter on the other end of the table, then Karl and Aidan sitting next to his mother.

As Judy released paws with Nick and Toni, she clapped them together as she looked up and down the table. It all smelled so delicious. There were grilled peppers, asparagus, onions and baby potatoes and Toni had put out a few dipping sauces including a garlic butter cream sauce that looked yummy.

Judy gushed, “It smells so wonderful!”

Judy filled her plate as dishes were passed around. She wanted to try some of everything. Walter had given Aidan the special task of walking around to each person at the table and serving them some of the main course. Judy smiled as she saw how the young tod carried the dish so carefully and he seemed so proud of the fact he was serving the most important part of the family meal.

Aidan stopped next to Judy with the platter in his paws and offered her some salmon. Toni gasped. “Aidan, no! Miss Judy is prey and some prey mammals find it very disrespectful to be offered a predator dish. Please apologize to Miss Judy.”

Aidan looked panicked, the first time he had been trusted to serve a guest and he had messed up. Judy could see a tear start to form as he bent to apologize. “Actually Aidan, thank you for offering me some salmon, it smells delicious and I would very much like to try some.”

Relief flowed across Aidan’s face at Judy’s words and he gladly placed a small piece on her plate. He served his mom last and then sat down to join everyone else in eating.

As Aidan was talking with his uncle Kyle, Toni leaned over to Judy and whispered a quiet ‘Thank you’ to Judy who nodded and smiled.

As Judy emptied her plate, Nick reached over with his fork and took aim at her salmon. “Hey Carrots, may I have a bite?”

Judy lightly slapped his paw away, “Nuh-uh, keep your paws to yourself Slick, you know better than to come between a bunny and her dinner.”

Judy took a bite of the salmon and as Aidan watched, she chewed. The last time she had tasted fish was on a dare in grade school, it was a couple days past its prime and reheated in a microwave, it was awful. So, fully expecting the intensely fishy taste and rubbery texture of the catfish she’d had before, she prepared one of her best fake smiles. As she chewed though, the honey sweet, spiced glaze hit her tongue and after the next chew, the flaky, fresh taste of the salmon, grilled to perfection came through. “Wow,” She looked at Walter, “You weren’t kidding, that’s fantastic!”

Suddenly covering her muzzle, “You guys won’t tell anyone, right?”

Everyone at the table laughed as Walter said, “Don’t worry, what happens at the dinner table stays at the dinner table.”

“Good!” She passed her now empty plate over to Aidan, “May I have a little more, please.”
Judy heard a snickering noise from Nick. Without even looking she elbowed him in the side. Hearing a satisfying ‘Umph,’ she set her plate down and delicately used her fork on her seconds.

Figuring she better say something before her partner started the teasing, she spoke up. “Before Nick here busts a gut laughing, I’ve had predator food a few times before. Once when I was in grade school on a dare and more recently, Nick and I have been privately sampling each other’s species foods.”

Looking at Aidan and Tyler, she said, “I’ve tried fried crickets, a bite of a bug-a-burger, it was a little greasy, uh, tofu, kind of bland, and stir-fried shrimp, those were pretty good.”

Staring down at her empty plate, “Nick’s jokes aside, I’d appreciate it if you would keep this to yourselves, my family would freak if they found out I’ve been trying predator food.”

As everyone around the table nodded and promised to keep the bunny’s secret, she turned to Nick and waved her paw toward the kits. “I shared, how about you tell the kits about some of the delicious prey foods the big bad predator has sampled.”

Nick laughed, “Okay, okay. I’ve tried some grasses including a salad of rye, wheatgrass and Alfalfa. At least three different types of kale, dandelions, homemade sunflower seed crackers, and steel-cut oatmeal, which was pretty good with cinnamon. And of course, I’ve sampled every fruit and vegetable that is grown on her family’s farm, even the carrots.” Folding his arms, he gave Judy a ‘So there’ look.

Seeing that the two competitors had finished, Walter spoke up. “So, kits, next time Mom asks you to finish your vegetables I expect you to remember that both Miss Judy and Mr. Nick have tried and enjoyed all sorts of different foods, both pred and prey.”

Nick whispered to Judy, “Should I warn them about brussels sprouts?”

“Shush, you. The kits might like them.” As Nick gave her his most incredulous ‘You can’t be serious’ look, Judy boxed him in the side. Nick came back with a pretty good pouty face which Judy disarmed by reaching down and stroking Nick’s tail which had found its way into her lap sometime during the food discussion.

Nick remained remarkably quiet as the dishes were cleared, maybe something to do with how good it felt to have someone without paw pads pet his tail. Toni brought in the berries that she and Judy had prepared earlier and Nick quickly sat at attention when a bowlful of his favorite blueberries with a side of vanilla ice cream was placed in front of him.

The adults talked for another hour or so while Tyler and Aidan relaxed playing a board game.

Judy gave Nick a nudge when she spied Aidan yawning. “I think it’s about time for Nick and me to head out.”

Tyler lightly punched Aidan in the arm and nodded toward Judy. Aidan pulled a phone out of his pocket and walked over to Judy. “Miss Judy, I took a picture of you and Mr. Nick without asking and I was wondering if it’s okay if I keep it.”

Aidan unlocked the phone and handed it to Judy. The picture was of her petting Nick’s tail while the two of them were sitting on the couch. She cooed to herself, they both looked so relaxed and happy.

“You were right to ask. Some mammals think it’s rude if someone takes their picture without asking permission first. How about we make a deal, you can keep it if you send me a copy and
promise not to post it on the internet. We’ll keep it between us. Alright?”

Aidan smiled as he forwarded a copy to Judy and promised not to share it with anyone but his mom.

After giving both Aidan and Tyler a hug goodbye, Judy went over to say goodnight to Kyle, “It was nice meeting you Kyle, I hope the next time we meet I will have been able to demonstrate that I am not the same ignorant mammal you saw a year ago.”

Kyle inclined his head slightly, “Judy, now that I’ve spent some time with you, I don’t think you were ever the speciest mammal I thought I saw. I think it’s time I looked a little harder in the mirror and stopped blaming others for the fact that I’m a fox. Nick told me how much you’ve helped him turn his life around and I need to take his example to heart and see what I can make of myself.”

“Kyle, you know if there is ever anything we can do to help, please let Nick or me know.”

Nick had already said his goodbyes to the kits and Toni and was now talking with Walter. Judy went and gave Toni a hug. “Thank you for a wonderful evening, everything was delicious.”

Toni returned the hug, “You’re welcome. It was a pleasure having you and Nick here. I was anxious about someone having to visit, but since it’s you, I’ll look forward to it. You call in a few days so we can schedule the next visit. We both need to keep you on the good side of your boss.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

Toni leaned closer to Judy and whispered, “Be sure to take care of your fox, you’ve got a good one there. Wrap your tail around him and don’t let him go.”

Judy nodded. Finishing her hug with Toni, she whispered back, “I will.”

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The trip back to Judy’s apartment was uneventful. Thankfully, the metro car was empty except for a young beaver couple in the back, too busy making out to notice a fox and a rabbit sitting much closer together than decorum would typically allow. Holding paws so no one could see, both mammals were content to sit quietly and enjoy each other’s company, Nick didn’t even make another joke about Judy’s carrot print cooler.

Nick walked with Judy all the way up to the door of her apartment. Standing on her cute welcome mat, she inserted her key into the door lock. As she did, Nick stepped forward and gently put his arms around her waist. Judy let go of the key and putting her paws on his arms, she leaned back into his chest. Judy fit nicely under Nick’s chin with an inch or so to spare and as their hug deepened, she could feel him resting his chin lightly on her head between her ears.

Judy closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth of Nick holding her so close. Judy started to quietly purr, something she’d been doing more of when she was near Nick.

Nick held her for another minute before he quietly cleared his throat and whispered, “Judy, there’s something I have to tell you. Something I can’t keep inside me anymore.”

Judy gently turned around to face Nick. She did it by pressing even deeper into his chest so he would know that she wasn’t trying to break their hug, but that she wanted to look into his eyes as they spoke.
Nick continued, “Judy, I—”

Judy reached up and placed a finger across Nick’s lips. Looking deeply into Nick’s green eyes with her own violet ones, she pleaded with him, “Nick, please don’t say it. If you do, I’m scared I won’t know what to do and I’ll mess everything up again.”

Judy gently removed her finger as the brightness in Nick’s eyes dimmed with disappointment and hurt. Nick nodded and his head drooped, “I understand.”

As Nick loosened the hold he had on Judy’s waist so that he could leave, she reached up and placed her paw on his cheek. He looked up at the touch and Judy smiled as she gently pulled his head down so that she could press her cheek against his.

As the fur of their cheeks intermingled, she whispered, “Nick, I wish there was some way I could promise that we could be together. I just…”

“Shh, not now.”

Judy nodded at Nick’s words. He was right, being held by her fox right now was all she wanted.

As the moment grew longer, the feelings she’d had a week ago after their date returned and grew stronger. Her head tried to say ‘no’ but her heart wanted this, she wanted him in her life. Judy slid her cheek down the side of Nick’s muzzle and rested her chin against his neck and started to lose herself as she tried to nuzzle deeper into the wonderfully soft fur in the crook of his neck.

Suddenly, Judy jerked away from Nick looking flustered. “Oh, no. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Nick had kept his paws on Judy’s waist, so he was able to stop her as she tried to turn away. “Shouldn’t have done what?”

Judy looked up at Nick and saw the confusion on his face. Breathing a sigh of relief, she quickly replied, “Nothing.”

Nick was about to ask another question when Judy derailed his thoughts by reaching up with both paws, pulling his muzzle down to hers, and kissing him. As she hummed in pleasure, Nick recovered from the surprise and deepened the kiss by brushing her soft lips with his tongue until she returned the touch with her own. They enjoyed each other for a time neither kept track of until Judy reluctantly ended the kiss.

Still in Nick’s arms, Judy turned her head and gently, rested it against his chest and listened to his heartbeat while breathing in his strong scent. Neither said anything as they once again enjoyed the feeling of holding each other close.

Nick finally whispered, “Carrots, you can do ‘Nothing’ to me anytime you want.”

Judy laughed into Nick’s chest for a few moments and then let their hug relax a little. Reaching up with her paw she gently rubbed Nick’s chest and then used a finger to trace a line halfway down his front. Nick slipped his paws down and gave Judy’s waist a final squeeze and then let go so that she could finish unlocking the door to her apartment. Pushing the door open, Judy turned around and smiled at Nick. “Thank you for today, Nick. See you in the morning.”

As the door latched closed, Nick stood staring at the space Judy had just occupied. He knew he must have the goofiest look on his face. He had no idea what had just happened, but he really wanted it to happen again.
Nick straightened up after a moment and headed down the hall to the stairway. He made it to the top of the stairs when he picked up a scent. He turned his head to the left and then to the right, it was stronger to the right, he turned again and started to feel like a young pup chasing its own tail, he could smell something so he knew it was there, but he couldn’t put his finger on where it was.

What he smelled was all Judy, but different. It complemented her usual earthiness with a sweetness like a morning dew glistening on a field of daisies, but it also had a deeper more possessive component, something that any mammal that could smell it would recognize as a warning – Mine!

Nick did a 360 as he sniffed around trying again to isolate the source of the complex scent when he reached up to his neck and felt where Judy had nuzzled him. His heart pounded louder in his chest when he realized what ‘Nothing’ really meant. Judy had accidentally left a tiny, tiny bit of her scent in his neck fur when she had caught herself about to mark him.
The sun was barely peeking over the horizon, way too early for a nocturnal mammal to be awake, let alone dressed and headed to work. Nick had slept like a kit and woke up before his alarm sounded. Last night with his bunny was more than he could have hoped for and now he was ready to make the world a better place, right after he picked up a large cup of joe.

“Get the hell out of my way, pelt!” said a Kunekune in a dark suit nearly running Nick over.

Nick put a thumb behind his badge and casually asked the pig standing in front of him, “Don’t you mean Officer Pelt?”

The pig looked more closely at the badge and started to rethink his situation. “Uh, sorry.”

Nick could see he wasn’t sorry in the least, but nothing was going to spoil his morning. Giving the pig his toothiest smile, he replied, “You have yourself a wonderful day.”

The Kunekune rambled off, mumbling something about foxes that Nick made sure to ignore.

Nick continued to walk to his and Judy’s go-to Snarlbucks. He hadn’t stopped there since Judy had broken up with him, and he figured after last night, getting back into their routine would be nice which meant a coffee for him and a half-caf with a carrot danish for Judy.

Arriving at the coffee house, he reached for the door and quickly stepped back as it was almost opened into him by a gray bunny backing through it carrying a tray with two cups.

Pulling the door the rest of the way open, he greeted the ears in front of his face. “Good morning, Carrots, nice to see you up and at ‘em.”

Judy turned and her face lit up, “Hey Nick, I got you some coffee.” Handing him the taller cup, she watched as he took a deep swallow.

“Thanks, I’ve missed this. The tar they call coffee in the break room doesn’t hold a candle to this.”

Talking about nothing and anything, the two partners walked together as if the last week hadn’t happened. A couple of blocks from the precinct, Nick slowed down and motioned Judy to stop. Guiding her over to a private spot in an alley, he took their coffees and set them on a box nearby. Nick looked to make sure no one could see them and then he took Judy’s paws in his own and leaned in closer to her. “Judy, I know what you almost did last night.”

Judy looked down at their joined paws and gave Nick’s a little squeeze, “Nick, a voice in my head keeps telling me that there is no way for us to be together without causing problems back home.”

Looking him in the eye now, she continued, “I do want us to be together, but I don’t know how. I didn’t mean to hurt you by almost…, I know I shouldn’t have, I was being an emotional bunny. I’m sorry.”
Nick let go of Judy’s paws and pulled her into a hug. “Dumb bunny, I’m not upset and like I said before, no matter what, I’ll always be your fox.”

Returning the hug, she wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled into his neck fur. It felt so good to hold him and know he’d forgiven her and was willing to put up with her bunny emotions.

Nick whispered into Judy’s ear, “You stopped yourself last night, how about we do it anyway and mark each other right now.”

Judy pulled back from her fox and shook her head. “Nick, you know we can’t, not now for sure.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you just said, your family, the town, pitchforks and torches, if anyone thinks we’re together.”

“No, well yes that too, but look around.”

Nick looked around and then back at Judy who had a smirk on her face. “What?”

She pecked him on the lips and then said, “There’s a dumpster over there, and I can hear a drunk mammal snoring about twenty yards that way, and if you look behind you someone puked all over the wall by that door.”

“So?”

Judy rolled her eyes, “Dumb fox, I’m not going to let you mark me in the back of a disgusting alley. What kind of girl do you think I am?” Before Nick could reply, she added in a coy voice, “Besides, for it to be official we have to mark each other while we’re, um, you know.”

Nick smirked and whispered in her ear, “Mm-hmm, if you’re game, there’s an old mattress leaning against the wall over there.”

Judy raised herself up on her toes and twisted a little to look where Nick had motioned. Not seeing anything, she turned back to see Nick wearing a wide smile. Realizing what he’d done, she punched him in the shoulder, “Jerk! I’m not doing that in an alley either.”

Nick started laughing, “You looked, though. Naughty bunny.”

Trying to look offended, she couldn’t help but smile instead, “Maybe,” kissing him quickly on the lips, she added, “Tasty fox.” Judy squirmed out of the hug and poked Nick in the chest, “Time to get going Slick, I don’t want to be late for roll call.”

The two officers checked their uniforms and brushed out any wrinkles. Watching Judy primp, Nick couldn’t help himself. He leaned closed to her and in a low, throaty voice he said, “Mark you I shall, my bunny someday you will be.” He winked and grabbed his coffee and stepped toward the sidewalk out of the alley.

Judy caught up to Nick and grabbed his arm. “Did you just turn one of our deepest moments into a Yoda meme?”

“Did I do that? Yes, yes I did.”

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Nick held the lobby door open for Judy and for the first time in a week, the two partners walked into the grand atrium of the ZPD’s Precinct One together. The two small officers walked up to the
reception desk to check in with Clawhauser. As they approached the large desk, they could both see the rotund cheetah munching away on his first bowl of Lucky Chomps.

As soon as he spotted the pair approaching, Clawhauser set his bowl down and looked like his face was going to split from the smile that formed. “Hey guys, it’s so amazing to see you two back together.”

Judy narrowed her eyes at the jovial officer as she replied, “Ben, what did we talk about?” Judy pressed him with her stern glare until she felt a soft touch against her ankle as Nick’s tail brushed against it.

Seeing Ben’s suddenly crestfallen face, Judy sighed, “Never mind, Ben. I need to get ready for the bullpen meeting.”

“And I’m sensing that there are a bunch of cars that need tickets. I’d better go grab the meter-maid vest from my locker and warm up the Joke-mobile if I want to be ready for the onslaught of scofflaws.”

Ben broke away from his cooing over the couple to stop Nick from leaving. “Hey Nick, Bogo wants you in the bullpen this morning, something about that girl you guys tranqed.”

Nick smirked, “Probably best to hold off on putting on the meter-maid uniform, you know how it affects all the females that see me in it.”

“Nausea? Uncontrolled laughter?” Judy added with a smirk.

“Har har, Carrots, how about we go hear what the boss mammal has to say.”

…..

Sitting in their usual shared seat up front, Nick and Judy waited with the rest of the officers in the bullpen for Bogo to arrive.

Judy’s ears swiveled as she heard quiet voices behind her.

“Where’s McHorn?”

“I think he’s with the TUSK guys today. He’s leading a training session on breaching techniques.”

A third voice replied, “No, that’s where he was supposed to be, but Clawhauser told me he’s on leave instead. He had some sort of breakdown and couldn’t finish his shift with that mastiff cop from the DMPD. I guess his mate called Clawhauser this morning and said it would be another day before he’d be able to come back to work.”

Judy let her ears drop as the voices behind her quieted and then made a mental note to call McHorn’s mate and see if there was anything she could do to help him out.

A few moments later, Bogo opened the door to the bullpen and made his way to the podium.

“Alright, everyone shut-it. A few items before I get to the assignments.” Nodding toward his smallest officers, “Saturday morning Wilde called in what appeared to be a mammal gone savage. Hopps responded and tranqed a female caracal in her early twenties. According to the girl, she was drugged by a capybara in his thirties. So, we have a possible new drug on the streets and the identified effects are similar to drunkenness and possibly a short-term savage episode.
“Clawhauser will post the incident details on the precinct’s secure site and send everyone a link. I want all of you to be on the watch for any new drug activity in your patrol areas and spread the word to your CIs to keep an eye out.” And anything you find out pass on to Clawhauser.

“Next, after reviewing the details of the savage caracal takedown, I have decided that the precinct policy on those performing parking enforcement or traffic control being unarmed is now rescinded. Going forward, tranq pistols or tasers may be carried by officers on parking duty. Patrol and off-duty rules are not changing, you are allowed to continue carrying your weapon as needed.”

Bogo cleared his throat and briefly made eye contact with Judy, “Last item, our Quartermaster, Sergeant Deerland, tendered his retirement papers early this morning and will be on leave starting Friday. Until a replacement is identified, if you need anything procured give your material request to Clawhauser and he will forward it to the quartermaster at Precinct Five.”

Bogo spent the next few minutes covering a couple of incidents from the weekend’s Festival that still needed to be worked and then gave each of the teams their patrol assignments. As Bogo looked to have gone through all the teams, Judy was suddenly curious, Bogo had skipped over giving her a task or a partner for the day.

Shuffling his notes, Bogo looked between Judy, Nick and a large gray wolf in the back of the room, “Wilde, Hopps, Pawson stay back, the rest of you are dismissed.”

Bogo motioned Officer Pawson to take a seat next to Nick and Judy and then waited for the room to finish clearing out. “Wilde, Hopps. I’m assigning Pawson to work the drug case with you today.”

“Hoo-yah! No parking duty.” Nick said with a big smile.

Bogo shook his head, “Hopps…”

“Yes, sir.” Judy said as she elbowed Nick lightly in the side.

Nodding his appreciation, Bogo continued, “You’ll be lead on the case and I’m assigning Pawson to work with you and Wilde so that he can help with the drug you two found.”

Looking at the wolf, Bogo said, “Pawson, what you’re about to hear is not to leave this room. There are only a few other mammals that are aware of what I’m about to tell you.”

Pawson nodded, “Yes, sir.”

“As we speak, tests are being performed on the female caracal’s blood to try and identify what she was drugged with. What almost no one knows is that Wilde was able to gather a tiny sample of what may have been the drug used on the girl. Wilde reported he got a whiff of the drug and now I need another canid officer to be scent trained on it. Woolford has the best nose in the department, but he’s on special assignment so that leaves you. The problem is that not enough of the drug was recovered to create a scent stick, so we don’t have anything we can give you to train your nose with.”

Addressing Nick, Bogo asked, “Can you train Officer Pawson up on the scent without using any of the sample?”

Nick turned to Pawson, “Where did you grow up?”

Pawson replied, “Northwest Savanna Central, why?”
Wilde replied back to Bogo, “Yes, sir, I think I can do it. We’ll need a few hours to visit the places I need to put the scent together.”

“Good. Check in with Clawhauser as needed and he’ll keep me informed. Pawson, let me know when your patrol is done if you’ve got the scent down and how confident you are on it. Dismissed.”

…..

The three Officers went up to Nick and Judy’s shared desk and checked on the CSI dump from the scene of the savage attack. It only took the team a few minutes to find out that there was only one working camera in the alley and it was pointed toward the alley entrance. The camera picked up Nick and Judy entering the alley and then a little while later some vehicles, but the camera didn’t pick up the girl going into the alley or any of the fight. Aside from the remaining shards of glass from the broken vial, the CSI team didn’t find anything else out of the ordinary.

Judy scrolled through the rest of the CSI files and didn’t see anything else useful. Going back to the notes she was sent, she read out the highlights to Nick and Officer Pawson.

“Jackson interviewed the manager of the bar while we were at the hospital and found out that there aren’t any working cameras inside the bar. Worse, when he talked with the staff, none of them recognized the perp or any of the patrons from the night before. Seems that with the festival going on all the regulars stayed home.

“Jackson also said none of the staff got a good look at our perp, seems that the fight lasted two or three swings and then our guy bolted out of the place before anyone figured out what was going on.”

Judy clicked open another file and gestured for Nick to take a closer look. “One of our sketch artists met with Katie at the hospital and this is what he came up with.”

Nick looked at the drawing on Judy’s screen and huffed, “Damn, that’s barely the side of his head.” Nick pointed at the drawing, “And that earring looks the same as what a thousand other mammals are wearing. We’re not going to be able to do anything with this sketch.”

Nick put his paw on Judy’s back and looked over her shoulder at the notes file still open on her screen. “A bunch of nothing.” Nick thought for a couple of moments and then added, “Carrots, shoot a message to Clawhauser and have him watch the social media sites for any uploads of our little bar fight. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone recorded something that ends up getting posted to Muzzlebook or EweTube.”

While Judy tapped out the message and sent it off to Clawhauser, Nick picked up a manila envelope sitting on Judy’s desk and shook out two wallets. Grabbing his phone, Nick walked away and made a couple of quick phone calls. It only took a few minutes to find out that the owners hadn’t known how they had lost their wallets and didn’t recall seeing a caracal or a capybara near them at the festival. Nick gave each of them instructions on how to claim their wallets and then had Judy make a few notes in her file in case they needed to talk to them again.

With nothing else to review, Judy shut off her computer and turned to her partner, “Okay, Nick, what now?”

Nick turned to Pawson and rubbed his paws together, “Pawson, how familiar are you with the diners and dives around town?”
“I’ve been to a few of the fish places down by the wharf and I’ve tried a couple of the restaurants on the west side of the Rainforest district near the industrial park gondola stop and there are a few other places my girlfriend and I have tried. Is that what you mean?”

Judy looked between the two mammals with her paws on her hips. “Nick, we’re supposed to be helping Officer Pawson here understand what that drug you found smells like, not plan our lunch break, besides it’s not even 9:30.”

“Carrots, the best way I know how to do this is to find an item that has the same smell as the drug or in this case, items. I think I can break the smell of the drug into a few parts and my best bet is to find some foods that Pawson can smell and put together to be able to ID the drug if he comes across it.” Smiling at Pawson, he added, “And if we have to sample some of Zootopia’s finer establishments to achieve our goal, well, that’s just a side benefit.”

Pawson chuckled at the look of exacerbation on the rabbit’s face as Judy replied, “You seriously expect me to believe that will work?”

“Actually, Officer Hopps, it does work. Some families give scent sticks to their pups so they can learn different smells, what’s safe, what’s not. If a pup can train their nose, they can get into some interesting jobs, maybe work for a company that specializes in recovery or even harvesting root plants like Truffles.” Nodding toward Nick, “I’m sure this is the same kind of thing.”

“By the way, you can call me Connor” reaching out with a paw to Judy. “We haven’t really talked before, nice to be working with you guys.”

“I’m Judy, and the always hungry fox is Nick.”

Pawson laughed at the look Judy was giving her partner.

Nick ignored the glare he was receiving and rubbed the back of his neck. As Judy started to feel ignored, her foot began to tap the floor. Raising an eyebrow, Nick focused back on the impatient rabbit, “Fox trying to think here.”

“Grrrrr” was all he heard as the tapping stopped.

“Alright, so we don’t have to drive all over town, Connor, have you ever eaten at Charlie’s Fish Shack on the Canal District’s South Wharf?”

“Is that the place with the fake swordfish mounted above the door?”

“Yeah, the owner is an old beaver, heard he used to be a cook in the navy.”

“Love that place, old Joe makes a great lobster bisque,” licking his lips he added, “and the seafood chowder is delicious.”

“The scallops, with the lemon and butter cream sauce,” now Nick was salivating, “that’s what does it for me, mm-hmm.”

“Grrrrrr”

With the reverie suddenly broken, Nick asked, “Have you had the tuna steak with the seasoned cream sauce?”

“Yeah, once, it was only okay.” Pawson’s lip turned up to emphasize the fact that the tuna wasn’t his favorite.
“Did Joe cook it, or was it the deer buck with the missing tooth?”

“The buck.”

“Okay, good, Joe does it differently. The sauce has a tang to it, I’m thinking of the citrusy taste with a tiny hint of cinnamon. Do you remember it?” Nick waited.

Pawson closed his eyes, “Um…” thinking for a minute, “Yeah, a lot of pepper, but I remember the scent.” Opening his eyes, he looked at Nick and nodded.

“Good, let’s get going, the other two scents aren’t as simple, so we’ll need to smell each sample and pick it apart to get it right.”

Judy’s eyes narrowed as she stood in silence glaring at her fox, a single finger raised in protest at what she had just witnessed. Nick countered with a smirk and tapped the side of his nose. “Foxy superpower, don’t doubt the nose!”

“Grrrrrr”

…..

Judy, Nick, and Connor were sitting in a booth in a small diner north of Hyenahurst. Nick and Judy sat close together on one bench while the large wolf took up most of the other bench. This diner was the second of the two places on Nick’s list.

At the first diner, Judy had watched as Nick and Connor ordered a dish and then spent ten minutes sniffing it and talking about various spices. Judy had waited patiently until their conversation turned into laughing as Nick started in on a story about a hustle he and Finn had dreamed up. Judy finally got them moving again after poking Nick in the side and reminding him that they were supposed to be working not pretending to be foodies.

Now, sitting on a bench almost leaning against her fox, Judy was trying to be mad at Nick for taking them all over the city, but the veggie wrap she was eating was really, really good and who would have thought that chips made from squash, carrots, and green beans could be so delicious.

“Mmmm” covering her mouth quickly, she saw Nick chuckling at her. ‘Carrot rust, he heard that.’

“I think somebunny is enjoying her lunch.” With a paw reaching over to her plate, Nick tried to snag one of her chips.

A gray blur slapped his paw away and then there was a small arm cradling the plate protectively, “Mine!”

Nick and Pawson both laughed and then Judy joined in after sliding her plate a little further away from Nick.

According to Nick, he’d been able to identify the scents Pawson needed to ID the drug, it wasn’t exact but close enough. Now they were taking a quick break before heading back out on patrol.

Pawson was munching on a French fry when he asked Nick, “So, how is it you know all these places? I mean, that last diner we were at looked great and I can’t wait to take my girlfriend there.”

Judy chimed in, “Nick knows all the best diners and dives in town. He even knows some of the
“Yeah, I worked in the industry for a little while. I spent some time working at a Bug-A-Burger and then a stint as a part-time line cook in a pretty nice restaurant.”

Judy smiled, “I didn’t know that! I was wondering where you learned to cook so well.”

Nick put his paw on Judy’s back, “Yup, I wasn’t always the disreputable street mammal you’ve come to know and love.”

Judy rolled her eyes, “Uh-huh.” Rubbing his leg with her paw under the table, “Should I be wondering what you were doing when you weren’t cooking?”

Nick chuckled and leaned in closer to Judy, “Probably not, I don’t want to spoil that innocent farm-girl image you have of me.”

Judy smirked and with her muzzle narrowing the distance to Nick’s, she added, “I think that tractor has already left the barn, Slick.”

Pawson, looking back and forth between his two partners for the day, was starting to wonder if what Clawhauser kept saying about these two was true when Judy’s radio came alive.

“Dispatch to Hopps, dispatch to Hopps, do you read?”

Judy leaned back away from Nick and took a quick breath, “Hopps here, what do you need Ben?”

“I know you guys are still 10-7, but Bogo wants Wilde in his office ASAP.”

“10-4, we’re headed in, ETA…” holding the mic against her chest she looked at Nick.

“No lights, forty minutes.”

“Forty minutes, unless it’s an emergency,” Judy repeated into the microphone.

“No emergency, Clawhauser out.”

…..

“Clawhauser, where is Wilde? They should have been back by now.”

Ben winced at the loud voice coming from the intercom on his desk. “Sir, they should be back in a few minutes, there was an accident on the parkway that was slowing traffic down all over. Do you want me to call Hopps and tell them to use lights to get back here quicker?”

“No, just send Wilde up as soon as he gets back.” Followed by static and then Bogo’s voice came through again. “And Clawhauser, I’m expecting a call soon, put it straight through no questions, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ben started to nervously rearrange items on his desk. Bogo was antsy and that made the ordinarily jolly cheetah nervous. He looked over at his jam-cam display trying to decide if he should call Judy and find out how far out they were when he heard the door from the garage open.

A huge smile of relief covered his face as he saw Nick, Judy and Connor approach his desk. Judy promptly hopped up onto the reception desk and returned his smile. “What’s up Ben? Why did
Bogo want us back from our patrol?”

“He misses me, the old softie.” joked Nick, nudging Pawson. “Seriously, we’re besties.”

The wolf looked at the small fox and rolled his eyes. “Wilde, you are in need of some serious therapy.”

“You need to head up to Bogo’s office right away, he’s called me twice wanting to know where you were.” Wringing his paws together, he added, “Please, he’s been yelling a lot.”

Nick looked up at Judy and motioned toward Bogo’s office, “Shall we, Carrots.”

Ben’s head flipped between the two small officers and he yelled, “No! Just you Nick, Bogo said for Judy to wait here until he called.”

Judy and Nick exchanged glances and Nick turned, “Okay, then.”

“What’s going on?” Judy asked in a concerned voice.

Shrugging his shoulders, Nick replied, “I don’t know.”

Ben watched as Nick walked up the stairs to Bogo’s second-floor office. Nick reached the top and a moment later he heard a knock on a door followed by a gruff “Come in Wilde.” The door opened and then closed.

Ben watched as Judy stood on his desk leaning toward Bogo’s office. Her ears were standing straight up and he saw as they rotated slightly as she tried to pick up anything.

“Hear anything?”

“Not really, mostly Bogo shouting.” Judy went silent and focused. “Something about the Mayor.”

“Hey Clawhauser, what are you guys up to?” asked Delgato stopping at the desk.

“Shhhhhh,” both Judy and Ben hissed at the lion.

Looking like he was just slapped, Delgato stood perfectly still and remained quiet.

Judy spoke quietly, “Now he’s yelling something about a drug case and bad timing.” Turning to Delgato, she said in a huff, “Francis, stop breathing, I can’t hear over your rumbling!”

Like radar dishes, Judy’s ears tried to pick up any signal they could, but Bogo’s office had gone quiet.

“Clawhauser...” Judy jumped straight up two feet in the air at the yell from the intercom, “send Hopps up immediately.”

Judy landed and bounced off the desk. Ben watched as she hopped the large steps two at a time and sped around to Bogo’s office. Listening carefully, he heard Judy’s triple knock and a gruff response from inside the office. Once the door closed, he couldn’t hear anything.

Ben grimaced as he looked back and forth between Delgato and Pawson. Trying to think of something to do, Ben grabbed his phone, “You guys want to listen to the latest Gazelle song?” A couple of distracted grunts were all he got from his fellow officers as they stared up to the second-floor office waiting for a hint of what was to come. They were avidly searching for even a small sign, like the sky growing dark before a category F5 tornado hits or maybe the distant sound of a
locomotive whistle just before the train derails detonating the nuclear weapon it was carrying wiping out all life within fifty miles of the blast. You know, little things like that.

Ben’s ears perked, Bogo’s door was opening, “Yes, sir,” he heard Judy say, then the door gently closed. Maybe whatever it was wasn’t a big deal. He prepared a couple of industrial strength ‘coos’ and waited for his favorite couple to come down the stairs.

“What did you do?!!”

Ben cringed, definitely the train derailment scenario.

“Carrots…”

“Don’t you dare ‘Carrots’ me Nicholas Piberius Wilde, I know this is all your fault!”

“But…”

Ben saw Nick stop at the top of the stairs. Ben’s head moved back and forth as an agitated gray blur circled the fox. Said blur paused long enough to poke Nick in the ribs. “Arrgh, I can’t believe you’d do this to me!” Followed with another, harder poke.”

“Ow! Would you stop with the poking.” Nick whined while grabbing his side.

Nick took a step down the staircase to move away from Miss Pokes-a-lot. Unfortunately, dodging her just made Judy more irate. “Carrots, please, I can explain.”

Judy had been hopping down the stairs next to Nick when she stopped and went back up a stair so she could look down on him. “This is some sort of hustle, isn’t it? Something to do with my family. Sweet cheese and crackers, what have you done? That’s my family you’re messing with!”

Judy had moved around to the other side of Nick and now was quickly walking down the stairs to the lobby.

“Judy, wait, it’s not like that!” Nick called out feeling like this argument was getting out of control.

Judy turned around and stepped back up to face Nick again. “What do you mean, what else could it be? Everything is just one big hustle to you, isn’t it?”

Nick stepped down off the stairs and turned to face Judy and tried to defuse the argument with his usual humor, “Come on, you know you love me.”

“No, right now I do not!” folding her arms, she glared at Nick.

Ben had been wringing his paws in concern. He silently watched his two friends hoping that whatever was going on wasn’t too serious. Ben held his breath when he saw the anger on Judy’s face as she glared at Nick and then as he continued to watch his favorite couple, Judy’s face suddenly changed from anger to one of disappointment and hurt.

Covering her mouth with her paw, tears started forming in Judy’s large purple eyes. “What have I done, oh my gosh” Looking directly into Nick’s green eyes, “What I almost did last night, what I said this morning. Was that part of your hustle too?”

“Judy, of course not, you know how I feel about you, please listen…”

“I’m done listening.” Judy turned and walked toward the garage. She made it part way to Ben’s desk when she heard Nick call after her.
With his paws in front of him, Nick tried appealing to Judy one last time, “I swear nothing bad will happen.”

Judy stopped, and then in a move that would have made the Flash jealous, she was suddenly pushing Nick into the empty bullpen briefing room out of view of Clawhauser and anyone else watching. Grabbing Nick’s tie, she pulled his muzzle to within an inch of hers and growled out, “Nothing better or I’ll find you and...”

Figuring there was only one sure-fire way left to defuse the angry bunny in front of him, Nick closed the gap between their muzzles and kissed her.

Stunned to silence, Judy let go of Nick’s tie and stood unmoving as Nick’s lips were pressed against hers. Nick cupped Judy’s cheek with his paw and as he deepened the kiss, Judy replied in kind. Judy reached up with her paw and was just starting to stroke the side of Nick’s muzzle when the gears in her brain suddenly re-engaged and she pulled away from her fox. A couple of panting breaths later, she narrowed her eyes and then poked Nick in the chest. “No! That won’t work on me! I’m mad at you and I’m staying mad at you!”

Nick watched as Judy turned and stomped her way to the door and just as she was stepping into the lobby, Nick smirked and said in a quiet voice, “It worked a little.”

Judy almost jumped when he heard his bunny shout back, “No, it didn’t!”

…..

Ben was watching the door to the bullpen with rapt attention waiting for something to happen. He couldn’t hear anything, so he just continued to wring his paws in worry over what was happening behind the closed door.

A few minutes later, the bullpen door opened and an angry bunny came out. Ben saw Judy yell back into the room and then heard her mumble something about ‘soft lips’ and ‘irritating foxes’ before stomping her way toward his desk.

Ben held his paws up to his cheeks still worried that something bad had happened when Judy stopped in front of his desk and looked at both him and Officer Pawson. Ben was about to ask how it went with Nick when he was interrupted by Judy.

“Ben, I’m taking my cruiser and patrolling ALONE.”

Ben was going to ask Judy why she wasn’t patrolling with Nick or Connor but decided not to when he saw Judy wasn’t in the mood for any of his questions. So, grabbing his clipboard, he made the appropriate notation and replied, “Yes ma’am, you’re marked out as patrolling solo.”

Connor watched Judy push open the door to the garage and disappear. “Ben, I’ll be at my desk, I owe Bogo a report.”

A few moments later, Ben saw Nick come out of the bullpen a little more disheveled than when he went in and looking a lot like a kit who was in trouble. “Hey Nick, you alright?”

He sighed, “Yeah, I better get going.”

Ben was about to ask if Nick was going to do a foot patrol or partner up with someone when the phone rang. Checking the lines, he saw it was on the Chief’s number. “Good afternoon, Chief Bogo’s office, may I help you?”
“Yes, please, may I speak with the Chief.” asked a female voice. Remembering Bogo’s order to put the call through, he replied, “Yes, ma’am, please hold.”

Hitting the intercom, Ben spoke into it, “Chief, that call you wanted is on line one?”

A gruff response came back, “Fine.”

Ben saw the line indicator flashing as the caller was on hold. He watched as it went solid and pressed the button again. Covering the mouthpiece, he knew he could get in trouble, but he had to know.

“Chief, did he agree?

“Yes, ma’am.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, good afternoon, ma’am.”

Ben disconnected as the Chief hung up. What was the Chief up to and who had just called him? What is going to happen to Nick and why is Judy so upset?

So many questions. Well, when confronted with a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma there’s only one thing to do. Ben pulled out his phone and put on Gazelle’s latest video, no matter the question, the horned angel’s music was always the answer.
Hanging up the phone, Mayor Karen Ackerbunn let out a sigh of relief. Drumming her claw tips on the desktop, she started to build a mental list of what she needed to do next.

A knock on her office door made her look up in time to see her assistant Ken poke his head in. “Hey Karen, how did it go with Chief Bogo?”

Waving Ken in and pointing at a chair, she replied, “I think it went okay, kind of hard to tell with him. He brings new meaning to the phrase ‘A mammal of few words.’ Fortunately, one of those words was ‘yes.’”

The porcupine popped back up and leaned forward with his paw up, “Sweet, high four?”

Karen just looked at the quill covered paw and grimaced, “How about a raincheck.”

Letting his paw drop, he smirked, “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

Sitting back in his chair, Ken rubbed his paws together, “I love it when a plan comes together!”

Karen smiled, “Well, it’s not together yet. Now comes the hardest part.” Sliding a mug back and forth between her paws on the desktop, she thought for a few moments before adding, “I’m not sure I trust Hopps. If he backs out or worse has something up his sleeve that blows up, then we’re the ones that are going to have to pick up the pieces.”

“I don’t know, maybe he’s loosened up a little and changed his attitude.”

Karen and Ken stoically looked each other in the eye. Neither moved or even twitched for almost five seconds until Ken finally broke first and started to laugh. “Okay, fine, I’m not buying it either, we’ll just have to keep an eye on him.”

Karen nodded, “Yeah, still, it was almost surreal seeing him.”

…..

Two days earlier….

“Morning Daisy, how’s our favorite Mayor doing this morning?” Ken Quillbert smiled at the elderly rabbit doe sitting at the receptionist’s desk.

Daisy Moses, the Mayor’s Executive Admin, swiveled her ears toward the set of wooden double doors behind her and was about to reply when a loud crashing noise caused her to jump in her seat.

“Never mind, I’m guessing she got my email.”
Daisy pulled a box out of her desk drawer and gave it to Ken, “You’ll need these, I think she’s out.”

Ken smiled at Daisy, knocked twice on the Mayor’s door and then let himself into her office before being invited.

“I thought you said we’d have more time before the social media sites would start hammering us.”

Glancing over at the broken ceramic pieces in the corner of the room, Ken sat down next to the Mayor’s desk and sighed. “We should’ve had more time and I can’t figure out why we didn’t get it. The metrics don’t make any sense. Some articles seemed to go viral and then suddenly die while other content is following a more normal lifecycle. I don’t know.”

Karen shook her head. “It doesn’t matter why it happened, it did and if we don’t think of something fast, we’re going to be playing host to a bunch of protests and sit-ins.”

Ken sighed, they’d tried yesterday to think of a solution, but nothing seemed workable, so they’d decided to think about it overnight and try again this morning. Unfortunately, the internet never sleeps and their time had run out. If they didn’t come up with something to present to the Co-op board, right now, they were going to be neck-deep in trouble.

“We could try submitting your predator equal rights bill to the city council again, maybe they’ll approve it this time.”

Karen shrugged. “If I knew I could get it passed, I’d resubmit it in a heartbeat, but I’m worried it would get voted down again, and if it did, we’d be proving that reporter right and end up encouraging even more protests.”

Ken reached down and pulled a mug out of the box Daisy had given him and set it on the desk for his boss. “Sorry, other than that, I’ve got nothing.”

Karen raised an eyebrow at Ken’s motion and then shook her head, “Yeah, me neither.”

The intercom on Karen’s desk buzzed. “Madam Mayor, there’s a Mr. Finnberry from the Pred-Prey Equal Rights Alliance on the phone asking to speak with you.”

Karen looked at Ken, who shrugged his shoulders, “Never heard of them.”

“Daisy, please put him through.”

…..

Rapping her knuckles on the table, Mayor Ackerbunn quieted the eight rabbits in the conference room. “Thank you all for attending this meeting on such short notice.

“As you are aware, an article was published a couple of days ago, highlighting some of the discriminatory policies and practices here in Bunnyburrow. This article has garnered a significant amount of interest online, and we expect that other media outlets in the city and eventually in the Commonwealth will pick it up soon.”

“Who cares about what people wasting their time reading crap on the internet think.” Retorted an old brown and mottled black buck.

“Mr. Hayes, we need to care about what those mammals are reading about us online. For many mammals, online is their only source of news and information.” Looking over the group, Karen
added, “Unfortunately for us, everything in that article is the truth. Predators are treated as second class citizens in this community. They are shunned, taken advantage of and mistreated. We were fortunate that more of our anti-predator ‘policies’ were not mentioned in the article.”

“I still don’t care.”

Ken stood up and replied, “Sir, the future of Bunnyburrow depends on us caring. Over the last six months, we have applied for almost ten million dollars’ worth of Commonwealth grants. We absolutely need those grants to improve our school programs, improve the Burrow communications network, and upgrade our utility infrastructure.”

Ken looked at the group of rabbits around the table and could see they still didn’t care, “How many of your kits are planning on moving out of Bunnyburrow when they’re old enough? What are we doing to help interest them in staying? We need to diversify the Burrow job base and embrace the online economy, it’s the only way to encourage your kits to stay in town and to do that we need the infrastructure and educational system to support it.”

Ken grimaced at the lack of response from the Board, “If the Commonwealth thinks we’re a bunch of speciest hicks that hate predators, they’ll trash our grant applications and give the money to Podunk or Farflung or worst case, one of the other Tri-Burrows communities.”

Karen scanned the group of rabbits and could see that Ken’s arguments hadn’t made an impact. Yes, it was critical that they calm the internet, and yes, the town desperately needed those grants, but she and Ken were really here after something bigger, something they’d both wanted since college, and this crisis, along with the solution they’d come up with, created the perfect opportunity to try and make it happen. She had to find a way to get enough support from the Board to move forward with her plan.

Motioning for Ken to step aside, Karen took over the meeting and pulled out the big guns, “There’s another bigger, more immediate set of problems we’re going to have to deal with if we don’t do something right away.”

That got Stu Hopps’ attention, “What are you talking about?”

“Protests, sit-ins, boycotts of our produce and shaming of any retailer or grocery store that carries Bunnyburrow goods. We’ve already seen mammals on social media sites calling for action against us because of our treatment of predators. If we don’t nip this in the bud, we could suffer devastating losses. Your harvests could end up rotting in the fields, your reserves wiped out, and we all know a couple of farms in Bunnyburrow that are on edge financially, this could be enough to force them into bankruptcy.”

Stu took a deep breath and asked, “Fine, what do you propose we do?”

Here goes, “I’m glad you asked. I have been in contact with an organization that promotes improving pred-prey relations and they have offered us an honorarium to fund an outreach program. I’ve spent most of the last few hours working on a plan which I believe will keep the internet trolls at bay and more importantly, actually help the community understand predators better.”

Looking at Stu again, “With your support, I would like to have one of the ZPD’s predator officers work for a couple of months as a deputy for Sheriff Hoofson.”

Blank stares.
“I’ve spoken with Zootopia’s mayor, Mayor Osborn, and requested that the ZPD’s first fox Officer, Nick Wilde, be transferred here. The honorarium I mentioned will easily cover his pay and room and board and leave plenty left over to fund the outreach events we have planned.” Karen forced a smile and waited for a response.

“Oh, hell no!”

“Over my dead body.”

“You can’t be serious, having a predator as a deputy is bad enough, but a fox? He’ll eat our kits.”

“Yeah, foxes are shifty, untrustworthy animals, he’ll steal the town blind.”

Karen’s smile fell, this wasn’t going at all like she had hoped. “Mr. Hopps, help me out here.”

Stu had been listening to all the objections and was about to voice his own when the Mayor interrupted his thoughts.

“What?” was all Stu got out.

“Mr. Hopps, Nick Wilde has been your daughter Judy’s partner at the ZPD for six months. I had hoped that their successful working relationship would be an example that we could use in Bunnyburrow to show that predators and prey can live and work together in harmony.”

Stu was stunned and just stared at the Mayor. ‘Nick Wilde, Nick Wilde, okay, yeah, Judy talked a couple of times about her partner Nick. That doesn’t mean it’s the same Nick. Aren’t all ZPD officers named Nick? It can’t be, she would have said something. This can’t be happening. Oh rotten, moldy pumpkins, Judy’s partner is…’

“A FOX?!”

Everyone around the table stopped talking at Stu’s outburst. Karen shook her head and said, “Yes, Mr. Hopps, Officer Wilde is a fox.”

Hayes smacked the top of the table, “Where’s he going to stay? Because it sure as hell ain’t going to be the motel. No way my family is going to allow some criminal to have a room there. We’ll never be able to rent a room again.”

Ken broke in, “Mr. Hayes, the costs for his room and board will be covered by the honorarium, please, he needs to be able to stay somewhere.”

“No, I don’t care about the money, let the filthy flea-bag sleep in the street for all I care!”

Other bucks started tossing out ideas. “How about letting him stay with that baker, he’s a fox.”

Karen showing more frustration than she meant to, replied, “He can’t, the zoning rules prohibit unrelated predators from living together unless they work on a farm.”

“Let him sleep in the jail. The cells have beds, a bucket in case he has to take a piss, and we can lock the door to make sure he doesn’t get out at night. Or just leave him there for the whole two months.”

“We are not going to lock up one of our own deputies.”

“How about we muzzle him and…”
“I’ll do it.”

“…then with some shackles, we chain him to—”

Stu pounded the table to get everyone’s attention. “I said, I’ll do it. He can stay at my warren while he’s working for the sheriff.”

Karen and Ken looked at each other, neither had expected Stu Hopps to volunteer to host Officer Wilde, the most they had been hoping for was for him to not actively oppose the plan.

“Thank you for your support, Mr. Hopps, and hosting Officer Wilde is very generous of you.” Addressing the rest of the group, “In a couple of days, Mayor Osborn and I will speak with ZPD Chief Bogo and get his approval for Officer Wilde’s transfer. Once that’s done, I will let you know when Officer Wilde is expected to arrive.”

Mayor Ackerbunn and Ken walked out of the conference room after adjourning the meeting. Stu sat at the table as the rest of the Co-op council exited the room.

As Hayes made his way to the exit, he stopped next to Stu and looked at him like he was an idiot, “Stu, you’re a damn fool for letting a fox stay in your warren, you best count your kits every morning to see which ones he eats.”

Stu nodded in reply. Hayes was right, letting a fox near his family was probably the stupidest thing he’d ever agreed to. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a choice. Judy was upset with him, and Bonnie was about to make him start sleeping on the couch, and even after thinking about it all night, he still had no idea on how to fix things with Judy. His only chance was to try and wheedle some information out of Judy’s fox partner and hope it was something that he could use.

Stu stood up and made his way out of the room. ‘A fox, why did it have to be a fox?’ Foxes are sly and deceitful and take advantage of every mammal they meet. He was going to have to be careful, if this Nick person found out that he needed his help to make things right with Judy, no telling what the fox would demand in return for his aid. Money, land, or god forbid, meat.

Now, how to tell the family what he’d agreed to? Well, Ackerbunn had said it’s not a done deal yet. As he left the building, he decided he would hold off on telling anyone about their possible visitor, no reason to upset them unnecessarily. In the meantime, a quick trip to the general store for a new fox taser and a couple canisters of Fox Away spray would probably be a good idea.

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**Ackerbunn’s office, Present**

Ken got up to leave, “You know, if we somehow pull this off, it’d make a sweet story. Town on the ropes, impending riots, Mayor throws a Hail Mary, gets equal rights for predators passed, secures millions in funding, and then gets reelected over and over until she dies and they put a statue of her in the town square.”

Karen snorted, “I think you’d better leave the storytelling to the pros. All I need to be a happy bun is to survive the day.”

“You sure? What if the statue has you dressed in a toga holding a sword in one paw and the head of a dragon in the other?”

“Don’t make me throw this mug at you, because I will. Now get out of my office and go tell the sheriff that his new officer will be here tomorrow.”
It was mid-morning when Finn finally pulled up, and now he and Nick stood talking in front of Nick’s building. Nick had an old suitcase and a backpack sitting next to him on the sidewalk where he’d left them while waiting for Finn to arrive with his dad’s car.

Nick had packed up everything he needed last night. Packing had been pretty easy since he’d only been in his place for a little while and didn’t really own much yet. He did make sure to take most of his Pawaiian shirts though, besides being pretty comfortable, he loved the eye rolls he got from Judy whenever he wore one.

“Thanks for taking care of my dad’s car, Finn, no way did I have enough time last week to get her serviced and ready to go.” Rubbing a paw over the soft top of the old red convertible, he thought of how much fun it used to be when his dad would take him out for a ride. “Never thought I’d hear her run again.”

Finn huffed, “Yeah, and never in my wildest dreams, did I think you’d ever drive her either.”

Nick went silent as he continued to look at the car and think about his dad.

“You know your dad would’ve wanted you to have his car years ago, right?”

Walking to the back of the car, Nick nodded slightly acknowledging Finn’s comment, and then asked his friend, “Were they able to mount the lockbox in the trunk?” Lifting the trunk lid, he saw Finn nod.

“Yup, just like you wanted.”

As Nick examined the trunk, Finn took a look around and asked with a smirk, “So, where’s your bunny-girl? I assumed she’d be here to see you off with hugs and kisses.”

Sighing, Nick replied, “She’s pissed at me.”

Finn laughed, “Still or again?”

“Again. Carrots blew up yesterday when she found out about me going to Bunnyburrow. I texted her a few times last night and this morning, but I don’t think she’s talking to me right now.”

“Really! Is there anything I can do so you’ll stop talking to me? I mean with all the crazy-ass things you’ve asked me to do over the last week, I’d kinda enjoy never hearing from your sorry tail again.”

“Thanks, love you too.”

Finn stopped chuckling and got a little more serious, “Alright, Nick, I’ve got to know, what are you
planning on doing once you get to Bunnyburrow. I know the Mayor has a few events she’s thinking about having you do like visiting some kits in the hospital, spending time at a community center, and hosting an outdoor picnic, but those are all pretty standard. What do you have planned? How are you going to scam them into letting you and the Cottontail get together?”

Nick lifted his nose and with a faux attitude replied, “What do you mean, I will not stoop so low as to scam anyone into doing anything.”

Finn pursed his lips, “Right. I’m thinkin’ you’re gonna stop at Frankie’s on the way out of town and pick up a load of surveillance gear and set up for a little blackmail. Catch a couple of councilors with their pants down while interviewing a new secretary, or maybe a drug sting, or catch them in a price-fixing scheme trying to corner the market on celery. It might take a while to get enough dirt on everyone, but that could work.”

Nick rolled his eyes, “No Finn, I’m not going to blackmail anyone.”

Finn scratched his head and looked a little worried, “You’re not gonna try bribing everyone, are you? Even if we let outsiders in on the charity, I don’t think we’d be able to raise enough cash to keep a whole town council in check. I suppose if you record them taking the bribes that could work, but bribing people is expensive and if one mammal goes soft on you, the whole scheme falls apart.”

“Finn, be serious, I’m not bribing anyone either.”

Finn looked at his friend and grinned, “A mammal after my own heart, you’re going to go old school on them. Break a few legs, maybe a finger or two accidentally get chopped off in a ‘tractor accident.’ Better yet, talk Mr. Big into sending Kevin and Raymond to Bunnyburrow. They can be very persuasive. You set up a few private ‘meetings’ between them and the right council members and I bet the rest of the town council changes its attitude toward preds in a heartbeat.”

Nick put his paws up, “Finn, stop it. I’m not going to threaten anyone and I’m sure as hell not going to call Mr. Big for any kind of help. This is my deal and I’m going to handle it my way.”

“Fine, then tell me what the hell you plan on doing when you get there.”

Nick took a breath and nodded, “Alright. Bunnyburrow has never had a predator working in the sheriff’s office before, so this is my opportunity to show the town that predators, even foxes, are decent mammals. I’m not going to do any of the crazy stuff you just said because I’m going into this as ZPD Officer Nick Wilde, no scams, no schemes, just me.”

Finn started to interrupt Nick to tell him he was an idiot when Nick put a paw up to stop him. “Look Finn, I’m in this for the long haul. I need to change hearts and minds the right way, anything like you suggested would eventually come back to bite me in the tail, or get me thrown in jail, and that doesn’t solve my problem. I promise I’m not going into this blind, but going forward I have to be careful what I do.”

“And getting to hook up with your bunny-girl, how’s that going to work?”

Nick shook his head at his crass friend, “After five or six weeks of showing the town that I’m a decent mammal, I’ll figure out a way to introduce myself to Judy’s parents and convince them to let me court their daughter.”
Nick quickly lifted his paw again to stop Finn from laughing. “I know it sounds weak, but there’s nothing I can do about that right now. I need some time in Bunnyburrow to get the lay of the land and come up with a solid plan for talking with Judy’s parents. Once I do that, I’ll set up the meet and go from there.”

Finn sighed, “Are you sure you don’t want my baseball bat, I really think that would be easier.”

Nick laughed and then put his backpack in the back seat of the car and his suitcase in the trunk and then slipped behind the wheel and adjusted the seat and mirrors to fit him instead of Finn.

Once Nick was settled, Finn came up and leaned against the window frame. “Good luck, I think you’re an idiot, but I hope this works out for you.”

Nick gave Finn a quick salute. “Thanks, buddy. I’ll see you in a couple of months.”

Nick started the car and then pulled out his phone. He checked to see if Judy had replied to any of his texts. Nothing. She must still be mad at him. Tapping a claw on the Zoogle maps app, he saw it was going to take almost four hours to drive to Bunnyburrow. Best get moving, the sooner he got there, the sooner he’d be able to work some magic and get his bunny back.

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Judy had a stern look on her face as she sat in her bullpen chair waiting for the Chief to start the meeting. She was still stewing from yesterday and everyone in the room was giving her a wide berth. By unspoken agreement, her coworkers felt it was best that the bunny’s wrath stay focused on Wilde, no one else wanted to be caught in the blast radius.

Judy grimaced as she felt her phone vibrate. Without looking, she knew it was a text from Nick. She’d refused to answer his texts last night and she vowed to not look at anything he sent her today. Judy focused on the empty podium and watched the second hand of the clock move glacially slow toward the start time of the meeting.

Her phone vibrated again. Judy looked up in exasperation and gritted her teeth. ‘I will not look.’ The clock ticked again. She folded her arms tightly across her chest and clenched her jaw. ‘I will not look.’ The clock ticked. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited. She heard the clock tick again, curse her bunny hearing.

Her phone vibrated again! Sighing, she fished out her phone and looked.

I know you’re mad at me, but I have to do this.

Don’t worry, I’ll find a way.

Into the valley of Death rode the Fox.

Judy rolled her eyes at the last text. Despite being angry at her fox, a slight smile tried to form on her muzzle. ‘No!’, she was mad at him and a few texts and a really nice kiss weren’t going to change her mind, not for a while at least. As her thoughts started to wander toward other fox related things that weren’t going to change her mind either like soft tails, green eyes, and claws brushing against her fur, she heard someone coming. Judy quickly made sure she still had a stern look plastered on her face and then put away her phone just as the side door opened and Bogo came in.
Bogo quieted the room in his usual way, pounding his hoof down on the podium. “Shut it, everyone.” Scanning the room to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “First up, you may have noticed that Wilde isn’t here.”

Judy could hear a few whispers.

“Hadn’t noticed, don’t care.”

“Knew the pelt wouldn’t last.”

“Hopps looks pissed.”

Another round of hoof pounding and the whispers quieted. “Enough! Wilde has been assigned to the Bunnyburrow Sheriff’s Office. This assignment was a joint request by Mayor Ackerbunn of Bunnyburrow and our own Mayor Osborn and is scheduled to last two months. If any of you are approached by the media for comment, refer them to the PR department. Any questions?”

“A fox trying to police three billion rabbits brings new meaning to pred vs. prey. I’d pay good money to see an enraged horde of fluffy bunnies chasing Wilde out of town with pitchforks and torches!”

Judy grumbled as everyone else laughed. “There aren’t that many bunnies in Bunnyburrow.”

“Alright, everyone, assignments. Officer Collins, since Wilde is out and you seem interested in seeing enraged mammals, parking duty. Pawson, you and Hopps, patrol the west side, everyone else same patrols as yesterday. Remember to be on the lookout for any signs of the drug used on that caracal over the weekend. Dismissed.”

Judy drove the patrol car as Pawson made himself comfortable in his seat. Pawson was larger than most wolves. Fortunately, the seats of Judy and Nick’s cruiser could be adjusted to fit them or any of their medium to medium-large co-workers.

Pawson nursed a large coffee as he surveyed the street for any unusual activity. “So, Hopps…” Judy glanced at him, “did you and Wilde get things worked out from yesterday?”

Judy gave Pawson a cold look as a reply.

“Gotcha, how about the wolf minds his own business.”

Judy huffed, “I’m sorry, it’s just, complicated.”

“Yeah, foxes can be complicated. I’m sure Wilde will be okay in Bunnyburrow.”

“It’s not Nick I’m worried about, it’s everyone else. He’s up to something, no way Mayor Ackerbunn just called out of the blue and asked for him to go be a deputy.” Chewing her lip, she continued, “He’s like a big kit sometimes and without proper supervision, there’s no telling what kind of damage he might do.”

“Proper Supervision?” Pawson asked with a smirk.

“Yeah,” with a twinkle in her eye, she raised her fist, “Sometimes a little bunny flavored
supervision is just what he needs.”

Pawson reached over and with a single finger, he carefully pushed her fist back down. “I’ve seen how some of your sparring partners look after a bout, so how about we keep that in reserve for now.”

Judy laughed, “For now.”

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Nick pulled into one of the parking spaces in front of the Bunnyburrow Sheriff’s Office. Nick got out of the car and stretched. The office faced a decent-sized town square. The square consisted of what looked like the Bunnyburrow courthouse and administrative building fronted by a large green space filled with trees, walking paths and a few vendors. The streets surrounding the park had not only the sheriff’s office but several smaller government buildings mixed in with some storefronts all facing the park.

Nick brushed himself down and made sure he was presentable from the long drive. He wasn’t wearing his ZPD uniform, instead, he’d decided to wear some comfortable slacks, a long sleeve shirt and a light jacket. Entering the office, Nick approached a twentysomething bunny doe at the reception desk. “Hello, my name is Nick Wilde, I’m here to see Sheriff Hoofson if he’s available.”

“Hi, Officer Wilde, the Sheriff has been expecting you. Have a seat and I’ll let him know you’re here.”

“Wendy, that’s okay, I heard Officer Wilde come in.”

Nick turned toward the voice coming from an office in the back. A medium-sized brocket deer buck in his early fifties walked up with a hoof extended. Nick shook the Sheriff’s hoof, “Nice to meet you, Sir.”

“Come on back to my office.”

Nick made himself comfortable as he and Hoofson chatted. Hoofson covered some of the basics of the Bunnyburrow population and the difficulties in handling an area as large and rural as a farming community. Hoofson emphasized that he wanted Nick to work regular patrols and perform the same functions as the other deputies in his office. Hoofson concluded by discussing the issues the Mayor was confronted with and Nick’s role in helping to show the town’s citizens that predators were as trustworthy and decent as any other mammal and that everyone regardless of species should be able to live and work together as one big, happy community.

Nick perked up at that and asked Hoofson, “Given that the majority of the mammals in Bunnyburrow are rabbits and considering the biases toward predators, how are interspecies couples treated here?”

Hoofson thought about that for a moment before answering, “Well, the provisions in the New Law regarding interspecies couples are pretty much the same as in the city, which means they can’t be legal mates, so we don’t see much of that kind of goings-on around here. I suppose behind closed doors it might happen, but I don’t recall any of my deputies being called out to deal with any trouble related to that kind of activity.

“I will tell you there are a few small groups out and about that profess that rabbits should keep to
themselves, but so far they haven’t caused any trouble.”

Nick quietly sighed, Hoofson had confirmed most of what Cassy had told him. He’d really hoped she was exaggerating, but deep down he knew she was too good of a reporter to let that happen.

Nick’s thought was interrupted by a question from Hoofson, “Do you have a weapon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“May I see it?”

Nick reached inside his jacket and pulled his gun out of his shoulder holster. Verifying the safety was engaged, Nick removed the magazine and handed it to Hoofson. The Sheriff turned it over in his hoof and whistled in admiration as he handed it back, “That’s a mighty fine piece of iron you have there.” Looking at the young fox, he added, “Should I be askin’ how you can afford something like that on a cop’s salary?

Looking uncomfortable, Nick replied, “Um, probably not, sir.”

“I thought not.”

“I’m okay with you carrying a tranq when it’s absolutely necessary, but I’d like you to keep that weapon locked up for now. I want to keep your time here low-key. We do what we have to when we need, but with you being the first predator officer this town has seen in a very long time, I think keeping a more friendly profile will work better.”

Nick was suddenly confused, “There’s been a predator in the department before? I thought I was going to be the first.”

Hoofson shook his head, “You’re the first to work for the Burrow, but it used to be that the law was handled by a Commonwealth Marshall that would come through and check on things every now and again and I heard that more often than not the Marshalls were predators. As you can imagin’, the locals never really cottoned well to predators with guns showin’ up and stickin’ their muzzles into their business, so the townsfolk were pretty happy when the Marshall service was shut down and a sheriff’s office of their own was set up. Of course, ever since the department was created, it’s only been staffed by prey officers.”

Nick asked, “Any rabbit deputies?”

Hoofson shook his head, “Nope, never. My understanding is that not enough of the locals, not even the few vets they’ve had in town, have ever shown enough of both the ability and determination needed to become an Officer to support a local training program. So, even if they’d had a candidate, the Burrow would have had to send them through the ZPA or a Commonwealth program. As you rightly know, those programs wouldn’t take a rabbit being as they’re so small and all, so the department has always had to go and hire trained prey officers from outside Bunnyburrow.”

Hoofson started to chuckle, “Well, none of them were determined enough exceptin’ that Hopps girl you’re partnered with in the city, she was quite the firebrand, always wantin’ to help investigate things and make things right for everyone.”

Nick laughed, “She hasn’t changed a bit, best Officer in the ZPD.”
Hoofson nodded and laughed, “I don’t doubt it. I think that doe would’ve found a way to be a cop even if the MII hadn’t passed and let the ZPA admit small mammals. If even a few of the locals had been like her years ago, the department wouldn’t have had to hire from outside the Burrow the way it did.”

Nick nodded, “That must have been tough to deal with the way I heard it used to be around here for everyone that wasn’t a rabbit.”

“You got that right, but the locals preferred prey officers enough that the department was able to make it work even though it was hard to keep a deputy here long-term. That all changed for the good years ago when old Mayor Burns made things right by getting the New Law changed for all the town’s prey mammals.”

Nick smiled and nodded, “Sounds like I won’t have any problem then.”

Hoofson coughed and leaned forward, “Well, let’s hold on there for a second, son. It ain’t all sunshine and roses for predators here in town and you being a fox, especially one in uniform, is going to rub a few of the local rabbits the wrong way just like it did, years ago, when those Marshalls came to town. So, I’ll need you to be on your best behavior.”

“That’s my plan, sir.”

Hoofson looked like he was ready to wrap this up, “Wilde, get with Wendy and she’ll have you fill out all the paperwork to get you set up as a deputy. After that, you can call it a day and go get settled into your housing.”

Nick nodded, “Will do, sir. I saw a motel on the way in. Is that where I’m being put up?”

Hoofson chuckled, “Son, didn’t anyone tell you where you’re staying?”

“No, sir. When Chief Bogo briefed me yesterday, he was a little, uh, preoccupied and never mentioned it. I figured I’d be staying at the motel, but worse case I suppose I can sleep in my car.”

Now laughing, Hoofson replied, “Won’t be necessary, the Hopps family has insisted on letting you stay with them for the duration of your assignment.”

Nodding, Nick grimaced a little, “Okay then, a little unexpected, but that sounds good, it will be really nice to meet my partner’s family on the very first day I’m in town, shouldn’t be a problem, nothing to worry about, it’ll be all good.”

Standing up, Nick asked, “Uh, Sheriff, do you think Mr. Hopps still has his fox tasers? I was told he had a few of them a year or so ago.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve heard tell that Stu only breaks those out anymore when some disreputable buck tries to mess with one of his daughters and with you being a fox, we don’t have to worry about that, do we?”

Nick just smiled and shook his head, “Of course not, sir.”

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Between Hoofson’s directions and Zoogle maps, Nick was able to find his way to the Hopps’ farm. He pulled up the driveway and parked next to a dozen other vehicles in a gravel parking area near a large building. He got out of his car and checked to make sure he looked presentable. For the umpteenth time since he left Hoofson’s office, Nick wished he was wearing his uniform. This was not how and when he’d planned on introducing himself to the Hopps family. Slipping the chain of his badge holder over his neck, he sighed, ‘So much for putting together a plan.’ Oh well, adapt, overcome, think on your feet, that’s what foxes do.

Nick looked around, the house looked huge, it was two stories tall and went back a couple hundred feet until it backed into a hillside that seemed to be a little higher than the roof of the house. The house was painted in multiple different bright colors, pink, purple, yellow, light green and a sky blue. Nick wanted to laugh as he imagined how one of the suburban HOAs would react at seeing the Hopps’ chosen color palette.

Walking up to the house, Nick saw that it had a wraparound porch on two sides. One side looked to be the front of the house, the other overlooked a groomed field of grass to Nicks left. He could see a large space that had area enough for two soccer fields and a baseball diamond. He also saw multiple pavilions and a large kit’s play area with swings, a jungle gym, a play fort, see-saws, and enough toys to make any daycare facility in Zootopia jealous.

Looking off to the side without the porch about 100 yards away, there were three large barns. The doors were all open and he could see one housed a bunch of farm vehicles, another some storage and the last looked like it was a huge workshop. He knew that Judy came from a large farming family and he’d never been on a farm before, so this much open space and a house as big as a middle school was overwhelming, to say the least.

Nick steeled himself and went up to the front door. Standing on the porch he examined the door, it was obviously sized for smaller mammals, no way buffalo-butt or any of the larger officers were going to be comfortable walking through that door. Nick knocked on the door and then stepped back. He made sure his teeth weren’t showing and his claws were sheathed. After a couple of moments, the door was opened by an eight or nine-year-old doe who stood frozen looking at him. Her eyes traced upwards and stopped when they settled on his face.

Nick gave his best toothless smile and waved his paw in greeting. “Hi there, are your parents at home?”

She screamed and slammed the door.

Nick winced, “Great.”

A minute later, the door opened again. This time, Nick was greeted by a matronly doe wearing an apron and four bucks in their late teens or very early twenties standing behind her.

“Oh my, Ronni was right, there is a fox at the door. “Oliver, go find your father.”

One of the bucks, giving Nick an unhappy look, ran out toward one of the barns Nick had seen earlier.

The doe looked at Nick and asked, “What can I do for you…” looking more closely at Nick’s badge, “…um, Officer?”

“Good afternoon, my name is Officer Nick Wilde with the ZPD. I’ve been assigned to the
Bunnyburrow Sheriff’s Department and Sheriff Hoofson told me that…” Looking past the doe, Nick could see scowls on the buck’s faces. “…that, um Mr. Hopps has offered to let me stay at your warren while I’m working for the Sheriff.” His voice trailed off as he finished, “uh, if that’s alright, ma’am.”

Nick grew nervous as he silently waited a pawful of breaths for any kind of response.

“Okay then.” Waving her paw toward the inside of the house, “My name is Bonnie Hopps. Why don’t you come in while we wait for Stu to come and explain what’s going on.”

As Bonnie led Nick into the warren, Nick found himself in awe. As big as the house looked from the outside, it was absolutely huge on the inside. He could see a large industrial-sized kitchen with an enormous walk-in freezer and a pantry to die for. Off the kitchen, Nick saw a large office space and across from the kitchen was a dining area with enough space to feed a small army. He could see doors to the yard and hallways leading back into what he assumed was the hill the house was connected to. The amount of effort it would take to build something like this in Zootopia was unimaginable.

Standing with his mouth open, Nick still couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Mrs. Hopps, your home is amazing, I’ve never seen anything like this in the city.”

Bonnie smiled and waved him to a nearby counter in the kitchen. Thank you, Officer Wilde, this warren has been in the Hopps family for generations. We’re quite proud of it.”

Leading Nick into the kitchen, Bonnie asked, “Would you like some water?” After seeing Nick nod, she filled up a glass and slid it over to Nick.

Taking a healthy swallow, Nick felt much better, “Thanks.”

Bonnie smiled and considered the fox, “You said you’re with the ZPD. My daughter Judy is also a ZPD officer, she works in the Precinct One office. Which precinct do you work at?”

Nick chuckled, “Actually Mrs. Hopps, I work with your daughter. Judy and I are partners on the force, have been since I graduated from the ZPA about six months ago.”

Bonnie gasped, “Oh my, I remember that Judy spoke about her partner being named Nick, but she never mentioned that he was a…,” she stopped in embarrassment.

“Dashing, debonair fox?”

Trying not to laugh, Bonnie shook her head, “I do remember Judy telling me that her partner’s sense of humor took some getting used to. Sorry about that Officer Wilde, it was rude of me.”

Smiling broadly at Bonnie, he replied, “Not at all, Mrs. Hopps, you’re very kind for inviting me into your home and please call me Nick, I’m still getting used to the whole ‘Officer’ thing.”

Smiling in return, Bonnie patted Nick on the shoulder. “Of course, Nicholas.”

Taking another drink of water, Nick replied, “You know, my mom is the only one to ever call me Nicholas and she usually only did that when I was in trouble.”

Bonnie, raised an eyebrow, “I seem to recall a story or two I heard from Judy about her partner…”
Nick tried to stare her down, but finally shrugged and gave up, “Yeah, Nicholas will work.”

“It’s settled then, welcome.”

Everyone turned as Stu walked into the kitchen. The older buck seemed not to be surprised at all to see a fox in his kitchen talking with his mate and kits. As he approached the group, Stu gruffly greeted the animal he’d only invited to stay in his warren because he’d had no choice. “You must be Officer Wilde.”

Nick reached out to shake the older buck’s paw, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Hopps, please call me Nick.”

Stu looked at Nick’s paw but didn’t shake it, “Well, Officer, you can call me Mr. Hopps.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bonnie spoke up, “Nicholas said that he’s working for Sheriff Hoofson for a little while and that you invited him to stay with us. I wish you would have said something, it would have given me a chance to tidy up the large guest room.”

Stu scowled, “Bon, I didn’t say anything because I have a space set up for Officer Wilde out in the barn. It’s walking distance to the old outhouse and right near the rain-barrel shower.” Pointing in the direction of the door, Stu said, “This way, fox.”

Nick straightened up to follow the old buck when he heard an angry voice stop him from moving.

“Stuart Hopps, what are you thinking? I will not have a guest of this warren, especially a friend of Judy’s, sleeping in the barn.” Glaring at her mate, she motioned to Nick, “Nicholas, come this way, I’ll show you to the guest room.”

Nick hesitated, “Mrs. Hopps if me staying here is a problem I can stay in town at the motel.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it, that place is terrible, you’d be infested with fleas after one night. Besides, we have plenty of room here. Now come with me.”

Nick, deciding that arguing with the matron of the household was a bad choice, dutifully followed Bonnie into the bowels of the warren.

Many twists and turns later, Bonnie opened the door to a small room. Flipping on the light, Bonnie surveyed the room and then groaned. Turning around, she brushed past Nick and yelled down the hall, “Colton Hopps, get your tail in here this instant!”

Nick looked around the room and saw a small dresser, nightstand and a little alcove with a hanger bar and a curtain. The room wasn’t very big by city standards but seemed nice enough.

A teenager came bouncing down the hall and stopped outside the door. “Hey Mom, what do you want?”

“Look in here and tell me what’s missing?”

Colton leaned around the door frame and took a look, “The bed?”
“Yes, the bed! Where is it?”

Without missing a beat, Colton replied, “Well Mom, a week or so ago a couple of litters were working on a project that was supposed to test certain principles of gravity and friction. After a few detailed experiments were conducted…”

Bonnie rolled her eyes while Nick snickered behind her. Nick decided to track this kit down later, he was apparently a mammal after his own heart.

“… the results showed that—”

“Where is the bed? It’s the only one big enough to fit our guest.”

“Um, all busted up and the mattress is shredded, sorry.”

Laughing now, Nick interrupted Bonnie’s retort, “Actually, Mrs. Hopps, this is great. A roof over my head, indoor plumbing, a few blankets to curl up in, I couldn’t ask for better.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Bonnie searched his face to see if he had been joking with her, especially about the indoor plumbing, but all she saw was a smile and honest appreciation in his eyes.

“Seriously, this is perfect.”

“The bathrooms and showers are down the hall and dinner will be in an hour. If you need anything, just ask someone and they should be able to help. I’ll let you get settled.” Reaching up, she patted Nick on the shoulder, “Make yourself at home.”

…..

Nick groomed his fur thoroughly and then used some of the fur conditioner that he had seen at Judy’s place, the guy version of course. He spent extra time on his tail to make sure it looked especially smooth, after all, a fox’s tail is their pride and joy. His mom always used to say that you could tell all about a fox based on how their tail looked. Nick made sure his claws were cleaned and buffed, took a last look at his teeth in a small mirror and then did a quick breath test, all good.

Nick had considered wearing his standard khaki pants and yellow-green Pawaiian shirt, but tonight was the first dinner with his host family and he needed to make a good impression. So, he decided to go with a pair of black khaki pants and a gray shirt. Lastly, Nick ran his paw over the half dozen neckties he had and picked the solid purple one.

Nick went over to the small dresser and contemplated the gift box sitting there. He’d put the gift together last week in the hopes that he would meet Judy’s family under the right circumstances to present it, but he hadn’t thought that it would be his first night in town. He grimaced, ‘Oh, well, go big or go home, the worst that can happen is I have to leave.’

He grabbed the box, checked himself in the mirror one last time and opened the door to his room.

Nick was greeted by the gasps from three small, wide-eyed bucks. “A fox!”

Thinking fast, Nick went to his knees in front of the kits and looked behind him, “A fox, where?” Covering his eyes in mock fear, he whined, “Please don’t let him get me.”
The kits looked at the cowering fox and then at each other until one of the braver bucks tugged on Nick's shirt, “Mister, you're the fox.”

Nick peeked out from behind his paws, “I am?”

All three kits nodded.

Putting his paws down, he looked at the boys, “Are you sure, I mean, isn’t that a fox over there?” Pointing behind the kits, Nick’s tail flipped around and tickled one of the boys as he had his head turned.

Giggling the buck grabbed his side, “Hey!”

“I think I see him over there.” Nick’s tail tickled another of the boys.

Spinning around the boy laughed and shouted, “I felt that!”

“I think you guys spotted a tickle-fox, very rare and pretty sneaky when they find young bunnies to tickle.”

“There’s no such thing as a tickle-fox,” said the third buck folding his arms across his chest and stomping his foot down firmly.

“Arrrre you suuure?” Leaning closer to the buck, Nick pointed down the hall, “I think I hear him coming back.” The buck squinted down the hall looking for any movement in the shadows. Nick’s tail crept up on the focused kit and suddenly struck, tickling him all up and down his sides.

The kit rolled around in laughter as his brothers joined in. Pretty soon everyone was laughing and out of breath. Nick rolled back up onto his knees and introduced himself, “Alright you guys, somebody is coming for-reals this time.”

The boys hopped up and brushed themselves off. “Probably Janae, it’s almost dinner time.”

“My name’s Mr. Nick, I’m a friend of your sister Judy and I’m staying here for a little while. Who are you guys?”

“I’m Scotty, that’s Steven and over there is Spencer. We’re littermates.”

Nick, still on his knees, assumed a more formal pose. Even though the forms were only used anymore for special situations like tonight’s dinner, Nick decided that it would be nice to greet these kits formally. He reached out and offered his paw to Scotty. The buck placed his paw in Nick’s and with a very gentle two-fingered shake Nick addressed him, “Mr. Scotty Hopps, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Officer Nick Wilde of the ZPD.” Followed by a slight bow and a silent sniff to memorize the buck’s scent.

Turning to each of the other boys, Nick repeated the form. Having never been so respectfully treated, each of the boys looked at their paws for a moment and then up at Nick still on his knees.

As predicted, a doe turned the corner at the end of the hall and came toward the group of boys. The doe looked to be about Judy’s age and had similar coloring except for the fur on her paws was
black to her wrists and her face and muzzle fur were a solid gray. As she approached, Nick noticed that she was being trailed by another two kits in pink dresses, each having a bow tied around their right ears.

The three does stopped next to the boys and the oldest folded her arms and glared at Nick on his knees, “Harrumph!” This was followed by the other two does taking the same pose and expressing their own higher pitched Harrumphs.

Nick almost laughed at the amazingly adorable display. “Hi, I’m Mr. Nick.” Waving at the small does.

The does gasped and hid behind the older bunny’s legs.

“Sasha, Susan, he’s just a fox, relax.”

“Just a fox? I’ll have you know that where I’m from, I’m known as ‘THE FOX.’ ” Nick followed up with a smirk and a head tilt to match those of the girls.

Janae looked down on Nick, and with an ear flip to make sure he knew that he wasn’t worth her time, replied, “Males.”

Walking away she said, “It’s dinner time, come on everyone. You too, Fox.”

Nick stood up and whispered to the boys, “I don’t think she likes me.”

Scotty shook his head, “She hates all boys.”

“Yeah, since Blake broke up with her, she’s been stomping around saying she’ll never talk to a boy again,” added Steven.

Spencer snickered, “It’s her own fault. I heard Blake said she’s a terrible kisser.”

“Yeah, and I heard that she drools a lot,” added Steven.

“Gross,” added Nick joining the snickering boys with his own chuckling.

Suddenly all the boys were stopped by said doe standing in the middle of the hall. Shaking her finger and looking directly at Spencer, she growled out, “I’m a great kisser! That dumb buck doesn’t know what he’s missing.” Turning to Steven, she finished with, “And I don’t drool, well just the one time, but that wasn’t my fault!”

Finally turning her ire on Nick, “And you!” Tapping her foot on the floor, “Not a word from you,” lowering her voice, “I know at least three good spots to hide a body, understand?”

Nick silently nodded and used his fingers to make a lip-zippering motion and then flicked away an imaginary key.

“Good.”

With that, Janae stomped her way to the dining room.

Looking at the young bucks, Nick whispered, “Wow, since yesterday, I’ve had two Hopps does
threaten me. Are all your sisters like that?"

All three boys nodded and Nick decided they best hurry to dinner before another doe appeared.

As the group arrived at the large dining hall, Nick paused, “Hey Scotty, do you know where I’m supposed to sit?”

“Well over there at the guest table.”

Nick squinted and saw a small card table with a single folding chair set in an alcove away from everyone else. “Okay.”

Spencer started bouncing, “Do you want to eat with us at the kit’s table? It’d be fun.”

“Yeah!”

“You can sit next to us!”

Laughing, Nick accepted the invitation, “Okay. I have something for your parents and then I’ll be right over.”

He walked toward the main table where Mr. and Mrs. Hopps were seated. As he got closer, the room quieted. Hundreds of pairs of eyes were on him and an equal number of ears had swiveled to hear what the strange fox was doing.

Nick took a breath and remembering the old forms he began, “Mr. and Mrs. Hopps, it is a vulpine tradition for a guest to honor and thank the Masters of the household for their generosity. As a sign of respect, I would like to gift you with a small token of my appreciation.”

Carefully placing the box on the table in front of the couple, Nick added, “It’s also vulpine tradition to offer to help cook a family meal as a way for a guest to participate in providing for the family. So, if time permits during my stay, I would like to do that if you’re willing.”

As he finished, Nick performed a perfect bow of normal respect, exposed his neck slightly, waited for a count of three and then straightened to face his hosts.

With an unmistakable scowl on his face, Stu looked at the box in the center of the table as if it carried the plague. As his eyes rotated up to Nick, he gave the fox tod a similar look of disgust.

Stu sputtered out, “We don’t—,” until the soft, but firmly wielded paw of his mate silenced him.

“What Stu was about to say is thank you for the kind gift and that we are happy to have you stay with us for as long as your assignment lasts.” Reaching out, Bonnie picked up the box. “Isn’t that right, dear?”

“Sure, welcome to the warren.”

“Ooh,” Bonnie had lifted the lid and was examining the contents, “Hibiscus seeds. Look, Stu, three different kinds, including Mutabilis, one of your favorites.”

Seeing that Stu was still in his mood, Bonnie smiled back at Nick, “Nicholas, it’s so rare to see anyone following the old traditions anymore.” Nudging Stu with her elbow, “Please tell me about
the spices, I don’t remember those being part of lagomorph lore.”

Nick sighed in relief. “No ma’am, they aren’t. Many vulpine traditions involve food and cooking, so gifting spices is a way of offering to share a meal in friendship.”

“I’d like that, Nicholas, thank you again.”

Nick found the kit’s table and as he walked to it, the noise level in the room rose back up to its previous level as everyone finished taking their seats. Nick pulled out an empty chair between Spencer and a young doe he hadn’t met yet and sat down. He waved to Spencer’s littermates and introduced himself around to the other kits.

The room quieted again as Stu gave the blessing and then the clinking of dishes started up as everyone started filling their plates and eating.

Spencer was on his left, but Nick didn’t know the doe to his right. “Hi, I’m Mr. Nick, what’s your name?”

The doe looked nervously ahead but didn’t say anything.

Spencer leaned toward Nick, “Her name is Sunni, she’s a scaredy-cat and doesn’t hardly talk to anyone.”

Nick smiled, “Well, I don’t think Sunni is a scaredy-cat, I’m a very scary fox, so it’s okay for her to be nervous, don’t you think?”

“Nooooo, you’re not scary, you’re funny,” added Scotty.

“How about we let Sunni decide.” Slowly placing his arm up so that she could reach it, Nick said, “Go ahead and feel the fur on my arm and tell these guys how scary it is.”

The doe looked at Nick, nervous about touching the fur of a predator. Nick nodded and motioned for her to go ahead.

Sunni slowly reached over and pressed her dull claws into his arm fur and plied it like dough. “Soft,” Nick heard in a bare whisper.

“Well, how about my ears then?” Nick waggled his ears and dipped his head down. He felt soft fingers brush his ears and he giggled, “That tickles.” He heard Sunni giggle too, “Furry.”

Nick looked the doe in the eye and scrunched his face, “Hmm, I know what’s scary, my eyes.” Nick spun his eyes around in circles and then looked cross-eyed at Sunni until she laughed, “Silly.”

“I know, I have a scary tongue.” Nick slowly stuck his tongue out a little and made a “thpppt” noise. He heard more giggling, “Eww, gross.”

Nick smirked, “I know I’m scary, how about,” Nick put his paw on the table, “I let you touch one of my claws.”

There was a round of “oohs” and “aahs” from the table as Nick slowly extended the claw on his index finger, “If you want you can touch the side, but be careful of the tip because it might scratch
you.”

Sunni carefully touched the side of his claw and looked wide-eyed at Nick. Nick nodded with a smile and then Sunni slid her finger to the tip and gently felt it. She smiled, “Pointy.”

She pulled her finger away and then leaned close to Nick’s ear and whispered so only he could hear. Nick nodded and then slowly let his lips separate so that she could see his fangs. She gently touched one and then giggling, pulled her finger away.

“So, what do you think Sunni, am I scary?”

All eyes at the table watched as she finally shook her head, “Nice.” A blush turned the insides of Sunni’s ears red as all the kits laughed at poor Nick, the not-scary fox.

…..

Janae was sitting a couple of tables away from the kit’s table talking with one of her littermates when she heard her older brother, Lucas, huff in annoyance. She turned to see Lucas shaking his head while looking at the kit’s laughing at the table behind him.

Turning to Janae, Lucas grumbled, “Janae, why are you letting that fox sit with the kits? They’re usually pretty well behaved, but with him around they’re all riled up.” Suddenly, the two siblings cringed at the high-pitched laughter of a young doe. “Do you hear that, even Sunni is being loud, she never misbehaves!”

Janae started to agree and then stopped. ‘Sunni is being loud?’

As the laughter continued behind him and more ears swiveled around trying to figure out what was going on, Lucas grabbed the napkin off his lap, “If you aren’t going to do anything about that damn fox, I am. Dad never should have let him in the warren, he needs his ass tossed outside right now.”

“Wait, Lucas, I’ll take care of it.” Swinging around, Janae walked over to the table of giggling kits and with her paws on her hips and a neutral look on her face, she waited to be noticed. Kit by kit the table went quiet until finally, a snickering Nick looked up. “Uh-oh”

Whispers followed, “Mr. Nick’s in trouble. Mr. Nick’s in trouble.”

As Janae turned toward the source of the teasing, Nick stuck his tongue out at the bunny in question. Janae whipped her head back around and glared at Nick, “Gotcha!”

Nick sucked his tongue back in with a loud slurp and smirked, “Sorry.”

Laughing she asked, “How old are you exactly?”

Nick nudged Sunni next to him. In response, the doe giggled and raised her paws spreading her fingers and one of her thumbs apart. Nick looked at the wiggling digits and then up at Janae, “Seven?”

“Yeah, that seems about right.” Snickers around the table caused her to shake her head and huff. “If you’re all done eating, how about you guys go to the playroom and pick out a movie to watch, alright.”
All the bunnies around the table started to shift until Nick cleared his throat and stopped them. With all eyes on him, he motioned with his muzzle to a buck across the table a few chairs down. The young bunny looked around with a ‘What did I do?’ look on his face.

“Timothy?”

Reaching down, Timothy pulled a stalk of broccoli out of his pocket. With a look of mild distaste on his face, he quickly nibbled it gone. When he was done, everyone got up to go to the playroom.

Sunní was leading Nick away with a grip on his finger when Janae put her paw on Sunnì’s shoulder, “Sunní, may I please talk with Mr. Nick for a minute, I promise he’ll be right in to help you watch the movie.”

Sunní smiled, “Okay” and ran to catch up with the other kits.

Turning to Nick, Janae looked him over and then put her paw out. “Nice to meet you, Nick, I’m Janae. Judy and I are littermates.”

Taking her paw and giving it a gentle shake, he replied, “Nice to meet you too, Janae. If I remember what Judy told me, you’re the oldest of the litter, then Jacob, June, Jackie, and Judy’s the youngest, right?”

Nodding her head, “Yup, that’s right. Judy’s told me a little about you too. Of course, she left out a few details that might have been handy to know.”

“Yeah, she’s kind of forgetful that way. I imagine knowing about the red fur would have helped.”

Snorting in laughter, “The fur color? Yeah sure, that’s the detail I was talking about.” Chewing her lip, Janae added, “Nick, sorry about earlier, I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

Chuckling himself, Nick replied, “No problem, wait to get to know me better and then you can yell at me, I’m sure we’ll be able to find a reason or two by then.”

Shaking her head and smiling, “Alright, I’ll work on that, at least the getting to know you part. By the way, nice job with my mom, gifting seeds to your hostess is pretty old-school.”

Nick looked in the direction of Mr. and Mrs. Hopps’ table and remarked, “Yeah, some of us vulpines can be a little old fashioned, I’m glad she liked them.” Nick added in a quieter voice, “I don’t think your dad likes me though.” Pausing to think for a second, he added with a slight smile, “Although, since he hasn’t whistled up a mob of pitchfork-wielding bucks, I should be able to count my first dinner with the family as a win, don’t you think?”

Janae motioned for Nick to look more carefully at some of the bucks giving him the evil eye. “Um, you seem to get along with the kits really well, so how about we call it a draw for now.” Pointing to a hallway on the other side of the room, “Speaking of the kits, I think you have a movie you’re supposed to be watching. And Nick, I’ll be right in to make sure you don’t stay up all night, remember you have a big day tomorrow.”

With a smirk and a “Yes, Mom,” Nick was off.

……
Janae had followed Nick into the playroom and arranged herself on one of the couches where a good number of the warren’s kits were waiting, not so patiently, for the live-action remake of ‘Bunny and the Beast’ to start. Nick claimed the extra-large couch in the center of the room and as he made himself comfortable, Sunni and her littermates all piled onto the couch next to him.

This was one of Janae’s favorite movies growing up, the beautiful bunny maiden falling in love with the buck cursed to be a horrible beast until he finds someone capable of loving him, how romantic. Halfway through the movie, Janae noticed that almost every time the beast appeared on the screen a few of the kits around her couch would filter over to where Nick was sitting and join that bunny pile. Toward the end of the movie, Janae almost laughed as the pile of kits around Nick had grown until every young kit in the warren was piled up around their new fox friend.

Now, with the movie over, Janae was standing in the doorway with her phone taking pictures. Nick was asleep with his tongue hanging out as he quietly snored completely oblivious to the pile of sleeping kits around him.

Janae attached the pictures she had taken to a message for Judy and hit the send button.

Bonnie had padded up behind Janae and was watching her. “Were you texting Judy?”

“Yeah, I thought she’d enjoy seeing her fox partner in action.”

Bonnie laughed, “Judy never said anything about Nicholas being a fox to Dad or me, did you know?”

“Nope.”

“The kits like him,” Bonnie said nodding toward the bunny pile.

“Yeah” Janae nodded her head, “You know, tonight’s the first night I’ve seen Timothy actually eat his broccoli without putting up a big fuss and Sunni’s said more in three hours than in the last month.”

Bonnie’s thoughts went back to the phone call with Judy and how upset she’d been. It had only been a few days, but Bonnie was a mom and she worried about every one of her kits. “Janae, you talk with Judy more than anyone else, do you think Nicholas is truly a good friend of hers or just someone she spends time with at work? I’m wondering because Judy hasn’t ever really had much in the way of close friends and I’ve been a little worried about her lately.”

Janae snorted at her mom’s question, “Mom, over the last year, I can barely remember a text or call that she didn’t mention her ‘goof-ball’ partner, even when he was at the academy, so yeah, it’s safe to say they’re really good friends.”

Bonnie smiled as the wheels began to turn, “Good, maybe I can get him to share a little info on your sister.” Bonnie patted her daughter on the shoulder, “Well, let’s get all these kits, including the big red one, into their beds.”

…..

Judy was lying in her bed looking at the ceiling as she tried to fall asleep. The patrol with Pawson had gone fine, actually a lot better than with any of her other temporary partners last week.
Pawson was a good guy and he didn’t have a problem with either Nick or her, he’d actually said several very nice things about foxes in general and Nick in particular. It was reassuring to know that not everyone at the ZPD was like Garrison or Schweinly.

Of course, Judy was still angry at Nick and that wasn’t helping with her quest for sleep. Judy decided a new tactic was in order, she closed her eyes, took a few calming breaths and started listing the various punishments she was going to inflict on Nick when he came back. It seemed to be working as Judy’s eyes grew heavier and heavier.

On or about punishment fifty-four, Judy’s phone chimed with an incoming text.

Picking her phone up off her desk, she saw it was from Janae. Thanks for the life-sized fox plushie, the kits love it! Followed by a laughing bunny emoji and then more text.

Dad said he invited Nick to stay with us while he works for the Sheriff. Thanks loads for telling me your partner is a fox, might have been nice to know before he showed up. Any other secrets I need to know about? A new fur color or maybe a special buck in your life? – Love ya.

Judy cringed, she’d purposely not told anyone at home about Nick being a fox. She hadn’t wanted them to freak out about her spending so much time with a predator. And what was up with her dad letting Nick stay at the warren? Judy shook her head and tried not to think about what Nick was up to.

Judy flipped through the pictures Janae had sent. The first picture was of Nick in the middle of a bunny pile, another highlighted him sleeping with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, which made her smile and laugh. ‘What a goof.’

As she finished flipping through all the pictures, she started to get a doe-eyed look on her face and then groaned to herself, ‘Aargh, I’m still angry at that carrot-picking fox, I’m not ready to forgive him yet.’

Slowly going through the pictures again and settling on her favorite, she felt her anger turn into a feeling more like butterflies in her stomach. He’s so cute. Realizing what she was thinking, she covered her muzzle. ‘A fox can’t be cute!’ Sighing, Judy closed her eyes in frustration, ‘Sweet cheese and crackers, who am I kidding, he’s darn cute.’
"Shh, you'll wake him up, it's not time yet."

Nick stirred slightly. He was warm and comfy wrapped up in his blankets. Sleeping under a bridge wasn't as bad as other mammals made it out to be. He'd blocked off a section to keep the wind out and it was usually warm and dry enough that he could get a good night's sleep.

Sensing that it was still dark out, a nocturnal mammal superpower that he relied upon regularly to avoid getting out of bed, he squirmed himself deeper into the blankets, sighed and then settled back into his slumber. Unfortunately, something was interrupting his bliss and was trying to drag him to consciousness. His conscious-self took a sniff and was confused, it should smell more like a musty tunnel, but it didn't. His unconscious-self stood with its paws on its hips, 'You're in your new place, not under that old bridge, go back to sleep.'

"Mm-hmm." Nick smiled and floated back to sleep. Until his conscious-self took control of his ears and swiveled them toward what sounded like quiet giggling. His unconscious-self quickly jumped in, 'Must be the neighbors, ignore them and go back to sleep.' He could buy that until his conscious-self countered with, 'Your neighbors are an old raccoon couple, scowl yes, giggle never.'

Conscious-self took another sniff, bunnies, young bunnies. Nick rolled the scents around in his head, definitely a Hopps base, but not Judy. As more mental circuit breakers closed, he finally remembered where he was.

A muffled voice came from the blanket pile, "Steven, Spencer, Scotty, aaaand Sunni, what are you guys doing in here? It's way too early to be awake."

More giggling, "How did you know it was us, you're still buried in your blankets?" Sunni reached into the pile and carefully lifted a blanket off of Nick's head.

"Foxes use more than just their eyes and ears, we use our noses too." Nick poked his nose into Sunni's paw. "Yup, smells like a Sunni Hopps."

"Eww, your nose is cold."

Nick stretched in his blanket pile and yawned. Reaching over to his phone on the nightstand, he tapped it and saw that it was 5:30 am. "Guys, it's kind of early don't you think?"

"Nope, it's breakfast time, you don't want to miss out on Mom's blueberry pancakes, do you?"

That got Nick's attention. Suddenly fully awake, he decided going to breakfast was a good choice. "Alright, I need to change, save me a seat and I'll be right there."

The kits scampered out of his room, letting Nick get dressed and run a grooming brush over his head fur before heading down to the dining hall.

Arriving dressed in a ZPD t-shirt and shorts, Nick joined the food line in the kitchen. The line moved quickly and within minutes he had loaded up his plate with a stack of pancakes, poured on
some maple syrup, and then added some hash browns and fresh fruit. Licking his chops, he went over to the kit's table and sat down.

"Yum, this smells terrific." Nick joined everyone in eating.

A few minutes later Janae walked over, "Good morning kits. Did everyone sleep well?"

Everyone, including Nick, replied in unison, "Good morning, Janae." And then they all giggled.

Janae smiled back. "Sunni, would you please hand Mr. Nick a napkin, he has syrup all over his muzzle."

Nick grinned and then with a sweep of his long tongue licked all the syrup off his muzzle. The table suddenly went quiet as Nick looked around and saw all the kits staring at him.

"What? I can't help it if bunnies have little tongues." Smirking, he went back to eating his stack of pancakes.

"Janae, can I be a fox?"

"Me too!"

Janae rolled her eyes, "I'm sorry kits, only Mr. Nick is allowed to be a fox."

"Awww, no fair."

Janae rubbed the head fur of one of the disappointed bunnies and added, "How about tonight you guys let Mr. Nick sit at the big kits' table for dinner?"

Disappointed looks swept around the table until Nick said, "Don't worry as soon as I'm done eating dinner, I'll be in to watch movies with you guys."

A chorus of happy 'okays' turned into a debate on who's turn it was to pick the movie.

…..

Clawhauser waved a box in front of Judy as she sat on his desk checking email on her phone. "Come on Judy, it has carrot shavings in the icing."

Sighing, "Fine, you win, I'll have one." Judy tried to look beaten, but no true bunny can turn down a carrot flavored doughnut with shaved carrot icing. 'Yum'

Judy flipped to another app on her phone as she started nibbling on the treat.

Clawhauser hummed, "Where'd Pawson go?"

Judy licked some frosting off her lips and replied, "He got a call from his girlfriend, she thinks she left her lunch bag in his car." Taking another bite of the doughnut, she looked up at the cheetah who was nodding toward her phone.

Judy lifted her eyebrows, "What?"

"Hear anything from Nick on his first day in Bunnyburrow?"

Judy scoffed. "No."
"Come on girl, you guys talk all the time, how can you have not heard anything?"

Looking back down at her phone and tapping the screen, she replied, "I'm mad at him and when a girl is mad at a boy, she stops talking to him."

"And texting?"

"We don't do that either."

"Muzzlebook?"

"Definitely not."

"Sending selfies?"

"No way."

"SnapJabber"

"Nope."

"Staring at your phone wallpaper that happens to be a picture of Nick buried in a pile of bunny kits?"

"Uh-uh."

Judy sighed distractedly and licked some icing off of her fingers and then slipped her phone into her pocket. Hearing cooing noises from her friend, Judy looked up at a smiling Clawhauser, "What?" Licking her lips again, she asked, "Did I miss some frosting on my fur?"

Before Clawhauser could do more than look pleased with himself, Pawson walked up to the reception desk with a pink soft-sided lunch bag in his paw.

Lifting the bag, he said, "Hopps, she was right, she left her bag in the back seat. Okay to drop it off at Zootopia Central on the way to our patrol area?"

"No problem, it's on the way." Judy jumped down from Clawhauser's desk. "Why don't you text her and let her know we'll be there in about fifteen minutes." Waving at Clawhauser, Judy added, "See ya later, Ben."

Clawhauser 'cooed' again and wiggled his fingers in goodbye.

Pawson leaned down and quietly asked Judy, "What's up with Clawhauser, one too many Gazelle videos?"

"No idea. Hey, do I have any frosting on my muzzle fur?"

.....

Traffic was light and Judy was making good time to the hospital. "What does your girlfriend do for the hospital?"

Pawson's face broke out with a proud smile, "She's a Pediatric ICU Nurse Practitioner. She started at Zootopia Generals' Meadowlands unit as a nurse straight out of school and then transferred to Central for their PICU Nurse Practitioner program. She finished the program with higher scores and ratings than anyone else who's ever gone through it." Looking a little sheepish, he added, "Not
that I'm bragging on her or anything."

Judy laughed, "Don't worry, it's okay. I have around fifteen siblings that have jobs in various medical fields and I know how hard they've had to work to get where they are. I can see why you're so proud of her."

"Yeah, why she ever agreed to be with a guy like me, I'll never know. She's amazing."

Judy had seen enough love-sick siblings to know that Pawson had it bad for his girlfriend. For the longest time, she had wondered what being that in love would feel like. Wanting to spend all your time with the same mammal, the butterflies in your stomach whenever you think about them, trying to help them and support them with their goals, standing up for them when no one else will, trusting them with your life and worrying about them even if they are being dumb.

It wasn't until a couple of weeks ago when Nick had asked her out that she'd realized her own feelings. She'd been 'that in love' for a while now, she just hadn't recognized it. Now she was stuck, the decent, upright population of Bunnyburrow would never accept them being together and she didn't know what to do about it.

Judy turned into the hospital parking lot when Pawson pointed at a set of double doors under a glass-enclosed walkway that spanned between two of the four large buildings that made up the hospital complex. "Stop over there out of the way, Olivia should be right down."

Judy pulled over and parked. Pawson got out of the cruiser and waited outside on the sidewalk holding the pink lunch bag. Judy looked around wondering what kind of wolf Olivia would be. Pawson was a big guy, and she expected any mate of his to be a relatively large and intimidating she-wolf, a mammal that would easily dominate other pack females.

Pawson slapped the top of the cruiser and quickly walked around it toward the far set of double doors. Judy looked out her window trying to see Pawson's girlfriend, there were a couple of mammals inside the door, but Judy couldn't tell because there was a small she-puma in scrubs and a lab coat blocking her view. Judy leaned back and forth trying for a better view when Pawson lifted the she-puma out of the way. Finally, Judy could see around her.

'A coyote and an older hyena, where is his wolf girlfriend?' Judy thought to herself.

Looking back at Pawson, she could see he wasn't going to be any help in figuring out who the she-wolf was since he was lip-locked with the puma.

Judy's mouth dropped open, 'Whoa, his girlfriend is a puma.' Covering her mouth with both paws, she shook her head in disbelief. The she-puma had a lithe build and looked barely two-thirds the size of her wolf boyfriend as his arms easily encompassed her frame in a loving hug. They each had their tails wrapped around each other and were clearly oblivious to anyone around them.

They finally separated, and Judy saw Olivia was blushing while trying to smooth out her scrubs and make sure her golden brown fur wasn't tufted up anywhere. Pawson leaned in for another kiss when Judy saw Olivia's paw come up and playfully push his muzzle to the side. Olivia lightly pushed him toward the cruiser and before going back inside, she gave a quick wave to Judy, who lifted a paw up and gave a tentative half wave in response.

Pawson slid into his seat in the cruiser, "Thanks, Hopps. Head straight that way and turn right at the stop sign and that will get us to Central Parkway."

Judy gripped the steering wheel but made no move to put the cruiser in gear.
They were an interspecies couple.

"Hopps?"

A wolf and a puma.

Pawson finished putting on his seatbelt and looked out the front expecting that they would be moving, instead they were still parked. A look of confusion swept across Pawson's face as he turned to Judy who

was still staring out the front of the cruiser, paws on the steering wheel.

A boy and a girl in love.

Waving a paw toward the windshield, Pawson said, "Hopps, fun and adventure is thataway, how about we get to it?"

Judy slowly turned to face Pawson.

Pawson, for his part, was oblivious to the storm of thoughts raging through Judy's brain. Instead, he was still smiling and humming a happy tune and why wouldn't he? He'd gotten a second round of nuzzling with his girlfriend, and now he was thinking of ways to help her start forgetting her lunch more often.

It's a known fact that a male's ability to think is hampered by certain situations. Unfortunately for Pawson, he was very much a male. To his credit though, he was also a cop, able to think quickly under high-stress situations and as these superior cop capabilities started to take control, he turned to face Judy, saw her confused face and picking the best response for the situation, asked, "What?"

"You neglected to mention that your girlfriend is a puma."

Once again, putting his cop intellect to the task, he replied, "Um, my girlfriend is a puma," and smiled.

Judy continued to stare at him trying to formulate what she should say next.

Pawson sighed, given that Hopps and Wilde were best friends, he'd hoped Hopps was a little more open-minded about interspecies couples, but apparently, she wasn't. "Look, Hopps, I'm sorry I didn't warn you up front. There are a lot of mammals in the precinct that think what Olivia and I have is disgusting or unnatural or immoral or whatever else gets their blood pressure up. Olivia and I love each other more than I thought it was possible for two mammals to love each other and it's never mattered to us that we're different species."

Pausing he tried to read Hopps' face for what she was thinking, having no luck, he soldiered on. "As much as we love each other, we don't force ourselves or our relationship on anyone. Over the years I've had to go to Bogo for a few partner changes. If patrolling with me bugs you because of my relationship status, let me know now. I have no problem letting Bogo know we can't work together and that it's my fault. No harm, no foul. I just don't want to find out what your real feelings are in the middle of a firefight and you leave me hanging when you're supposed to be backing me up."

Disappointed, Pawson leaned back into his seat and spun his finger in the air. "Flip a U-ey and head back to the precinct. You can drop me off and patrol by yourself today. I'll talk to Bogo."

.....
Nick was enjoying the warm morning as he walked from the sheriff's office to the City Hall building where the Mayor's office was. The park area of the town square was a lush green space with a variety of flowerbeds and trees. Benches were conveniently placed near the trees to create several areas that mammals could sit and read a book or just relax.

As Nick reached the City Hall building, he saw a thirtysomething rabbit doe with a half dozen kits walking his way on the sidewalk. Nick stopped and toothlessly smiled at the family. Giving them a little wave with his paw, he greeted the group, "Good morning."

The doe paused, looked at Nick and continued on without saying anything. As the kits passed, Nick wiggled his fingers. A couple of the kits ran up to grab their mom's paws, but a few of the others slowed down to look at Nick, giggled and shyly waved back.

The older doe turned her head and called after the slow-moving bunnies, "Kits, come on or we'll be late."

Nick watched for a moment as the group walked away and then turned and headed up the steps and into the City Hall building.

"Good morning, I'm Officer Nick Wilde." Nick smiled at the older bunny doe behind the desk. "Sheriff Hoofson told me the Mayor wanted to speak with me."

"Good morning Officer Wilde, my name is Daisy Moses. Please have a seat, the Mayor is expecting you and will be right out."

Nick sat and scanned the office. The office décor was on the old side but well maintained. Dark paneling with large double doors to the Mayor's office, not large enough for an elephant but sufficient for Chief Bogo to visit comfortably. The receptionist's desk was a little large for Daisy, but she seemed to be able to make it work. Nick focused in on some of the newer additions to the office. He saw a high-end wireless access point in the ceiling and from the looks of the gear he could see on the admin's desk, someone had recently spent some serious IT budget on this office.

"May I offer you some juice, Officer Wilde?"

"No thank you, ma'am. Although a cup of coffee would be amazing. I meant to look around for a Snarlbucks before my shift started."

Daisy tittered as she politely covered her mouth, "Oh my no, there are a few places that serve coffee, but it's not too popular in Bunnyburrow. I shudder to think of the damage that could be caused by hundreds of over-caffeinated rabbits running around bouncing into each other."

Nick mentally shuddered at that thought too. Imagining Judy drinking something more potent than her usual half-calf was kind of frightening. She was already high-energy enough without any extra help, now multiply that by hundreds of rabbits and you'd have chaos.

"Yes, ma'am, I suppose you have a point there. I take it there aren't enough other species in town to support a coffee cart or two?"

A new voice broke in before Daisy could reply. "Not really, Officer Wilde, and that's one of the reasons I need your help." Stepping out of the office doorway, the owner of the voice, a doe, extended her paw out. "I'm Mayor Ackerbunn, nice to meet you."

Nick followed the Mayor into her office and then the two mammals made themselves comfortable in a pair of chairs in an informal sitting area near a window.
"I agree with you by the way. Some mornings I'd kill for a Snarlbucks half-caf. I wouldn't have made it through college without a cup now and then.

"Thanks for agreeing to do this. Some of the recent press we've gotten has been pretty unfavorable with regards to the treatment of predators here in Bunnyburrow. When I was approached with the idea of adding you to the sheriff's staff, I jumped at the opportunity. I really think your presence here will go a long way toward helping the citizens here better understand predators and the positive contributions they can make.

"And speaking of positive contributions, I had an interesting conversation with Chief Bogo about your tenure so far with the ZPD. He shared a few anecdotes about some of the cases you and your partner have solved and filled me in on a few other tidbits with regards to your problem-solving skills."

Nick perked up, "Really, what did he say?"

"Let's just say, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't do any of what he said while you're here. The folks around here can be a bit skittish and my goal is outreach."

"Yes ma'am, no eating the townsfolk."

Ackerbunn gave Nick a look, slowly raising an eyebrow for emphasis.

Nick seeing what was happening, quickly backtracked, "I promise I'll be on my best behavior."

"I was told to mention something about a sparring demonstration with your partner…"

Nick gulped.

"…every week for six months."

Nick put up his paws, "Seriously ma'am, no need for that. Well behaved fox here, ready for duty."

"Glad to hear it." Looking at a note on the table next to them, Ackerbunn added, "There will be a few ceremonial functions I'd like you to attend and we'll have a press conference to introduce you at the end of the week. That should give you some time to settle in and learn Bunnyburrow a little before being harassed by reporters."

Standing, Ackerbunn indicated the short meeting was over. "I'll have Daisy send you an email with information on the events for the next couple of weeks. If you have any questions, please let Daisy know, she can get hold of me faster than anyone else."

"Thank you, ma'am. It was nice meeting you." Nick shook paws with Ackerbunn again and headed back to the sheriff's office to find out what his patrol duty for the day would be and then either scope out a cup of coffee or look at ordering a coffeemaker online.

…..

Judy hadn't moved since Pawson had told her to return to the precinct.

Pawson grunted at his frozen partner. Grabbing the radio mic on the dash, he pressed the transmit button. "Unit Z-240 to base, Clawhauser come in."

"Base to Z-240, Pawson are you and Hopps in your patrol area now?"

"No, not yet. We're headed..." Pawson felt a soft paw on his arm.
"Wait, Connor, please."

"Clawhauser, wait one." Muting the mic, Pawson just looked at Judy and waited.

"Tell him we're going 10-7 for a few minutes, we need to talk."

"Clawhauser, Pawson here, Z-240 is going 10-7 for a few minutes."

As Pawson put the mic back in its holder, they both heard, "Base to Z-240, 10-7 acknowledged."

Pawson nodded at the radio and sat back in his seat.

Judy released her belt and turned to sit crisscross in her seat facing Pawson. "Connor, I was surprised when I saw you two together and I didn't know how to react. To be clear, I don't have a problem with you and Olivia being together, I don't have a problem with interspecies relationships, and I don't have any problem being on patrol with you."

Looking the wolf in the eyes, Judy added, "Actually, I think it's pretty cool. Olivia sounds like an amazing girl and you're a lucky mammal to have her as a girlfriend."

"So, if you're okay with everything, what happened? That was more than just being a little surprised."

Gathering her thoughts, she debated what to tell him. Nick was the only one she'd ever told about the attitudes she'd lived with growing up in Bunnyburrow, and how some of the town might react toward anyone that didn't follow the local moral code.

"You're right, there's more to it than just being surprised. When I was growing up In Bunnyburrow, interspecies relationships just didn't happen, at least not publicly, and definitely not where there was a rabbit involved. My dad especially didn't do well around anyone that wasn't a rabbit, whenever I tried to hang out with a friend that didn't meet with his approval, he would give them the stink eye. You're the first mammal I've personally known who's been involved with someone outside their own species and making it work."

Judy chewed one of her claws, "Connor, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but how did you guys' parents react when they found out?"

"Well, Olivia and I met in our senior year at college and it wasn't too long afterward that we got together. So, we all met for the first time at graduation." Smiling, Pawson continued, "Let's just say it was a real tense dinner."

Laughing at the memory, Pawson continued, "Olivia's dad was cool with us being together, her mom, less so. Olivia is their youngest cub and I think her mom had a lot of high expectations for how her daughter's life was going to go. A prestigious career in medical research, meet an upper-class mate and then have a huge, high society wedding.

"Of course, Olivia has a mind of her own and pushed back on the career part of her mom's plan by wanting to be a nurse and eventually getting into the PICU program here. She's always believed that the nurses were closer to the patients and that's where she wanted to be. And then I show up and wreck the rest of her mom's dream. A wolf with a lowly criminal science degree that wants to be a cop. No high-profile mate and no big wedding."

Judy nodded, she and Olivia probably had a few things in common at least as far as disappointing parents went.
"Olivia's parents came to our commitment ceremony, but that's a lot different than being legally mated. I'm betting if there were some way for us to have a traditional, legal ceremony, it would go a long way toward her mom fully accepting me into the family."

Smiling now, Judy asked, "So, the biggest issue was that you couldn't legally have an elaborate wedding, not that you were a wolf? I would have thought the whole wolf-thing would have been at the top of the list seeing that felines and canines can be like oil and water, except, you know, with fangs and claws."

Laughing, Pawson replied, "Yeah, sometimes that's the way it seems between the two species. Luckily for me, most of her family is pretty open-minded and ultimately, they really just want Olivia to be happy. Doesn't mean we drink a lot of beers together, but I don't get the door slammed in my face either."

"How about your parents?"

"Don't exactly know. They were cordial enough to Olivia and her parents at the graduation dinner I mentioned, but I haven't seen them since. My mom sent me a note a week later letting me know that it would be for the best for everyone if I stayed away from the pack for a while, give everyone a chance to sort through things. That was about six years ago."

Judy reached out and placed her paw on Pawson's arm, "I'm so sorry."

"Judy, it's okay. Olivia is the most important mammal in my life and I wouldn't give her up for anything. Besides, my mom sends me a letter every now and then, letting me know how the pack is doing and that she hopes we'll eventually be a family again. I even got a nice card from her when I graduated from the ZPA telling me how proud of me she was. So, maybe someday the rest of my family will come around and if they don't, not my problem."

"Thanks for telling me, Connor. If there is ever anything I can do to help you and Olivia, please let me know." Judy patted his arm again and sighed. "We should probably get going, if Bogo finds out how long it's taking us to get to our patrol area, he'll have us both on parking duty for a week."

Judy started up the cruiser while Pawson reported them back on duty. Gripping the steering wheel, Judy thought of Nick and wished with all her heart that things back home were different. If she only had to worry about herself, she already knew what she'd do, but… Sighing, Judy put the cruiser in gear and headed out.

…..

Nick and Deputy Buckstein spent the morning in their cruiser touring some of the different areas of Bunnyburrow. Buckstein had wanted Nick to be able to get around by himself so that he could patrol alone if needed. Bunnyburrow being a farming community, there was a lot of area for the sheriff's department to cover and even with a half a day of driving around, Nick still hadn't gotten close to any of the outlying warrens.

Buckstein's ride-along plan had been disrupted by a call from the dispatcher directing them closer back into town to rescue a bunny kit. Nick had been worried at hearing the call, but Buckstein took it in stride. It wasn't the way he and Carrots would handle a call to rescue a mammal, but Nick decided to wait and see before getting too excited.

Standing in front of a small farmhouse and looking up into a tree, Nick shook his head, "Seriously, Buckstein, how is this even possible?"
"No one knows, it just happens."

"Why us, I would think the Burrow Fire Department could handle this better than we can."

"Yup, except it's our turn."

Nick stood with his paws on his hips, "Fine. So, how's this done then?"

The white-tailed deer just looked at Nick, patted a belly that would have made Clawhauser proud and replied. "This old boy don't climb trees, so we need to find a ladder."

Nick laughed as he looked up into the large tree again. About eighteen feet up there was a small kit sitting on a branch with a sippy-cup. The kit was smiling and giggling like he owned the best play spot in the universe.

Nick turned around to the group of rabbits behind him and addressed the kit's mother, "Are you sure you don't have a ladder tall enough that we could use?"

"No Officer, my mate is deathly afraid of heights and can't stand to have those things around the warren. Sorry."

Buckstein snickered, "I'm guessing being a city fox and all, you've never had occasion to climb a tree."

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry I got this."

It had been a little over a year since the last time Nick had had to carry an elephant-sized jumbo pop up a drainpipe to the roof of a building for melting, but some skills you don't forget. Rubbing his paws together, Nick figured retrieving a tiny bunny kit would be a piece of cake.

As Nick extended his claws and dug them into the bark, he heard a gasp from the group of bunnies and saw a few of the teenagers pull out their phones.

"You're not going to eat him, are you? He's so little," asked Mrs. Davidson.

Nick wrinkled his nose and replied, "No ma'am, I can smell his diaper from here. Your boy is safe as can be from anyone with a functioning nose."

"Hey little guy, Mr. Nick is coming up to rescue you. Just sit still and I'll be right there."

Giggles and coos were the only replies.

Nick was about halfway up when he heard some loud laughter and looked up. "Nooooo." Nick was hit square in the face with carrot juice from the kit's upturned, and now lidless, sippy-cup. "Thanks, kit, you have no idea how hard it will be to get that sticky mess out of my fur."

Finally reaching the branch the kit was sitting on, Nick carefully leaned out to pick him up. Fortunately, the kit appeared to be pretty used to this part and didn't try to hop away from Nick's outstretched paw. Securing the kit in the crook of his arm, Nick carefully climbed down.

Once on the ground, Nick adjusted his hold on the kit and walked over to his mother. Before handing the kit back, Nick made a few cooing noises and tickled the kit's chin.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Wilde."

"What?" Looking toward Buckstein and then back to the kit he was met by a stream of projectile
vomit to his face and chest.

"The kit don't like it when you tickle 'em."

Groaning, Nick handed the kit to his mother, "Here you go ma'am, maybe try heavy ankle weights, might help keep him on the ground in the future."

…..

"Hey Pawson, over there, someone I want you to meet." Judy pulled the cruiser over and parked behind an old, brown van with some pretty impressive graphic art on its side panels.

Judy motioned for Pawson to follow her around the corner where they saw a small, big-eared Finnick fox standing behind a cooler selling pawpsicles.

"Hey Finn, still trying to hustle your way to riches?"

Finn smiled, "Well, well. If it isn't the bunny cop, how's it hangin' Officer Toot-Toot? Are you surviving with your lesser-half safely out of town?"

"Yeah, doing okay. I wanted you to meet my temporary partner, Officer Connor Pawson. Pawson this is Finn, a good friend of Nick's."

Finn looked Pawson up and down, "Yeah, swell. How abouts you guys move it along. Talking to cops isn't so good for business around here."

Judy pulled out a five and offered it to Finn, "We'll each take a pawpsicle, that should help protect your reputation as a fine upstanding businessmammal.

"Finn, Nick told you about the drugged caracal that attacked us, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he wanted me to ask around and let him know if anyone hears anything about a new drug on the street or any mammals going temporarily savage."

"Good, even though Nick's in Bunnyburrow, he, Pawson and I are still working the case. I'd appreciate it if you hear anything that you get hold of one of us. If you think it's pretty hot information, I can meet up with you anytime you want."

"Okay, toots, I'm working a possibility with a guy who knows a guy I know of. If anything shakes loose, I'll get hold of you." Handing the two cops their frozen treats he added, "Now get lost, I still have half a cooler to sell."

The two cops walked back to their cruiser as Pawson stared at the red paw-shaped frozen treat. Taking a sniff, Pawson shrugged and took a long lick. Nodding, he smiled at Judy and then took a big bite.

Judy watched as Pawson's face started to contort as he succumbed to a brain freeze. Laughing at her partner, she climbed into the cruiser and let Clawhauser know they were back on patrol.

…..

Nick pulled off his ZPD shorts and put on something a little nicer for dinner. Gracefully moving around the small room, Nick hummed in harmony to the music he was listening too. It was nice scrubbing the remaining smell of that kit's puke out of his chest fur. Sometimes he envied the fact that a lot of prey were a little nose blind.
Checking himself out in the mirror, Nick smiled. "Looking good, Wilde."

Nick heard a knocking at his door, "Mr. Nick, Mr. Nick, it's almost time for dinner."

Nick opened his bedroom door and saw a half dozen young does gathered there. "Mr. Nick, we're here to help you get ready."

Nick knelt down and ruffled Sunni's ears, "What? You guys don't think I'm handsome enough just the way I am?"

All the does giggled and shook their heads. With a knowing look, Sunni said with concern, "Mr. Nick, you get to sit at the big kit's table, so you have to look extra pretty and be on your best behavior."

Nick smirked and leaned close to Sunni, "Oh, okay. What do I need to do to look extra pretty?"

In unison, the does all yelled, "Ribbons!"

…..

Nick was led into the dining hall by two does pulling him by his paws and the rest of the small group following close behind. They led him to his seat at the table and then giggling, hopped off to their own table. Nick spied a look at his tail wrapped in six brightly colored ribbons with the largest forming a bow near the tip.

Janae sat in the chair next to him, looking over at Nick's decorations she laughed. "I see Sunni's been busy."

"Yeah, she wanted to make sure I looked good for my first meal at the big kit's table." Swinging his tail in between him and Janae, he pointed out one of the ribbons, "This purple one is my favorite."

Rolling her eyes, Janae couldn't help but ask, "Has Judy ever told you that you're a goof?"

"Yeah, lots of times, why?"

Holding paws with the bunnies to either side of him, Nick silently bowed his head in respect as Mr. Hopps gave the blessing. Once done, the noise level rose and the eating began.

Janae nudged Nick, "How'd your first full day of being a deputy go?"

Nick shook his head, "You wouldn't believe it, my first call was a kit stuck in a tree."

From across the table, a buck asked, "You mean the Davidson kit, warren on the north side, right?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"You didn't try and tickle him, I hope."

"Uhhh," Nick looked back and forth between Janae and her younger brother who was now laughing.

A few seats away, a teenaged doe waved her phone around and yelled, "I found it!" Passing her phone to Janae, Nick looked over at the small screen and heard a retching noise come from the speaker.
Janae elbowed him in the side, "You're famous, big guy."

Nick looked stricken, "No. Don't tell me someone recorded me and puke-boy and posted it on EweTube."

Nick heard another puking sound from his right, then from his left, then a chorus of puking noises from all the phones around the table followed by giggles, snickers and outright laughing.

Nick put his head on the table and moaned, "Noooooo."

Another round of puking sounds was the only response Nick got to his pleas for mercy.

"Kits, everyone put your phones away, you've tormented poor Nicholas enough."

"But Mom…." Holding the phone up for his mother to see, "look," glancing down, Bonnie smiled until she heard the young kit puke again. "Lewis, that's enough." Leaning closer to the buck, Bonnie whispered, "Text me the link and then put your phone away, alright."

Once the video noises had quieted, Nick turned his head to look up at Janae, "Is it over yet?"

Janae started to nod until Lewis spoke up again. "Hey Nick, do you know someone named Clawhauser? He posted wanting to know if this was the real Nick Wilde." After a few taps, Lewis looked up. "I told him it was you."

"Noooooooooooooooo. You didn't, please tell me you didn't just tell the biggest gossip in Zootopia it was me."

Head rocking back and forth on the table, "Nick Wilde, first fox cop in the ZPD. He had a short, glorious career that ended in epic humiliation."

Janae laughed at Nick, "And I thought Judy could be a drama queen!"

"Cool, the video is trending, that Clawhauser guy sure knows his stuff."

"Doomed, I'm doomed." Nick groaned out.

Patting him on the back, Janae tried to soothe the fox. "I'm sure no one else you know will see it."

"Who's Fangmeyer?"

Nick looked back up at Janae. "Doomed."

Janae laughed again and told her brother to put away his phone.

Nick gave up on the last of his dignity and joined Janae and the rest of the room in laughing at his misfortune.

As their laughter petered out, another buck got Nick's attention. "Hey, Nick. How long have you been a cop?"

Nick looked over at the darker brown, black and white buck across the table from him, "I graduated from the Academy six months ago and started with the ZPD right after that."

"What was your degree in from college? Was it in Criminal Science like Judy's?" asked a doe.

"No, not exactly. I like to say I got my degree from the college of hard knocks." Chuckling he
added, "Probably did enough studying to get a Master's degree at least." Reaching for a bowl of beans, Nick laughed, "Seriously though, I finished High School when I was eighteen and went from there."

"Judy said that the only way that she was going to be accepted to the Academy would be for her to get a four-year degree, how did you get in without one?"

Nick paused and frowned in thought, "Needing a degree never came up, maybe the MII waived that requirement, I guess I don't know."

The multicolored buck shook his head, "Actually, Judy said that the MII added some requirements for small mammals. I remember she was in her senior year away at college when the first draft of the MII failed to pass the Zootopia city council and they demanded a bunch of changes. When Judy got hold of an early draft of the revised MII, she was unhappy because the new requirements meant that she had to stay in Burrow's Edge and take another year of required classes and then do a six-month unpaid internship. She ended up spending a semester stuffing envelopes for some Deerbrook County bureaucrat and then waiting tables for a few months before she could even apply to the ZPA.

"When the updated MII finally passed, the ZPA accepted Judy's application, but it was only after she'd been saddled with another year and a half's worth of student loan debt and had turned twenty-four years old which was way later than she'd originally hoped for."

Nick stared at the buck with a confused look on his face. "I had no idea Judy went through all that to join the ZPD." Looking down at his plate, Nick furrowed his brow in thought, "Umm, I had to show up at the academy early and take a couple weeks' worth of pretty hard-core tests, written and physical, before the next class of recruits showed up. I also remember that Judy had a long talk with Chief Bogo and a couple of meetings with the ZPA Commandant before they would sign off on my attendance."

Nick thought about all the mammals that were in his ZPA class and remembered a couple of them talking about being sponsored since they didn't have degrees either. Shaking his head at the memory, he angrily whispered to himself, "I'll bet she sponsored me and somehow got them to waive the special requirements. That crazy rabbit, she probably put her career on the line for me. Why in the world would she do that?"

Rubbing his forehead, he failed to notice Janae's ears twitching from hearing what Nick had whispered to himself.

Nick's thoughts were interrupted by another question from a tan and black furred doe, "Was the academy training difficult?"

"Well—" Nick was loudly interrupted by Judy's older brother, Lucas. "Kristy, look at the fox, he's not a serious cop, he's a joke. They let him into the academy without meeting any of the prerequisites probably because they knew a fox would never be able to meet the minimum qualifications. Seriously, how difficult can the academy be if a loser like him can graduate."

Waving his paw at some of the rabbits around the table he added, "And the fox proves my point about Judy too, no way did a bunny, especially one as pathetic as her, have a real chance to pass the academy. They must have lowered the standards and moved her through just to get her out of their fur. Her going off to pretend to be a cop was the single most embarrassing thing to ever happen to this family! She should have listened to Dad and stayed here and settled down with someone that could have taken care of her properly."
Nick's mouth dropped open in shock, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Nick looked over at Judy's parents and saw them both looking absolutely mortified by Lucas' outburst.

Another solid tan doe, a few years younger than Judy, laughed and added, "Oh yeah, a buck wanting to hook up with Jude the Dude, like that would ever happen."

Nick continued looking around, he could tell pretty quickly that most of the siblings didn't agree with Lucas tearing into Judy, but it seemed like no one was willing to confront him.

Lucas scoffed in response, "I'm sure we can find some poor sap to mate with her and after a couple of dozen litters she'd settle down."

Bonnie gasped in horror and shame at Lucas' outrageous statements about Judy, and was about to get up and twist his ears and send him out of the dining room when she was halted by a loud bark from Nick, a bark that silenced the room.

Nick had had enough, he glared at Lucas and spat out, "You have no idea what you're talking about. Judy is an amazing cop, she works harder, is more committed and a better officer than anyone at the ZPD."

Nick pointed at Kristy, "You asked how hard the ZPA is to get through, it's incredibly hard, mammals a hundred times larger than Judy were washed out of the program in the first week. Not only did your sister set an Academy record in sparring by knocking out a rhino with one hit, she also holds more records than any mammal who has ever graduated, and on top of all that, she was valedictorian of her class."

Red-faced and angry Lucas yelled at Nick, "You need to shut up fox, you don't know anything about rabbits or our society. We know what's best for our kind and we don't need some mangy predator interfering."

Nick stood up, hackles raised and his tail bushed out. "You're right, I don't know anything about rabbits, but I know a lot about mammals and Judy is the best mammal I've ever met. Every day she puts herself in harm's way to keep the city safe and she doesn't think twice about going out of her way to help those in need. Everyone in this room should be proud of what she's accomplished, she's done more good in the last year than most mammals could hope to do in a lifetime."

Nick looked around at the silenced group. Seeing many more positive nods than negative scowls, he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. Looking directly at Lucas and brandishing a clawed finger, he said, "I don't care what you say about me, I'm a fox and I probably deserve it, but Judy is my best friend and family or not, I won't stand by and let you say those kinds of things about her again. Ever."

With his upper lip quivering just enough to expose a single fang, Nick glared at Lucas until the buck, his instincts suddenly reminding him of what predators used to do to prey, gave a single nod and backed down.

Bowing his head slightly to Stu and Bonnie, "Please forgive my outburst, I am a guest in your warren and I meant no disrespect to your hospitality. If you will excuse me, I believe I am needed in the playroom."

Nick left behind a room full of stunned rabbits. No one had ever stood up for Judy like that before. Nick had not only shamed everyone with Judy's accomplishments, but he had also slapped Lucas down hard. Lucas had been Judy's harshest critic for years, no one knew why, but his attitude had gotten old a long time ago. Most of the bucks were thrilled to see Lucas knocked down a few pegs and at the same time, a lot of Judy's sisters experienced a different kind of thrill watching as a big, bad predator took on the largest, most intimidating buck in the family solely to defend the honor of
Bonnie made eye contact with Janae and nodded. Bonnie's question of how good of a friend Nick was had been answered, now all she needed to do was figure out how to pick his brain on what was upsetting Judy enough for her to stop talking with them.

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'Bzzzzzzz'

Judy got up from her bed and checked her phone.

*Take a look at DoeNet.*

It was a text from Janae.

*What am I looking for?*

*Just go look!* Followed by a winking bunny emoji.

Judy hadn't realized the DoeNet chat was still being used, not that she ever really paid attention to her sisters and their latest hormone driven crushes. Clicking on the icon, she waited for the app to load.

'New Male in the Warren!' flashed a banner on the small screen.

A video auto-played and Judy watched a familiar bushy red tail wagging as its barely-dressed owner, wearing only a pair of ZPD shorts, walked down one of the warren's hallways. This was a way better view of her fox than the other night at Toni's house.

Nick looked good.

Judy hummed as she saw his broad, toned back displaying solid muscle that rippled under his fur as he moved. So different from a bunny buck, Nick was all predator.

Judy smiled to herself as Nick, earbuds firmly in place, walked with a little beat to his step, oblivious to the fact that he was being filmed. As the video neared its end, Judy picked up the voice of her sister Amy as she said, "Hey girls, take a look at what Jude sent us."

Judy's eyes narrowed as her sister's voice turned into giggles, and then once Nick turned a corner and walked out of view of the camera, Judy heard a very predatory growl. Looking at the now blank screen, Judy realized the growl hadn't come from the phone.
Coffee Quest

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Coffee, please, let there be coffee. Nick stepped out of his car parked a couple of blocks away from the town center. He'd driven slowly into town, looking around for a shop that was open this early and might be able to hook him up with a tall cup of the precious black liquid.

Nick was standing in front of a bakery. There were lights on, but he wasn't entirely sure if the shop was open. What he was sure of was the smell of a dark roast brew wafting out a slightly open window.

Nick laughed, 'Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff,' no guessing what they sell here, gotta love small towns.

Nick pushed open the door and stepped into the dim interior. "Hello, are you open?" He sniffed, smiled, and followed his nose to the side counter. "Coffee, I love you, I need you, where have you been all week?"

"She gets off work at two today if you'd like a little alone time later." Giggling, a ewe with black wool, wearing a red apron over blue jeans and a cotton t-shirt smiled at Nick and continued, "You'll have to have her back home by ten unless you want her dad coming out after you."

"Done!" Laughing now, Nick reached out and shook her hoof. "Nick Wilde, ZPD. I'm working with the sheriff's department and am sorely in need of some caffeine. Are you guys open enough that I can buy a cup?"

"Sharla Woolston, nice to meet you. Help yourself, the cups are in the cabinet under the counter."

Watching the fox prepare his coffee with the same reverence that a priest prepares for mass, Sharla asked, "Are you in from the city? I hadn't heard about any new foxes in town."

Holding the large cup in his paws, Nick took a sip. "Oh yeah." Another sip and then some lip-smacking. "Okay, I'm good now." Turning to Sharla with a smile, "I arrived a few days ago. They're supposed to have a press conference in a few days to announce my assignment. Until then, I get to do deputy things like ticketing trucks for going over fifteen miles an hour and rescuing kits stuck in trees."

"You don't mean the Davidson's kit up north? You know he doesn't like…"

"Yes, yes, I am quite aware and I'd really like to forget everything about the whole incident. No idea what they feed that kit, but it took three rounds of shampoo to get the smell of it out of my fur."

After Sharla stopped laughing, Nick asked, "So, who's Gideon Grey, you know, on the sign outside?"

Sharla went behind the counter and leaning through the kitchen doorway, yelled, "Hey Gid, there's someone here you need to meet."
A voice from the kitchen replied, "Just about done loading the oven, be right there."

A few moments later, Nick smiled as another red fox came ambling out. Gideon was brushing himself off and didn't immediately see Nick. Nick, on the other hand, was happy to see another fox in a town filled with mostly fluff. He remembered Cassy saying a predator ran a bakery in Bunnyburrow, but he'd forgotten to ask what species the predator was.

Nick took note that Gideon was Judy's age and looked like he'd sampled plenty of his own cooking. The more rotund fox was wearing his apron over a white t-shirt and khaki work pants. As he finished cleaning himself off, Gideon looked up at Nick and stopped.

"Hi, I'm..." Nick began.

Gideon barked out nervously, "You're Nick Wilde, the first fox to join the ZPD," gulping he added, "and Judy Hopps' partner."

Gideon had gone wide-eyed and then remembered the form he needed. He started to bow his head and expose his neck when Nick reached out, and lightly placing a paw on Gideon's chest, said quietly, "Whoa there friend, nothing special going on here, just a couple of foxes enjoying a cup of joe in the morning."

Sharla, hearing Judy's name, came back out from behind the counter and asked, "Are you really Judy's partner? You know, we went to school together. Haven't really seen her since high school though. Is she doing okay? I saw her on the news a year ago. That was so scary all those predators being poisoned and going savage. I couldn't believe our Judy solved such a big case, she's so smart."

"Yes, yes I am. I didn't know that. You should call her, I'm sure she'd like to hear from you. She's doing great. She is very photogenic. Yes, it was pretty scary for a while. She actually solved a couple of huge cases, and you're right she's amazing." Nick took a sip of coffee and gave Sharla one of his better smirks.

Sharla's gaze narrowed as she mentally walked through what Nick had just said. "Okay then, I guess that covers everything Judy for the last year or so."

Chuckling, Nick smiled and looked at Gideon, "It's nice to meet another fox in town, especially one that knows his way around a pastry. I've got a friend at the precinct in the city that would sell his soul for a chance to sample what I'm smelling right now."

Sharla went and picked out a blueberry and an apple puff pastry. Bagging them up, she handed them to Nick. "Here you go, on the house. We all know a cop is nothing without a brew and some sweets."

Taking the bag, he lifted his cup in salute, "Thanks, Sharla. I'm here for a while, how about I stop back in for lunch sometime so we can trade stories about our favorite bunny. I could use a little new material for when Judy and I are stuck doing long, boring patrols together."

Nick checked the time on his phone, "I've got to get to work and sign in." Handing Sharla one of his cards, "Here's my cell number and email, let me know when's good and I'll swing by. Nice meeting you both."

Gideon and Sharla watched as Nick left, closing the door behind him. He waved back at them as he climbed into his car for the short drive over to the sheriff's office.

Gideon sighed, "He doesn't know. Otherwise, he wouldn't have stopped me."
Sharla looked at Gideon and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talk'n about what I did to Miss Judy all those years ago." Taking a deep breath, he added, "They're partners and friends, I best be the one to tell him what I did to her, if he hears it from someone else there will be hell to pay."

Sharla looked at the receding car and wondered how Judy's ZPD partner would react when Gideon told him what he'd done. Sharla shook her head, maybe she'd try talking with Judy and see if there was a way she could smooth things over with Nick. Putting Nick's card in her pocket, Sharla went to finish her prep work and open the bakery.

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Judy was trying to enjoy the warm morning sun on her fur as she walked from the metro to Little Rodentia. As it was though, she still couldn't get that DoeNet video out of her head. Well, not the video so much, she'd downloaded that and watched it a couple of dozen times, no, she meant what was up with her sister Amy's lewd comment about Nick.

Judy knew that she hadn't been around the warren a lot since she'd left for school and that her sisters were notorious for sneaking around with their boyfriends behind her dad's back, but Nick was a fox. A really handsome fox, but still a fox, which meant that they shouldn't be filming him or watching him walk half-naked down the hall like Amy had been, especially with her hundreds of miles away and not able to keep an eye on him, or, um, his amazingly soft and furry tail.

Finally coming up on one of the small to medium mammal entrances to Little Rodentia, Judy pressed the call box button mounted on the wall next to the gate, "Officer Hopps reporting, please open gate three."

Judy made her way down the broad path to one of the large parks that doubled as a reception area for small or medium mammals like her. This morning was set aside for ZPD outreach. Some daycares and kit's clubs had scheduled field trips for their kits to meet the famous Judy Hopps, and just before lunch, she'd have a couple of photo ops with some of the local leaders.

Bogo had promised her that she wouldn't be giving any speeches. After her failed press conference, a year ago, Judy had sworn off talking to the press. Fortunately for her, Nick had no problem with reporters. She smiled as she remembered the last time they had to do a press conference together.

"Carrots, all these guys want are pictures of some eye-candy and a few non-answers to help them sell ad space. Since you're the muscle on this team, you just stand next to me and look intimidating while I woo the cameras with my foxy good looks and million-dollar smile." Judy couldn't help but roll her eyes again at the memory, especially the part where she had elbowed him in the side for being a dork.

Judy arrived at the open space and sat down in a grassy area near a gathering of young mice, rats, shrews, hamsters, and gerbils. The next couple of hours went by quickly as Judy answered questions, showed off some of her gear and passed out mini-sticker badges to all the kits.

Taking a break while waiting for the photographers to get set up, Judy felt her phone vibrate. Pulling it out, she saw a text from Finn. Hey bunny girl, meet me at the Foxburg Diner after lunch. Near Cedar Ln & Wellington. Come alone.

Judy quickly looked up the location and the nearest metro stop to the diner. Seeing that the closest stop was on the edge of Happytown, she decided it would be best to go straight there from the Little Rodentia metro stop instead of going back to the station and picking up her squad car.
Will do. Followed by a big-eared fox emoji.

Judy's phone vibrated with Finn's terse response, Nice.

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Nick and Deputy Buckstein spent the morning staying close to the town center as they walked the various streets and shops around the square. Actually, it was more like moving from bench to chair to stool and back to another bench as Buckstein was really only good for a few blocks before he wanted to sit and 'rest a mite bit' before moving on.

Nick chuckled to himself as Buckstein made himself comfortable, again, out in front of an old diner. Looking over at the building, Nick figured they might as well take lunch and enjoy a comfortable seat.

Nodding toward the diner, Nick asked, "Hey, Buckstein, how about we go in there and get something to eat?"

Buckstein looked at the marquee, 'Hopping Good Eats', "I don't think so, Wilde, how about we go up the street and I get us something to-go from the 'June Bug', I think that'll be better."

"What's wrong with this place?"

"Well, the old geezer that used to run it, Leapwell was his name, didn't really take a shine to predators, and I'm not really sure how the new kits that are runnin' the place would be with you coming in for lunch."

Nick smiled, "Don't worry, Buckstein, I haven't been thrown out of a place in at least a month, how about we go in and see what happens."

Nick led the way into the small restaurant, and once inside he paused to take a look around. The place had a decent sized dining area with tables and booths. It also had an old-style counter with round, cushioned bar stools for those that wanted to get a quick bite. The place had a real homely feel to it.

Of course, the other thing Nick noticed is that the place was empty. Well, almost. Looking over at one of the booths, Nick saw a lone buck typing away on a laptop. The buck looked up and saw the two cops walk in and quickly shut his laptop and made his way out the door.

Walking up to the doe behind the counter, Nick motioned toward the door, "Sorry, didn't mean to scare him off."

The doe shrugged her shoulders, "Don't worry about it, he was just using the WiFi, didn't even bother to order anything."

Nick looked at the doe's name tag and then said, "Well, Brenna, my partner and I are famished. Being as we are cops, I think I'd like a half-dozen glazed and a cruller and my partner here will take an even dozen crème filled. Oh, and we'll each have a diet orange drink."

Brenna started laughing and pointed toward the counter, "Nice, cop humor, I like it. How about you two have a seat at the counter and I'll get you a menu."

Nick and Buckstein sat and ordered a grilled vegetable and potato medley and chatted with Brenna while their lunch was being cooked. After a little while, Nick slowly spun in his seat and took another look around the diner, still empty, and it was getting close to lunch hour.
Nick turned back to the counter just as a buck wearing an apron was sliding plates in front of him and Buckstein. "No, I wish. We just reopened a few weeks ago and I don't think anyone knows we're here yet." Looking at Nick, the buck put out a paw, "Hi, I'm Brian Leapwell. You must be new in town."

"Yup, Nick Wilde, ZPD and now a new Burrow Deputy."

Buckstein and Brian chatted while Nick sampled his lunch. Brian had a nice variety of vegetables, but the broccoli was severely overcooked while the asparagus was practically raw and the potatoes were cut too thick to cook right. The beans were soggy and even the carrots needed help. There was a good reason the diner was empty and it didn't have much to do with advertising.

"Hey, Brian. So, where did you learn to cook?"

"I used to help my Grandpa out in the kitchen. He showed me a few things and I've been trying to work through some of his recipes. It's been tough though; he didn't write everything down and figuring out some of the details has been a pain."

Brenna huffed from where she was standing leaning against the counter. As Nick and Brian both turned to look at her, she started to chuckle, "I think what Nick's trying to say is you can't cook."

"Brenna, I can so."

"I don't think so."

"Can too."

"Nope."

Nick started laughing, "I take it you two are related."

Brenna rolled her eyes, "Yeah, we're littermates."

Brian added, "Our grandpa left the diner to us when he passed because we were the only ones interested in trying to run it. Now I'm not so sure it was a good idea for us to keep the place."

Nick nodded, "You know, back in the city, I used to work at a couple of restaurants. If you want, I might be able to show you a couple of quick things."

Brian paused and looked at Nick, he wasn't sure that would be a good idea, but…

Brenna yelled, "Yes!" and looked at Brian, "Say no to him and I'll smack you."

Nick laughed and made his way to the kitchen. Within a few minutes, he and Brian were deep into a training session. Brian wasn't really all that bad, he just needed a little help. Nick explained a few good prep techniques and then he showed him the right spices to use for his medley and how best to cook all the veggies so they cooked evenly and their flavors mixed just right. While the first round of veggies was cooking, Nick showed Brian how to make a couple of simple sauces. Nick set aside the veggies and walked Brian through the prep of another dish and a little while later they dragged Brenna back into the kitchen and had her try a couple of things too.

Buckstein was in heaven, a nice relaxing lunch hour (or so), some ice-tea and a little pie. 'Well, not
this pie.' The tough, chewy crust hid a load of undercooked apple slices, so Buckstein pushed the plate away and focused on his tea and the delicious smells coming from the kitchen.

A little while after Brenna started helping, all three cooks exited the kitchen with plates of two different kinds of vegetable medley mixes, both of which looked a lot better than the dish served earlier.

Brian placed his plate in front of Buckstein and motioned for him to try it. Sniffing the plate, he looked up at the rabbit buck and smiled. Grabbing his fork, he tentatively tried a bite and then hummed in pleasure.

"Oh, yeah, this is good."

Buckstein stopped talking after that and focused on his lunch. Besides having not eaten for at least three hours, this was way better than even his mate could make."

"See told ya, I could do it," Brian told his littermate.

"Phfft.."

"Thanks Nick!"

"Not a problem, foxes are all about the food. My mom used to say that if a fox wanted to get into heaven, then they'd better be carrying a casserole dish, and for years she tried her best to make sure I knew enough to get through the pearly gates." Sitting down on one of the stools, Nick looked at the littermates and added, "You know, I have a few of my mom's old recipes I could share with you if you'd like."

Brian's ears turned to Nick in a flash, "Really? That would be great!"

Nick smiled, "Yeah, I was thinking, if you're interested in branching out a bit, maybe diversifying and attracting a wider variety of customers, she had some great recipes for predator dishes. Mostly bug-based and a few that use tofu." Leaning in, he added, "Even a few simple ones for some amazing shrimp dishes. All of them are pretty easy, and I know some suppliers in the city that can get you fresh protein-based ingredients shipped out here pretty cheap."

Brian looked at Brenna, "I don't know, Grandpa always had a thing against predators." Quickly looking at Nick, Brian added, "Sorry, no offense, my Grandpa could be…"


"Brenna…"

"Hey, I loved him the same as you, but you know how he could get."

Brian brushed back an ear, "Yeah, Brenna's right, our grandpa didn't always get along with everyone, if you know what I mean."

Nick nodded, "Don't worry about it, we've got some of that going on in the city too."

Brenna spoke up again, "Brian, let's do it."

Both Brenna and Brian nodded as they thought about filling the old diner up with customers again, predator and prey.

Nick had one more idea for the littermates, "One other thing to think about…."
The two rabbits smirked as they looked again at Nick and Brenna asked, "Do you secretly work for one of those shows that tries to save dying restaurants?"

Nick shook his head, "Nope, just a lowly cop looking for a good place to eat for the next couple of months." Motioning to the barely-eaten pie in front of Buckstein, Nick continued. "Baking desserts and pastries involves a whole different skill set than being a cook. I'd suggest you outsource your desserts; you'd get better quality and you'll make a little on each serving without all the hassle. And, I met a great baker this morning, Gideon Grey, and sampled a couple of his pastries. They were amazing, you'd do well to partner up with him for your desserts."

Brian smirked at his sister until she shook her head and laughed, "Fine, I suck at making pie." Turning to Nick, "I'll go talk to him, thanks."

Nick gave the siblings his phone number and email and then wrote down a couple of his mom's go-to predator recipes for them to try until he could find a few other recipes to send them. After looking over Nick's notes, they made a plan for Nick to come back when he was off duty later in the week to help them out a little more in the kitchen.

Buckstein, groaned as he lifted himself off his stool, "Well, I think we best get back to our foot patrol, can't spend all afternoon cookin' and eatin' and talking about cookin' and eatin', now can we?"

Nick didn't quite agree with Buckstein, but said his goodbyes to Brian and Brenna anyway and followed the older deer buck out.

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Judy finished up with the photographers and ended up spending a little more time chatting with a couple of Little Rodentia's councilmammals. Both had been interested in expanding the MII to include small rodents in some sort of ZPD role. They said that there was too much reliance on private security and auxiliaries to give the residents the feeling that the city really cared about their safety. Judy promised to bring up their concerns with Chief Bogo and assured them someone would get back to them.

On her way to the metro stop, Judy radioed Clawhauser to let him know that she was going to meet with a CI and to tell Pawson that he was on his own for the afternoon.

About forty-five minutes of Metro rail travel later, Judy pushed open the door to the Foxburg diner. 'Whoa, something smelled good.' Judy hadn't eaten lunch yet, and her stomach was now growling in the hopes that she'd order some of whatever it was that smelled so good.

Standing in the doorway letting her eyes adjust to the dim interior, Judy heard a familiar voice. "Judy, what a surprise!"

Squinting a bit, Judy recognized the source of the voice. "Toni!" Quickly walking over to the vixen, Judy gave her a big hug. "It so good to see you, I didn't know you worked here, how are you doing?"

"I'm great, but more importantly, how are you and your fox doing, hmmmm?"

Judy let her ears drop down her back to hide a sudden blush. "It's still complicated."

Toni put her paw on Judy's back and guided her over to one of the booths along the wall. "How about I bring you out something to eat and then we'll see if us girls can't uncomplicate things a bit."
"That would be great, I was stuck doing a PR event and haven't had a chance for lunch yet." Sitting down, she added, "Hey, I'm supposed to meet a fennec fox here. Maybe you've seen him, short, gruff, and always threatening to bite your face off."

"Yeah, Finn, he's the manager and one of the cooks. I'll let him know you're here."

Toni went back to the kitchen while Judy waited. Her eyes finally adjusted and she took a look around. The diner's décor reminded her of something you'd see in an old travel guide. Dark wood booths with thick vinyl cushioned seats all around the walls, old linoleum tables with metal edges and chairs sized to fit small to medium-sized customers.

Judy saw that except for a pair of coyotes paying their bill, everyone else in the diner was a fox. Judy hummed as she scanned the lunch menu. She was surprised to see a nice mix of predator and prey dishes and then she remembered that foxes were omnivores and according to Nick 'Foodies willing to cross any species boundary for the right meal.'

Judy smiled as Toni came out of the kitchen carrying a couple of dishes. Sitting down she passed one to Judy. "Chipotle grilled veggie wrap with a side of glazed carrots." Leaning forward Toni whispered, "I put a few honey and garlic grilled shrimp under the lettuce garnish, you know, just in case."

Leaning back, Toni asked in a normal voice, "So, spill. What's up with Nick and what's going on that's so complicated?"

Judy took a bite of her wrap, "Wow, this is good." Taking another bite and then licking her lips. "Nick's up to something. The Bunnyburrow Mayor asked for him to go to Bunnyburrow and work with the sheriff's department for a couple of months and then I found out my dad invited him to stay in my family's warren."

Toni shrugged her shoulders, "Doesn't seem so bad."

Judy shook her head, "My dad doesn't like foxes. When I moved to Zootopia, he tried to load me down with Fox Away products and I know he still has a drawer full of tasers and sprays at home." Munching down some of the carrots, she added, "Besides his problem with foxes, my dad doesn't really like to be around anyone who's not a rabbit. I hate to say it about my own family, but he's a speciest. Always has been."

"How did Nick end up staying with your family if your dad doesn't like foxes, that doesn't make sense?"

"I know, Nick's up to something and my family has gone insane. Nothing for a bunny to worry about, right?"

Toni hummed and then winked, "Why don't you head home for a few days and check on your fox? Might be a good chance to get a little quality time in with him while you make sure everything is okay."

Judy sighed, "I don't know. I'm thinking about it, but I sort of had it out with my dad last week, and I need to not be near him for a while. My littermate Janae has been keeping an eye on Nick, and she's texted me a couple of times to let me know what's going on."

Toni nodded, "Sorry about your dad, you know if you need anything while Nick is away, just give me a call."

Judy smiled, "Thanks." A moment later, Judy's stomach rumbled and both she and Toni laughed.
Looking around quickly to make sure no one was watching her, Judy grabbed one of the shrimp and popped it in her mouth. Chewing it slowly, she covered her mouth as her eyes went wide. Toni chuckled, "Thought you'd like them." Judy nodded and ate the rest before anyone noticed that there was a rare poterant Lagomorph in their midst.

Judy and Toni finished their lunches and Toni was about to go off her break when Judy motioned toward a gray fox that had just walked in. Judy could tell the fox was upset. He stood in front of the door for a moment, squeezing his paws into fists. The tod was wearing dirty overalls over a long sleeve shirt, had a pair of worn synthetic leather gloves hanging from a front pocket and was wearing a beat-up Keep on Truckin' cap.

Toni turned around to look. "Uh-oh. Judy, I'll be right back." As the newcomer sat himself down in a booth, one of the other waitresses set a cup down in front of him and filled it with coffee. Before she could ask if he wanted anything else, the fox swiped his paw across the table and spilled the coffee all over, "Don't want no coffee, leave me be vixen."

Judy straightened up and prepared to intervene if needed. From the corner of her eye, she saw Finn come out from the kitchen. He stopped a few feet from the door and scanned the dining room. Seeing Judy, ears at attention at her table, he paused, narrowed his brow, and stared at her. After a few uncomfortable seconds for Judy, Finn appeared to have made some sort of decision and gave her a quick nod.

As Judy waited to see what Finn was up to, Toni returned to stand next to her and placed a paw on Judy's shoulder.

The dining room went quiet as Finn grabbed a chair from a nearby table, set it next to the booth and jumped on top of it and glared at the gray fox with his arms folded across his chest. The gray fox appeared not to notice Finn and instead just stared down at the half-empty mug and spilled coffee.

Finally tilting his head up and grimacing, "What do you want, Finn?"

"You come into my place, make a mess, and act like an ass. What the hell's wrong with you, Colin?"

"I got fired, the boss accused me of stealing inventory. Finn, it wasn't me. It was that old hog's son. He's been going in there after hours and skimming off some of the stock. I told the warehouse foreman twice, I even told him how the boy lifted the alarm code and was selling the stock to some weasels down by the docks." Swirling one of his claws in the spilled coffee the now dejected looking fox let out a whimper. "Ain't fair, I needed that job. They blamed me and kicked me to the curb like so much garbage."

Judy let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding and watched the heart-wrenching scene. Judy felt Toni squeeze her shoulder, "One of Colin's kits has been sick, and he's been working double shifts to cover his mate having to stay home more."

Finn continued to stare down at the fox until Colin looked up. In a loud, rough voice Finn barked out, "You know that's not what I'm talking about, tell me what the real problem is."

"Which problem are you talking about? My landlord's a prick, the doctor won't see my kit without being paid in full up front, my mate is busting her tail and getting stiffed out of her tips, or I just got fired for being a thief. Take your pick!"

Finn glared at Colin, "We need to hear you say it."
Colin and Finn stared at each other while everyone else watched the tension between them rise. After almost thirty seconds, an old corsac fox in the back of the diner yelled out, "Damn pup! Stop feeling sorry for yourself and own it like the rest of us do."

Colin shook his head back and forth in frustration. Judy could see that he was struggling to keep his cool, whatever the problem was it ran deep and it wasn't something he wanted to admit.

Judy started to ease toward the edge of the bench in case she needed to get out and help Finn when Toni whispered, "It's okay."

Colin finally yelled out, "Fine, I'm a fox, that's why it happened, because I'm a fox."

Shaking his finger at Colin, Finn barked back, "Damn straight, you're a fuckin' pelt and don't you ever forget it."

"I'm a fox."

"That's right, no one trusts a fox, no one's going to help a fox and when something goes wrong…"

"Blame the fuckin' fox," Colin finished for Finn.

"Yeah, you can want things to be different, but they aren't right now, and the sooner you recognize that the sooner those things will stop holding you back."

Stepping down from the chair, Finn put a paw on Colin's arm. "Foxes are family too, we watch out for each other, and help as best we can. You clean up this mess and tell Tiff you're sorry for scaring her while I fix you up a couple of meals to take home to the family. Alright?"

"Thanks, Finn, sorry for being an ass." As Finn walked back to the kitchen, Judy saw another fox give a piece of paper to Colin. "My boss needs some short-haul drivers, here's my number, call me and I can get you hooked up."

Another fox passed him a number too. "If you've got any trade experience, we got some construction jobs. If not, we can train you up as a framer pretty quick."

Judy couldn't stop herself, she slipped out of the booth and with Toni following, went to Colin's table. Pulling out one of her own cards, she held it out for him. "I'm Judy Hopps and I heard what you said about getting fired. I don't know if it would help you get your job back, but if you call me with more details on what happened, I might be able to find enough evidence to show your boss that it wasn't you that skimmed the inventory."

Colin looked at the card and then at Judy, "I've heard of you. From that press conference a year ago."

Judy's face fell, another victim of her ignorant comments. Steeling herself, she set the card down in a dry spot on the table and said in a quiet voice, "I'm sorry I'm not a fox, but I'd still like to help if I can."

With downcast eyes, Judy turned to return to her booth when a paw on her shoulder prevented her from moving. Toni held Judy tight and said, "Colin, Nick Wilde is Judy's fox, and he's forgiven her for what she said at that press conference. If he can forgive her, the rest of us can too. Everyone makes mistakes."

After a moment of thought, Colin picked up the card and smiled at Judy, "Yeah, Finn just made it
pretty clear that me blaming everyone else for my problems isn't helping so…" Putting his paw out, he and Judy shook paws, "Thank you for offering to help. It may be best for me to move on from that job, but if you don't mind, I'd like to keep your card just in case."

Feeling much better, Judy smiled and said, "I'd like that."

Judy sat back down in her booth and took a drink of water. Toni was checking her uniform and getting ready to go back on shift.

"Hey Toni, what exactly was that all about?" Nodding over toward Colin.

Toni leaned down to Judy, "It's kind of a fox thing. Actually, I'm surprised Finn let you watch, you know, since you're not a fox."

"Nick and Finn are good friends, and they were partners before Nick became a cop. Finn and I don't hang out, but I like to think we're friends."

"I've seen it happen a few times, for a fox, it's a cathartic experience. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we're on the bottom rung of society. Prey don't like us because they think we're shifty predators trying to either hustle them or eat their kits and large predators look down on us because they think we're lowlife, untrustworthy, scavengers."

"That old corsac tod, pretty much nailed it, for a fox to succeed, he has to own being a fox. Foxes have to accept that other mammals are going to treat them like dirt and then work harder and smarter than anyone else to prove those other mammals wrong."

"It's not all bad though," smiling as she continued to speak, "foxes don't belong to packs or prides, but like Finn said, we still think of ourselves as a loose-knit family, a seriously dysfunctional family sometimes, but one that tries to help when it can."

Toni gave Judy an earnest look, "Just a few things you may want to consider if you're serious about taking Nick as your mate."

Judy blushed at Toni's matter of fact statement and was only able to nod as Toni went into the kitchen to help Finn.

After a few minutes of Judy fidgeting with her water glass, Toni and Finn came out of the kitchen carrying a couple of large to-go bags. Giving them to Colin, Finn said something to Toni and then slipped into the bench across from Judy.

"Hey Finn"

"Hey yourself, Bunny-girl."

Judy rolled her eyes, "I didn't know you worked here. Actually, I didn't know you worked anywhere, what happened to selling pawpsicles?"

Finn laughed, "That's just a side hustle for my days off and ever since you turned my partner into a respectable mammal, it hasn't been nearly as much fun. So, thanks for that."

Putting a paw on Finn's arm, Judy couldn't help herself, "Don't worry, if you both promise to be good, I'll let Nick out to play with you sometime."

Before Finn could threaten to bite her, Judy added, "So, what have you got for me?"
"First off, since you're tight with my boy, I'm trusting you to keep all of what you just saw under your meter-maid cap, capiche?"

"Gotcha, my lips are sealed."

"Good." Finn lowered his voice so that only Judy would be able to hear. "I know a guy that can help me set up a meet with a fox who's based near the Savanna Central docks. This fox is a mid-level player, and if anyone knows what's going on in the nastier sections of that area, it's him."

"That's great! When can I meet him?"

"Whoa there flopsy, that's not how it works with guys like this. They have to be handled just right if you expect to get anything out of them."

"Okay, so tell me what to do."

"Yeah right, not my job. You need to talk to your boyfriend about how to handle this fox. Tell Wilde, the meet is with Thorn, he'll know who that is."

"Finn, Nick's in Bunnyburrow. I can handle talking to some small-time thug by myself."

Finn's smirk disappeared as he gave Judy a severe look. "Use those ears and listen carefully, these guys are dangerous, you do it wrong, pieces of you will end up being someone's lucky charm, and if Wilde finds out it was me that got you hurt, he will skin me alive. So, no, I'm not setting up a meet until you and Wilde come up with a plan that doesn't end in dead bunny."

"Finn…"

"No, now get out of here, cops make my customers nervous."

Judy slid out of the booth and waved Toni down. "I gotta get going."

"Finn covered your lunch." Toni gave Judy a hug and added, "Are you going to come by for a visit soon? The boys keep asking when you're coming back."

Judy nodded, "Yeah, that sounds great, I'll text you, thanks Toni."

Once outside, Judy headed toward the metro stop. She made it about a hundred yards, stopped and pulled out her phone. Staring at it in her paw, her foot started to rapidly thump. Clenching her jaw, she weighed her options, go back and try again with Finn to set up the meeting with this Thorn character or talk to Nick. She was still angry with Nick, not as much as she had been, mostly because she really missed him, but definitely still irritated. Turning around, she decided she'd work on Finn.

About ten yards later, she stopped again. Squeezing the phone in her paw, Judy looked up in exacerbation, she knew all Finn was going to do was threaten to bite her face off.

Judy stomped her foot and grumbled, "Fine, I'll text him tonight, but I'm staying mad at him!"

"You go, girl! And don't forgive your mate until he deserves it!"

Judy looked up to see a middle-aged female mink giving her a wink as she walked by. Trying not to smile at the thought of her and Nick as mates, Judy called Clawhauser and let him know she was headed back to the precinct.

…..
A/N: Translation: carnivorous (adj) = poterant (Latin)
The Pond

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Alex was hopping in a circle around his big sister Jessie as they walked to the pond. Alex was so excited, he'd never been to the pond before. He'd heard all about the rope swing and being able to see fish. He'd never seen a live fish before, this was going to be totally excellent.

Jessie looked up from her phone at the bouncing buck and smiled. "Alex, calm down. We'll be there in a little bit."

With a giggle, Alex asked, "Who ya texting?"

"None of your business."

"I bet it's Loooogan. Logan and Jessie sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love then...."

The young doe stopped and gave her brother a look. "You had better shut up about Logan, or I'll never take you anywhere again for as long as you live. And that means no telling Mom or Dad we went to the pond either."

Alex laughed and continued teasing his sister as she watched her phone for a text from Logan letting her know when he'd be getting to the pond. She would only have a couple of hours or so before her parents came back from shopping. If she and Alex weren't home when they got there, they'd freak and if they found out she was meeting up with Logan, she'd probably get grounded.

Still no message, and then Jessie groaned as she lost the remaining bar of reception on her phone. She looked up as the pond came in sight and rolled her eyes as Alex took off toward the rope swing whooping and hollering and leaving a trail of clothes in the dirt path.

.....

With his first day of foot patrol with Buckstein behind him, Nick was enjoying a relaxing drive back to the Hopps' farm. After he and Buckstein had finished lunch at the Leapwell's place, Buckstein had spent the rest of the afternoon showing Nick important deputy things like, 'how to mosey,' where to 'take a load off' and the best, 'enjoying the afternoon sun.'

Nick smiled as he felt the cool evening air blowing in through the open windows of his convertible, well, a convertible that couldn't convert. Nick thought a moment about his dad and then decided that maybe, if he had a little downtime while he was here, he'd take a look at getting the roof working again.

Flipping his aviators onto the top of his head, he could see the sun headed to the horizon, it was a beautiful backdrop to the acres of green fields that stretched out in front of him. It had only been a couple of days since he'd arrived, but the town was already starting to grow on him.

The sound of Nick's phone ringing broke into his thoughts. "Hello, Wilde here."

Nick heard Sheriff Hoofson drawling voice in reply.
He and the sheriff had talked about ordering a radio for his car, but then they'd decided that even though the cell service around Bunnyburrow wasn't the greatest, it was good enough that ordering and installing a radio wouldn't be worth the effort. Of course, as part of the discussion, Nick had lobbied hard for a set of lights and a super loud siren to mount behind his car's grill, so far Hoofson had been just as obstinate as Bogo when it came to Nick having any cool cop toys. He hadn't broached getting one of those big smoky the bear hats yet either. Maybe in a couple of days, once he knew Hoofson better, he'd find a way to talk him into it.

"Wilde, this is Sheriff Hoofson, I know your shift just ended, but would you be able to head over to the Thrasher warren? We just got a call from Daniel Thrasher and they can't find a couple of their kits. They've looked around, but with it getting dark and all, they're getting a little frantic." Hoofson paused for a moment and Nick could tell by his tone that something else was going on.

"Wilde, the Thrashers are city buns, they moved out here maybe a year ago with a few litters of kits and they both worry a lot which means they call the office a lot. The last time we got a call like this from another of the warrens out that way, it turned out the doe was with her boyfriend, so do me a favor and see if you can settle the Thrashers down. Right now, everyone else is out on a call or too far away to help out, call me if you need backup and I'll send someone out there for you, otherwise you can let me know how it went in the morning. Okay?"

"Sure Sheriff, talk a little city talk and wait for the kits to show. Text me the address and I'll head over."

"I'll send it when we hang up, do you still have the paper maps I gave you yesterday, the cell service is a might bit spotty out that way?"

Nick quickly checked his glove compartment, "Got 'em. Thanks, Sheriff."

Nick set the phone down on the seat and a few moments later it buzzed with an incoming text. Nick pulled over, marked the address on the map and pulled back onto the road. Forty minutes later he was pulling into the Thrasher's driveway.

…..

Jessie was laying out on the edge of the pond enjoying the late afternoon sun as it started to creep down. It was starting to cool off a little and they were going to have to head back soon and still no Logan. He was so cute and she definitely meant it in the way a bunny calls another bunny cute. Tall for a rabbit and round in all the right places, she loved his strong paws and his eyes were to die for. His fur was a mottled blend of gray and black and the way his ears turned toward her every time she was near him made her heart skip.

Her mom wasn't being fair, she was the oldest doe from the very first litter and she should be able to go out on a date if she wanted to.

It was about time to get going. Jessie started to roll over and grab her wrap. What a waste, she was wearing her cutest one-piece swimsuit just for Logan. Ready for him to come walking over, pull her into his arms and….

"Jessie, look at me."

Leaving her wrap, Jessie sat up and turned toward Alex. How could any mammal have that much energy? He hadn't stopped for a second since they'd arrived. Suddenly her eyes widened, "Alex, get down from there, you'll hurt yourself."
Alex had climbed up onto the top of the old beaver dam that was holding back enough water to form the pond. Everyone knew to stay off that dam, the old beaver that built it was half-blind and couldn't drive a nail into a board straight even if he'd had an extra set of paws and a nail gun.

Alex's smile was huge as he yelled back, "Here I come, I'm Batbun" and proceeded to try a backflip that would land him in the pond. Instead, his leap dislodged a log in the dam causing him to fall the other way and land in the river along with a bunch of loose branches.

Jessie screamed and ran to the edge of the dam. Seeing Alex in the middle of the river, already too far away for her to reach, she ran down to the riverbank and tried to keep up with her brother.

.....

Nick walked up to the Thrasher's warren noticing that it was much smaller than the Hopps'. Similar to the Hopps' main house, theirs backed into a hillside also, so Nick assumed that most of the living space was under the hill. A couple of outbuildings were off to the left surrounded by a decent sized parking area, but there were only a few non-farm vehicles in sight. Probably about right for a new warren being homesteaded by a family from the city. As Nick reached out to knock on the door, it suddenly opened and he was quickly ushered inside by a frantic doe.

Showing the upset doe his badge and ID, Nick shook her paw. "Hi Mrs. Thrasher, I'm Officer Wilde."

As he started to try and calm the doe down, a buck walked out of a nearby room and with his paw extended, introduced himself, "Officer Wilde, I'm Daniel Thrasher. Thank you so much for coming out on such short notice. My mate is worried sick, two of our kits should have been home almost two hours ago and we don't know where they are."

Over the next few minutes, the Thrashers explained that their oldest daughter Jessie had taken her little brother Alex out for the afternoon. She was a responsible doe and knew better than to be gone this long. Mrs. Thrasher was sure something was wrong now because it was getting chilly out and with no moon tonight it would soon be pitch black out. Jessie knew that Alex hated the dark and wouldn't keep him out on a night like this.

"Mrs. Thrasher, did you try calling her on her cell?"

"Of course we tried, it's just that the cell service out here is terrible. We had to put in a landline just to get reliable phone and internet. Every time I call it rolls over to her voicemail. I've tried texting but no response. We checked with all her siblings and friends and no one knows where she might be."

Daniel spoke up as his mate finished, "I was just getting ready to take a couple of my kits out to look for her when you pulled up. We have a couple of flashlights, but none of us are any good in the dark."

Nick stood with his paws on his hips, chewing his lip for a moment before replying. Hoofson had warned him that the Thrashers were quick to worry, but Nick wasn't so sure about tonight. He decided it wouldn't hurt to take a look around and if he couldn't get a bead on the kits, he'd call for backup. "You're right about it getting dark. My eyesight's a lot better and using my nose, I should be able to track them pretty easily since they haven't been gone that long."

Nick asked for some of Jessie and Alex's dirty clothes and took a deep sniff. Memorizing the scent of the two kits, he handed the clothes back. "I've got their scent. I'll start tracking them and don't worry, the night is calm, so it shouldn't be a problem finding out where they went. It'll be like
taking a nice walk in a Sahara Square park."

Nick went out to the front yard and started sniffing until he caught the scent of the older doe. It had been a few hours, so the scent was a little weak. It faded in and out causing Nick to lose time reacquiring it. After the fourth time losing the scent, Nick stopped, looked around and shrugged his shoulders. No one was around so he wouldn't be seen. Nick went down on all fours. Picking up the scent again, he returned to his hunt for the rabbits. After a few minutes of tracking the kits, Nick had to admit to himself that being down low was the way to go; he was making good time, and he had no problem tracking either kit's scent.

Nick came up to a small pond formed behind a poorly built beaver dam. He found a towel near the pond with a small backpack and a book laying on it. He sniffed around the shore and near the dam and found traces of both Alex and Jessie all over. He was initially worried that the kits had drowned until he found the doe's scent on the riverbank headed downstream. Nick searched around for Alex's scent and followed it to the top of the dam where it suddenly disappeared. Nick saw some freshly exposed logs and then saw some material stuck on the riverbank a few yards away.

After thinking about it for a few moments, Nick had a pretty good idea of what had happened. He needed backup in case either one of the kits was hurt. Nick grabbed his phone to call the sheriff and saw there was no service available. Putting the phone back in his pocket, he rubbed his brow, he couldn't risk the time running back to the Thrasher's to make a call, with no real choice he took off on all fours following the doe's scent trail.

A few minutes later, a gentle breeze blew through the glade that held the pond. Something changed in the humidity or the atmospheric bands or some other such thing. The change lasted for only a moment, but that moment was long enough for the phone in Jessie's bag to vibrate and ping with the receipt of a half a dozen delayed texts. As the phone went back to sleep, the preview screen showed one of the messages. *Sorry Jess can't meet u at the pond, dad needs help until late call u tomorrow – L.*

Alex landed on his back in the river, yelling as he hit the surface. He went under and was spun around by the current and turbulence until he was disoriented. He broke through the surface coughing while bobbing in the water. Alex was pushed into a branch dislodged from the dam as he fell. Grabbing hold of the branch, Alex yelled for his sister as the river current swept him away.

Jessie was frantic as she ran along the riverbank keeping up with her brother. She could see him hanging on for dear life, long ears trailing in the water behind him with only his swim trunks on in the cold water.

"Heeelp!" Alex screamed again.

Jessie yelled back for Alex to hang on and she'd find a way to pull him out. She patted her thigh feeling for her phone out of habit, she was wearing only her swimsuit, no pocket, no phone. She hesitated as she looked back up the river toward where she remembered leaving her phone and then heard Alex yell again. Decision made, she ran along the riverbank pacing her brother, looking for a way to pull him out of the river.

Jessie put on extra speed and ran ahead to a bend in the river, she stopped on the small bank that jutted out into the water and looked for anything to use to snag the floating branch. She grabbed a long-dead branch and turned to use it only to see Alex float by her position.

Jessie's next couple of tries failed in the same way. She had been keeping up with Alex for what
felt like miles. She was getting tired and started to stumble over some of the tree roots she easily hopped over earlier. To make things worse, the sun would be setting soon. Once it got dark, she and Alex would be in real trouble, rabbits had terrible night vision.

Finally, she was in luck. Up ahead was an old tree with long branches hanging over the middle of the river, one only about ten feet up but hopefully low enough for her to snag her brother. She put on a burst of speed and headed to the tree. Grabbing the longest branch she could handle, she went out onto the lower limb and swung it into the path she hoped the river would push her brother.

"Alex! Alex! Grab the branch!"

Alex looked up from his 'raft' and reached for the end of the branch in front of him. He hung on tight as he was swung around in an arc toward the shore. When he was only a couple of yards away from the riverbank, he felt the current grab hold of him again with a sharp tug. He started to paddle with one paw to get out of the rough water and get closer to the riverbank. The current suddenly stopped pulling and he heard a loud scream and the branch he was holding suddenly went slack and started to float away.

Alex let go of his end of the branch and made it the rest of the way to the riverbank. He looked back to the tree limb his sister was just on and didn't see her.

Alex was cold and completely drenched with river water. He dragged himself up onto his feet and went around the base of the old tree to find his sister. Once there, he saw her unconscious form in the rocks. She had fallen off the branch when the river's current changed suddenly causing her to lose her balance.

Jessie's limp body was partially in the river and Alex knew he had to get her out of the water so she wouldn't get too cold. He found a safe spot a few yards away and used all his remaining energy to slowly and carefully drag Jessie out of the water.

Alex had been able to pull Jessie most of the way out of the river when his foot slipped on some wet rocks and he fell over. As he fell, his foot got stuck between a couple of the rocks and he twisted it enough that he cried out in pain. Fortunately, as Alex went down, Jessie landed on top of him instead of on the rocks. Alex was in a lot of pain, but he continued to drag his sister out of the water and onto the muddy riverbank near an old log.

Alex started to cry. His sister was unconscious, he couldn't walk, he was cold, wet, and now it was starting to get dark. This was all his fault and he didn't know what to do. Alex curled up next to his sister and snuggled into her as close as he could get and tried to stop crying.

…..

"Dylan, do you have to hit every rut and pothole in the road?" Ethan had been in a bad mood since his brothers had decided that they would go to the old beaver pond to drink their last batch of moonshine.

"This is stupid, why are we going all the way to the pond?"

Henry, the oldest of the littermates, whacked his brother in the back of the head. "Why do you think? We have to go there because those animals found our spot in the forest, and then Dad said he'd banish us if he ever caught us drinking shine anywhere near the farm."

Dylan groused, "I still don't know what Dad's problem is, we're all almost old enough to drink. Just because he thinks alcohol Is 'the devil' doesn't mean we should have to suffer."
Ethan shook his head, "Dumb ass, a year isn't almost and shine ain't legal, and besides hating alcohol, Dad don't want the sheriff chasing up and down the farm looking for a still."

Henry fumed silently while his brothers bickered until he couldn't take it anymore. "Shut up, both of you. All of this is because of those filthy cats. The Pawfields had to go and hire more preds this year to work their farm and just like all preds they couldn't keep their noses out of other people's business. Now we can't go there no more, mangy animals ruined it for us."

"Damn felines, hiring preds should be illegal," Dylan added, slapping the steering wheel.

Henry motioned, punching his open palm. "Yeah, maybe after we finish the last of our shine, we go pay them a visit."

It was quiet in the truck for the rest of the trip to the pond. It was pretty late, and nice and dark when Dylan finally pulled the small truck next to the beaver pond and unloaded a couple of liquor jars as his brothers moved a log over so they could sit down in front of the truck's lights.

…..

Nick was panting now. Splattered with mud, twigs stuck in his fur, and he was starting to smell a little ripe from the hike. Yes, a long time ago foxes tracked their meals through the wilderness, but modern civilization happened and now that he was a city fox, Nick preferred to track his meals with a phone app. It was quicker and cleaner and you could watch TV while doing it.

The trail took another sharp turn to the water line and Nick followed. Nick had been sure for a while now that one of the kits was floating down the river and the other kit was following. Every now and then he followed the trail to the river's edge and saw the signs of another attempted rescue, and then he'd was back to following the trail downriver as the rescue attempt must have failed.

It was pitch black now, not even the moon was out to lend a little light. Nick's night vision was excellent, but that didn't prevent the occasional stumble or being scratched by the thorns on a bush. He'd traveled a few miles by now and was getting tired. The scent grew stronger as he approached another outcropping into the river, the doe must have stopped here to try and pull her brother out again.

Nick sniffed around the outcropping, but the doe's scent stopped. Nick's heart sank as he realized that the doe must have gone into the water here. Backtracking, Nick started sniffing around the riverbank to see if the doe came out and after a couple of minutes of searching in the pitch black, he found the doe's scent again, and if Nick was right, her brother's too.

Nick followed his nose a short distance until he could barely make out two lumps huddling close to each other next to a downed tree trunk. As Nick got closer, he saw the lumps were a teenage doe lying still with a smaller, shivering buck pressed up against her side.

Figuring something bad had happened to the doe, Nick slowly reached out to the buck and then whispered, "Hello there, are you Alex?"

Nick heard a quiet voice reply, "H-help please, I'm so c-cold and Jessie's h-hurt."

Nick could see the buck's eyes looking blindly out toward the sound of his voice. "My name is Mr. Nick, I'm a police officer and I'm here to help you both." Hearing the kit's teeth chatter, Nick took off his shirt and laid it over the two bunnies. "This should help a little. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I-I hurt my ankle getting Jessie out of the water and I can't walk. I think Jessie hurt her head when
she fell off the tree and into the water over there." The young buck's voice started to crack, "Is she going to be okay?"

Nick looked over to where the small buck had indicated and saw the scrape marks in the dirt and mud leading up to where the two kits were. "Alex, you must be a very brave and strong buck to have helped get your sister all the way over here."

Nick reached down and gently examined Jessie. Her breathing was steady, but she was shivering and had a decent sized bump on her head. Sniffing around her, Nick could smell a little blood from a few cuts he couldn't see. She probably had a mild concussion and maybe some other injuries.

"Alex, she looks like she will be fine, she's just sleeping right now. Do you know how long you've been here?"

"I'm not sure, a long time, it wasn't nearly this dark when Jessie fell."

Nick guessed that to float all the way here from the pond, Alex must have been in the cold water for a very long time and the sun had completely set nearly an hour ago. That meant that both the kits had been wet and cold in the chilly evening air for hours, and with their short fur, he had to worry about hypothermia. The doe needed a doctor and the young buck was cold, couldn't walk and couldn't see. He'd already checked his phone and still no service, which meant he was on his own.

It was probably three miles back to the pond and even further to the Thrasher's burrow if he couldn't call for help. Nick chewed his lip as he evaluated options. Jessie looked to be smaller than Judy, but not as lean which meant she was going to be about as heavy as his partner, and with almost the same build, Alex was about three-quarters the size of his sister. So, between the siblings, he was going to have to deal with one-and-a-half to nearly two Judys worth of weight.

He'd always believed that rabbits were cute balls of fluff until the first time he'd lifted Judy up so she could reach the coffee maker in the precinct breakroom. She was deceptively dense, probably due to her supernatural bunny strength. Of course, said strength and the possibility of being punched were reasons enough for him to keep all opinions about a bunny's weight to himself.

Jokes about bunny density aside, if it was just the doe, he could probably carry her out in his arms, both of them, no way. How about carry her, let him ride on his shoulders? In the dark, cold night through the underbrush that he had trouble enough traversing on all fours, nope.

Nick thought about a drag-along carrier, but bouncing a doe with a possible concussion through the underbrush wasn't a good idea either, even if this city fox, with ten minutes of Ranger Scout experience, could figure out how to put one together.

Another idea struck Nick, not a good idea, but it was all he had. "Alex, I think I know a way for me to get you and your sister back home, but for it to work, I need your help. Do you think you can be extra brave and help me?"

Alex replied to where Nick's voice was coming from with a slightly stronger voice. "I think so."

"Alex, have you ever met a fox?"

"No."

"Well, I'm a fox. I'm going to help you and your sister, but before I start, I was hoping you could hang onto my tail for a few minutes while I get us ready to go."
Nick stretched his tail over to Alex, who grabbed hold of it. Nick hoped that the small rabbit could get used to being near a fox quickly. All he didn't need was an injured bun trying to run through the trees, terrified that he was about to get eaten.

"Wow, it's so soft and warm."

One minor problem solved, ten major ones to go.

Nick grabbed his shirt from where it lay on top of the kits and wrapped it around Jessie with the sleeves hanging loose. He used his pocket knife, go Ranger Scouts, to cut his pant legs off and then cut them into large strips. He slid the cloth strips around the Doe’s waist and thighs and then made sure she was resting on her side.

He was about ready to load Jessie up when he grabbed his phone and tapping the torch icon, he handed the phone to Alex, "Here you go bud, this will help you see better."

"Thanks, Mr. Nick."

"Alright Alex, I'm ready. I need you to move over here while I tie Jessie to my back and then I want you to crawl inside my shirt next to her and hold onto my back fur real tight. Okay?"

Alex let go of Nick's tail and crawled to the other side of Nick and watched as Nick lay down next to Jessie, tied all the strips around his chest and waist. Next, Nick tied his shirt sleeves together and then rolled over onto his stomach with the doe strapped to his back.

"Alex, Jessie's all set, time for you to crawl in."

Nick loosened the sleeves so Alex could slide in next to his sister, retightened the sleeves, checked his makeshift straps, and then lifted himself and the two kits on his back until he was standing on all fours.

"Alex, I need you to hang on and tell me if you think you are starting to fall off. And uh, buddy, go ahead and turn off the light, I can actually see better without it."

After a little rustling around, Alex replied, "Thanks, Mr. Nick, The light's off and I'm hanging on real tight."

Nick grunted as he turned and started to retrace his steps along the riverbank and headed back to the pond. This was going to be a long, slow hike back.

…..

Robert Gardiner, Sarge to everyone in town, was sitting with most of his older kits around a dozen benches in their common room. Their afternoon of work out in the west barn had lasted late into the evening, but they'd fixed the combine and it would be ready to use in the morning. His mate had saved him and the boys some dinner and now she and a few of their kits were cleaning up those dishes and readying the kitchen for breakfast in the morning. With all the young kits having been put to bed a couple of hours ago, most of the family's older kits were spread out playing games on their phones, watching TV or thinking about going to bed themselves.

One of Sarge's sons, Logan, was showing him a drawing and was trying to explain something to him when Sarge heard the phone ring. He was old school and still had a landline, so he looked up toward the study. Wondering who would be calling this late at night, he heard one of his kits yell, "Mom, it's Mrs. Thrasher, she wants to know if we've talked to Jessie or Alex."
"Tell her no, and that we will give her a call right away if we do."

Logan's ears shot straight up as he heard his mom's reply. "Mom, what's going on with Jessie?"

"Liz called hours ago, she said that Jessie and Alex weren't at the house when they got home from shopping and she was wondering if Jessie was with you. I told her no, that you were working with your brothers and wouldn't be back until very late."

Logan jumped up from his seat, "Dad, I need a truck, I have to go now."

"Son, it'll be lights out in a bit, where do you need to be going at this hour?"

"Dad, don't be mad, but I was supposed to meet Jessie at the old beaver pond this afternoon. I texted her and told her I couldn't go, and now I'm afraid she went and something bad happened."

Sarge slammed his paw on the table, "How many times have I told you kits to stay away from that beaver pond, it's not safe."

"Dad, I know. Please, I need to go now."

"Fine, but not alone. Take Mitch with you."

Logan waved his littermate over and they both moved toward the door.

"Logan, you guys take the new truck, it has the bigger light bar. And radio in when you find out what's going on, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Logan grabbed the truck keys off the panel of hooks by the door and were soon headed out to the barn to get the truck. Sarge stood by the window, with his arms folded, watching his son slide into the large truck and then carefully maneuver it down the driveway.

The truck was barely fifty yards away when Sarge's nose started to twitch followed by a tingle that ran down his back to his tail. It'd been a while since he'd felt that tingle, not since…

Using a voice that could be heard throughout the warren, Sarge called out, "Abigail Gardiner!"

An eighteen-year-old doe, studiously researching makeup techniques and proper jewelry placement for an upcoming date with a really, really cute buck, looked up in surprise. "Present."

"I want your team geared up and ready to deploy ASAP."

"What?"

"Girl, you heard what Logan said, I've got a bad feeling about those kits and Logan is engineering, not EMR. So, move your tail, I want your team at the pond before Logan gets there, and he left two minutes ago!"

The light brown doe, dressed in pink warmups, hopped up onto the table, pointed at various siblings with her nicely manicured finger, and bellowed out orders like a veteran noncom.

"All right people, you heard the Old Bun, we're taking two trucks, drivers grab the best for off-road, muddy conditions and pull them around for loadout now. Who's the medic on duty?"

A doe quickly came in from the kitchen. Wiping her paws on an apron, she replied, "I am, what's
Abby pointed at the doe, "Emma, we're looking at a possible nighttime water rescue from the pond, and injuries that could include anything from broken bones to hypothermia and dehydration. Grab your gear, the trucks are being loaded outside right now."

Dismissing Emma, Abby glared at a couple of slow-moving rabbits, "We are on the clock people, move like you have a purpose!"

Sarge checked his watch and nodded proudly, they'd be ready, Abby was too good not to make it.

Sarge called out to her, "Abby, no restrictions if you need to cut across any fields, do it. Anyone raises a stink, I'll take care of it."

"Yes, sir. Pedal to the metal." Yelling at a black and brown buck standing in a doorway that opened to a room filled with electronics, "Ronald, you're on comms, finish your checks, the trucks are moving out now, now, now!"

As Sarge watched the trucks racing away, he called the sheriff's office to let them know about the failed meetup at the pond and that he had some kits on the way to scout it out. Waiting for the office to answer, he mentally rearranged next week's schedule to include tearing down that old beaver dam.

…..

Nick was feeling it. Tongue hanging out he was panting trying to cool himself down. He felt like he'd been running or hiking for hours and almost half that time he'd been doing it with nearly his own body weight in bunnies tied to his back.

"How you *pant* doing back there, buddy?"

"I'm okay, it's nice and warm now."

"Good *pant* to hear, I *pant, pant* think I need some water. *cough, pant*"

Nick had been panting hard for a while and was starting to feel dehydrated. He wasn't sure how far away from the pond he was, but he couldn't wait, he needed water now. Veering toward the river, Nick saw a flat rocky surface that jutted out from the shore. Stepping onto the rock, Nick was preparing to lean his muzzle over the side and lap up some water. He was just glad no one from the precinct was around to see this, he imagined finding old-style canine drinking bowls in his locker for the next couple of months.

"Hey Mr. Nick, you can't drink out of the river below the pond. My mom says it will give you a stomach ache."

Nick stood on all fours shaking his head, "What do you mean Alex, what's wrong with the water?"

"Mom said that with all the rain lately and the planting going on, the fertilizer is running off and contaminating the river, so we're not supposed to drink from it for a few days."

"I think you mean contaminate there, Alex. What's wrong with some of the fertilizer going into the river, I thought farmers around here only used all-natural fertilizer?"

"Yeah, they do, that's what I'm talking about."
Nick bent over the edge and took a deep sniff, "Ugh, you're right." You had to have a good nose to smell it, but the river definitely had a tint of 'all-natural,' and now that Nick recognized it, he decided a drink could wait for a little while.

"Alright Alex, we can't be any more than a half a mile from the pond, just hang on tight and everything will be okay."

Nick started up the river again, he was still thirsty and worn out from the long hike, but he was determined to get these kits back home safe. Nick moved away from the river's edge to avoid the mud and find more solid ground to walk on. With his head down, panting again, Nick almost walked headfirst into the roots of a large tree.

Moving back toward the river's edge to get around the huge roots Nick saw a spot where he could walk over them without getting wet. A few more steps and he'd be around the tree.

Suddenly, Nick's left paw slipped on the flat surface of a wet rock. Nick lost balance as his arm slid out and then he shrieked out in pain. With a high-pitched howl, Nick collapsed and went face-first into the mud. As tears of pain were squeezed out of his eyes, he did everything he could to stay flat and not spill his bunny load into the mud.

A pair of ears poked out from his makeshift backpack. "Mr. Nick, are you okay?"

Breathing heavily, and barely able to talk through the pain, Nick said through clenched teeth, "Ah, it's *whimper* I'm *pant* my arm, *ah...* hang on."

Lying in the mud, Nick could feel that he had impaled his left forearm on a broken root sticking up from the ground. He took a couple of quick breaths to prepare for the pain and then carefully pulled his arm up and off the root. Pulling his arm to his chest, Nick let out another scream, this one muffled by mud. "Oh, gawd bless..., mother fu..., *moan*.

"Mom says those are bad words, Mr. Nick."

"Got it, Alex." Nick licked his arm and tasted blood, and then quietly berated himself, "Great, just great. You stupid, clumsy pelt, you thought you needed another challenge, like this wasn't hard enough already?"

Nick heard Alex quietly crying, "This is all my fault, I'm so sorry Mr. Nick."

"Alex, it's okay, I just need to catch my breath, alright." Nick grimaced as he listened to Alex and then had an idea. "Alex, I could really use your help, do you think you can help me fix my arm?"

"*sniff* Sure."

Lying in the mud, Nick reached around to his back pocket with his good arm and pulled out an old red kerchief. Groaning again, he repositioned his paw so it was behind his head. "Alex, I'm holding a cloth near your head, can you grab it out of my paw?"

"Yeah, I got it."

Lifting his injured arm up so Alex could reach it, Nick told him, "Alex, use the light and wrap the cloth around my arm where it's hurt and tie it real tight."

Alex pulled the phone out of his trunks and tried to get it to wake up so he could use the light again, but nothing happened. "Mr. Nick, the phone won't come on."
Nick groaned again, 'Great, so much for being able to call for help.' Trying not to worry the buck, Nick went with plan-B. "It's alright, Alex, the battery probably died. Can you see anything at all?"

"A little."

"Okay, buddy, I'm holding my arm up, use your paws to feel where it's wet on my arm and then put the cloth around that spot and then tie the ends together with a knot."

Nick felt the cloth on his arm as Alex found the right spot.

"Your arm's wet because your bleeding, isn't it?"

"Don't worry about that, buddy, it's just a scratch."

Nick felt the cloth tighten around his arm as Alex knotted it.

"Pull just a little tighter and then knot it again, okay. You're doing great."

Once Alex was finished tying off the makeshift bandage, Nick was able to lift himself back up on all fours and got ready to move out. "Thanks, buddy, remind me to get you a Junior Ranger Scout first aid badge when we get home. Now scoot back next to your sister and hang on."

Nick limped slowly for another half an hour before he noticed the trees starting to clear a little. Looking up, he saw the old beaver dam off in the distance. Thank god, he'd made it. "Alex, we're almost there."

As Nick got closer to the pond, he heard some music playing and saw the lights of a vehicle, still a ways away, shining in his direction. It looked like someone had a little party going.

Looking around, Nick saw a good spot about twenty yards away near the edge of the clearing surrounding the pond. "Alex, I can barely move, I need to drop you guys off over there by that tree. You stay with your sister and make sure to keep her warm and covered up. I'll get help and be right back."

Nick carefully flattened himself on the ground and then gently rolled the two kits off his back. Once they were covered up again, he rubbed Alex's head fur. "We're almost home."

Alex nodded and cuddled into his sister to keep her warm.

Nick hadn't been this sore and wiped out since running the ZPA obstacle course for the third time in one day. He was half-naked with only cutoffs on, his back was killing him, and he was cramping up. Nick tried to stand and groaned instead. As humiliating as it was, he had to stay on all fours if he wanted to be able to move at all. So, Nick painfully hobbled his way toward the parked vehicle, and hopefully, someone that could help.

…..

Ethan was still pissed about having to come all the way out to the pond, so he hadn't been drinking as much as his brothers. They, on the other hand, were already halfway to drunk. Sitting on an old log grumbling, Ethan heard the voice first. He stood up, ears erect, and looked to the source of the cries. Unfortunately, being a bunny, his nighttime vision wasn't very good, so all he saw was a hunched over, furry animal on all fours stumbling toward their campsite.

Ethan called out to his brothers, "Guys, something is coming this way, look." Pointing at the approaching creature, he heard it say something again, but couldn't make out the words.
His brothers got up and despite the alcohol were able to make out the slow-moving figure too.

Dylan squinted and was finally able to make out the form. "Whoa, is that a fox? How the hell did a fox get here and why is it hobbling around on all-fours like that?"

Henry slapped Dylan in the chest with the back of his paw, "How about we have some fun?" Dylan grinned and they both ran to the back of the truck and grabbed a couple of ax handles. Stumbling a little, they walked at a relaxed pace toward Nick swinging the large wooden handles in their paws.

Henry and Dylan separated to try and surround the fox, then they started edging closer to their prey.

Ethan called out, "Is he drunk or hurt or what?

"Don't care, the only good pred is a dead pred. Go grab the shovel in the back of the truck, we'll bury this pelt as soon as we finish giving him a beating."

Henry swung his stick under Nick hitting him in the chest and knocking him over. Nick curled up and coughed out in a weak voice, "Stop, I'm a cop, I'm a cop."

Kicking dirt into Nick's face and eyes, Dylan yelled, "There's no such thing as a fox cop, so shut your filthy, lying muzzle." And then to drive the point home, he kicked Nick in the stomach forcing the fox to curl in on himself even more.

Henry moved in and followed up his brother with a kick to Nick's side and laughed, "Damn pelt, we'll teach you what it means to come around the Burrows."

"Hey, whoever you are, leave him alone."

All three bucks looked over at the tree line as a head ducked behind a large root. "Look, there's another one over by that tree." As Ethan pointed to the tree, Henry nodded and started to walk toward the new target. "You guys finish that pelt off, I'll take care of his buddy."

Spinning the ax handle in his paw like a baseball player getting ready for his turn at bat, Henry walked toward where Alex was hiding, not realizing he was stalking a bunny kit.

Nick couldn't see because of the dirt in his eyes and he was nose blind due to the foul mud dried all over his muzzle. Fortunately, he could still roughly make out where his attackers were by listening to their movements. Realizing that one of them was headed to where he'd left Alex and Jessie, Nick screamed out "No!" and with everything he had left, he bolted to his feet and leaped toward the sound of the animal hunting his charges.

Slamming into Henry, Nick knocked him over and then moved past him. Back on all fours, he spun around and placed himself between the kits and the attacking animals and let out a loud set of vicious barks. Nick's fur was bushed out and his tail bristled as he bared all of his teeth and growled menacingly toward where he thought his attackers were.

Henry rolled over, picked up his ax handle, and looked at the now savage fox. He backed up to join his brothers. "Spread out, we hit him from three sides at the same time, and we can take him down and then get whoever he's protecting."

Tracking the voice, Nick yelled out, "I'm Officer Wilde, ZPD. You've assaulted a police officer, don't make this any worse than it already is, put down your weapons and get on the ground."

Ethan looked at the fox and then over at Henry, "Are you sure he's not a cop, they let preds be cops
in the city?"

Nick snarled as he tried to blink the dirt out of his eyes, but it wasn't working. He was about to try cleaning them with his paw when he saw a couple of fuzzy, bright lights coming from a couple of miles down the road.

The bucks all looked behind them and with their better hearing, heard what Nick was seeing, two or three trucks, bright lights shining, headed toward the pond.

"Someone's coming, leave the pelt, we gotta get out of here now!"

Ethan pulled Dylan away from the fox, but Henry rushed Nick and leveled a swing at him with his ax handle, Nick ducked but not quick enough and took a glancing blow to the head. Nick yelped in pain and went down in a heap holding the side of his head.

Ethan pushed Dylan toward their truck and then pulled Henry away from the fight. They all grabbed their stuff and made a beeline for the truck. A few moments later, Ethan had the vehicle racing through an old fallow field pointed toward a road that would get them out of there.

As Nick rolled on the ground groaning, he heard the loud roars of multiple truck engines as they pulled up and came to a stop about twenty yards away, their lights illuminating a broad section of the pond shore. He was dizzy with pain, exhausted, and he had no idea what these new animals wanted, but he was going to be ready this time. Nick struggled until he was back up on all fours again and then facing toward the new threat, he limped backward until he'd positioned himself in front of where Alex was hiding. Nick bristled his fur out and prepared to defend the unconscious doe and her brother, no matter the cost.

As Nick made out some blurs slowly coming his way, he felt a small paw grabbing hold of his back fur, Alex was hopping on one foot trying to put himself in front of the fox. Waving his free paw, Alex yelled at the new arrivals, "He's a cop. My sister's hurt, please help us."

As Alex pleaded with the approaching animals, Nick reached into his back pocket, pulled out his badge, and dropped it on the ground in front of him. "I'm a cop, please help them."

Nick started to black out as he heard a female voice say, "It's okay, we're here to help, just take it easy Officer, we've got you."

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A/N: EMR = Emergency Medical Response
Consequences

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Judy huffed and set the printout she'd been reading down on the table in front of her. She'd been excited when Clawhauser had given her the report from Dr. Badger's office as she walked by his desk on the way to the morning brief, but after a few minutes of technical reading, she was now pretty discouraged.

Dr. Badger's lead lab tech had described the various tests that had been run on Katie's blood, the problems with identifying substances that have had hours to be flushed from the body, and then summarized Katie's blood tests pretty succinctly by saying, 'Nothing unexpected was detected in the victim's blood.'

The tech had then written a more extensive report on the lab's testing of the liquid Nick had tried so hard to save. He described how unstable the liquid was and that its components had broken down and deteriorated too quickly to be adequately tested. He'd gone on to say that it wasn't so much the evaporation, but that something was probably missing that allowed the liquid to destabilize when exposed to the atmosphere. About the only useful thing the tech had figured out was that the liquid was definitely a botanical, he just couldn't identify from which plant or plants it had been processed from.

Judy shook her head, what had Nick said before he left, "A bunch of nothing," well that's all she had right now. What she needed was for Nick to text her back. She'd sent him a couple of texts last night, but he never replied. Judy chuckled, he was probably stuck in another pile of kits, what a goof. She'd try him again after the morning meeting was over.

Speaking of the morning meeting, 'Where was Bogo?' Judy started to drum her claws in frustration on the table while she waited for Bogo to arrive. Bogo was late. He was never late. It took another couple of minutes of officers whispering and wondering about what could happen to make the most punctual mammal on the planet late before Judy began to worry about what was going on with the Chief.

Judy was the first to hear the pounding hoofsteps just before the door to the bullpen was nearly ripped off its hinges by a very pissed-off buffalo. Slamming a fistful of papers on the podium, Bogo pointed at Judy and yelled, "Hopps, my office, immediately after the meeting."

Judy jumped to her feet without thinking, "Yes, sir."

Bogo glared at her for another few long seconds before addressing the rest of the officers. "I was just informed by the Mayor of Bunnyburrow that Officer Wilde was attacked by a group of unknown assailants and hospitalized late last night."

"WHAT!" Judy yelled.

"Shut it, Hopps. He's alright."

Judy relaxed a little until her ears swiveled to hear a whispering voice behind her. "I win, barely three days and the pelt got his ass kicked by a horde of fluffy bunnies."
Judy spun around and waved her finger in the direction of the voice, "If someone needs their tail kicked by a bunny, tell me and I'll be happy to oblige you in the ring."

"Stand down, Hopps. And the rest of you, can it." Glaring at everyone to make sure they knew he was serious, Bogo continued. "Wilde rescued a couple of kits. A little boy who had been washed down a river and almost drowned, and his older sister who was injured while pulling him from the water. After tracking the kits down, and carrying them to safety through about three miles of rough terrain at night, Wilde was attacked by some mammals near a local beaver pond."

Judy tensed up, she knew where that pond was. For the life of her, she couldn't believe it hadn't been torn down by now.

"This appears to be a local issue, but if any of you hear anything about the attack being sourced from the city, pass the tip on to Clawhauser, and he'll get it to me."

"I also want to remind you of precinct policy with regards to talking to the media or posting to social media. If you are asked about Wilde or the ongoing case in Bunnyburrow, you are to refer the reporter to the ZPD media liaison. If I hear of anyone breaking policy, they'll be on parking duty for a month."

After Bogo finished the brief, Judy headed up to his office and waited outside his door. She pulled out her phone and checked to see if there were any texts from her family about Nick. Seeing nothing, she sent a text to Janae. I heard Nick was hurt, what's going on? Why didn't you call me?

Judy heard Bogo approaching, so she put her phone away and waited.

Bogo led her into his office and pointed to the large mammal chair in front of his desk. Hopping up onto the chair, Judy remained standing as she waited for the Chief to let her know what he wanted.

"Have a seat, Hopps."

Judy reluctantly sat down in the large chair and waited.

"I take it from your reaction in the bullpen that you hadn't heard Wilde was assaulted last night."

"No sir, I texted one of my littermates to find out what's going on."

Bogo huffed, "Wilde is still in the hospital…"

Judy jumped up again, ears erect and focused on Bogo, "But, you said…"

"For observation, Hopps. He'll be released this afternoon, relax."

Before sitting back down, Judy heard her phone ping with a text alert. She looked at Bogo, who nodded once. Pulling the phone out, she saw Janae had replied. No idea, he never came back last night, will ask mom.

"My littermate doesn't know anything about Nick getting hurt, she's going to ask my mom if she's heard anything."

Bogo grumbled, "I'd think his host family, especially since it yours, would know if something had happened to a guest under their roof. I'm also a little concerned that the Mayor was overly worried about the media reaction to the assault on Wilde."

Picking up a printout from his desk, he waved the paper in front of Judy, "Have you read this
article about Bunnyburrow that was posted last week?"

"Yes, sir. My dad called me about it when it came out."

Setting the paper down, Bogo put his hooves on his desk and looked Judy in the eye, "I want your honest opinion, how safe is Wilde in Bunnyburrow, and I don't mean doing his job as a cop, I mean safe from the citizenry?"

Seeing a blank look on Judy's face, he continued, "Hopps, the bottom line is, I don't have a warm-fuzzy that your people tolerate predators and as unhappy as I was about Wilde participating in this PR stunt, I will be seriously pissed off if one of my officers is being set up for another beating because of his species."

Judy wrung her paws in her lap, "Sir, Bunnyburrow has its problems, and they aren't always the most predator friendly, but the majority of the people are decent. I met Mayor Ackerbunn before she ran for office and she's passionate about bringing Bunnyburrow into the modern era, especially with regards to social issues like equal rights. I voted for her in the last election, and I remember she won by a wide margin, so I think most of the population is supportive of her ideas."

"And the ones that aren't?"

"There are a few families that are more speciest than most, but no worse in attitude than what you would find in Zootopia. Sir, since the Accords, rabbits have been pretty non-confrontational, and even back then, they only defended themselves when they had to. Nowadays, maybe four or five percent of the population is the type that would be willing to take action over a cause and far fewer anything close to violent action."

Bogo rubbed his temple, "Alright, but if I catch wind of any more problems, I'll pull the plug on this little social experiment. And understand this, if Wilde is ambushed again, I'll be sending my own people to Bunnyburrow to take action regardless of what Ackerbunn wants or whose turf I cross."

"Sir, I'd like to go to Bunnyburrow, if I leave now, I can pack and be there late tonight."

Bogo sat back in his chair and tented his hooves in front of his muzzle. After a few moments, he replied, "No, with Wilde gone, I need you here."

"But sir, Nick's my partner, and I'd like to help find whoever attacked him. And sir, he's all the way in Bunnyburrow, and I'm here, hundreds of miles away from him, I should be there, with him... helping."

Bogo leaned forward and glared at the fidgety rabbit in front of him and coolly replied, "Did you or did you not read the same report from Dr. Badger's lab that I read this morning?"

Judy cringed, "Yes, sir. I read it."

"And did you not tell me yesterday that a CI of yours had a lead you were going to follow up on."

"Yes, sir."

Bogo raised an eyebrow and waited.

Defeated, Judy said, "Of course, sir," sighing, she continued, "I'll talk to my littermate about keeping a better eye on Nick and letting me know if it looks like he's getting into any more trouble."
"Alright, that will do for now, you're dismissed. Go find Pawson and start your patrol."

Judy slid off the overly large chair and thudded to the floor. Turning to leave, she plodded toward the door, head down and ears droopy.

As Bogo watched his smallest officer trudge past his desk, he groaned to himself and wished again that he'd never agreed to let Wilde go to Bunnyburrow. He didn't know exactly what was going on between the two of them, but Hopps hadn't been the same since Wilde went on parking duty and it had only gotten worse when she found out that her partner was going to Bunnyburrow. As much of a pain in his tail that Wilde was, he and Hopps were one of his best teams, and he hated to see anything interfere with that, especially if it meant that he was going to have a distracted, unhappy officer investigating an important case.

"Hopps."

Judy turned back to her boss, "Yes, sir?"

"I've already approved your time off for next month so you can attend that festival you wanted to go to." Taking a breath, Bogo reluctantly added, "Keep up on your caseload, and I'll see what I can do about getting you a few days off before then, so you can visit with your partner and make sure he's staying out of trouble."

Judy instantly perked up, "Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! I won't let you down," and then hurried out of Bogo's office.

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The Mayor's office was silent except for the tinkling of ceramic shards falling to the floor.

Sheriff Hoofson, Ken Quillbert, and Daisy Moses, all watched as the remains of the Mayor's mug settled into a pile. With trepidation, all three mammals moved their focus to the enraged rabbit doe sitting at the desk in front of them. For nearly half a minute, Karen Ackerbunn glared at Hoofson until he visibly cringed and tried to look away.

"Look at me!"

Reluctantly, Hoofson looked into the dark pools of rage that were the Mayor, and as she stared at him, he felt as if his soul was being sucked out of his body. He gulped, trying to breathe under the onslaught from his boss.

"Don't you EVER make me have to talk with Chief Bogo like that again!"

Using her paw to emphasize her words, the Mayor quietly asked, "Now, I need you to tell me exactly how it is that Nicholas P. Wilde; first fox Officer of the ZPD; our poster child for improved pred-prey relations; who single handily found two injured bunnies in the pitch-black night; carried them both to safety on his back through miles of rough terrain with an injured arm, and then dehydrated and exhausted was attacked and might have been killed if not for Sarge Gardiner's kits coming to his rescue."

Ackerbunn looked at Hoofson with one of her best fake smiles, cocked her head to the side and waited.

"Umm…"

"Have the animals responsible for attacking Officer Wilde been apprehended?"
"No, ma'am."

Standing up, Ackerbunn pounded her balled up fists on the desktop and yelled out, "HOW. THE. HELL. DID. THIS. HAPPEN?!"

"I'm sorry ma'am, I asked Wilde to stop by the Thrasher's warren on his way home. We've gotten so many false alarm calls from the Thrashers that I thought this one was going to be the same thing. Everything that happened was a combination of bad luck, bad cell service, the dark, and a random group of drunk animals."

"Fine. Tell me why those animals haven't been found yet?"

"Ma'am, I spoke with both Officer Wilde and the young buck, Alex Thrasher, this morning and neither of them saw enough of the mammals to be able to make a positive ID. Alex heard some of the fighting, but with the music going, he couldn't hear any of the voices well enough to recognize them or figure out how many animals there were. Wilde told me that when he hurt his arm, he face-planted into the mud and from then on all he could smell was the river muck, so he wasn't able to get their scent. Wilde didn't see much either, between the truck lights blinding him and getting a bunch of dirt kicked into his eyes he pretty much couldn't see anything but blurs moving around."

Shrugging his shoulders, he added, "Wilde said that it was a group of rabbits that attacked him and that they had probably been drinking, but he couldn't say exactly how many there were, and with all the rain that came through before anyone from my office could get out to the pond to investigate, we don't have any footprints or tire tracks or any other evidence we can use. I'm sorry, but we have no way of figuring out exactly who attacked Wilde."

Karen ground her teeth in frustration, everything's gone to shit, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. Wanting to tear into something, she pressed her stubby claws into the desktop and tried to gouge the surface.

Ken, sitting closest to the desk, whispered, "I ordered the claw resistant surface, sorry."

Karen turned her head and focused her ire on Ken. Lifting her paws off the desk, she reached toward Ken and made a gimme motion with her fingers. Ken reluctantly reached under his chair and pulled a mug out of the almost empty box and placed it in her paw. In a quick motion, she hurled it into the corner and watched the broken pieces fall in a cloud to the floor.

Sitting down Karen huffed, "Any chance I had of getting those grants approved or getting predator equal rights passed just got flushed down the toilet. When the media finds out about the attack on Wilde, and it spreads to the internet, we are screwed. There will be protests, our products will be boycotted, and some people may lose their farms or businesses. If it gets bad enough that the Commonwealth has to step in, the town will explode, and then the city council will push back on everything I want to do. This is a complete and utter disaster."

Shaking her head, Karen said in a softer voice, "I know I could've made this work; I just needed a little more time. Now…" Sighing, she added, "Yup, unless someone's got a brilliant idea they'd like to share, I think the youngest Mayor in history is about to have the shortest term in history."

All the mammals looked at each other, as much as they hated to admit it, they knew the Mayor was right. No way were they going to survive this.

Ken reached down under the desk again and pulled out another mug. Setting it on the desktop, he tried to lighten the mood, "Looks like there won't be a statue of you in the town square after all."
Picking up the mug, Karen shifted it back and forth between her paws as she quietly laughed, "Yeah, the only award I'll be getting is an 'Epic Fail' meme that will follow me on the internet for the rest of my life."

Tossing the mug back and forth a couple more times, Karen suddenly stopped and looked at Ken, "An award."

Ken thought for a moment and then smiled broadly, "Yeah, he saved those kits." He got up and started to pace, "Something big, we need to downplay the assault and highlight the rescue." Stopping in the middle of the room, he looked at Karen, "Brilliant. What have we got that we can give him?"

Hoofson cleared his throat, "Well, we have an award we give school kits for following rules like using the crosswalks and cleaning up trash from the roadside."

Everyone stopped and looked at Hoofson. Karen lifted an eyebrow and was about to say something when Hoofson broke the silence.

"Never mind."

Daisy spoke up, "Would any of the Harvest awards work?"

Karen made a face, "No, unless he rescued the largest cucumber ever grown, I don't think so."

Ken snapped his fingers, "Hey, what about that guy who rescued that family when their house caught on fire? That was like fifteen or sixteen years ago. Didn't he get something for bravery or service to Bunnyburrow? I remember reading something about what happened in an old article."

Karen furrowed her brows as she tried to remember, "Yeah, there was an award, um…"

"Madam Mayor, it was the Burrow Meister award. You probably don't remember much about it because it's only been given out a half dozen times in the last century."

Hoofson shook his head, "No, that award won't work, the Burrow Meister is only given out posthumously, Wilde is still alive."

"Actually Sheriff, that's not entirely accurate." Daisy turned to the Mayor, "Since I started working for the mayor's office over forty years ago, I've seen the Burrow Meister awarded three times. If I remember right, the award can be given out posthumously to as many recipients as you want, but only one living mammal can hold the award at a time."

Brushing back one of her ears, Daisy continued. "Mayor Owens, god rest his soul, was the real expert on the award, I remember him explaining it to me the first time he gave it out."

Karen leaned toward the older doe, "Daisy, please tell me you remember what he told you about the award."

"Yes, ma'am, he told me that the Burrow Meister is an Old Law award and that the Mayor can give it out to any deserving mammal as long as they have standing in the community and if another living mammal holds the award, they need to give their blessing for it to be passed on."

"Any mammal, not just a rabbit?"

Tapping her chin, Daisy replied, "I've only ever heard of the award going to a rabbit, but I do remember Mayor Owens saying that unlike the New Law, the Old Law doesn't reference species,
so you should be able to give it to any mammal you decide deserves it." Pausing and then nodding to herself, she added, "Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure there's a copy of the Old Law translation downstairs in a box somewhere, if you give me a day or two, I believe I can find it and then you can read all about the award yourself."

Hoofson shook his head and interrupted, "Mayor, you heard what Daisy just said about that award, it's pretty special and has only been awarded a few times, are you sure you want to give it to Wilde?"

Karen shook her finger at Hoofson, "You just told me that those kits, injured, wet, cold, and lying in the muck all night with nothing on but swimsuits, weren't going to last two more hours let alone overnight. And you also said that we were lucky Wilde was around because no one else could have tracked them down and carried them out the way he did."

Looking Hoofson in the eye now, she continued, "So, unless you're telling me something different now, Wilde deserves that award, and if it just so happens that giving it to him solves another couple of problems, then I'm good with that."

"No, ma'am, you're right."

Karen nodded at Hoofson and looked over at Daisy, "Okay, is there someone living that has the award, or can I give it to Wilde?"

"Oh, my, yes. Mayor Burns. He was awarded the Burrow Meister about twenty-five years ago. All that good work he did to have the rail station located here in Bunnyburrow; everyone was so proud of him."

Karen looked perplexed, "He never told me he got an award from the town."

"Yes, ma'am and he'd know all about the award too, so if you'd like to talk with him about it, I'm sure he'd be able to help."

Karen nodded at Daisy and then refocused her attention on Hoofson, "He filled out the paperwork to work for the sheriff's department, right?"

"Yes, the first day he was here."

"Good, and we're paying him, and he's living with the Hopps family, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sounds like someone of standing to me."

Ken grimaced, "A Deputy for two and a half days? Kind of thin, don't you think?"

Karen nodded, "Yeah, well, today 'thin' is my middle name." Pointing at Daisy, "You go figure out what the award looks like and gin up a plaque or a ribbon or whatever it is." Switching to Hoofson, "Make sure all his employment paperwork is in order and sit on any info about the attack for a couple of days until we can present the award."

"What about Mayor Burns?" Hoofson asked.

"Leave him to me." Now focusing on Ken, "Quietly work the ceremony prep and prime your media contacts, once Mayor Burns agrees to help, I want to be able to move quickly. I'm thinking we do the presentation three days from now."
Scanning the room, "Any questions?" Everyone shook their heads. "Good, get moving. I want this to happen before the media catches wind of the fact that Wilde was attacked because he's a fox."
Janae slid her phone into her back pocket, closed the door to Nick's room, and then jogging through the warren, she made a beeline to the kitchen to find her mom.

"Mom," turning the corner, Janae stopped herself against a counter. "Mom, what happened to Nick?"

Bonnie dried her paws on her apron and replied, "Isn't he at work?"

"No, he's not. Judy just texted me and said Nick's been hurt. I checked his room, and it doesn't look like he ever came back last night."

Bonnie pulled her apron off and tossed it in the sink, "Stuart Hopps! Come out here right this instant."

Janae heard a couple of grunts, and the squeak of a chair as Stu stood up and came out of the office. "What's going on, Bon?"

"Judy said that Nicholas has been hurt, do you know if anything has happened to him?"

Hooking his thumbs in the straps to his overalls, he nodded, "Yup, I got a call from the sheriff early this morning. He said that fox was beaten up last night and now he's in the hospital. I think they're waiting to see if he wakes up. The sheriff said someone would give a call back later today."

Stu looked back and forth between Bonnie and Janae, who were just staring at him. Shrugging his shoulders, Stu turned to go back into his office.

"WHAT!" Bonnie yelled. "Janae, call the hospital and find out how Nicholas is doing and how soon we can see him." Grabbing the top of Stu's overalls, Bonnie pulled him into the office.

"Why didn't you tell me Nicholas was hurt and in the hospital? You should have told me as soon as the sheriff called."

"Why do you care, he's just a fox."

Bonnie moved closer to Stu, "What do you mean 'just a fox?' Nicholas is a guest in our warren, and he's a good friend and partner of our daughter, Judy. If he's hurt, it's our responsibility as decent mammals to help him, and you not telling me as soon as you knew something had happened, is not being a decent mammal."

Shaking his head, "He's a fox, I shouldn't have let him stay here."

Bonnie's eyes narrowed, she was in Mom mode now. "That young mammal has been nothing but decent, kind, and very respectful of you and the rest of this family even when all he's gotten from some of our kits in return is their scorn." Poking Stu in the chest to emphasize her words, Bonnie continued, "In a room filled with hundreds of strangers, Nicholas stood up for our Judy at dinner the other night and put Lucas in his place. No one in this warren, including you, has ever done
anything for Judy like that before. He deserves to be treated like the decent mammal he is."

Backing away from Stu, Bonnie put her paws on her hips and mentally went through a list while Stu waited. "Alright, this is how it's going to be. If there are any more calls from anyone about Nicholas, I want to know right away. Got it?"

Stu nodded.

"Good, Janae and I are going to the hospital to visit Nicholas and see if there is anything we can do for him. I'm also going to find the sheriff and give him a good talking to about watching out for my kits."

"That fo…Officer Wilde is not..." Stu stuttered and then stopped seeing the angry look on his mate's face.

"Any mammal living under my roof is part of my family." Glaring at Stu, finger poised to start poking him again, "I don't care if he's not a bunny, he's a good boy, and we are going to treat him like the rest of our kits. So, get over yourself and figure out how to make that happen."

"Mom."

Both Stu and Bonnie turned to see Janae standing in the doorway. "I just talked with Nick's nurse at the hospital, she said that he's awake and resting comfortably and we can visit him anytime. She also asked me to bring him a change of clothes, so I'm going to grab some stuff from his room, and then I'll meet you back here in a few minutes."

Bonnie turned back to Stu and gave him one final poke to the chest before going to get her purse and picking out a truck.

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'Ugh, what is that pinging noise, and who left the shades open?' Nick snuggled into the bed and put a pillow over his head to block out the noise and the 'dawn's way too early' light. 'Much better.'

Nick had almost fallen back asleep when he remembered an important fact, he didn't have a bed. Groaning, he poked his nose out from under the pillow and took a whiff. Nick knew that smell, and there was a reason he knew it; he hated hospitals.

The door to the room opened as a sturdy doe in a white uniform came in, holding a tray of food. "Good morning Officer Wilde. My name is Carol, and I'm your nurse today. How are you feeling?"

"Mm ed murts wtl nit."

"Well, that's to be expected after the night you had. I'll leave a couple of Tigrenol capsules and some juice on the table here with your breakfast."

"Lank gu."

"You're welcome, but I need you to come out from under there so I can run a few tests." Carol reached over and lifted the pillow a smidge, "Wakey, wakey, time for nurse Carol to poke and prod you."

Carol laughed as she heard a few moans and grumbles come from under the pillow until a red-furred muzzle finally poked out.
"Fine, fine, I'm awake. What happened to it being important for patients to get lots of rest?"

Carol smirked at her patient, "Oh, that's only in the city hospitals, out here in the burbs we figure it's best to get an early start on the healing process."

Carol grabbed her stethoscope and motioned to Nick, "I'm going to raise you up." As Nick was lifted into a sitting position, the sheets covering him started to slip.

"Whoa, I'm mostly naked here." Grabbing the sheet, Nick made sure it didn't fall below his waist.

"Sorry about that, I heard what little you were wearing was too torn up to salvage and last night they didn't have a gown big enough to fit you, so they did the best they could with one of the regular ones. I'll have someone check the supply room and see if we have anything that might fit better."

It took Carol only a few minutes to check the readings on the monitors and run her own tests. Next, she examined the side of Nick's head for any bumps or bruising. Not seeing anything to worry about, she moved to his chest and gently felt along Nick's ribs, checking for any swelling or tenderness.

"Ow."

Carol stopped, "Yeah, it's a little swollen right there, feels like a minor bruise. Unfortunately, there's not a lot we can do about a bruised rib except let it heal. Rest and use an ice pack on it for a couple of days, and you should be fine."

Nick nodded, "Will do, but I'll need you to write a note to my bunny-kit alarm clock that I'm allowed to sleep in the rest of the week, no, I mean the next two months."

Trying not to laugh, Carol grabbed a tray of supplies, sprayed the scrape on Nick's paw pad, and then spent a few minutes replacing the bandage on his arm.

"Officer Wilde, you don't appear to have any serious bruising, and the injuries to your arm and paw pad look like they will heal fine. I want you to replace the bandage on your arm once a day, make sure you use the antibiotic cream we give you and keep the bandage dry when you take a shower. Your paw pad was only scraped a little, so it should be fine by tomorrow. The wound on your arm is the one we need to watch carefully. We shaved the fur around the puncture, so if you see the skin turning red, that means it's infected, and you need to come back right away. Otherwise, the doctor wants to see you in a week."

"Thank you, and I'm Nick, by the way, kind of hard to be too formal when all I have on is a dish towel."

Chuckling, Carol pointed to the call button on the bed and told Nick which button to press if he needed anything from the on-duty nurse. Turning to go, she remembered who was waiting to see her patient, "Nick, Sheriff Hoofson is here and would like to talk with you, I'll send him in if you're feeling up to it."

Nick yawned and nodded, "Sounds good, thanks."

Nick spoke with the sheriff and described everything he could remember from his search for the kits, how far he hiked, where he found them, their condition, and carrying them out. He also described the attack and let the sheriff know that he was exhausted, nose blind, couldn't see and too far gone at the time of the attack to be able to ID the perps or give him any useful information.
The sheriff wrote down a few notes and told Nick that he'd pass everything on to the team that had been out since dawn searching the areas around the pond and along the riverbank for anything useful that might help them identify the mammals that had attacked him.

Checking his watch, the Sheriff let Nick know that he had to go. He still needed to talk with the Thrasher kits and then get a few other things done before he'd be ready to meet with the mayor later. As he left, he thanked Nick and told him to plan on taking a few days off to recover, and that he'd call him later.

Later in the morning, and with nothing to do except watch soap operas, game shows, or the Meerkat Pawich show, Nick was staring in disbelief at the TV, 'Seriously, how many guys did that antelope doe sleep with in one week that she can't figure out who the father of her calf is?'

Nurse Carol poked her head in just as Pawich was opening the most recent DNA test results for the antelope doe, which came back negative by the way, and let Nick know that the doctor had decided to rerun a couple of tests and that she'd be back later to poke and prod him some more.

Shaking his head at the news, both Nurse Carol's and Pawich's, Nick grabbed the TV remote and was about to start channel surfing again, when he heard a light knock at his door. Turning off the TV, he turned toward the door and said, "Come in."

Nick sat up straight as Mayor Ackerbunn came into his room. Without thinking, Nick made to get out of bed and stand up but quickly stopped when he remembered that he was still half-naked with only a small gown covering part of him.

The Mayor lifted a paw, "Please, Officer Wilde, don't get up. I only wanted to see how you were doing and to thank you for rescuing Jessie and Alex. That was some impressive work you did last night. I'm told that no one else on the sheriff's staff would have been able to find those kits the way you did."

"Thank you, ma'am. All in a night's work."

Chuckling, Ackerbunn nodded, "Yeah, no, what you did was special." Shaking Nick's paw, she smiled, "I heard you're going to be released later today, so I'll leave you be for now, and if there is anything I can do for you while you're recuperating, please let me know."

Opening the door to leave, Ackerbunn added, "Sarge Gardiner is here, and would like to visit with you if that's alright. It was his kits that chased away your attackers, and then got all of you here to the hospital so quickly."

"Yes, ma'am, please send him in, and thank you for stopping by."

Another knock at the door had him look up in time to see a stoutly built middle-aged rabbit come into his room. Nick realized 'Sarge' had to be more than a name, it must also be a title. Where Stu Hopps was a little soft in the middle, this rabbit looked like he was made of solid muscle, and where some rabbits could be a little nervous being this close to a fox, Sarge looked like he'd been around predators all his life and wasn't the least bit worried about them. He had a presence about him, Nick wanted more than anything to come to attention and salute this rabbit.

Reaching out to shake paws, "Officer Wilde, I'm Robert Gardiner. I'm here with my son visiting Jessie and Alex Thrasher, and they asked me to check on you and ask you if you'd be able to come over and visit with them before you're released."

"Nice to meet you, sir. Please call me Nick. Yes, um, as soon as I find some pants, I'll stop over
and say 'hi.'" Nick wagged his tail to emphasize his problem.

Laughing, Robert nodded, "My kits told me you were almost down to your skivvies when they found you. Pretty damn smart using your clothes to tie those kits to your back. One of the sheriff's deputies was out early this morning with my daughter scouting for where you told the sheriff you found Jessie and Alex, and if the spot they found is the right place, that would have made for a hell of a tough hike out, especially on such a dark, moonless night."

"Yeah, well, if it weren't for your family, I don't think we'd be talking right now. Whoever those animals were last night, they weren't going to stop with just beatings, hell, I think one of them already had a shovel out and was getting ready to dig me a shallow grave."

Both mammals were quiet for a moment thinking about how close to a tragedy last night was.

Nick broke the silence, "Mr. Gardiner, thank you, and please pass my gratitude onto your family."

Robert nodded, "I will, and call me Sarge, everyone else in Bunnyburrow does."

From outside Nick's room, both heard a female's voice. "I'm looking for Nicholas Wilde's room."

"Right over there, ma'am."

A knock and a pair of ears poked around the curtain partially blocking the doorway, "Nicholas, are you in here?"

"Mrs. H., yes, yes I am."

Bonnie came rushing the rest of the way into the room, "Oh dear, Nicholas, you gave me quite the fright." She padded to the bed, looked Nick over, and then gave him a hug, "Don't worry me like that again."

Turning to Sarge, she said, "Hello, Robert. I heard that it was Abigail's team that attended to our three injured kits last night. Please tell her, 'Thank you' for me."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll let her know."

Patting Robert on the shoulder, she said, "Good, if I remember right, she likes strawberry rhubarb pie. I'll have one of my boys drop a few off at your warren for her."

Turning back to Nick, Bonnie couldn't help but notice how uncomfortable Nick appeared. "Nicholas, is something the matter?"

"Uh, well, I'm hoping you brought me some clothes, this gown isn't exactly big enough to cover all of me."

"Oh."

Bonnie turned to the doorway, "Janae, would you please bring Nicholas' things in for him."

Janae came into the room carrying a bundle of clothes and a plastic evidence bag.

Nick whispered, "Mrs. H., more females in the naked fox's room was not the solution I was looking for."

Sarge laughed at the embarrassed tod. "Looks like things are well in hand here, so I'm going to head out. Before I go, I wanted to invite all of you to dinner tomorrow night. I've invited the
Thrashers and a few others. It would be an opportunity for everyone to get together and celebrate your finding those kits."

Nick, Bonnie, and Janae all accepted the dinner invitation. Once Sarge left, Janae set her bundle down on the bed while tactfully averting her eyes, although she did giggle a little at Nick's discomfort.

"Nick, are you sure I shouldn't go to the store and pick you out a shirt or two? The only clean shirts I could find all had these hideous flowered prints on them. I can't believe Judy would let you wear those awful colors."

Nick huffed, "I'll have you know that those shirts are classics, and I am a big fox now, and if I want to wear a Pawaiian shirt, I can."

"Does Judy know that you brought half a suitcase of those ugly shirts?"

"Maybe."

Janae raised an eyebrow and started tapping her foot.

"They're soooo comfortable though."

A huff, followed by more tapping.

"Fine, if you promise not to tell her, I'll go with you to find some new shirts."

Bonnie and Janae both laughed as Nick picked up his clothes.

"Janae, it's going to be a little bit before the doctor is in to check on Nicholas. Why don't you go over to Gideon's Bakery and pick up something for Nicholas to eat. I'm going to find the sheriff and have a word with him."

Patting Nick on the arm, Bonnie let him know that they would both be back in a little bit and then went to find a certain deer buck and give him a piece of her mind.

Janae was following her mom out of the room when she turned back to Nick, "Hey Nick, Judy has been trying to get hold of you. She called me earlier, and she sounded pretty worried."

Nick nodded as the does left, and then he changed into his clothes. After he was done, he dumped the contents of the evidence bag out and was happy to see his wallet, badge, keys, and especially his phone.

Nick tried to turn on his phone and then remembered the battery had died last night. Walking out to the nurse's station, he asked if they had a spare charger. He searched a box full of forgotten chargers and found one that would work.

Once plugged in, his phone blew up with texts and voicemails, almost all of them from Judy.

Nick scanned his email and texts and didn't see anything he needed to jump on before calling Judy except…, "No, no, no! What is she thinking?"

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"Cucumber beetles, he still hasn't texted me back." Dropping her phone on the seat next to her, Judy crossed her arms and fretted.
"Stop worrying, Hopps, he's fine."

Judy harrumphed, "He should know that I'm worried about him and text me back."

Pawson thought about making a comment on the fact that telepathy was more a female trait, but was quickly stopped by a 'don't you dare say it' glare from Judy. 'Damn females, how do they do that?'

"How about you call the hospital? I'm sure they can send a nurse to his room and ask him to call you."

"No. I'm still mad at Nick, and I don't want him to think that I'm that worried about him."

Pawson raised an eyebrow, this was a lot like talking to his girlfriend. Deciding to play it safe, he replied, "Uh-huh."

Judy brightened suddenly as she thought of a great idea, "You text him." Smiling like she'd just found the last digit of Pi, she nodded for Pawson to start texting.

Not wanting to get involved, at all, he replied, "I uh, can't. I'm driving."

"Fine, you can do it next time we stop."

Pawson checked the car's gas gauge, three-quarters full, and then interrogated his bladder, half-full. Smiling, he figured he had two hours before he had to stop. Wilde better…

Judy's phone rang. In the blink of an eye, she had the phone in her paw and was staring at a picture of Nick with his phone number on the screen. The phone rang again.

Pulling the cruiser over, Pawson asked, "Aren't you going to answer it?"

"Not yet, angry bunnies wait for three rings."

The phone rang a third time, barely, as Judy swiped her finger on the screen to receive the call and then put it on speaker and set it on the console between her and Pawson.

"Hey, Carrots. Miss me?"

"Nope."

"Hmm, fourteen texts and six voicemails say otherwise."

Judy harrumphed again, folded her arms, and then nodded toward Pawson.

Picking up the hint, Pawson took over. "Hey, Wilde, this is Pawson, Hopps wants…"

"Connor," whispered Judy.

"I meant, I want to know if you're okay."

Judy was glad this wasn't a video call, she didn't need to see the smirk on Nick's face.

"Well, thank you for asking, Officer Pawson. Since you are obviously concerned about a fellow officer who was critically injured in the line of duty, hospitalized, poked, prodded and then hooked up to a machine that goes ping, I feel comfortable telling you that, all things considered, I'm doing quite peachy."
Judy blurted out, "Oh, Nick, please tell me you're okay, I was so worried." And then covered her mouth to stop herself from saying anything else.

Nick heard the concern in Judy’s voice and decided he'd teased her enough. "Carrots, please don't worry, I'm fine. My left arm is bandaged up, my paw is a little scraped, and I have a few bruises from whoever beat me last night, but I'm good. The doctor said he's going to release me pretty soon."

"Alright, I forgive you."

"You do?"

Judy huffed, "No, I forgive you for making me worry." Glancing at Pawson, she continued in a quieter tone, "I'm still mad at you for the other thing."

Nick chuckled, "Alright, just for you, I'll try not to get beat up again."

Frowning at Nick's joke, Judy replied in a cool tone, "Bogo briefed everyone on what happened this morning and then called with an update a little while ago. He said the sheriff contacted him and filled him in on all the details of the investigation so far, and from what Bogo told me, it doesn't sound like the sheriff was able to find anything that he could use to track down the animals that attacked you."

"Yeah, it was a bad night, I wish I could have given him something he could've used, but I couldn't."

Judy sighed, "You know, If Bogo hadn't stopped me, I'd be on a train to Bunnyburrow right now."

"And have half the town's population in a lineup by tomorrow night, right?" added Nick.

Judy smiled, "Yup."

"I'd like that, especially the part where you're here."

Judy took a quick glance at Pawson, and then quietly replied, "Me too."

Pawson watched as Judy, lightly biting her bottom lip and stared at the phone without saying anything. Hoping some police strategy talk might break out, Pawson waited.

And waited.

And…, "Alright, you two, how about we talk about this Thorn character that Hopps is supposed to talk to."

Pawson heard a coughing noise from the phone, and then Nick replied, "Not going to happen."

"What!" Judy yelled and then more calmly said, "Nick, I got a report from Dr. Badger's lab this morning, and they weren't able to come up with anything from either Katie's blood or the smashed vial, except that the fluid was a botanical, so Thorn is our only lead. We have no choice, you have to help us."

"No, Carrots, you don't know these guys the way I do, if they're not handled just right, you could end up in a lot of trouble. How about you give me a week for my arm to heal completely, and then I can meet with him."

"Nicholas Piberius Wilde, I am as capable an officer as you are, and I have been trained to handle
situations exactly like this. We need to talk to this informant, and we need your help now."

"Carrots..."

"Nick, please, I promise I'll be careful."

Judy waited for a response and then rolled her eyes when she heard a rumbling noise. "Stop your
growlin', you sound like an old bear or something. Just say yes, already."

"Fine."

Judy fist pumped, "Yes."

"Pawson, did she just fist pump?"

Pawson looked at the gloating bunny next to him and replied, "Yes, she did."

"Alright, I'll do it, but I have a couple of conditions. First, you both have to promise me that you'll
follow my instructions to the letter. Second, Pawson..."

Pawson leaned closer to the phone. "Yes?"

"I want you to swear on your pack that you'll watch out for my partner, I need to know that you've
got her back."

Judy huffed, "Nick, we're all cops, it's our job to watch out for each other."

Nick was firm, "Carrots, this is different, I only know a little about Pawson, I respect what I've
heard about his reputation, but I also know that not everyone at the ZPD can be relied on in a
pinch, so I need more before I agree to this. He swears or no deal."

Pawson looked between the phone and Judy. An oath on your pack was not something a wolf did
lightly, and there were significant risks in getting involved with these two at that level. Pawson
remembered the stories some of Hopps' temporary partners relayed to him before Wilde became
her partner. They all said Hopps was a good cop, really cared about helping others, a terrific friend,
and a relentless hunter. If you were a bad guy, you did not want Hopps on your tail.

What worried him was that she didn't always think about the consequences of her actions to herself
or to those around her. Sometimes she was so single-mindedly tenacious, that she could be like a
crazed bull in a china shop, leaping first and pounding anything that got in her way. Hopps still had
the department record for property damage set in her first six months as an officer. Fortunately for
the department, her damage tally leveled off after she'd partnered up with Wilde.

And then there was Wilde, he was the precinct enigma. The few mammals that had partnered with
him when Hopps was off, and hadn't already written him off just because he was a fox, said that he
is a thinker, always looking for a subtle angle, and then he'd want a contingency plan just in case.
Like Hopps, they said Wilde was a good cop who really cared. One big difference between them
was that Wilde didn't have any close friends on the force except for Hopps and maybe Clawhauser.
Putting these factors together meant that Wilde would sometimes overthink a situation, didn't
always trust others to give him alternatives, and occasionally would take longer to work a case
when a more direct approach could have resolved it faster.

Individually they were good cops, but partnered up they were something much more. Each of their
strengths compensated for the other's weaknesses, and the end result was a team exponentially
better than the sum of its parts. The two of them were able to communicate on a level no one else
could understand, anticipating each other's actions, feed off of each other's ideas, and be able to piece together evidence and make leaps of logic that left others scratching their heads. Among all the ZPD teams citywide, they had the third-highest case closure percentage, which is astounding considering they'd only been partners for six months.

Pawson shook his head, maybe a compromise over the oath was possible.

"Wilde, Hopps said it right, we're all cops who've sworn to serve and protect, and that includes accepting the risk that we could get hurt or killed in the line of duty." Now focusing on Judy instead of the phone, "So I'll do it, but I have a condition for you Hopps."

Judy nodded for Pawson to continue.

"Every day I go to work, I tell my mate I'll be back home that night. Hopps, I need you to respect the fact that I'm not Wilde and that we don't have the same connection that you and Wilde do. I can't read you and anticipate what you're doing the same way. So, you need to keep the crazy stunts to a minimum, and if it looks like we're facing a bad situation that you'll be willing to call in backup."

"What crazy stunts, I'm a by the book cop."

"Hopps, you grabbed a subway car right out from under a terrorist gang, nearly collided it with a commuter train, rammed it into a building, and blew up a rail station."

Judy stammered, "That was over a year ago, and it just sort of happened."

Both Pawson and Judy turned to the phone as Nick added, "Carrots, jumping our cruiser over that gulch and crashing it into a van of fleeing Nip dealers was a touch crazy."

Pouting now, Judy replied, "Was not. They were about to get away."

Pawson countered, "How about when you two took down those bank robbers. I saw the security camera footage. Wilde, you were like a ghost moving between the fixtures and furniture darting your targets, while Hopps was some sort of acrobatic nightmare bouncing off counters, chairs, and walls tranqing everyone else."

Nick chuckled, "Pawson, you had to be there to see her in action, that gang of weasels never stood a chance against her."

"But that's what I mean, I'm not like you guys, I'm not stealthy, and I'm not bouncy. You want a door caved in, I'm your mammal, a straight-up fight with a grizzly, I got it. What you guys do, not so much."

After a few quiet moments, Nick broke the silence, "Carrots…"

With her best pouty face on, she replied, "Alright, I'll be a good bunny."

Pawson took a breath, "Okay, Wilde. I swear on pack Black Paw that I will support Judy Hopps as I would another member of my pack. If I fail to uphold this oath, then I will accept the judgment of my Alpha even if I am made to be an Omega and shunned by my packmates."

"I thought your family was in pack Silver Claw."

Frowning, Pawson replied with a more bitter tone than he intended, "They still are. I had to change packs when Olivia and I decided to become a couple."
Judy rested a paw on Pawson's arm, "I'm sorry, Connor. No one should have to go through that."

"It's okay, Black Paw welcomed us in as a couple, and they treat Olivia like they would any wolf." Chuckling a little, he added, "You should have seen her at the last pack Howl. Olivia can't howl to save her life, so she ended up spending the night trying to teach a half-dozen young she-wolves how to roar, it was the cutest thing I'd ever seen."

Nick laughed, "Alright, back to business. Thorn's full name is Axl Thorn, he's a Sand fox, smaller than me, ears almost as big as Finn's and short limbed. Thorn also has a real pale coloring, not an albino, but a very light sandy colored fur. It's important that you don't let his size and looks fool you, he's quick, tough, and fights dirty. Imagine a young, upstart Mr. Big as a fox and include a posse of predator gang bangers."

Judy interrupted, "If I'm going to be talking with a crime-boss wannabe, why don't I just give Mr. Big a call and ask him for help? He likes me, and I haven't been by to see Fru Fru or little Judy for a while."

Pawson coughed, "Hopps, you know Mr. Big, and you're still alive, how does that happen?"

Judy nodded, "Yeah, I saved his daughter, Fru Fru, from being crushed by a doughnut in Little Rodentia, and now I'm the godmother of his grandchild."

"Carrots, let's keep talking with Mr. Big in your back pocket for now. We have to be careful who you end up owing favors to and owing Big could come back to bite you."

"Okay, Thorn first, then we'll see."

"If he's agreed to this meeting, he wants something. I'm guessing that Finn hit a sore spot asking about information on a new drug on the street or mammals going temporarily savage."

"Do you think he wants to help us?" Pawson asked.

"Probably, but he's not going to give us any information for free, and he's going to expect us to ask for help in a way that makes him look good in front of his gang."

Pawson made to ask Nick something when Judy held up her paw, "What do you mean by making him look good?"

"Carrots, it's like what we did to hustle Bellwether into spilling her guts on the Nighthowler case. Thorn knows you're a cop, and you know he knows so you have to play to his gang and convince them that you're legit. That way, he can help us by making it look like you're asking him for a favor, all while his gang watches him get what he wants from you. Even if some of his gang recognize you, they'll keep quiet because Thorn is playing the famous Judy Hopps. Bottom line, if you play it right, you get the information, and Thorn wins with his gang and gets what he wants."

"That sounds really complicated, how about a little bunny persuasion instead?" Judy made a fist and punched it into the palm of her other paw.

Hearing the slap of Judy's paws, Nick replied, "Ah, no. We're trying to avoid violence if we can."

Judy huffed, "Fine, then what do you think he's going to want?"

Nick was quiet for a few seconds, "Well, from me, he wants a favor and probably the boost to his reputation from having me owe him."
"But you won't be there, I'll be doing the meet."

"If it comes to a favor, that needs to be on me, Carrots. I won't let you be compromised by someone like Thorn."

Pawson leaned over the phone again, "Alright, Wilde, how do you want us to play this?"

"Carrots, you need to treat this as a business meeting between mob bosses. You need to act like Big, the head of an organization, no fear, raise an eyebrow, and a mammal's legs get broken, you snap your fingers, and someone dies. As far as everyone watching is concerned, you and Thorn are equals making a deal over lattes."

"If Hopps is the brains, I suppose that makes me the brawn," sighed Pawson.

Nick replied, "Yeah, you're the muscle, so I need you to act like it, big and dumb. Carrots is in charge, you're furniture. She nods, you move. If anyone wants to talk to her, you're the door they need to go through first.

I want Thorn's crew to respect Hopps, and with someone like you on her payroll, they'll figure she's either a major player or a serious badass. This way, if they are going to go after someone, it'll be you. Muscle is a known quantity, and they'll prefer a straight-up fight with you if the meet goes bad."

"So, I'm the decoy," Pawson whined.

"And I'm the badass!" Judy shouted, adding a fist pump for good measure.

"Pawson, did she fist pump again?"

"Yep, sure did."

"THBPBPTHPT."

"Nice there, Carrots. Any mature responses or questions so far?"

"Nope," said the bunny flexing her muscles.

"Good, now a few details. Pawson, find yourself a dark suit that looks good with a holster and not for a tranq, you need to carry a lethal. Don't take your service pistol, use your backup piece, and borrow another one to wear on your ankle or get a big knife. You need to be armed and dangerous and look ready to take on a whole pack."

"Oooh," rubbing her paws together, Judy asked, "I've got some nunchakus, can I take those?"

"Carrots, ah, we've already said 'no' to bunny persuasion. Instead, we're going to need to play to one of your natural strengths because you have to do this meet unarmed and not in uniform."

"WHAT!" Judy yelled.

"Yeah, and you made me swear on my pack. What the hell, Wilde?"

"Carrots, you going to the meet unarmed and out of uniform helps in two ways. First, it lets Thorn think you respect him which helps him with his gang, and the second reason, the one I'm counting on the most, is Thorn has a weakness for beautiful things, he likes to have them, show them off or just be surrounded by them. In some ways he's like Clawhauser is with doughnuts, he can't help himself."
Pawson could see the confusion on Judy's face as she asked, "What do you mean like I need to bring flowers or a pretty gift to this meeting?"

Nick chuckled, "No, all you need to bring is you. You're a beautiful girl, and once we find you something to wear besides your uniform, he won't let anything happen to you because it would be like breaking a fine bottle of wine or damaging a priceless Rambrandt painting."

"What? I hope you're not telling me that I have to get all dressed up to meet this slimeball. The only pretty dress I have is the one that Janae gave me when I graduated from college, and I'm not wearing that to visit the docks. I'm saving that dress for a date with someone…special."

Judy looked up from the phone to Pawson and then back down. Fortunately for her, Pawson didn't know bunnies very well, or he might wonder why her ears were pinker than they had been a moment ago.

"Ah, you mean that purple dress hanging on the rack in your apartment? The one that exactly matches the color of your eyes. You know, the backless one, made of a silky, glisteny material that's going to accentuate your gray fur as it plunges all the way to your fluffy tail, while the side slit that starts mid-thigh will show off your perfect legs. Is that the dress you're talking about?"

Judy flipped her ears over her eyes, "Moldy berries, I can't believe you saw it in my apartment."

"It was kind of hard to miss since you don't have a closet, but don't worry, Carrots, you can't wear that dress anyway, it's not right for this meet."

"Why?"

"What we need for this meeting is understated beautiful, not hot. You wearing that dress is hot, and no way anybody in Thorn's gang is going to believe someone that attractive would willingly talk to a mid-level fox gang-leader, you show up in anything like that dress and the whole meet will go south in a hurry."

Judy peeked around an ear and glanced at Pawson and then back to the phone. "I'm not hot, I'm not even pretty. You've seen my sisters by now, they're pretty, all curvy and with perfect fur." Her voice went to a whisper, "You don't know anything about rabbits, compared to most of my sisters, I'm just a boring, drab-looking bunny."

"Lately, I've had a number of mammals tell me that I don't know anything about bunnies. You're right, I don't know all about bunnies, but I do know about you…"

Pawson was trying to figure a way to bail out of the cruiser and get away from these two. No way were they just ZPD partners, hell, he'd been with Olivia for years, and he'd never had a conversation like this with her. Thinking about it, maybe he needed to. He could take her to a fancy place so they could get dressed up, pick her out a cocktail dress, or perhaps some lingerie. And then he'd–

"…Pawson, back me up and tell Hopps she's hot."

Pawson's train of thought derailed, and he started sputtering, "What…wait. Oh, hell no, Wilde. Not in a million years am I going to do that, do you think I have some sort of death wish? Olivia may be smaller than I am, but her claws and fangs are much sharper than mine, and she's not afraid to use them. Believe me when I say that this male is not dumb enough to comment on the hotness of any female except his own mate. So, you two go find a room, or a counselor, or whatever, but leave me out of this conversation."
Pawson opened the cruiser door and leaned toward the phone, "Wilde, I think I know my part in this, so I'll let you two 'partners' talk privately. Be back in a few, Hopps." Stepping out and closing the door behind him, Pawson shook his head, between Wilde's version of a mission prep and Hopps practically hotboxing him with her scent as Wilde spoke, he needed to be out of there.

Taking a last look at Hopps before stepping away, Pawson huffed, 'Friends my furry ass, I'd always figured Clawhauser was a couple crullers short of a variety pack when he talked about those two, but now–'

Stopping in mid-thought, Pawson remembered that just a few moments ago he'd been in the middle of his own version of a mission prep. As visions of lingerie popped back into his head, Pawson pulled out his phone and sent a text to Olivia. A moment later, he got back a couple of winking cat emojis. Pawson smiled, he loved it when a plan came together, now if there were only a Valerie's Secret or a Frisky Feline store around nearby…

After the cruiser door closed, Nick carried on, "Fine, never mind Carrots, trust me you're hot and the fact you don't know it works in our favor. Just be your normal self, and you'll do fine. Instead of the dress, wear your newest blue jeans and your purple blouse. Oh, and wear the silver necklace I got you for Christmas."

Ears bright red now, Judy took a deep breath, "Okay, anything else?"

"Yeah, when you're in front of his crew you need to let them hear you tell him, 'Nick Wilde respects your knowledge of the docks and the influence of your organization.' Once you've done that and you're alone with him, you should be able to get him to talk business.

"If you have to give up a favor, tell him I will owe him a small favor, but nothing that runs contrary to my position at the ZPD. If he needs proof that you can speak for me, show him that picture Aidan took of us at the Greytail's den."

"What's so special about a picture of us sitting on a couch that Thorn would care?"

"It's a fox thing. Hopefully, he'll just take your word for it."

Judy started to play with her ear a little, "Alright, Connor and I will get ready and wait to hear from Finn."

Nick paused and then continued in a nervous tone, "Judy, promise me you'll be careful."

Hearing him use her name and not one of the many nicknames he usually called her, was a sure sign that she had a worried fox on her paws. Trying to soothe her fox's concerns, she replied, "I promise, no crazy bunny stunts."

"Still mad at me?" Nick whispered hopefully.

Judy mustered up the best fake mad voice she had and replied, "Yup," making sure to pop the 'p' as cutely as she could.

Hearing the forgiveness in her voice, Nick's tail began to wag as he said, "I miss you."

Judy sighed, "I miss you more."

…..

Janae opened the door to the hospital ward, waved to the duty nurse, and walked to Nick's room.
She wasn't exactly sure all the foods Nick liked, so she'd decided to play it safe and get him a couple of Gideon's blueberry pastry turnovers. They smelled good and had to be better than the glop the hospital served.

The door to Nick's room was open, but the privacy curtain was partway closed. Janae was about to knock on the door frame and walk in when she overheard Nick talking to someone on his phone.

"Still mad at me?"

Janae put her free paw up to her mouth to help stifle a laugh. Nick must be talking with a girl, she'd heard her brothers use that lonely-lover tone with their girlfriends, especially when they knew they were in trouble for doing something stupid.

"I miss you."

Janae lightly knocked and then padded into the room. Peeking around the curtain, she saw Nick staring at a contact picture on his phone, tail wagging, and a goofy look on his face.

Definitely a girl.

.....

A/N: Sand fox = Ruppell's fox
Soccer

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Judy hummed happily as she sat on the metro car, earbuds in, listening to her favorite Gazelle playlist. Judy was feeling great. Having shelved all the angry bunny rules, she and Nick had traded a few messages last night while he was watching a movie with her young siblings. He'd even sent her a selfie that showed him buried in another bunny pile. Once the movie was over and they'd texted their goodnights, Judy had curled up with her scented fox plushie and fallen immediately to sleep.

Today was supposed to be pretty warm, so Judy was decked out in one of her workout outfits, gray athletic shorts and a short sleeve pink t-shirt over a black sports bra. Judy had texted Toni yesterday afternoon about visiting with Aidan and Tyler, and Toni had invited her to go with them to their soccer game, and now she was headed out to Foxburg to meet up with the team.

According to Toni, the team had a dozen kits, most of them foxes, and the game today was at a soccer park on the north side of the city. Toni had also asked Judy to help chaperone the kits while they traveled. As team mom, Toni was always short parents that could go with the team since so many of them had to work. Judy quickly agreed, she hadn't done anything soccer since high school and was looking forward to a fun day outside with her new friends.

After getting off the Metro, Judy walked about six blocks to Sister Mary's. Going around back, she saw a group of ten and eleven-year-old kits and a few adults waiting on benches near a play area. The group of kits was made up of mostly foxes, but Judy saw a lynx kitten and an otter boar too. The kits all had on blue t-shirts and shorts with white numbers on the back and blue and white striped socks. Judy also noticed that the shirts all had a Foxburg Diner logo printed in small letters near the bottom hem.

"Miss Judy, Miss Judy, you came." Judy bent down with her arms open as she was rushed by a couple of young foxes. Aidan and Tyler jumped into a hug with the bunny, and then they all laughed as Judy tussled their head fur.

"I wouldn't miss seeing you two play for the world." Taking each of them by the paw, Judy walked over to the waiting group.

Toni gave Judy a big hug and then introduced her to two other parents and the team's Assistant Coach, a fox named Martin Blacktail, whose daughter was also a player on the team. They waited a few more minutes for the last two players to show up, a pair of weasels named Eric and Cooper.

Martin walked over to the group of adults and motioned with his phone, "Hey guys, I just spoke with Coach Mitchell, he said he's stuck at work and will have to meet us at the field a few minutes before the game starts."

Toni yelled out, "Alright, everyone, time to go. Does everyone have their Metro passes?" All the kits and parents nodded as they headed toward the Metro station.

Judy felt something soft touch her paw, "Hi, my name is Jeffrey, are you really a cop?"

Judy looked down at the young otter, "Hi Jeffery, my name is Miss Judy and yes, I am a cop. I've
been a ZPD officer for a year now."

"That's so cool. Aidan said you're friends with Mr. Nick, he's really cool too."

Judy smiled at Jeffrey, "Yeah, you're right, Mr. Nick is pretty cool."

Reaching the Metro stop a little early, Coach Blacktail gathered all the kits around, "Alright everyone, we're getting ready to ride the train, so we need to go over the rules again."

All the kits groaned.

Judy stood in the back of the group with the other adults and let her ears swivel toward the coach so she could hear what she had to watch out for as a chaperone.

"Come on everyone, listen up. Once we're on the train, stay in your seats, no running around and no yelling or throwing anything. And you all remember that there will be prey mammals on the train too, so keep your claws in and no showing your teeth." Pausing and waving toward a few of the kits, he added, "Everyone, show me how you keep your teeth hidden."

All the kits jutted their chins out and pursed their lips so the adults could see their toothless faces.

"Good job." Looking at Toni, "What else?"

All the kits turned to look at Toni as she replied, "Some prey mammals can be nervous around predators, so it's important that none of you kits growl, howl, bark, gekker, or scream." Turning to Rory and giving the girl a look, "And no hissing or yowling."

With a pouty look, the lynx thumped the fox next to her, "That wasn't my fault, you need to tell Devin not to sit on my tail."

"Cooper pushed me."

"Did not, the train moved and you fell over."

"Nuh-uh, you elbowed him when you were talking with Jeffery."

Judy stifled a laugh as the adults shushed the kits.

"Okay everybody, watch out for each other's tails when you're sitting down and if you have any problems, ask one of the adults for help."

Once everyone was seated on the railcar, Judy leaned over toward her friend, "Toni, what was with all the behavior rules for the kits on the platform? I'm prey, and claws, fangs and growling don't bother me."

Toni chuckled, "Given who your boyfriend is, I'm pretty sure I don't have to worry about you. Although, it might be a good idea to go over the rules for how a lovesick couple is supposed to act in front of a bunch of kits, hmmm."

Judy let her ears drop down before Toni could see her blushing, "You're so mean, we weren't that bad."

"You mean, nothing that a bucket of cold water couldn't have fixed."

"Toni..."
"Sorry Judy, you're too easy." Gesturing with her paw to the rest of the car, "To answer your question, look around and you can see the looks a few of the other passengers are giving us, fear, disgust, sometimes even pity. Ignoring the problem only puts the kits at risk for abuse, so we tackle it head-on, acknowledge it, and teach the kits how to appear less predatory. So far it's helped a little to keep the more sensitive prey mammals from getting overly nervous around us."

Judy put her paw on her friend's arm, "I'm so sorry, no one should have to grow up hiding what they are just because of another mammal's attitude."

"It's okay, attitudes were getting better before Bellwether threw a wrench into everything with her Nighthowler attacks, since then, we've just had to start over and hope for the best." Pausing for a moment, Toni smiled, "Speaking of claws, fangs, and growling, how used to them are you, or maybe I should be asking, how used to them do you want to be?"

Flipping her ears over her eyes, Judy laughed, "Toni, stop…"

"Too easy."

.....

Judy and Toni chatted like schoolgirls on a field trip. It was so nice to have a friend to talk to. Ever since Judy had left Bunnyburrow, she'd missed girl-time with her littermate, Janae. Yes, they texted a bunch, but it wasn't the same. Same with Fru Fru, she enjoyed their get-togethers, but they traveled in different social circles and sometimes Judy just wanted to hang out.

"Miss Judy, have you ever played soccer?"

Judy turned around in her seat and saw Rory, the team's goalie, waving at her. Judy nodded, "Yeah, I played striker on my high school team."

"Sweet, can I ask you a couple of questions?" Rory pointed to the empty seat next to her.

"Toni, I'm going to sit with Rory for a few minutes."

Rory peppered Judy with questions about offensive strategy, moves she might see and technique. Judy was glad to help since a couple of her brothers had been goalies and within minutes, they were immersed in soccer talk.

Toni was reading an article on her phone when she heard an "Uh-oh," from behind her and then saw Aidan's soccer ball roll toward the medium-mammal seating section. The ball rolled down the aisle, stopping as it hit the leg of an old white-tailed deer buck. Aidan went to retrieve the ball, but the buck picked it up a few seconds before Aidan was able to get there.

"I'm sorry, mister. May I please have my ball back?"

Toni was a little miffed that Aidan had let his ball slip out of his paws but happy that he was being polite and respectful in the way he was apologizing.

"Get away from me you little mongrel and thank your lucky stars I don't have you thrown off this train for roughhousing."

Aidan glanced back at his mom and then tried again. "Sir, I said I'm sorry, the ball slipped out of my paws. I didn't mean for it to bother you."

"It's my ball now, go away."
Toni shook her head in frustration. How could anyone, no matter how speciest, treat a kit so poorly? As Toni got up, she saw Judy looking directly at the old buck with a concerned face. Toni caught her eye and shrugged and then made her way over to her son.

"Good morning, sir, I'm sorry my son disturbed you with his ball. We are headed to a game, and we would appreciate it if you would please return his ball."

Judy was standing up listening to the conversation. Nick had been giving her a hard time about her tendency to jump into situations too quickly, so this time she was hanging back a little to give Toni a chance to help Aidan.

Standing up, the buck made a poking gesture toward Toni while holding the ball in his other hoof. "You disgusting pelts how dare you talk to me, both of you get out of my sight, now."

Okay, so much for hanging back.

Judy came up, squeezed herself next to Aidan and put an arm around his shoulder, "Is there a problem here?"

"No, this is between the foxes and me, so hop along rabbit before you get hurt."

"These are my good friends, so if you have something to say to them, I think I'd like to hear it too."

Leaning in close to Judy he spoke slowly, "Unless you're a fox and you want a piece of this, scram cutie."

That was the wrong thing to say, especially the cutie part. "Well, as a matter of fact, today I am a fox. A long-eared, big-footed, Vulpes-Lapine…."

Suddenly the buck's attention turned to Judy's paw, which was holding something shiny in his face. "…with a badge."

Judy put on her 'Make my day' smile, the one that made her co-workers cringe because it usually preceded significant property damage and a lot of paperwork.

"Officer Judy Hopps, ZPD. You've been asked nicely twice to return my friend's soccer ball. Unless you'd like me to arrest you for threatening a mammal, petty theft, and violating three different ZTA ordinances, return the ball, sit down, and leave my friends alone."

The buck's glare cycled between Judy and her badge. "But you're prey, and they're…"

Judy silenced the buck by grabbing a pair of cuffs from her pocket and waving them in front of his nose. "I suggest you choose your next words…carefully."

The old mammal's eyes went wide at seeing the metal restraints and his attitude quickly changed, "I'm very sorry, Officer. How about we forget any of this happened." Handing the ball back to Aidan, he backed away, "You kits have a good game."

Then in a blur of motion, the speciest buck was through the gangway connection and into the next car.

Judy shook her head. "Unbelievable, some mammals." She turned to Aidan and then paused as he was staring at her, wide-eyed with his mouth open. "Aidan, are you alright?"

Aidan smiled and then yelled out, "That was totally WICKED!" Hugging Judy, who was now
laughing at the tod, "Did you see that guy take off, you're the most awesomest fox ever." And then glancing at his mother, he added in a lower tone, "I mean besides my mom and dad."

Toni rolled her eyes and rubbed Aidan's head fur. "Go and get back in your seat, we'll be at our stop in about ten minutes."

Aidan bounced back to his seat with the biggest grin on his face.

Tyler leaned over to Aidan, "You know she's not a real fox, right?"

Aidan gave his brother a dirty look and was about to say something when Jason, an arctic fox sitting in the seat behind him, showed Aidan his phone. Aidan took the phone and looked at the results of a Zoogle search on the small screen. With a smug look on his face, Aidan passed the phone over to his brother.

Tyler read the article and looked up at Judy in wonder, "Wow, she is a fox. Who would have thought that there was such a thing as a Silver Fox Rabbit."

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"We're here, everyone out." Janae opened the door of the farm truck she had checked out and waited for everyone else to get out too." Scotty, Steven, Spencer, Sasha, Susan, Sunni and… Walking to the other side of the truck, she stood with her paws on her hips looking at the fox still in the front seat.

"Ahem."

Sighing loudly, Nick pouted, "Do I have to? I could stay here and watch the truck."

Janae's foot started tapping rapidly on the ground. "We had a deal. Besides, you need something nice to wear for dinner tonight."

Nick shook his head, clothes shopping, the bane of every male. "Okay, but no flannel and I'm pretty sure I'm allergic to plaid."

Janae rolled her eyes and pulled open the door so she could see for herself that Nick got out. "Come on, the kits are waiting."

Nick shuffled toward the old-school department store as if he were headed to his own funeral. Janae gave up on trying to drag the fox to his doom all by herself, a quick whistle and she had six kits doing it for her instead.

As soon as the kits hit the store, they headed to a play area filled with climbing tubes and a slide that ended in a large area filled with colored plastic balls.

With the kits properly distracted, Janae was able to maneuver Nick around the small male mammal section of the store and help him pick out a couple of nice shirts. After about a half an hour, three years in guy time, Nick and Janae were at the checkout counter with three shirts and a blueberry print tie.

Nick had worried, or as Janae suspected, hoped, that not being rabbit shaped Nick might not be able to find anything that would fit. Much to Janae's joy and Nick's chagrin, the store carried a selection of clothes for mammals that weren't rabbits. There wasn't a huge variety to choose from, but with a minimal amount of moaning and complaining from a certain fox, Janae was able to improve on Nick's selection of hideous Pawaiian shirts.
Looking up from the small stack, Nick smiled and said, "Hey Janae, you should come to the city sometime and take Judy out shopping. If there was ever a bunny in need of a wardrobe intervention, it's Judy."

Janae laughed, "Believe me, I've tried. Judy is worse than you are. Although, I think half your moaning is just for show. Something about being a male in a clothing store."

"I can neither confirm nor deny your theory, you know, guy-code and all."

As Nick was chuckling, he noticed that Janae suddenly went silent. Nick looked up and saw a tall brown furred rabbit with the longest ears he'd ever seen on any rabbit coming toward them. Looking back at Janae, he saw her eyes go wide, and her nose start to twitch rapidly as she focused on the buck positioning himself behind the counter.

Nick was about to greet the sales clerk when the buck said in a quiet voice, "Hi Janae."

Nick turned as another, equally soft voice, replied, "Hi Dalton."

Nick looked back at the buck and then at Janae and then back to the buck and was about to say something when Janae spoke up.

"I didn't know you were back in town."

"Yeah, I moved back to help my mom and dad."

Nick smirked as Janae's nose started to twitch even faster, "So, you're back for a while?"

Nick had to lean in to hear Dalton's whisper of a reply, "Yeah."

"What about Lena?"

"We broke up when I went to college. How about you?"

"I'm not seeing anyone either."

"Oh..."

Nick started to smile as the conversation died and the silence dragged on. Finally, Nick interrupted the quiet as he grabbed the shirt on top of the stack and gently asked, "Hi Dalton, I'm Nick, a friend of Janae's sister Judy. Janae was trying to help me pick out a couple of shirts and I was wondering if you had one of these in purple, I didn't see one on the shelf. Would you mind checking in the back to see if you guys have one?"

"Sure."

As Dalton left, Janae's eyes carefully followed the buck as he made his way to the back room.

Nick chuckled, "What happened to not talking with boys ever again?"

Breaking out of her trance, Janae replied, "What?"

"What are you waiting for? Ask him out."

"What, no. I can't do that."

"Why not, you're drooling just looking at him."
"What?" Janae wiped at her mouth with her paw and then checked her shirt. "I am not."

"Why don't you ask him out, I'll go watch the kits if you need some alone time to do it."

Janae looked over toward the backroom door and sighed, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Nick, he's a hare, and hares and rabbits don't date."

Nick huffed, "Oh come on, don't tell me there's a law against you two going out. I mean, Zootopia doesn't allow interspecies couples to become mates, but no one there knows or cares about the differences between rabbits and hares. Heck, I thought he was rabbit when I first saw him, and if I can't tell the difference, no one else can either. Seriously, you both have long ears and cotton ball tails, trust me, no one in the city would care."

Janae looked at Nick and sadly said, "Well, they care here. It's not against the law, it's just not done. My dad would freak, and some of the old-timers in town would lose their minds. If it weren't for all the grief we'd get, I would've asked him out in high school. He's really, really cute."

Nick motioned to the backroom door as Dalton came out, and whispered, "Anyone who'd give you guys a hard time for going out is an idiot."

Dalton set a purple shirt down on the stack, "Here you go, this is the last one we have."

"Thanks, Dalton." Quickly looking between Janae and Dalton, Nick cleared his throat, "Hey, Dalton, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you for another favor. I'm working for the sheriff's department, and one of the things we're supposed to do is interview some store employees about, um, fire safety. Would you mind if I bought you lunch in a few days and picked your brain about the safety procedures here?"

The now confused buck started to ask 'why him' when Nick continued.

"I don't know if you noticed or not, but I hurt my arm pretty bad, I can barely move it, you know lots and lots of pain, so if you don't mind, I'd like to invite Janae too so she can help me take notes and stuff, if that's alright."

"Really? I mean, sure I'd like to help, and it's okay if Janae's there to help you since your arm hurts that much."

Janae's eyes went wide and she started to protest as Nick continued. "Would you mind giving your phone number to Janae, my arm hurts too much for me to even use my phone."

"Sure."

Janae pulled out her phone and exchanged numbers with Dalton.

Nick needed all his willpower to keep his face neutral as the two mammals stared at their phones as if they held the secret to universal happiness. Nick was going to slowly ease back and let Janae and Dalton reconnect when he heard some loud kit voices behind him.

"Mr. Nick, Mr. Nick, we found you some jammies."

Nick turned around and saw Sunni holding a package as she and her female littermates bounced in excitement. "Uh, thanks Sunni, but I already have some shorts for sleeping."
Sasha pointed at the package, "These are nicer to look at for when we have to wake you up early in the morning."

Laughing, Nick asked, "Wouldn't it be easier if you just waited outside my room for me to get up on my own?"

A chorus of giggles followed by, "No," "Nope," and "Uh-uh," answered his question.

Nick took a closer look at what the girls had picked out. Shaking his head, he handed the package to Janae who was still leaning in toward Dalton. Looking at the package, she laughed too, and then added the carrot print pajamas to Nick's clothing pile.

"Good job girls, I'm sure Mr. Nick will like wearing them very much."

As Nick paid, Janae smiled and said goodbye to Dalton and then heard Nick tell Dalton that Janae would be calling him soon to set up the lunch meeting. A small part of Janae wanted to punch the fox for what he'd done, but a larger, much happier part of her had decided that no one could possibly object to her helping Nick interview Dalton over lunch, and that same happy part was now inventorying her closet for the outfit that would best show off her tail.

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The group of young predators stood and watched as coach Blacktail checked the map of the soccer park. "Okay everyone, our game is on field #8 in about ninety minutes. Let's head over to the practice area for some warmups."

While the kits led the way to the practice area, Coach Blacktail stayed in the back of the group to talk with Judy. "I overheard on the train that you played varsity soccer for your high school, is that right?"

"Yeah, I played striker or center forward all four years."

Coach Blacktail lowered his voice as he leaned closer to Judy. "I, uh, never played soccer when I was little. I volunteered to help the team out, but it's Coach Mitchell that knows all the drills. I was wondering if maybe you could help me run the warmups and practice drills before the game."

With a huge smile on her face, Judy bounced with excitement, "Wow, I'd love to help. Tell me quick who plays which position and any of the drills you can remember that the kits have done before."

Judy was entirely in her element. She set up offensive and defensive drills and rotated the team through them. She also had a couple of the parents run goalie drills with Rory. The parents were in awe as Judy hopped from group to group adjusting the drills, giving out pointers and even having the midfielders swap positions to take advantage of one of the players being left-handed.

About twenty minutes before game time, Judy called everyone in from the warm-up drills and then the team headed over to the field for the final pre-game prep. The kits were pumped, they'd never practiced that well before and were looking forward to applying a few of the simple techniques that Miss Judy had shown them.

Judy caught up to Toni and Coach Blacktail as they reached the field. "Hey, guys. The team is ready to go. Is Coach Mitchell here yet?"

Toni looked worried, "No, Martin was just talking with him, he's still stuck at work and has to miss the game. We were just trying to figure out what to do."
Martin rubbed his forehead, "Toni's right, we're playing the first-place team from last season and they're undefeated so far this year." Looking between the two females, Martin sighed, "If I'm coaching today's game, I need help, a lot of help."

Toni grimaced, 'I'd like to, but I've never played soccer, theater was my thing in school."

Both the foxes turned to Judy with a hopeful look, as Martin started to ask, "Ah, Judy…"

"I'd be more than happy to help, I've coached my siblings' teams a few times before, so this shouldn't be a problem."

With obvious relief, Martin hollered, "Yes!" and then smiled broadly, "Thank you so much. You're the most awesomest fox ever."

Toni and Martin laughed while Judy rolled her eyes, "Come on, let's get these guys organized."

"Yay."

The kits piled into the bakery and spread out along the display cases filled with tarts, biscuits, pies, bread, and other assorted goods.

"Alright everybody, just a small treat. Mom's going to have lunch ready in a couple of hours."

"Awwww, no fair."

"Yeah, no fair." Added the big red kit behind Janae.

A quick motion with her elbow quieted the fox.

"Ow, you and Judy, how do you guys do that. Do those ears double as radar dishes or something?"

"Nope, we're just both good at managing unruly kits."

"Miss Sharla, Miss Sharla."

Janae and Nick both waved as the ewe came around from the back, wiping her hooves off on her apron. "Hey, guys. Morning Janae. Hi Nick." Nodding at the coffeemaker, "Back for a second date? You know if this keeps up, Gideon's going to have to have one of those 'talks' with you."

"Don't worry, Mom. I promise to treat her right."

Janae was confused, "Date? You two know each other?"

Both Sharla and Nick laughed.

Nick headed over to the coffeemaker and looked in the pot to see if it had anything in it. "I met Sharla and Gideon a couple of days ago when I was looking for some coffee before my shift."

Sharla added, "The date thing is an inside joke. A cup of coffee to Nick is more of a religious experience than a drink, so we were just having some fun."

Janae heard Nick cooing and looked over at him holding a cup in reverence between his paws.

"Oh, yes. There she is. Mmm. Come to papa."
Janae rolled her eyes, "Judy's right, you are a goof."

Nick glanced at Janae and then back at his cup, "Don't listen to her my love, she's just jealous. Not everyone has a relationship like ours."

Janae and Sharla chatted while the kits picked out their treats. Looking over at the content fox, Janae had Sharla add something extra to the order as a surprise for Nick.

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The score was 0-1, late in the second half. The other team had scored about ten minutes into the first half. Rory had been playing out of her mind. Judy had seen some impressive goalie play from rabbits before, but watching a feline keeper was something else. Rory couldn't jump as high as a bunny, but she made up for it in being able to twist in mid-air to block balls from going in the net. And her ability to always land on her feet gave her an edge in handling rebound shots.

Unfortunately, the other team's striker and midfielders had overwhelmed their defense and were able to make a quick pass in front of the net drawing Rory slightly out of position and then a back pass to her weak side where another player was able to kick the goal.

Judy made a couple of changes before the next kickoff. She moved Jeffrey from left midfielder to stopper. Jeffrey was the fastest kit on the team. Judy could see why making him a midfielder would seem like a no-brainer, except Jeffrey wasn't very good at catching a pass and the majority of the times his teammates fed him the ball, he miss handled it or couldn't settle it before an opposing player would take it away or pressure him toward the sideline.

What Judy did see was that besides Jeffery's speed, he was highly disruptive. He could get in between the other player's legs and snatch the ball from them, and his passes were great when he wasn't settling it from receiving a pass. He made the perfect stopper to support the fullbacks.

Judy also moved Tamara Blacktail, Tam to her teammates, from the stopper position to right midfielder. During practice, Tam had come across to Judy as a thinker, always calculating the angles and trying to look ahead a few moves. Tam was also a little taller than most of the other kits which made her look bigger and more intimidating. Judy figured Tam got pegged as a stopper to take advantage of those traits.

Unfortunately for whoever made that decision, Tam was all about offense, she liked to attack the ball, could pass and catch, dribble around almost anyone and always seemed to be in the right spot to catch a pass. She hadn't shot on goal much, but she was a master at feeding the ball to the striker and the other midfielders when they played up.

After Judy had made those changes and worked the right substitutions, the game became more of a battle of attrition. Judy did a good job of keeping her players fresh while the other team's coach relied too much on his top lines. The game ebbed and flowed with the activity pushing slowly into the other team's zone. Judy could tell the other team was getting tired. Their coach had given up on trying to score again, now all he was doing was trying to protect his one goal lead.

With about a minute left in the game, Aidan and Tam had one of the other team's fullbacks out of position and isolated in the corner to the right of their goalie. The kit was boxed in and tried to kick the ball to his goalie so the goalie could kick it out of the zone. Instead, the fullback slipped in a divot in the grass and kicked the ball toward his own goal. The goalie was slow to react to the errant ball. He wanted to kick it out to his teammates, but the ball came off his foot funny and ended up going out of play through their own goal line.
Judy fist pumped, corner kick for her team.

Judy started to wave her players into position for the corner kick when she heard the coach, a black woolen ram, on the other team start to scream at his players. He threw down his clipboard and stomped his hooves on the sidelines. When he let loose a few choice curse words, the referee pulled out a yellow card and headed over to talk to the belligerent coach.

Judy got an idea. While the ref was warning the other coach to calm down and documenting the yellow card, Judy pulled together Aidan, Tam, and Cooper. She yelled for Devin, one of the fullbacks on the field to run over for a substitution and notified the linesman that she was making three player substitutions.

As Judy led the kits over to the sideline, she quickly explained what her plan was. After the three kits nodded that they understood the play, they ran in to take their positions and let the players already on the field know what they were going to try and do.

Judy had picked Cooper, her best left fullback, for the corner kick. Since he took all the goal kicks when he was in, Cooper was the most accurate placekicker on the team and Judy hoped, fast enough to get back in position after the kick. Pulling one of her defenders up to take the corner kick was the riskiest part of her plan. If something went wrong after the kick, the other team would have a lightly defended field in front of them and a pretty easy shot on Rory.

The ref let the other coach make a couple of substitutions including the pudu fullback that had been tripped up. The coach started to berate the kit again but stopped when the ref pointed at him in warning. With a last look at the ram coach, the ref blew the whistle to let Cooper know he could kick the ball when he was ready.

Cooper kicked the ball high to the far side of the penalty area where Tam was waiting. She didn't have the right angle to take a shot on goal around all the defenders, but the other team didn't know that. As the defenders shifted her way, Tam used her extra height and her ability to jump, to chip pass the ball with her chest back to the front of the penalty area to where Tyler was waiting. The players moving toward Tam stopped and turned to Tyler. The goalie squared up as well waiting for Tyler to attempt a scoring kick when, instead of shooting the ball, Tyler passed it to Aidan who was running in from the top of the penalty area toward the goal. Aidan caught the ball from his brother and before the goalie could shift position to cover the angle, Aidan kicked it into the corner of the net.

Judy hopped straight up, whooping and hollering and when she landed, she did a double binky. All the kits were screaming as if they had just won the World Cup. Aidan was even trying to do a knee slide but failed due to the thick fur on his legs.

The other team's coach threw down his clipboard again and was about to lose it on his players when his assistant pulled him aside to keep him from getting a red card. What shocked Judy the most was that a few of the opposing team's parents started yelling at their kits for being out of position or being too slow. Fortunately, the rest of the parents looked pretty disgusted by the show of bad behavior, at least not all the adults on the other team were as crazed as their coach.

The ref blew the whistle to alert everyone to get back in position for the kickoff and the final thirty seconds of the game. The kickoff was passed to the other team's striker, a young pony who tried to break through, but only made it partway toward Rory before Jeffery came up and stole the ball, kicked it toward the opposing goal and did a forward flip as the ref blew the whistle three times, ending the game.

Judy's team did their appreciation chant and then lined up to shake hands with the kits from the
other team. Judy was last in line after Martin. As Judy touched hands with each of the other kits, she said "Good job" or in a few cases remarked on a specific good play the kit made.

At the end of the line, she reached out to shake hands with the opposing coach, but all she got back was a dirty look.

"What kind of prey are you that you hang around with a bunch of filthy pelts? And to be coaching them, unbelievable."

Judy pulled her paw back and shook her head in disappointment, "What kind of coach yells at his team after they played a good game." Motioning to the pudu being consoled by his mom, "Especially a young buck that played his heart out and was tripped up by bad turf."

Walking away from the sputtering coach before he could reply, Judy went over to the upset pudu buck and knelt down, "Hi, I'm Miss Judy, and I wanted to let you know how well you played today."

Sniffling, the small buck replied with his face in his mother's chest. "I'm CJ, I cost my team the win, now they hate me. I messed up." The buck buried his head deeper into his mom's fur.

"Hey, do you know what I do for a living?"

"No."

"I'm a cop and my job is to defend the people of the city from trouble. Your job is sort of like mine, you're a defender on the field. Sometimes things happen to me and I mess up too, but I always keep trying until I get it right."

Sniffling, CJ asked, "Have you ever been yelled at by your coach?"

Judy looked CJ in the eye, "Yup. One time I drove a train car into an old rail station and blew everything up. I got yelled at a lot for doing that."

CJ rubbed his eyes and smiled, "No way, that's crazy."

"I know, that's what my partner said too. Look CJ, I can tell you're a hard worker and you don't give up. You played a good game, don't let a bad bounce or a random turf problem get you down. Okay?"

The buck pulled away from his mom and nodded.

Judy smiled, reached into her pocket and pulled out a small ZPD badge sticker, "I think everyone should know that you're a hard-working defender that sometimes makes mistakes, just like me." Reaching over, she stuck the sticker to CJ's uniform jersey.

"Thanks, Coach."

Judy looked at the boy's mom and then back to him, "Is it okay if I give you a hug?"

The boy nodded, and Judy gave him one of her patented healing hugs and whispered into his ear, "You did good, don't let your coach or anyone else tell you anything different."

Aidan came up as Judy stood.

Aidan nodded at CJ, "Hey, nice take away when I was attacking right before the half." Holding out his fist, Aidan smiled.
"Thanks, your goal was pretty sweet too." CJ fist bumped Aidan.

CJ's mom shook Judy's paw and thanked her for helping CJ. Rubbing Aidan's head fur, Judy left him and CJ to talk while she went to help the rest of the team pack up.

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Judy couldn't help but laugh at Rory and Tam as they batted paws in some sort of sing-song game. Aidan, Jeffrey, and Jason were strutting around like they were kings of the world, of course, their image of royalty was tarnished by whip cream and caramel sauce on their muzzles.

On the train ride back, Toni arranged for an impromptu ice cream celebration for the team. She sent a text/email blast for all the parents to meet the team at the diner for treats then to take their player home. When the team arrived, the diner was abuzz with excited parents. The team had lost their first three league games and were excited to have broken the losing streak by tying last season's first-place team. This tie game was a huge win in everyone's book.

Judy took another sip of her chocolate malt as Finn slipped into the chair next to her.

"So, I hear you're a fox now, huh."

Judy smirked at Finn, "Yup, sure am. And I'm all ready to start doing fox things."

Finn raised his eyebrow, "What fox things?"

Judy put a finger to her chin, "Oh let's see, things like, chase my tail, uh, howl at the moon, bury foot-covers in the yard, poke my head out the window of a moving car. You know, fox things like that."

Finn snorted, "You do any of those things, and I'll take your fox card away. Well, except for the car thing, that is sort of fun."

Fist pumping, she yelled, "And the fox secrets start coming out."

Finn laughed and then put his paw on Judy's arm, "Hey, thanks for what you did today. I haven't seen this many happy kits in here like, ever. And especially for what you did on the Metro. Toni filled me in, it does the kits good to see they don't have to put up with all the crap they get from other mammals."

"Finn, they're all great kits. You know, today was the most fun I've had playing or coaching soccer since I was a little kit. They were so excited and such great teammates to each other, I wish I could have been on a team like theirs when I was growing up."

"Well, before you get all emotional, which is NOT a fox thing, by the way, I have your meet with Thorn set up to happen in a few days. I'll text you the address and the exact time later."

"Thanks, Finn."

A moment later, the diner went quiet as all the kits from the team, followed by Coach Blacktail, approached Judy's table.

Aidan stood in front of the group and squared his shoulders. "Miss Judy, we all wanted to thank you for coaching us today. No way we would have tied those guys without your help."

Judy smiled, "Thank you guys, a few good practices, and next time you'll do even better."
"Well, that's the other part, we all talked about it, and we were wondering if you could be one of our coaches for the rest of the season."

"Wow, I don't know, I mean, is Coach Mitchell okay with that?"

Martin lifted his phone and yelled from the back of the group, "Oh, he can't wait to meet you. He said, if you're interested, he'd be excited to have you join the team."

"Really? Well, sometimes I have to work crazy hours, but yeah, as much as I can, I'd love to."

Judy was buried in a group hug as all the kits whooped and hollered and their parents clapped and cheered. Finn even got a misty-eyed look, that was until Judy leaned over, "Hey, remember it's only bunnies that get all emotional."

"Yeah, yeah, you tell anyone, and I'll bite your face off."
Nick surveyed the warren as he walked behind the small group of rabbits making its way across the yard toward the Gardiner's front door. This building had a flat roof and was laid out differently from the Hopps' house. The wrap-around porch was wide and comfortable looking with lots of windows, but as Nick looked closer, they all had shutters with what looked like gun ports cut into them. Looking up on the roof of the house he saw what had to be a parapet that ran all along the edge.

Nick stopped in the yard as he tried to figure out what he was looking at. The house and a couple of barns were in the center of an arc-shaped earthen berm. The wall looked ancient with a stone base topped with thick wooden timbers. Huge amounts of dirt had been piled up in front of the wall and gently sloped away forming the grass covered berm. The top timbers had cuts in them every yard or so and behind the berm, there were large stone pads set in the ground. In the distance, Nick saw that the pads furthest away from the house were occupied by large contraptions that looked like catapults or cannon.

If he didn't know any better, Nick would swear that the whole setup was some sort of defensive emplacement or frontier fort just like he would have built when he and his friends played army growing up.

Bonnie and Janae stopped once they noticed Nick wasn't moving and looked back.

"Mrs. H, what's the berm for? Flood control or something? And what are those things over there?"

Bonnie looked toward what Nick was pointing at and then back to him. "The Gardiner's warren is one of the Border Warrens. Back before the Accords, the border families were responsible for defending Bunnyburrow from raiders. I don't know much about how defenses work, but I'm guessing what you're looking at was set up to help them in case of an attack."

Nick chuckled and then asked, "Oh, did marauding bunnies from Podunk try and steal the Burrow carrot harvests?"

With a grunt, Stu interrupted, "No Officer Wilde, predators raid our farms for meat."

"But rabbits don't raise chickens or…"

Stu stared at Nick until he stopped speaking.

"Oh."

Giving the fox a disgusted look, Stu walked up to the door and knocked.

Janae smirked and nudged Nick with her elbow as she walked past, "Smooth there, Wilde."

As Nick and Janae reached the porch where everyone else was waiting, the front door was opened by a rabbit doe in her early forties. "Stu, Bonnie. I'm so glad you were able to come tonight. And Officer Wilde, the mammal of the hour, welcome." Stepping back from the door, Mrs. Gardiner,
Bonnie smiled, "Thank you, Evelyn. Bonnie motioned toward her daughters, "You remember Janae and the shy one hiding behind her sister's leg is Sunni."

"I'm not shy," said a pair of ears poking out from behind Janae.

Nick smiled at Sunni and then shook hands with their hostess, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Gardiner, thank you for inviting me into your home, it's quite impressive." Motioning toward Stu, he continued, "I'm staying with the Hopps' and I thought their home was unique in how impressive it was, but yours is in the same category. Being a city fox, it's hard to wrap my brain around the amazing architectural achievements that both your families have accomplished here in Bunnyburrow."

Patting Nick's good arm, "Please call me Evelyn and thank you, the Gardiners are the oldest of the Border Warren families and have lived here since the founding of Bunnyburrow. Which means, we've had plenty of time to add on or remodel when the need arose."

"Speaking of adding on, Stu you need to see the new barn we're putting up if you have time after dinner."

Everyone turned to see Sarge walking up. "Son, how are you feeling?"

Nick greeted his host, "Much better, Mr… umm Sarge."

Nick stood still for a moment, thinking. Apparently, the Gardiner's were a very old and prestigious family, much more so than he had initially prepared for. Nick mentally modified the form he needed and turned slightly to properly face his hosts.

"Hold on there, Nick," said Sarge, "I've served with a fox or two over the years, so I know something about your community and their pomp for special occasions, besides it's written all over your face." Taking a step toward Nick, Sarge put his paw on the tod's arm to gently keep him from leaning forward. "From one mammal who's served to another, you're our guest of honor and as such, you shall bow to no one in my warren." Smiling, he added, "Rank has its privileges, eh?"

Patting Nick lightly on the back, Sarge said, "Come on in and meet the family and make sure you try some of Evelyn's famous jalapeno cheese balls, careful though, the really hot ones are on the red plates."

After greeting Stu with a clap to the shoulder, giving Bonnie a hug, and greeting Janae and Sunni, Sarge ushered them all toward the great hall. Nick stopped at the entryway of the dining hall with Janae and Sunni next to him. "How do you bunnies do it? I can't imagine one family, all by themselves, building something like this in Zootopia, just amazing."

As he stood there in wonder, Nick's ears twitched at a clomping sound getting louder as it came closer.

"Mr. Nick, Mr. Nick, you came."

The clomping tried to speed up but became unstable instead. Nick turned just in time to see Alex lose his balance trying to run with a foot immobilized in a medical boot.

Nick reached out and scooped up the bunny before he could fall. "Hey buddy, you gotta slow down, I don't want you to hurt your other foot." Setting him down and ruffling his head fur. "How's your ankle?"
Alex looked around quickly and then whispered, "I'm fine, Mom's making me wear this just cause the dumb doctor says I have to. Luckily, Mom won't know if I take it off when I'm outside."

"Yes I will Alex, take it off and you're grounded," said a voice from the other side of the room.

"Sorry, bud, looks like you're wearing the boot." Nick turned to Janae and Sunny who had hung back with him while the real adults had gone into the great hall.

"Hey Alex, I'd like you to meet a couple friends of mine." Motioning to the does, "This is Janae and her little sister Sunny." Reaching behind Janae, Nick gently took Sunny's paw and led her to Alex.

"Sunny, this is Alex, he's one of the bravest bucks I know. He rescued his big sister and then helped me when I hurt my arm. He even tried to chase off some bad mammals that wanted to hurt me."

As Sunny listened to Nick, her eyes widened in wonder. When he finished, she just stood and looked at Alex.

Alex suddenly found the big toe of his uninjured foot very interesting as it poked at a small knot in the floor.

"You helped Mr. Nick?"

Alex nodded without looking up.

Sunny moved closer to Alex and then without warning hugged him. Squeezing tight, she said, "Thank you for helping my friend."

Sunny released Alex after a few moments and then leaned into Alex and whispered, "Mr. Nick's not a bunny, so he needs lots of help on how to do things right."

Alex smiled at Sunny, "Yeah, he does. He almost drank the water from the river."

"Ewww."

Both kits looked at Nick and giggled as he shrugged his shoulders.

Janae did an excellent job of keeping her own response to a snicker as she patted both kits on the back. "Sunny why don't you find us a good place to sit and I will be right there."

"Can we sit with Alex, can we, pleaaase?"

Janae nodded, "If it's alright with his Mom and Dad that would be fine with me."

Both kits fist pumped, "Yay!"

Janae and Nick were about to follow the kits into the dining room when Sarge came back with one of his daughters in tow. The doe was wearing pink slacks, a white top, and had a blue and brown cloth bangle around the base of her left ear.

"Janae."

"Abby."

The two does hugged and then gave each other a quick nuzzle. Sarge smiled, "Nick, before the evening gets too crazy, I wanted to introduce you to my daughter, Abigail. She was the leader of
the team that found you and the Thrasher kits at the pond."

Nick straightened up, "Miss Gardiner, I owe you a debt of gratitude. The animals that were attacking us were about to get down to business. If you hadn't shown up when you did, I'm not sure if any of us would have made it out of there. Thank you."

Abby nodded, "Please call me Abby, I'm glad we made it in time to help. Dad has a sixth-sense about trouble and when the balloon went up, we 'hopped to.'" Chuckling at her own joke, she added, "It's what we train for."

"Well, I owe you one."

Abby reached into a pocket and pulled out a red cloth and handed it to Nick. "Your arm was wrapped up with this. I thought you might want it back, so we washed it for you."

"Wow, thanks. I thought I'd lost it." Nick quickly folded his kerchief up with one paw and slipped it into his pocket.

Sarge patted Abby on her back, "You kits chat, I have a few guests to attend to."

As soon as Sarge was out of earshot, Nick leaned toward Abby. "Abby, you said you do a lot of training. Before we came in, Mr. Hopps said that the Border Warrens used to have to defend Bunnyburrow from predators hunting uh…"

"Rabbits?"

"Yeah, um, do you guys still worry about that sort of thing? I'm wondering because I saw what looked like cannon out front."

Abby furrowed her brow and thought for a moment, "Are you worried that we still train to fight off predators?"

Nick rubbed the back of his neck and suddenly felt embarrassed that he had even said anything. "Um, well when you say it out loud like that, it does sound kind of crazy. Sorry."

Janae leaned into Abby and whispered in her ear. Once Janae straightened up, Abby covered her mouth with a paw and laughed. "Oh, no, that's funny."

"What?"

"We're not training to fight predators, we train for EMR, Emergency Medical Response. Since the warrens out here are so far out of town, we have to be able to respond to accidents like tractor injuries, falls, burns and lacerations or worse from some of the machinery we use."

Gesturing toward the front of the house, Abby smiled and said, "What you saw out front are pumpkin launchers."

Nick tilted his head in confusion.

Abby rolled her eyes at the fox's perplexed look. "Yes, a long time ago the Border Warrens fought off predators with spears, bows and arrows, and other primitive weapons, but nowadays, we build catapults and cannon so that we can compete during the Carrot Days Festival to see who can shoot a pumpkin the farthest, or the most accurately. Our warren has won the distance competition the last four years straight. Our best distance so far is around fourteen hundred yards. Logan and the other engineers think they can get another fifty yards out of their new designs. That's why the
launchers are set up out front, they've been testing them all week."

Nick laughed, "You guys shoot vegetables out of cannon for fun? Wait until I get back to the city and see Judy, this should be good for an entire afternoon of teasing."

"Well, technically pumpkins are fruits, but yeah, it's a lot of fun to watch."

Dawning a more serious look, Abby reached out and patted Nick on the arm, "Nick, I know some of the warrens around Bunnyburrow can be a little speciest with regards to predators, but don't worry about Dad, he has a lot of predator friends he served with while in the Army, and he doesn't stand for any of that kind of behavior around here."

Abby made to go when Janae reached out to stop her. Pointing at the bangle on Abby's ear, she asked, "Who's the lucky buck?"

Abby giggled and motioned to a table with three bucks talking, "Liam Thumper, he asked me if we could be exclusive last night. Isn't he cute?"

The girls giggled and cooed while Nick rolled his eyes. Sneaking away from the girl talk, Nick focused back on the great hall. The hall was almost as large as the Hopps' dining hall, but there weren't nearly as many rabbits in attendance. From what Nick could tell, the Gardiner family was maybe a third of the size of the Hopps' and the oldest kits couldn't be any older than about twenty-one years old.

Surveying the room again, this time for a place to sit, Nick saw Sarge waving him over to where he was talking with a small group of adults at the front of the room.

As Nick maneuvered himself around the tables filling up with bunnies, he started to realize something, they were waving at him and smiling and there weren't the usual looks of disgust or fear, it was as if they didn't mind him being here. Nick genuinely smiled when a buck in his teens raised a paw for a high-four. Nick slapped his palm and laughed when he got a "Hooah!" in return.

Sarge put his paw on Nick's back and motioned to the rabbits he was talking to, "Nick, I'd like you to meet a couple of very special guests."

The bunnies in front of them parted, and Nick was surprised to see Mayor Ackerbunn standing next to an old buck who must have been in his mid-sixties.

"Madam Mayor, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"You're looking well, Officer Wilde."

"Thank you, Ma'am. A good night's sleep and some real clothes both helped a lot."

Laughing, Karen motioned to the buck next to her, "I'd like to introduce you to Mayor Theodore Burns. He retired about twenty-five years ago and has been a mentor of mine since I was in high school."

"It's an honor to meet you, Sir."

Sarge excused himself to go find his mate and help get dinner started, leaving Nick to talk with Mayor Burns and Mayor Ackerbunn. After a few minutes of chatting with the mayors, Nick spied Sarge taking his seat and was about to excuse himself to find his, when the Thrashers came over to join the conversation and thank Nick again. Jessie, mostly recovered from her injuries, gave him a big hug while Logan was glued to her side making sure she was alright.
Watching from the end of the head table was the oldest living member of the Gardiner warren, ninety-year-old, Joseph Gardiner, Sarge Gardiner's grandfather, known to everyone in town as Grandpa Joe. Unfortunately, Grandpa Joe was getting fidgety.

"Grandpa Joe, what's wrong?" The teen buck sitting next to him asked.

Waving a wrinkled finger at the crowd, "We should be eating, I'm hungry."

"Mayor Ackerbunn and the Thrashers are still talking with Officer Wilde, he's the one that rescued their kits, Jessie and Alex, the other night."

"Who are they talking to?"

The younger buck pointed at Nick, "The red fox, right there, that's Officer Nicholas Wilde of the ZPD, he works in the sheriff's office."

Grandpa Joe grumbled to himself, "A fox in the warren, that's different. Hmm, Wilde, a fox named Nicholas Wilde." Grandpa Joe stared intensely at the fox standing in front of the main table chatting with a half-dozen bunnies. Age had slowed him down, but some things you never forget, for Grandpa Joe, a red fox named Wilde was one of those things.

Grandpa Joe leaned over to the buck next to him and whispered into his ear. The buck leaned away and gave his Grandpa Joe a 'what the hell' look.

As Grandpa Joe stood up, he patted the buck on the back, "Hurry up son, this is something important I need to take care of right now."

Grandpa Joe, leaning on his cane, walked around the table and slowly shuffled his way to where Nick had just finished talking with everyone and was now looking around for a seat.

Evelyn, with a look of worry on her face, leaned over to her mate and nodded toward the elderly buck, "Robert what is Grandpa Joe doing, I thought you said he'd behave."

Sarge shook his head, "I don't know, something's got him riled up though." Waving his paw, he caught Logan's attention through the din of bunny conversations and then motioned for him to help Grandpa Joe.

Logan hopped up and offered his arm to Grandpa Joe.

Grandpa Joe gently pushed away Logan's arm, "Thank you, son. This is something I need to take care of myself."

Focusing on Nick, Grandpa Joe walked a few more steps and then gruffly asked, "I heard tell your name's Wilde is that correct?"

Turning to the new voice, Nick faced an old buck with a slight stoop looking up at him waiting for a reply. "Yes Sir, Nicholas P. Wilde, ZPD."

"You're from the city, right?"

"Yes Sir, Zootopia born and bred."

"Have you ever heard of an outfit named 'Suitopia', it was run by a Mr. Wilde and his son?"

Nick's eyes widened at that question, "Ah, yes, Sir, that was my dad's shop."
"Was?"

"Yes, sir. He died when I was twelve and since I'm the last of the Wilde line, there wasn't anyone to take over the shop and keep it open."

Nick opened his wallet and fished out an old photograph his mom had taken years ago, "Here's a picture of my dad and me in front of his shop. I was about eight when it was taken, and Happytown was a better place back then than it is now."

As Grandpa Joe examined the old picture, he could see how proud the older fox looked with his arm around his young son standing next to him. Handing the picture back, the elderly buck saw that his great-grandson had returned from his errand and was now carrying an old camouflage coat and a notebook.

Gesturing the young buck over, Grandpa Joe took the coat and showing it to Nick, asked, "Is this your family's work?"

Nick looked at the label sewn into the collar of the coat the old buck was holding and as he read the text stitched into the cloth, goosebumps spread across his skin and his fur puffed out. At the top was written 'Suitopia' in block letters, with 'Wilde & Son' and a set of initials, 'JNW', below it.

Looking at the old buck, Nick nodded, "Yes, sir, it is. I don't recognize the initials, but since this coat is so old, I assume the work was done by one of the first Wildes to settle in Zootopia. My dad's name was Jonathan P. Wilde, and I remember he always stitched 'JPW' into the label of everything he made, it must have been a family thing."

Grandpa Joe nodded to Nick and then turned to face the room full of bunnies. Pounding his cane on the floor, he commanded everyone's attention. Once the room was quiet, he began to speak in a surprisingly strong voice. "I know that we are all here tonight to celebrate the safe return of these two kits and to thank the mammal that found them. I'm sure my grandson Robert has some inspirational words prepared, but I'd like to say something myself."

Looking back at Robert, Grandpa Joe smiled as he saw him drop a couple of note cards on the table and shrug his shoulders.

"As many of you know, during the great war, I joined the Commonwealth Army. There were a dozen of us, both predator and prey, that made up the first small mammal squad ever formed. All of us were ready to serve the Commonwealth and do our part. Unfortunately, the army quartermasters weren't as prepared as we were. They had to scramble to find gear that we could use and what they found didn't fit worth a plugged nickel."

Nick huffed, "Nothing's changed sir, even today the ZPD's got the same problem with me and my partner."

Grandpa Joe chuckled at Nick's comment, it was reassuring to know that government efficiency was timeless. "When our Staff Sergeant found out where we were going to be deployed and that it was going to be in the dead of winter, he knew we would need better gear than what the Commonwealth could provide us small mammals."

"He made a call to a friend and a week later a couple of mammals arrived from the city and outfitted the entire squad with winter gear that was warmer and better made than anything any other soldier had." Lifting up the coat so everyone could see it, he continued. "This here is what they brought, and I know for a fact they weren't paid a dime by the Commonwealth for what they made for us, they did it all because they wanted to help in the best way they knew how."
"A lot of you may be wondering what was so important about a good set of winter gear. Well, our Staff Sergeant's nightmares came true and my squad spent the worst winter of the war in trenches defending a section of the front that was under constant fire. The brigade lost dozens of mammals to the cold and a lot more lost fingers or toes or worse to frostbite.

"For small mammals and especially those of us with short fur, the cold was deadly dangerous. To this day I am certain that most of my unit would have been wiped out by the cold if it hadn't been for those two mammals that outfitted us."

Grandpa Joe put his paw on Nick's arm, "For a lot of years, I regretted not finding those two mammals and thanking them. I know now that I won't ever be able to thank them in person, but tonight I have a chance to do the next best thing."

Setting the coat down, Grandpa Joe opened the notebook and showed it to Nick.

Nick couldn't believe what he was looking at, "I've seen this newspaper clipping before. My dad used to have a copy of it hanging on the wall behind the counter in his shop." The black and white picture above the article showed a squad of twelve small mammals all wearing camouflage coats, pants, and foot covers, standing to the side of the group was a large arctic wolf and two small foxes.

Grandpa Joe pointed a claw at the names listed in the article. Nick looked carefully and gasped.

As everyone in the hall tried to see what Nick was looking at and why he seemed so emotional, Grandpa Joe finished with the rest of his story. "Everyone here may believe that we are celebrating the heroic actions of this young tod, but tonight it is my wish to honor both him and his family. Those two mammals I mentioned earlier, were a pair of red foxes, the oldest stitched his initials, 'JNW', in my coat, his name was Jonathan Nicholas Wilde."

Grandpa Joe handed his cane to Logan and then nodded at Robert. Sarge stood as Grandpa Joe straightened his old frame up and stood at attention in front of Nick.

Nick looked wide-eyed at the old buck and then around the room at all the rabbits focused on him. Turning back to face Grandpa Joe he wondered what was going on and what everyone was waiting for.

Suddenly, Nick heard the loud voice of Sarge ring through the hall, "Ladies and Gentlemammals, Officer Nicholas P. Wilde of the ZPD and descendant of the honored mammal, Jonathan Nicholas Wilde."

As one, every bunny of the Gardiner warren stood straight up. The Thrasher and Hopps families followed suit a moment later, in a much less practiced manner.

Grandpa Joe saluted Nick. "Sergeant First Class Joseph Gardiner, Sir."

Nick paused for only a moment before standing at attention and drawing on his ZPA training, performed a perfect salute in return.

As Grandpa Joe lowered his paw to his side everyone in the hall started clapping. Grandpa Joe shook paws with Nick and then turned Nick toward the clapping bunnies and they both smiled.

Nick was obviously embarrassed at all the attention but waved his thanks anyway. Grandpa Joe leaned closer to Nick and said, "Son, you did good saving those kits, your family would be proud of you."
Nick coughed and shook his head, "I don't know about that sir, I was a disappointment to my parents for a lot of years. It's only recently that I've been trying to turn my life around and if it weren't for my partner, I'd probably still be a disreputable fox living on the street and hustling for my next meal."

"Officer Wilde, everyone's got a past, just remember it's in the past. Learn from it, but don't let it define your future."

"You sound a lot like my best friend, always looking for the good in every mammal."

"She sounds like a smart girl, you should make sure you keep listening to her."

Nick helped Grandpa Joe as he sat down and made ready to find his seat when he paused and gave Grandpa Joe a questioning look, "How did you know she was a girl?"

"Son, us males don't just change everything overnight unless there's a girl involved. Now go sit down, I'm hungry."

Nick found his seat, and the volume in the hall rose as everyone started eating. Nick was surprised when an expertly prepared salmon dish was placed in front of him.

Leaning around the other diners, he caught Evelyn's eye, smiled and mouthed, "Thank you."

Evelyn returned the smile and nodded.

Nick enjoyed the meal immensely. Throughout the meal, bunnies would come by and chat with him, and a few small groups listened to some of his stories. Nick laughed when a group of kits, led by Sunni, asked permission to pet his tail.

Dessert was a delicious carrot souffle, and when he saw Sarge with a cup of coffee, he nearly bounced with joy when the buck pointed out the coffee maker. As Nick was pouring a cup of the black goodness, Mayor Burns found him, poured his own cup of coffee, and as he was adding cream and sugar, 'who does that to good coffee?', asked Nick to join him for a few minutes.

A few minutes turned into quite the lengthy conversation, Mayor Burns was fascinated to hear about Nick's experiences with the ZPD, and he was particularly interested in the Missing Mammal and Nighthowler cases and how Nick had helped Judy even before he was a cop. Nick got a little uncomfortable when the Mayor asked him about his years before meeting Judy, but Nick answered his questions as honestly as he could without dwelling too much on how difficult it was being a young fox growing up on the city streets.

After speaking with Mayor Burns, Nick hunted through the last of the fruit and dessert trays and found a few stray blueberries that needed to be eaten. As he was munching, a few of the older Gardiner teens joined him and started asking him more questions about the rescue and Nick shrugged as they lamented the fact that they couldn't scent track the way he could. He was able to brighten their mood by relaying a few stories about Judy and some of her exploits, in particular, he pointed out her favorite spot to elbow him in the side when he teased her too much."

Nick figured it was getting to be time to go after Stu and Sarge finished their inspection of the new barn and the 'aww moms' started from the little kits having to go get ready for bed. As Nick said his goodnights to the bunnies he had been talking with, he felt a paw on his arm. Janae had come to collect him so they could all leave.

Janae led Nick over to where the Hopps' and Thrashers were talking with Sarge and Evelyn. Nick shook paws with Sarge and then with Mr. Thrasher, who insisted that Nick call him Daniel, and
then Nick attempted to shake paws with Mrs. Thrasher who brushed his paw aside and gave him a big hug instead.

Nick was tempted to make a joke about emotional bunnies but stopped himself when he felt Mrs. Thrasher crying into his chest as she thanked him again for saving her kits. The hug, lasted for a few moments until an approaching clomping noise got everyone's attention.

Alex and Sunni had each finished one last cookie and were now making their way, paw in paw, toward the group of adults. They made it almost all the way to the group when Alex stumbled and tripped over his boot again, and would have tumbled to the floor if it weren't for another great save by Nick.

After setting Alex upright on his feet, Nick got down on one knee and said in a light tone, "You really need to listen to your mom and be more careful, alright Buddy? I feel like I'm always catching you, having to find you, or carrying you for miles on my back."

Alex looked down a little chagrined and replied quietly, "Sorry."

Nick took a finger and lifted Alex's chin, "Don't be, for you, I'd do it all again in a heartbeat."

Alex got a teary-eyed look on his face and then gave Nick a hug, "Thank you, Mr. Nick. Thank you for finding Jessie and me."

Nick hugged Alex back and as the buck squeezed his friend tight, maybe, just maybe, one very small, non-emotional tear crept its way down the red-furred cheek of a certain fox.
Nick wandered down the hall toward the kitchen, yawning wide, and stretching his arms. With a quick double-take, he looked around to make sure no bunny saw his wide-mouthed, full-fang stretch. Fortunately, he was in the clear.

It was waaay too early in the morning to be up, especially after dinner last night. Smoothing out his carrot print pajamas, he started to devise a way for nocturnal mammals to take over the agency that controlled daylight savings time and get them to start the morning around noon.

Passing the common room, he saw that the tables were about a third full of bunnies eating cereal, pancakes, and fresh fruit. Almost to the kitchen, he caught the whiff of something he didn't think was possible here, fresh coffee.

"Good morning Mrs. H., that coffee smells delicious."

Bonnie watched Nicholas enter and chuckled at his pajamas. "Good morning Nicholas, trying to fit in I see – love the pattern."

"Yeah, these were Sunni, Sasha, and Susan's idea. I figured they'd get a kick out of me actually wearing them."

Grabbing a mug, Nick poured himself a cup of joe and blew on it to cool it off. "Although it'd probably be in my best interest if Judy doesn't find out about these, I'm not sure I can handle the teasing."

"Your secret is safe with me. Not so sure about the kits, though."

Bonnie nodded her head toward the common room, and Nick turned to see a couple of young does taking pictures with their cell phones, giggling, and comparing images.

Nick smiled and took a tentative sip from his mug, testing the temperature, "Oh yeah. My dignity is a small price to pay for a good cup of coffee."

"I'm glad you like it. Janae picked up a package of coffee from Gideon's and told me that you had a 'thing' for it, so I pulled our coffee maker out of storage."

"Thanks, Mrs. H., I'll have to thank Janae too when I see her, this is good."

Holding the mug, Nick warmed his paws and savored the taste while the caffeine started coursing through his veins. He broke away from his reverie as Bonnie slid a plate of blueberry pancakes in front of him.

Looking up at Bonnie, Nick said, "Has anyone ever told you that you're an angel?"

Bonnie chuckled as Nick took a deep whiff of the tall stack of deliciousness. "Only when they want something."

"Definitely, I would love a peek at your recipe book, specifically the blueberry section."
Bonnie could tell that Nick was a charmer, so she retaliated with a big smile, "No can do, Officer Wilde, that book is filled with Hopps family secrets too special for mortal mammals, especially the recipes that involve blueberries."

Nick smiled himself and broke out his best puppy dog look, wide, sad eyes, head tilted to the side, bottom lip trembling. He even threw in a quietly pleading, almost injured whine. He'd conned many a mammal with this look.

"Pleeease, Mrs. H."

Bonnie rolled her eyes at his antics and asked, "Has that look ever worked on Judy?"

Nick dropped the face and sighed as he replied, "No, not really."

"Well, it's not going to work on me either."

Nick slowly picked up his plate, and with rounded shoulders hunched over and his tail dragging dejectedly on the floor, he very slowly shuffled toward the dining room. Only a few feet away, Nick took a deep breath and let it out in a loud, stuttering, emotional way, and then with one last sniffle, he stepped across the threshold into the other room.

Bonnie watched the pathetic display as Nick made his way to the dining room. Looking up at the ceiling, she shook her head, "Fine, one recipe, you can pick it out, and we'll make it together for dessert one evening this week."

Nick instantly brightened up and rushed back into the kitchen and gave Bonnie a hug, "Thanks, Mrs. H., you're the best."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, just don't tell Judy what you did, I don't need her thinking I'm getting soft in my old age."

Laughing, Nick started back toward the dining room when Bonnie stopped him, "Nicholas, Colton and his littermate Cody are helping Stu work on his old truck out in the large barn, it might be interesting if you like old vehicles. Stu won't get rid of that old truck, which means he's always tinkering with it to try and keep it running."

"Sweet, when I'm done eating, I'll change and head out." Lifting his bandaged arm up for emphasis, he added, "I didn't have anything planned for today anyway."

Judy was walking down the sidewalk, enjoying a pleasant morning in the sun. Even though she didn't have to work today, she'd gotten up before her alarm went off and gone for a nice long run. The park had been a little more crowded with joggers than usual because it was the weekend, but she knew of a few scenic trails that were designed for small mammals, so she was able to get in a good run without worrying about being trampled by any of the larger mammals.

Judy had stopped at a small grocery store after she'd finished stretching from her run, and now she was walking the last few blocks to her apartment building as a warm down.

As Judy turned the corner and approached the Grand Pangolin Arms, she saw one of her neighbors sitting on a large suitcase surrounded by boxes, bags of clothing, and an animal cage all on the front sidewalk.

Coming up on the skunk doe reading something on her phone, Judy asked, "Hey, Mindy, what's
with all the boxes and bags?"

Mindy looked up from her phone and smiled, "Hey, Judy," and then nodding toward the building entrance behind her, she added, "moving day."

Looking up at the entrance, Judy saw their landlord, Mr. Critterly, a thirty-something Red Panda, wearing torn jeans and an old dirty white t-shirt, standing at the top of the stairs with his arms folded across his chest and a scowl on his face.

Judy grimaced a little at seeing the panda, ever since he'd taken over the building from Dharma Armadillo, the only thing he'd been prompt about doing was collecting the rent. Turning back to Mindy, she asked, "What do you mean?"

Mindy shrugged, "Bruiser got loose again, and this time that old creeper saw him in the hall. Critterly got me on the lease's 'no pets' clause and told me I had to get rid of Bruiser or leave."

Judy cooed when she saw a pair of eyes blinking from Mindy's lap, giving away the presence of the small chameleon. Judy reached out and lightly scratched the lizard on his head. Bruiser leaned into Judy's touch, and after a moment, she could hear his quiet purring.

"Who could ever be so mean to such a happy little guy?" Turning toward Critterly, Judy returned his scowl.

Mindy turned around and joined Judy in glaring at Critterly, and then Bruiser ran up Mindy's arm and standing on her shoulder, hissed his own displeasure at the red panda. Critterly huffed at the angry display and waved a paw in dismissal of the group before opening the entryway door.

Seeing Critterly about to step into the building lobby, Mindy quickly raised her paw and giving the finger to her former landlord, barked out, "I better get all of my deposit back, you sleaze." The last thing either girl saw before the door closed was the landlord returning Mindy's suggestive gesture.

Judy chuckled at her neighbor's tact, "That probably didn't do anything to help speed up getting your deposit back."

"Maybe not, but it sure felt good. That degenerate slimeball has been useless ever since he took over the building."

Judy reached out and scratched Bruiser again, "Do you want me to see if there's anything the housing board can do?"

Mindy shook her head, "Nah, ever since that squirrel at the end of the hall got booted, I've been looking for another place to live, I figured it was only a matter of time before that maggot panda came after me."

Surprised, Judy said, "What? I didn't know that guy got kicked out, what happened?"

"His girlfriend stayed over one too many times. Any more than a couple of days a month and wham, lease violation. He had to either add her to his lease or leave, he decided to move in with her at her place."

"I was wondering why I hadn't seen him around for a while."

"Yeah, I think our scumbag landlord is trying to take the building condo or something. He's been snooping around and writing people up, no matter how small the violation, it's almost like he's looking for an excuse to toss mammals out."
"So, what are you going to do?"

"My old college roommate has a place with an extra bedroom, and the building allows pets, so I'm moving in with her. She should be here in a minute with her brother and his truck to help me with my stuff.

"Judy, you may want to start looking around too. This place is a dump. I mean, I was done with communal showers after my first year living in the dorms at school, and when you add in the fact that he's started to charge us for delousing, the heat barely works, there's no AC, no workout facilities, and the frosting on the cake, Mr. Lazy Ass still hasn't installed any lobby door locks, something I've been asking for since that witch, Dharma, ran the place."

Putting a paw on Judy's arm, Mindy huffed, "Us delicate does need to worry about those kinds of things, no way do I want any of the shady characters that Critterly hangs out with anywhere near me or my sweet little Buster." Scratching her chameleon along his back and down his tail, Mindy cooed and made some kissy-face noises until Buster started to rub his cheek against Mindy's paw.

Looking up from her loving pet, Mindy said, "Judy, trust me, Critterly is a flaming POS, and he deserves to be buried under a truckload of manure, or squished by a rampaging elephant, or both. Hell, I'm almost glad he booted me out, no way is living here worth the grief, and it's certainly not worth the rent he charges."

Judy was torn between agreeing with the less colorful parts of her neighbor's rant and having to go back to the store to get some ear wash to undo the damage Mindy had just inflicted on her sensitive appendages. In the end, she decided not to get into it with Mindy. It had taken her way too long to find this place when she first moved to Zootopia, and even with as bad as it was, she didn't want to have to go through a search like that again. So, instead of egging the skunk on, she just said, "Thanks, I'll keep an eye out. I live alone, and I'm pretty quiet, so hopefully he'll just leave me alone."

Mindy got a coy look on her face, "Alone, huh, how about that good-looking fox you're always hanging out with?"

"Mindy, he's my partner at the ZPD."

"Oh, okay, well in that case, here," Mindy handed Judy one of her contact cards from work, "give him my number and ask him to call me. You know, once you go skunk, no one else ever smells as fine." Nudging Judy lightly with her elbow, Mindy leaned in, "I made that last part up just now."

Before Judy could roll her eyes or reply, a truck pulled up and parked in front of the small pile of boxes. Mindy's new roommate and her brother both got out of the vehicle, and after a few quick greetings everyone, including Judy, helped load the truck up. Once the sidewalk was empty, and Bruiser safely on Mindy's shoulder, Judy and Mindy gave each other a hug.

"Good luck, Judy."

"You too, Mindy."

Judy waved as the truck pulled away and then headed into her building. Passing a trashcan, she was about to throw Mindy's contact card away, no way was she going to give it to her fox, when Judy suddenly started chuckling with a much better idea. If Mindy was interested in meeting a fox, Judy knew exactly the right one to introduce her to.

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Nick made his way out to the large barn. This was the largest of all the barns, being big enough to park multiple tractors, a plow, a flatbed trailer, and a variety of different pull-behind implements. The walls were covered in tools, and at least eight workbenches were mounted to the perimeter walls, most holding partially completed projects.

Nick headed to the back corner where all the activity was. This part of the barn was split between a machine shop and a repair bay. He spied an old pickup truck on a portable lift. Nick recognized the truck as the one that Judy had driven from Bunnyburrow to Zootopia a year ago to find him and tell him about her Nighthowler discovery. Now it looked like it was in surgery, and the prognosis couldn't be good.

"Nick," hollered Colton as he waved, "we're back here."

Stu came around from behind the lift dressed in old, grease-stained overalls, and grunted at seeing Nick amble into his domain.

"Hey, Colton, good morning Mr. Hopps," and then nodding toward the truck, "Mrs. H. said there was a little surgery going on out here. How's the patient doing?"

Stu folded his arms across his chest and was about to say something about foxes needing to mind their own business, when Colton broke in, "Come over here, we were just getting ready to remove the transmission."

Nick grimaced at seeing Stu giving him the hairy eyeball, so he quickly went over to where Colton and his littermate were standing. "What's wrong with the transmission?"

Stu spoke up before his boys could answer, "Have you ever worked on a car or truck before? Some of the repairs we have to make can get pretty complicated, and not every mammal is used to that kind of detail-oriented work."

Nick shrugged, "A little. The car I'm driving was my dad's, and when I was a little kit, he and I did most of the repairs to get it up and running. We had to replace the brakes, install a new alternator, new belts, and do a tune-up. Probably the hardest thing we had to do was replace the radiator."

Stu, a little surprised by the fox's answer, waved Nick back, saying, "How about you stand over there and yell if you see anything snagging on the transmission as Colton pulls it forward."

Colton undid the brackets, and then he and Cody slid it out. As it cleared, Cody started to slip. Instead of yelling, Nick jumped under the transmission, taking the weight on his right shoulder and arm. Once Cody regained his footing, Nick helped the rabbits place the transmission on the workbench.

Stu watched as Nick brushed himself off and asked, "Are you alright?"

"No problem, Mr. Hopps, I used my good arm. Although I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell Mrs. H. what I just did, she told me to take it easy."

Stu shook his head, maybe Bonnie was right and he needed to give the fox more of a chance. Maybe. "Don't worry, what happens in the barn stays in the barn."

Throughout the next hour, Nick, using his good paw, and the younger bucks disassembled the unit under the direction of Stu.

Once the gears were exposed, Stu grumbled, "This looks bad, half of the gears are stripped, and one of them is cracked and wobbly. This shaft looks bent too."
Colton looked up at his dad, "Do you think we can machine something, or are we looking at a new transmission?"

Stu stroked his chin thinking about the various parts around the farm and then shook his head, "Neither, we don't have anything close enough to modify, and this truck is older than I am. They don't make parts for trucks this old anymore, and I went through all the junkyards in the Tri-Burrows area the last time she broke down."

Stu sighed, this was his dad's first truck, and it was a hobby of his to keep it running. His thoughts were bouncing around reviewing increasingly desperate ideas on how to fix the transmission. As he started contemplating how duct tape could play a role in the repair, his sensitive ears picked up a tap, tap, tap noise. Looking up, he saw Nick typing a number on his phone.

Nick turned on his phone's speaker, so everyone could hear, "I know a guy."

A voice on the phone announced, "Ridgeway Pull and Pay, this is Jake, how can I help you?"

"Jake, this is Nick Wilde, how are you?"

"Alpha Foxtrot, he lives and breathes, what have you been up to, we've been missing our best sniper."

Nick tried to answer, but Jake was yelling, "Josh, Josh, get your butt in here, Nick's on the line. Hang on, Nick."

Nick finally broke in, "Jake, get your dad too, I'm helping a friend find an old truck part."

"DAAAD. NICK'S ON THE PHONE, HE NEEDS TO TALK TO YOU!"

Nick seeing all the rabbits cringe, reached down and adjusted the phone's volume a bit. A few moments later, a couple of new voices joined the conversation. There were competing questions from Josh and his dad until the older mammal quickly won out.

"Nicholas, you haven't been over in a long time, how are you doing?"

"Hi Mr. Hunter, sorry I haven't been by. I started a new job and all. I'm actually working in Bunnyburrow for a couple of months and ran into something I was hoping you could help me out with."

"Sure son, what do you need?"

"I have you on speaker with Mr. Stu Hopps. He's looking for parts for an old truck. I'll let you guys talk, Mr. Hopps, this is Mr. Karl Hunter if he can't find your parts, no one can."

Nick, Colton, and Cody listened in as Stu and Karl quickly got down to business. Stu described his truck and the parts that were damaged. Karl didn't have that model year truck on the lot, so they both debated compatible parts from different years. Nick smirked, the two old-timers were going to be at it for a while.

Colton, padded up next to Nick and in a low voice, asked, "Alpha Foxtrot?"

"Yeah, my gaming handle, haven't played much lately, but Josh, Jake, and I used to team up all the time."

"What are their tags?"
"Jake is FoxFire and Josh is QuickPaw"

Colton started waving his littermate over, "Cody, those guys are Skulk Prime."

Nick did a double-take, "Do you guys play?"

Colton nodded, "Yeah, I'm Buckshot, and Cody is Rogue Bun."

"Sweet, you're the Crazy Hares, right?"

Stu whooped as Nick overheard Karl report back that one of his old wrecks should have what was needed. The conversation started to focus on how to get the parts to Bunnyburrow when Colton hopped over and got involved.

"Dad, Cody, and I will drive to Zootopia and pick up the parts." Moving closer to the microphone, he called out a challenge, "Hey Jake, would you and QuickPaw like a team deathmatch with the Crazy Hares, in person?"

"Seriously, I can't believe it, I'm talking to team Crazy Hares. You guys are going down!"

Nick heard some frantic pleading from the other end about Colton and Cody staying the night, and no they won't stay up all night, and they swore they would get the basement cleaned out. After a few more negotiations were had, he was able to retrieve his phone and walk over to Stu.

Stu had a grin on his face and was lightly bouncing on his feet. "Thanks, Kurt knows his stuff, I can't wait to get the old truck running again."

"No problem, Mr. Hopps. Mr. Hunter used to help my dad and me out when we needed parts for the convertible I'm driving."

Tilting his head a bit and with a gleam in his eye, Nick added, "If you'd like to make a friend for life, Mr. Hunter loves strawberries and his mate likes blueberries almost as much as I do."

Stu smiled at the suggestion and directed his boys to load up some of their best berries as a gift for the Hunters while Nick headed into the house to clean off any evidence of working on the truck before Mrs. H. caught wind of his transgressions.

Half an hour later, after Nick had carefully washed the grease off his paw, his phone buzzed with an incoming text message. Looking at his phone, he saw it was from Sheriff Hoofson.

Nick, no work tomorrow so your arm can heal another day. We do need you to come in a little before 4. Mayor has a press conference set up to brief the rescue. She wants to give you a pat on the back, so please wear your dress blues.

Nick rolled his eyes. Seriously, a press conference? Anyone would have done what he did, hell, Carrots would have figured out a way to lash together an ambulance and would have had the kits out in half the time. Figuring there wasn't any way out of it, he sent back a text letting the sheriff know he'd be there with bells on.

You city slickers sure have a funny way of dressing up :)

Nick groaned at the dad joke and went to grab some lunch.

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Judy dropped her laundry bag on her bed and pulled out all the still warm clothes. Aside from
Mindy moving out, and the ear maintenance she'd had to do because of their conversation, it had been a quiet day of hanging out topped off with laundry. Judy had pitched all the Musk Mask cleaners and laundry detergent into the trash, she was done with ever doing that level of cleaning again. The last few nights of sleeping with her marked fox plushie had made it clear that she liked the scent of a certain fox and she was a grown doe, and if that's what made her happy, then she didn't have a problem with it, and if Garrison did, well she could just go–

Judy shook her head to stop herself from going all Mindy-like on Garrison, instead she decided to focus on more fun thoughts.

Yesterday's soccer game was so much fun, and the kits were the best. She wished there was something fun, and cheap, she could treat them to. Judy was living on the edge financially, between rent and her student loans, she had to watch her pennies. Her last big splurge was buying the salmon for Toni and her family. She really shouldn't have, but it was so worth it, she didn't feel a bit sorry about the cost.

Hmm, what would Nick do if he wanted to do something fun for his friends? Shaking her head, she laughed, 'Dumb bunny, he'd hustle someone or call in a favor.'

Judy pulled out her under bed drawer and put her folded clothes in it and pushed it back. Picking up one of her uniforms, she pressed it out with her paw, put it on a hanger and hung it up on the rack next to the purple dress Janae had bought her.

Running her paw through the fabric of the dress, she remembered Nick's vivid description of what he thought she would look like when she finally wore it. A coy smile broke out on her face as she imagined her own version of what Nick's reaction would be. After a few moments, she sighed and then chided herself for having naughty-bunny thoughts about a certain fox with a wonderful smile, warm fur, an extra fluffy tail, and… Okay, she was doing it again. With determination this time, Judy finished with her uniforms, put away her laundry bag, and then sat on her bed to think about something other than her fox.

'A hustle or a favor?'

Considering she was a cop, cashing in a favor was better than running a hustle. So, who owed her a favor? Judy tapped her finger on her chin as she thought about it. The Museum. After the Bellwether incident, they'd told her she could come to visit anytime and bring anyone she wanted. Something about no safety railings around the pit exhibit during the construction work and the museum wanting to avoid any uncomfortable legal action. They said that they'd give her free passes to all the exhibits, including the special ones, the planetarium, a behind the scenes tour, and even meal vouchers.

Judy gave a call to Toni and asked if she thought the kits from the team would be interested in a day at the museum. Toni hesitated until Judy explained that the Museum would cover all the costs, including meals, and she'd talk to Bogo about the field trip and having it count as one of their weekly meetups. Judy gave Toni a few upcoming dates that would work for her and told Toni to pick one that would work for the group and let her know when and how many could make it.

They chatted for a few minutes until Judy heard a crashing noise in the background. Toni let Judy know she'd be back to her soon on the trip and then excused herself to go find out who broke what in the other room.

Judy leaned back on her bed with a smile on her face, this was going to be so much fun.

"Hey Judy, can we go?"
"She didn't invite us, you dummy."

"But she's our friend."

"She's my friend, you're too loud, so she doesn't like you."

Judy clapped her paws over her ears, "Guys, guys. This trip is for kits, I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy it."

"Are we still friends, even though I'm loud?"

"Yes, Pronk, we're still friends. It would be nice, though, if sometimes you were a little less loud."

"See, we're friends."

"Fine, but she wants you to be quiet."

"I would be if you'd try to be quiet too."

"Would not."

"Would so."

Judy grabbed her headphones and put them on. She picked a soothing playlist, closed her eyes, and waited for her noisy neighbors to stop arguing.

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The following morning found Nick asleep on a couch in one of the media rooms with a game controller resting next to him. Nick had finished a movie with the little kits and was getting ready for bed when Alpha Foxtrot was invited to join the combined Skulk Prime/Crazy Hares team as they made Planet Doom a better place, one enemy at a time. Well, depending on the weapons being used, sometimes whole squads at a time. They dominated the battlefield until team 'Mom can't take it anymore' hustled them all off to bed.

Nick had meant to go back to his room and bury himself in his blanket pile but had been thwarted by the comfy couch in the media room. During the night, Nick had curled himself into a furry ball with his nose tucked into his paws and his tail covering everything but his head.

Bonnie was on her way to the kitchen to get started on breakfast before anyone woke up when she heard unusually heavy breathing coming from one of the media rooms. Poking her head in, she saw the source of the noise was a carrot print covered lump on the couch. Smiling at the sight of Nicholas on the couch, she padded over to the snoring fox and spied the game controller on the cushion next to his paw.

Paws on her hips, Bonnie shook her head. 'Nicholas Wilde, what were you thinking? Your arm is bandaged up, and your paw is hurt, and you're playing video games.'

Wondering what Nicholas' mother would think of her kit's behavior, Bonnie was about to 'harrumph' when she felt a chill and saw Nicholas shiver and tighten in on himself. Shaking her head, Bonnie reaching down, moved the game controller over to the table, and then finding a blanket, she draped it on Nicholas and tucked it in around him.

As Bonnie nodded at her handiwork and made to leave, she heard a whisper from the sleeping fox, "Love you, Mom."
Bonnie covered her mouth and almost teared up. What a sweet boy. She bent down and lightly brushed his head fur and smiled at the innocent look on the sleeping tod's face. Sighing, Bonnie quietly padded out of the room and gently closed the door behind her so that Nicholas could sleep in for a few more hours.

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Nick woke to a commotion as Colton and Cody pulled up outside the burrow, honking the truck horn followed by the whooping and hollering of two excited bucks. Nick made it into the common room just in time to see a two-bun synchronized binky. "Nick that was the greatest, it was so sweet to meet those guys and play together, we were unstoppable."

Bonnie stood laughing at her boys while wiping her paws on her apron. "Glad you kits had fun, throw your dirty clothes in the laundry and get cleaned up, you know you both have potato chip crumbs in your fur."

In unison, they gave a deadpan response, "Yes, Mom."

Bonnie smirked and gave them both a look.

Bouncing over to Nick, Colton gave him a quick fist bump, "Mr. Hunter said to say 'Hi.' He's a pretty cool guy. He showed us around the yard and let us see some of the crazy weird things he's picked up over the years. He asked about you, so I hope you don't mind, but Cody and I told him about how you rescued the Thrasher kits and defended them from those animals. He seemed pretty happy to hear about how well you're doing at being a cop."

"Thanks. You're right, Mr. Hunter is pretty cool, he and my dad knew each other growing up, and were good friends."

Colton smiled like Nick had just answered a nagging question. "That explains it. I was wondering how he knew so much about you. At dinner, he told us a bunch of stories about you as a kit."

Nick groaned, "He didn't."

"He did, and I'm thinking Judy would really like to hear about the chocolate paw incident."

Nick chuckled, the kit sure knew his way around a hustle. "Okay, what'll it cost me for you to forget everything you heard?"

Colton smiled big, "Alpha Foxtrot plays for the Crazy Hares in the deathmatch tournament next month."

Nick shook his head, "Not against Skulk Prime."

Colton waved his paws in front of Nick, "No, no. Don't worry, we're already teaming up. Jake thinks he can get the Raccoon Raiders to join us, and then we're going to challenge the Wolf Pack."

Nick whistled, "The Wolf Pack? And you've got the Raiders?"

Colton nodded as he bounced in excitement. "They won't know what hit them."

"Sweet, as long as I'm not on duty, I'll do it."

"Cody, he's in!"

Nick laughed as he watched the two bucks high four each other, and then Colton came bouncing
"Thanks, Nick. And I won't spill anything to Judy." Colton grabbed his backpack and pulled out an old cardboard box and handed it to Nick, "Mr. Hunter wanted me to give you this. He said you'd know what it's for."

Nick took the box and opened it up. Inside was an old motor wrapped in faded newspaper.

"He also said to tell you that he sends his respects and that your dad would be proud of you."

Nick's eyes widened as Colton finished relaying the message, and then he smiled looking at the lift motor for his convertible's top. His dad had asked his best friend, Karl, to find him this motor just before the accident. It was the last thing they needed to replace before the father-son project would have been completed.

His dad was happiest when he was working on that car, and it was during those times that Nick felt most comfortable talking with him. If only his dad had been given more time, he would have been so happy to see the car fully restored.

"Thanks." Nick checked the time and saw that he had a few hours until he needed to leave, plenty of time to swap out the motor.

Bonnie watched Nick head to his room to change, a smile on her face as she noticed the spring in his step and the happy swish of his tail.
The Hopps kitchen was running at a lull at the moment. Dinner was still a few hours off, so the kitchen was pretty calm. Some of the younger kits were in the common room coloring or playing on their phones while a half dozen teenage does were laying out pots or poking through the pantry gathering up dry ingredients for tonight's meal.

Nick was lost in thought as he walked down the hallway. He didn't like press conferences, they were too freewheeling for his taste. The reporters would either ask the same question over and over or try and trip you up with a leading or trick question. Ever since Carrots had cratered at her Q&A session a year ago, he'd taken care of all their press events. Due to all his years of hustling, he had a flair for handling the press, it just wasn't something he liked doing. He'd worked in the shadows for so long it made him nervous to see his muzzle on the nightly news.

Nick's thoughts came to a halt as he heard a wolf whistle come from a doe sitting at a table with a few of her sisters in the common area. As Nick stood frozen in confusion, all four of the does wrote something down and then, as one, lifted their sheets up so Nick could see them.

'10', '9', '10', '10'.

Nick, recovering quickly, waved his paw from his head to his tail and then gave his one overly harsh critic a 'seriously' look. The doe looked at her sisters and then updated her rating, giving the fox the perfect score he'd lobbied for, followed by a lot of giggling.

With a quick thumbs-up gesture and a dramatic swish of his tail, Nick strutted the rest of the way into the kitchen.

Janae and Sunni had been sitting at the kitchen counter working on a coloring book when they saw Nick get 'rated' by a litter of their sisters. Of course, they weren't the only ones. Janae's ears perked up as she heard the footsteps of more of her sisters gathering around to watch Nick show off as he entered the kitchen.

Sunni clapped, and Janae laughed at the fox's antics.

Janae spoke up first, "So, Officer Wilde, why are we all dressed up this afternoon?"

"Well, Miss Hopps, the Mayor has asked for my attendance at a press conference this fine afternoon. City Hall at 4 p.m., if I recall the summons correctly."

Sunni jumped up on her chair, "Wow, Mr. Nick, are you going to be on TV?" Turning to Janae, she clapped her paws in excitement, "Janae, can we watch?"

Nick relaxed his runway look and chuckled, "Sunni, trust me, these things are no fun to watch."

"I'd like to watch."
"Yeah, me too."

Janae rolled her eyes as she listened to Amy and another one of her sisters behind her.

Suni clapped her paws again, "See, we all want to watch."

Nick reached over and tussled Suni's ears, "Okay, but if you fall asleep, don't say I didn't warn you."

Suni threw her little arms up, "Yay," and then ran out of the kitchen to organize her siblings for a watch party.

Looking at Janae, Nick shrugged his shoulders, "I better get going, wish me luck."

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Pawson pushed the muzzled coyote through the atrium doors toward the reception desk. Judy followed behind gesturing to herself, "Just once, when I yell, 'Stop, ZPD,' I'd like to see someone actually stop. Is that really too much to ask?"

Pawson smirked, "You want me to let him go so you can try again?"

The coyote yelped from behind the muzzle, "No, I give! Don't let her touch me." Going to his knees, he started to plead, "Please, I swear I'll tell you everything, my supplier, my contacts, everyone I stole money from in middle school, all of it. Just keep her away from me."

Pawson looked at Judy, shrugged his shoulders and motioned toward the coyote, "Well?"

Judy huffed, "Just book him. Next time though… Maybe if I use a deeper voice or I wear a mask with a voice changing speaker system."

"Darth Bunny?"

Judy rolled her eyes, "I am surrounded by kits."

Clawhauser waved as the group made it to the reception area, "Hi Judy, hi Connor. Do you need someone from holding to collect this guy?"

Judy hopped up on to Clawhauser's desk and put her paws on her hips, "Yup, he's a Nip dealer, and he ignored me when I told him to stop running away."

Ben smiled knowingly, "Okay, I'll make sure they add one count of felony stupid to the list."

Judy felt her phone vibrate and pulled it out. Check out BNN, Nick's doing a press conference with the Mayor at 4.

Judy waited until Clawhauser finished his call to the holding tank and then asked, "Hey Ben, would you put the Bunnyburrow News Network on the lobby monitor? My littermate just texted me and said Nick is doing a press conference with the Bunnyburrow Mayor."

…..

Nick stood next to the railing surrounding the raised porch of the City Hall building. Nick had just finished saying 'Hi' to the Gardiners and the Thrashers who were now taking their seats behind the podium. A dozen chairs were set up in two rows facing out toward the town square. The podium and microphones were set up at the top of the main stairs where Nick saw a buck jiggling a few
wires and tapping the microphone to make sure it worked.

As a few reporters settled themselves in the chairs set up in the courtyard in front of the building, Nick headed over to his seat. He'd wished he could have picked a spot behind one of the large columns, out of view of the cameras being set up, but the Mayor's assistant had been quite specific about which chair he was to occupy.

Nick checked the time on his phone and then set it to vibrate if someone called. Hopefully, this would be over quickly, Janae had told him blueberry cobbler was on the menu tonight, and he wanted to be back in time to get some before it was all gone.

Nick turned as he heard the large doors open behind him and saw a small group of mammals make their way to the front row of chairs. Standing, he greeted the mammals and waited for them to be seated before sitting back down himself.

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"Look, look! It's Mr. Nick." Sunni clapped and pointed at the screen.

All the kits in the media room went silent at seeing Nick standing as Mayor Ackerbunn walked to her seat.

Bonnie poked her head in the door and saw the room full of kits, "Janae, what's going on?"

"Nick was asked to attend a press conference. He didn't say anything about it except that it was happening."

Bonnie leaned back out of the room and yelled for her mate, "Stu, come down here, Nicholas is meeting with the Mayor."

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Clawhauser clicked a few times on his computer screen and then pointed at the large lobby monitor as it blinked and then showed the BNN feed. Clawhauser tapped another checkbox, and the speaker on his desk turned on with the voice of a commentator pointing out all the mammals waiting for the Mayor to arrive.

"There you go, Judy."

Sitting down, Clawhauser sent a quick IM to Chief Bogo to let him know what was going on and what feed to use to pick up the press conference in his office.

Judy looked at the monitor and saw as a BNN camera showed a wide shot of the front of the Town Hall building. Judy recognized most of the mammals sitting with Nick except for the rabbits sitting next to Sarge Gardiner, they must be new to Bunnyburrow.

Judy was surprised when she saw old Mayor Burns come out of the City Hall building with Mayor Ackerbunn. She wondered what was going on that he would be involved.

"Hey, Pawson." Came a voice from behind the wolf, "What's going on?"

Pawson turned to see Collins and then gestured to the screen, "Wilde is getting ready to do a press conference."

"Huh, doesn't look like he's in cuffs, so I suppose that's good."
Judy shook her head and ignored her co-workers as she waited for the presser to start.

"Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemammals, and distinguished members of the media. Before I take any questions, I have invited former Mayor Teddy Burns to help me in recognizing one of our own for outstanding service to Bunnyburrow. Joining us for the presentation are heads of two of our Burrow warrens, Mr. and Mrs. Thrasher and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and members of their families.

"Four days ago, there was an accident at the old beaver pond. A young kit, Alex Thrasher, was washed down the river, and his sister, Jessie, followed him for three miles trying to pull him from the water. When she finally rescued her brother from the river, Jessie was injured and knocked unconscious. Alex bravely pulled his sister from the river but was hurt himself getting her to the shore.

"As many of you will remember, it was a chilly, moonless night, and these two kits were stranded in their swimsuits, injured and unable to call for help.

"Officer Wilde, who had recently joined our sheriff's department, was off duty and on his way home when he took the call to track down the two lost kits. Officer Wilde scent tracked the kits and found them injured and suffering from the first stages of hypothermia. Officer Wilde, unable to call for help due to being in a cell phone dead zone, devised a way to keep the kits warm and carry them to safety tied to his back.

"During the hike back to the pond, Officer Wilde, exhausted and suffering from dehydration, impaled his arm on an exposed root which added to the difficulty of his task since he was carrying the kits while on all fours. Upon reaching the pond, Officer Wilde was attacked while defending the injured kits from an unknown number of drunken animals.

"Sheriff Hoofson has reviewed Officer Wilde's actions and informed me that no one else on his staff would have been able to find Alex and Jessie as quickly or been able to carry them out on such a dark night the way that Officer Wilde did.

"In recognition of this gallant mammal's selfless actions, it is with great honor that I have authorized the awarding of the Bunnyburrow Burrow Meister award to Officer Nicholas Wilde."

Nick's eyes went wide, the Burrow Meister Award? What kind of award is that? Sighing, Nick wanted to shake his head, 'What is it with Mayors throwing cops in front of reporters without telling them what's going on?'

"To help me with this presentation, I have invited former Mayor Theodore Burns to officiate the awarding of the medal to Officer Wilde. Please welcome, Mayor Teddy Burns."

Nick broke out of his reverie when he heard the clapping and cheering for Mayor Burns. Nick remembered from Mr. Gardiner that Mayor Burns had been a pretty popular Mayor back in the day.

"Thank you, Mayor Ackerbunn."

Mayor Burns motioned for Nick to come forward and stand next to the podium, "Officer Wilde, if you would please join me."

"Yes, sir." Nick squared his shoulders and stood up. Remembering his academy parade ground training, he moved to the left of Mayor Burns and came to a perfect parade rest.
"We are gathered here today to honor the bravery and service of this young mammal, Nicholas Wilde, to the Bunnyburrow community.

"Before we do the honors, I wanted to take a moment to talk to you about an award that most in the community know very little about. In the last hundred years, the Burrow Meister has only been awarded six times. Five of those times, it was to posthumously recognize members of the Bunnyburrow community that selflessly gave of themselves to help our community and its citizens.

"One recipient stands out in particular, Lewis Grazer, who sixteen years ago rescued four young kits from their family's burning home. Without consideration for his own safety, Lewis ran into the small house and found the kits hiding in a bedroom closet. Lewis had to navigate around burning rooms and through a smoke-filled house to rescue these kits and return them to their parents.

"Lewis was hospitalized due to smoke inhalation and never recovered."

Mayor Burns paused for a moment of silence in respect of Lewis' memory.

Looking back up, he continued. "Over the last century, the Burrow Meister has only been given to one living recipient. Most people don't realize that only one living mammal at a time may hold the award, and for another living mammal to receive it, the current holder must agree he's deserving and, if possible, help in passing it on.

"Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Officer Wilde and get to know him better. He shared with me some about his background and what it was like for him growing up as a young fox in the city. He was also quick to confide in me that he has not always been the best of role models, but I could see that in his heart, he has always cared about those around him.

"At a dinner a couple of nights ago, I learned, as many others did, about Officer Wilde's family and their aid and support to another of our Burrow families many years ago. By the end of that evening, it was clear to me that giving of themselves and selfless duty is a Wilde family trait.

"I had a lengthy conversation with Officer Wilde's Police Academy instructor, Major Friedkin. She spoke highly of his commitment to the ZPD and the effort he put into his training. She told me that Cadet Wilde was one of the hardest working mammals that she had ever trained and he demonstrated that by setting multiple ZPA performance and academic records and, ultimately, graduating as valedictorian of his class.

"I also had the pleasure to speak with Officer Wilde's ZPD supervisor, Chief Bogo of Precinct One. Chief Bogo, notorious for being a mammal of few words, shared with me, and I quote, 'Wilde is a major pain in my tail, but he and his partner are among the top-rated teams in the city. Anything else, I don't know because I don't care.'"

Nick couldn't help it and whispered out the side of his mouth, "He loves me, we're best buds."

Mayor Burns glanced at Nick and had to cover his muzzle with his paw to keep from laughing. He'd lay odds that Bogo's comment about Wilde being a pain in his tail was a gross understatement.

After a final chuckle, Mayor Burns motioned to the Thrashers and Gardiners sitting behind him off to the side.

"Finally, I have consulted with the heads of the two families most involved in this traumatic event, and been given their blessing to recognize this very deserving mammal with Bunnyburrow's highest award for service to the community."
"Officer Wilde." Mayor Burns waved over Mayor Ackerbunn as Nick stood at attention in front of the small crowd.

"Today, as the current holder of the Burrow Meister, I am honored to recognize Nicholas P. Wilde as its newest recipient."

Mayor Burns stepped back from the podium, reached under his jacket, and lifted a medallion off of his chest. Looking up at Nick, Mayor Burns smiled and motioned for him to lean down. Nick lowered his head and folded his ears down so Mayor burns could fit the antique brass chain over his head.

Mayor Burns leaned in as he adjusted the chain around Nick's neck and whispered, "Congratulations Son, well deserved."

Straightening up, Nick couldn't help but see the look of satisfaction on the Mayor's face. Nick was stunned, here he was a fox in a town of rabbits, and Mayor Burns, easily the most respected mammal in the entire Tri-Burrows area, was honoring him.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Nick took one step back and did something he'd never done before, no matter how special the occasion had been, Nick bowed deeply using a reverent form and held it for a full ten seconds. Returning to a standing position, he watched as Mayor Burns returned the gesture by executing a perfect bow of respect between equals. Once Mayor Burns was done with his bow, he gave Nick a pat on the arm and then turned back to the podium.

Clapping while looking back at Nick, Mayor Burns said into the microphone, "A round of applause for Bunnyburrow's newest holder of the Burrow Meister."

The bunnies in the crowd clapped politely while the surprisingly large number of predators and other prey mammals added more than a few whoops and hollers to the response.

Nick moved to the podium, smiled, and waved to some of the mammals still cheering.

"Thank you, Mayor Ackerbunn and former Mayor Burns, Mr. and Mrs. Thrasher, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. I am honored to receive this award today and am humbled to hear about one of the previous award holders and to have my name included among such a distinguished group of respected mammals.

"In police work, it is all about the team you work with. Your leadership, your coworkers, and your partner. Without a solid team, it's like you're working with one paw tied behind your back. It is important to me that everyone understands that I did not rescue these two kits all by myself."

Turning to Jessie and Alex, he said, "First to Jessie, without a thought to her own safety, she followed her brother over difficult terrain and saved him from the river. And then to Alex, one very tough little bun. As the Mayor mentioned, alone and hurt, he pulled his sister to safety and kept her safe until I arrived, and then on the hike back, he bandaged my injured arm after I had impaled it on a dead root. Without his help, the hike back would have been much more difficult, and I also appreciate that he kept me from drinking the river water."

Nick paused at the moans and groans from the crowd and then continued.

"Next, I'd like to give a shout out to Abigail Gardiner and her family. They responded faster and better than any Zootopia medical unit could have. Without their timely arrival and expert aid, I'd probably be in the hospital right now, or worse." Waving to Abigail sitting next to her father, Nick clapped his paws and mouthed another 'Thank you.'
"Lastly, I need to thank the one mammal that is most responsible for me being here today. A name all of you will recognize because she grew up in Bunnyburrow. Officer Judy Hopps, my partner, and my best friend. Without her support and encouragement over the last year, I wouldn't be who I am today, and I certainly wouldn't be a cop."

Pausing to gather himself, Nick looked directly into the BNN camera and continued, "Judy spoke at my Academy graduation, and one thing she said always stuck with me, 'Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us.' Judy's encouragement to change led me here. Let her words lead all of us to be better than we are now, and together we will make the world a better place one small change at a time."

Nick straightened up and said a little more formally, "Today I accept this award for all those I mentioned and all the other mammals that have supported me over the years. I pledge to try as hard as I can to live up to your expectations and to someday be worthy of the respect you have shown me as an Officer of the Bunnyburrow Sheriff's Department."

"Thank you."

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Judy stood with her paws over her muzzle, staring at the monitor. Mayor Ackerbunn was answering questions from the local reporters, but Judy only had eyes for her fox. The Burrow Meister. Like everyone else, she thought it was only awarded posthumously, now it was hanging around her fox's neck. Her brave, handsome, sweet fox. And all those things he said. Judy started to tear up, he was the one that had helped her, not the other way around.

"Judy, are you okay?"

The BNN camera zoomed in on Nick as the Mayor finished answering a question. Judy's breathing hitched as she stared into his beautiful green eyes.

Judy felt the light touch of Ben's paw on her back.

"Judy?"

Judy looked over at the large cheetah, "Ben, the Mayor gave him the Burrow Meister."

Clawhauser cooed, "I saw. That's a good thing, right?"

"Yeah, Ben, it's a very good thing."

The camera moved and focused on Mayor Ackerbunn. As she spoke and answered questions, Judy chewed on her lip for a moment and then grabbed her phone, she knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't help herself. She quickly tapped out a short message and then watched the big screen. A few moments later, the camera angle widened out and Judy saw the last motion of Nick stealthy slipping his phone back in his pocket. As she continued to watch her fox, he looked up at the camera, smiled and waggled his left ear.

Judy clapped her paws together, and then with the biggest smile on her face, she popped up on Ben's desk, did a quick backflip and landed on the floor. With a last look at Nick on the monitor, Judy went to catch up with Pawson, she still had a Nip dealer to question.

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Bonnie sniffled as Stu pulled her closer into his side, "Are you okay, Bon?"
"Yeah."

"I mean, he's a fox."

"Nicholas is a good mammal. I think Lewis would have liked him."

"Mom."

Bonnie turned to her son, "Yes, dear?"

"Isn't Grazer your maiden name? Are you related to the Lewis Grazer that Mayor Burns was talking about?"

Bonnie pulled her arm out from around Stu and faced the teen, "Yes I am, and you are too in a special way. He would have been your great-uncle. You know, you should ask your grandpa about him the next time he comes to Bunnyburrow for a visit, Uncle Lewis was very brave rescuing those kits and our whole family was proud of him for what he did."

Putting her paw on the buck's shoulder, Bonnie continued, "There's something else you should know. When Uncle Lewis passed, I named one of the bucks from my next litter after him. I wanted someone brave and caring to help keep his memory alive for as long as possible."

"Me?"

Pulling Lewis into a hug, she nuzzled him and then freshened her mother's mark on the top of his head. "Yes, honey. You."

Releasing her son from the hug, Bonnie remembered something that needed doing. "Lewis, would you please find Cody and Colton and the three of you go over to the Gardiner's warren and pick up a bed and mattress big enough for Nicholas to use. They have predator guests often enough that I think they should be able to lend us something that will work. I'll call ahead and let Grandpa Joe know you are coming."

As Lewis left to find his brothers, Bonnie folded her arms across her chest and watched the Mayor field questions for another few moments. Thinking back on the last week of having Nicholas as part of their warren, Bonnie nodded to herself, 'Yeah, he and Uncle Lewis would have gotten along just fine.'

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, since we are a couple of weeks away from the first anniversary of this little story, I wanted to say thank you to all of you for taking the time to read, comment, give kudos, or PM me with questions and feedback. I know that I'm not always the best in replying, but I do read and think about all of your comments.

Over the next six weeks, I’ll be working/editing the next set of chapters, so the next posting won’t be until early February. In the meantime, if you have any thoughts or questions, please PM me and let me know what they are.

Next up is Chapter 23: The Meet, where Judy has her meeting with Axl Thorn and hopefully uncovers a lead that helps her with the drug case. Have a great Christmas and a Happy New Year.
~Mikey
Pawson was driving an older model unmarked car he had checked out of the impound earlier in the morning. Driving through what looked like an old industrial park in a pretty bad part of town just across the tracks from the docks, Pawson was checking addresses looking for their destination.

The ride had been quiet except for the occasional tap, tap, tap of Judy exchanging texts with Nick. Glancing over at Judy, Pawson figured Wilde was giving her a few last-minute tips until he saw the bunny smile and quickly tap back a short message, make a happy humming noise, and then slip her phone into her back pocket.

Pawson cleared his throat to get Judy's attention.

Looking over at Pawson, Judy quickly pasted a neutral look on her face, and innocently asked, "Yes?"

Pawson shook his head, "Anything else from Wilde?"

"Nope."

Pawson nodded and was about to say something about hormonal teenagers when Judy pointed at a large brick building on her side of the street, "Connor, that's the building we want. And there's the gate over there."

Turning into a driveway and pulling the car up to the entrance of a fenced yard, Pawson opened his window and nodded to the mammal standing watch at the gate, "We're here to see Thorn."

The guard mammal opened the gate and waved them in. Pawson found a spot and backed the car in so that, if needed, it was an easy straight shot out of the yard.

Pawson got out of the car and walked around to open Judy's door so she could get out. As his partner jumped down from the seat and started to walk toward the building entrance, Pawson followed a few steps behind Judy. Looking closely at the rabbit, Pawson shook his head, "Hopps, hold up."

Judy turned around, "Yeah?"

Pawson put his paw out, "Come on, you promised."

Judy innocently looked up at Pawson with her eyes wide, "What?"

Pawson made a gimme motion with his paw.

Judy huffed, "Fine," and reached under the back of her purple blouse and pulled out a small set of nunchakus and gave them to Pawson. Turning, she made to quickly get to the building entrance when she was stopped again by Pawson's gruff voice.

"Hopps…"
Judy stood with her back to him for a few seconds and then let out a loud sigh as her shoulders sagged in defeat. Reaching down to her leg, she lifted the cuff of her jeans up and pulled a small knife holder off her leg. Head down, she quickly walked back to Pawson and slapped the knife into his outstretched paw and then went up to the door to wait for him.

Pawson did his best not to smirk as he walked up to where the unhappy bunny was glaring at him while tapping her foot. Pawson looked at Judy as he knocked on the large door and then whispered, "Alright Hopps, put your game face on, it's showtime."

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Smiling, Nick read the last text from Judy, slipped his phone into his pocket, and waited for Buckstein to mosey on up to where Nick was waiting for him.

As he waited, Nick stretched a little and wagged his tail. He was still recovering from yesterday but in a good way. He'd stuck around for a little while after the press conference to shake some paws, sign autographs and have his picture taken while holding a few kits. Thankfully, the photographer wrapped the picture taking part up just before Mrs. Davidson tried to get a picture of Nick holding her precious, tree climbing, puke machine.

Once the mayor had released him from his PR duties, Nick had made a beeline back to the Hopps' warren for the most important part of the evening, blueberry cobbler. While eating that wonderful dessert, Nick was sure he'd died and gone to heaven, he swore to all the food gods that life couldn't possibly get any better until that fateful moment when he'd finished his last bite of pie and… Mrs. H. brought him another piece. Janae and Sunni had both laughed at the joyous expression on Nick's face as he looked at the second piece of pie and then jumped up and gave Bonnie the biggest hug, all the while pleading with her to adopt him.

Of course, the biggest surprise was yet to come. After dinner was done, and Nick had finished watching 'Meowana' with all the kits, and a good number of the older Hopps does, Sunni and her littermates made Nick close his eyes as they led him back to his room. As soon as the door was opened, all the kits ran into his bedroom and started jumping up and down on a new bed.

Smiling, Bonnie poked her head in from the doorway to make sure the bed would work for Nick and then shooed all the acrobatic kits out of the room. As the kits left, Nick gave them all a goodnight hug, and it was then that Sunni gave him the best present a fox could get, Sunni promised to let Nick sleep-in for a whole extra half-hour before she and her littermates would be in to wake him up in the morning.

"You young kits, always in a hurry. All that rushing around is a waste of a nice morning if'n you ask me."

Nick was about to roll his eyes when he noticed an old buck, holding the arm of a young ferret kit who looked to be about fourteen years old, waving at him and Buckstein. "Hey, Buckstein, it looks like something is going on over there." Nick nodded toward the hobby store where the buck was waving.

Walking over, Nick put on a friendly smile and greeted the buck, "Good morning, is there a problem?"

The old buck looked past Nick and angrily spoke to Buckstein, "Deputy, I want you to arrest this predator, he's been taking things out of my store for a couple of weeks now."

The young boy looked up at the angry buck, "Sir, I was just looking, I haven't taken anything. I
swear." Looking to Nick, he pleaded, "I promise, I would never steal anything."

Nick moved forward and put a paw on the youngster's shoulder and gently pulling the boy away from the old buck he asked, "What's your name?"

"Charlie Duncan, sir."

"Every night, I take inventory, and the days I remember seeing him in the store, things end up missing."

Nick looked at the boy, he was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, but he wasn't carrying anything and didn't have anything in his pockets, "Sir, what's missing from the store, and why do you think it was Charlie that took it?"

"He was walking around the store, and one of the collectible Iron Mammal figurines I just got in is missing, I know I didn't sell one, so it had to have been him."

The boy stood with his head down. "I was just looking at it, I'm trying to save enough money to buy one."

Nick shook his head, "Sir, he obviously doesn't have anything with him, are you sure the figurine wasn't just misplaced?"

"He must have hidden it somewhere because it's missing. Deputy Buckstein, would you please handle this. I'm tired of my merchandise disappearing."

Before Buckstein could respond, Nick put up a paw, "Sir, this doesn't make any sense, how about we go inside and take a look around." Buckstein nodded and motioned for everyone to head into the store.

The store was decent sized and carried everything that a teenage kit might want. Toys, hobby supplies, comic books, small gaming electronics, books, movies, snacks, and the collectibles that the old buck had been talking about. Nick even saw a few boxes full of old vinyl records, maybe later he'd stop back and take a look at what the old bun had in stock, Nick didn't know why, but listening to an analog recording always felt more real to him than something in a digital format.

The boy led the group over to the section where the figurines were on display, and then the old buck pushed his way in front of the ferret and pointed to an empty space on the shelf, "See right there, this morning there were two of those figurines, and now there's only one, and I haven't sold any today."

Nick looked around and up at the ceiling, "Any security cameras that might have picked up who took the toy?"

"Pffft, no, never needed a camera, up until now, that is."

Nick huffed, "Okay, we'll do this the hard way." Leaning down to the boy, he motioned to his paw, "Charlie, let me smell your paw."

The old buck whispered to Buckstein, "What's he doing?"

Buckstein shook his head, "Mr. Fehler, didn't you see the mayor's press conference? This is how Officer Wilde found the Thrasher kits."

After getting the boy's scent, Nick sniffed around the display and the remaining figurine in its box.
Picking up the box, Nick noticed one of the top flaps was torn; not being 'Mint in Box' would diminish its value as a collectible.

Before the old buck was able to add damaging merchandise to the list of the boy's crimes, the kit spoke up, "I didn't do that, it was that way when I was looking at them. The other one was fine."

Nick took a sniff of the box and nodded, "There are two fresh scents on the box, Charlie's is one of them, let's see about the other."

Nick sniffed around a little more and started to follow a scent trail. Fortunately, the trail was still fresh, and he didn't need to get down low to follow it. Nick moved to the end of the aisle and stopped in front of a display case full of comic books. He smelled the fresh scent on a couple of the comics and then followed it over to another aisle.

The trail led Nick to the snack section, and after sniffing around, he found the scent he was following on a few potato chip bags, a package of black licorice, and a bag of gummi bears. Following the trail a little further, it stopped again in front of the drink cooler. Nick opened the refrigerator and noticed the diet drinks were completely untouched, whereas the high sugar, caffeinated drinks were well handled.

The trail continued to the back of the store where the restrooms were. Nick paused in front of the male mammals' room, expecting the trail to lead into the bathroom, but instead, it continued on to a door at the end of the hallway.

Looking at Fehler, he asked, "Where does that go?"

"Storeroom, customers aren't allowed back there."

A small sliding aperture door opened, and someone looked out. After a moment, the slider closed, and the large door opened wide.

With a sneer, a twentysomething Hyena looked at the two mammals on the step and turned to another gang member, "Go tell Thorn, the rabbit is here."

Looking back at Judy, the hyena pointed to the room behind him, "Wait over there by the bar."

Pawson grunted at the hyena and then led Judy toward the old-style wooden bar on the far side of the large room. As Pawson entered the space, he was blocked by a brown bear who stood up and planted himself in front of the large wolf. Pawson calmly stared at the bear and then cracked the knuckles of his paws as he stretched out his fingers and balled them back into fists.

The bear sneered at Pawson until Judy stepped between them and calmly looking up at her partner said, "Connor, what did I say about killing mammals today?"

Looking properly chastised, he replied, "Sorry, ma'am, force of habit."

Pawson stepped back, and Judy continued past the two large mammals, without a thought for either one of them, and made her way to the bar. The bear gulped, watching Judy settle herself as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Pawson growled at the bear and was about to step back in to make a point about him being in the way when he heard Judy snap her fingers and point to a spot next to her by the bar. Pawson gave the bear a final glare and then went to where Judy had indicated and waited for Thorn to meet
them.

As Judy stood by the bar, she took a look around at the large room. It reminded her of the common room in her freshman dorm. There were a couple of pool tables, a ping pong table, and a few old-style video games, even an old pinball machine. She saw, off to one side of the room, a large screen TV with a few couches spread around filled with young mammals watching some sort of game show.

Judy's ears swiveled as she heard a voice from behind her, "Something to drink, cutie?"

Pawson heard the comment and turned to face the ill-mannered, smirking coyote that had just made a terrible mistake.

"Pup, unless you're a rabbit, you best not be calling the lady that."

The coyote chuckled and nodded for Pawson to look behind him.

Judy was the first to turn and see three mammals arrayed around the wolf, waiting for him to notice them. The biggest was a young lion who smiled as he flicked open a switchblade and started to wave it around.

"Come on, old-timer, let's dance."

Judy casually gestured in the lion's direction and said, "Connor, mind yourself, he has a knife."

Pawson finished turning around and snorted, "Ma'am, that's not a knife…"

Putting his paw under his jacket, Pawson reached around to the sheath strapped to his back and pulled out a Bowie knife that was easily as long as his forearm. Slowly waving the large, razor-sharp blade in front of the lion, Pawson said in a low rumble, "…this is a knife."

The young lion's eyes went wide as the light reflected off the blade's edge floating in front of his muzzle. About to take a step back, he was halted by a voice coming from behind Judy.

"Enough, Billy. You don't know who you're playing with there, and if you want to stay pretty for your date tonight, I suggest you mind your manners and show our guests a little more respect."

Judy turned to face the voice and saw a fox standing in front of her. This had to be Thorn, sandy-colored fur and ears almost as big as Finn's.

Judy put out her paw and said, "Hello, you must be—"

Gently taking Judy's paw and lifting it to his lips, he lightly kissed the back of her paw and said, "Axl Thorn at your service, and you must be the illustrious Judy Hopps. It is truly a pleasure to have a beautiful creature, such as yourself, grace this tired old establishment."

After releasing her paw, Judy smiled, "Thank you, Mr. Thorn. Although it seems as if some of your associates could learn a lesson or two from you on the finer points of hospitality." Judy flicked an ear toward the coyote behind the bar and tilted her head.

Thorn's eyes narrowed as he focused on a suddenly nervous barkeep who was looking back and forth between his angry boss and a smiling wolf who was cleaning a claw with the tip of his large knife.

Coughing, the young mammal quietly said, "Sorry about calling you cu..., um, sorry, ma'am."
Signaling to the coyote that his lesson in proper manners would continue later, Thorn glanced at Pawson, dismissed him as muscle-bound window dressing incapable of intelligent thought, and then focused back on Judy.

"What can I do for you today, Miss Hopps?"

"I was told you may be able to provide me some information on an issue that I am looking into. As a matter of fact, my very good friend, Nick Wilde, advised me to seek your counsel, and he also wanted me to let you know that he respects your knowledge of the docks and the influence of your organization."

As Judy finished, she noticed the room had gone quiet. Judy kept her facial expression neutral and waited for Thorn's response. After a moment, Thorn inclined his head to Judy and held it for a second. Judy carefully returned the motion, making sure her slight nod was no deeper than Thorn's.

"This way, Miss Hopps."

Judy moved toward where Thorn had indicated, and as she did, Pawson straightened up to follow.

Thorn glanced at Pawson and then at the lion with the switchblade, "Billy, why don't you and the rest of the crew keep our friend here entertained while I speak with our guest."

As all the animals in the room stood and grinned, Billy cracked his knuckles and replied, "Our pleasure, sir, take your time."

Not wanting to leave Connor alone with a room full of violent thugs, Judy was about to say something when Connor caught her eye. He gave her a slight nod to let her know that it was more important for her to go and get the information they needed than for her to worry about him.

Connor turned to face the group of animals in front of him and flashed all his sharp teeth in a grin designed to send shivers down most mammal's backs. With his paw out, Connor pointed at Billy and then opened and closed his curled fingers motioning for the lion to 'Bring It On.'

Thorn smiled as his guys moved to ready themselves, and then placing his paw on Judy's elbow, he gently guided her away from what was about to happen.

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Opening the storeroom door, Nick led the group into a large space filled with boxes, old items, packing material, and some small electronics on a bench waiting to be repaired. The scent trail led to a corner space that had been walled off with old boxes, a couple of wooden pallets, and a few heavy curtains. On one of the temporary walls, there was a covered entryway where Nick pulled back the curtains. Nick took a look inside the space and then, still holding the curtain open, he stepped back and motioned for the old buck to take a look.

Fehler stepped into the makeshift clubhouse and saw his grandson, who was supposed to be working, sitting with headphones on, eating chips, and playing a video game. Looking over at a small table to the side, Fehler saw the missing figurine in its box sitting next to a couple of comics in their protective covers and an unopened video game cartridge.

Walking up to the oblivious buck, Fehler pulled the headphones off the kit's head and dropped them in the buck's lap. The kit jumped up and saw the crowd of mammals in his secret space and quickly realized he was in big trouble.

Nick, Charlie, and Buckstein stood and watched as the buck was grabbed by one of his ears and pulled over to the group. "This is my grandson."
The old buck looked at the group, "I'm sorry I wasted your time, Deputy Buckstein, I'll take care of this from here."

Nick cleared his throat and nudged Charlie forward. Seeing the boy, the old buck looked at him for a moment and then said, "Son, I need to apologize to you. I'm sorry for accusing you of taking things from my store." Fehler leaned over and picked up the figurine and held it out to the young ferret, "Here you go, take this with my apologies."

The boy looked up at the old buck, "Thank you, sir, but I can't accept that. My mom said that I'm not allowed to take handouts, that I have to work hard for what I want because that's the only way other mammals will ever respect me."

Fehler stood for a moment, looked at his grandson, and then back at the ferret. "Your mom sounds like a very smart mammal. So, how about I offer you a job instead. I suddenly have an opening and need someone to help me with the inventory and keeping the store clean."

Nick watched as Charlie thought about Fehler's offer. Nick knew what it was like to be accused of being a criminal by another mammal just because of his species. He could also tell that Mr. Fehler was genuinely sorry for what he'd done and was trying to find a way to make things right.

Putting a paw on Charlie's shoulder, Nick leaned down to speak with him, "Hey, Charlie. Can I tell you a story?"

"Okay."

"A little over a year ago, I had a ZPD Officer accuse me of breaking the law by selling products without the proper paperwork. That officer was wrong. I had all the right permits, and that officer ended up apologizing to me, and later, that same officer asked me to apply for a job so we could work together. Do you want to know what I did?"

Staring wide-eyed at Nick, Charlie shook his head.

"I accepted the apology, and applied for the job, and that officer is now my best friend and my partner. Saying yes to her was the best decision I've ever made in my whole life."

Charlie chewed his lip as he considered Nick's story and then reached his paw out to Mr. Fehler, "Thank you, sir. I accept."

"Holding the box back out, the old buck said, "Good, and please take this as a, um..."

Nick quietly added, "A signing bonus?"

"Yes, please take it as a bonus, and I'll see you tomorrow morning at ten sharp."

The excited boy nearly skipped out of the store to go tell his mom that he'd just gotten a great job and a figurine of his most favorite superhero character.

The old bun sighed and looked at his grandson, "Now what to do with you. Your dad and I both agree you need a summer job, but obviously not here."

Nick cleared his throat, "The 'Hopping Good Eats' diner just reopened, and I'm pretty sure they could use either a busboy or a dishwasher."

Fehler reached out and shook Nick's paw, "Thank you, Officer Wilde, I think that's a great idea."
Still worried about Connor, Judy reluctantly settled herself in a chair as Thorn closed the office door and then went and sat behind his desk.

"So, Officer Hopps, now that we're alone…"

Judy smiled slightly at the change in tone and demeanor, it wasn't just her and Connor that seemed to be playing roles here. "Of course, Mr. Thorn, as you're aware, there seems to be a new drug on the street with a similar effect to the Nighthowler drug that Bellwether was terrorizing the city with last year. I was told you may have some information that could help me track this drug down."

Looking the rabbit over, Thorn maintained a neutral look, "I'm not sure, I find my memory is a fickle thing, and sometimes it needs a little something to shake it loose."

Judy took a breath, she'd figured this was how it was going to go, just not this quickly. "What might help you with your memory?"

"Well, to know that, you'd have to understand something about foxes--""A favor."

Smiling, Thorn nodded, "Very good, I see spending time with Wilde has taught you something."

Judy chewed her lip, she could handle this guy herself. "I am willing to give you a favor in return for your help. A small favor and nothing that runs counter to my work at the ZPD."

Thorn shook his head, "No, you don't have anything I want. Wilde, on the other hand, I'll take a favor from him."

Judy sat quietly for a few moments, and then sighed, "Fine, Nick will do it, same conditions."

"He's not here, how do I know he will honor your word?"

Judy pulled out her phone and tapped a picture icon. Once the picture of her and Nick sitting on the Greytail's couch loaded, she slid her phone over to Thorn, "Nick said to show you that picture if you needed proof that I can speak for him."

Thorn looked at the picture of Judy holding Nick's tail in her lap, and his eyes widened. Quickly recovering, he looked up at Judy and then back down at the picture. It had never crossed his mind that Wilde would be interested in taking a mate outside his species, but then again, no one in the community had expected Wilde to go straight and become a cop either.

Reevaluating the rabbit sitting in front of him, Thorn straightened up a bit and slid the phone back over to Judy, "Alright, deal."

Clearing his throat, Thorn began, "I think something is going on in the homeless community. My guys swing by their encampment over on the east side industrial zone near 34th St. and the highway once every few weeks and they've been hearing things over the last nine or ten months.

"I didn't really put two and two together until Finn started asking around about a new drug and savage incidents. What made me think something was wrong were the stories I'd heard about Crazy Ray Simon."

Judy pulled a notebook out of her pocket and showed it to Thorn. He waved his paw in
"What happened to Mr. Simon?"

"Well, about four months ago, he showed up in the camp going on about escaping from a group of monsters that had abducted him and performed all sorts of experiments on him. No one paid much attention to anything he said until he started to froth at the mouth and really went crazy. Crazy Ray is a big maned wolf, and he's always had a bad temper, so it wasn't like people hadn't seen him lose it every now and then, but this was different. He got loud and knocked over some grocery carts and then took off into a wooded area near the encampment.

"My guys told me that some of the mammals in the camp heard him howling and growling for a few hours, and when he came back, his clothes were all torn up. When someone asked him what happened, he said that he couldn't exactly remember and then immediately screamed something about a dragon and took off."

Judy wrote a note and then asked, "Where did he go?"

"Don't know, I think he's still around, but he's not staying in the encampment anymore." Opening a drawer, Thorn pulled out a picture, "Here's a group shot taken at one of the encampment meals that was served about a year ago. Crazy Ray is the big guy in the back."

Judy put the picture in her notebook and asked, "Anything else?"

"Yeah, I've heard about a few of the old-timers, all predators, from the encampment and a few other places going missing, I don't know their names, but there's been talk. I guess I figured they'd left town or maybe headed over to one of the other districts, but after thinking about Crazy Ray, now I'm not so sure."

Judy nodded and folded up her notebook, "Okay, I'll take a look."

"Last thing, Hopps, I don't want a bunch of cops spreading out all over the encampment, that will just scare everyone and make them scatter. I'll pass the word around to a few of the players I know that you'll be poking around and to leave you alone, but try and be as low-key as possible while you're there."

Standing up, Judy nodded, "Thanks, and I'll do my best not to cause any trouble." Judy pulled out a card and handed it to Thorn, "If you hear of anything else or need to get hold of me, here are my office and cell numbers."

As the two of them reached the door to Thorn's office, Judy put up a paw to stop Thorn and asked him, "You seem to be watching the encampment and its residents pretty closely, not exactly what I'd expect from someone in your line of work, why?"

Thorn paused for a second and then answered, "Zootopia is a lot like other places, they don't really know what to do about the homeless. Some of the mammals are addicts, some have mental health problems, and some just don't fit in with the rest of us. For years I've watched the city try different programs, and nothing has really worked, so my guys and I try to help a little when we can and maybe point the support staff at some of the mammals that need their help the most."

Looking Judy in the eyes, Thorn said, "That picture I gave you with Crazy Ray in it, the fox in the front of the group is my older brother Dominic, and he has a lot of problems. For years, our parents kept trying to get him help, but nothing worked, and when he finally left home, it broke my mom's heart. I used to see him on the streets or at the encampment every once in a while, but I think his
demons finally won, I haven't seen or heard anything from him in months.

"I keep hoping he'll turn up, I'd like to be able to tell my mom he's still alive."

Thorn shook away the memory and motioned to the door, "That stays between you and me, I don't need anyone else knowing why I have my guys keeping an eye on the homeless."

Judy patted the fox on his arm and smiled, "Don't worry, as far as I'm concerned, you're a heartless, uncaring thug."

"Thank you."

Business concluded, the two mammals pasted stern looks on their muzzles and stepped back into the hallway. Judy suddenly stopped as she heard Pawson's voice coming from the common room.

"...But being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful pawgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one thing: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya, punk?"

Judy went wide-eyed and gasped, "Oh, no," and then grabbing Thorn by the arm, she pulled him after her as she rushed to the rec room. Dashing into the room full of young mammals, Judy skidded to a stop behind Pawson and... watched as he finished taking a bow to a loud round of applause and a few hoots and hollers.

"I love that movie!"

"Woo-hoo, you'd make a great tough-guy cop!"

"Do the other part where he gets the perp to confess."

"Uh-oh."

The room went quiet except for the tap, tap, tap of a certain rabbit's foot hitting the floor, "Connor Leyland Pawson, what are you doing?"

Pawson froze at hearing Judy's stern voice full name him, and then to a chorus of snickers, he slowly turned around to face his partner.

"Nothing, ma'am."

Thorn quietly whispered to Judy, "You swear you won't tell Wilde about any of this, right? I've got a reputation to uphold."

Judy rolled her eyes, "Come on, Connor, let's go."
Judy pushed open the doors of the Precinct One atrium and made her way toward Clawhauser's desk. She shivered as the door closed behind her, not from the slight breeze, but from having had to talk to her sleazy landlord this morning on the way out of her building.

"Good morning, Miss Hopps. Nice to see you leaving by yourself this morning."

Judy had been about to give the red panda a pleasant morning greeting, but instead, Judy said in a much colder tone, "What's that supposed to mean, Mr. Critterly?"

"Nothing, I'm just happy to see that you've stopped letting that fox hang out with you. I was starting to worry about your taste in friends."

Judy growled out, "What you should be worried about is my taste in landlords. Officer Wilde is my ZPD partner, and if I want him to stay over at my place, then I'm allowed to do that, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Critterly put his paws up as if he were surrendering and took a step back, "Fine, fine, whatever you say, just making sure you remember what was in the lease you signed."

Judy huffed, Mindy was right about Critterly, not that she was ready to use the same language to describe him as she had, but she was getting there. "I know what I signed, and I'm allowed to have guests over if I want to, so please leave me alone."

"Of course, Miss Hopps."

"That's Officer Hopps to you, Mister Critterly. Now if you will excuse me, good day."

Critterly just smirked, and with an exaggerated flourish, he waved his arm toward the lobby door, "And you have yourself a wonderful day also."

Judy finished walking to Clawhauser's desk as she shook her head in the hopes she could forget about that flaming… Judy chided herself, she wasn't going to go all Mindy on him yet.

"Morning Ben, did anything interesting happen overnight?"

Wiping his muzzle, Clawhauser swallowed and then replied, "Nope, all quiet. How about with you? Or should I be asking about Nick and how he's doing?"

Judy rolled her eyes, "Nick's doing fine, although if I hear any more about the deputy he's partnered with and how far he can 'mosey' before he needs to 'take a load off,' I think I'll scream."

Clawhauser gave his friend a serious look as he replied, "Now, Judy. A well-performed mosey is a work of art, it takes almost the same amount of effort and practice to perfect, as being able to eat a powdered doughnut without making a mess." Reaching under his desk, Clawhauser said, "Here, let me show you."

Judy facepalmed, "Ben, no, seriously, please stop."
Clawhauser looked at Judy innocently, with powdered sugar all over his muzzle and covering his shirt, and said, "Mmwh?"

"Ben, I need to talk with Connor, has he come in yet?"

*Cough* "No, he called and said he won't be in until lunchtime. His mate, I mean, girlfriend, was able to take advantage of a last-minute cancellation and get in to see her doctor this morning, and Connor said he had to go with her. He told me that he'd catch up with you later."

Judy chewed on her lip and thought. She'd talked with Nick last night and filled him in on the meet with Thorn, well not everything that had happened, she'd promised Axl that she would keep a few things to herself.

Nick knew about the homeless encampment but had never been there, so it was going to be up to Judy to scope it out and see if she could find Crazy Ray. Nick had agreed with her that her next best lead was to track down Crazy Ray and figure out what had happened to him and if it had anything to do with the drug that was used on Katie Leyton.

As the two partners bantered around ways to canvas the encampment without scattering the residents, the ZMS came up. One of the Zootopia Mammal Services' responsibilities was to work with the homeless. They tried to provide emergency housing and some medical services to the homeless mammals around town, and they might have records on some of the encampment residents, including, maybe, Crazy Ray.

Nick wasn't the biggest fan of the ZMS because he hadn't seen much in the way of help from them when he was living on the streets, but after he and Judy talked about it, they agreed that it would be a good idea to see what they might have on Crazy Ray before just showing up at the encampment and asking a bunch of questions.

With Connor out for the morning, she was on her own with the ZMS. Judy turned back to Clawhauser, who was still wiping powdered sugar off of himself, his microphone, keyboard, computer screen, chair, and a potted plant on the shelf behind him, and said, "Ben, mark me out as going down to the ZMS office this morning. I'll clear it with Bogo after the bullpen meeting."

"Sure thing, Judy," and then mumbled to himself, "O M Goodness, how did I get powdered sugar all over the ZPD wall plaque way over there?"

…..

Nick stretched as he walked into the kitchen, Sunni and her littermates had got him up at the regular time so he'd headed out for a run, showered, rebandaged his arm, dressed and was now ready to grab a late breakfast, well late for the Hopps, still early for a fox and plenty of time before he needed to meet up with Buckstein.

Grabbing a few pancakes off a stack on the counter, Nick smacked his lips. The kitchen was a lot quieter with breakfast over and most of the kits having headed out to do chores or meet up with friends.

Nick set his plate down on the counter and joined the dozen or so kits either helping clean the kitchen or sitting around the counter working, or reading on their phones.

Nick was about to pull out his phone and check the news to see if anything was going on in the world that he needed to care about when a nineteen-year-old doe named Maggie, who was reading an article on Okapi Whinnyfrey in the latest edition of Mammal magazine, interrupted his thoughts.
with a question, "So, Nick, I was wondering, do you have a mate back in Zootopia?"

Nick nearly choked on a bite of pancake and then grabbed his glass of water and took a drink. "Uh, no. No, I don't have a mate."

"Oh, how about a girlfriend?"

Nick look around as everyone went quiet and waited for him to answer. "Well, sort of, I think. I mean, I hope. You know, there's this girl I know in the City, and I'm pretty sure she likes me, we went out once, but..."

Janae smirked and figured she was due a little payback for what Nick did to her at the department store with Dalton, "Come on, Nick, spill. I heard you say goodbye to someone on the phone at the hospital, and by the goofy look on your face, it had to be a girlfriend."

Nick smiled as he remembered the earlier parts of that conversation with Judy, "Fine. Yes, there's a girl, and we're pretty close, it's just that dating a guy like me might cause her a few family complications."

Janae looked a little confused and pressed, "What do you mean, you're a cop. Who would have a problem with that?"

Mentally kicking himself, Nick realized he'd been a little too cute talking about Judy as his girl in the city and knowing that interspecies relationships weren't a thing in Bunnyburrow, he couldn't exactly tell these guys that he was in love with a prey mammal and him being a predator was the family complication.

"Let's just say she comes from a pretty straight and narrow family, and I've got a little bit of a history, you know, having been a street fox and all."

A doe sitting across from Nick perked up at his comment and got his attention with an excited chirp. The doe's fur was dyed completely black except her head fur which was a combination of purple and red. She wore a black and silver choker, black fingerless gloves and she was wearing some clip-on jewelry, but no piercings. Nick figured she'd gone goth, but her mom had drawn a firm line on how goth she could be.

"Really! Are you like the foxes on TV or in the movies? Do you ride around on a motorcycle wearing a faux leather jacket and get into gang fights? Are you one of those kinds of bad boy foxes everyone talks about and that's why this girl is afraid to let you meet her family?"

Nick wanted to groan at how often foxes were portrayed as an evil underling in the movies but decided not to go there now, "Uh, no. I've never been on a motorcycle; I prefer riding the metro, and wearing leather, fake or not, sounds gross." Puffing up his chest, Nick added, "And I much prefer disreputable to 'bad.'"

"Okay, are you like a 'made' animal and part of the mob? Have you ever killed anyone?"

Nick hesitated before answering that question as a few memories that didn't need to be shared flashed into his head. Shaking the thoughts away, he replied, "No, being a cop means not being in a gang, and I've never killed anyone. I've had to tranq a few while on duty, but that's it."

The doe huffed; this was going to be tougher than she had thought. "How about smuggling or selling drugs?"

"No, drugs are evil, and no decent mammal would be involved in selling them. And just so you
know, the only thing foxes like to smuggle are seconds of blueberry pie." Looking at Bonnie, Nick quietly added, "Not that I would have grabbed an extra piece from the pie on the top shelf of the refrigerator, so if any of it is missing, it wasn't me."

Bonnie smiled and nodded, "Nicholas, you know you're always welcome to help yourself as long as you don't spoil your appetite for dinner."

"Thank you, Mrs. H."

The doe shook her head and then leaned closer to Nick and almost whispered, "Did you run a brothel, or were you like a pimp or something? I bet you ran a stable of girls and…"

"NO! That's twisted. No killing, no drugs, no leather, and definitely no to whatever else you were just asking."

Bonnie interrupted her daughter's inquisition, "Grace Marie, that's enough. Leave the poor boy alone."

"Mooooooooom! My name is Raven now, no one calls me Grace anymore."

"Of course, dear. Why don't you ask Nicholas a normal question, like what his favorite movie is, or where he went to high school."

"But, Mom, he said he was disreputable, so…" Opening her palms up, Raven looked at Nick, "…tell me, what did you do that's so bad, this girl is afraid of you meeting her family?"

Nick took a breath, "Okay, I'll tell you, but don't say I didn't warn you if what I say upsets you."

Raven smiled tolerantly back at Nick and made a 'move it along' gesture with her paw.

"I used to hustle folks playing cards, a little Three Card Monte, street craps was good, and the tourists were pretty easy to suck into a shell game. Not my favorite way to hustle, but I used to make a little on those games at least up until the city passed an ordinance against street games, and I stopped running them."

"A tall buck at the end of the counter perked up. "Hey, Nick," the buck spread a deck of cards out in an arc in front of him and then lifted one and ran his finger across all the cards, flipping them over in place and then he quickly reversed the motion flipping them again.

Scooping the cards back up into a deck, he grinned at Nick while performing several elaborate card flourishes, "We have some tables set up in the south barn, and we play Outback Hold'em every third Thursday of the month. You're welcome to join us if you'd like. If you're short on the buy-in, we can always play for pinks."

Nick's eyes went wide for a moment watching the card handling skills of the teen, and then he replied, "Ah, thanks, but that was my dad's car, I don't think he'd want me to be gambling with it."

"Jonathan Hopps, I better not hear you're playing for real money again, or your father will tan the fur off your hide."

"No, Mom." Touching the side of his nose with his finger, Johnny nodded his head slightly toward Nick and quickly left before his mom started asking any more questions.

Raven cleared her throat to get Nick's attention again and motioned for him to continue.
"Okay, I used to be pretty good at finding hard to get merchandise and then discretely delivering the purchases to the mammals that had ordered them. Sometimes I had to track down an item, more often, it was information. Either way, I'd make a little money as the middle-mammal in the transaction."

Maggie spoke up, "You mean like using the internet? Someone would order something or want some information, and you'd get it to them and charge a shipping fee?"

Nick shook his head, "Well, no, I mean sort of, except sometimes I had to work fast because buying and delivering the item was really important."

"Like same-day delivery?" asked Maggie.

Nick's face fell, "I guess."

Raven facepalmed, and then shook her head in disappointment. After a few moments, she sighed and looked back up at Nick and waited.

"Look, give me a second, uh, I've got it." Straightening his shoulders, he said, "Classic hustle, works all the time. You find a mark that looks sappy and naive, and you lay a sob story on him. Like, your car broke down, or you're in from out of town and your luggage was stolen or…"

Nick paused at a shout from the other room. "Erika, Erin, I'm going into town, if you want to come let's go."

"…someone is sick, and you need a little bit of cash to tide you over. If you work the story, maybe wear some old clothes, it's almost always a winner. I did really well with that hustle when I was younger, adults can't resist a kit. The most important part of the hustle though, is to make sure that…"

Nick felt a paw pulling on his pant leg. He looked down and saw two young kits. They both had the saddest looks on their faces. One of the kits lifted her paw and showed Nick what looked like a broken doll with a torn cloth wrapped around it. The plastic was old and dirty, and there were only a few patches of fake fur left on the body and head.

Nick held the toy in his paw and sighed, "Oh, I'm sorry. This looks bad. If my dad were here, he might be able to fix the clothes, but I was never as good as he was at sewing."

The kits looked dejected, and their shoulders sagged as their ears fell limply down their backs.

Nick tried to cheer them up, "Hey, how about this," reaching into his pocket, Nick pulled out a ten and gave it to one of the kits, "why don't you go into town and pick out a new toy."

The kits looked at the bill and then back up at Nick. Thinking it over, Nick reached into his pocket and pulled out another ten and gave it to the second kit, "Here, now each of you can get something, okay."

The kits smiled and bounced toward where their sister was waiting for them.

Nick looked back at Raven, who was now shaking her head and had the most incredulous look on her face, "So, like I was saying, the most important part is for the mark to never realize that he was just hustled, that way no one calls the cops."

Nick smiled, believing he'd finally found something to sate Raven when he noticed that she was looking past him. Nick turned just in time to see one of the two kits that had just left the room, toss
the old doll into a trash can and then spin around to high four her littermate as they both followed
their older sister out the front door.

Raven put her head on the counter and moaned, "Mom, would you please find us a different fox, I
want one like they have on TV."

Bonnie laughed and patted the doe on the back, "Be nice, Grace Marie. I can tell that deep down
Nicholas is a very disreputable mammal, and if you give him another chance, I'm sure he'll be able
to prove it."

Nick shook his paws out and took a breath, "Alright, here's the one that your sister Judy tried to get
me on."

Nick had everyone's attention now, Judy was always good at catching them doing things wrong, so
this had to be good.

"Actually, this was also how Judy and I first met. Okay, so the way this worked is that my hustling
partner and I would pretend to be a Dad taking his son out for a birthday treat, and we would go
into an ice cream parlor and convince someone to buy us an elephant-sized red popsicle. I'd make
up a story about forgetting my wallet and we'd be holding up the line and usually, someone would
buy us the popsicle because they felt sorry for my disappointed son."

Janae asked, "Did Judy catch you trying to get someone to pay for your popsicle?"

Nick groaned a little and rubbed the back of his neck, "I uh, sort of hustled Judy into paying for the
popsicle, she even gave the elephant clerk a big tip."

Janae laughed, "I bet she was pretty mad when she found out what you'd done."

Nick nodded at Janae, "Yes, yes she was." Continuing his story, Nick looked back to Raven, "Well,
after we had the popsicle, we'd melt it down and take the liquid to Tundra Town and refreeze it into
Pawpsicles and sell them for a big profit."

Colton looked up from some papers he was working on, "What's wrong with doing that, did you
have a permit to sell food and a receipt of declared commerce?"

"Yes, but Judy didn't know that, and like Janae said, she was pretty mad that I hustled her in the ice
cream parlor."

"So, how much was the big popsicle, and how many Pawpsicles did you make out of it?" asked
Colton with pencil in paw.

"Fifteen dollars and we could get about two hundred Pawpsicles out of it." Lifting his paw up, "We
used our own paws as molds."

Making a note on his paper, Colton asked, "How about the popsicle sticks?"

"We had a great supplier, a dollar for 200 sticks, and we'd collect them after they were used and
resell them as recycled red wood lumber to a mouse construction firm." Leaning toward Colton,
Nick winked and added, "You know, red wood, with a space in the middle, gotta keep the
paperwork right."

Colton rolled his eyes as he made more notes, "How much did you get per unit for the Pawpsicles?
"Two dollars apiece."
"What did your daily sales look like?"

Nick replied, "Including the lumber sales, my partner and I grossed between $475 and $500."

"Do you think they used any artificial flavors or dyes in the original popsicle?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders, "I suppose, never thought about it."

"Any trouble selling all your stock?"

"Nope, we targeted lemmings, once we sold to one of them, they'd all buy one. I know we could have sold a lot more if we'd been able to make more. And if we'd had better distribution, we could have hit different parts of town at the same time or gone into wholesaling."

Tapping the paper with his pencil, Colton nodded, "We've been selling surplus fruits and berries to a wholesaler just to get rid of them. The price we've been getting is so low we've been thinking about just plowing it under or dumping it for compost. I'm looking at a few numbers here, and I'm thinking, if we used all-natural juices, charged a little more, advertised them as no GMOs, gluten-free and no dyes, and up the production, all we'd have to do is figure out the sales side and we could clear a pretty penny."

Raven had had enough, "Stop it, I can't take it anymore! Now you want to go into business with him! The next thing we're going to find out is that he volunteers at an orphanage or something."

Nick bit his lips closed and raised his eyebrows as he looked at Raven.

The frustrated doe stared at the silent fox for a few seconds and then sighed, "You volunteer at an orphanage, don't you?"

Nick nodded slowly, "A couple of times a month."

"Aaargh!" She put her head back down on the counter and rolled it back and forth in frustration.

Colton chuckled as he looked at his sister, "Done?"

Raven nodded without lifting her head off the counter, "I hate foxes."

Nick shook his head at the moaning doe and looked to Colton, "What about the freezing process, making the molds in the snow and waiting for the liquid to freeze took the longest."

"Got that covered, when Cody and I went to Mr. Hunter's to pick up Dad's truck parts, he showed us around his yard, one of the things he'd just gotten in were a pair of industrial, elephant-sized, super-cold freezers, and one of my sisters makes food safe molds for her plasterwork and can make us all the paw molds we need. All we need now is someone that knows distribution, and we're talking some serious money."

Nick pulled out his phone, "I know a guy." Dialing Finn's number, he lowered the volume on his phone and braced himself.

"WHAT, who the hell is calling me this early in the morning on my day off?!"

"Finn buddy, it's Nick, I've got someone here with a business proposal. Are you interested?"

After a few seconds of threats, Nick calmed the irate fox down, let him know about Colton, and then handed his phone to the buck.
Nick leaned against the counter and patted Raven on the back, "Sorry, kit, I don't have a problem with twisting the law into a pretzel when I have to, but breaking it is bad for business."

Looking up, the doe asked with a whimper, "Do you know any weasels that ride motorcycles?"

Nick put his head down low and replied, "No, but I know one that's a Street Minister if that helps."

Groaning and pounding her head on the counter a couple of more times, Raven finally gave up and stomped out of the kitchen.

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Judy parked her patrol car in front of the ZMS main office and headed up to the lobby doors. Judy paused at the entrance and took a look around, she hadn't patrolled much in this part of the city and was noticing that the buildings here were a little older and less well maintained. They were also a little off the beaten path, probably due to funding priorities forcing the ZMS to use cheaper space for its offices.

Judy walked into a decently-sized lobby filled with seats and a counter at the front. There were a few stations with ZMS caseworkers talking with clients sitting in chairs. Judy thought about using her badge to interrupt one of the mammals talking, but the lobby was empty, and it looked like an elderly mammal talking to a stoat doe was about done. Judy grabbed a number, just in case, and then took a seat closest to the stoat's desk.

A few minutes later, Judy was sitting in front of the caseworker. Showing the caseworker her badge and ID, Judy looked at the nameplate on the desk and introduced herself, "Good morning, Miss Furring. My name is Judy Hopps, ZPD. If you have a few minutes, I could use your help."

"Of course, Officer Hopps. I'm Penny Furring, how can I help?"

As Judy pulled out her notebook, a female llama in a gray pantsuit, paused to look the rabbit over and then slowly walked to a coffee machine along the back wall.

Judy checked the time, made a notation in her notebook and then replied, "I'm looking for an older male maned wolf, his name is Ray Simon, you may know him as Crazy Ray. I was told that he used to spend time at the homeless encampment on 34th St." Pulling out the picture that Thorn had given her, she handed it to Penny. "I was hoping you might know of him or have some records on him that might help me figure out where he is now."

Furring looked at the picture and then tapped on her computer keyboard for a few moments. Judy could see the doe furrow her brows in confusion and then type a little more. After another few shakes of her head, she looked behind her and waved for the llama to come over.

"Miss Packler, Officer Hopps here, is looking for anything we may have on Crazy Ray, you know the big maned wolf who was always a little off, up at the 34th street encampment." Showing her supervisor the picture from Judy, she continued, "I know he was treated for an infection a year or so ago because I was at the camp when the medic worked on him, but I'm not finding a record of his treatment or anything at all on him in the system."

Packler pointed at something on the computer screen, thought for a moment, and then she looked up at Judy, "I'm sorry Officer, a few months ago, we had a system crash, and it looks like some of our records were lost." Looking at the stoat, she added, "Penny, it happened when you were away visiting your parents, someone deleted something they shouldn't have by mistake, and the system went down. Once the computers came back up, the technicians told me nothing was lost, but they
must have been mistaken."

As the llama walked away, Furring handed the picture back to Judy and shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, Cecelia is not only my boss, but she's also the one that gets stuck dealing with the IT mammals the most, I'm guessing if she can't find the records, they're gone."

Judy put the picture back in her notebook and asked, "What can you tell me about the encampment where Crazy Ray used to stay and the other mammals that live there?"

Penny searched her desk for a moment and then finding a flyer, she handed it to Judy, "That's a list of the ZMS managed shelters around City Central. They are all fully staffed and have all the necessary facilities you'd expect to be provided.

"The encampment, on the other hand, formed itself a couple of years ago. It's located away from any residential neighborhoods and is surrounded by a large industrial park, a highway, and a forested greenbelt. It's not exactly sanctioned by the City, but ZMS tries to make sure there are some basic hygiene facilities, like portable toilets, available to those camped there.

"The residents there are mostly predators, maybe 80% of them, and for the most part, they want to be left alone, and they don't want anyone getting too close. I'd say the population is a mix of mammals who've lost their jobs and homes, some addicts, a few veterans that are trying to sort things out, and a few that just can't fit in. Thankfully, there's rarely any violence at the encampment, but we do hear about some petty crime every now and then."

Judy took down a few notes and then asked, "I was told that Crazy Ray had an episode of some sort about four months ago, something that was more dramatic than his normal, unusual behavior. I was also told that he ran into the nearby woods, and some of the camp residents heard howling that lasted for a few hours. Do you know anything about that?"

Furring shook her head, "Sorry, no. But, if what you are saying is true, it wouldn't surprise me that no one said anything, the mammals living there really aren't ones to talk to the authorities about anything."

Tapping her chin, Furring suddenly smiled, "Officer Hopps, besides providing medical care a couple of times a month, the ZMS works with a local non-profit to provide hot meals once a week. The next meal service is going to be the day after tomorrow. If you are interested in meeting with the encampment residents, that would be a good time. As a matter of fact, a good number of mammals come in from the surrounding areas to pick up some food and a few supplies that we provide. The non-profit is always looking for volunteers, and I'd be happy to let the organizer know that you'd like to help."

Judy nodded enthusiastically, "Yes, please. That's a great idea. It will give me a chance to see the encampment, and maybe I can ask around to see if anyone remembers Crazy Ray and if they know where he might be now."

As Judy folded up her notebook, Furring added, "Officer Hopps, one thing you should be aware of is that the meals being served include chicken, fish, and other proteins, and the residents that are predators can be a little aggressive in using their claws and teeth while eating. I know you're a cop and all, but I figured I should warn you, and if you would prefer to only serve the prey mammals, I'm sure the coordinator would understand."

Judy smiled and feeling a few goosbumps go down her back as she thought of a certain fox's claws brushing through her fur, replied, "Please call me Judy, and thanks for the heads up, but you don't need to worry, claws and sharp teeth don't bother me."
"Well, I'm Penny, and I'm glad to hear that you're okay around predators; not too many prey are, at
least not while they're eating."

"Pffft, you should see my partner at lunch, the way that fox attacks a salad, it's frightening."

Laughing, the two girls exchanged contact cards and made a plan to meet at the encampment
before dinner so Judy could help set up. As Judy left, she asked Penny to call her if she
remembered anything more about Crazy Ray or if she heard of anyone seeing him. Judy pocketed
her notebook and headed back to the precinct to catch up with Connor for their afternoon patrol.

…..

Bonnie walked over and watched with Nick as Raven left, "Sorry about Grace Marie, she's going
through a phase."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. H., us bad boys are used to it."

Patting him on the shoulder, she said, "Of course you are, dear."

Bonnie stood with Nick for a few moments as they listened to Colton, and a couple of his siblings
negotiate with Finn. Nick was about to help when Bonnie cleared her throat, "Nicholas, do you
have a moment?"

"Sure, Mrs. H."

I'm glad to hear that you have a special someone in the city, even though it sounds like there are a
few wrinkles you need to work through. I can tell by the look on your face that this girl makes you
very happy."

"Yes, ma'am, she's the most important mammal in my life, she's an amazing girl."

"That's how I feel about Stuart, he's frustrating sometimes, but I love him with all my heart. Most
mammals don't understand how important family is for rabbits, they think we are just interested in
lots of kits and that we jump into and out of relationships without a thought. The reality is that once
a pair of rabbits decide to become mates, they bond on a level that most other mammals don't
appreciate. The bond takes time to form, but once it does, it's unbreakable and very special."

Bonnie paused, thinking about her lost son, "Sometimes the bond can hurt, but the joy that comes
from finding your one true love can't be described."

Nodding, Nick was about to describe how similar imprinting sounded to the type of bonding that
rabbits experienced when Bonnie continued, "Nicholas, I'd like to ask you for a favor, it has to do
with Judy."

Nick smiled, he figured he'd have to wait for another month or so before asking Judy's parents
about courting her, and here Bonnie had just provided him with the perfect setup. "Of course, Mrs.
H., as a matter of fact, I think the world of Judy and her being happy is--""

"Oh good, I'm glad because I've tried a few times in the past to convince her to get out and meet a
nice buck. I so want her to meet someone that makes her happy. Judy's always been so single-
minded about being a police officer that I'm worried she'll miss out on finding her true love or
settle for someone that she can't bond with and then she'll miss out on one of the most wonderful
things a rabbit can experience in life, the feeling of comfort and joy that comes from being with the
one you want to spend the rest of your life with."
"Well, Mrs. H., I um…"

Pulling a notecard from her apron pocket, Bonnie held it out for Nick. "Nicholas, this is the number of a nice buck in the city. He just finished his pharmacy degree and has a small apartment not too far away from where Judy lives. I spoke with him and let him know you and I would talk. If you're willing to give your blessing for him to call Judy, then she might listen to him and maybe go out with him on a date."

This was not the way Nick had wanted this conversation to go. No way was he going to let some other guy anywhere near his bunny, especially a smart, well-heeled, professional rabbit buck.

"I don't know, I'm not so sure she'd appreciate me sticking my muzzle in her personal life." Nick grimaced, and hoping that Bonnie would forget about trying to fix Judy up with the buck, tried to give the card back.

Bonnie folded Nick's paw back over the card so he would keep it. "Nicholas, please think about it, I told Randall not to do anything unless he heard from you. I just want Judy to be happy."

Looking at the card in defeat, Nick nodded, "Okay, I'll think about it."

Bonnie smiled and patted Nick on the arm, "Thank you, dear."

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Packler watched as the small rabbit officer left and then went into her office and grabbed her phone out of her purse. Making her way to the breakroom, the llama went in, shut and locked the door, and dialed a number to make a call she did not want to make.

Stopped at a light, an SUV with tinted windows idled as the Ram driving it waited impatiently for the light to turn green. The phone sitting in one of the car's cupholders rang. Picking it up, he glanced at the screen and saw that the caller ID was blocked, "White here."

"Sir, this is Pink, you said you wanted to know if anyone ever came around asking about any of the test subjects."

"Yes, go on."

"That rabbit cop, Judy Hopps, was just here asking about Crazy Ray, the big maned wolf we acquired a little over four months ago. She even had a picture of him from the encampment. I deleted all the records on him when we captured him, but one of the caseworkers remembered him even without the records."

"Sir, the caseworker invited Hopps to ask around the encampment about Crazy Ray while helping to serve dinner the day after tomorrow."

White gritted his teeth, "Okay, not much we can do about that. Lucky for us, that canine was a mental case, and I don't think anyone took his rants seriously, so keep an eye on Hopps, but don't do anything that draws any attention to you or us."

"Sir, I know your team was going to make another pickup at the encampment this weekend, I think you should have them hold off until I can identify a few new candidates at alternate locations."

"Fine, anything else?"

Pink paused, "What about Brown? If he finds out Crazy Ray escaped from the lab and we didn't
tell him…"

"I know, I know, just keep me informed on the rabbit and make sure that there aren't any records in the system on any of our other subjects."

"Yes, sir." Hanging up the phone, Pink pulled up a file on her phone, and after unlocking it, she reviewed her old escape plan. If things go south, she wanted to make sure she had a way out of town and away from both Brown and White. They paid her a lot of money to identify subjects that could go missing without being noticed, but she didn't care enough about their cause to end up as one of the missing herself.
A few rabbits in the dining hall looked up from eating their breakfast as a giggling group of does pulled a sleepy-eyed fox into the room. Most of the rabbits in the room, however, had grown used to the red-furred addition to the warren and ignored the morning ritual the same way they would ignore any of their other siblings coming in for breakfast.

Nick sat down next to Janae with his plate and stifling a yawn said, "Good morning."

The pawful of teenage rabbits at the table with Janae had already finished their breakfast and stood up shortly after Nick arrived, "Back at you, Nick."

Nick put up a paw and let each of them give him a high-four as they left. Once they had all hopped away, Nick shook his head, "Waaay too much energy for this early in the morning."

Janae smiled, "You know what they say about the early bird catching the worm, right?"

"Yeah, except in the city, the early bird calls in its worm order for a noon delivery and then goes back to bed."

Janae snorted and went back to eating her breakfast.

Nick took a few bites of his pancakes, and then seeing Janae was almost done, he leaned her way and quietly asked, "So, have you called him yet?"

Janae coughed and almost choked on the bite she'd just swallowed. Recovering, she whispered back, "No."

"Why not?"

"I just haven't."

"You said he's really cute, so call him." "Nick, keep your voice down..."

"Call him!"

Looking around the room, Janae pulled her phone out and held it under the table so no one could see her, "Fine, I'll text him, but if he doesn't text me back, I'm done. He's probably out doing something anyway."

A few taps later, Janae set her phone down next to her plate and ate the last couple of bites of her breakfast. Waving at her phone, she turned to Nick and said, "See, he's not interested."

Janae's phone buzzed. Grabbing it off the table before anyone noticed the noise, she unlocked her
phone and opened the message. Seeing that it was a text from Dalton, Janae hummed, and then as Nick leaned over to sneak a peek at the screen, she hid the phone from him and said, "He wants to know when and where we, I mean, you want to meet for lunch."

Nick thought about the morning's duty with Buckstein and then replied, "Tell him to meet both of us at the 'Hoppin Good Eats' diner at 11:30."

"Alright," replied Janae as she typed furiously for a few moments and then sent her message. Quickly looking at Nick and then back at her phone, she held the phone against her chest and waited.

About a minute later, the phone buzzed again, and Janae quickly opened the app and read the reply. Smiling, she scrolled down to see the whole message, and then when she was finished, she locked her phone and held it in her lap as she sat and stared at her empty plate with the happiest smile on her face.

Nick waited and watched Janae for a few seconds and then cleared his throat, "Well?"

Janae, startled out of her thoughts, replied, "Oh, uh, he said 'okay.'"

Rolling his eyes, Nick picked up his and Janae's dirty dishes and left the doe to her thoughts as he went to change into his uniform and head into town.

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Coming out of the morning bullpen meeting, Judy and Connor were walking together while continuing their conversation about the afternoon they'd had yesterday. After meeting with Penny at the ZMS, Judy had hoped to have time to brainstorm with Connor some ideas on how to proceed with their drug case. Unfortunately, as soon as she'd picked up Connor, they were sent on a domestic violence case.

Judy was assigned the duty of talking with the couple since all the mammals involved were groundhogs. She wasn't sure if she got the task because they were all small mammals or because a rabbit could talk burrowing techniques with them, but drawing on her ZPD training and her experience having listened to over a hundred broken-hearted siblings, Judy felt she could handle the situation.

Judy was making good headway calming the couple down, and it looked like everything was headed toward an amicable solution until the boyfriend showed up. All hell broke loose after that. First, the claws came out, and then the boyfriend pulled a knife. Judy pushed the couple out of the way and tried to talk the boyfriend out of making the situation worse than it already was. Unfortunately, the boyfriend was drunk and pissed off at being dumped and ready for a fight.

As Judy had continued to try and calm the situation, Connor had moved closer to the group and positioned himself behind a shrub in the yard. Judy, seeing Connor give her a signal, turned and put the couple on the ground with her on top. A moment later, a shwaap and a yelp told Judy that the boyfriend had been darted, and when she looked over at him, she watched as he stumbled a few steps, tried to take a halfhearted swipe at her, which wasn't even close, and then collapse in a heap on the ground.

The groundhog couple held each other, crying, forgiving each other, and pledging their undying love. Of course, threatening another mammal with claws and Connor discharging his tranq gun both meant that the rest of the afternoon would be spent doing lots and lots of paperwork.
Passing through the lobby, Judy refocused on the drug case, she'd been too tired to think about it last night, but this morning in the shower, she'd come up with a plan of action.

Connor interrupted her thoughts and asked, "So, I saw you talking with Bogo after the meeting, have you got something in mind for the morning patrol?"

Judy led Connor to her and Nick's shared desk as she replied, "I got an idea this morning, and I let the Chief know that I wanted to search the cold case files for any predators that have been reported missing over the last year. I figured if Thorn was worried enough to mention that a few old-timers had disappeared, maybe others have been reported missing too." Judy shrugged her shoulders, "Worth a shot."

Connor nodded, "Makes sense." Judy hopped up in her chair, and Connor took a seat at the empty desk behind her. Judy turned and saw that a picture of Olivia and a few other personal items had shown up on the desk. She was about to ask if he'd decided to move in when Connor beat her to the punch.

"I figured I'd transfer my phone here and take over this space while Wilde is out, it'll be easier for us to work this case if I don't have to walk from half a building away to meet with you."

Turning on his computer, Connor turned to Judy and asked, "Are we searching for any mammal that's gone missing or just the homeless ones. I'm asking because I'm not sure how many homeless would get reported missing, I mean that's kind of the major problem, no one really keeps track of all of them."

"Yeah, I know. Let's look at all the cold cases and see if any of them stick out as something we should look at more carefully."

Judy pushed her chair over to Connor's desk as he brought up the case file search screen and started typing. "Alright, past twelve months," looking at Judy, he asked, "any district?"

Judy thought and then replied, "Just City Central and the surrounding sub-districts for now."

"Males only?"

"No, include both sexes and include any small to large-sized mammals, which means leave out anyone from Little Rodentia."

Connor submitted the request and leaned back while he waited for a response. Turning to Judy, he asked, "So how goes it with Nick, is he surviving your family, or should I be asking if your family is surviving Nick?"

Judy smiled, "Yeah, in between watching movies with the kits, he's connected my brothers up with Finn and another fox family here in the city, and they're all going to get in on his Pawpsicle business." Laughing, Judy continued, "I couldn't believe it when he told me. If the plan pans out, it'll probably add 10% to the warren's bottom line, and if my brother has his way, our warren is going to team up with the Gardiner's warren and expand production into markets outside of Zootopia."

Connor smirked as he replied, "Foxes and rabbits going into business with each other, what's crazier than that?"

Tapping his muzzle with a finger, Connor seemed to be talking to himself as he added, "I mean, the only thing crazier than working together would be if a fox and a rabbit were to, oh I don't know, spend a lot of time together and talk all the time on the phone and…"
Judy suddenly whisper-shouted, "Connor." Waving her paws to distract the wolf, Judy pointed at his screen, "Uh, look, the search, it found something."

Connor chuckled and started typing on his keyboard, "Mmm-hmm."

As Judy leaned in to see the list of hits on the screen, she whispered to the wolf, "You're as bad as Clawhauser." Pointing at the screen, Judy focused Connor back on their work. "Four unresolved cases, open up the first one, and let's take a look."

A couple of clicks and Connor was reading the case summary. "A kit, ten years old, the mom thinks the dad took their son because he wanted full custody. The dad was born overseas and reportedly left the Commonwealth about the time the kit went missing."

Judy shook her head, "Nope, doesn't fit, too young." Looking closer, Judy noticed a notation, "Yeah, this has already been sent to the ZBI and the Commonwealth State Department, it'll be marked closed as soon as they send the ZPD their final report."

The next record looked like it was the result of a domestic abuse case, a male bear's mate had disappeared after she had called the ZPD a half-dozen times over two years. The black bear was a high-ranking corporate executive, and every time charges were filed, a veritable army of lawyers would get them thrown out. The bear filed the missing mammal report, but when the investigating officers interviewed the girl's family, they either refused to help or gave dead-end statements that made no sense.

As Judy finished reading the summary, Connor chimed in, "I don't think this one fits either, I've heard of families helping get their mated kits out of bad situations like this. I'm betting this girl is as far away from the city, and her ex, as possible."

Judy wasn't so sure she agreed with Connor until she saw a notation from the investigating officer that the girl's dad had bought a vacation condo way north of the city and refused to disclose its location or why he bought it. The officer had gone on to include a comment that basically parroted Connor's assessment. Judy waved a paw in agreement and had Connor open the next file.

Connor read aloud the case details, and Judy nodded as he finished, this one sounded like a better match to what they were looking for. An accountant had disappeared on his way home from work. His mate had reported him missing and explained that he'd never been gone this long before, and she was very worried about him.

Judy chewed on her lip, the guy's mate had said he'd had a meeting with an important client the day he disappeared, but the investigators could never find any client lists, books, computers or anything else in his office. The entire space had been cleaned out as if he'd moved out of town, and without any evidence of foul play, the investigators had marked the case 'Voluntary Missing,' but kept the file open just in case new evidence surfaced.

About to give up on this file, Judy looked at the guy's office address and had an idea. Grabbing her phone, she quickly tapped out a message to Nick with the guy's name, species, address, and a couple of details from the report and then asked him if he knew of the guy.

Hitting send, she looked up at Connor, who was staring at her with a smile on his face, "What? Nick keeps saying he knows everyone, maybe he's heard of our missing accountant."

A dinging noise from Connor's pocket had him pulling his phone out and check an incoming text. As he read the message, a smile crept across his face. Connor typed a response, sent it, and put his phone away. Still smiling, Connor noticed Judy watching him. "That was my girlfriend, we're
having dinner with her parents tonight."

Judy smiled, "That's nice, does that mean things are getting better between you and her mom?"

"We'll see, if my name gets added to this list tomorrow," pointing to the screen, "I expect you to be the one who comes looking for me."

Judy's phone pinged, and she looked at the text from Nick. Reading it, she nodded and then said, "Nick says that he's heard of the guy, and he kept the books for a couple of medium level organizations. The word on the street was that he relocated suddenly because he was skimming from one of the organizations, and they found out about it."

Sliding in front of the computer, Judy added a couple of notes to the case file and then sent it to Bogo so he could decide if he wanted someone to look into it or give it to the ZBI. Judy closed the file and then waved Connor back over.

Connor opened up the last entry on the list. "Male raccoon, early twenties, went missing about five months ago. His grandmother put in the missing mammal report."

Judy nodded, "Okay, where was he last seen?"

Connor scrolled down, "Here's the address, it's near Park and Dry Creek, southwest part of Sahara Square."

Judy pursed her lips as she looked at the address, "I know that address." Grabbing her notebook, she flipped through a few pages until she got to her notes from her ZMS visit yesterday, she pulled out the shelter list Karen had given her and scanned down the list, "Here it is, that address belongs to an overnight shelter run by the ZMS." Judy nodded as she continued, "I want to look at this one more carefully. Who did the initial investigation?"

Connor scrolled down to the officer's comments, and as he used the mouse to highlight the officer's name, he groaned, "Garrison."

Judy shook her head, "Great." Taking a deep breath, she asked, "What did she find out?"

"Looks like she made a call to the family and then," clicking again, "she put here that the boy's grandmother was worried because he had finished rehab and was supposed to have been home the night before the report was filed, but hadn't shown up. Since it hadn't been 72 hours between the guy going missing and the report, Garrison marked it as Voluntary Missing with a note to follow up later."

Connor clicked another link and then grunted, "That's it, I don't see any follow up notes."

Judy got an angry look on her face, "Unbelievable, what kind of cop lets something like this drop?" Looking at Connor, Judy continued, "I don't know if you've ever patrolled with her, but she's a real piece of work."

Connor shook his head, "Yeah, we partnered up together once, but our patrolling together ended a few minutes after she found out about Olivia. Garrison isn't exactly the most tolerant officer at the ZPD." Motioning toward the record, "So, do we talk to her about this missing mammal report, or check it out ourselves?"

"We check it out ourselves, Garrison has a problem with small predators like raccoons, anything we get from her at this point will be biased or useless." Standing up, Judy pointed at the report, "Send me a copy of that, I may need it if I have to talk to Garrison about what happened on this or I
end up taking it to Bogo."

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Nick knocked on the Sheriff's door and poked his head in, "Sir, Wendy said you wanted to see me before I went on patrol."

"Wilde, yes, come in," said Sheriff Hoofson as he stood and motioned for Nick to take a seat. "How are you feeling? Is your arm healing up?"

Nick nodded, "Yes, sir. I've been trying to take it easy, you know, keeping the gunplay to a minimum and only using my right paw to carry my coffee, stuff like that."

"Well, I can see your sense of humor hasn't suffered any." Grabbing a note off his desk, Hoofson handed it to Nick, "Two things for you. Your doctor at the hospital asked me to give you his number and remind you that he'd like to see you tomorrow. And I got a call from the Mayor, she's rescheduled your PR event at the hospital for tomorrow too. So, it looks like you'll be spending most of your day tomorrow at the hospital."

"Lucky me," Nick deadpanned.

Hoofson chuckled, "Son, the hospital ain't that bad. Just think of all the kits that have never met a fox before, it'll be fun for them."

"I thought parents around here used to tell their kits to behave, or a red devil fox would come and eat them up."

Hoofson shook his head a little as he thought about what Nick said for a moment and then replied, "I think if you skip the part where you eat the kits that misbehave, you should be okay."

Nick groaned as Hoofson smiled at the dad joke he'd just inflicted on the fox.

"Thanks, Sheriff, sounds like good advice."

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About forty-five minutes later, Judy and Connor stepped out of their patrol car and made their way to a small house in an old neighborhood that sat on the south edge of the Meadowlands just north of the Rainforest District.

Connor knocked on the door and stepped back. A few moments later, the door opened, and a raccoon boar in his late twenties poked his head out. With a surprised look on his face, he stuttered out, "Hello."

Judy stepped up and replied, "Hello, I'm Officer Judy Hopps, and this is Officer Pawson; we're with the ZPD, and we'd like to talk to you about Griffin Rogers."

The boar got a disgusted look on his face, "What has he done now? Hang on a minute." Turning, the raccoon yelled back into the house, "Grandma, there's a couple of cops here asking about Griffin." Motioning to Judy, "Why don't you both come in. My name's Baxter, Griffin and I are cousins."

As Judy and Connor stepped into the house, Baxter led them to the living room as an older sow, wearing a light robe and slippers, walked in from another room. Putting her paw out, she introduced herself as Doreen Rogers, "Baxter said you're here about my grandson. Have you found him?"
"Grandma, why do you keep worrying about him? He's probably strung out on drugs somewhere, trying to figure out how to get his next fix."

"That's enough from you, Baxter! Griffin is part of our family, and he finished rehab. He promised me that he was all done with drugs and that he had a job and was ready to straighten out his life."

"Grandma–"

Judy interrupted the argument, "Ma'am, we're investigating your grandson's disappearance, and I was hoping you could tell me a little more about what happened to him."

Shaking her head, she sat down heavily on the couch, "I told that officer that called everything I knew." Wringing her paws together, the elderly raccoon looked down as she said in a quiet voice, "I take it, you haven't found him yet."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, no, he hasn't been found yet. Would you please go over again what you told the officer that called."

Sighing, the raccoon replied, "Griffin called, it was in the morning, and he was leaving an overnight shelter in Sahara Square. He'd finished his rehab program earlier in the week and had been checked out by the doctors. He needed a place to stay as part of his program and asked if he could stay here with me."

Baxter grumbled, "I told the loser to find another place to go, but you told him he could stay here. You know it would have only been a matter of time before he asked you for money to buy drugs."

"I said enough, Baxter." Turning back to the Officers, she said, "He told me that the shelter would call him a ride, and he'd be here in a couple of hours, but he never showed up. I called the number back, but all the person on the other end said was that he'd been picked up and was gone. I waited until the next day, and when Griffin still hadn't shown up, that's when I called the police and filed the missing mammal report.

"He promised he was better and he was supposed to come stay with me. Something happened." Starting to sob a little, she added, "It's been months, even when he was sick, he'd never go this long without calling me."

Judy moved next to the elderly mammal and put her paw on her shoulder, "I'm sorry he's still missing, we'll do our best to find out what happened to him."

Mrs. Rogers sniffed, "You're that police officer that found all those missing mammals that Bellwether poisoned, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, my partner and I found them."

The sow turned to Judy and hugged her, "Thank you for looking for my grandson. He's been in trouble for so long, and I just want him back home."

Mrs. Rogers let go of Judy and then opened the drawer to a side table next to the couch. Rummaging around for a moment, she pulled a picture out and handed it to Judy, "Here's a picture of Griffin, he's the one with the hat. He never took it off, that hat was his dad's, and it was all he had left of his parents from when they passed."

Judy took the picture; it was of Mrs. Rogers and a small group of younger raccoons.

Baxter leaned over, "That picture was taken maybe three years ago, Griffin wasn't as messed up
then, but it wasn't too long afterward that he went downhill and started wandering the streets."

Judy and Connor thanked Mrs. Rogers and her grandson and promised to let them know if they found anything out. They both walked out to the squad car in silent thought. Just as Connor was about to start the engine, Judy said, "I think our next stop is the shelter. Griffin was picked up, but he never made it here. Since it was the shelter that got him the ride, maybe they have a record of who picked him up and where they actually took him."

.....

Buckstein pulled the patrol car into a parking spot in front of the diner, shut off the engine, and looked at Nick, "Lunch!"

Chuckling, Nick got out of the car and followed the enthusiastic buck into the diner.

Nick stopped at the entrance and took a look around. It had been a week since he'd been here, and the change had been amazing. All the booths were full, the majority of the tables were occupied, even most of the counter seats were taken, which, as Nick watched, was where Buckstein was settling himself in.

The smells coming from the kitchen were delicious, Nick could smell one of his mom's old dishes being cooked, and he also took a whiff of a couple of the veggie meals he and Brian had made up when he was here last.

A rabbit doe in a retro pink waitress' uniform with a black apron came up to Nick and greeted him pleasantly, "Good morning, Officer Wilde, please take any seat you'd like, and I'll be right over to take your order."

Nick smiled at the doe and replied, "Thank you, ah, Miss…"

"Brianna Leapwell, I'm Brian and Brenna's littermate, it got so busy here, they put out the word they needed help, and now the whole litter is helping out."

Nick watched as Brianna went back to making her rounds, and then he surveyed the room again, looking for Janae.

"Nick, over here!" Seeing a paw waving from one of the booths, Nick waved back and headed over.

"Hey Janae, hi Dalton," putting his paw out, Nick and Dalton shook paws. "Nice to see you again and thanks for taking the time to come talk with me, you know fire safety is of critical importance." Turning to Janae, Nick gave her a quick wink and heard a quiet growl in return.

"No problem, Officer Wilde, anything I can do to help. How is your arm feeling? I saw you at the Mayor's press conference, that was awesome what you did to help those kits."

"All in a day's work, besides, I had a lot of help."

"Speaking of help," Nick felt a paw on his back and turned to see Brian in his cook's uniform standing next to him, "I could use an extra paw in the kitchen, and I really need you to show me how to put together that last recipe you emailed me." Turning to Janae and Dalton, he added, "Okay, if I borrow Nick for a few minutes?" Without waiting for an answer, Brian handed the fox an apron and guided him into the kitchen.

Dalton scrunched his eyebrows as he watched Nick and Brian walk away and once the two were in
the kitchen, he leaned toward Janae and said, "His arm doesn't look like it's hurting him that bad."

Janae huffed, "Oh, trust me, the pain in his arm is killing him, and later, I'm pretty sure his leg and a couple of ribs will be hurting too."

With traffic, the trip to the shelter was about an hour and a half from Mrs. Rogers' house. Connor parked the cruiser, and the two Officers crossed the parking lot toward the building entrance.

Connor stopped while still standing on the sidewalk. "Hopps, take a look," waving his paw toward the building's facade, "no security cameras."

Judy turned and looked at the surrounding buildings and added, "Yeah, none over there either. You'd think they would have at least one covering the entrance. Without any cameras, I guess we'll have to hope someone saw something and they remember what happened.

Once in the lobby, the two officers looked around until they saw a coyote female coming out of one of the side offices. Judy waved to get the mammal's attention as she and Connor walked over. "Good afternoon, I'm Judy Hopps, ZPD, I'd like to speak with the facility director or someone that might know about one of your residents that stayed here about five months ago."

"Sure, I'm Director Knowles, Winnie Knowles. Who do you want to know about?"

Judy pulled the picture out of her notebook and handed it to the coyote, "His name is Griffin Rogers, he's the one wearing the Brother Grump hat. He called home from here and told his grandmother that you guys had arranged a ride for him. He never made it home, and we're trying to find out what happened to him."

"I remember who you're talking about, he stayed here for a couple of weeks after his rehab, first step in transitioning back to the real world. We typically call them a ZooRyd and charge it to our account. I'm not the one that makes those arrangements though, Dellie does that." Waving for Judy to follow, Winnie led the two officers down the hall to an office.

Knocking on the door, Winnie asked the aardvark sitting behind the desk, "Dellie, these two officers are asking about Griffin Rogers." Motioning for Judy to show her assistant the picture, she continued, "Do you remember setting up a ride for the boar in the picture, the one with the hat?"

The aardvark smiled wide, "Oh yes, I remember him," looking up at Judy, "mostly because he always wore that hat, I loved that movie." Handing the picture back, she thought back, "Let's see, I set up the ride with ZooRyd, and I remember he was going to somewhere on the south side of the Meadowlands, I think he said it was his grandma's place."

Judy nodded, "Yes, but he never arrived, is there anything you can look up that would show us the trip ticket, who picked him up or anything like that?"

"Hang on." Dellie logged into the shelter's credit card account and went to some of the old statements, "We had two that week, what day was Griffin's ride?"

Judy flipped to the report in her notebook, "Thursday the 12th."

"Okay, it's this one," turning the monitor around so everyone could see it, "right here. What's weird is this amount isn't nearly enough for a ride all the way to the Meadowlands, this looks like a bill for a short ride or maybe the penalty fee they charge for a missed ride. I'm not sure which." Dellie paused and then vigorously shook her head, "No way is it for a missed ride, I saw him get picked
up. I remember because I was coming back from getting a Snarlbucks, and I wished him luck as one of the mammals picking him up was helping him into the car."

Connor furrowed his brow and spoke up, "Ma'am, did you say mammals?"

"Yeah, two guys in coveralls. I wasn't really paying much attention; I remember my boyfriend had called and I was on my phone talking to him."

Judy asked, "Did you get a good look at the two guys?"

"Sorry, no. I think one of them had short antlers or horns, but the other one was behind the car, I just saw enough to know that they were dressed the same."

Judy and Connor looked at each, something wasn't right with this. "Dellie, would you please print out the charge record you have," turning to Miss Knowles, "I'd like to have one of the ZPD legal liaisons contact ZooRyd and see what kinds of records they have for this pickup. I agree with Dellie, that fee is not enough to cover a ride all the way to the south side of the Meadowlands."

Judy thanked the Director and Dellie for their help and gave them each a card in case they thought of anything else that might be helpful. Judy also mentioned to Dellie that they might need to talk with her again, depending on what they found out from ZooRyd.

.....

"Good morning, Mr. Hayes."

Hayes was grumbling to himself as he walked down the sidewalk. He'd just left Fehler's hobby shop and wasn't happy. There was a filthy pred kit working there, and even a couple of preds in the store wanting to buy toys. And then when he went to confront Fehler about it, he'd gotten the brush off, 'Best worker I've ever had,' was the response, disgusting.

The older rabbit just grunted in response to the greeting he'd received. He was hungry, and the drive back to the warren was going to take a while, that was the problem with living in a Border Warren and having to check up on the family's motel and gas station here in town, he wasted a lot of time driving every time he had to come into town.

He always enjoyed visiting his old friend Owen Leapwell. He ran a decent, upstanding eatery, the food was a little basic, but the atmosphere and the company made up for it. He remembered the old buck's funeral, most of the Leapwells were there and a few rabbits from town made it, not many though, he'd heard that the old bun rubbed a lot of folks the wrong way with how he treated those that weren't rabbits. A pox on them, they just didn't understand him, he was one of the few voices of reason in this town.

Hayes came up to his friend's diner, he figured Leapwell would have gone to great pains to make sure his place was turned over to the kits in his family that would be the ones to carry on his legacy. About time he met whoever Leapwell trusted that much, and maybe together, they'd be able to keep the town on the right path.

Opening the door, Hayes stepped in and his mouth dropped open. 'What in the sam hills is going on here?'

The diner was filled with rabbits and prey mammals of all types, sitting and eating and laughing. 'How is this possible?'

As Hayes' eyes adjusted to the dim light, they went wide, and he almost gasped, 'Oh my god,'
were predators in the dining room. There were predators sitting at tables in the dining room. There were predators eating food, talking with rabbits, and all of them were in the same dining room.

Hayes waved his paws and took a small step back. And then the smell hit him, from the kitchen he could smell. 'Oh no, what have they done to the place?' He could smell bug patties being cooked!

Hayes' stomach started to churn, he wasn't going to stay in this horrible place one second longer than he had to. Turning to go, he scanned the room again and stopped as he saw a disgusting sight, something he hadn't seen in years, in one of the booths there was a rabbit doe talking with a hare buck.

Hayes' eyes narrowed as he looked more closely and recognized the doe as one of Stu's kits. He'd thought that Stu had taken care of that kind of deviant behavior a long time ago. It was too bad about Stu's boy, but the kits in town needed to know that that kind of behavior wouldn't be tolerated and now to see it happening again. He and Leapwell should have run all the hares out of town instead of just the Longears.

As he was about to leave, Hayes stopped when he saw Nick, with an apron tied around his uniform, coming out of the kitchen with a couple of plates of food for the Hopps girl and the hare. The fox placed the plates in front of the kits, and as Hayes watched, they both took a taste and then he could hear them gush over the dishes. The fox made a theatrical bow waving his paw toward the food and then rushed back into the kitchen.

'That pelt, he's to blame for all of this.'

A doe came up to Hayes and pleasantly said, "Good afternoon, sir, please take any seat you'd like, and I'll be right with you."

"No," giving the place a last look of distaste, he said, "I've lost my appetite." Pushing open the door, Hayes left the ruined diner. The Mayor invited that animal to Bunnyburrow, the Sheriff likely won't do anything about him, and Stu is letting him stay in his warren, put all together, it meant that it was going to be up to him to figure out a way to teach that fox what a predator's proper place was in this town.

.....

Judy came out of the female's locker room and walked over to where Connor was standing by Clawhauser's desk. Connor was dressed nicely for dinner with his girlfriend, whereas Judy was dressed in her workout gear, ready to chase kits all over a soccer field for a couple of hours.

Clawhauser smiled as Judy came up to his desk, "Where are you headed, Judy?"

Judy adjusted her small backpack and replied, "To the Twin Pines Soccer park, I'm helping coach a team of kits for the summer."

Connor spoke up and said, "Hey Judy, that park is on the way to the restaurant I'm meeting my girlfriend and her parents at for dinner, I can drop you off on the way if you'd like."

Pulling his car into the soccer park's parking lot, Connor stopped near two fields where a couple of prey teams were practicing. Nodding toward the fields, Connor asked, "Which field is your team on?"

"Field #4, right over there," said Judy pointing out the other side of the car.

Turning, Connor raised an eyebrow at seeing a kit's team made up of mostly foxes with a lynx, a
couple of weasels, an otter, and walking toward the group, what looked like a pudu buck. "Looks like a nice bunch of kits."

Judy smiled, "Yup, we're playing the second-place team next game, lots of work to do if we want to beat them. Thanks for the ride, see you tomorrow, Connor."

Judy hopped over to the group, and Connor watched as she stopped in surprise as the pudu buck came out of the group and gave Judy a big hug. Judy put an arm around the buck's shoulders as they both walked back into the group, followed by a round of high-fours from the rest of the players.

Connor put his car in gear and pulled away. With a last glance toward the team on the field, he hoped that one of these days, he'd be as good with kits as Judy was.

Chapter End Notes

Any and all thoughts are appreciated, the next chapter will be out in a couple of weeks. Stay healthy and be safe!
Nick stepped into the hospital lobby as the doors slid open. It was a treat to be walking in versus being carted in on a gurney, not that he remembered anything from that night a week ago after being beaten up.

He was a little early, figuring he might get caught behind a slow-moving tractor he'd allowed a little extra time to get here. Lucky for him the roads had been clear, and he'd been able to get the convertible up to a fast enough speed that he was able to enjoy having the top down, something he'd wished his dad could have experienced years ago.

Looking around, he saw the lobby was empty except for a couple of young margays sitting on a couch and a female, probably their mother, talking with the receptionist. Figuring he had time to kill, Nick walked over to where the two younger felines were sitting.

As Nick approached the seating area, he noticed that the larger margay looked to be a teen boy, maybe seventeen, and the other cub was a young girl, eight or nine, with a splint on her arm. Accidents happen to kits all the time, but he was a cop, and this town wasn't always as friendly to predators as it should be.

"Hi there, I'm Officer Wilde, is everything okay?"

The teen, looking a little frustrated, put out a paw, "Hi, I'm Riley Purrbrook, and this is my sister, Chloe. She fell while climbing a tree and broke her arm," nodding toward the older female at the reception desk, "and my mom's trying to get her in to see a doctor." Grumbling, he added, "They're making her do a lot of paperwork first."

Nick nodded, "Yeah, bureaucrats everywhere are all about the paperwork; I'm sure it'll only take a few more minutes." Turning to the girl, "So, you fell out of a tree, huh, you know that can happen to anyone, I had to rescue a bunny kit from a tree about ten days ago," extending his claws, "had to climb using just my claws, that was pretty scary."

Riley leaned toward his sister, "Remember that video I showed you?" Chloe nodded as her brother continued, "That was him."

Chloe started to laugh quietly and whispered, "Really?"

Nick, figuring anything he could do to brighten the mood of a hurt cub, rolled his eyes and mock groaned, "Is there anyone, anywhere that hasn't seen that video?"

The little girl laughed a little more and shook her head as she perked up.

The mood quickly soured as the shadow of Mrs. Purrbrook cast itself over the small group.

"Come on, that… that animal won't check Chloe in, so we can't see a doctor here. Riley, go get the truck, we have to go somewhere else."

"But, Mom, where? The guy at the clinic said she needed a hospital and the next nearest hospital
Standing up, Nick interrupted, "Excuse me, Mrs. Purrbrook, my name is Nick Wilde, and I'm with the sheriff's department, maybe I can help."

Mrs. Purrbrook shook her head, "I don't think so, not unless you can help her find our insurance information." She growled, "Damn rabbit, I'd like to show her a thing or two, making my cub wait."

Nick nodded, "You know, my partner in the city says I'm pretty good at getting other mammals to do paperwork, how about if you let me see if I can work some magic here."

Nick and Mrs. Purrbrook went back up to the receptionist's desk, and Nick politely cleared his throat.

Without looking up from giving herself a manicure with an emery board, the twentysomething doe said, "What?"

Nick looked at the nameplate on the desk, and politely said, "Good morning, Courtney, Mrs. Purrbrook here needs a doctor to look at her daughter right away."

Still focused on her stubby claws, Courtney replied apathetically, "Can't find her insurance information in the system, they need to make an appointment and come back another time when they can pay cash upfront."

Mrs. Purrbrook broke in, "We absolutely have insurance, Mr. Pawfield is very good about making sure all of his employees have full coverage for anything they might need." Turning to Nick, she added, "The Pawfields are wonderful, they are very fair with all their employees regardless of their species."

Nick nodded, "Courtney, you heard Mrs. Purrbrook, please look again."

"No."

Nick's lip twitched, something wasn't right, he knew the medical staff here from when they'd taken care of him, they had treated him without bias and had given him as good of care as anyone else in town would have received. He looked around to see where the Head Administrator's office might be and if a conversation about this female was in order.

About to try again with the obstinate doe, Nick heard Riley call from the waiting area behind him, "Mom, Chloe's crying, would you hurry please."

'Fuck it.'

Turning to Mrs. Purrbrook, Nick said in his best fake pleasant voice, "Ma'am, would you come with me, please."

Mrs. Purrbrook followed Nick as he went over to the couch and gently picked up the young girl and headed to the emergency room. Looking over at the older margay that was standing stock still watching him, Nick calmly said, "This way to the ER, ma'am. I'm checking your daughter in, myself."

As they both moved away, Courtney yelled after them, "Stop this instant; you can't go back there with that girl."

Nick turned his head slightly and yelled back, "Watch me!"
Mrs. Purrbrook looked at Nick and then back to her son, "Wait out here, Riley, I'll find you as soon as we're finished."

Storming into the ER, Nick yelled out, "I need a doctor here!"

"Nick, what are you doing in here, I thought you were meeting with—" 

"Carol, I need your help. I've got a little girl here with a broken arm."

Carol quickly waved toward an empty examination room, "Put her in there," following Nick, Carol pointed, "on the bed. I'll get Doc Livingston."

Nick set her down, "Mrs. Purrbrook, come in, Nurse Carol will be right back with the doctor."

"Officer Wilde, we won't get in trouble for this, will we?"

"No ma'am, I'll take care of everything, you just stay here with your daughter and don't worry, Doc Livingston is a great doc, he worked on me when I was hurt last week."

"Thank you."

Dr. Livingston came rushing in with Nurse Carol, "Nick what's going…," looking at the girl on the bed who now appeared to be frightened by everything that was going on, Dr. Livingston calmly asked in a much more gentle voice, "Hi, I'm Doctor Livingston, you look like you hurt your arm, may I examine it?"

Nick closed the curtain to the exam room and walked back out to the lobby. As soon as he was through the double doors to the reception area, he heard Riley shouting and then Courtney yelling. Picking up the pace, he jogged to where Courtney and Riley were squared off across the receptionist's desk, arguing in front of an older buck in a suit and tie.

Entering the fray, Nick put his arm around the teen to calm him a little, and then asked in a pleasant voice, "What's going on here?"

"That's him, Mr. Furrguson. He's the one I told you about."

Riley pointed at Courtney and yelled, "She said they're going to call the Sheriff and have all of us arrested."

"Who's getting arrested? What in the blazes is going on?"

Everyone turned to see who had suddenly joined the argument. The Hospital Administrator, Mr. Furrguson, was the first to reply, "Madam Mayor, how nice to see you."

"Yes, I'm sure it is, now someone tell me what's going on."

Gesturing to Nick, the doe blurted out, "This animal—"

"You mean Officer Wilde of the Bunnyburrow Sheriff's Department?"

"Uh, yeah, he, um, took a margay cub back to the doctors for treatment without the right paperwork."

Riley gasped at seeing the Mayor, predators got fired for a lot less than what this fox had done, jumping in to defend Nick, he blurted out, "He only did that because YOU couldn't find our insurance paperwork." Turning to the Mayor, "Ma'am, please don't fire him for helping my sister,
she broke her arm this morning, and we had to come here. If you want, call the Pawfield warren, they'll tell you what happened."

Ackerbunn patted the boy on the shoulder, "Don't worry, son, Officer Wilde isn't the one that needs to be worried about their job right at the moment."

Ackerbunn stepped over to the desk and glared at Courtney, "Pull up this family's insurance record, now!"

Courtney looked at Furrguson and then back to her keyboard. After typing for a moment, she said in a quiet voice, "Must have been a computer glitch, it came up this time."

"A computer glitch, right. I'm betting the only glitch is in your attitude toward predators, now admit this boy's sister."

Typing the doe grumbled, "Allowing that animal into this hospital is a mistake."

Waiting until Courtney had completed the admission form and submitted it, Ackerbunn said in her coldest voice, "You want to talk about mistakes? Allowing your father to talk me into letting you have this job just because of his position in the Burrow was a mistake. A mistake, I am thankful to say, I do not have to live with any longer. Miss Hayes, you're fired."

Turning to Riley, Ackerbunn asked, "Officer Wilde and I were going to go get something to eat, would you care to join us, my treat?"

Motioning for the teen to join her as she started toward the cafeteria, Ackerbunn put her arm around the margay's shoulder and led him away while Nick stood with a grin on his face watching the speciest doe fume as she gathered her things.

Nodding, Nick moved to catch up with the Mayor, and as he walked past Furrguson, he heard the buck complain, "She can't do that."

Nick paused and nodded toward the Mayor in satisfaction, "She just did."

…..

Pawson was in the breakroom eating his lunch and reading a short story about one of his favorite movies on his phone, kind of crazy what you could find on the internet, but it was something to do while he waited for Hopps.

Looking up, said bunny interrupted him just as the two main characters of the story were about to kiss, by dropping her lunch sack on the table and then hopping into the chair next to him.

"You won't believe what the ZPD legal liaison said when I asked them to contact ZooRyd for us and request a copy of Griffin Rogers' ride record."

"Go ahead, guess."

"Well…"

"You don't believe what the ZPD legal liaison said when I asked them to contact ZooRyd for us and request a copy of Griffin Rogers' ride record." Folding her arms across her chest, Judy huffed, "Go ahead, guess."

Pawson looked at the irritated bunny and said, "Um."

Judy threw her arms up in the air, "Exactly! They said they'd try to work on it and get back to me. What kind of attitude is that?"

"Well…"

Tearing open her sack lunch, Judy shook her head, "I know, it's like they don't realize we're in the
middle of trying to solve an important case. What do you think, should I go to Bogo, get him to make a call?"

"Ahh…"

Grabbing a carrot stick, Judy sighed, "Fine, you're right, I'll wait until tomorrow to decide, maybe I'll get lucky tonight and find something out on Crazy Ray." Waving her half-nibbled carrot stick in the air, Judy said, "Would you please pass the ketchup."

Pawson slid a bottle over to Judy and raised an eyebrow, "You're not seriously going to put ketchup on your carrots, are you? That would be disgusting."

Judy rolled her eyes, "No, silly, it's for my sweet potato fries." Squirting out a glob of ketchup on a piece of wax paper, she asked, "So, how'd it go with your in-laws last night?"

Connor wiped his muzzle with the back of his paw, cleaning off a little mayonnaise from the egg salad sandwich he was eating. "It went okay, Olivia's mom spent most of the dinner asking me questions about my family, growing up, and what Pack Black Paw is like, I think she wanted to make sure that Olivia's being treated properly."

"How'd it go with her dad?"

"He invited me to play golf with him in a couple of weeks."

"Sounds like you're making progress."

Laughing, Connor replied, "Yeah, at least until he figures out how bad of a golfer I am."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," and then in a quieter voice, Judy added, "it's nice that both of Olivia's parents are trying."

"Yeah," looking at Judy's lunch, Connor asked, "May I try one of those fries?"

…..

Karen was leaning against the doorway to the large combo waiting room and kit's play area. She'd been watching all the activity for a while and was amazed at how good Wilde was with kits. Karen watched as Nick introduced himself to a young mother and then proceeded to perform a few simple magic tricks to entertain her kits as they waited for their booster shots. The kits went from being worried about their shots to excited about what they were going to buy with all the coins that had fallen out of their ears.

Nick was currently sitting with another group of kits, coloring at a small table. Some of the bunnies were trying to help their new fox friend color inside the lines, something that he seemed wholly incapable of doing, while others were trying to explain that there was no such thing as a purple poke-a-dot colored rabbit. As the kits tried in vain to bring out Nick's inner artist, other kits would come up to the table and politely ask to pet his long tail or to touch the Burrow Meister medallion hanging from its chain around his neck.

Karen heard voices behind her and turned to see Nurse Carol, Riley, and two margay females who had to be Riley's mother and sister.

Riley brought the older feline up to Karen and introduced her, "Mom, this is Mayor Ackerbunn. Ma'am, this is my mom and my little sister Chloe."
Putting out a paw, Mrs. Purrbrook said, "Nice to meet you Mayor Ackerbunn, I'm Margaret."

"I'm Karen, nice to meet you too."

Putting a paw on each of her cubs, Margaret looked into the room and whispered to Chloe, "Look over there, they have some new toys for predators that look fun. I see some scratch and sniff books, and that looks like a bin of rope toys, your favorite. And Riley, I think I see a spinning chase toy with feathers, I'll bet that's a lot of fun to play with."

"Rolling his eyes, Riley whined, "Moooom, I'm way too old for toys like that."

Gently pushing him into the room, Margaret chuckled, "Go play and make sure your sister is being careful with her arm."

Margaret, Karen, and Carol all watched the teen explore the room for a moment, and then as he eased over to where the chase toy was, they watched as he poked it with a claw. Riley tried and failed to catch the spinning feather for a few moments and then as he looked back at the group of smirking adults, he blushed in embarrassment and quickly pushed the toy back into the toy pile and went over to where his sister was sniffing a book of scented flower pictures.

All the adults turned away from watching Chloe and Riley as they heard a kit's voice call out, "Right paw, blue."

Carol gasped as she watched Nick tent himself over two kits and slap his right paw on a blue circle. "Nick, your arm!" She called out to the big red kit playing Twister with a group of kits that were much more bendable than him.

"What?"

"Your arm, be careful you don't fall on it and hurt yourself again." Shaking her head, Carol chuckled, "He's worse than all the other kits put together." Stepping into the room, she went from group to group and checked on everyone while keeping an eye on both of her more recent predator patients.

Turning to Karen, Margaret whispered, "Where did all the predator kit toys come from, your office?"

Karen shook her head and whispered back, "We helped, but it's more because of him than anyone else."

"Tail tip, red."

"Hey, no fair, my tail's not long enough to reach," groused a bunny kit.

"Use your ear instead," suggested Nick.

"Oh, okay."

"Riley told me you took care of that doe at the front desk."

"Yeah, she was my fault, I should never have signed off on her working for the hospital."

"Left foot, yellow."

Both females laughed as they watched the fox try and get his leg around a kit and touch his toes to a yellow dot when he lost his balance, yelped, and fell over onto his good side.
"I'm okay, nothing hurt here!" Nick called out as Carol saw him rub his arm as he stood back up, ready for round two of the game.

Carol rolled her eyes and decided something other than Twister would be a good choice if she wanted to keep Nick whole for his checkup later. "How about a story? Everyone who wants Mr. Nick to tell a story, clap."

A roar of clapping from all the kits encouraged Nick to the front of the room where, after a few moments, he was standing in front of an audience of kits, a few adults, and both the margay cubs all sitting crisscross on the floor.

"Thank you for getting rid of her, mine wasn't the first family she'd given a hard time to about admission paperwork."

"Alright kits, today I'm going to tell you a story about how the first bunny police officer, Judy Hopps, and her incredibly handsome fox best friend found a bunch of missing mammals."

"I'll try to do a better job of picking who I sign off on in the future."

"…and then we saw on the JamCam video that the van went into a secret tunnel…"

"Well, it looks like you've picked a winner with that one," said Margaret nodding toward Nick.

"And then Officer Hopps had a brilliant idea, you know she's super smart by the way, she started to howl just like this…"

As the kits laughed and clapped at the howling fox, Margaret added, "Word in the community is that you're going to try and resubmit your predator rights bill."

Hunched over and high stepping on his toes, Nick mock whispered, "And then we crept around, just like this, until we found all the missing mammals locked up in rooms."

"Were they sad, Mr. Nick?" asked a young doe.

"Yes, they were, but don't worry, Officer Hopps was there to fix everything."

The little doe crawled up next to Chloe and picking up the feline's good arm, she put it around her so she could nuzzle in close.

Both Karen and Margaret almost cooed at what they were seeing, and after a moment, Karen said, "Yes, and I'm doing everything I can to get it passed this time."

"But then the guards came, and we had to hide. Making scared motions with his arms, Nick's voice trembled as he said, "I was so scared, but then Officer Hopps saved us."

"What did she do, Mr. Nick?" asked the doe still pressed against Chloe's side.

"She flushed us down a huge toilet…"

"Eww," called out all the kits.

"You know, if there is anything any of us in the community can do to help, you only need to ask."

"It was like the bestest water slide ever. Nick waved his arms around and wiggled his body and tail, "I did this the whole way down."
"Thanks, I might take you up on that, here's my direct number, you see anything like what happened this morning, call me or if you'd rather call our storyteller over there," Karen checked her phone and then wrote a number on the back of her card, "here's his number too."

"And then we swam to shore and crawled out of the water, we were totally soaked. My fur was all wet and yucky. I looked like a big mop."

"Even your tail, Mr. Nick? It looks so soft."

Nick swung his tail around and tickled the young doe next to Chloe as he replied, "Yes, even my tail."

"After we shook ourselves dry, Officer Hopps called the ZPD headquarters for extra help, and they sent helicopters and vans and a whole bunch of police to help her rescue all the missing mammals. The end."

"Thank you. Do you know if he has a mate? I might know of a few females that would like to have a talk with him if he doesn't."

Nick bowed with a flourish to all the clapping kits.

Smirking, Karen replied, "Sorry, I don't know anything about his status, and be sure to tell any of those females you talk to, that unless they're vixens to keep it quiet, that's a law I can't do anything about right now."

…..

Judy poked her head around the door to where Pawson was talking with another officer, "Hey Connor, I've got to go. Penny texted me, and they had a volunteer drop out for tonight, so I'm headed over to the encampment early to help out with the meal setup."

"Alright, I'll let Bogo know you had to leave early. Are you sure you don't want me to go with you and help ask questions?"

"Thanks, but no. Thorn asked me to keep things low key, and you're not exactly a low-key kind of guy."

"Point taken. If you need anything over the weekend, give me a call."

"Thanks, I'm working a short shift tomorrow, if anything comes up, I'll let you know."

"Good luck, Judy, see you Monday."

…..

Nurse Carol was chatting with Nick as she led him on an impromptu tour of the East Wing of the hospital. Carol had just finished tearing Nick away from all the kits in the play area, and the twelve-story wooden block building they were about to christen for the city of Blocktopia, when Nick had turned around too quickly and suddenly became a one-fox demolition crew with his tail. After apologizing profusely, and paying for his unpermitted razing of a city monument by giving each kit a hug and a mini sheriff sticker, Nick was enjoying the slow walk to Doc Livingston's office where he was due to get his arm examined.

"…and this is our Geriatric Ward. Here we have several patients with unique needs and--" Carol's
 pager vibrated. Reading the code on the small screen, she turned to Nick and said, "I need to call Doc Livingston, wait here for a minute."

Nick hung by the Nurse's station for a few moments and then spied a small kitchenette with a vending machine down the hall. Figuring a snack was in order, Nick let his stomach lead him toward the promise of a sugar buzz.

Halfway down the hall, Nick was passing an open door when he heard what sounded like a kit's voice calling out, "Help me, please. I'm scared, please…"

Nick looked back for Nurse Carol and saw her still on the phone, so he poked his head in the room to see what was going on. Lying on the bed was a very, very old rabbit buck. He had on a light hospital gown that covered his pure gray fur, and his ears were limply draped across the pillow his head was lying on. As Nick stood in the doorway, he could see a set of thick glasses on the table next to the old-timer along with a few get well cards and a small vase of fresh flowers.

Stepping into the room, Nick quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

As Nick waited, the buck squinted and tried to focus on him and then said in the childlike voice Nick had heard from the hallway, "Hi, my name's Tommy, my Great Grandpap said he would be right back, but I don't know where he is, and now the bad mammal wants to take me away. I'm scared."

Nick softly padded into the room and stood next to the buck's bed. Looking down at the old buck, Nick figured that he must be suffering from some form of dementia or something that made him think he was a little kit again. "Hi, my name is Mr. Nick, would you like me to wait with you until your Great Grandpap comes back?"

"Yes, please." Closing his eyes for a moment, the buck continued, "I don't want to go with the bad mammal, I didn't mean to make Ruthie sad, I'm sorry."

Nick leaned forward to put his paw on the old-timer's shoulder when his medallion swung out on its chain in front of the buck.

Reaching up, Tommy carefully caught the swinging medallion and held it in his paw. He used his thumb to rub the medallion's engraving of a buck holding a sword, point down, in one paw and scrolls in the other, and then asked, "What's this, Mr. Nick?"

Nick smiled, he'd gotten asked that a lot by the kits downstairs. "That's the Burrow Meister medallion, I helped a couple of kits and the Mayor gave it to me, it's very special to me."

The old buck smiled big, and his eyes went wide, "Wow, you're the Burrow Meister, I can't wait to tell my Great Grandpap that you're here. He'll be so happy to see you again."

Nick patted Tommy's arm, sat down in the chair next to the bed, and said, "I'm glad to hear that, but I don't think your Great Grandpap and I have ever met before."

Nodding his head as if Nick were trying to keep a secret, Tommy replied, "My Great Grandpap told me all about you. He said that when he was little like me that you helped his dad and his grandpap save the farm. He told me that you talked to the mean people at the bank and made them stop trying to take away the farm and that you even made them give back some of the money they'd taken because they weren't following the rules like they were supposed to."

Nick started to tell the old buck that he was mistaken, that he must be mixing him up with the old Marshalls that Sheriff Hoofson had talked about his first day in town, when he felt a soft paw on
his shoulder. Looking around, he saw Nurse Carol standing behind him, a look of concern on her face.

"Nick…", motioning Nick to the door out of earshot of the buck, Carol whispered as quietly as she could. "Nick, Thomas just turned 110 years old, and he doesn't have much time left, we're taking him to hospice as soon as his niece arrives. Sometimes it's like he's a kit again and sometimes he's just incoherent, he hasn't been in a normal lucid state in weeks." I don't know what you said to him, but this is as good as we've seen him in a long time, anything more you can do would be a big help to the family."

Nick nodded and went back to the bed, "Tommy, I'm looking forward to seeing your Great Grandpap again, and I'm glad I was able to help your family all those years ago."

Tommy sniffed, "Mr. Nick, do you, um, do you think you can help me now?"

Nick looked at Carol and saw her shrug her shoulders, "Sure, Tommy, I'll try real hard to help you, what do you need me to do?"

"Please make the bad mammal leave me alone." Tommy wiped a tear out of his eye and then continued, "I made my sister mad, and she told me that the bad mammal would take me away because of what I did."

Putting his paw back on the buck's arm, Nick asked, "What bad thing did you do?"

Sniffing again, "At Ruthie's birthday party last month, I took her most favorite shooter marble, the one that was pink and all glittery, and I lost it outside somewhere. I looked all over, but I couldn't find it, and now the bad mammal is here just like she said he would be."

Carol leaned over and whispered into Nick's ear, "She passed over forty years ago."

Nick took Tommy's paw in his own and looked the old buck in the eyes, "Tommy, I know that Ruthie loves you very much. She was just angry for a minute when she said that about the bad mammal. I'm sure if she were here now, she would tell you that she'd forgiven you a long time ago and that she was sorry for saying those things to you."

Tommy gently squeezed Nick's paw, "I wish she were here; I miss her so much."

Nick breathed in deeply, "When my dad left my mom and me, I was so sad I couldn't even cry. My mom hugged me extra tight and told me that the ones we love never leave us. They watch over us and try to help us when we need it. She also told me that if I wanted to feel my dad again, all I had to do was close my eyes and picture him in my mind and think about how wonderful it was when we were together, and then I'd be surrounded by his love again."

"I'll try." Tommy held Nick's paw tight, closed his eyes, and then smiled as he whispered, "I'll think of Ruthie, and you think of your dad, maybe they'll both come."

As Nick closed his eyes and bowed his head slightly, he heard a gasp from behind him. He took a quick look and saw a young doe standing in the doorway with her paw over her muzzle. Nurse Carol quickly went over to the doe and whispered something in her ear.

Nick turned back to Tommy and quietly thought about his dad.

Carol stood next to the young doe with a paw on her shoulder as they both watched the two silent mammals. The doe looked at the nurse and then back to her great, great uncle holding paws with a red fox in a police uniform. Not sure what was going on, but trusting Nurse Carol, she decided to
watch and wait for a few minutes.

With his eyes still closed, Tommy smiled and turned his head toward Nick, "Thank you, I knew the Burrow Meister would be able to help me. The bad mammal went away, I think Ruthie told him to leave me alone." Opening his eyes, Tommy paused and then quietly asked, "Mr. Nick, would you give this to Ruthie the next time you see her and tell her I'm sorry for losing hers."

Nick opened his eyes and saw that the old buck was holding his palm open to give Nick a blue and gold shooter. Nick reached out and took the marble and then nodding, said, "I'll keep this with me until I see her."

Nick saw a relaxed, content look sweep over Thomas' face. The buck's eyes then sharpened as he said in a clear voice, "Thank you, Officer. I think I'm ready now. These old bones need a rest."

Nick smiled, "Of course, sir. But, if you're up to it, there's someone here that would like to talk with you first." Waving for Thomas' niece to come over, Nick stood up and said, "It was an honor meeting you, sir." Looking at the marble in his paw he added, "I'm sorry there's not anything I can do to help."

"Thank you, son, you've done more than I could have ever hoped for."

Bowing slightly to the old buck, Nick moved to the doorway and stood with Nurse Carol for a moment as they both watched the two rabbits, generations in age apart, support each other with the love that comes from being family.

Thomas hugged his niece and then laughed with a joy he hadn't felt in years, so many burdens had been lifted from his tired shoulders that he felt as light as a feather and ready to fly to the heavens.

Feeling her uncle's joy, the young doe looked over to Nick, and with tears in her eyes, she smiled and silently mouthed a 'Thank You' and then turned back to her uncle and nuzzled him for what she knew would be the last time.

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Walking down the sidewalk, Judy made her way between a treed area and a small industrial park to a large, grassy open space. The encampment sat on the backside of the complex against a greenbelt. Judy saw a couple of vans and a few mammals, mostly predators, unloading supplies.

Judy looked around and saw Penny helping with the unloading of an old green minivan. Waving to the Stoat, Judy walked up, "Hi, Penny."

Penny hugged her new friend, and said, "Hi Judy, I'm so glad you came," and then in a whisper, she added, "and thanks for not wearing your uniform, a lot of mammals around here get nervous around cops."

Whispering back, Judy replied, "No problem, I was warned by a friend to keep a low profile." Judy broke the hug, pulled out a pair of work gloves, and asked in a louder voice, "What do you want me to do first?"

Judy had come to work, and for the next hour, she helped everywhere she could. As the larger mammals set up the tables that would be used to serve the food, Judy cleaned up the areas where the camp's mammals would be eating. There were at least twenty picnic tables that needed a wipe down, and ten portable heaters to set up. Judy made sure the heaters were fueled and ready to be used later.
Next up, Judy helped unpack the health kits. One of the local church congregations had spent the previous weekend putting together the kits. Each kit was a large sealable bag that contained a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, a fur brush, bandages, claw clippers, and a washcloth. Penny had told her that the ZMS set up a few portable sinks, but they couldn't put them everywhere, and the kits provided basic necessities to those that couldn't access the ZMS resources.

After putting out the health kits out on one table, Judy unloaded another box, this one contained another congregation's to-go bags of food the residents could eat later. They'd put together bags for both the predators and the prey. The prey bags contained grain-heavy meal bars, some fruit, and single-serving oatmeal cups. For the predators, they put together bags of high protein meal bars, bug chips, and fish jerky.

As Judy put out the predator bags, she started to turn her nose up at the fish jerky when she noticed it was made from salmon. Judy examined the packaging to see who made it and gave herself a mental note to look up online who sold them. It might be nice to pick some up for Nick to snack on during their next movie night.

After finishing her setup tasks, Judy washed her paws off at the portable sink and went to join the groups prepping the food service tables. Seeing that all the prey volunteers were working on the prey food, Judy went over and joined Penny and two other small predators as they laid out a burrito station.

As the food was set out, a line started to form. Since the majority of the residents were predators, the line was longer on their side. The predators had multiple stations to choose from, there were stations for tuna casserole, fish tacos, and the end station where Penny and Judy were, bug and tofu burritos.

Penny gave Judy a quick demo on how to put the burritos together and made sure Judy had plenty of ingredients to work with, and then they started making a few of each type of burrito, wrapping each one in a foil sheet for the mammals making their way down the line.

Nudging Penny, Judy motioned toward the prey table and said, "Is that Cecelia?" Penny spied the llama and wanted to shake her head. Cecelia had on designer slacks, a silk blouse and sequined foot covers.

"I don't even know why she's here; she almost never comes to help. I don't think she'd recognize hard work if it slapped her across the muzzle."

As mammals came through the line and made their requests, Judy scooped out bugs, seasoned tofu or both, rice beans, cheese, and sauce and quickly made a burrito. It wasn't too long before she was able to put one together as well as Penny, or any of the other volunteers.

Looking out at the eating areas, Judy spied an old pampas fox as he slowly made his way to one of the more remote spaces and sat down. Judy passed out another few burritos and looked back at the fox to see that he was still sitting alone. A large hyena growled at Judy for not paying attention to what she was doing and then looked at what Judy saw and sneered, "Damn Fox, don't see why anyone lets them come around here."

Judy shook her head, Toni was right when she said foxes were looked down upon by everyone, even those at the bottom gave foxes a hard time.

Judy finished making the extra-large combo burrito the Hyena had asked for, and then after handing it to her, Judy made two smaller combo burritos. Turning to Penny, Judy said, "I'll be right back."
Putting the burritos on a plate, Judy walked over to the prey serving table, picked up a bowl of blueberries, and then grabbed a water bottle from the cooler. Navigating her way around all the larger mammals, Judy headed toward where the fox was sitting. Judy set the plate and water down next to the old fox and then turned on the heater in the center of the area he was sitting in. A moment later, with the space warming up, Judy turned to the fox and said, "Sir, if there is anything else I can get you, just let me know."

Once back at the serving table, Judy helped with the burritos for another twenty minutes until the worst of the line was done. Penny knowing that Judy needed to get a little work done, nudged the bunny, "Judy, how about you grab a plate and join the residents, you deserve a break."

Seeing what Penny was doing, Judy thanked her and grabbed a pawful of bell pepper slices and some baby carrots. Judy had wanted to sit with the old fox for a bit, but when she looked over to where he had been sitting, she saw that he was gone and the seats were now all occupied by a group of prey mammals.

Judy saw a few predators, including the hyena from earlier, sitting around another heater. Judy walked over to an empty seat and asked, "Is it okay if I sit here?"

The Hyena, showing all her teeth, growled out, "No prey, don't need your kind here."

Judy looked around at the other mammals on the benches as a couple gave her a sour look, and the others just shrugged.

Sighing, Judy looked around for another group to sit with when she heard someone calling to her from a group a few yards away. Judy gave a last look to the hyena messily finishing her second large burrito and quickly walked over to the other group.

Coming up on a group of about a half dozen predators, two of them scooted apart to make room for her. A middle-aged Bobcat patted the space next to her and hissed, "Don't mind them, they don't get along with anyone."

Greeting everyone on the benches, she said, "Hi, I'm Judy," and then turning to the Bobcat, "Thank you for inviting me over."

A weasel squinted at Judy, "Yup, one good meal a week, might as well enjoy it with your friends. Have you had any of the flounder yet, it's a lot better than the sardines they usually serve?" Leaning over, the weasel put a foil-wrapped street taco made with seasoned flounder, on Judy's plate, "Here you go, you fennecs like fish, right?"

The Bobcat next to Judy shook his head in disbelief, "Magloo, put your glasses on, you just gave a prey mammal a fish taco. Judy here is a rabbit, not a fennec fox, you blind old coot."

The weasel reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses with very, very thick lenses, put them on and continued to squint at Judy, "I thought you looked kind of funny for a fox, sorry about that."

Judy chuckled, "Don't worry about it, I get mammals calling me a fox more often than you might think."

"It's the ears, got me all confused."

"Wear your glasses, you know you can't see without them."

As the back and forth continued, Judy sniffed the taco under discussion, and after glancing around
to see that everyone was focused on the blind weasel, took a little nibble. Judy nodded to herself and added flounder to her list of foods not to talk with her parents about, and then leaned back and watched, and laughed, as everyone else in the small group chimed in to give the old weasel a good-natured ribbing for not being able to see his own paw in front of his face.

Finishing up the last of her vegetables, Judy set her empty plate down and interrupted the friendly argument just as the mammals had moved from eyesight comparisons to a scent detection contest. "Ah, guys, have any of you seen Ray Simon? I heard he used to stay here, and I was hoping to meet up with him?"

The Bobcat next to her shrugged, "Crazy Ray? I haven't seen him around here for a while."
Nodding toward a jackal sitting on the next bench over, the bobcat yelled, "Hey, Pills. Judy's looking for Crazy Ray. Have you seen him around?"

"Nah, haven't talked to him since that day I made him let the ZMS medic treat his infected paw and I haven't seen him since he went all crazy and howled at everything that moved."

Judy spoke up, "Um, Mr. Pills-"

"Just Pills, they call me that because I used to be an Orderly, got hurt real bad, lost my job, and ended up here because I took too much of my own medicine." Chuckling at his own joke, he sighed and then got serious as he added, "Be careful when the docs prescribe you painkillers, too much, too often, and you'll end up here like me, depressing everyone you know around a portable heater."

"Sorry, you were asking about Crazy Ray?"

Judy nodded, "Yes, I was wondering if you knew of anyone who might know Crazy Ray, I need to find him."

Standing up, Pills moved away from the eating area and motioned for Judy to follow him.

"You the one that Thorn said might be around?"

Judy nodded slightly, "Yeah."

Pills pursed his lips before asking, "You're a cop, aren't you?"

Judy nodded again.

"Why are you looking for him?"

Judy hesitated for a moment and then replied, "Thorn told me what happened to Crazy Ray just before he ran away, and he also told me a couple of residents might have gone missing from the encampment. I'm looking into it."

"You're not after Ray for some sort of crime or something? Trying to put him away?"

"No, I promise, I just want to talk to him."

After a little shuffling, the jackal replied, "Okay, I can't help you on finding anyone that's gone missing lately, you'd have to keep asking around about that. But, if you want to find Crazy Ray, that old fox you gave that plate of food to earlier is the one to ask."

Judy nodded, "Who is he? He disappeared before I could talk with him."
"Don't know, he's never told anyone his name, just shows up every now and then. All I know is he's the only one who could ever make any sense of Crazy Ray."

Heading back to where his meal was sitting, Pills wished Judy good luck and sat back down.

Judy grabbed her plate, and after refilling it, she spent the rest of the meal time talking with as many of the residents as she could, unfortunately, she didn't come away with anything very helpful. One mammal would mention a friend they hadn't seen in a while, just for another mammal at a different table or eating area mention seeing the very same mammal in the last week. By the end of mealtime, Judy was pretty discouraged.

After writing a few notes down, Judy found Penny and helped with cleanup. The team was pretty organized, and some of the residents pitched in to help, so the cleanup only took about forty-five minutes.

As the last few trucks and vans were being loaded, Judy saw Penny closing up her minivan, now stuffed full with leftover supplies. Heading over, Judy caught her friend as she was getting in the driver's seat.

"Hey, Penny, thanks for inviting me out."

Penny glanced at where Miss Packler was standing next to her car about twenty yards away, staring at Judy and her with her arms folded, and asked, "How'd it go?"

Judy shrugged her shoulders, "Not too well, no one's seen Crazy Ray since his episode. I suppose on the plus side, no one could think of anyone that had gone missing that someone else hadn't recently seen, either."

"Well, there's always next week."

Judy nodded, "Yeah, sign me up."

"Good, I'll do that. Are you sure you don't want a lift?"

"No, I'm good, the Metro station isn't that far away."

Penny hugged Judy and said, "Call me if you need anything, thanks again for coming out."

Judy returned the hug and then waved goodbye as Penny left. Judy turned and let her paw drop as she heard the rumble of Miss Packler's sports car as she pulled it out of the parking area and stopped just before turning on to the street. Judy watched through the car's open window, as Packler turned, gave her a look, and then followed Penny's minivan toward the highway.

Taking a last look around, Judy headed back to the Metro station. Even though she hadn't found anything out on Crazy Ray, she was happy she'd come out. She'd met a bunch of nice mammals and been able to help out a bit.

Continuing to think to herself about the evening, she wasn't paying as good of attention to her surroundings as she should have been, and was startled by a gruff voice coming from near a dumpster she was passing.

"Hey, rabbit."

Judy stopped and turned toward the voice, "Yes?"
"When you came over, I could smell fox on you, barely there, but it was there."

Seeing that it was the pampas fox from earlier in the evening, Judy replied, "My partner is a fox, and I help coach a soccer team of mostly foxes from Sister Mary's."

"Decent female that one," and a moment later, "heard you were looking for Crazy Ray."

"Yes, sir, I am. I only want to talk with him, nothing more."

Looking around to make sure no one was within earshot, the fox said, "I haven't seen Crazy Ray for a while. He doesn't come to the camp like he used to, ever since he started going on about how monsters abducted him." Sighing, he continued, "He's not the same mammal I used to know, and he won't talk to me about what's eating at him."

"I'll try to find out, if you let me."

"Are you serving again next week?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll talk then."

"Thank–," Judy was cut off by the old fox handing her a piece of paper.

"Find one, and you'll find the other," was the last thing the fox said before quickly walking off.

Judy opened the paper and saw two names scrawled in pencil on it. Looking up, she saw the fox was gone. Putting the paper in her pocket, she continued to the Metro station, maybe she'd found something helpful after all.

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